

Transforming Early Childhood Education in Delaware: Building Foundations of Change

A Briefing Paper for
Delaware Education for a Global Economy: *Making Vision 2015 Work*

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A Vision 2015 Priority: We must invest in early childhood education, targeting more resources to high-need children.¹

Early education is one of the best investments we can make—the returns for society are measurable. Each dollar spent on early education saves society about \$4-\$7 down the road in other costs, such as incarceration and Medicaid.

Learning doesn't begin when children enter kindergarten at age 5 or 6. Research shows that the greatest brain growth and stimulation occur much, much earlier. Children who enter kindergarten unprepared are often two or three years behind their peers and many never catch up. If we want to dramatically increase the percentage of children ready to enter college or the workplace, we must ensure that all children have a fair start.

What Research Has Shown

Quality early childhood care and education (ECE) contributes to children's readiness to learn and achieve as they enter kindergarten and elementary school;

Quality early childhood care and education contributes to a state's economic development by better enabling parents to pursue and retain employment as well as ultimately enabling children to be better prepared for the workforce and post-secondary education;

Quality early childhood care and education minimizes future social problems related to children's health and their need for special educational services; and,

Quality teaching contributes more to children's achievement than any other single school factor.

Therefore, the short- and long-term benefits of *quality* early childhood education care and education are directly dependent upon how well teachers are prepared to care for and teach preschoolers. Yet, in Delaware, too few pre-school educators are sufficiently prepared to effectively address the learning and development needs of children in their

¹ See Appendix for full range of Vision 2015 recommendations regarding early care and education.

care. Without skilled professionals, without stable programs, without proven practices, early childhood care and education will make limited contributions to the state's vision of a world class education system. What the state expects ECE teachers to know and do appears is not reflected in how educators are compensated. The following data speak to this tension between expectations and compensation.

National ECE Expectations

The National Research Council Committee of Early Childhood Pedagogy recommends that "each group of children in an early childhood education and care program should be assigned a teacher who has a bachelor's degree with specialized education related to early childhood." ⁱ

National Association for the Education of Young Children standardsⁱⁱ for ECE teachers include: 1) promoting child development and learning; 2) building family and community relationships; 3) observing, documenting, and assessing; 4) teaching and learning; and, 5) becoming a professional.

Delaware ECE Expectations

Delaware's Early Learning Foundations for School Success, a statement of guiding principles and instructional guidance, outlines "the types of learning experiences children ideally should have before they come to kindergarten." It addresses seven developmental domains: 1) language development; 2) mathematics; 3) science; 4) creative arts; 5) emotional and social development; 6) approaches to learning; and, 6) physical health and development.

Preparation of Delaware ECE Teachers

"The most common education level attained for all early care and education teachers is a high school diploma or GED or less (37.5%). However, 36.8% have earned an associate's degree or higher... Delaware teachers' education levels are lower in comparison to teachers across the nation. Delaware teachers are more likely to have a high school diploma or less (37.5%) than teachers nationwide (20%). Delaware early care and education teachers are also less likely to have bachelor's degrees or higher (23.9%) than early care and education teachers across the nation (33%)."ⁱⁱⁱ

In May 2008, Delaware's Early Childhood Council released *Delaware's Young Children: Early Success or Future Failure? -A Call to Action* that indicated, "programs have difficulty hiring qualified teachers. 93% of infant and toddler teachers, and 58% of teachers of children ages 3-5, have only a high school education; some lack literacy skills beyond a sixth grade level."

Strong early childhood instruction and strong early care and education personnel are dependent upon at least four factors: 1) strong personnel preparation programs, 2) continuing professional development opportunities that provide teachers with up-to-date information about development and interventions, 3) strong administrative

leadership that raises expectations regarding programming and instruction, and 4) competitive compensation to attract and retain qualified instructors.

Delaware has devoted strong efforts to address two of these variables: personnel preparation and fostering administrative leadership. Through its TEACH and Stars programs, the Delaware Early Care and Education Council and the Department of Education has created systemic structures to improve the knowledge and skills of early care and education personnel.

Delaware also has plans to establish an Early Care and Education Institute that will collaboratively address both on-going professional development needs and spearhead new initiatives such as obesity prevention programming and support for children’s social and emotional development. These efforts will be in combination with institutes of higher education, school districts, professional organizations such as the Delaware Head Start Association and the Delaware Association for the Education of Young Children, and federally funded programs such as Head Start.

These efforts are helping to improve the early care and education system in Delaware, however, they are not enough.

Compensation^{iv} of Delaware ECE Teachers

There are clearly distinct differences in the levels of compensation of those working in Delaware preschools and k-12 schools. These discrepancies exist at the teacher and administrator levels. Figure 1 below compares 2007 average wages among these groups of Delaware educators.

