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BUSTING THE MYTHS FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

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As more young children spend most of their day in early childhood settings, it is critical to have a well-educated, fairly compensated, and respected early childhood workforce. North Carolina has worked diligently to improve its standards, funding, and resources to support this goal. Education standards for all early childhood educators including teachers, teacher assistants, directors, and family child care home providers are part of the regulatory system for early care and education programs. Over the years, both state and federal funds have been used to support the early childhood workforce through programs such as: Smart Start, T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® scholarships, Child Care WAGES®, and Infant Toddler AWARD\$®. These resources, among others, have helped (1) early childhood programs improve the quality of their environments for children and (2) early childhood educators improve their education, compensation, and retention.

Yet even as work is being done, the need for an educated workforce is questioned. Often assumptions about early childhood education are based on erroneous or incomplete information. With this document, the North Carolina Institute for Child Development Professionals (NCICDP/ “The Institute”) seeks (1) to identify some of the myths about educating this workforce and (2) to provide research (facts) that refutes or corrects these false assumptions.

Myth #1: Early childhood education is not considered a professional field.

“We are a far cry from the “babysitters” and “daycare workers” of the past. Most of us have degrees in early childhood or are working on them. We have professional standards to work towards and are starting to be recognized as the professionals that we are.” -Miranda, two-year-old teacher in an early childhood center

The Truth:

- Early childhood educators working in NC Pre-K programs operated in child care settings are held to comparable professional standards as teachers of NC Pre-K and K-12 students working in public school settings. In addition, The National Association for the

Education of Young Children (NAEYC) *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* aligns with the NC Public Schools, Department of Public Instruction Professional Teaching Standards. The *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* include knowledge and practice, expectations for mastery, and drive accountability for the profession (Power to the Profession, 2020; NC Public Schools, State BOE, 2018).

- Early childhood educators nurture and educate young children as many hours in total as children will spend in kindergarten - 12th grade. Promoting the vital learning and development of children from birth through age eight, early childhood educators deserve a professional title and the accompanying standards, competencies, accountabilities, and compensation of an essential profession (Center on the Developing Child, 2017; Power to the Profession, 2020).
- NC's Star Rated License System allows for child care programs to be recognized for higher quality care and individual strengths. Facilities are rated with stars from 1 (meets minimum licensing standards) to 5 (meeting highest quality standards) based on staff education and program standards. Currently, approximately 67% of NC child care facilities (child care centers and family child care homes) are meeting higher standards at the 4 or 5 star level (NCDHHS, 2022). In addition, several (N=93) early childhood programs in NC are nationally accredited by NAEYC. National accreditation provides educator preparation meeting national standards and high-quality learning experiences for the children (NAEYC, n.d.).

Moving Forward:

The *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* must be used to guide the work of all early childhood professionals and be owned by all in the field. A more educated, accountable workforce will demonstrate the professionalism of early childhood educators and the need to be adequately compensated.

Myth #2: Early childhood education is not relevant to a child's development.

“Since entering Pre School and Pre-Kindergarten, our children’s development has increased dramatically. Not only have they achieved their cognitive and academic goals, but the social-emotional skills they have learned have been amazing. We are so grateful to have such a high-quality Pre-School/Pre K available to our family and our community.” -Mr. & Mrs. H., Parents of two rising Pre-K students, and one Kindergarten student

The Truth:

- Early childhood educators promote the social-emotional development, physical development, health, cognitive development, and general learning competencies of each child served. They establish and maintain a safe, caring, inclusive, and healthy learning environment, observe, document, and assess children’s learning and development, as well as develop reciprocal, culturally responsive relationships with families and communities (PTP, 2020).
- Young children experience the greatest amount of brain development in the life cycle during the early years; up to 2 million neurons per second are built during the years from birth to age three, and the social and emotional foundation that Early Childhood Educators foster for children lays the foundation for all future learning (Center on the Developing Child, 2017).
- Research confirms that the experiences children have in their earliest years lay the foundation for a child’s entire future, predict their highest level of education, income level, rates of incarceration, efficacy as parents, and overall quality of their participation as adults in our communities (Schweinhart, L. J., 2004).
- If children's developmental needs are met earlier in life, they are less likely to be referred to special education once in the K-12 system, less likely to need social services, and less likely to end up in the criminal justice system. (Developmental trauma; Emerging Issues).

