Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children

The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Tennessee

Highlights

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The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) was founded in 1999 to focus on achieving comprehensive public investments that enable and reward the early childhood workforce to deliver high-quality care and education for all children. To achieve this goal, CSCCE conducts cutting-edge research and proposes policy solutions aimed at improving how our nation prepares, supports, and rewards the early care and education workforce to ensure young children's optimal development.

Introduction

The importance of early care and education (ECE) to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic well-being is recognized up to the highest levels of government and in businesses, schools, and living rooms across the country. This understanding represents a dramatic shift from earlier decades and carries with it heightened expectations for what teachers of young children should know and be able to do,[1] especially in light of mounting evidence about inadequate and unequal educational quality for many children, particularly those of color and those living in low-income families.[2]

Tennessee is home to more than 463,000 children under the age of six. Sixty-three percent of these young children have all available parents in the workforce and, thus, potentially need child care.[3] Stakeholders and advocates in Tennessee remain committed to advancing strategies that improve ECE services, including workforce preparation and development in order to ensure that early educators have what they need to meet the complex needs of young children. Critical to these efforts is the establishment of a well-coordinated, comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can prepare and support an incoming generation of educators, while also strengthening the skills of the existing early education workforce. Institutions of higher education are crucial to meeting the evolving and increasing demands identified as improving developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population.

The following pages highlight findings from the *Tennessee Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory* and the extent to which early childhood higher education programs offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation. The full report, *Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children: The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Tennessee*, presents the full findings.

Distribution of Tennessee Early Childhood Degree Programs

Legend:
- ● No Early Childhood Degree Program
- ● Associate
- ● Bachelor's
- ● Associate and Bachelor's
- ● Bachelor's and Graduate
- ● Associate, Bachelor's, and Graduate

Part 1: Early Childhood Higher Education, Mapping the Scene

This section of the report examines program offerings, faculty characteristics, student supports, and institutional challenges.

FINDING ONE: PROGRAM OFFERINGS
Goals, Course Content, and Age-Group Focus

Most Tennessee early childhood degree programs identify their primary goal as teacher preparation across early childhood and elementary school settings. While these programs offer a range of topics related to child development and approaches to teaching, the age-group focus varied, depending on degree level. Associate degree programs were equally likely to require a focus on all age groups, birth through elementary school, while bachelor's degree programs were more likely to focus on elementary school children. Availability of content related to administration and leadership is inconsistent across degree levels.

FINDING TWO: FIELD-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES
Requirements and Age-Group Focus

Bachelor's degree programs are much more likely than associate degree programs to require students to participate in student teaching or practica. When field-based learning experiences are required, students across degree programs are much more likely to be required to participate in a practicum experience. However, there is little consistency as to the duration, frequency, or age-group focus of these field-based experiences.

FINDING THREE: PORTRAIT OF FACULTY
Employment Status, Demographics, and Professional Background

Tennessee early childhood degree programs are staffed with a mix of part- and full-time faculty. Faculty members are primarily women, white/Caucasian, monolingual (speaking only English), and are less diverse than Tennessee's child population. Most faculty members across degree levels reported having had academic preparation specific to early childhood, and most associate degree faculty members reported having worked in a different ECE professional role in the past decade.

FINDING FOUR: FACULTY PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERTISE
Faculty Perspectives on Course Content, Teaching Experience and Capacity, Professional Development Background, and Professional Development Interests

Tennessee early childhood degree faculty were more likely to consider the inclusion of socioemotional development important, compared to other course content. In general, faculty members were more likely to report feeling that content areas were "very important" for teachers working with elementary-age children. Across content areas, faculty members reported feeling least capable of preparing teachers to work with infants and toddlers, as compared to older children. Tennessee early childhood degree program faculty members reported particular interest in professional development related to working with children who have experienced trauma, children from diverse cultural backgrounds, and dual language learners, as well as teaching practitioners to use child assessment effectively.

