

Unifying Framework

for the Early Childhood Education Profession

■ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ■

The research and science are clear: it is time for the United States to make significant and sustained investments in high-quality early childhood education provided by well-prepared and well-compensated professionals who reflect the diversity of the children and families they serve.

Building on the charge in the National Academy of Medicine's seminal report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Eight*, and in partnership with a diverse range of stakeholders and thousands of educators, advocates, and allies, 15 national organizations established the Power to the Profession initiative. The goal: Establish unity and clarity around the career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, accountability, supports, and compensation to define the early childhood education profession across all states and settings.

Difficult Current Realities

As a result of our country's collective failure to adequately invest in high-quality child care and early learning, children aren't getting what they need, families are paying more for child care than for housing, and the early childhood education workforce is paid so little that nearly half live in families that depend on public assistance. This scarcity environment has resulted in a disjointed, inequitable, and undervalued field in which some educators have increased their educational attainment (though not their compensation), while many other educators still work in states and settings where they are not required to meet even minimal educational qualifications.

The workforce is stratified, with many labels, designations, and roles that vary within and across states, sectors, and settings. The complexity and inconsistency means that differences in preparation, skills, and experience are not recognized. The hodge-podge of preparation programs of uneven quality disproportionately harms students of color, first-generation students, and working students—perpetuating

systemic inequalities and barriers to access and attainment at the bachelor's and associate degree levels. At an average of \$10.60 per hour, compensation is too low for the average early childhood educator to live on, while the sum of it is too high for the average early childhood setting—or family—to afford. Educators cannot make less, while parents cannot pay more.

A Pathway to a Unifying Framework

Implementation of the *Unifying Framework* embraces our future workforce and honors our existing one by recognizing and respecting their diversity, dedication, and experience. Given the history of our field, many current and prospective educators are justifiably skeptical that higher qualification requirements will be matched with needed resources and increased compensation. As such, the Power to the Profession Task Force organizations are making commitments to the field that we will *not* advocate for increased requirements or regulations without advocating for funding and timelines that address needs and strengths across all early learning settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A Distinct Profession

Within the broader early childhood field, the “early childhood education profession” will be made up in part of those who will be called “early childhood educators.” Their responsibilities are to care for and promote the learning, development, and well-being of children birth through age 8 to establish a foundation for lifelong learning and development. While some individuals who work directly with young children may choose to care for them without meeting the guidelines of the early childhood education profession, they will remain part of the *field*, and there will be accessible, equitable, and supportive pathways for them to move into the *profession*.

One Profession, Three Designations

Create a structure in which the cacophony of labels and roles is reduced to three distinct and meaningful designations (Early Childhood Educator I, II, and III) and all early childhood educators hold a license to practice. Although these professionals will be prepared to work together in various configurations as part of a teaching team, each designation has an associated scope of practice, expected level of professional preparation, and expected level of mastery of the *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*. Licensure assessments must have multiple measures, be affordable, and not reinforce cultural, gender, racial, and linguistic biases. Educators must have affordable, equitable, efficient, and high-quality paths to licensure.

Aligned Professional Preparation Pathways

Establish a primary set of pathways, aligned to the designations of the profession. Three primary professional preparation pathways—early childhood certificate/credential programs, early childhood associate degree programs, and early childhood bachelor’s degree/initial master’s degree programs—will prepare early childhood educators for licensure at the ECE I, II, and III designations, respectively. At each of these designations, early childhood educators must have a general early childhood education foundation before specializing. Other qualifying professional preparation programs, particularly non-degree-awarding programs or programs in freestanding institutions, will also be incorporated.

Professional Compensation

Increase state and federal investments in early childhood education to achieve fair compensation for the profession.

As early childhood educators are professionally prepared, they must be professionally compensated as well. Compensation must be comparable for those with comparable qualifications, experience, and job responsibilities, regardless of whether they work in a community-based center, elementary school, or family-based child care home. Compensation will include an adequate benefits package, increase commensurate with increased preparation and competency, and not be differentiated on the basis of the ages of children served. Public school salaries will serve as the minimum benchmark for comparable compensation, assuming comparable qualifications, experience, and job responsibilities.

Supportive Infrastructure, Shared Accountability

Create a broader, more coherent system, as other professions have done. In addition to preparation programs, the following sectors will also take on specific responsibilities and accountability provisions:

- ➔ **Professional preparation programs.** As public funding is increased and the necessary infrastructure is built,

The *Unifying Framework*, by establishing clarity about who early childhood educators are and what they will be accountable for, gives all of us and our allies a fighting chance at getting the significant and sustained public investments that our children and families need. These investments are well worth the cost. They are investments in our nation’s essential infrastructure, as important as other public goods such as highways and clean drinking water. They are investments in people, who are the most valuable resource our country has, and who represent the cornerstone of quality in early childhood education. With the voices of educators at the forefront of the movement, we must take advantage of this moment, for the good of our country’s children, families, educators, businesses, and economy.

professional preparation programs will be held accountable for supporting the early childhood education profession. They will commit to earning accreditation or recognition, ensuring graduates are proficient in the *Professional Standards and Competencies*, and providing seamless pathways so that individuals may advance their preparation and role.

- ➔ **Employers/owners.** As public funding is increased and the necessary infrastructure is built, employers/owners will be accountable for providing comparable compensation, benefits, and working conditions that promote the well-being, autonomy, and effectiveness of employees, and support the implementation of the profession’s standards. Owners and operators of family child care in particular will need additional support.
- ➔ **Professional governance.** An initial professional governance body (PGB) will support implementation of the *Unifying Framework* and advance the long-term sustainability of the profession. The PGB will set the guidelines for the profession and ensure that a significant portion of its members are individual early childhood educators, representing all settings, as well as public members who do not serve on behalf of organizations. The PGB will operate as a semiautonomous body initially hosted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and subject to a comprehensive, substantial, and independent review within the first three years.
- ➔ **Government agencies.** States will use increased and targeted funding, legislation, and smart regulations to advance these recommendations. The federal government will serve as the financing backbone for the early childhood education system, and will protect and invest in early childhood education as a public good. Both states and the federal government will engage with and be responsive to the public and to members of the profession and professional organizations (such as associations and unions) and address barriers to membership in such organizations.

Power to the Profession National Task Force Members

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees • American Federation of Teachers • Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators • Child Care Aware of America • Council for Professional Recognition • Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children • Early Care and Education Consortium • National Association for Family Child Care • National Association for the Education of Young Children • National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators • National Association of Elementary School Principals • National Education Association • National Head Start Association • Service Employees International Union • ZERO TO THREE • *Karen Ponder, Chair*