



Better Teachers, Better Preschools:

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT LINKED TO TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS

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Much of the debate on early childhood care and education centers around adequate supply of providers. But even if the current level of service stayed the same, there is much work to be done on improving quality of early childhood programs, particularly in the area of teacher quality. The National Institute for Early Education Research explains what current teacher qualifications are and how higher educational standards can markedly improve early childhood development.

The nation has yet to fully appreciate the importance of high standards for preschool teacher knowledge and expertise, as it does for K-12 teachers. This is evident in the minimal requirements for early childhood teachers in Head Start and many state preschool and child care programs. Early childhood teacher qualifications are low relative to other professions and have not been improving over time.

What qualifications do preschool teachers need now?

America's preschools vary widely in teacher education requirements, to some extent because standards vary across the different government agencies that sponsor and regulate Head Start, public school, and other preschool and child care programs. The consequence is that preschool education is less effective than it should be, and educational effectiveness varies depending on the government agency responsible.

Rhode Island is *the only state that requires a bachelor's degree* for teachers in all early education programs, including licensed child-care centers. All its teachers must have a four-year degree and early childhood education teacher certification.

Preschool programs operated by public schools employ the best-educated teachers. Nearly 90 percent of preschool teachers in public school programs have at least a four-year college degree. Typically they have degrees that require specialized preparation in early childhood education. Most early childhood teachers in public schools have a teaching credential or license that has requirements beyond completing a bachelor's degree.

State-funded prekindergarten programs are not always provided through the public schools, however, and vary in whether they require a four-year degree or a teaching credential. For example, Georgia's universal prekindergarten program has yet to fully implement a requirement that teachers have even a two-year college degree.

Until recently, the federal government's Head Start program did not require teachers to have any higher education. Only a quarter of Head Start's teachers have four-year college degrees. Others have some college and many have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, which may not require

college coursework. Congress has increased the accountability of Head Start for enhancing children's school readiness. However, it was reluctant to substantially increase standards for Head Start teachers, requiring only that half of all teachers have a two-year college degree by 2003. Until Head Start teacher qualifications and compensation are raised, Americans won't see the large educational gains for disadvantaged children that was the impetus for the creation of Head Start, based on studies of high-quality preschool programs.

Government regulation and funding for child care provide little support for teacher quality, with the lowest teacher education standards of any early childhood program. As a result, compensation is poor and teacher qualifications are highly variable. Less than half the teachers in child care centers have four-year college degrees, and many teachers have just a high school education. More teachers in child care centers have just a high school education than in Head Start and other programs.

Forty states require no formal education beyond a high school diploma for teachers in child care centers. Many of the states require some kind of early childhood-specific preparation, but this can be as little as a few hours of training. Only three states (California, Massachusetts and Vermont) require training to be obtained through college courses.

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What does research tell us about the link between teacher qualifications and child development?

A preschool teacher with a college education is more effective. Studies have found teacher education to be related to the quality of preschool education and the development of children in preschool classrooms. Both general education and specific preparation in early childhood education have been found to predict teaching quality. Better-educated teachers have more positive, sensitive and responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences, and are less authoritarian, punitive and detached. The result is better social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development for the child.

Several studies of state-supported preschool programs have found that quality is higher in programs where more teachers have at least a four-year college degree. The higher quality of preschool programs in the public schools is plausibly related to better pay and benefits that enable them to hire teachers with at least a B.A. Teachers with four-year degrees also have been found to be better teachers in Head Start.

Confidence in this conclusion also derives from the simple logic that explains this pattern of findings. Better-educated teachers have more knowledge and skills. This makes them more effective teachers for many reasons. For example, they:

- have larger vocabularies to which young children are exposed
- are better at constructing and individualizing lesson plans

- are better problem solvers when they encounter challenges in the classroom such as a child with a learning difficulty or a child upset by a death in the family.

Low quality is linked to poor compensation. Poor pay and benefits make it difficult to recruit and hire good early education teachers. And poor compensation contributes to high turnover, which harms educational quality and wastes the resources spent on teacher preparation and continuing education.

