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## **Realizing the Promise of Early Educator Apprenticeships**

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# REALIZING THE PROMISE OF EARLY EDUCATOR APPRENTICESHIPS

Brandy Jones Lawrence, Emily Sharrock, and Courtney Parkerson



***Imagine what would happen if every child—regardless of race, income, or opportunity—experienced consistent, developmentally meaningful interactions and experiences from birth.***

The first three years of life offer the most powerful window for positive intervention, critical to ameliorating the inequalities in outcomes we witness later in life.<sup>1</sup> Gaps in behavioral and cognitive development are present in children as young as nine months and grow significantly larger by the time a child is 24 months.<sup>2</sup> Responsive caregivers have the power to mitigate these impacts, and it is therefore crucial that these educators receive quality training and support.<sup>3</sup> Residency and apprenticeship programs can enable early childhood educators to earn credentials and degrees through on-the-job learning, recognizing the value of their existing competencies and the importance of practical experience in the classroom.



It is imperative that we pay attention to the quality of the learning experiences children have while in child care as we work to rebuild the nearly 4.5 million child care slots at risk of disappearing in the wake of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Due to a gross underinvestment of public resources, less than 10 percent of child care programs were operating at a level that would be considered high quality prior to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> This means that millions of children are at risk of being denied the developmentally meaningful experiences we know are critical to reaching their full potential. Apprenticeships, or “educator residencies,” as we refer to them in **Investing in the Birth-to-Three Workforce: A New Vision to Strengthen the Foundation for All Learning**, offer a roadmap for rebuilding the workforce at this critical moment with quality and equity at the center. High-quality apprenticeship programs have the potential to serve as the backbone of a national effort to address the supply shock we expect as our economy rebounds. A national system of robust apprenticeship programs could serve as an early childhood educator corps—both rebuilding our supply of care while also ensuring educators at long last receive the high-quality clinical practice and coaching required for the complex task of supporting early brain development. To achieve the intended impact, a high-quality apprenticeship program will require investment of adequate public resources at the federal level along with specific provisions for implementation as outlined below.

Supporting early learning is complex work and requires skilled educator-caregivers. Sustainably investing in quality means investing in the workforce in two ways: high-quality training and equitable salaries with benefits. Done right, early educator apprenticeships can deliver on both. They should be a pathway for diverse candidates (both new to the field and currently working in the field) to earn formal credentials through coursework and job-embedded coaching, while earning a salary and avoiding costly student loans. **K-12 teacher residency** or apprenticeship programs have been effective in improving school systems and studies consistently demonstrate strong, positive differences in candidate diversity, their preparedness on initial entry into the profession, and retention.<sup>6,7,8,9,10</sup> Importantly, the opportunity to earn formal credentials also puts early childhood educators on a clear path to justify parity compensation with similarly credentialed K-12 teachers.

While they have the power to be transformative, implementation must address the following issues if apprenticeship programs are to deliver on their potential for real and lasting change. These considerations must be taken into account while guidance, requirements, and funding are identified at the federal level and then as states and local communities devise strategies for implementation.

A photograph of a child's play area. In the foreground, there are several stacks of light-colored wooden blocks. In the background, there are more blocks and some small toys, including a yellow stick figure, a green stick figure, and a yellow cat figurine. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor play area.

