

IN-SERVICE STRATEGIES FOR CONSIDERATION

Preparing Highly Qualified Prekindergarten Teachers Symposium April 15-16, 2002

Sue Russell
Child Care Services Association

This paper is based on certain assumptions about the status of the current system and desired goals for the education and compensation of prekindergarten teachers. These assumptions are cited below.

- Currently, prekindergarten teachers and assistant teachers have diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from high school diplomas with some inservice training to bachelor's and master's degrees and teacher certification.
- Prekindergarten teachers should have at least a bachelor's degree in child development or early childhood education with appropriate teacher certification. Teacher assistants should have at least an associate's degree in early childhood education.
- Prekindergarten teachers with comparable education should be compensated with salaries and benefits comparable to those found in states' public education systems.
- Prekindergarten teachers are found in diverse early childhood settings: child care, Head Start and public schools.

Given these assumptions, the remainder of this paper will focus primarily on strategies to help teachers and assistant teachers who do not meet the minimum educational goal defined above. Each strategy will be described and include a rationale for its inclusion as a recommendation for action.

Strategy 1: Provide universally available, comprehensive scholarships to teachers and assistant teachers working with preschoolers in child care, Head Start and public school settings who are pursuing two- or four-year degrees in child development or early childhood education and/or teacher certification. An array of scholarship options need to be available to address the varying educational levels of the workforce. Scholarships not only need to address the costs of tuition, fees and books but also critical support components such as travel costs, practicums that require teachers to spend significant time away from their classroom, paid release time and child care. There should be no means test on availability, but rather a required co-payment on tuition and/or

book costs as well as a contractual expectation that recipients maintain employment teaching preschool children for a specified period of time. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project approach to scholarships provides a model for this type of comprehensive and is already in place in 19 states. North Carolina, the state with the oldest and most comprehensive T.E.A.C.H. program, offers eight different scholarship options for the field, beginning scholarships for basic credentials, but including scholarships for associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees and Birth to Kindergarten Teacher Licensure.

Rationale: The prekindergarten teaching workforce will be challenged to juggle work, family and the additional responsibility of taking college courses. Most teachers of young children are also parents; many earn very low wages with little extra to support the cost of college. Scholarships need to be tailored to the demographics of the workforce and the reality of the lengthy time commitments needed to earn degrees. In return for significant support, however, small monetary contributions toward their education and required commitments to future employment insure that individuals are making an investment in themselves as early childhood professionals.

Strategy 2: Link all scholarships and the completion of specified numbers of credit hours with incremental increases in compensation. As teachers complete credit hours toward degrees or certification, they will gain new proficiencies. Incremental bonuses and/or raises will help motivate their continuing effort.

Rationale: Because it may take many years for teachers working full-time to earn degrees and/or teacher certification, incremental compensation incentives need to recognize and reward their efforts.

Strategy 3: Create strategic partnerships through loan forgiveness and scholarship programs to facilitate the availability of better educated, retained teachers. Loan forgiveness programs can create strategic partnerships with prekindergarten teachers who acquire debt to continue their education, want to retire that debt and are willing to work in critical need areas. In addition, the employers of the prekindergarten teachers receiving support for their continued professional development should also be seen as partners in the cost of these initiatives. Requiring their contribution can offset some of the costs and allow limited dollars to reach more teachers.

Rationale: Targeting loan forgiveness programs to teachers working with children with the greatest needs can have a positive impact on child outcomes. However, the beneficiaries of a better educated, retained workforce are not just the children. Program administrators save time and money when turnover is lowered; enrollments in programs with better educated teachers are often higher and more stable.

Strategy 4: Encourage flexible methods for the delivery of coursework within two- and four-year degree programs and for practicums, including student teaching. Classes and practicums must be designed with the working student in mind, with courses offered at nights, on weekends, in accelerated formats, on-line and in various languages. Students need to be able to demonstrate their competencies and/or test-out of classes where they believe they have the core knowledge required. Practicum requirements are often the hardest for working students to meet, if the requirements specify that they must work in settings other than the one in which they work. Sometimes this means that working students are even asked to leave their current, nationally accredited settings to work in settings of lesser quality.

Rationale: Teachers who are trying to work and go to school have limited periods and amount of time to take courses. Without flexibility in course and practicum modalities and times, working students are easily discouraged and often cannot afford the time and/or money it takes to meet the requirements.

