

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of the Early Education Workforce: *Removing Barriers to Access and Advancement*

Najeema Holas-Huggins
Annemarie Lewis Kerwin

CONSULTANT TEAM

Martha McCahill Cowden
Nancy L. Marshall, Ed.D.
Marta Rosa, MEd



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Glossary

- BTWIC** Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children
- CCPLF**..... Child Care Provider Loan Forgiveness Demonstration Program
- CDA**..... Child Development Associate Credentials
- CPC**..... Community Partnerships for Children
- DEEC**..... Department of Early Education and Care
- EEC**..... Early Education and Care (refers to the field as a whole)
- ESOL**..... English as a Second or Other Language
- FCC**..... Family Child Care
- IHE**..... Institute of Higher Learning
- NAEYC**..... National Association for the Education of Young Children
- R&R** Child Care Resource and Referral Agency

Executive Summary

The challenge for Massachusetts is to raise the quality of all early education and care, and provide an innovative, exceptional early education experience. Furthermore, organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have used the research on early education and later effects to call for increased educational requirements for early childhood educators. As awareness of the importance of early education increases, it is likely that legislators and families will join these groups in demanding higher education degrees from the field.

The state's mission to provide high-quality early education and care relies heavily on the education level, training, and professional satisfaction of early childhood educators. Yet, a long history of being undervalued and underpaid has created a workforce with low morale and high turnover rates. Pay rates often do not reflect the cost of living, especially in urban areas.

The Bessie Tarrt Wilson Initiative for Children (BTWIC) envisions a workforce of early childhood educators and caregivers who strive to provide the best possible experience to all children, including low-income children and those in the child care voucher system. Of the utmost importance, we see opportunities for education and degree achievement available to all in the field.

This report from the BTWIC looks at the interrelated issues of degree attainment, financing early education, communication, and public perception of the field. It begins with a discussion of the findings from BTWIC's research – seven town meetings throughout the state and a two page anonymous questionnaire, and concludes with formal recommendations in each of the following areas – higher education, compensation and benefits, communication, and public education/awareness.

Findings From the Field

The most compelling finding from our research is that the challenges and frustrations for all early childhood educators are the same across the board. The same issues exist throughout the state, regardless of position or type of early education and care provided. These overwhelming consistencies create an excellent opportunity for the state to make a positive impact that will reach the entire field.

1. Compensation is the largest stressor for the field and the principal barrier to accessing higher education.
 - The lack of appropriate compensation causes personal and professional stress, embarrassment, and low morale. These outcomes all affect children who rely on continuous care from happy early childhood educators.
2. Early childhood educators have trouble accessing higher education for a variety of reasons.
 - 59.2% of questionnaire respondents need scholarships to afford to attend an institute of higher education.
3. Communication within the field, at all levels, is lacking.
 - Early education and care administrators feel that they do not receive timely communications from the Department of Early Education and Care, while early childhood educators feel they do not receive enough information from their directors.

Comments From the Field

“We are not paid enough for what we do or for what we are worth.”

Town Meeting Attendee, Boston.

“We need to do a better job of educating the government on what we actually do.”

Town Meeting Attendee, Springfield.

“I have to keep three jobs.”

Town Meeting Attendee, Lawrence.

An Early childhood educator in New Bedford shared that the center has been offering college level courses for a number of years; she has taken advantage of them but never matriculated in a college. After 8 years of taking courses, she just found out that many have been duplicate courses and they do not add to the requirements of the degree.

A Plan to Move Forward

Each recommendation is phrased as an overarching goal, followed by detailed measures to achieve each goal.

Many issues were considered in the development of these recommendations, including the current economic climate in Massachusetts. BTWIC understands that major change cannot occur without monetary costs. Our recommendations are designed to create a foundation for long-term change when the economy recovers. But change cannot wait; to that end, many of the recommendations can be implemented immediately.

Higher Education

1. Implement a simple credentialing system to encourage early childhood educators to attain degrees. Request that implementation occurs within the Department of Early Education and Care and the Executive Office of Education.

