

State Policies Shape the Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Prekindergarten Workforce

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Erica Greenberg and Grace Luetmer
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In early care and education (ECE), as is true in K–12, minimum preservice qualification requirements establish a gateway into the profession. But unlike in K–12, inconsistent requirements across ECE sectors create incentives for educators to move from one to another in search of better compensation and working conditions, causing what is known as “drain of talent” (table 1). Public prekindergarten offers the greatest pull because of its stable public funding and career supports.¹ This pull yields benefits, including more teachers of color in the prekindergarten classroom and better race-matching between students and teachers (figure 1).² On the flipside, prekindergarten may lose out if its own qualification requirements are difficult to attain, especially for Hispanic or Latina educators (figure 1). Either way, prekindergarten has the potential to destabilize other ECE sectors, especially child care, by drawing away the most qualified early educators.

This essay demonstrates the limitations of the “nonsystem” of ECE. State policy solutions include moving the “nonsystem” of ECE closer to a coordinated and well-integrated system and addressing structural barriers to education and training. In addition, federal ECE leadership can support states by tracking qualification requirements across sectors, providing guidance on how requirements in each sector can shape all sectors, and investing in state solutions across ECE.

¹ Christina Weiland, Erica Greenberg, Daphna Bassok, Anna Markowitz, Paola Guerrero Rosada, Grace Luetmer, Rachel Abenavoli, et al., *Historic Crisis, Historic Opportunity: Using Evidence to Mitigate the Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis on Young Children and Early Care and Education Programs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan; Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021); and Elliot Haspel, “Funding Universal Pre-K and Not Childcare Would Be a Disaster,” *New Republic*, October 13, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/163991/funding-universal-prek-childcare>.

² Damira S. Rasheed, Joshua L. Brown, Sebrina L. Doyle, and Patricia A. Jennings, “The Effect of Teacher–Child Race–Ethnicity Matching and Classroom Diversity on Children’s Socioemotional and Academic Skills,” *Child Development* 91, no. 3 (May 2020): e597, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13275>; Jason T. Downer, Priscilla Goble, Sonya S. Myers, and Robert C. Pianta, “Teacher–Child Racial/Ethnic Match within Prekindergarten Classrooms and Children’s Early School Adjustment,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2016): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2016.02.007>; and Anna J. Markowitz, Daphna Bassok, and Jason A. Grissom, “Teacher–Child Racial/Ethnic Match and Parental Engagement with Head Start,” *American Educational Research Journal* 57, no. 5 (October 2020): 2132, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219899356>.

The “Nonsystem” of American Early Care and Education

American ECE has been called a nonsystem of program types, funding streams, and governance structures.³ Federal, state, and local governments administer the wide range of programs that care for and educate young children. They set different standards for staff, facilities, and program quality. And they do so while competing with outside occupations for educators, including K–12 schools.

The nonsystem contains three program types central in this essay. *Home-based child care* provided by family, friends, neighbors, and licensed caregivers serves about one-third of children from birth to age 5 not yet in kindergarten, while *child care centers* serve just under one-third of children in the same age group.⁴ *Public prekindergarten* enrolls about one-third of all 4-year-olds and 6 percent of 3-year-olds nationwide.⁵ State governments administer licensed home-based child care, centers, and public prekindergarten. Together with federal programming, more than 12.5 million children from birth to age 5 not yet in kindergarten participate in ECE every day.⁶

State Requirements Vary between Home-Based Care, Center-Based Care, and Prekindergarten

States set different lead teacher education requirements for home-based child care, child care centers, and public prekindergarten programs. Unlike programs such as Head Start, there is no federal regulation that states must comply with when setting these educator qualification requirements. We therefore observe substantial variation in requirements between states and sectors. State education requirements are highest for lead teachers in prekindergarten. Home-based child care teachers have the lowest education requirements, on average, and center-based lead teachers have slightly higher requirements.

In 2019, 20 states had no formal education requirement or required less than a high school diploma for home-based providers (table 1). Thirteen states did not require a high school diploma for center-based lead teachers. All states required prekindergarten lead teachers to have some education beyond a high school diploma.

³ Sharon L. Kagan and Nancy E. Cohen, *Not by Chance: Creating an Early Care and Education System for America's Children* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy, 1997).

⁴ Jiashan Cui and Luke Natzke, *Early Childhood Program Participation, 2019: National Household Education Surveys Program, First Look* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

⁵ Allison H. Friedman-Krauss, W. Steven Barnett, Karin A. Garver, Katherine S. Hodges, G.G. Weisenfeld, and Beth Ann Gardiner, *The State of Preschool 2020: State Preschool Yearbook* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, National Institute for Early Education Research, 2021).

⁶ Cui and Natzke, *Early Childhood Program Participation, 2019*.

