

New York City's Early Childhood Workforce: The Foundation for Quality

Today, nearly five million individuals other than parents care for and educate almost two thirds of America's children under five.¹ Research confirms that the quality of the settings in which these children are served is linked to the quality of their staffs, in particular, to their levels of formal education and specialized training in early childhood education.² High-quality early childhood experiences provided by effective teachers are increasingly recognized as critical to lifelong learning and success.³ It is time for public policy to catch up to the research and knowledge base. It is time for all children of New York City to have the finest early childhood education.



This brief provides a portrait of New York City's early childhood workforce and the beginnings of a policy agenda for the city. The findings and recommendations presented here emerged from a recent study of early childhood

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What We Found:	Great disparities in levels of education and certification exist between community- and school-based early childhood practitioners.
Policy Recommendation:	Increase access to higher education and allocate new resources for student support services, scholarships, loan forgiveness, and flexible study opportunities. Institutions of higher education must find innovative ways of tailoring coursework, credentialing, and certification to the needs of teachers and children.
What We Found:	Directors, the stewards of program quality, do not reflect the diversity of their communities and are lacking in management and leadership skills.
Policy Recommendation:	Provide support to current directors and recruit from a diverse pool of teachers to prepare the next generation of directors. Make management and leadership training available to those entering the field as well as those currently directing early childhood programs.
What We Found:	Nearly three quarters of directors, 70 percent of community-based teachers, and almost half of school-based teachers reported the need for additional professional development.
Policy Recommendation:	Create a comprehensive and sequential professional development system that serves all early childhood professionals.
What We Found:	Setting is the dominant determining factor of compensation levels of early childhood educators. Community-based teachers as a whole are compensated at significantly lower rates than their school-based colleagues.
Policy Recommendation:	Commit greater energy and resources to changing current financing paradigms. Convene a group of financial experts to create an experimental model for New York City.
What We Found:	Retention and turnover are critical challenges for NYC's early childhood programs. Three quarters of all directors are significantly concerned about retention, with nearly a quarter losing staff to the NYC Department of Education.
Policy Recommendation:	Conduct further research to isolate the factors that influence recruitment, job satisfaction, and teachers' plans to remain in the field. New York City and New York State must continue to explore strategies for increasing compensation, which has been linked to greater job satisfaction.

educators—including directors, teachers, and assistant teachers—conducted by the NYC Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (PDI) and the Cornell University Early Childhood Program. Our profile includes center-based programs serving children birth to five in public and private community-based child care centers, community- and school-based pre-kindergarten programs and Head Start and Early Head Start.⁴

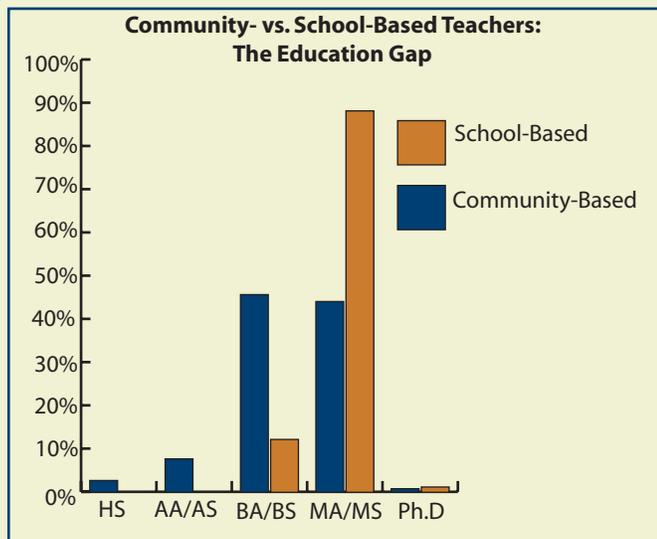
Who are NYC’s Early Childhood Educators?

Like their peers nationwide, New York City’s early childhood workforce is overwhelmingly female. The city’s workforce, however, is more racially and ethnically diverse than the early childhood workforce throughout the country, mirroring the rich mix of people and cultures in the city. Forty-four percent of directors, 53 percent of teachers, and 61 percent of assistant teachers are people of color, with the greater representation in community-based settings. In addition, about 20 percent of early childhood teachers are fluent speakers of Spanish—the most common tongue of New York’s rapidly expanding group of English Language Learners (ELL).

As the stewards of programs serving an increasingly diverse body of children, program directors must reflect that diversity. Research shows that a cultural match between staff and children can enhance quality.⁵ Greater efforts should be made to recruit administrators and managers from a variety of racial and ethnic groups, especially those represented by the children and families in their communities.

