

April 25, 2018

Comments to the Power to the Profession Task Force

As analysts and advisors at Bellwether Education Partners,¹ we have conducted extensive research and analysis on both early childhood workforce issues and P-12 teacher preparation and pipelines. We also advise diverse early childhood providers, charter systems, teacher preparation programs, human capital organizations, city-based intermediaries, states, and foundations working to advance the field on these issues. Through this experience we have a deep appreciation for the crucial importance of early childhood educators, a clear understanding of the current state of both the early childhood workforce and P-12 teacher preparation systems, and a vision for the changes that are needed to ensure a high-quality pipeline of teachers for all our nation's children, birth through high school. These experiences and perspectives inform our comments below.

We strongly support and agree with the stated *goals* of the Power to the Profession work. Research and experience in the field demonstrate that the skills, knowledge, and practices of adults who educate and care for young children play a powerful role in shaping children's development and learning in the early years — and are particularly important for those children growing up in families and communities farthest from opportunity. But the compensation, training, support, and professional status of early childhood educators in the United States today are woefully mismatched with what we know about the complexity and importance of their work. Elevating the early childhood profession, ensuring that all early childhood educators have the competencies needed to support young children's development and learning, and compensating early childhood workers on par with their importance and skills are essential to realizing a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict outcomes for children and to advancing equity for adults working in the early childhood field.

Yet we also have some concerns about the *outputs* of the Power to the Profession work to date, as well as the larger *process*. We believe that the recommendations outlined in Decision Cycles 3-5 set the bar too low for early childhood educators leading classrooms of 3- and 4-year-olds in school- and center-based settings, have the potential to entrench inequities along racial and class lines within the profession, and do not sufficiently acknowledge variations in the quality of existing programs and the need for new types of pathways to credentials.

Expectations for early childhood professionals in Decision Cycles 3-5

We recognize that some Decision Cycle 3-5 recommendations would elevate expectations for early childhood professionals in a variety of settings and roles:

- Making the Child Development Associate (CDA) or similar professional training the minimum threshold for all adults working as early childhood educators would raise standards above current practice in many states and settings today, ensuring all adults educating young children have some background in early childhood development
- Requiring an associate degree for all early educators with primary responsibility for developing and sustaining learning environments for children 0-5 would raise standards above current

¹ The statements contained in this comment reflect the personal views of the authors, and should not be attributed to Bellwether Education Partners or any others within the organization. Bellwether does not take organizational positions except on issues that affect nonprofit organizations as a class.

practice in some states and settings today, particularly privately funded childcare settings and those serving infants and toddlers

However, the Decision Cycle 3-5 recommendations would actually represent a step backwards in expectations for teachers of 3- and 4-year-olds in many publicly funded settings. Thirty-four state pre-K programs require pre-K teachers to have a bachelor's degree, and federal law requires 50 percent of Head Start preschool teachers to have a bachelor's degree (in practice 75 percent do so).² These requirements also reflect teacher qualifications found in pre-K programs that research shows produce lasting learning gains for children.³ By setting an associate degree, rather than a bachelor's, as the expectation for educators responsible for developing and sustaining learning environments across 0-5 settings, the Task Force recommendations for ECE II could provide cover to roll back qualifications of pre-K and Head Start teachers. In doing so, they also perpetuate different standards for settings serving children birth through pre-kindergarten and those serving children in kindergarten through third grade — an arbitrary distinction that is not supported by research on child development.

In contrast, the standards for ECE III would expect early educators with a bachelor's degree to be prepared to develop and sustain learning environments across the 0-8 continuum. We understand the child development rationale for this, but are concerned that, in practice, expecting bachelor's degree programs to prepare educators to serve the full 0-8 continuum may lead to preparation programs that are too broad in scope to be effective. While all early childhood educators should understand child development across the 0-8 continuum, the specific practices required to deliver quality learning experiences look different in settings serving infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and the early elementary grades. An expectation that programs prepare individuals for all these settings may result in curricula that are too broad and insufficiently deep, preparing candidates well for none of them. We see this currently in elementary teacher preparation programs that cover a broad elementary age span (such as "K-5" or "EC-6") and as a result devote insufficient attention to early childhood development and the needs of young children.⁴ In response to these recognized weaknesses, some states have moved to replace broad elementary credentials with PreK-3rd teaching credentials focused on developmental needs and specialized practices required to teach children in this age range,⁵ but the Task Force's recommendations run counter to these efforts.

