

Meeting the Needs of the Early Childhood Workforce: State Perspectives

Guests: Robin Zeiter, Candace Vinson, Christi Moore, Jamilah Jordan

Martine Gordon:

Hello, and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Martine Sadarangani Gordon, senior advisor for Early Childhood Development with the Administration for Children and Families. Today, I'm very happy to be speaking with a panel of experts and leaders from across the country about their state's efforts to diversify the early childhood workforce, and their recommendations for others who are working toward that same goal. From Michigan, we have Robin Zeiter, professional Development Specialist, and Candace Vinson, education consultant with the Michigan Department of Education. Robin and Candace, thanks for joining us.

Robin Zeiter:

Thanks for having us.

Candace Vinson:

Yes, thank you. Happy to be here.

Martine Gordon:

From Georgia, we have Christi Moore, director of Professional Learning with the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. It's great to have you as well, Christi.

Christi Moore:

Thanks. It's great to be here.

Martine Gordon:

From Illinois, we have Dr. Jamilah Jordan, executive director of the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development. Thanks so much for joining us, Dr. Jordan.

Jamilah Jordan:

Thank you very much, Martine, for the invitation.

Martine Gordon:

So, Christi, let's talk about the community need and language access in Georgia. What needs of families are you and your team seeing that prompted the Spanish Child Development Associate credential pilot?

Christi Moore:

Well, in Georgia, as in many other states, there are a wide variety of languages that are spoken by children and families. In Georgia the top two are English and Spanish. But, interestingly enough, our work and our foray into the Child Development Associate in Spanish was actually prompted by some work that we did in other languages. We had a pilot work that we did in Clarkston, which is an area in the metro Atlanta area here that is home to a wide variety of immigrant and refugee families speaking over 60 languages just in a very small area of the metro Atlanta community.

So, in the Clarkston area, we were hearing that there was an interest in having access to family child care learning home providers and teachers in child care programs who spoke the languages of the children and families in that community, who understood the cultural backgrounds of those children and families, their religious values, and were really able to relate to them because they had those same lived experiences, and so we were able to pilot a Child Development Associate program offering it in primarily Somali and Arabic because those are some prevalent languages that are spoken in Clarkston, but also in Spanish, to make sure that we had individuals who were speaking those languages who were trained to be early childhood professionals in that community. What we came to learn from that is that there were many other communities across the state who were interested in replicating that work and also training individuals in their community to enter into the early childhood workforce.

Martine Gordon:

So, in Clarkston and other areas, how did you and your team partner with community to recruit folks into the workforce?

Christi Moore:

Well, the success of this work is really the community. There are two important pieces that we want to make sure are in place. The first is that we have a strong community organization in the area who can come alongside a technical college, which is the second piece, to really support students, and so the technical college offers the training, they offer access to the instructor through their adult education programs, and then of course, they also work with students to navigate the higher education landscape, which certainly many of them need coaching and support in if they're new to higher education.

So, what I have found in doing this work is that technical college instructors really know the communities and really know the workforce in their areas. They know their students, they know their needs, they really have a beat on what's happening in their communities, and so the technical college and the instructors there are really important piece of this, and again, as I said, that community organization, which is typically a foundation or an organization that does work in the community, they really can come alongside the technical college and provide recruitment to provide support to the students, but maybe beyond what could be paid for with federal money, and so it's a really beautiful way to bring community organizations together to support the early learning workforce, and really the goal with that is to of course have a diverse, well prepared workforce that will stay in those communities and continue to be invested in those communities.

Martine Gordon:

Christi, were there any unexpected wins, for lack of a better word, for Georgia, in implementing this pilot? Of course, the diverse workforce, very exciting, especially because of the diverse communities you just outlined. Can you talk about any communities that specifically may have been historically left out of opportunities that your team has worked particularly hard to include?

Christi Moore:

Well, you know what's interesting? And I would say that this was certainly an unexpected finding for us through this process, is when we first started, we were so focused on recruiting students into CDA programs, making sure that there were instructors available who spoke the languages of the students, really making sure that that infrastructure was in place on the side of educating the student and getting access to the training. But, the finding that came out of that was that we also needed to increase access to CDA observers in our state. So, once individuals complete their training, they do have to have an

observation from someone who is trained by the Council for Professional Recognition, who actually issues the CDA when it is completed, and there are professional development specialists who are trained by the council to do the actual observations that are required as part of the CDA process.