Moving Forward:

With more research indicating the importance and long-term effects of early childhood education, the public will understand the critical role and the importance of the role of the early childhood educator as well as support increased standards, compensation, and funding.

Myth #3: Early childhood educators are not interested in further developing their careers with higher education.

“When I decided to pursue Early Childhood Education as a major, I knew it would be a challenge doing it as an adult student. The study of ECE is full of amazing opportunities to create, collaborate, and investigate. On a daily basis, I remind my students that they can do hard things – I remind myself of the same, through each semester!” - Mary, NC Pre K Teacher

The Truth:

- In 2001, only 20% of teachers had an associate degree or bachelors degree in early childhood/child development or a bachelor’s degree in another field with some early childhood coursework. In 2011, this percentage was 46%. By 2019 this had risen to 59% (CCSA, 2020).
- In 2019, 87% of directors, 66% of teachers, 50% of teacher assistants and 51% of family child care providers had at least an associate degree or more in any field and of those 50% of directors, 44% of teachers, 29% of assistant teachers, and 38% of family child care providers had at least one degree specifically in early childhood education/child development (CCSA, 2020).
- Of the participants taking advantage of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood ® North Carolina Scholarship Program, 49% were first-generation college students and 53% were able to begin college using the scholarship. People of color and/or Latinx made up 51%

of the recipients and 75% were teachers earning an average of \$12.15 per hour according to 2020 data. Participants reported that their college attendance raised the expectation that their children would go to college. Other benefits included better jobs and more money, which was an economic benefit for their families. (CCSA Policy Brief: Creating Equity for and within the Early Childhood Education Workforce).

- According to data from T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood ® North Carolina Scholarship Program, 68% of T.E.A.C.H. program participants feel more appreciated and recognized for their work. Fifty-six percent of the participants said that they were more willing to stay in their current early childhood program because of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood ® North Carolina Scholarship. Professional growth opportunities was listed by 39% of the early childhood teaching staff as a factor motivating them to stay in the field (CCSA, 2020).

Moving Forward:

North Carolina has made significant gains in educational attainment for the early childhood workforce over the last two decades. With more opportunities and financial assistance to obtain degrees and with additional efforts to further increase compensation, the number of early childhood educators seeking degrees should increase in the future (CCSA, 2020).

Myth #4: Early childhood educators cannot afford higher education and have no available resources for funding.

“I never dreamed I could afford to go to college on my salary but my center and T.E.A.C.H. Scholarships made it possible. Now I have a bachelor's degree which not only makes me a better teacher but also allows me to make more money.”-Miriam, NC PreK teacher

The Truth:

- The Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® NC Scholarship Program created by Child Care Services Association (CCSA) in 1990 and

funded by the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, provides educational scholarships for the early childhood workforce. In the 2019 CCSA Workforce Survey, 28% percent of teachers and 17% or assistant teachers reported receiving T.E.A.C.H. support during their careers.

- Some early childhood centers help pay tuition for staff to pursue higher education. 49% of the centers responding to the 2019 CCSA Workforce Survey indicated that they contributed towards the tuition for their employees.
- Other financial supports such as Pell Grants and Scholarships (Ex. local college scholarships, Long Leaf Grant) exist for early childhood education.
- High school students can begin taking college courses in early childhood education for free through the community colleges which moves them towards completion of certificates and degrees in the field.

Moving Forward:

The need for higher education for early childhood professionals is becoming increasingly supported by lawmakers, administrators of early childhood education programs, families with children in early childhood programs, and communities. More funds are available than ever before to support working early childhood educators in achieving their associate, bachelor's, and even master's degrees.

Myth #5: Early childhood educators can live on current early childhood education salaries.

“As a Director of a Child Development Center, I see the financial struggles my current Teaching Team members face on a daily basis, from rising grocery costs to increasing gas prices. In centers where I previously worked, the Teaching Teams never had health insurance, which resulted in enormous medical debt and avoidance of general and specialized health care. I do everything I can to make sure my Team feels supported, but I feel they will eventually leave to take jobs that require less effort with a much higher salary compared to what they earn working in early childhood education.” -Kim H., Director of a NC Early Learning Center

The Truth:

- According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), in May 2020 the median hourly wage for childcare workers was \$12.24.
- The lowest 10% of early childhood educators earned less than \$8.84 and the highest 10% earned more than \$18.13.
- Only 15% of ECEs have fully paid health insurance while 33% have their health insurance partially paid for.
- 71% of ECEs have paid sick leave, 87% paid vacation, and 93% paid holidays.
- 43% of ECEs have retirement benefits (CCSA, 2020).
- Early childhood educators working in formal childcare settings and those with more education usually earn higher wages (Aurelian, 2019).