The recommendations in Decision Cycles 3-5, as currently articulated, seem to draw rigid distinctions between early educators based on their educational qualifications and the ages of children they work with. In the absence of clearly defined competencies, the current recommendations for ECE II and ECE III suggest that the primary difference between the two levels is the breadth of age ranges completers are

² Allison Friedman-Krauss, W. Steven Barnett, G.G. Weisenfeld, Richard Kasmin, nicole DiCrecchio, and Michelle Horowitz, [The State of Preschool 2017: State Preschool Yearbook](#), National Institute for Early Education Research, April 2018. National Institute for Early Education Research, [State Pre-K Yearbook 2017](#). Marnie Kaplan and Sara Mead, "[The Best Teachers for Our Littlest Learners? Lessons From Head Start's Last Decade](#)," Bellwether Education Partners, February 2017

³ Jim Minervino, [Lessons from Research in the Classroom: Implementing High-Quality Pre-K that Makes a difference for Young Children](#), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, September 2014.

⁴ Hannah Putman, Kate Walsh, and Amber Moorer, "[Some Assembly Required: Piecing together the preparation preschool teachers need](#)," National Council on Teacher Quality, June 2016.

⁵ Sarah Jackson, Natalie Orenstein, and Laura Bornfreund, [One Size Doesn't Fit All: The Need for Specialized Teacher Licenses in the Early Grades](#), New America Foundation, 2017.

prepared to serve (with ECE II educators prepared to be responsible for learning environments serving children birth through pre-K, and ECE III teachers prepared to be responsible for learning environments serving children 0-8), rather than in specific competencies or depth of mastery of those competencies associated with different credentials. In addition, the current differentiation of ECE I, II, and III appears to relegate all ECE I educators and ECE II educators in K-3 settings to a helping role that does not acknowledge the crucial role that all adults in early childhood settings play in supporting young children's development,⁶ or the deep expertise that early childhood educators with extensive experience but less formal education often bring to their work. We suspect that this is not intentional but the result of trying to define qualifications prior to completion of work on the competencies — nevertheless, it is problematic and would entrench existing inequities in the field along lines of race and class.

This seems counter to the central goals of the Power to the Profession work. Common competencies for the early childhood profession should allow a more nuanced approach to defining how early childhood educators with different levels of formal education and experience work together as complementary partners in supporting young children's development — rather than simply differentiating by children's ages and who is “responsible for” versus “helping to” create and sustain learning environments. We urge the Task Force to work towards such a more nuanced vision.

Looking at the Power to the Profession process as a whole

We understand why the Task Force chose to divide its work into decision cycles. In practice, however, the recommendations in Decision Cycles 3-5 demonstrate why it is virtually impossible to talk about qualifications for the early childhood workforce without greater clarity around the necessary competencies for that workforce and much more robust engagement with questions of preparation program quality and pathways, both of which must be informed by a clear equity lens that engages issues of racism, sexism, and classism in our country and the field. It is crucial that Power to the Profession engage these issues throughout the process — not just in specific Decision Cycles.

Competencies

In its work on Decision Cycle 2, the Taskforce identified the *2010 NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs* as an existing set of standards that reflect required competencies for all early childhood educators, but also determined that the standards needed revisions to position them as the foundational competencies for the early childhood profession and incorporate the most recent research, science, and evidence. There are good reasons for the Task Force to choose to work from existing standards rather than creating new ones from scratch. But the fact that the proposed revision of the *2010 NAEYC Standards* has not yet occurred means that Decision Cycles 3-5 were undertaken without a clear set of competencies as a guide. Without first knowing the

⁶ An additional issue here is that the standards for ECE III seem designed primarily for school-based teachers of children in grades K-3 and do not account for the important work of individuals who educate and care for children in afterschool and other out-of-school time programs. It is unclear whether the Task Force intends to imply that these individuals are not part of the early childhood profession, that they should have the same qualifications as articulated for ECE III, or something else. We would encourage the Task Force to address this in future revisions — and also note that this example highlights the limitations of a primarily age-based approach to differentiating expectations for early educator qualifications.

competencies that are to be expected of early childhood educators, it is not clear how the Task Force, or anyone else, can reasonably understand or judge whether different types of qualifications can prepare an individual to demonstrate those competencies.