What we came to learn was that we didn't have enough professional development specialists in Georgia who spoke English, much less other languages, and especially in rural communities, getting an observer to come has been very difficult for some of these students in these CDA programs. So, something that was unexpected for us was that we realized that we also needed to leverage our PDG funds to really support training more professional development specialists to be able to do the observations.

Martine Gordon:

While we're talking about the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five funds, and the role they played in this credentials implementation, is there any other ways that Georgia was able to leverage PDG money for this pilot and anything you're looking forward to using the funds for going forward?

Christi Moore:

Well, sure. I mean, obviously without the PDG Birth through Five grant, we certainly wouldn't have had that targeted, dedicated funding stream to support this work, and as you know, PDG certainly encourages leveraging existing community systems, and so we were encouraged through writing the grant to think through what community systems might already be in place that we could leverage to support this, and so really it has allowed us to prove, if you will, the model to test it in a couple of different communities and to really understand what all of the pieces are that are in place, so that we can continue to replicate this in other areas of the state and expand it across the state in the upcoming years. Of course, continuing to increase access to those observers, that's going to be an important piece of this.

Martine Gordon:

It's really exciting to hear how all of this multiple language CDA has the potential to impact Georgians in a whole new way. Do any participants in particular come to mind for you who have been able to broaden their career journey because of this work? If so, could you share a story?

Christi Moore:

Well, certainly if my mind goes all the way back to that first group of individuals in the Clarkston area, and I'm thinking of one individual in particular who speaks Somali, and she was very excited about completing her CDA. She really never thought that she would be able to have access to this kind of learning and really be able to, as someone who is new to the United States and new to Atlanta, be able to really think through, "Okay, what is my next career step here?" And so we were able to provide her access to the CDA.

What was so interesting about it is at the end of that CDA program, the technical college there had a little celebration, and her entire family came, her husband came, her children came, her parents came. They were so excited to see her complete this CDA and really take a next step into her new career, and so I could tell you many stories of individuals like that, but she's actually a family child care learning home provider now running her own business there in Clarkston, serving those children. So, that's really the vision come true for what we're trying to accomplish with this CDA program.

Martine Gordon:

Thanks, Christi. So, Dr. Jordan, when I hear the term virtual reality, I really feel like I'm in the future. I'm sure I'm not the only one, but tell me more about Illinois's Prior Learning Assessment and how this technology, I think, most people associate with maybe video games, is being used in a whole new way.

Jamilah Jordan:

Martine, thank you for the question, and know you're not alone. In Illinois, we have leveraged the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five to engage in a innovative strategy. As you mentioned, it is the development of a virtual reality based Prior Learning Assessment. This is a partnership between the Governor's office of Early Childhood Development, our Illinois network or Child Care Resource & Referral agency, Competency-Based Education Network, which many know as C-BEN, Immersion, which is a virtual reality technology company, state agency partners, 30 faculty from 23 higher education institutions in Illinois representing community colleges, universities. As a result of this work, we seek to address equity, access, the teacher's shortage, workforce supports and program quality.

The virtual reality based Prior Learning Assessment consists of a series of simulations that allows the learner to interact with children and/or adults in ways that shows the learner's competencies. In this case, it's our Early Childhood Level II credential. They're engaging in this environment while problem solving in authentic and everyday workplace situations, in each simulation, the learner interacts with the child and adult avatars, which is powered by an Immersion company actor who has been trained to deliver these simulations using the language and responses developed by the project faculty who created the scenarios upon which these simulations are based.

There's also a host avatar that serves as the what we call the guide on the side to support users if there are questions or issues that arise during the assessment, and at the end of each simulation, the host engages the learner in reflection using prompts that were developed by the project faculty before moving onto the next simulation. The assessment is accessible on the web through desktop, laptop, or tablet. No other equipment is necessary, and learners are able to make an appointment to complete the assessment on a website at their convenience. So, you know, that's our virtual reality Prior Learning Assessment.

Martine Gordon:

No, I was looking at the pilot report and it notes that students with credits from the Prior Learning Assessment were 22% more likely to complete a post-secondary credential. That's super promising. We also know, of course, that with any pilot program, there are typically challenges to overcome. Is there something that's been seemingly a significant challenge in implementing the assessment pilot and how has the team been addressing it?

