

## **Meeting the Needs of the Early Childhood Workforce: National Perspectives**

*Guests: Richard Gonzales and Chrishana Lloyd*

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Ciearra Norwood, policy and technical assistance project manager with SRI Education. Today in a special episode, we're going to discuss a national perspective that addresses history, areas of progress, federal priorities and supports in the early childhood workforce. I am very happy to welcome Richard Gonzales, project manager of the Preschool Development Grants, Birth through Five at the Department of Health and Human Services in the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Early Childhood Development. It's great to have you here, Richard.

Richard Gonzales:

I'm very happy to be here. Thank you.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

And Chrishana Lloyd, research scholar with Child Trends. Thanks for joining us, Chrishana.

Chrishana Lloyd:

Thanks so much for having me.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

So I wanted to ask you for a federal perspective on the early childhood workforce. Richard, can you talk to us about the Administration for Children and Families priorities for supporting the workforce and the more recent federal investments your agency has committed to?

Richard Gonzales:

Sure. So to understand ACF's early childhood priorities, it's important to recognize that our mission and vision include promoting an early childhood sector that meets the needs of children and their families and communities across the country. In order to do that, it is our responsibility to create opportunities for children and families and the early childhood workforce so that children and families have safe and supportive environments that promote child development across multiple domains. Physical, cognitive, social emotional, along with high-quality opportunities that meet families' unique needs, logistically, linguistically, culturally, and financially. I think we all recognize that in order for this to happen, our early childhood mixed delivery programs and services need to operate in a system that attracts, prepares, supports, and retains a qualified diverse workforce across settings and programs. We're committed to proactively help states and communities build their early childhood workforce, not just maintain the workforce that we have today.

So to that end, our vision for the early educator workforce focuses on five key priorities, increasing compensation, including benefits that demonstrate the value of the workforce to our communities, building a pipeline of knowledgeable providers and staff, maintaining the diversity of the workforce, fostering equitable access to great educators and trainers, and ensuring that the early childhood workforce is fully supported and has the skills and competencies to implement high-quality practices. Internally, we've organized our work streams to focus on these priorities and our early childhood education team continues to implement and develop initiatives that help the federal

government, states, and communities address these challenges. Because ACF recognizes that the early childhood workforce is a linchpin to both preserving and stabilizing the early childhood system and building a more equitable and effective system for the future that works for all stakeholders, we know that more investment is needed to achieve our long-term vision, and we are maximizing all policy and funding levers at our disposal to help incentivize states and communities to invest in the retention, growth, and advancement of the early childhood workforce.

For example, we issued guidance for three federal programs, including guidance to Head Start grantees to dedicate resources to compensation, including offering the opportunity to request for reduced enrollment if needed, guidance to child care administrators to leverage CCDF funds to increase compensation and make subsidy policy changes that will support and strengthen the child care workforce, and guidance to PDG B-5 grantees that they could repurpose their existing funds for workforce strategies. And we elevated workforce as a priority in both our renewal and planning grant notices of funding opportunity so that applicants coming in for new rounds of funding will be able to fully utilize this funding to support and strengthen workforce compensation and build more viable career pathways and entry points to the profession.

In addition, we're working to disseminate information about promising strategies from states and communities that early childhood programs and systems can invest in through online strategy, resources, workforce Wednesday e-blasts, monthly webinars, and dear colleague letters. We're leveraging opportunities in partnership with other federal agencies to benefit the early childhood workforce. For example, disseminating information about public service loan forgiveness to the workforce, connecting educators to healthcare opportunities such as the ACA marketplace and Medicaid. And finally, we're launching a new national Early Care and Education Workforce Center. The grant will fund a research and technical assistance center that will work to increase recruitment and retention of a diverse, qualified and effective workforce across all ECE settings and programs through the provision of technical assistance at state and local levels, and a program of rigorous research that builds the knowledge base and informs TA efforts.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

Can you share some state examples of progress that you are most excited about?

Richard Gonzales:

There are so many worthwhile efforts underway that I could highlight, but, let me start with four. Personally, I'm excited to see the efforts in states to support the mental health and wellbeing of our early childhood workforce. We're seeing intentional efforts to set up systems of support through mental health hotlines and through telehealth that can be easily accessed by all providers and especially those in rural communities.