Further, it is important that competencies, credentials, and quality assurance measures for early childhood educators — or for any profession — differentiate between the skills and knowledge an individual must demonstrate to *enter* the profession, and those expected of a *fully accomplished professional*. Because early childhood educators and other teachers play a crucial role in shaping children’s development and learning, any individual working in the profession should master certain competencies from day one. But research in K-12 teacher preparation also shows that educators grow in their effectiveness and practice in their first few years on the job, and that it is difficult to predict an individual’s effectiveness based on what can be measured prior to entering the classroom.⁷ Moreover, a core element of any profession — in addition to initial qualification requirements — is an expectation that the professional will continue to learn and grow in their practice throughout their career and that the systems and organizations in which they work provide them support and opportunities to do so. Research and the experience of exemplary early childhood operators indicates that high-quality, ongoing, job-embedded professional development is important for supporting quality practice for all early childhood educators, including those who have attained postsecondary credentials.⁸

As such, we encourage both NAEYC and the Task Force to ensure that the final version of Decision Cycles 3-5, the recommendations to be developed in Decision Cycles 7 and 8, and the updated version of the “Professional Knowledge and Competencies for the Early Childhood Profession” differentiate competencies required for *entry* to the profession from those that *fully accomplished professionals* are ultimately expected to master and demonstrate.

As noted above, such an approach would also allow a more nuanced articulation of how roles and competencies differ across early childhood educators with differing levels of experience and formal qualifications. Specifically, this would allow the field (and the Power to the Profession recommendations) to better recognize: a) the threshold common competencies required for *any individual* working in the early childhood profession, b) the competencies expected *at program completion* for individuals pursuing different levels of qualifications, c) that experienced early educators with less formal education may master some competencies at comparable or higher levels than individuals entering the profession with more advanced educational qualifications, and d) which competencies are best developed through formal education, which can be mastered only through experience, and which can be developed through either formal training or experience.

Preparation program quality

Competencies are particularly important in light of the wide variation in existing preparation programs for early childhood educators. The Task Force’s recommendations identify professional training programs (e.g., CDA) and associate degree, bachelor’s degree, and master’s degree programs as the primary preparation programs through which ECE professionals can earn credentials. Yet, as both our

⁷ For more on this, see: Chad Aldeman and Ashley LiBetti Mitchel, “[No Guarantees: Is It Possible to Ensure Teachers are Ready on Day One?](#)” Bellwether Education Partners, February 2016.

⁸ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, [Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation](#), The National Academies Press, 2015.

research and research by others shows, there is wide variation in the quality, content, and structure of associate and bachelor's degree programs preparing early childhood educators in the United States.⁹ There is no current consensus in the field about common content for early childhood bachelor's degree programs—or even which majors indicate specialized training in early childhood!¹⁰ In other words, simply knowing that someone has completed an associate degree program or bachelor's degree program tells us very little about the quality and focus of their coursework, clinical field experiences, or the competencies they have mastered. Further, there is virtually no rigorous research on how well different early childhood degree programs are preparing graduates to master necessary knowledge and skills, or the characteristics and practices of early childhood preparation programs that produce better-prepared graduates.

We understand that quality assurance and accountability systems for early childhood educator preparation programs will be addressed in Decision Cycle 7. But it seems unwise to attempt to define qualification requirements for the profession without *simultaneously* acknowledging the current variation in what different credentials mean and the likely need for improvements in preparation program quality and capacity. Both the current cycles and Decision Cycle 7 must engage a key tension facing the field: To be meaningful, efforts to elevate the early childhood education profession must ensure that completion of a recognized early childhood credential reflects mastery of an agreed upon set of competencies, and this likely requires greater consistency of standards and requirements for early childhood educator preparation programs. At the same time, however, there are large gaps in our knowledge about how preparation programs can enable candidates to master competencies, and policymakers and advocates should resist the temptation to overprescribe the components or content of preparation beyond what research currently supports.¹¹ To foster continuous improvement and innovation in early educator preparation, and provide new high-quality pathways that meet the needs of the early childhood workforce, Power to the Profession, and the broader field, must both confront these tensions and encourage new and creative thinking about how to address them.¹²