Jamilah Jordan:

Thank you again for the question. You have noted a promising outcome of Prior Learning Assessment, and we have learned in Illinois that Prior Learning Assessment benefits all students, and increases persistence and graduation rates, it requires less time and cost for degrees, in addressing equity and access. These benefits are even greater for racial minorities and lower income students when they have access to Prior Learning Assessment. The strategy highlighted need to address policies and guidelines related to Prior Learning Assessment, and one challenge that we face is how often Prior Learning Assessment credit does or does not neatly transfer from one institution to another, and just to clarify that, institutions are not required to accept another institution's Prior Learning Assessment credit. So, there remains some inconsistency and lack of transferability of prior assessment credit.

Martine Gordon:

Thanks, Dr. Jordan, you've mentioned-

Jamilah Jordan:

You're welcome.

Martine Gordon:

... a few times the role that the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five funds played in developing and implementing the Prior Learning Assessment. What's next for the assessment and what else are you excited to do with these PDG funds?

Jamilah Jordan:

Yes, we've really appreciated the opportunity in Illinois to be a grantee, and the PDG B-5 grant has made it possible to, again, to explore an innovative strategy for early childhood preparation to create a virtual reality based Prior Learning Assessment for college credit based upon the Illinois Gateways to Opportunity ECE level 2 credential competencies through an allocation to the Illinois network of Child Care Resource & Referral agencies. The project design was informed by our state agency partners as well as faculty from our Illinois higher education institutions and early childhood employers from around the state assisted in further vetting the instrument's validity and relevance to the incumbent workforce for whom this strategy was designed. The strategy has required several partners, it's required coordination and collaboration, and our employer representatives who participated in the Immersion vetting sessions frequently expressed that this form of Prior Learning Assessment felt more natural and real than ones that require writing or test taking.

In addition, the PDG B-5 grant has made it possible for us to map the landscape of Prior Learning Assessment policies and processes and tools that are used across Illinois's two year and four year institutions. We are planning to conduct an independent diversity, equity and inclusion review of the simulations' scenarios, and this is as a result of faculty feedback, we want to continue the development and review of new avatars and early childhood environments, create additional learner supports that can be provided before doing the simulation, and then finally, we hope to develop an online assessment orientation tutorial for the learners that complete the session.

Martine Gordon:

Thanks, Dr. Jordan. So, I think we've all experienced the impact of the current early childhood workforce shortage. Robin, Candace, could you tell us about the priorities of the Future Proud Michigan Educator Launch to help build a pipeline to the profession?

Candace Vinson:

Absolutely. At the Michigan Department of Education, we have marketed our Grow Your Own Educator programs with the name Future Proud Michigan Educator. LAUNCH is our career and technical education program for secondary students, which aligns to our educator preparation program competencies, and in LAUNCH, we address a variety of workforce shortages. We have early childhood education out of school time programming, and then PK-12 teaching. We've been using a tagline of launching educational careers through credentialing because our Perkins CTE State Plan decided on attained recognized industry credentials as one of our core performance indicators for program quality. Students in this program have the choice of working towards their infant toddler or preschool Child

Development Associate, or the Michigan Youth Development Associate, which is a credential that's similar to the CDA, and we use it in Michigan for workers in our out of school time programs, so for school age child care.

Our goal is to feed the pipeline to multiple careers in education and caring for children with these new professionals. Our high school students are able to begin working in early childhood and school age programs while earning a wage in high school. Some choose to immediately enter the profession, others move into the teacher preparation track because Michigan has a birth to kindergarten teaching band, and that aligns nicely with the CDA. In addition to that, we've been working very hard with the goal of increasing access to this CTE program. We understand from all research that increasing areas to CTE programming increases equity and diversifies the workforce. So, as we move towards a more diversified workforce to best meet the needs of all students' at Michigan, we really have to make sure that this program is available to all students in Michigan as well.

Martine Gordon:

Can you tell us a little bit about the role that the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five funding has played in the implementation, conceptualization even, of the Future Proud Michigan Educator launch?

Robin Zeiter:

Absolutely. So, PDG actually helped support some really critical things that I think not only have supported us as we've been building, but also will continue from a sustainability standpoint. So, the first and probably most unique piece to the PDG funding support was around a teacher liaison. So, we had the luxury of having a recently retired teacher, very recent, who actually taught in this program and had experience with both credentials and is also a PD specialist with the council, really serve in, again, that liaison role. So, she's able to help us on the state team level, really have a sense for what those teachers are experiencing, and she also is a trusted messenger. She's someone that the teachers seek out for additional support, and we also... Candace, didn't mention this, but she also taught in this program, so we have that luxury as we are sort of building and working through this really exciting opportunity to build our workforce.

