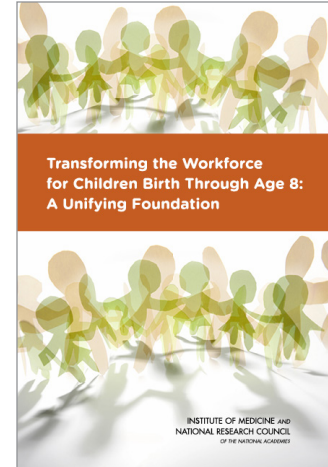


Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8

A Unifying Foundation



Children are already learning at birth, and they develop and learn at a rapid pace in their early years. This provides a critical foundation for lifelong progress, and the adults who provide for the care and education of young children bear a great responsibility for these children's health, development, and learning.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) were commissioned to explore the science of child development, particularly looking at implications for the professionals who work with children birth through age 8. In the resulting report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, the committee finds that much is known about how children learn and develop, what professionals who provide care and education for children need to know and be able to do, and what professional learning supports they need. Although much of that knowledge increasingly informs standards for what *should be*, it is not fully reflected in what *is*—the current capacities and practices of the workforce, the settings in which they work, the policies and infrastructure that set qualifications and provide professional learning, and the government and other funders who support and oversee these systems.

In response, the committee offers a blueprint for action based on a unifying foundation that will underlie more consistent and cumulative support for the development and early learning of children birth through age 8.

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Fragmented Workforce

The science of child development and early learning makes it clear how important and complex it is to work with children from infancy through the early elementary years. Yet despite their shared objective of nurturing and securing the future success of young children, those who provide for the care and education of children from birth through age 8 are not acknowledged as a cohesive workforce, unified by the shared knowledge and competencies needed to do their jobs well. Expectations for these professionals often have not kept pace with what the science indicates children need, and many current policies do not place enough value on the significant contributions these professionals make to children's long-term success.

Strengthening this workforce is challenging because the relevant professional roles, systems, and services are diverse and often decentralized. The care and education of young children takes place in many different settings with different practitioner traditions and cultures; is funded through multiple government and nongovernment sources; and operates under the management or regulatory oversight of diverse agencies with varying policies, incentives, and constraints. The report says that achieving convergence will require coordination and alignment among stakeholders at multiple levels and across different systems. Better support of care and education professionals will require mobilizing local, state, and national leadership; building a culture in higher education and ongoing professional learning that fosters a cohesive workforce for young children; ensuring practice environments that enable and reinforce the quality of these professionals' work; and creating consistency across policies and infrastructure.

Blueprint for Action

The IOM/NRC report offers 13 areas of recommendation for local, state, and national actors—

including governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations, philanthropic funders, and the business sector—to support improvements to the quality of professional practice and the practice environment for care and education professionals who work with children from birth through age 8. These detailed recommendations—which include extensive considerations for their implementation—are presented in Chapter 12 of the report. Together, the recommendations create a blueprint for action that builds on a unifying foundation of child development and early learning, shared knowledge and competencies for care and education professionals, and principles for effective professional learning.

Central to building this foundation is improving professional learning and practice of the birth through 8 workforce. The report recommends actions geared toward

- improving higher education and ongoing professional learning;
- strengthening qualification requirements based on knowledge and competencies; and
- promoting evaluation that leads to continuous improvements in professional practices.

To strengthen higher education, the report calls for high-quality training programs for specific professional roles based on a foundation of interdisciplinary programs that foster a shared fundamental knowledge base and competencies to support child development for professionals in all sectors who work with young children—care and education, social services, and health/allied health professions—using required core coursework and field-based experiences.

For educators in particular, the report notes the need for greater coherence in professional learning supports, both in higher education and during ongoing practice. For example, those who provide care and education for infants and toddlers and those who practice in settings outside of centers and schools, such as family child care, need greater access to infrastructure for professional learning. For early elementary educators,

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the competencies needed to work with the youngest students can be overshadowed in broader K-12 professional learning systems that skew toward the education of older children. The report recommends ways to make it easier for practitioners to access appropriate, high-quality professional learning.

Practices and policies regarding requirements for qualification to practice vary widely depending on the professional's role, ages of children with whom he or she works, practice setting, and which agency or institution has authority for setting qualification criteria. The committee recommends that agencies and organizations that oversee care and education settings strengthen and align competency-based qualification requirements for all care and education professionals working with children from birth through age 8. In particular, the committee calls for phased, multiyear pathways to transition to a minimum bachelor's degree requirement with specialized knowledge and competencies for all lead educators, meaning those who bear primary responsibility for the instructional and other activities for children in formal care and education environments.

The science of child development and early learning clearly indicates that the work of lead educators for young children of all ages requires the same high level of sophisticated knowledge and competencies related to child development, content knowledge, and educational practices. Holding lower educational expectations for early childhood educators than for those working in early elementary grades perpetuates the perception that educating children before kindergarten

requires less expertise than educating older students, which helps to justify policies—such as for compensation, program funding, and professional supports—that make it difficult to maximize the potential of young children and the early learning programs that serve them. The committee is cognizant of the complex issues that accompany a minimum degree requirement, which will require careful planning for implementation over time and in the context of efforts to address other interrelated factors that affect the quality of professional practice.

In addition, the report recommends developing new approaches for assessing the quality of professional practice for those who work with young children. Continuous quality improvement systems should align with the science of child development and learning, be comprehensive in scope, reflect day-to-day practice, be tied to access to professional learning, and account for setting- and community-level factors that affect the capacity of educators to practice effectively, such as overcrowded classrooms and poorly resourced settings.

The committee also recommends specific actions to bolster the supports that will make these changes to workforce development feasible, such as well-informed and capable leadership; coherent policies, guidance, and standards; support for implementation; and a connection to the evolving knowledge base. In particular, the committee recommends complementary approaches to provide coherent guidance and support at the national level, with specific strategies and timelines for implementation at the state and local level that can



**Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8:
Deepening and Broadening the Foundation for Success**

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accommodate variations in local circumstances.

The committee recognizes the challenges of making these multiple interdependent changes. Full implementation of some recommendations could take years or even decades; at the same time, the need is urgent to improve the quality and consistency of professional practice for children from birth through age 8. This calls for strategic prioritization of immediate actions as well as long-term goals with clearly articulated intermediate steps. Significant resources will be required from government at all levels and from nongovernmental sources. Therefore, assessments of resource needs, mobilization of funding, and financing innovations will be important.

Conclusion

Persisting with the status quo for the professionals who do this important, complex work will perpetuate today's fragmented approach to the care and education of young children, resulting in inadequate learning and development, especially among America's most vulnerable families and communities. The IOM/NRC committee anticipates that a significant investment, commitment, and concerted effort following its recommendations will lay the groundwork to improve the quality of both professional practice and the practice environment, the status and well-being of the workforce, recruitment and retention of a robust pipeline of new professionals—and ultimately, outcomes for children. 🌀

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