As the Task Force moves forward with work in Decision Cycles 7 and 8, which are intended to address accountability, quality assurance, supports, and infrastructure, it will be imperative that the recommendations produced in these cycles take into account the state teacher licensure and program

⁹ See: Marnie Kaplan, "[It Takes a Community: Leveraging Community Colleges to Transform the Early Childhood Workforce](#)," Bellwether Education Partners, February 2018; Lea J.E. Austin and Marcy Whitebook, "[Early Childhood Higher Education: Taking Stock Across the States](#)," Center for the Study of Childcare Employment, November 2015 (and individual state higher education inventories); Hannah Putman, Kate Walsh, and Amber Moorer, "[Some Assembly Required: Piecing together the preparation preschool teachers need](#)," National Council on Teacher Quality (June 2016)

¹⁰ See: Marnie Kaplan and Sara Mead, "[The Best Teachers for Our Littlest Learners? Lessons From Head Start's Last Decade](#)," Bellwether Education Partners, February 2017.

¹¹ For discussions of how research does and does not inform the policies governing teacher preparation, see: Ashley LiBetti Mitchel and Melissa Steel King, "[A New Agenda: Research to Build a Better Preparation Program](#)," Bellwether Education Partners, October 2016; Chad Aldeman and Ashley LiBetti Mitchel, "[No Guarantees: Is It Possible to Ensure Teachers are Ready on Day One?](#)" Bellwether Education Partners, February 2016; and Ashley LiBetti and Justin Trinidad, "Meeting Residency Requirements," Bellwether Education Partners, forthcoming.

¹² For some thinking on what this could potentially look like, please see Ashley LiBetti Mitchel and Melissa Steel King, "[A New Agenda: Research to Build a Better Preparation Program](#)," Bellwether Education Partners, October 2016, and Chad Aldeman and Ashley LiBetti Mitchel, "[No Guarantees: Is It Possible to Ensure Teachers are Ready on Day One?](#)" Bellwether Education Partners, February 2016.

approval systems that govern preparation of K-12 teachers and engage other advocates and actors working to improve and reform K-12 teacher preparation and licensure systems. Failure to do so will likely result in continuation of a harmful double standard for educators in 0-5 and public K-12 education settings that perpetuates inequities in prestige and compensation for early childhood educators and undermines quality of learning opportunities for children.

Diverse, high-quality pathways

Innovation is particularly important to address concerns that other commenters have raised about equity, social justice, and maintaining diversity within the early childhood profession. Like those commenters, we believe that many current and prospective early childhood educators are highly capable of mastering the demanding competencies needed to be responsible for fostering children's learning and development across 0-8 settings. At the same time, due to deep societal inequities that are reflected at all levels of our educational system, these educators lack the opportunities and support needed to complete formal training programs to master them. Our nation's higher education system has a particularly poor track record of success in serving low-income students, first-generation college goers, and non-traditional learners, particularly those who are working full-time and/or parenting — which includes many early childhood educators.¹³ Efforts to elevate the profession must neither ignore this reality, nor respond to it by pushing existing early educators out of the field or lowering expectations.

Rather, Power to the Profession and related efforts to advance the early childhood profession must both better support current and prospective early childhood educators to access and succeed in traditional postsecondary education, *and* foster new, innovative pathways through which early educators can acquire and demonstrate mastery of competencies at the same level as traditional bachelor's degree programs. We know that supports to access higher education will be further addressed in Decision Cycle 8, but innovation in preparation delivery is equally important. The Decision Cycle document references the need for "innovations that are designed to reach non-traditional students," potentially including "competency based program admittance, use of prior learning assessments for awarding credit, workbased supervised practicum/clinical experiences and intensive degree programs with shorter duration." Yet the recommendations reflected in pages 16-17 and Appendix A seem to take for granted that these programs will occur within traditional higher education structures.