So, PDG funded that teacher liaison support. We also kicked this sort of project off or initiative off with the opportunity for CTE teachers or Career Tech Ed teachers to actually have some funding to build kind of a classroom resource library, and so teachers were given a thousand dollars to build that actual space or opportunity or library for lack of a better word, of materials that the students might use in their work-based learning, critical sort of assets or resources like NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice, and so that was a really nice foundational sort of opportunity for those students to have that. The other piece or another piece that was really important and has continued to be critical to this, that PDG's funds helped support or fully supported, is around being able to actually enter into a contract with a communications agency so that we could have a really strong professional marketing company, help support sort of those message pieces, promotional materials, to really support the audiences that we need and want to know about this as we're trying to build students or encourage students to be part of these programs in their local areas.

It also included video testimonials. We're working on those right now, again, to sort of build that excitement around teaching across the early childhood through high school setting. Then we also did some funding around assessor training on our complimentary state, what we call Youth Development Associate. We needed to build not only the cadre of assessors or PD specialists on the CDA side, we also had to do that on the MI-YDA side. So, those are the things that the PDG funds helped support. Then we

also really used those PDG funds to leverage other funding that has really made an enormous difference. So, we have about a million dollars in CCDF or Child Development and Care ARPA funds, and we have used those to really support that building of the PD specialist environment and cadre in our state. We were able to offer an incentive for becoming a PD specialist as well as renewing as a PD specialist, and then we've added \$150 on to the actual stipend or visit payment that the council makes, and that's really new for us.

We just launched that really earlier in August, and so we're anxious to see because we too, like Georgia mentioned, we have a fairly critical shortage, I would say, on that PD specialist front. We also used ARPA funds to support a scholarship for high school students who don't qualify for TEACH, particularly or most likely because they may not be 18 years old when they approach submitting for the credential, and so we have a scholarship opportunity that is being funded by ARPA. We also have funded Michigan our local affiliate, our state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. We funded conference attendance for CTE teachers and then follow-up access to all of the content in an on-demand format so that they could support students with that, and they will do that this fall.

Then we also used ARPA funds to create a systems video, and that is in development right now, and that's really an opportunity for the individual that's part of this workforce to have a really good sense for how all of the pieces fit together. It can be really confusing and muddy for folks, and so we're hopeful that that systems video will help ground them in kind of how the things and pieces fit together around them as a professional, as part of this workforce,

Martine Gordon:

It's really great to hear how Michigan's been able to leverage preschool development grant funds alongside American Rescue Plan act dollars to further the field. I know different states are doing that in different ways. Robin, Candace, you've mentioned so many things that are happening in Michigan, what's coming in Michigan. Is there something in particular that you've mentioned or didn't that you are excited to see happen in the coming year?

Candace Vinson:

Well, I'll go ahead and start with this one. One thing that is just in general exciting about our project is it's cross office in the Department of Education. It's also cross agency. We've used a lot of community partners as well. So, it's really a comprehensive all systems approach to workforce shortage. But, moving forward, in particular in this year, we would like to increase the number of programs that we have. Again, we've been increasing with each year, but we would like to have more CTE education programs, more of those launch programs within our early middle college system. So, in many states, they have early college or they have middle college.

In Michigan, we have a combination of the two. Our students enter into early middle college and high school, and they have a year 13 to their program of study, and so during that time, our students will receive a lot of wraparound services so that they are successful in early middle college and they complete approximately two years of college. Some are a little bit more, some are a little bit less, in that extra year of high school. When we can have the career tech program offered with early middle college, it gives students more time to complete their credential. It also gives them a lot of work experience along with the college credit. So, these students really emerged from that program extremely prepared and qualified to step right into a classroom or to have less cost to move to a bachelor's degree. It makes them very ideal for districts to hire them, especially if a district is considering funding the rest of the degree to use that as leverage for hiring practice.

We're also working on creating more agreements across our state where our post-secondary institutions are awarding credit for those credentials. We have some schools where students can earn anywhere between 14 and 18 college credits for having completed their CDA, and we'd like to see that more universal across the state. Same with prior learning credit. So, that's a big project that Michigan's been working on with post-secondary. We have a competency based education system for this particular program, and so we want to see that system strengthen and strengthen the post-secondary alignment as well. As with all states right now, including Michigan, teacher apprenticeship is a huge buzz, and everyone is working towards creating a plan for teacher apprenticeship. But, this high school foundation is really a key to success in recruiting and retaining younger educators just across the board. They're more prepared, again, to enter classrooms and work with students, and that really strengthens our overall system.

