COLLECTIVE PROSPERITY: TO SUPPORT CHILDREN, INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Lauren Hogan
Senior Director, Public Policy and Advocacy

Lucy Recio
Senior Analyst, Public Policy and Advocacy

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Decades of neuroscientific research confirms what social scientists have long known to be true—the first years of a child's life are the period of most rapid brain growth, laying the foundation for all future learning and development.[1] During this critical period, children's positive interactions with peers and caring, knowledgeable adults allow for the blossoming of the skills they need for a lifetime of success.[2] This success is seen across a variety of domains, from their cognitive and academic skills to their social-emotional development to their long-term economic success. Indeed, longitudinal research has shown time and again that "a high-quality early childhood intervention program, especially one that extends through third grade, can have benefits well into adult life."[3]

In communities across America, early childhood educators play a crucial role in promoting these positive interactions and creating safe, nurturing spaces where young children can learn and thrive. They are considered important members of their communities, on par with firefighters and nurses, by nearly 90 percent of American voters, who recognize early childhood educators as professionals who have complex and demanding jobs and responsibilities.[4] Successfully executing on these responsibilities demands knowledge, skills, and competencies that allow educators to do everything from helping our youngest learners explore their environments to engaging them in creative problem solving.

Yet far too many early childhood educators are stuck in the quandary of helping to raise children out of poverty even as they themselves are sinking deeper into it. Their very jobs come at the cost of facing the pernicious impact of poverty and the associated stressors it places on the lives of those living within it. Childcare makes significant contributions to a state's economy; a recent study in Louisiana, for example, found that parents' struggles with childcare resulted in absences, turnovers, and related losses to the workforce amounting to $1.1 billion annually.[5] Yet despite their work in the profession that makes all other professions possible, early childhood educators' wages are often significantly below the state median wage. Indeed, in a workforce of over two million, the median hourly wage for an early childhood educator is $10.31.[6] One in seven early childhood educators lives in a family with an income below the official poverty line. Only 15 percent of early childhood educators receive health insurance from their job.[7] Nationwide, they are paid so poorly that nearly half are themselves part of families enrolled in at least one public safety net program.[8]

For the many early childhood educators living at or near poverty, the insecurity around meeting the basic necessities in their own lives creates worry and anxiety that ultimately impacts how they present themselves in their practice with young children. The constant burden of making ends meet in their personal lives, compounded by workplace environments that often lack the necessary professional supports to meet and mitigate the emotional burden poverty has on working adults, is a threat to the promise of high-quality early childhood education.

Forty-five percent of young children under the age of six live in low-income families.[9] Early childhood educators are at the front lines in caring for, educating, and supporting these children and their families, and as such, must respond with tools and practices that acknowledge and address the impacts of stress, fear, and trauma. Yet, as early childhood specialist and nationally certified Mental Health First Aid trainer Tanya Dennis notes, "Far too often, as early childhood educators, we mask our own issues and the hurts, horrors, and fragmentation in our own lives without realizing the impact this has on the quality of our programs and on the children and families we serve…. As those individuals working the front lines, we have to be able to adequately respond to the needs of our families and our colleagues, or staff, and know how to provide the tools and resources to support those who are feeling overwhelmed by the stressors we face."

This is why Dennis, in partnership with the North Carolina Association for the Education of Young Children, has committed to the task of increasing awareness about the importance and implications of wellness and well-being in the lives of the adults who care for and educate young children. Through the facilitation of Mental Health First Aid trainings across the state, Dennis is working with hundreds of educators to help guide them toward addressing mental health crises before they impact the teaching practices and interactions of early childhood educators.

However, the scale of the problem requires that we bolster this effort, and those like it, with larger, bolder, transformative investments in the early childhood education profession. It requires that our policymaking catch up with the science of early learning and acknowledge the contributions of this field to the strengthening of America's collective prosperity, now and in the future. Addressing this challenge calls for us to work together to build a stronger early education workforce that is well prepared, effective, and diverse, working within a compensation and recognition

system that supports their excellence. It means building a public awareness campaign that exemplifies the excellence of the early childhood profession and its vital and critical role in society, coupled with a robust policy and financing agenda. Early childhood educators and, by extension, the children and families they serve, need policies that put them first, including (1) transfer and articulation policies to ensure that institutions of higher education recognize and award credits for students' previous early childhood courses and degrees, (2) increased federal and state funding directed toward increasing payment rates to providers so that states can reach the federally recommended benchmark and move toward payments based on the cost of high-quality childcare, and (3) revised early learning standards and indicators in quality rating and improvement systems to actively reflect the principles of cultural competence and anti-bias.

Investing in high-quality early childhood education is one of the solutions to the crisis of child poverty. But those investments increasingly need to be targeted to the educators without whom quality is out of reach. For too long, we have allowed early childhood educators to subsidize the early learning systems in our country through their own low wages. We have relied on their passion to drive their engagement—and this has, predictably, led to high levels of turnover and low levels of retention, undermining the stability young children require to benefit from high-quality early experiences. The time has come to create the political, financial, and social will to address the crises faced by early childhood educators. Compensated and supported early childhood educators are essential components of quality early learning programs and a linchpin for the strength and vitality of our nation's current and future prosperity. We must act boldly and firmly; our young children and families are counting on our country to deliver for them in the present so that they, in turn, can deliver for us in the future.

ENDNOTES

1. "Brain Architecture," Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, accessed March 23, 2018, https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/.

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3. Arthur J. Reynolds, Suh-Ruu Ou, and Judy A. Temple, "A Multicomponent, Preschool to Third Grade Preventive Intervention and Educational Attainment at 35 Years of Age," *JAMA Pediatrics* 172, no. 3 (2018): 247–256.

4. Public opinion poll, conducted August 6–12, 2015, by Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Public Opinion Strategies on behalf of NAEYC. Details available at www.naeyc.org/profession.

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6. Elise Gould, *Child Care Workers Aren't Paid Enough to Make Ends Meet*, Issue Brief #405 (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2015), https://www.epi.org/publication/child-care-workers-arent-paid-enough-to-make-ends-meet/#epi-toc-11.

7. Ibid.

8. Marcy Whitebook, Caitlin McLean, and Lea J. E. Austin, *Executive Summary: Early Childhood Workforce Index, 2016* (Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley, 2016), http://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2016/Index-2016-Executive-Summary.pdf.

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