

Raising the Bar

JOAN FITZGERALD OCTOBER 17, 2004

Lilliana Diaz has operated a child-care business in her Lowell, Massachusetts, home for more than four years. Often rising before dawn and putting in 10-hour days, she guides eight toddlers through a busy schedule of reading, playtime, meals, and more. To get to this point, Diaz completed a 63-hour training course, then earned a Childhood Development Associate (CDA) credential, and is now working toward an associate's degree. But because Massachusetts, like 32 other states, does not reimburse family child-care providers based on their education level, she makes the same as a provider who has just 15 hours of course work -- the bare minimum required by the state. The same is true for workers in most child-care centers; there is little pay differentiation even for workers with college degrees.

In both family day-care settings (a small number of children in the provider's home) and child-care centers (more formal and larger), the quality of care is more custodial than developmental. Only 16 states require family child-care providers to be licensed, and the licensing requirements mostly address safety issues, not educational quality or caretaker training. Just 7 percent of child-care centers are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the field's accrediting body. And the picture is no better when it comes to child-care workers, who -- shamefully -- are among the lowest-paid people in the country. Assistants earn an average hourly wage of \$8.37 and teachers about \$9.66. It's no wonder only one-third of child-care teachers hold a college degree; those with degrees can get better jobs in other fields.

We know that professionalization of the people who work with kids makes a big difference in outcomes for children. But how do we get from the current workforce to one that provides enriching, developmentally focused care that prepares children to do well in school? Should we aim high -- for the kindergarten model, where teachers hold bachelor's degrees? Or should we look to an attainable middle ground -- focusing on upgrading skills for current providers to ensure better results for kids? With a few notable exceptions detailed below, most states unfortunately are taking a minimalist approach.

We also know definitively that high-quality child care is essential to the social, cognitive, and emotional development of children, particularly for poor children who may not get parenting that meets these needs at home. Child-care providers with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in activities that stimulate children's development. Compelling evidence suggests that teachers with bachelor's degrees in early-childhood development or education are much more likely to provide children with the literacy skills and vocabularies needed to do well in school. As far back as 1979, the National Day Care Study found that children in centers with a high proportion of well-trained caregivers had higher cognitive test scores than others. Voluminous research since then has shown a positive correlation between teacher education and children's language scores, their healthy interaction with peers, and other important measures of success.

But professionalizing the workforce requires not only a system of credentials but also some assurance that better education will be rewarded with better pay. Only 21 states set education standards for child-care-center employees, and most of those are minimal. Rhode Island and New Jersey alone require teachers in child-care centers to hold bachelor's degrees and to have taken part in specialized early-childhood training. Vermont is the only state requiring that a child-care center have on staff at least one person with a master's degree. And just 17 states reimburse workers based on their education or training, mostly by offering a one-time award or annual stipend. In Georgia, for example, the INCENTIVE\$ program offers annual salary supplements to child-care workers who meet licensing-credentialing criteria as a way to boost skills and reduce turnover. A worker with a cda gets a \$400 annual stipend; an associate's degree brings \$1,500; a bachelor's degree means \$2,000.

In Washington state, an innovative middle-ground approach links wage increases to education and experience in a formal career ladder. The Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder program [see Joan Fitzgerald, "Caring for Children as a Career," *TAP*, July 15, 2002] was started in 2000 with state welfare savings and ran for 3 years in 126 child-care centers. It required participating centers to pay a minimum wage and provided raises based on years of service, job responsibility, and specific educational credentials. A study by Washington State University found that the program increased median hourly wages of participating child-care workers (to \$9 versus \$8.14 for other child-care workers). It doubled the number of centers offering health benefits (86 percent for participating centers versus 45 percent for others). It boosted morale among teachers and gained support among parents and center directors. Significantly more workers in the pilot centers pursued additional education than did other child-care workers. And, most important, it improved the quality of child care delivered, as measured by two widely used quality-assessment tools.

