

A Unified Foundation to Support a Highly Qualified Early Childhood Workforce

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As a result of the recommendations from the report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (IOM and NRC, 2015), a group of representatives from national organizations came together in a series of meetings in 2016 to discuss how to work as a unified foundation to support state efforts to improve the quality of the early childhood workforce serving children from birth through age 8 in an aligned and coordinated way. This paper is the result of this year-long process to identify a unified voice and a set of unified actions that if implemented could advance a highly qualified professional field of practice.

Problem

The early care and education system has not kept pace with the rapid changes in family life and new scientific

understandings about how young children learn. According to the report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, early care and education for children from birth through age 8 is best described as fragmented (IOM and NRC, 2015). Many families struggle to identify high-quality settings and places for their children to develop and learn during their critical, formative years. There is also a shortage of adequately prepared and appropriately compensated adults (referred to as the “early childhood workforce” throughout this paper) to meet the needs of children. The report clearly shows the linkages between the well-being of children from birth to age 8 and the well-being of adults who care for and educate them. Therefore, supporting a strong and fairly compensated workforce is critical to the future health and development of children. While the report calls for identifying pathways to higher qualifications

for the early childhood workforce, policies to increase qualifications and competencies may yield unintended, negative consequences if a system is not in place to support the preparation and ongoing professional development of the early childhood workforce. Without such a system, too many children will continue attending poor-quality settings and fail to reach their potential.

Disparities in access to high-quality early care and education exist across socioeconomic status, ethnicity, immigrant status, and geography. These disparities are in part driven by misalignment or inadequate program standards across all care and education settings, differing professional standards for the early childhood workforce, and inequitable resources allocated to implement high-quality care and education in all settings. First, **program standards** for the early childhood workforce, ranging from home visitors to family child care providers to center-based and early elementary school teachers, depend more on funding streams and settings than on what the science indicates children need from the early childhood workforce to grow and develop along a healthy trajectory. Second, **professional standards** for the preparation and professional development of the early childhood workforce are based more on what the market and public funding can support than what is best for young children. Third, **resources** available in settings that serve children from birth through age 8 are based on different policies and funding streams rather than what all children need to reach their full developmental potential.

The field needs to come together to coordinate and align the early care and education provided to young children from birth through age 8 to best support children's growth and development and maximize the effectiveness of investments made in children today. There are significant missed opportunities to leverage strengths and resources across programs and align services to best serve the needs of children. The *Transforming the Workforce* report highlights the scientific evidence about what children require to reach their developmental potential, and the skills and knowledge that the early childhood workforce is required to have to support children to do so. By coming together around the scientific knowledge base and putting children first, the early childhood workforce can move from fragmentation toward working collaboratively as a unified foundation.

Solution

We recognize the need to come together around a shared evidence base and set of evidence-informed policies and practices to improve the quality of the early childhood workforce and to build a professional pipeline for the workforce serving children from birth through age 8, particularly as this period serves as the foundation for the education and development of children as they continue to grow and develop. Together, we are committed to working from the knowledge base on children's development and what the research indicates about workforce skills, to guide action that strengthens the birth through age 8 workforce. We need all voices to converge around a common agenda to accelerate progress by working together. The magnitude of the problem and importance of actionable solutions right now necessitates us to be more effective and efficient in serving children and families. Together we believe that we can address the growing disparities in quality early care and education for young children in the United States, as well as build a high-quality professional field of practice.

The impetus for our collective commitment and plans for collaborative action are grounded in the findings in the report *Transforming the Workforce*. The authoring committee of the report recommended:

To provide guidance and support for efforts at the local, state, and national levels, national nongovernmental organizations that offer resources and support for the care and education workforce should collaborate to provide and periodically update shared, coherent foundational guidance for care and education professionals working with children from birth through age 8. This collaborative effort should represent professional roles across settings and age ranges to improve the consistency and continuity of high-quality developmental support and learning experiences for children as they age. (p. 545)

In addition, "Local, state, and national governmental and nongovernmental organizations, institutions of higher education, and those who provide professional learning should use this guidance to align and augment their own standards for care and education professionals who work with children from birth through age 8" (p. 545).

The report summarizes the science on what all children require as they grow and develop, and it also

Box 1 | Shared Beliefs That Drive Our Collective Work

- The report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* and its recommendations are the starting point for our work across sectors, age groups, and professional roles.
- Aligned and coordinated systems across ages, sectors, and settings are necessary to drive quality and equity.
- An understanding and acceptance of each stakeholder's unique contributions to the unifying foundation is necessary to have the greatest impact on the field.
- Family values, cultures, and choice must be included in our collective actions to support a diverse, well-prepared, and compensated workforce.

unifies all bodies working on behalf of young children. We are committed to collectively working toward moving the recommendations to implementation in a coordinated and aligned way.