The state has made commendable strides in the creation of a draft credentialing system and career lattice, but the need for a formalized, functional system is growing. Early childhood educators want a career path that includes the strengths of the public school system – clearly defined job titles, an easily understood plan for advancement, and compensation tied to educational achievement and experience. The next steps for the credentialing system should include significant input from family child care educators and the inclusion of compensation linked to progress through the system.

- 1.1. Strengthen the transfer of prior learning into degree credits by creating clearer guidelines, based on the core competencies developed by the Early Education and Care and Out-of-School-Time Workforce Development Task Force. Credit for prior learning should include Child Development Associate credentials (CDA) and prior work experience.
- 1.2. Create a formal system of University and Career Path Navigation Advisement.
- 1.3. Create an “Early Educators Career Passport” book for early childhood educators that explains and documents their pathway towards a degree.
- 1.4. Explore existing barriers to financing college education, including loan default and loan forgiveness and expand existing successful models to include the EEC field.
- 1.5. Support the Department of Early Education and Care’s efforts to increase usage of the Early Childhood Educators Scholarship Fund by publicizing the fund and streamlining paperwork requirements.

Compensation

2. Identify ways to increase compensation and provide benefits commensurate with education and professional responsibilities.

Compensation affects every aspect of an early childhood educator's life. It is important to note the connection between low compensation and the high number of questionnaire respondents (54.1%) who believe they cannot afford to pursue higher education.

- 2.1. Contribute to a three-part dialogue initiated by the Bessie Tarrt Wilson Initiative for Children in the upcoming year to discuss early education and care financing systems. The final result of the dialogue will be a blueprint for finance reform of Massachusetts's mixed delivery system, inclusive of all families receiving child care. Beginning with a task force comprised of early childhood education financing experts and state legislators and followed by a conference including early childhood educators and workforce, the dialogue will culminate in the release of a blueprint for financing early education and care in Massachusetts.

Communication

3. Improve overall communication between the field and the Department of Early Education and Care, as well as strengthen communication between administrators and early childhood educators' workforce.

The issue of communication came up frequently in town meetings; in fact, it was mentioned in every town meeting. The Department of Early Education and Care holds valuable information about programs to support the early education and care field, yet a common phrase at all town meetings was "I didn't know about that."

- 3.1. Conduct a review of and evaluate current communication systems in the early education and care workforce to identify and solve problems such as consistency, ease of understanding, translation, and breadth of issues.
- 3.2. Provide computer training and related translation services to enhance computer literacy in the early education and care field through contracts with Community Partnerships for Children programs (CPCs) and Resource & Referral agencies (R&Rs).
- 3.3. Increase and strengthen use of consistent electronic communication to individuals in the field and early education and care centers to provide information about the Early Childhood Educators Scholarship Fund, health benefits through MassHealth and Commonwealth Care Connector, existing discounts to education supply stores, and state and federal tax breaks.
- 3.4. Update the Department of Early Education and Care website so it is more user-friendly and easier to navigate.

Public Education Campaign

4. Launch a public relations campaign to increase public understanding of the role and responsibilities of the early education and care profession.

As our research shows, early childhood educators feel that they are not valued in the public eye. Compensation rates and use of labels such as “day care worker” and “babysitter” reveal the basis for these perceived slights. It is important to change public perception because it influences everything from compensation and benefits to educational opportunities. The early education and care field needs to be supported by the public.

- 4.1. Develop an earned media campaign that targets free print, broadcast, and electronic media.
- 4.2. Encourage the Department of Early Education and Care to partner with a corporation, foundation or other entity like the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley to secure funding to develop and launch a paid advertising campaign that utilizes communication vehicles like billboards, mass transit and television and radio advertisements

A Final Word

Standing in the middle of a tunnel, it can be hard to see the light at the end, or remember the reason for entering. The Department of Early Education and Care and state government have made notable inroads to improving the early education and care field. Now is the time to continue forward, despite the current challenges. It is important for all involved to remember that this long tunnel will lead to the outcome we all desire – the best opportunities possible for all children, from day one.



**Bessie Tartt Wilson
Initiative for Children, Inc.**

142 Berkeley Street
Boston, MA 02116
PHONE 617-425-0002
FAX 617-425-0008
www.btwic.org