Also, I'm excited to see the blended and braided approach to provide increased access to child care supported and provided through private businesses, but the effort also addresses increased compensation for early childhood teachers working within those facilities. I'm excited to hear about state efforts to seriously conduct wage and salary studies across all early childhood programs and moving towards pay parity for the early childhood workforce. And finally, I'm excited by state's continued efforts to develop and implement coordinated application, eligibility, and enrollment processes so that parents have an easier time applying for the many possible programs and services for which they might be eligible. And to do so by including opportunities for meaningful parent engagement resulting in hearing from those parents who are most likely to be affected by such procedures. While not

specifically connected to the workforce issues we've been addressing, I believe our work making parents' lives easier also improve the lives of the workforce serving those children.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

From your perspective, how can states better leverage these opportunities to address the systemic barriers to education and compensation and support a diverse early childhood workforce?

Richard Gonzales:

So we continue to encourage states to maximize the use of federal funding sources dedicated to early childhood education. For example, ARPA funds, PDG, CCDF, Head Start, and look at other federal funding sources that can help augment and sustain efforts seeded by these funding streams, including professional development and training funds from the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, and TANF. And also, we encourage states to develop cross agency relationships, collaborations, and funding opportunities. For example, labor workforce agencies to invest in alternative pathways like apprenticeships, K12 agencies to address workforce shortage, higher education agencies to build more inclusive and supportive career pathways, scholarships, accessible coursework, counseling and mentorship, credit for prior learning articulation and so on.

We also are continuing to encourage states to identify and to create funding streams that can be dedicated to ECE and the workforce. Some examples include permanent land grant funding, early childhood trust funds that match local investments, an early childhood educator pay equity fund, funding to help pay for health insurance premiums, state investment and pay incentives that reduce teacher turnover in early childhood. And we are intentionally focusing on supporting and strengthening a diverse early childhood workforce by means of such strategies as incentive payments for bilingual educators, offering coursework and training opportunities in multiple languages, bringing credential and degree attainment opportunities to the workforce through registered apprenticeship models, and other job embedded opportunities. Also working with institutes of higher education to offer credit for prior learning and experience. I'm sure there are many more strategies that are being explored every day in states and communities across the country.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

Thank you for your time and your perspective today, Richard. So Chrishana, we focus so much on the current state of the early care and education workforce and its challenges that we often forget about the progress that has been made. Can you share some of the key transition points that have occurred that have been important for addressing systemic barriers that impact the workforce?

Chrishana Lloyd:

Yes, really, really great question. I think from a national perspective, there actually has been a lot that has occurred that's been beneficial to the workforce, the early care and education workforce. And it starts really in the 40s. I think a lot of folks don't know that in the 1940s, Congress passed what was called the Lanham Act, and that act was really designed to fund public works and that included child care. And so what happened during the 40s, folks remember we were at war, World War II was going on, and so women were entering the workforce in record numbers. And this was pretty unusual for white women. Black women had been in the workforce for quite some time, but white women were also entering the workforce and they were heavily involved in the war effort. And that was occurring kind of regardless of income. And so in order for women to work, child care needed to be available.

And so the Lanham Act really put forth legislation that enabled child care to be available universally for up to six days a week in our country, which is quite a shocker. And so it was subsidized. People were paying about \$10 a day in today's dollars to send their children to these Lanham centers, which is what they were called. They're about 3,000 of them across the country. They were high quality. The teachers and the professionals that were working with them were well trained, had ongoing professional development. There were low student teacher ratios, there were meals, there were snacks. They were open about 12 hours a day and children were being taught and also being enriched socially and emotionally. And so really, I mean, that's just one example on the national scale. There've been a couple others, but I think what's telling is that when there is a push, when there's an impetus in the country that we can pull together and we can create systems to address some of these barriers that historically have faced women and also women of color in the early care and education field.

Just thinking about another more recent example, in the late 80s, the Department of Defense, there was kind of a scathing report written about the child care that was available for military families. And they quickly got it together. And about late 80s, kind of early 90s, they passed the Military Child Care Act and that mandated and funded a complete overhaul of the system. And so again, what you saw there is teachers who had significant levels of training and professional development working with children, and their pay was really commensurate with their skills and their education level. And that's still in place today. And we know the military is one place where we think about kind of inequities in compensation, leadership, things like that in the early care and education space. And more broadly, the military has done a pretty good job, certainly not stellar.