For example, the document refers to "Bachelor's degree program" and "Master's degree program (initial entry)" as training/educational pathways through which individuals might acquire qualifications for ECE III, but does not acknowledge post-baccalaureate Alternative Certification or Residency Programs that may not confer a Master's degree. Such programs are increasingly common in K-12 education and, while their quality and results vary, overall research suggests that most alternative certification and residency models produce teachers who are no less well prepared than traditional preparation program completers¹⁴ — and that residency and alternative certification programs prepare much higher

¹³See Bethany, Nelson, Megan Froehner and Barbara Gault, *College Students with Children Are Common and Face Many Challenges in Completing Higher Education*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research; E. Kobena Osam, Matt Bergman, and Denise M. Cumberland, "An Integrative Literature Review on the Barriers Impacting Adult Learners' Return to College," *Adult Learning*, Volume 28, No. 2, May 2017.

¹⁴ See, for example, Jill Constantine et al., *An Evaluation of Teachers Trained Through Different Routes to Certification: Final Report*, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094043/pdf/20094043.pdf>; Tim R. Sass, "Licensure and

percentages of teachers of color than traditional programs.¹⁵ As such, residency and alternative route models may also have promise as one of a variety of options for cultivating a well-prepared, diverse early childhood profession, but the current recommendations appear to exclude them. Similarly, the document does not appear to include Montessori preparation programs that prepare individuals to be responsible for developing and sustaining children’s learning experiences in Montessori settings, but may not be located in degree-granting institutions. We are not suggesting that alternative certification, residency, or Montessori models offer the “best” or “right” approach for preparing early childhood educators, but that they are options that should be available. These examples also illustrate how the current framing may exclude important and viable preparation options. Our shared goals might be better served by explicitly taking a broader framing of the types of pathways through which individuals might acquire competencies — without lowering standards.

Our nation’s higher education landscape is evolving rapidly and will continue to do so over the time period it will take to realize these recommendations. The early childhood field must both recognize that this evolution is occurring and take advantage of the opportunity to pioneer new approaches that allow early childhood educators to master the same competencies as traditional bachelor’s degree programs but with variations in pacing, learning modalities, and delivery structures customized to support success for the early childhood workforce.¹⁶ Explicitly acknowledging this in the framing of pathways to qualifications can help to address equity and access concerns without lowering standards.

Conclusion

Achieving the goals of Power to the Profession will require substantial changes in the current practices and financing of childcare settings serving children ages 0-5 — but it will also require substantial changes in the practices and policies of K-12 public schools and state teacher licensure systems. Unions and professional associations representing public schools teachers are represented on the Task Force, as are associations of institutions that prepare public school teachers. But public dialogue on this process has primarily focused on the implications of Power to the Profession for childcare providers and other early childhood settings serving children ages 0-8. We hope that, as this work moves forward, NAEYC and the Task Force will continue to seek input from a wide range of organizations representing public and private school stakeholders and that individuals and organizations representing a variety of K-12 perspectives will take initiative to engage in this work.

In responding to feedback on the current decision cycles, we urge the Task Force not only to address feedback on the current Decision Cycle recommendations, but also to consider how its overall process ensures adequate attention and deep, thoughtful engagement with the field around these topics. Such

Worker Quality: A Comparison of Alternative Routes to Teaching," *The Journal of Law and Economics* 58, no. 1 (February 2015): 1-35.

¹⁵ Alternative certification programs also played a role in helping New Jersey meet new teacher credential requirements mandated by Abbott Court rulings. For additional information on the diversity of alternative pathways, see Jonathan Osler, “Beyond Brochures: Practicing ‘Soul Care’ in the Recruitment of Teachers of Color,” San Francisco Teacher Residency, 2016, <http://2nzvmtmxyesbi7fm3pk4v9h7.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SFTR-SoulCare-Final.pdf> and National Center for Teacher Residencies, “2015 Network Impact Overview,” February 2016, <https://nctrresidencies.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NCTR-2015-Network-Impact-Overview.pdf>.

¹⁶ For more ideas on this see Kevin Carey and Sara Mead, [*Beyond Bachelor’s: The Case for Charter Colleges of Early Education*](#), Brookings Institution, 2011.

an approach may take more time, but, given the crucial importance of this work for our nation's children, the early childhood profession, and social justice, as well as the long time frame that will likely be required to fully realize a vision for professionalizing the field, it is worth the time and effort to grapple with tensions and hard questions to get the vision and goals right up front.

Sincerely,

Marnie Kaplan

marnie.kaplan@bellwethereducation.org

Ashley LiBetti

Ashley.libetti@bellwethereducation.org

Sara Mead

sara@bellwethereducation.org