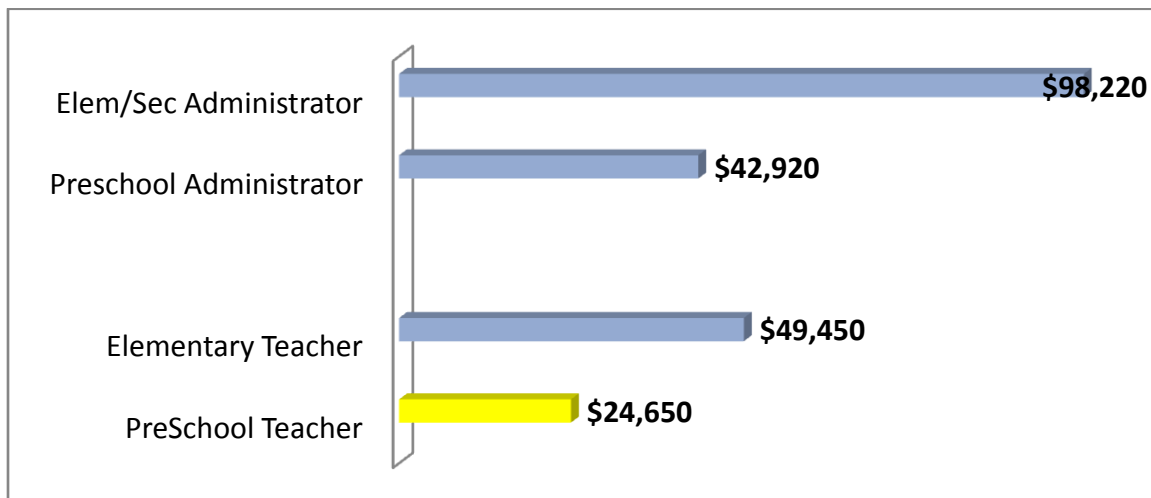


Figure 1. 2007 Mean Wages of DE Pre- and k-12 Administrators & Teachers

In 2007, Delaware preschool and childcare workers also earned the lowest average wages within their Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational category-- Education, Training, and Library Occupations. From another perspective, in 2008 the poverty guideline for a family of four is set at \$21,200, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

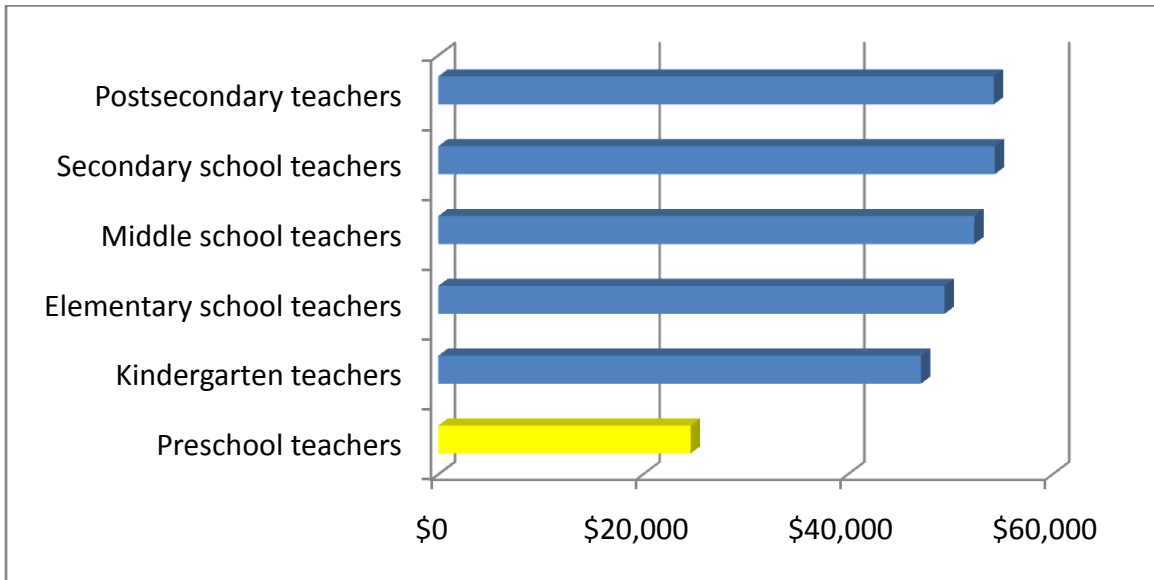


Figure 2. 2007 Mean Wages of DE Educators at Different Instructional Levels

Figure 3 provides a comparison of the 2007 average wage of Delaware preschool teachers and childcare workers with other occupations within a similar salary range.