We are a country that's kind of built on systemic racism, but has been one of the agencies that has done a better job of addressing some of these issues. So to be able to have early care and education professionals that have access to training that are getting well paid. As they get more credentials, the pay also increases, I think is pretty impressive. And again, when we think about that, we're looking at defense issues, right? Before in the 40s it was World War II. And then again, kind of in the 80s, not a push for war, but this desire and this acknowledgement that in order to keep our country secure and safe and families together and intact and working uncomfortable, the military addressed these issues.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

And what type of questions do federal and state leaders need to think about now to better address systemic barriers that our early care and education workforce are currently facing?

Chrishana Lloyd:

Another really good question. I think when we look at the history of the country and what's been happening with early care and education, we do see movement. I think people sometimes lose hope. But from the 40s I just talked about Lanham Act. There is legislation in the mid 60s with the Head Start programs. It's really kind of groundbreaking and provided lots of opportunity for black women in particular to be in leadership positions in early care and education. And then we had what didn't pass, but a Comprehensive Child Development Act in the 70s that even was kind of vetoed by the president. And then we talked about the military history. So across this time, from the 40s to date, we've seen shifts, we've seen growth, and that's happened largely at the federal level with federal dollars and federal push. That then makes it down. Those monies make it down to the states and the state leaders.

So when we think about now, I think what they need to be thinking about to address some of these systemic barriers, access to education and professional development to me is a biggie. If we look at the workforce historically, what we've seen is black women, brown women, women of color more generally tend to be in home-based child care, more so than working in center-based care. Home-based

child care is not compensated as well. Even when we look at subsidy systems within states, we see that with subsidies, they're receiving less money as well. So that to me is a challenge and something that people really need to think about, particularly given the fact that the majority of our young children, infants and toddlers, the very, very young children are in home-based child care environments. So that to me is pretty important. We're also seeing research now indicating that a lot of home-based child care is being provided by family, friends, and neighbors.

So we say workforce, right? And what does that really mean? Are we talking about people who are seeing child care, early care and education as a lifelong career? Are we looking at people who are just providing child care for a spell for their families, their grandchildren, and then moving on? So really trying to dig into a little bit who the workforce is, their motivations for being in the positions that they're in, and how best to support them that way. I worked on a study now, I guess it's been probably about 15 years. And a unique aspect of that study was that we had what we called clinical consultants in center-based preschool classrooms working with teachers, and they were supporting teachers around children's social emotional development. And a give back as part of that project was really kind of working with teachers, both lead teachers and assistant teachers and preschool classrooms one on one around challenges that they were facing, whether it be professionally or personally.

And we heard a lot, we had clinically trained social workers, mental health consultants in those positions. And we heard about issues related to health, mental and physical, domestic violence, not having enough money to get by and struggling. And so these were the things that when you think about folks who are really lifting up our children and really supporting them and carrying them through to the next stage, they were dealing with very, very big issues. So wellbeing to me is incredibly important. And something that I think gets left behind when we think about these systemic barriers. We know people, particularly black and brown people in this country have less access to resources. And in the early care and education field more broadly, things like health insurance benefits and retirement packages and things are few and far between and even less so for people of color. So that wellbeing to me is an issue that I think is particularly important.

And then I think housing is key. Again, if we think about home-based child care and historically what's happened in our country around redlining and not even historically. Still in the past month or so, we've heard a lot about kind of our larger banks who have been unfairly discriminating against particular groups of people. And so if your home is where you build wealth, if your home is where you have your business, you really need to be thinking about those types of issues and the barriers that prevent people from ownership, generating wealth, which there helps support their businesses.

Ciearra Norwood-Williams:

Thank you for highlighting those challenges. Well, I wish we had more time, but we'll leave it here for now. Richard and Chrishana, thank you so much for joining me today.

Richard Gonzales:

Thank you so much. I really appreciate having the opportunity to speak to you and to the audience.

Chrishana Lloyd:

Thank you.