Twenty-nine states required a high school diploma or a GED or high school equivalency for home-based providers, and 26 states required at least a high school diploma for center-based lead teachers. Georgia and Missouri required additional education after high school graduation for home-based lead teachers. Ten states required the same for center-based lead teachers.

No state required a bachelor’s degree for home-based child care lead teachers, and Vermont was the only state with that degree requirement for lead teachers in child care centers. Meanwhile, 36 states required a bachelor’s degree for lead teachers in a prekindergarten program and 4 required at least an associate degree.

TABLE 1
Count of States, by Preservice Qualification Requirements in 2019

Minimum education requirement	Home-based child care	Child care centers	Public prekindergarten
			n
Less than high school	20	13	0
High school diploma/GED/high school equivalency	29	26	0
CDA, some college, or a combination	2	10	5
Associate degree	0	1	4
Bachelor’s degree	0	1	36

Source: Novel qualifications database compiled by the authors.

Notes: CDA = child development associate. Six states do not have a prekindergarten program.

State Requirements Shape the Diversity of the Prekindergarten Workforce

Variation in minimum qualification requirements across ECE sectors and states appears to shape the prekindergarten workforce by changing its racial and ethnic composition. Data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) show that the prekindergarten workforce became more racially diverse between 2012 and 2019, going from 13.7 percent people of color to 28.4 percent people of color (table 2).⁷ In contrast, the child care center workforce became slightly less diverse, shifting from 25.2 percent to 24.3 percent people of color. Changes moved in the opposite direction for ethnic diversity: 11.4 percent of center-based educators were Hispanic or Latina⁸ in 2012 compared with 13.3 percent in 2019, while 19.7 percent of prekindergarten educators were Hispanic or Latina in 2012 compared with 18.9 percent in 2019.

⁷ We define people of color using the racial identity variables included in the 2012 and 2019 waves of the National Survey of Early Care and Education. Respondents selected one or more of the following categories: white, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or other. In this essay, people of color are those who select any option other than white.

⁸ We use the terms Hispanic or Latina included in the NSECE, though we opt for Latina over Latino because the vast majority of early educators are women.

TABLE 2

Changes in the Diversity of the Early Care and Education Workforce between 2012 and 2019

	Educator of color		Hispanic/Latina educator	
	2012	2019	2012	2019
Home-based child care	31.3%	37.6%	16.3%	19.4%
Child care center	25.2%	24.3%	11.4%	13.3%
Prekindergarten	13.7%	28.4%	19.7%	18.9%

Sources: 2012 and 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE).

Notes: All analyses include a design-corrected variance estimation necessary for generating nationally representative estimates. Rounding is in accordance with NSECE requirements.

Linking NSECE data on early educators to state qualification requirements, we find that prekindergarten educators are more likely to be people of color in states with greater requirements for center-based child care. Specifically, in states that require one more year of education and training for center educators (say, requiring some college rather than a high school diploma), prekindergarten educators are about 2 percentage points more likely to be people of color (figure 1).

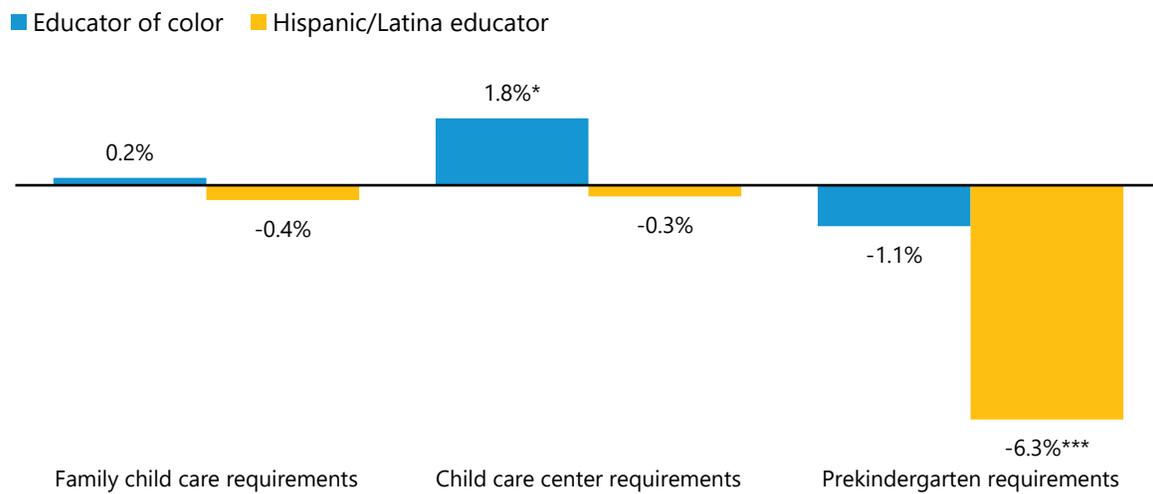
This finding is small but suggests drain of talent: as center educators train up to meet new requirements, they become eligible for prekindergarten positions and leave child care for jobs with better pay and better working conditions. New opportunities may be particularly appealing for educators of color, who face long-standing racial wage disparities in ECE.⁹ More teachers of color would benefit the prekindergarten workforce and would support better matching between students and teachers.¹⁰ But drain of talent could come at the expense of child care centers and the children who attend them by increasing staff turnover and making these settings less diverse.