Lower quality preschool programs with less qualified, more poorly paid teachers have much smaller effects on learning and development and may not pay off. Thus, the question taxpayers should be asking is whether America can afford not to pay for highly qualified preschool teachers.

Disadvantaged children have less access to high-quality teachers, even though they may benefit the most from teacher quality. Studies from around the nation show that preschool education quality is lower for children from the most disadvantaged families. While there is evidence that quality makes a difference for all children, a number of studies suggest that quality may have larger impacts on the learning and development of children from disadvantaged families.

What should good preschool teachers know?

The knowledge and skills required of an effective preschool teacher have increased as science has revealed more about the capacities of young

Lead Teacher Qualifications Required in Pennsylvania

Early Education and Care Center	Pre-Service	Continuing Education
Child Care Center	A.A. with 30 credits in child-related coursework, and 3 years of experience; higher levels of Keystone STARS require more staff with higher degrees in ECE	6 hours/year; higher levels of Keystone STARS require more continuing education
Prekindergarten	B.A. in Early Childhood Education with teaching certificate	180 hours every five years
Private Nursery Schools	B.A. in Early Childhood Education, or B.A. with 24 hours in ECE or child development or elementary education, or B.A. and 2 years of experience in specified settings	None
Kindergarten	B.A. in Early Childhood or Elementary Education with teaching certificate	180 hours every five years

Source: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

children, how they learn best, and the importance of early learning for later school success.

The National Research Council (NRC) report, *Eager to Learn*, recommends that the minimum standard for teachers of 3- and 4-year-olds should be a four-year college degree, with specialized training in early childhood education. The report says preschool teachers need to know:

- How young children learn and what they need to learn based on an understanding of child development and knowledge in specific subject areas.
- How to individualize teaching based on the temperament, responsiveness, learning style, ability, home language and culture, and other characteristics of each child.
- How to establish effective relationships with young children and their families.
- How to best work with groups of young children.

In 2001, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) approved standards to prepare early childhood professionals. They require a four-year college degree and practical experience in which teacher candidates learn and demonstrate the abilities of effective teachers.

Recommendations for Policy Makers and Educators

Qualifications for New Teachers

Require a four-year college degree and specialized training for teachers in Head Start, state prekindergarten programs, and licensed child-care centers serving as the primary providers of education for 3- and 4-year-olds outside the home.

Professional Development Support for Current Teachers

Design and subsidize professional development programs that will enable current teachers and assistant teachers to obtain four-year degrees within a reasonable time.

Certification and Regulation

Encourage policy makers and schools of education to use NAEYC/NCATE standards in designing new programs to prepare preschool teachers.

Salary and Benefits

Pay preschool teachers salary and benefits comparable to those of similarly qualified teachers in K-12 education, whether they work in public schools,

Minimum Post-Secondary Degree Requirements for Preschool Teachers, by State

State	Child Care **	State Financed Pre-K	Kindergarten
California	6 credits***	24 credits****	BA
Florida	None	CDA	BA
Georgia	None	AA*	BA
Illinois	CDA or CCP	BA*	BA
Maryland	None	BA*	BA*
Michigan	None	BA	BA
New Jersey	CDA*	BA*	BA
New York	None	BA	BA
North Carolina	None	AA*	BA*
Ohio	None	AA by 2008	BA*
Pennsylvania	None	BA*	BA
Texas	None	BA*	BA
Virginia	None	CDA	BA*

AA – Associates Degree; BA – Bachelor's Degree; CDA – Child Development Associates Credential; Pre-K – Prekindergarten; CCP – Certified Childcare Professional.

* with courses or certification in early childhood.

** many states require professional training or ongoing development.

*** 2 year vocational child care course or 6 credits in early childhood education.

**** in topics related to early childhood education or child development.

Source: MERR

Head Start, or child care centers. The cost will be offset by savings from reduced teacher turnover and the economic returns to taxpayers from educationally effective public programs.

Education and Training Institutions

Support institutions of higher education in developing the faculty and programs required to provide the professional development early child-hood teachers need. These programs must meet high standards for preparing teachers with knowledge of child development, best teaching practices, and the knowledge and skills required to teach a highly diverse population.

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