We are building a unified foundation for intentional alignment and coordinated action to provide high-quality care and education to children from birth through age 8 across roles, settings, and sectors (see *Box 1*). Collectively, we commit to building relationships that are grounded in a common understanding and knowledge base for what the early childhood workforce needs to know and be able to do to best support children's growth and development. **Our work together is bidirectional** and grounded in learning, sharing, and building on each of our unique skills and services. Our relationships and commitment are core to building a unifying foundation, which aims to be more impactful than the sum of each organization operating in isolation. **We also aim to create a collaborative infrastructure that can be a trusted source** for the field to come to for up-to-date scientific knowledge on child development and workforce competencies, technical assistance, and policy resources.

Collaborative Action

Authentic change at the local, state, and national levels occurs when people and organizations have a shared vision, pool their resources and knowledge, and work together in a coordinated manner. Therefore, as authors of this paper we are making a sincere and public commitment to working collaboratively toward creating a unifying foundation to support early childhood workforce improvement efforts taking place across the country. We recognize the profound importance of collective action and hope our commitment and actions will provide a model for this collaborative approach at

different levels of government. We know that together we are greater than the sum of our parts and we can make transformative change through coordinated and aligned action.

To foster an environment of engagement and collaboration among the many people working across the United States to transform the birth through age 8 workforce, we aim to act in coordination in following the seven principles of engagement (see *Box 2*).

To implement the changes envisioned by the *Transforming the Workforce* report, a systematic way of continually reviewing the research, providing and updating guidance for policy and practice, and disseminating and applying the guidance are needed. Currently, on many of the most pressing workforce issues, research findings do not lead to definitive conclusions and can be interpreted differently depending on the source. At best, they point to emerging, tentative consensus. As a result policymakers, program leaders, and practitioners are often seeking relevant research evidence to draw conclusions and make decisions. Coherent guidance to inform their decisions would be optimal. While ambiguity will never be eliminated and innovations could come from diverse strategies, current attempts to improve the quality of the early childhood workforce are too susceptible to unreliable sources of information, misinterpretation of the research, and haphazard trial-and-error approaches that fail to significantly advance the field's understanding of "what works."

With this current situation as the context, we propose a collaborative partnership, beginning with the authors of this paper, that engages in the following actions, which we believe are necessary to provide coherent, evidence-based guidance to the field:

1. **Continually review the research and lessons from existing national, state, and local efforts**

Box 2 | Seven Principles of Engagement

- **Build.** We will learn about, recognize, and build on existing and new activities that use these practices and principles as foundations for our work.
- **Incorporate.** We will incorporate, apply, and integrate learnings across partner organizations to expedite progress in both policy and practice.
- **Leverage.** We will leverage each other's unique roles, knowledge, and skills, thus avoiding unnecessary duplication. We will collaborate and join forces to advance goals rather than operate in isolation from each other.
- **Communicate.** We will share our plans for action and our institutional knowledge, and disseminate findings to each other and to the public as a collective voice for the field.
- **Respond.** We will respond in good faith to queries from partner organizations and the public to share knowledge and accelerate solutions.
- **Promote.** We will work to promote the voices of the professions we seek to advance and promote professionals in leadership roles, particularly in establishing definitions and standards to guide professional practice.
- **Engage.** We will prioritize multidirectional conversations with states, localities, and the profession to draw on their wealth of expertise.

and develop coherent guidance for policymakers, program leaders, and care and education professionals. The work of the collective partnership would be seen as the “go-to” place for early childhood workforce research and policy, providing a “north star” for national, state, and local stakeholders who aim to improve the quality of the birth through age 8 workforce.

2. **Disseminate and apply the guidance through various mechanisms that match the goal and audience,** such as electronic communications, virtual and in-person learning opportunities, and technical assistance for policy development and implementation. Some activities may focus on increasing awareness, while others may help cultivate political will for change or build capacity for implementation.
3. **Help local and state programs, leaders, agencies, and advocates identify organizations that provide technical assistance (TA)** and coordinate these services to ensure they complement and build on each other. The multitude of TA providers can be difficult to navigate for decision makers and state or local organizations, thus serving as a clearinghouse for TA, and identifying the TA that matches needs, the collaborative partnership can serve as a much needed resource to those strengthening and supporting the workforce.

4. **Nongovernmental organizations leverage opportunities, as appropriate to their roles, to promote more adequate and sustainable investments at local, state, and national levels in the birth through age 8 workforce and its systems of supports to advance the recommendations found in the *Transforming the Workforce* report.** Because existing resources are inadequate to support and sustain a high-quality early childhood workforce, these organizations can identify ways to increase effective investments for a thriving field. These organizations can also explore and learn from bold, new approaches for financing sustainable systems to support the workforce, including how to use resources more effectively and innovatively.

5. **Engage the early childhood workforce in all of the above activities.** The early childhood workforce, including all individuals working with young children from birth through age 8, are central to our purpose, and we value and commit to their active participation in developing and shaping high-quality practices and policies for their professional practice.

We will continue to explore the feasibility of this proposed partnership and determine its structure via an iterative process with organizations and stakeholders across the country at the national, state, and local

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levels. The structure that supports these actions may be designed around the five action items above, within the context of the agreed upon principles of engagement and collaboration of all organizations who are working to support the birth through age 8 workforce.

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