⁹ Rebecca Ullrich, Katie Hamm, and Rachel Herzfeldt-Kamprath, *Underpaid and Unequal: Racial Wage Disparities in the Early Childhood Workforce* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2016); and Lea J.E. Austin, Bethany Edwards, Raúl Chávez, and Marcy Whitebook, "Racial Wage Gaps in Early Education Employment," Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, December 19, 2019, <https://csce.berkeley.edu/racial-wage-gaps-in-early-education-employment/>.

¹⁰ Rasheed et al., "The Effect of Teacher–Child Race/Ethnicity Matching"; Downer et al., "Teacher-Child Racial/Ethnic Match"; and Markowitz, Bassok, and Grissom, "Teacher-Child Racial/Ethnic Match."

FIGURE 1

Predictors of Prekindergarten Educators’ Racial and Ethnic Diversity



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Sources: Novel qualifications database and the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE).

Notes: Controls include unemployment and poverty rates, median female earnings, federal funds used to improve child care quality, and supports for child care workers provided through the TEACH and WAGE\$ programs (see “Programs,” Child Care Services Association, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.childcareservices.org/programs/>). All analyses include a design-corrected variance estimation necessary for generating nationally representative estimates. Rounding is in accordance with NSECE requirements.

+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Prekindergarten requirements shape the prekindergarten workforce, too. In states with one additional year of required education and training, prekindergarten educators are more than 6 percentage points *less* likely to be Hispanic or Latina (figure 1). This finding raises concerns about structural barriers to education and training that may make it more difficult for Hispanic or Latina educators to stay in the field. For example, insufficient language access, limited information on US educational systems, and a need to balance education, work, and family may all prevent Hispanic or Latina educators from meeting new requirements.¹¹ In turn, these barriers may have detrimental effects on all students¹² and Hispanic or Latinx prekindergarten students, especially.¹³

¹¹ Nina L. Dulabaum, “Barriers to Academic Success: A Qualitative Study of African American and Latino Male Students,” *Innovation Showcase* (blog), League for Innovation in the Community College, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.league.org/innovation-showcase/barriers-academic-success-qualitative-study-african-american-and-latino-male>.

¹² Chandra Williams, “Why Do Schools Need to Hire a Racially Diverse Teaching Staff?” Center for Student Achievement Solutions blog, August 17, 2020, <https://www.studentachievementsolutions.com/why-do-schools-need-to-hire-a-racially-diverse-teaching-staff/>.

¹³ Constance Lindsay, Tomás Monarrez, and Grace Luetmer, *The Effects of Teacher Diversity on Hispanic Student Achievement in Texas* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

State Requirements Appear to Shape Little Else about the Prekindergarten Workforce

Diversity was not the only characteristic of the prekindergarten workforce we thought state requirements might explain. But when we looked at results like those in figure 1 for other characteristics, they were largely inconsistent. Specifically, state requirements had little consistent association with early educators' educational attainment, years of experience, motivation (career-related or based on a personal calling, or focused on helping children and parents), hourly wages, and the likelihood of having employer-provided health insurance. (Results available upon request.)

One reason for this is that early educators routinely have more education and training than is required for their jobs.¹⁴ Another is that minimum *preservice* qualification requirements may have little bearing on prekindergarten educators' cumulative experience, motivation, or compensation, given that these characteristics change over a person's job tenure. A third reason is that change in the racial and ethnic composition of prekindergarten educators may not change other educator characteristics *on average* but might change their distribution—or might result in educators with similar characteristics entering and leaving the profession in tandem. Future research can help explore these possibilities and whether they have changed since 2019.

State Coordination and Federal Guidance Can Support the Prekindergarten Workforce—and Child Care

What can policymakers do to support educators and children across ECE?

- To address drain of talent, especially among educators of color, state policymakers can move the nonsystem of ECE closer to a coordinated and well-integrated system. One option would be to make entry requirements consistent across sectors.¹⁵ But without a concomitant improvement in compensation and working conditions, educators will still migrate toward prekindergarten. Instead, policymakers can build out career ladders across ECE and equalize funding for positions with similar requirements and job functions. (Critically, the government, and not families of young children, must foot this bill, as child care is already unaffordable.¹⁶) The District of Columbia is starting to do this with new bonuses for infant and toddler

¹⁴ Marcy Whitebook, Caitlin McLean, Lea J.E. Austin, and Bethany Edwards, *Early Childhood Workforce Index 2018* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2018).