FINDING FIVE: SUPPORTING STUDENTS
Services Offered and Articulation

Tennessee early childhood degree programs offer multiple types of support services specifically tailored to help students access resources and strengthen their academic skills. Associate degree programs are more likely to offer blended programs (combining online and in-person courses), but both associate and bachelor's degree programs offer few alternative class schedules or classes in community locations. Across degree levels, programs provide little academic support for students and even less specifically for adult English-language learners. Although most degree programs participating in the *Inventory* reported having an articulation agreement with at least one other college or university, inconsistent articulation was reported as a challenge by the majority of associate degree programs.

FINDING SIX: PROGRAM CHALLENGES
Faculty and Program Needs

Tennessee early childhood degree programs experience challenges related to time and resources required to fulfill faculty responsibilities, as well as the need for faculty members with specific expertise, such as teaching dual language learners. The majority of program leads, especially those teaching at the associate degree level, indicated that the low pay of the ECE field has led to challenges in recruiting and retaining students.

Part 2: Early Childhood Higher Education, An Evolving Landscape

This section of the report examines how institutions of higher education are adapting to emerging research in three key domains: family engagement, early mathematics, and dual language learners.

FINDING SEVEN: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider the inclusion of family engagement to be important in the preparation of early childhood teachers. Multiple topics related to family engagement are embedded in all levels of degree programs, with a higher focus on school-age children, as compared to infants/toddlers and preschoolers. Faculty members reported feeling most capable of teaching topics related to family engagement at the elementary-school level. Faculty members expressed varied levels of interest in professional development in this topic area.

FINDING EIGHT: EARLY MATHEMATICS
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Across degree levels, programs were unlikely to offer mathematics content, especially as it relates to infants and toddlers. Faculty members were likely to rate the inclusion of early mathematics as "very important" for preschool- and school-age children, but not for infants and toddlers. More than one-half of faculty members across degree levels reported that they had not participated in math-related professional development in the past two years.

FINDING NINE: DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Although faculty members consider the inclusion of teaching young dual language learners (DLLs) to be important in the preparation of teachers, they reported feeling least prepared to teach this topic, compared to all other topics asked about in the *Inventory*. While multiple topics focused on dual language learners are embedded in required course content in bachelor's degree programs, associate degree programs were less likely to offer content related to DLLs. Across degree levels, programs were most likely to offer content in this area as it pertains to teaching school-age children rather than infants/toddlers and preschoolers. Faculty members were unlikely to have participated in professional development about DLLs, and interest in ongoing dual language learner-related professional development varied by degree level and topic area.

Recommendations

Here, we outline an approach to strengthening early childhood workforce development in Tennessee, with an emphasis on higher education. Efforts should be coordinated among key stakeholders in Tennessee (including the Tennessee Office of Early Learning, the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, and the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance) and are predicated on identifying new resources from state, federal, and philanthropic sources.

1. Invest resources in early childhood higher education degree programs and increase access and supports for students

- Invest more resources for early childhood degree programs across the state, including funding for program planning and improvement and expanding access to students in areas of the state that have limited access to brick-and-mortar colleges (see map on page 2); and
- Implement or expand resources and supports that promote student success in attaining their degrees, including:
  - Blended and non-traditional formats for degree programs;
  - Alternative class schedules and locations;
  - Targeted academic advising and tutoring;
  - Cohort models;
  - Academic skill support in reading, writing, mathematics, and computer/technological skills; and
  - Financial resources for students and financial aid counseling.

2. Unify expectations and pathways for early childhood workforce preparation

- Build on the professional development steps outlined in the existing Tennessee Star-Quality Child Care Program to establish a more uniform system for certifying teachers and administrators throughout the state that reflects foundational knowledge for early educators across age groups and auspices aligned with the Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards;
- Align early education degree program course requirements with state standards and competencies, such as the Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards; and
- Provide clear roadmaps to identify whether the course of study in a particular degree program is intended to prepare practitioners for the demands of teaching young children and/or for leading ECE programs or whether the course of study is designed for other purposes.

