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early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

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NCEDL News: Research Spotlight

Making gains...A national conference tackles ways to improve training and compensation of early childhood workers

Two days of impassioned pleas, determined efforts, patient negotiating, listening to research data, and optimistic networking characterized a Chapel Hill, NC conference held earlier this year that focused on how to upgrade the compensation and education of the early childhood workforce.

Sponsored by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) and four other groups, the conference brought together 180 professionals, teachers, child care center directors, leaders of national advocacy groups, researchers, and administrators and policy makers from national and state governments.



Experts shared research and strategies that set the context for often-passionate discussions. Highlights include:

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- Several speakers decried the general lack of a career development ladder for child care workers. Such a ladder, they said, should support better compensation, reward training, and create organizational roles for teachers and providers. These steps would also create a stronger foundation for more diverse leadership in the field.
- Approximately 30% of early childhood teachers leave the field each year—and research is beginning to describe the serious impact of turnover and change on young children.
- Over the years, research has shown for every dollar invested in high quality child care, there is up to a \$7 benefit to children, parents, and society.
- Rosemarie Vardell of the Center for the Child Care Workforce (CCW) said there is a severe staff shortage facing child care centers. Wages are low, and “the market place is not taking care of the problem.” She said that upgrading teaching requirements without upgrading compensation is a squandering of resources. “The entire child care system needs major new sources of funding.”
- Anne Mitchell of Wheelock College said subsidies to child care can take two forms: 1) portable subsidies that follow the family such as vouchers, scholarships, and tax credits, and 2) direct subsidies that go directly to the child care system.
- In a paper entitled “Who’s Missing at the Table?” written for the conference, Marcy Whitebrook of CCW wrote, “The lack of sufficient resources in early childhood settings, combined with practitioners’ meager earnings, results in limited access to professional development, participation in advocacy, or other experiences for many teachers and providers.”

Voices from the front lines were heard in a panel called “Perspectives from Key Stakeholders.” Panel members shared stories of what it means to be a teacher, a director, a parent and a college professor facing the realities and limitations created when a workforce is shackled with wages averaging \$7.50 an hour.

Six different compensation/professional development models were presented and discussed from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, California, Georgia, North Carolina’s T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education And Compensation Helps), and Canada.

Conference participants interacted as members of 21 teams—10 state teams, 10 NC county teams and one national team—all of which included leaders in the early childhood field. The teams listened to experts, talked amongst themselves and crafted plans for their teams to take home to begin to institute changes.

Conference Coordinator Kate Thegen of NCEDL said follow-ups to the

“IDEAL SOLUTIONS”— Excerpts from notes on walls around various teams

- “Consider increasing benefits (in addition to salary) to increase compensation.”
- “Determine the ‘living wage’ for our county and persuade funding agencies that we need to pay that.”
- “A career lattice is needed.”
- “What do we do about an early child care worker who may not have the education, but has years of experience and an excellent reputation?”
- “We need to show a clear link between early child care and educational outcomes in school later.”
- “Better evaluation tools needed.”


conference include interviews with team leaders to determine progress and barriers. Information about the conference is on the NCEDL website <www.ncedl.org> and shared through future presentations, articles, and a book.

Joan Lombardi, deputy assistant secretary for children and families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services until last year, captured the spirit of the conference in her closing remarks as “a tribute to those Americans who wake up every



morning, greet parents, hug children, change diapers, read books, dry tears, and help the country work and children thrive.”

Pam Winton, who directs the Research-to-Practice unit of NCEDL, said the conference is believed to be the first such national gathering to address compensation and professional development issues for the early childhood workforce.

Other Making Gains sponsors were CCW, Day Care Services Association, the NC Department of Health and Human Services Division of Child Development, and the NC Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development. 

New product speeds dissemination of NCEDL research information

Recognizing a need to place research results before constituents quickly and in an easily read format, the Research-to-Practice unit of NCEDL has created a new product, *Spotlights*.

Spotlights are monthly, one-page summaries of research data, presentations by researchers, and articles written by NCEDL researchers for academic journals.