Moving Forward:

The North Carolina Early Childhood Compensation Collaborative's Model Salary Scale was developed as a guide for the early childhood field to establish better compensation tied to educational attainment for the early childhood workforce. Based on a living wage, the Model Salary Scale allows comparison of current compensation, suggested steps for change, and resources to help make the needed wage changes (NCICDP, 2021).



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Myth #6: Parent fees alone can support the salaries and benefits needed by the early childhood workforce.

“It would be amazing if I could work but I would be working just to pay for childcare. There wouldn’t be any money left!” -Taylor, mom of two young children.

“Public investments can help compensate early childhood educators in a manner that approaches parity with salaries in public schools. Such investments will then help ensure that children benefit from more consistent, qualified educators during the early years when brain development, the establishment of trust, and the promotion of learning are most critical.” - (Aurelien and Forter Sirota, 2019)

The Truth:

- Center-based child care for an infant is \$1,230 per month, \$910 for a toddler, \$760 for a preschooler, and family child care home is \$800 per month. A family with median income would spend 18 percent of their income to pay for infant care, and 13 percent for the care of a toddler. (Workman and Jessen-Howard, 2018).
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recommends that the price of child care be no more than 7% of household income. For married couples, it would take more than 10% of household income to cover the current average child care prices for one child. For a single parent, it would be 35% of household income (ChildCare Aware, 2022).
- Infant toddler care is more expensive for ECE programs due to the cost of minimum staffing needed for ratios. Given the minimum requirements for ratio and maximum group size shown in the chart below, parents of infants and toddlers would have to pay around twice the amount of a parent of a child two years or older if their fees were the only source of payment.

| Age of Children | Ratio: Staff/Children | Maximum Group Size |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 0-12 months | 1/5 | 10 |
| 12-24 months | 1/6 | 12 |
| 2-3 years | 1/10 | 20 |
| 3-4 years | 1/15 | 25 |
| 4-5 years | 1/20 | 25 |
| 5 years and older | 1/25 | 25 |

(NC Division of Child Development and Early Education)

Moving Forward:

Parents cannot afford to fully fund early childhood programs and teachers cannot “subsidize the system through poverty-level wages”. Deficiencies of the current early childhood education system must be addressed. “ECE must be recognized as a public good and funded accordingly to ensure access for all children and families and good jobs for educators.” (CSCCE Berkley). Cost-sharing is necessary for quality early childhood programs with fairly compensated staff. Costs must be shared from a variety of sources including providers, parents, governmental bodies and other funding sources (NCICDP, 2021).

Myth #7: The early childhood education system is broken and will never be able to recover.

“Early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society.” -Maria Montessori

“The first five years have everything to do with how the next 80 turn out.” - Bill Gates

The Truth:

- Deficiencies in the current ECE system negatively impact not only the children and families in need of affordable, high-quality ECE programs but also ECE educators.

Putting a new financing structure for ECE in place will take time, political will, and leadership but change in funding is critical to provide high-quality ECE to all children (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

- Participation in early childhood classrooms significantly results in decreased future special education and grade retention and increased high school graduation rates (McCoy et al., 2017)
- 44 states offer some public PreK with participation doubling over the past two decades for three-year-olds to 6% and increasing from 14% to 34% for four-year-olds. Proposals for federal expansion of PreK started during the Obama administration and President Biden has included the provision of universal PreK for all three- and four-year-olds nationally in his The American Families Plan. Although this has not passed, it brings the topic to the forefront. (Kim, 2021)

Moving Forward:

The early childhood education system must recover because families depend on it. Lack of access to early childhood programs causes work loss, especially among mothers, which lowers household incomes. Access to early childhood programs allows parents to work and generates an average of an additional \$94,000 in career earnings for mothers. Families who are supported with the cost of early childhood programs benefit the economy by providing a more efficient and productive workforce not only when their children are young but also in the long term.

<https://www.ffyf.org/why-it-matters/support-working-families/>



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