¹⁵ Stephanie Feeney, Alice Galper, and Carol Seefeldt, *Continuing Issues in Early Childhood Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2018).

¹⁶ Grover J. Whitehurst, "Why the Federal Government Should Subsidize Childcare and How to Pay for It" (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2017); "The Childcare Crisis," *Time*, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://time.com/child-care-crisis/>; and Claire Cain Miller, "How Other Nations Pay for Child Care. The U.S. Is an Outlier," *New York Times*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/06/upshot/child-care-biden.html>.

teachers in child care programs.¹⁷ North Carolina is launching a similar effort.¹⁸ And the national TEACH Early Childhood National Center and the Child Care WAGE\$ programs have long sought to pair increased support for education and training with salary supplements.¹⁹ Expanding these efforts, with attention to workforce movement across sectors and support from federal funding sources, can produce systemwide benefits.

- To make upskilling more attainable for Hispanic or Latina educators, states must address structural barriers to education and training. Latinos enroll in community colleges more than any other racial or ethnic group, but more than half never complete a postsecondary degree.²⁰ For Spanish-speaking educators and those new to the US education system, comprehensive language access and better information are just the beginning. Financial supports may be necessary, too. But Hispanic Americans have the lowest rates of student borrowing of any racial or ethnic group.²¹ Recent research attributes this pattern to “failed borrowing systems throughout our economy and the uncertainty and discrimination in the labor market” and finds transportation can pose key barriers, as well.²² Addressing these needs can help Hispanic or Latina educators stay in the prekindergarten workforce. Competency-based approaches to upskilling may be worth consideration, as well.²³
- To help inform states as they make these changes, federal guidance can track qualification requirements and provide guidance on how they do or do not work together to support the ECE workforce. The US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families already tracks some of this information through its National Database of Child Care Licensing Regulations.²⁴ Including state-specific prekindergarten requirements, and 50-

¹⁷ Megan Cerullo, “D.C. Will Give Early Educators \$10,000 Checks to Reflect Their ‘Skill’ and ‘Worth,’” CBS News, February 2, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dc-early-educators-10000-grant-program-pay-inequity/>.

¹⁸ Charles Duncan, “N.C. to Spend \$800 Million on Early Childhood Programs Still Struggling from Pandemic,” Spectrum News, October 7, 2021, <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2021/10/07/-800-million-for-early-childhood-education-in-nc-could-raise-teacher-salaries>.

¹⁹ “Programs,” Child Care Services Association, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.childcareservices.org/programs/>.

²⁰ American Federation of Teachers, “Closing the Achievement Gap: Focus on Latino Students,” Colorín Colorado, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/closing-achievement-gap-focus-latino-students-0>.

²¹ “Survey of Consumer Finances, 1989–2019,” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, last updated November 4, 2021, https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/scf/dataviz/scf/chart/#series:Education_Installment_Loans;demographic:race4;population:1,2,3,4;units:have;range:1989,2019.

²² Kate Sablosky Elengold, Jess Dorrance, Amanda Martinez, Patricia Foxen, and Paul Mihás, *Dreams Interrupted: A Mixed-Methods Research Project Exploring Latino College Completion* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, n.d.).

²³ Sarah LeMoine, “Defining Competencies for the Early Childhood Workforce,” *Zero to Three* 40, no. 3 (January 2020): 5.

²⁴ “National Database of Child Licensing Regulations,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, Child Care Technical Assistance Network, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://licensingregulations.acf.hhs.gov/>.

state Head Start and K–12 educator requirements, can help highlight inconsistencies and inform coordination efforts. Coupling these data with perspectives from state administrators and workforce experts, along with early educators and administrators, can further point toward best practices for setting requirements, building career ladders, and defining compensation packages and other staff supports. The federal government is uniquely positioned to support states in moving from a nonsystem to a cohesive set of offerings for young children and families.

Now is a critical time for improved state coordination and federal guidance. The ECE field is reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic, with more systematized sectors such as prekindergarten and Head Start faring far better in the crisis than child care.²⁵ Federal pandemic relief funds have helped, but without a major new and sustained investment such as the one proposed in the Build Back Better framework, long-term change seems elusive. Worse, proposals to divide Build Back Better into prekindergarten *or* child care supports risk exacerbating the drain of talent highlighted here.²⁶ But even existing funding can help states move toward a cohesive ECE system. And that would benefit children and early educators in prekindergarten, child care, and beyond.

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²⁵ Weiland et al., *Historic Crisis, Historic Opportunity*.

²⁶ Haspel, “Funding Universal Pre-K.”

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