Traditionally, research data would arrive in a format for public consumption after as much as a year while the material made its way into various academic journals and into often-lengthy final reports for funding agencies. “However, much of our work today is of urgent significance not only to the research community but to practitioners in the field, families, and policymakers,” said Pam Winton, who directs the Research-to-Practice unit.

By working closely with the researchers involved and using an internal review system, a *Spotlight* can typically be produced within two weeks. Furthermore, *Spotlights* can be directed toward certain constituen-

cies. For example, one *Spotlights* explained a decision matrix aimed at helping decision makers/policy analysts weigh the pros and cons of various policy options for a public issue such as childcare quality. Another


Spotlight discussed diarrhea and child care and was directed toward child care workers and operators of child care centers.

Other topics among the first 10 *Spotlights* ranged from a theoretical discussion of assessing readiness of children for school, to the transition considerations for children with disabilities and their families.

The response to *Spotlights* has been quite good, according to Winton. More than 8,500 have been disseminated in paper format; many have been downloaded from the NCEDL web site, and permission has been given to other organizations to print and disseminate *Spotlights*. For example, the state of Kentucky printed 1,000 copies of *Spotlight #2* on Quality Child Care and disseminated it in a pre-school mailing packet to teachers, and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies disseminated 500 copies of *Spotlight #1* on Kindergarten Transitions to member agencies. 

Highlights from past NCEDL Spotlights

- Kindergarten teachers report that 48 percent of children entering kindergarten have moderate or serious problems.
- A three-year study showed that children with closer relationships to their preschool teachers showed fewer problem behaviors—this was especially true for boys. These children also had better language skills through kindergarten.
- Interventions involving parents and the community can be a valuable adjunct in controlling enteric diseases in child care centers.
- A common difficulty in the transition of children with disabilities from preschool programs to school-age programs is having multiple sending agencies and a single receiving agency. A recommended solution is to establish a community-wide interagency transition policy.
- NCEDL researchers are developing a new scale to assess the quality of early intervention services provided to young children and their families.

Spotlights posted on the NCEDL web site <www.ncedl.org> are in PDF format, which means they may be downloaded and printed. 



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Research spotlight

Recent findings at FPG

The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go to School—Executive Summary

Cost Quality Study Team. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, National Center for Early Development & Learning. (1999). Available at <www.ncedl.org>.

THE COST, QUALITY AND CHILD OUTCOMES in Child Care Centers Study, begun in 1993, was designed in part to examine the influence of typical center-based child care on children's development during preschool years and as they moved into the formal education system. These children have now been followed through the end of second grade. Overall findings can be summarized in a few broad statements.

Findings

- High-quality child care is an important element in achieving the national goal of having all children ready to learn when they come to school.
- Children who attended higher quality child care centers scored higher on measures of both cognitive and social skills in child care and through the transition into school. Further, this influence of child care quality was important for children from a wide range of family backgrounds.
- High quality child care continues to positively predict children's performance well into their school careers.
- Longitudinal analysis indicated that the quality of child care experienced by these children before they entered school continued to affect their development at least through kindergarten, and in many cases through the end of second grade.
- Children who have traditionally been at risk of not doing well in school are affected more by the quality of child care experiences than other children.
- For some outcomes (math skills and problem behaviors), children whose mothers had lower levels of education were more sensitive to the negative effects of poor quality child care or received more benefits from high quality child care. Moreover, in typical child care, the influences of child care quality for children at risk were sustained through second grade.
- The quality of child care classroom practices was related to children's cognitive development, while the nature of the preschool teacher-child relationship influenced children's social development through the early school years.

The quality of the child care environment affected children's cognitive development (language and math skills) through early elementary school. The relationships children had with their teachers in child care were related to better social skills (greater cognitive/attention skills and sociability and fewer problem behaviors) over time. Children's ability to get the most benefit from both their teachers and educational environments available to them in school is what readiness is really all about, and high-quality child care experiences help children develop this ability.