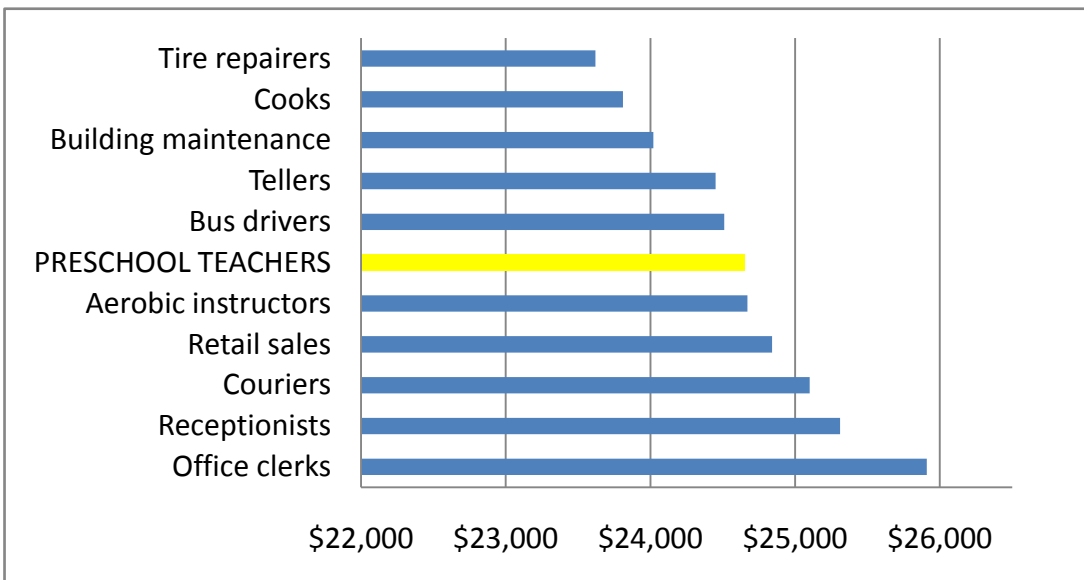


Figure 3. 2007 Mean Wages of DE Occupational Groups Similar to Preschool Teachers

Next Steps

There are serious disconnects between what is expected of Delaware early care and education teachers in regards to what they are expected to know and do and what they receive in return. Many of Delaware ECE teachers are living close to or below the poverty level. At the same time, expectations of their level of education and training are increasing as are the expectations of their capacity to perform complex instructional tasks. Realistically, under these circumstances, the state cannot expect to recruit and retain qualified ECE educators. With the poor level of compensation, it seems unreasonable to expect individuals to commit additional time to professional development designed to improve their skills. While some attention is being paid to this compensation dilemma, many efforts currently underway seem to ignore the primacy of this issue.

To move the early care and education system forward, three steps need to be taken:

- 1) The education level of Delaware's early care and education workforce needs to be increased, at least to the associate degree level for all teachers and at least to the bachelor level for all lead teachers; therefore, the education and training initiatives begun by the Delaware Early Care and Education Council need to be fully supported and funded.
- 2) Comprehensive education and training for early care and education directors needs to take place. This includes training that is comparable to the leadership training available to school leaders through such programs as the Delaware Academy for School Leadership.
- 3) The direct compensation of the early care and education workforce needs to be restructured to bring their compensation in line with the expectations of their positions. The work of early care and education professionals now mirrors that of teachers in the public school system. The expectations of knowledge and skills regarding child development, family interactions, support and intervention systems, as well as instructional strategies for language, cognitive, physical and social-emotional development, are commensurate with the complex skills necessary to be a K-12 teacher.

If Delaware is sincere about its belief that "early education is one of the best investments we can make", then investment must be made to first resolve the compensation problem. Left unaddressed, all other efforts to improve early care and education will surely be undermined.

Vision 2015 Priorities^v

Invest in Early Childhood Education.

We must invest in early childhood education, targeting more resources to high-need children. Research demonstrates that experiences in programs like Head Start translate directly into long-term success in school, careers, and life. In fact, early education is one of the best investments we can make—the returns for society are measurable. Each dollar spent on early education saves society about \$4-\$7 down the road in other costs, such as incarceration and Medicaid. Recommendations include:

- Tuition subsidies for more low-income 3- and 4-year-olds to attend high-quality educational programs
- Required participation in the Delaware Stars for Early Success Program, which sets high-quality program standards
- Annual license renewals for all early child care and education providers to ensure consistent high quality
- Additional professional development for providers so that they have the knowledge and skills to serve our youngsters well
- Data systems to share information and follow the educational progress of students from prekindergarten through grade 12
- Increased coordination across service agencies for children from birth to age 3

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ⁱ National Research Council (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Barbara T. Bowman, M. Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, editors. Commission on Behavioral and Social Science and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

ⁱⁱ National Association for the Education of Young Children (2006). Where we stand on standards for programs to prepare early childhood professionals. Available: <http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/programStandards>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gamel-McCormick, M., Buell, M.J., Amsden, D.J., & Fahey, M. (2005). *Delaware early care and education baseline quality study*. Prepared for the Delaware Interagency Resource Management Committee and the Department of Education, Department of Health and Social Services, and the Department of Services for Children, Youth and their Families. Newark, DE: Center for Disabilities Studies.

^{iv} The following data are derived from the May 2007 Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage reports for Delaware. Available: http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_de.htm

^v <http://www.vision2015delaware.org/vision/priorities/#2>