## Considerations for Funding and Implementation

- 1 *Connect Apprenticeship Programs with Compensation Reform*** Apprenticeships must be directly tied to improved financial status through predictable and sustainable increases in salary.
- 2 *Prioritize Infant/Toddler Educators to Fill Critical Gaps in Access*** Pending federal legislation prioritizes rural communities, where child care deserts are most extreme. However, it does not call attention to the shortfall in infant/toddler capacity that impacts nearly every community throughout the country. Infant/toddler educators need access to high-quality training to deliver on the important role they play establishing the foundation for lifelong learning.
- 3 *Design Program Requirements to Accommodate the Existing Workforce*** Apprenticeships must be designed to accommodate and attract the existing workforce, not just a pipeline of new educators.
- 4 *Design Programs that Meet the Unique Needs of Home-Based Child Care*** Careful planning is needed to ensure these models support the settings that serve most infants and toddlers.
- 5 *Define Quality Coaching*** To be effective, models must include intensive and sustained opportunities for coaching (or supervised fieldwork and advisement) with an experienced educator that can facilitate a process of self-reflection and professional growth.
- 6 *Invest in Overall Program-Level Improvement*** Additional investment will be required to ensure that there is an adequate number of child care programs poised to serve as effective learning environments for apprentices.



## Considerations for Funding and Implementation

### 1 Connect Apprenticeship Programs with Compensation Reform

Apprenticeships must be directly tied to improved financial status through predictable and sustainable increases in salary.

Any new investment to improve the quality of early education and child care must be coupled with a path toward equitable compensation and benefits with similarly credentialed elementary school teachers. On average, compensation levels in the field have increased only one percent in 25 years, and are currently so low that nearly half of the early childhood educator workforce is forced to rely on public assistance.<sup>11,12</sup> This makes the task of attracting and retaining a highly skilled workforce nearly impossible. For educators to make the commitment to earn additional credentials or to make the early childhood education field an attractive one to enter, financial incentive must exist not only while the apprentice is participating in the program, but also upon completion of the program. Apprenticeship programs require an increase in wages as the apprentice progresses through various stages of the program; however, in many cases those wage increases or stipends cease after the apprentice has completed the program. While some financial incentives to attain additional credentials do exist within the early childhood field (e.g., tax credits or salary supplements), the overall baseline and temporary nature of these supplements do not create the predictable and steady salary increases needed to retain talent. Investments in training will be wasted if we cannot retain educators within the early childhood field.

**Commitment to compensation reform and the goal of pay parity for the early care and education field should be a primary consideration in assessing a locality's ability to implement a successful apprenticeship program and whether grants are awarded. We outline strategies for states and local communities to consider that can begin to lay the groundwork for pay parity in our brief, *Equitable Compensation for the Child Care Workforce: Within Reach and Worth the Investment*.**

## 2 Prioritize Infant/Toddler Educators to Fill Critical Gaps in Access

Pending federal legislation prioritizes rural communities, where child care deserts are most extreme. However, it does not call attention to the shortfall in infant/toddler capacity that impacts nearly every community throughout the country. Infant/toddler educators need access to high-quality training to deliver on the important role they play establishing the foundation for lifelong learning.

Nationally the ratio of demand to capacity for infants and toddlers in licensed settings is 5:1, classifying more than 95 percent of the counties studied as infant and toddler child care deserts. These shortages are especially pronounced in rural counties where the ratio of demand to capacity increases to 9:1.<sup>13</sup> The creation of a talent pipeline to meet the demand for these difficult-to-staff areas is critical if we are going to make progress in closing the gap in access to high-quality child care throughout the country.

Additionally, infant/toddler educators are often left out of many professional development initiatives. Despite their critical role in building the foundation for all future learning, a lack of credential requirements throughout the field has led to little incentive for institutions of higher education or other professional development organizations to develop robust models of training and ongoing professional learning for the infant/toddler workforce.<sup>14</sup> Apprenticeship programs that prioritize infant/toddler educators can fill this void, offering opportunities for clinical practice and coaching, combined with coursework and the chance to earn formal credentials. These reforms will make significant progress toward recognizing the child care workforce as a critical component of the education field and shifting the public mindset from babysitting to a profession worthy of investment.