Washington's pilot program made a stronger link between education and wages than most initiatives, catalyzing educational advancement with the carrot of increased wages. But program weaknesses also limited its impact. As a three-year pilot, the "ladder" was not in place long enough to ensure significant educational advancement. (It takes *longer* than three years to earn an associate's degree while working as a full-time child-care teacher.) And despite the higher pay and incentive raises, workers with bachelor's degrees were often lured away from the child-care field to better-paying jobs.

Elsewhere, New Jersey has shown that the high ground can be achieved -- and that young children are the beneficiaries. In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled, in *Abbott v. Burke*, that high-quality preschool was needed for children in the state's 30 poorest school districts to enter school ready to learn. Another ruling in 2000 required child-care teachers in *Abbott* districts already working in centers funded by the state's Department of Education to earn a bachelor's degree and early-childhood certification in four years. The state would help them do so by funding salaries and program expenses, as well as scholarships.

ADVERTISEMENT By late 2003, an astonishing 92 percent of the *Abbott* district teachers held bachelor's degrees -- up from just 35 percent at the time of the court ruling. A preliminary study just published by the Early Learning Improvement Consortium found that children's language skills were improving, too. As yet, it's not clear how much of the jump in teachers' credentials is attributable to newly acquired degrees and how much resulted from attrition of the least-educated teachers (who were replaced, in turn, by college graduates). But early signs are encouraging, experts agree.

To guard against newly credentialed teachers leaving for better jobs in other school districts, the Supreme Court required *Abbott* districts to pay providers adequately to retain teaching staff. The *Abbott* district teachers are now earning an average annual salary of \$41,333 (the range is \$31,359 to \$61,035.) Further, the state has provided increased benefits to the level of district benefits. The results are so promising that the state has expanded the scholarship program to all workers in centers with *Abbott* contracts.

New Jersey seems to have proved that the child-care labor force *can* meet higher standards, and child-care experts are confident the Garden State is not an exception. Amy Kershaw of Strategies for Children, an advocacy and public-policy nonprofit focusing on youth and families, has interviewed many teachers in connection with her organization's campaign for comprehensive early preschool in Massachusetts. "Teachers aren't opposed to higher standards and want to achieve them," she says. "What they fear is that standards will be imposed without giving them a way to get there." And getting there can be hard: The average caregiver is 39 years old, juggling family and work, and faced with the many challenges confronting adult learners. But with enough support, many will do it.

The biggest barrier is funding. Despite its success, Washington's pilot program ended due to a lack of state funding. Advocates of the pilot spearheaded a unique fund-raising effort -- a 2003 ballot initiative levying 10 cents on every espresso shot sold -- that went down to defeat. This year, the Washington business community did support the reauthorization of the Families and Education Levy, a property-tax measure that funds education and health programs in the Seattle area. But the \$116 million, seven-year levy allocates only \$220,000 yearly to the career-ladder program -- enough to fund 10 of the original 22 Seattle centers. The Economic Opportunity Institute, which originated the career-ladder initiative, is now seeking a longer-term legislative solution.

New Jersey, meanwhile, chose to use child-care funds from its welfare program for scholarships for teachers returning to school. Although the *Abbott* ruling's deadline technically expired in September, the Department of Human Services is still funding the scholarship program for both assistant teachers and new teachers needing certification.

The Washington and New Jersey cases demonstrate that better-quality care can be partly achieved with the existing workforce, although New Jersey did supplement the existing workers with new teachers who had bachelor's degrees. Washington's pilot program focused on the need to increase workers' wages, while New Jersey's court mandate was to improve quality to prepare poor children to do well in school. Importantly, the court didn't just throw a little money at newly educated child-care teachers; it also required *parity* with public-school teachers with similar educations. Further, as one analyst of the New Jersey program, Julia Coffman, notes, "New Jersey's Supreme Court gave the state a significant push forward in its movement toward high-quality early care and education by forcing the state to tackle the problem in a defined period of time and to dedicate adequate resources."

We have evidence that such initiatives can improve the quality of early-childhood programs. What we need now is the political will. Let's hope that the courts do not have to be the drivers in the movement toward quality early care and education.

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