

**THE NEED FOR HIGHLY QUALIFIED PREKINDERGARTEN TEACHERS
RESPONSE**

**Preparing Highly Qualified Prekindergarten Teachers Symposium
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Dick and Kelly have done an excellent job of discussing the need for highly qualified prekindergarten teachers. Issues discussed to support the premise of this need included quality, what states are doing to address this need, projected demand, training capacities, and barriers such as the field's professional status, or lack thereof, compensation, and diversity. I think we can all agree that there is a tremendous need for highly qualified prekindergarten teachers. I would like, however, to focus my remarks around what I believe to be the underlying reasons as to why there is such a need. My response is not at all in disagreement with Dick and Kelly, but rather a different frame from which to approach the topic, elaborating on three of the barriers identified.

My contention is that there will always be great need until we fix the system. Until states raise the standards for prek teachers and fund a professional development system that prepares, supports, and adequately compensates them, we will always have a supply issue. Therefore, a major focus should be on recruitment, retention, and compensation.

Many factors affect the quality of prek programs, but no factor is more important than the preparedness, competence, and commitment of the teachers. Compared to elementary and secondary teachers, prek teachers have fewer opportunities to prepare for their roles, acquire ongoing training and support, or advance along a career path. They have fewer incentives, economic or professional, for staying in the field. Addressing these issues is necessary to enhance the readiness of young children for school.

High staff turnover rates, which threaten program quality, cannot be improved without addressing compensation. Compared with teachers in the K-12 system, those who work with younger children are very poorly compensated. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average annual salary for prek teachers is \$19,610, less than half what the average elementary school teacher earns. This salary disparity increases turnover and impedes the continuity of care that is so important to young children. The field is losing well-educated teachers at an alarming rate and is hiring replacement teachers with less training and education.

For those who have a bachelor's degree or above and who perform functions comparable to their public school colleagues, salaries, benefits, and annual cost of living increases should be commensurate. For those who do not have a bachelor's degree but are working toward a bachelor's or associate's degree or a child development credential, salaries and benefits should be commensurate with public school employees who have similar training, experience, and job descriptions. Furthermore, those working toward a degree or credential who are teaching in early care and education settings should receive salary increases when they successfully complete approved courses. A high standard of staff certification must be in place throughout the early childhood education system, regardless of the program setting or funding source. Quality Counts 2002 reports that states have a long way to go to ensure that those who work with young children are well-educated and well compensated.

Raising the compensation for teachers who meet professional standards will be critical to recruitment and retention efforts. The challenge to recruiting qualified people to the early childhood field is great. To develop a competent early childhood workforce--one that allows children to have adults who speak their language and reflect their culture--a focus on recruitment, retention, and professional development is essential. Incentives must be created to

bring new talent into the field, beginning with secondary school students.

We know non-degreed prekindergarten teachers need to move from informal educational opportunities to more formal offerings delivered by our higher education institutions. Specific strategies should be developed to expand the supply of qualified prek teachers who provide culturally and linguistically appropriate practices. Specific strategies should be developed to increase the number of male prek teachers. Strategies might include involving high school students in career awareness programs, special internships, mentoring, workplace learning and other personnel development techniques, as well as innovative uses of technology and distance learning.

In order to ensure that every child is ready for school, we must have a master plan for a professional development system that is:

- credit bearing, leading to some type of certification or accreditation;
- delivered through a system that fully articulates between informal training, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities;
- able to yield increases in compensation, commensurate with competencies garnered;
- sufficiently funded; and
- transformative and supportive of all the elements necessary to prepare and continuously develop prek teachers.