



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Children, Youth & Family

background

Report # 51

Shortage of Well-Educated Early Childhood Teachers

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Early Childhood Care & Education In Pennsylvania

Recruiting Woes

Few college graduates choose early childhood

Researchers are not exactly sure why the quality of Pennsylvania's early childhood programs is falling, but they are certain that a serious shortage of well-educated teachers skilled in early childhood development is one of the main culprits.

The quality of early childhood programs is greatly influenced by the experience and education of their staff and teachers. Today, fewer college-educated teachers are found in child care, preschool, and kindergarten classrooms than a decade earlier. As if that trend isn't troubling enough, colleges are struggling to find students interested in pursuing degrees in the early childhood field.

The findings, reported by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative, are the result of six months of research on early childhood care and education in Pennsylvania, including an examination of educational and training opportunities for professionals in the early childhood field. UCPC is a collaborative of the Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, and the Center for Public Policy of Temple University. It was created to provide nonpartisan information on issues important to the well-being of children, youth, and families.

Good Teachers = Quality

The experience, education, and training of teachers and staff is an important measure of the quality level of an early childhood program.

UCPC researchers and others have

found that teachers with at least a bachelor's degree provide higher quality of care. Some of the areas influenced by having well-educated teachers include using language to develop reasoning skills, art activities, and promoting acceptance of diversity. The impact of employing well-educated staff and teachers is most marked in home-based child care.

Head Start programs, as a group, earned the highest marks for quality in the state, according to a UCPC quality study of early childhood services. One of the key reasons for its success is the high level of education of the staff and teachers in the programs.

"One of the best ways of improving quality – a very cost-effective way – is looking at education of staff and training. That has clearly been demonstrated," said Richard Fiene, Ph.D., Director of the Capital Area Early Childhood Training Institute at Pennsylvania

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State University.

Quality early care and education is associated with better school achievement among children, less grade retention, higher graduation rates, fewer behavior problems at school, and other benefits. But only high quality early childhood services achieve those results. Unfortunately, high quality services are the exception rather than the rule in Pennsylvania, where fewer than 20% of early childhood programs offer the kind of quality environments that promote the full potential of early learning, according to the UCPC quality study. Just as troubling, the study found that the quality of services has declined in the past five years over heights received in the early 1990s.

A Serious Shortage

Researchers found that the decline in quality coincided with a sharp drop in the percentage of well-educated teachers em-

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ployed by early childhood programs. For example, 25% of the infant toddler teachers in 1996 had bachelor's degrees compared to only 5% of the teachers in 2000.

Overall, UCPC researchers report that today only 58% of preschool teachers, 39% of Head Start teachers, 22% of child care center teachers and 18% of home-based providers in Pennsylvania have a bachelors degree in any subject.

Fewer still are child care and early education teachers with degrees in early childhood – the course of study that is the most appropriate for their work. More than half of college-educated teachers who teach children 5 years old and younger have a background in elementary education instead.

Programs in early childhood offer more comprehensive training in early childhood development and services than do programs in elementary education. For example, 96% of early childhood programs required a practica with 3-to-5 year-old children compared to only 60% of elementary education programs. Early childhood programs also employ more faculty trained in early childhood than programs in elementary education, which tend to train their graduates to be teachers in any of the elementary school grades, not specifically in early childhood.

More specialized training of early childhood teachers is desperately needed but not always offered as part of the coursework for a degree. For example, 96% of child care centers, pre-schools, and Head Start programs report having at least one child enrolled who has a disability. But only 58% of the early childhood and 35% of elementary education bachelors programs require a course on working with such children.

Recruiting Woes

Only half of the early childhood college graduates take jobs working with children kindergarten age or younger – and more than a quarter of them leave Pennsylvania to do so, according to the UCPC survey of higher education programs.

“It’s harder to recruit students to go into early childhood fields because they know they will make little money when they come out,” said Christina Groark, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

Programs admit that wages and benefits are serious obstacles to attracting well-educated teachers.

University faculty similarly complain that the prospect of graduating to low paying jobs and poor working conditions deters students from the field.

To make matters worse, the cost of a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education is nearly \$10,000 higher than the cost of obtaining a degree in elementary education. And a full tuition waiver is very rarely available for students in either discipline at any level of degree.

These costs, the lack of aid, and the low pay offered in the field are all reasons why 43% of bachelors students in early childhood education say they have difficulty paying back their student loans.

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references

This report was based largely on the following studies conducted the by Universities Children's Policy Collaborative.

- The State of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Higher Education Survey (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development) www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm.
- A Baseline Report of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Early Care and Education Provider Survey (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development). www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm.
- Pennsylvania Quality of Early Childhood Settings Study (Written by Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University). www.prevention.psu.edu/ECE.

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