**Priority should be given to programs designed for educators working in areas where there is the largest shortfall in capacity, including educators working with children from birth through age three.**

## 3 Design Program Requirements to Accommodate the Existing Workforce

**Apprenticeships must be designed to accommodate and attract the existing workforce, not just a pipeline of new educators.**

The existing workforce, especially infant/toddler educators, are on average more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse than K-12 educators.<sup>15</sup> And, this diversity is often concentrated in roles with fewer educational requirements and lower pay (home-based providers vs. center-based providers, or assistant teachers vs. lead teachers or program directors).<sup>16</sup> Black educators working with children ages birth to age 5 are paid 84 cents for every dollar earned by their White counterparts.<sup>17</sup> By reaching the existing workforce, apprenticeships can begin to rectify deep inequities throughout the early childhood field if they are designed to be accessible to the existing workforce (in both center-based and home-based programs) rather than to merely supplant it with a new pipeline of talent.

To be accessible, program design will need to take into account the different needs of the existing workforce. Within the child care field, there are many skilled educators who possess essential competencies and have gained significant knowledge through lived experiences. These educators deserve the opportunity to earn formal credentials through a pathway that values their knowledge and experience, so that they too can strengthen their practice and become eligible for the compensation they deserve. A competency-based approach values the funds of knowledge experienced and diverse educators bring to the table. Delivering coursework in a flexible format (both in person and online) accommodates educators who are working full time. And, experienced educators should also have the opportunity to complete their apprenticeships within their existing jobs.<sup>18</sup>

**When developing guidelines and selecting apprenticeship programs for grants, priority should be given to those designed to accommodate the current workforce, not just a new pipeline of educators. Professionally recognizing the workforce should not mean further entrenching existing inequities or driving those currently in the field out of work.**

## 4 Design Programs that Meet the Unique Needs of Home-Based Child Care

Careful planning is needed to ensure these models support the settings that serve most infants and toddlers.

Home-based (or family child care) providers, who serve the majority of infants and toddlers in this country, face barriers when it comes to accessing many existing apprenticeship or similar programs.<sup>19</sup> For example, they are small business owners, not employees, which makes it difficult to identify a sponsor for the program. They also do not have access to more experienced educators or supervisors within their programs who can serve as their coach. Flexibility must be built into the guidelines to take into account the unique circumstance of home-based providers to ensure that this critical sector of the workforce is not left out of the opportunity to attain formal credentials and increased compensation. Failing to do so would create a bifurcated system that devalues the critical work home-based providers do. Apprenticeship models could be implemented through, or in partnership with, intermediaries like family child care networks to ensure that home-based providers are engaged and their unique needs and experiences are accounted for within the program design. The Family Child Care On-the-Job Training Program in California offers one example of an on-the-job learning program tailored to the needs of home-based providers.<sup>20</sup>

**Guidelines must have flexibility to accommodate the unique needs and circumstances of home-based child care providers. Denying this sector of the field access to high-quality training and the opportunity to earn formal credentials is detrimental to the workforce and the children they serve.**

## 5 Define Quality Coaching

To be effective, models must include intensive and sustained opportunities for coaching (or supervised fieldwork and advisement) with an experienced educator that can facilitate a process of self-reflection and professional growth.

Given what we know about adult learning and impactful professional development experiences, supervision or coaching coupled with opportunities for reflection and advisement are the most critical elements to deepen expertise during on-the-job learning. Supervision from seasoned educators (e.g., core faculty from institutions of higher education, coaches affiliated with professional development organizations, or experienced educators or site directors) will support apprentices' ability to connect theory, research, and coursework to practice and reflect on their growth as educators. Supervision can blend individual and group meetings to empower apprentices to find their own voice as educators, as well as learn from their peers' experiences. Ultimately, aspiring educators will internalize the quality of the learning environment created for them and develop their own style that will reflect their personal experience in learning to become an educator.<sup>21</sup>

While coaching and supervision are embedded within the existing guidelines for apprenticeship programs, it is important that these regulations are clear about the value of coaching and set expectations that ensure quality coaching, such as dosage (i.e., the frequency with which the coach meets and observes the apprentice) and a clear set of coaching competencies. In many cases, there is value in identifying a site-level "mentor," as well as an external coach who can push into a child care center or home-based program to offer supervision and support. This will be especially important in the child care field where a sufficient number of high-quality placement sites might not be readily available.