Robin Zeiter:

I'll just add kind of from an excited or what I'm looking forward to, one of the things that we've been really intentional about with this work is to tie it or include these students who are part of the profession in our state's workforce registry, and that was a fairly heavy lift for teachers and students to have sort of this new thing that they needed to connect and interact with. But, as we look at being able to track those students and support those students who might not complete their credential while they're in high school, giving them sort of that foundational content piece and having it tracked in the registry, really supports their ability to kind of pick up without interruption, should they leave, come back, or just not complete well in high school.

It also supports their work-based learning sites, that in many cases, especially on the early childhood side, our licensed child care programs, being able to connect those students to those licensed programs and having that administrator be able to track, make sure that required health and safety is completed, has really, and again, this is all fairly new to us, last year was the first time that students and CTE began using or utilizing the registry. So, we're anxious to continue to support them with that experience and also to begin to look at some of the data across that. Then the other thing is we really have worked hard on those marketing materials and we need counselors and administrators and parents to get those materials in their hands so that we can continue to build enthusiasm and excitement and understanding for education, or becoming an educator in Michigan.

Martine Gordon:

So, Robin, Candace, could you share any insights into how the launch project has been able to address or has been impacted by any sort of compensation challenges with the workforce in Michigan?

Candace Vinson:

Absolutely. At the beginning, when we first started this, so this is we're entering year four of a five year project. So, in the first and second years in particular, we were struggling with our own administrators and teachers within the state who were telling us, we don't want to encourage students to earn their CDA because they won't make enough money, and what COVID did really was it kind of blew that whole concept wide open. We know that we have to pay all of our educators better, but in particular our early childhood educators, they need to be compensated better, and so we've had an exasperated workforce shortage, and we are finally seeing that areas are realizing that they have to raise wages to make this work, and there's kind of a twofold thing here. The first being that we changed over to a grade banding system for our teachers, so we now have a birth to kindergarten grade band.

As we start to move towards a concept of preschool for all, we know that that will help with pay for preschool teachers who have earned that grade band. The other piece that we are seeing in both early childhood and in school age child care, our regulatory agency in Michigan actually worked with us to create some rule changes on who can count into ratio in a child care facility, and so now our 16 and 17 year olds in career tech programs can be working in paid work-based learning and still supervised by an adult of course, but they are filling a role of a child care worker in the room, therefore they're getting paid, and we're watching our districts use their ESSER funds and our funds to compensate appropriately and to give retention bonuses. We have a district, fairly affluent district in Michigan, but they are giving bonuses that when you do the math, our high school students are making over \$20 an hour working in school-age child care.

So, it's kind of leveraging the whole system. We're putting in more requirements for our career tech program in a hope to get more credentials in the hands of students, but then in turn, what we're seeing is that districts are utilizing their funding to pay their workers that have the credentials. So, I think this is a win-win just across the board for the industry.

Robin Zeiter:

I was just going to add that we are working not only on teaching apprenticeships, we are working on them on the early childhood side as well, and some of those have really strong wage requirements as individuals acquire more training and more time and work-based learning, and so we're hopeful to see, or looking forward to the possibility that that might also create a wage that is more reasonable and ideally sustainable.

Candace Vinson:

In addition to that, when we look at young people entering the profession with a higher credential, or when we look at apprenticeship in general, we know that there's a cost saving to the worker. The employer gets a qualified employee who is more likely to stick around, which saves the employer money in the long run for retainment. In an addition, we see education cost savings. So, one statistic from the US Department of Labor on apprenticeship, in general, is that they have a 94% retainment rate, and an apprentice makes, on average, in their lifetime, \$300,000 more than someone who did not complete an apprenticeship simply from that savings combined with early wages and moving up the wage scale. It's just exciting stuff.

Martine Gordon:

It's really exciting across all three of your states. I think we could all sit and talk about this for hours and hours. Unfortunately, we don't have as much time as we would like, but it was really wonderful to be with you all today. I really want to thank you for sharing your time, your expertise, your knowledge of what's going on in your states in particular, and sharing it with this podcast. So, thank you for all of your work. Thank you to your teams, and all you do on behalf of our nation's children, families, and communities. It's been great having this conversation today.

Candace Vinson:

Yes, thank you so much for allowing us to share what we're doing in Michigan to promote the profession.

Christi Moore:

I've enjoyed the conversation today and have been really excited to share what's going on in Georgia, and so thank you for the opportunity.