3. Strengthen program content and equity across the age span

To strengthen required content and align it with child development and teacher preparation research and to equalize required content for all children across the birth-to-age-eight continuum, we recommend that resources be provided to develop and support participation in faculty professional development to enable faculty members across degree programs and institutions to collaborate with other experts to develop and enhance program content standards related to:

- **Child Development and Pedagogy,** preparing teachers to work with children of different ages, including:
    - Infant development and learning across multiple domains; and
    - Methods of teaching and pedagogy for children of different ages;
- **Early Mathematics,** addressing:
    - Children's mathematical understanding from infancy through early elementary grades; and
    - Developmentally appropriate pedagogy for early mathematics instruction across the birth-to-age-eight age span;
- **Dual Language Learners,** emphasizing:
    - Recognition of the value and importance of supporting children's home-language development as they also learn English, with an emphasis on very young children;
    - Strategies for using observation and assessment in teaching young dual language learners and strategies to support the mathematical, literacy, language, cognitive, and socioemotional development of young dual language learners; and
    - An understanding of the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry and retention in the ECE field; and
- **Trauma**, preparing practitioners to work with children and families who have experienced trauma.

4. Strengthen the application of field-based learning experiences

- Provide resources and support to faculty members across degree programs and institutions to develop degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, with opportunities focused on children from infancy through preschool;
- Develop differentiated field experiences for pre- and in-service students (for pre-service students, extend more opportunities for in-depth student teaching experiences, and for in-service students, explore and implement models that accommodate those already working in classrooms, while also providing quality experiences);
- Implement additional opportunities for student teaching experiences, in which students are engaged in classrooms for a longer period of time and are given increasing responsibility related to curriculum development, instruction, and assessment; and
- Provide field-based learning opportunities for students to engage with:
    - Infants and toddlers;
    - Children with special needs;
    - Children who are dual language learners;
    - Families; and
    - Community organizations that support children and families.

5. Improve and expand articulation agreements across institutions

- Increase the number of articulation agreements between institutions that grant associate and bachelor's degrees;
- Provide dedicated personnel at community colleges for student advising to ensure that students have adequate information and guidance for seamless transfer between institutions;
- Ensure that articulation agreements are comprehensive and that coursework is aligned across institutions so that students may realize the maximum benefits of the agreements; and
- Expand the availability of and access to portable and stackable certificates that articulate and lead to degree completion across higher education systems.

6. Build a leadership pipeline reflective of the diversity of the state's practitioner and child populations

To create a clearer leadership pipeline and ensure that leaders have comparable skills across age groups and settings, we recommend:

- Identifying the appropriate course of study and degree level (associate, bachelor's, graduate) for each leadership role based on the specific skills and knowledge outlined in the Tennessee Early Learning Development Standards;
- Ensuring training and ongoing professional opportunities for faculty members teaching coursework on supervision, administration, and leadership development in undergraduate and graduate degree programs;
- Identifying options to create leadership pathways and/or programs; and
- Ensuring an adequate number of degree programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level that offer the appropriate course content.

To increase the diversity of the early childhood higher education faculty, we recommend:

- Investigating and developing strategies used in other professions (e.g., health, education, social welfare) to create faculty development programs — such as a fellowship or grant — intended to increase ethnic and linguistic diversity among faculty, particularly in key leadership positions.

7. Increase faculty supports

- Establish an ongoing fund with well-articulated expectations for faculty members' professional development honoraria and program improvement; and
- Ensure adequate resources, including funding, staffing, and dedicated time for program planning and improvement, as well as effective faculty mentoring.

Endnotes

A complete list of references can be found in the full narrative report.

[1] Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years After the National Child Care Staffing Study.* Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from http://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2014/ReportFINAL.pdf.

[2] Hernandez, D.J. (2011). *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.* Albany, NY: Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.fcd-us.org/double-jeopardy-how-third-grade-reading-skills-and-poverty-influence-high-school-graduation/; Karoly, L.A. (2009). *Preschool Adequacy and Efficiency in California: Issues, Policy Options, and Recommendations.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG889.pdf; Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M.R., Espinosa, L.M., Gormley, W.T., Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K.A., Phillips, D., & Zaslow, M.J. (2013). *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education.* Washington, DC: Society for Research in Child Development & New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

[3] Annie. E. Casey Foundation. (2016). *Child Population by Race and Age Group – 2016.* Kids Count Data Center. Retrieved from http://datacenter.kidscount.org/.
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