**For apprenticeship programs to have the desired impact on educator practice and program quality, a deep investment in sustained and intensive, high-quality coaching and supervision is necessary.**



## 6 Invest in Overall Program-Level Improvement

**Additional investment will be required to ensure that there is an adequate number of child care programs poised to serve as effective learning environments for apprentices.**

Apprenticeship programs can begin by prioritizing child care programs where apprentices will be immersed in high-quality learning environments. Investments in site-level coaching and leadership support can make a difference in transforming a program's learning environment and level of care. Communities where apprenticeship models are being developed could begin with a qualitative assessment of all child care programs. Those that are poised to serve as effective learning environments could begin to host apprenticeships, while those in need of more support could be assigned a coach to work with site directors and educators within the program to strengthen practice and improve the overall quality of care. Enabling brief intervisitations with other child care programs, while ensuring the time away does not disrupt the continuity of care, can also help to bolster an apprentice's exposure to high-quality practice. Another option would be to allocate funding to pay salaries so that high-quality sites could hire additional apprentices. This would allow a high-quality program to train more than the number of available positions that exist, enabling more new educators to be trained in high-quality programs faster.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, additional programs must be brought up to the level we would want emulated and reinforced for apprentices. Investments in capacity-building alongside implementation of apprenticeship programs can pave the way for the scale needed to meet demand.

**In order to achieve the desired impact, apprenticeship programs must be able to scale. This will require more high-quality placement sites than currently exist in the field. Intentional investments are needed to build the capacity of child care programs so that they are capable of serving as effective training sites.**





## Key Design Principles for Effective Early Educator Apprenticeship Models

- Placement in high-quality settings poised to serve as effective learning environments for apprentice
- Intensive and sustained coaching to translate theory and research into practice
- Opportunities to reflect and learn alongside other residents in advisory or cohort groups
- Accessible coursework delivered in a blended format (online and in person)
- Coursework tailored to the needs of the early educator and child care workforce using a competency-based approach
- Scholarships to cover all costs of participation
- Sustained financial incentives during and after completion of the program that puts early educators and child care workers on a path to pay parity with similarly credentialed elementary educators



## Supporting Implementation

To develop high-quality early educator apprenticeship programs with these considerations in mind, many states and local communities will benefit from support. An investment in technical assistance should accompany the grants allocated to implement early educator apprenticeship programs. Some examples include:

- Developing a strategy for increasing the number of high-quality placement sites for apprentices over time through site-level coaching and leadership development for program directors and administrators
- Building, training, and supporting an intentional approach to coaching and creating a coaching corps to strengthen the advisory and supervision component
- Supporting higher education partners in program design to address the ways in which traditional programs need to be adapted for this workforce, such as:
  - Designing accessible pathways to earn credentials
  - Building relevant course content about infant/toddler development
  - Building on existing mastery-based competency approaches that recognize educators' experience and knowledge
- Developing a parity compensation scale that outlines just compensation for early childhood educators and aligns to career pathways

A connected research agenda should also be funded to capture best practices and demonstrate what is possible when strategic investments are made to sustainably invest in quality. This research must go deeper than reporting requirements related to retention and completion of the apprenticeship program. It could include questions to inform the impact of compensation reform on child outcomes and lessons learned from new approaches to serving existing educators, for example.

All of these recommendations require additional public resources; however, these investments will ensure more significant returns. Research indicates that every dollar invested in quality early childhood programs yields a \$4-\$9 return in individual and community outcomes. The earlier services begin, the higher the return on investment.<sup>23,24</sup> The implementation of high-quality apprenticeship programs will lead to higher retention, improved program quality, equitable access to training and just compensation, and increased opportunities for children to reach their full potential. Now is the time to make this investment in the quality of our child care system. The impacts will be transformational for both the individual child and society at large.

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