



Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation

Emerging science on early child development and learning makes clear the importance and complexity of working with young children from infancy through the early elementary years. Yet current policies and practices regarding professionals who educate and care for young children do not reflect the significant role they play in children's long-term learning and well-being.

Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation (2015), a report published by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council in 2015, identifies the shared knowledge and competencies needed by all professionals who care for and educate young children. Based in the science of child development, the report recommends changes to policies and practices to strengthen this workforce in ways that better reflect the importance and complexity of working with young children.

Science on Early Child Development Supports the Importance of Early Enrichment

Early childhood is a time when developmental changes are happening that can have profound and lasting consequences for a child's future. Recent research shows that infants and young children are developing cognitively, socially, and emotionally, and even in their earliest years, children are starting to learn about their world in sophisticated ways. Development proceeds in ways that are both rapid and cumulative, with early progress laying the foundation for future learning.

Shared Knowledge and Competencies Are Needed Across the Workforce

Research emphasizes how important it is for children to have continuous, consistent high-quality support for their development and learning from infancy through the early elementary years. All care and education professionals – across age ranges and settings – need:

- core knowledge of developmental science and content knowledge;
- mastery of practices that help children learn and develop on individual pathways;
- knowledge of how to work with diverse populations of children;
- the capability to partner with children’s families and with professional colleagues; and
- the ability to access and engage in ongoing professional learning to keep current in their knowledge and continuously improve their professional practice.

However, strengthening the workforce to ensure that early childhood professionals have the competencies and knowledge they need is challenging, because care and education for young children is fragmented. It takes place in many different programs and settings, with different practitioner cultures and traditions, funded by multiple government and nongovernment sources, and overseen by diverse agencies. At the same time, this means that there are many possible ways to drive changes at the community, state, and national levels.

Policy Efforts Can Strengthen the Workforce

Among the steps that policymakers should take to strengthen the early childhood care and education workforce are:

Support workforce development with coherent funding, oversight, and policies. National, state, and local government agencies and nongovernment organizations should review and revise their policies, guidelines, programmatic portfolios, oversight provisions, and incentives for professional learning and quality professional practice to ensure that they are oriented to the primary aim of optimally supporting child development and early learning. Policies and funding streams should be revised to identify and remove barriers to continuity across practice settings, professional roles, and age ranges from birth through age 8.

Support the development and use of coherent guidance that is foundational across roles and settings for care and education professionals. Nongovernmental organizations at local, state, and national levels should collaboratively develop and update guidance that can be shared across the care and education workforce. Local, state, and national governmental and nongovernmental organizations, in addition to institutions of higher education and professional learning, should use this guidance to align their own standards for care and education professionals. Federal agencies, in partnership with private-sector funders, should support this effort by jointly convening meetings among relevant stakeholders so as to catalog related activities and develop a common agenda and initial priorities.

Support comprehensive state- and local-level efforts to transform the professional workforce for children from birth through age 8. Federal and state agencies and nongovernment organizations should provide technical support and cross-sector financial resources that can be combined with local resources. To model this approach, national government and nongovernment funders should jointly support local or state coalitions to undertake initiatives to review, assess, and improve professional learning and workforce development for the care and education workforce for children birth through age 8. Guided by the science of child development and early learning, these initiatives should:

- implement a collective effort to build a more coherent infrastructure of professional learning supports;
- improve the quality, availability, and accessibility of professional learning activities;
- revise and align policies, incentives, and financial and technical support.

Coordinated Efforts Needed Going Forward

Providing better support for care and education professionals will require:

- mobilizing local, state, and national leadership;
- building a culture in higher education and ongoing professional learning that reflects the importance of establishing a cohesive workforce for children from birth through age 8;
- ensuring practice environments that enable and reinforce the quality of their work;
- making substantial improvements in working conditions, well-being, compensation, and perceived status; and
- creating consistency across local, state, and national systems, policies, and infrastructure.

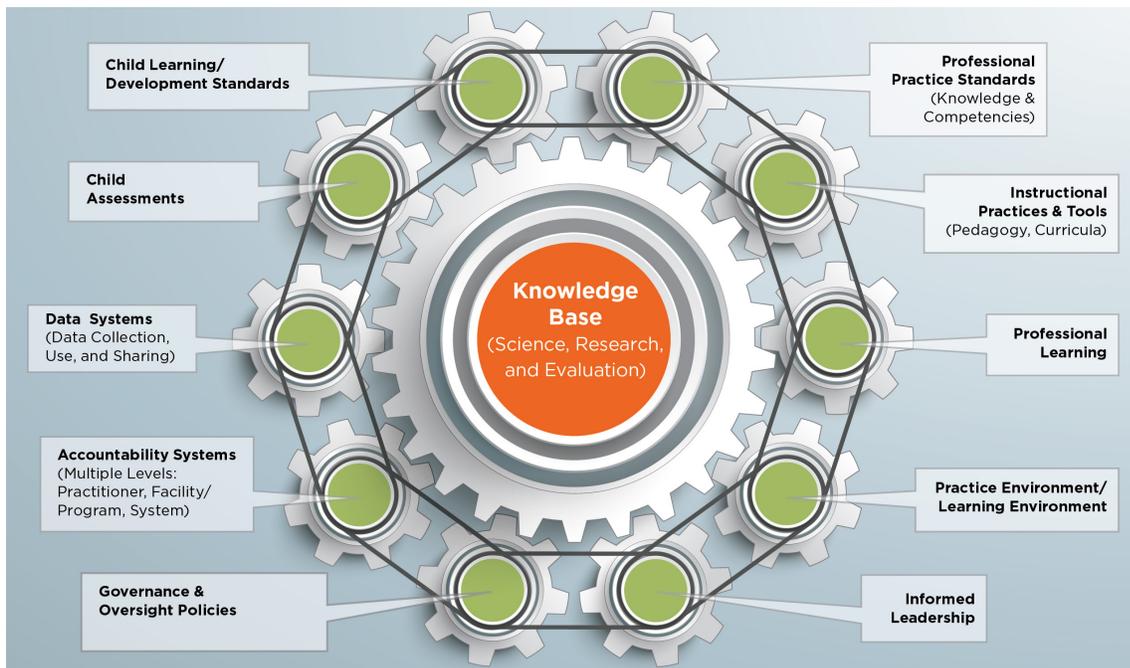


FIGURE 1. Interacting elements of supporting quality professional practice for the care and education of children from birth through age 8.

As with multiple sets of complex gears, many interconnected elements need to move together to support a coordinated approach to caring for and teaching young children – one that allows for continuity across settings from birth through elementary school, driven by the shared core of the science of child development and early learning (see Figure 1 above).

For More Information

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Board on Children, Youth, and Families
The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
500 Fifth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
bocyf@nas.edu
www.nationalacademies.org/bcyf

