

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE

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Investing to build a quality workforce

The quality of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce is one of the most important predictors of educationally rich classrooms and of overall ECE quality.¹ Children's early learning and wellbeing rely on the ability of ECE educators to facilitate high-quality classroom interactions. Similarly, children's motivation to learn, as well as educational achievement, is strongly influenced by the characteristics and behaviors of ECE educators. Global evidence suggests that educators who are valued – through pay, prestige, qualifications and professional development – tend to perform better, and therefore contribute to greater learning outcomes.

Building a quality ECE workforce, however, is challenging. Early childhood educators are generally young, poorly paid and inadequately prepared for their roles. Often, ECE educators have no academic background, professional training or hold non-credentialed training certificates. In 2018, only 60 percent of ECE educators in low-income countries met the minimum academic qualification requirement necessary to become an ECE educator, compared to 80 percent of primary school educators.² Ensuring that working conditions are attractive, with opportunities for high quality training, will help ensure ECE educators are well-prepared, supported and incentivized to stay in the profession.

Strategies to build and support a quality workforce

While every country is different, there are four key strategies that can help countries build an effective ECE workforce: *attract, prepare, support and retain*. These four strategies can improve the status, training, skills and support of staff, which in turn has the potential to raise the quality of learning.

Attract. Recruiting high quality candidates with adequate qualifications and desired dispositions is critical for developing a thriving workforce. As ECE has not been universally incorporated into all national education systems, there is a tendency for

ECE educators to operate under relatively informal conditions, often earning less than educators at the primary or secondary level.³ Similarly, given the low qualification requirements, the ECE workforce tends to be seen as a lower-status occupation.⁴ Since educators' feelings of being valued by society are linked to their salaries, and to the perceived selectivity of the profession, it is not surprising that ECE educators earning less than their counterparts may feel undervalued or unsatisfied in their jobs.⁵ It is important that policies and investments emphasize the significance of the early childhood years and the skills required to deliver high quality learning experiences for young children.

Prepare. Educators need appropriate pre-service and in-service career development that is rigorous and high quality, yet responsive to context and flexible in approach. Because of the contexts in which many ECE educators work, research and implementation experience suggests that in-service professional development which incorporates hands-on, experiential learning may be effective in changing the skills and behaviors of educators.⁶ When qualified trainers or materials are in short supply, partnerships among government and other agencies working in the field are more likely to result in quality training.⁷

Support. Professional support systems for teachers remain an under-researched and under-conceptualized aspect of ECE educator development despite evidence that effective support systems constitute a key aspect of a thriving, high quality workforce. Examples of support include ongoing revision and updates to curriculum development and training and mentoring through communities of practice. Genuinely supportive systems that result in enhanced teaching and learning are grounded in valuing teachers, recognizing their contributions to supporting early learning and ensuring that educators have access to opportunities for enhancing their practice and careers.

Retain. Retention of ECE educators is notoriously difficult across countries. Low status, compensation and qualifications coupled with few opportunities for professional development and challenging working conditions jeopardize retention of quality educators, particularly in rural and remote areas. Establishing and maintaining attractive working conditions involves improving the status of the ECE workforce through enhanced pay, better working conditions and social recognition. Similarly, it requires better support systems, which includes greater opportunities for professional development, ongoing mentoring, as well as emotional wellbeing support.

Putting strategies into practice to build and support a quality workforce

In order to implement the four strategies to build an effective ECE workforce, there are several steps policymakers can take: *diagnose, plan effectively, coordinate and integrate and monitor and evaluate.*

Diagnose. Building a quality ECE workforce takes time. Policymakers should diagnose their contextual situation as a starting point and sequence the interventions that are most likely to be effective. Relevant information includes the duration of training programs, integration with in-service support structures, as well as the viability of ECE teaching as a profession versus other opportunities in the market. For example, in places with very few educators trained, the emphasis should be on integrating pre-service ECE training with a robust in-service professional development structure that can rapidly and effectively improve the skills of educators, ideally with a pathway to upgrade their formal, professional qualifications.

Plan Effectively. Planning is critical to ensure sustained gains in workforce quality. A country must carefully select from different strategies that are logical, affordable and effective. In contexts where countries are responding to increased demand for ECE enrollment, planning should consider the number of new classrooms needed, use of nearby feeder ECE centers and the number of new teachers needed to be hired and paid, to avoid substantial increases in class sizes. Changes in the ECE workforce size may have substantial fiscal impacts.

Coordinate and Integrate. Coordination and integration are vital to achieving wider gains. Policymakers considering ECE workforce development should coordinate with health and social services leadership and bring cross-sectoral ideas into the design for ECE workforce development. ECE leaders should also strengthen coordination and integration with the primary educator curriculum to reduce shocks for learners leaving ECE and entering primary school given the vast differences in pedagogy, content and expectations. In many cases, the primary educator curriculum could learn from the ECE educator curriculum.

Monitor and Evaluate. Monitoring and evaluation can help underpin success. A severe weakness in many systems is a lack of a robust ECE educator database at the aggregate level to help match the supply and demand for educators. Effective data management is especially critical when policy changes are stuck in implementation bottlenecks. On the other hand, ECE educator development structures that have impressive data but little learning are ineffective, so knowing both how educators are being developed and what their impact is on learning is essential to shaping and increasing a quality workforce.

Investing in the ECE workforce is one of the most important investments to impact the quality of ECE and children's learning. These practical steps have the potential to generate substantial positive impacts on the quality of the ECE workforce and, in turn, young children's learning outcomes. For the best outcomes, the investment in the ECE workforce should be one piece of a systems approach which is essential when standards for operation of early childhood programs are non-existent, relatively low or not implemented. This requires a coherent system that responds to contextual diversities and is underpinned by a strong vision supported by sustained political commitment.

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