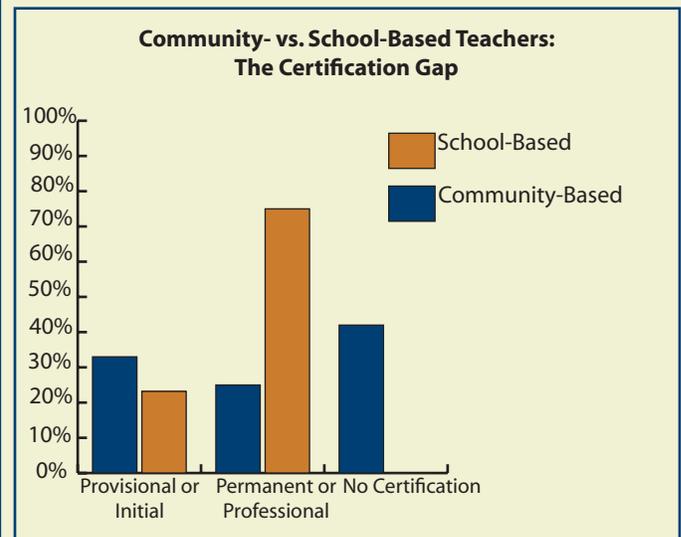
Education, Specialization, and Certification Levels

The education, specialization, and certification profile of the city’s workforce is complex. Because of the diversity of early childhood programs and their agencies, all of which have different requirements, the educational background of staff varies greatly according to setting.



Nearly 90 percent of school-based teachers, for example, have master’s degrees, while only 43 percent of community-based teachers have reached the master’s level. Strikingly, twice the percentage of community-based assistant teachers as school-based assistant teachers have the high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment. Overall, only a small proportion of assistant teachers hold master’s degrees; about a quarter, bachelor’s; nearly a third, an associate’s degree; and less than half, a high school degree or the equivalent.

Specialization and certification in early childhood, also linked to quality, varies tremendously. Across settings, certification levels are highest among pre-kindergarten teachers, 80 percent of whom are certified. Certification, however, is most prevalent among school-based pre-K lead teachers and assistant teachers. Seventy-five percent



of lead teachers in school-based universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) programs are permanently certified. Combining teachers with permanent certification with those holding provisional certification yields a 100 percent overall certification rate in the public schools. While the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) requires all community-based teachers of three- and four-year-olds to be certified, our data revealed a certification rate of only 61 percent.

Among the various pathways to certification is the study plan, required by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Nearly a quarter of teachers and a small percentage of assistant teachers in community-based programs are currently pursuing study plans. Many teachers view the process as challenging, with nearly half reporting that they find it somewhat difficult and nearly a third, extremely difficult. Most difficult are the financial constraints and passing the certification exams. Finding and registering for the necessary courses is also a challenge.

While certification is not required of infant teachers—and more than half of lead teachers serving infants in community-based programs remain uncertified—they certainly should be required to have some significant professional preparation. The city’s proposed regulation requiring associate’s degrees is an important first step in that direction.

Directors are widely acknowledged to play a significant role in creating the context for a high-quality early childhood program. As is the case with the teachers whom they supervise, directors’ formal education and specialized early childhood training are linked to quality.⁶ Research has consistently found that administrative practices are critical to positive outcomes for children.⁷ In New York City, 85 percent of directors have master’s degrees. Moreover, two thirds of directors hold their higher education degrees in early childhood education. Ninety-two percent, however, have had no education or experience in management prior to assuming their current position. Few directors in the state and no directors in New York City possess the New York State Children’s Program Administrator Credential (CPAC).

To facilitate certification of early childhood educators at all levels, the process needs to be simplified, made more accessible and affordable, and accompanied by support for candidates. Access to required courses and financial aid are paramount, along with tutoring for certification exams, which are often an obstacle to completion of the process. To address the gaps in directors’ managerial experience, the city needs to provide greater access to the CPAC as well as subsequent leadership development.

What are the Needs of Early Childhood Educators?

The needs of early childhood educators are diverse and urgent, with compensation and professional development high on, if not at the top of, the list. Wages for early childhood workers are abysmally low and compensation varies enormously across settings. Overall, directors in community-based programs earn an average of \$52,000 annually, with at least one salary reported as low as \$16,000. Those in private and UPK programs command the highest average salaries, or about \$60,000, followed by directors at Head Start and Early Head Start programs, at \$54,000, and directors at Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) programs, who earn about \$51,000.

Community-based teachers average \$36,000 annually, with at least one salary reported as low as \$13,000—significantly less than their colleagues in school-based programs, who average nearly \$27,000 more, with salaries starting at \$24,000. The differences are most striking among teachers carrying out parallel educational mandates. Community-based pre-kindergarten teachers, for example, make only 60

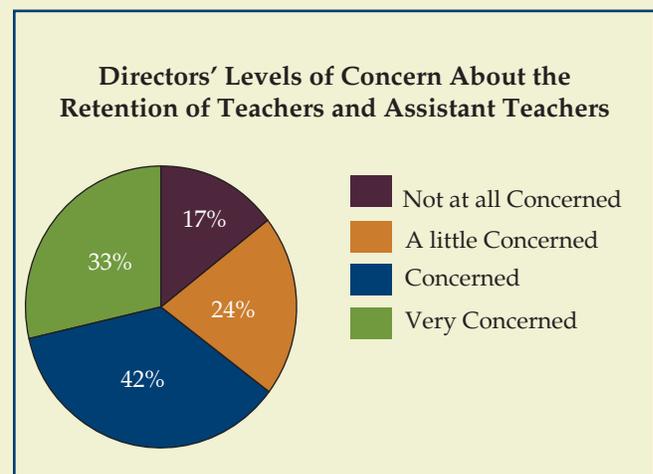
percent of what their school-based colleagues earn, in spite of their similar responsibilities. Among assistant teachers, those in community-based settings average about \$3,000 less than their school-based counterparts.

*The quality, content, and accessibility of professional development continue to be significant challenges for the field. Myriad state programs have different requirements for professional development as well as diverse mechanisms and levels of support for training, educating, and supporting the early childhood workforce.⁸ The findings of PDI’s assessment of New York City’s early childhood workforce, *Learning About the Learners*, conducted in 2005, illuminate some of these challenges on the ground, including gaps in the supply of accessible training; minimal quality control of trainings and training; inadequate support for those undergoing the certification process; limited use of financial resources for training; and the overall lack of cohesion of professional development options.⁹ The most recent study of the workforce confirms that this is still the case.*

Given the high stakes for the field and the children it serves, the need for comprehensive, sequential, and developmental training as well as technical assistance for all early childhood professionals is of the essence. The establishment of early childhood career advisors is a critical component of such a system. The culture needs to be transformed such that the value of life-long professional development is internalized and applied. Teachers and directors need a knowledge base that includes specific skills and dispositions.

Job Satisfaction, Retention, and Turnover

In the early childhood field at large, job satisfaction can be elusive, with inadequate compensation often cited as a critical factor in turnover.¹⁰ Turnover within the field is rampant—the annual rate has long hovered around 30 percent.¹¹



Surprisingly, many educators express the highest level of satisfaction with their jobs. Roughly 60 percent of teachers and assistant teachers claim to be very

satisfied in their positions—in spite of notable degrees of dissatisfaction among particular groups across settings. Teachers' claims of high levels of satisfaction, however, seem to belie the reality of turnover. Directors remain significantly concerned about retention and turnover. Nearly half of all directors reported experiencing the turnover of as many as eight teachers and 15 assistant teachers during the previous year, and almost a quarter lost teachers to the Department of Education. Overall, more than three quarters of directors are significantly concerned about retention of their teachers.

Teachers' plans for remaining in the field are hardly reassuring. School-based teachers are more likely to plan to remain in the field for over five years, and less likely to be uncertain of their plans, than their community-based colleagues. Most assistant teachers plan to remain in the field at least one or more years. However, more than a third of school-based and almost half of community-based assistant teachers are unsure about whether or not they will remain in the field.

A number of factors predict teacher plans to remain in the field, including levels of compensation, job satisfaction and certification, and perceptions of how well their education had prepared them to work in the field. In school-based programs, for example, those with positive views of their educational preparation were more likely to plan to

remain in the field for five or more years, and less likely to be uncertain about their futures in the field. However, a substantial percentage of teachers have reported that they were "very poorly" and "somewhat poorly" prepared. As professors in higher education continue to develop programs to meet the needs of the next generation of teachers, such data must be part of their deliberations.

A Policy Agenda for NYC

We know the characteristics of the workforce that are linked to high-quality early childhood education—levels of education and certification; compensation; participation in professional development; and staff stability and tenure. We also know where New York City's workforce stands in relation to these indicators. PDI's findings provide a solid foundation for application to policy and practice. They provide a blueprint for the city and a model for the state as we continue to plan and build a comprehensive system of training and professional development that supports high-quality services for all our city's children and families.

ENDNOTES

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Developing Adults Working with Developing Children

The New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute is a public/private partnership that brings together a range of city agencies, a consortium of private funders, and the nation's largest urban university to build a comprehensive system of professional development for individuals who work with young children in New York City.

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