Strategy 5: Create scholarship opportunities to insure the sufficiency, diversity and quality of instructors within community college and university early childhood departments. Many states are struggling with finding instructors with advanced degrees who are willing to work for the low pay often provided with the state higher education systems. Often instructors do not reflect the demographics of the children living in the community, nor the demographics of their students. In addition, many do not have the financial resources necessary to earn advanced degrees.

Rationale: Investing in early childhood professionals who are already working in community college and university early childhood departments, child care resource and referral agencies, early care and education programs or other early childhood organizations is like investing in the prekindergarten workforce. They have already made a commitment to

work in the field, even though they are underpaid and lack the support they need. They are more likely to reflect the demographics of the community in which they live. For many, teaching at the college level will bring greater compensation and allow them to use their experiences working in the field at another level. Scholarships can be designed in such a way as to secure their commitment to teach at the college level.

Strategy 6: Legislate meaningful articulation agreements and processes between and among two- and four-year early childhood degree programs within states. For the most part, community colleges are cheaper, more prevalent, more attractive to a diverse population, more accepting of working students and more willing to work with students who need extra remedial support to increase their basic skills.

Rationale: There is no time to lose. It may take a teacher five years to earn her two-year degree, and, if given full credit, another five years to earn her four-year degree. Many times a teacher beginning her educational journey does not know that she will want to earn her bachelor's or master's degree. If this teacher has to repeat all or a significant part of her two-year degree when she moves to the four-year institution, she will be deterred from completion. Recent research indicates that transfer students appear to do as well or better than native students, even when they do not have to repeat coursework (Cassidy, Hestenes, Teague, & Springs, 2000).

Strategy 7: Develop outreach strategies and mechanisms such as teacher education registries that create a vehicle for direct communication with teachers about the availability of scholarship opportunities. Teachers need to be given information regularly and directly about how they can access financial support for continuing professional development. Lack of information should not be the barrier to improving the education of prekindergarten teachers.

Rationale: Often principals and program directors are the gatekeepers of information about opportunities for professional development. Dissemination of this information may not be at the top of their priority lists. Their inaction may limit options for accessing time-sensitive opportunities.

Strategy 8: Fund various targeted strategies to insure that teachers with desired degrees are compensated at rates that are comparable to similarly educated teachers within states' public education systems. Strategies being tried nationally include salary supplements, direct wage enhancements tied to education and retention, higher payment rates tied to the education of the teacher, and resources to underwrite some or all of the cost of health insurance. Such methods should be applied across the entire delivery system, including Head Start and child care, with classrooms with teachers meeting higher education standards receiving more money.

Rationale: Unless teachers can earn wages and receive benefits that are competitive with public school teachers, they will leave teaching preschool children. Some will teach older children; others will leave the field.

Strategy 9: Provide beginning teachers with experienced, well-educated and trained mentors to provide them with encouragement, real-life teaching techniques and resources to insure their retention in the field and their desire to learn more.

Rationale: Because of high turnover, one-third or more of the workforce within an early childhood setting may be new to teaching. Initially, many will not have the knowledge or skills they need to be effective prekindergarten teachers. A mentor teacher can model best practice, has the desired educational background and is trained in how to support new teachers, so she can be an effective tool to help new teachers want to learn more and stay.

While the full implementation of these strategies may seem overwhelming, there are model programs operating across the nation that are addressing each of these. From such efforts we have the information that can help us act quickly and effectively. The challenge is the lack of priority in public policy to invest sufficient resources in such strategies to substantially improve the educational outcomes for children.

References

- Cassidy, D., Hestenes, L., Teague, P., & Springs, J. (2000). *North Carolina early childhood education articulation manual: The facilitation of the transfer of credit between early childhood education/child development departments in two- and four-year institutions of higher education*. Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Child Development.
- Child Care Services Association. (2000). *T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood®: Celebrating ten years*. Chapel Hill, NC: Author.
- Early, D., & Winton, P. (2001). Preparing the workforce: Early childhood teacher preparation at 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 16*, 285-306.
- National Research Council. Institute of Medicine. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Quality counts 2002: Building blocks for success [Special issue]. (2002). *Education Week, 21*(17).
- Russell, S., Lyons, J., Grigoriuc, M., & Lowman, B. (2002). *Working in child care in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill, NC: Child Care Services Association.
- Schulman, K., Blank, H., & Ewen, D. (1999). *Seeds of success: State prekindergarten initiatives 1998-1999*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.
- Whitebook, M. (2002). *Working for worthy wages: The child care compensation movement, 1970-2001*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Whitebook, M., Sakai, L., Gerber, E., & Howes, C. (2001). *Then & now: Changes in child care staffing, 1994-2000, technical report*. Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce.