Every day, families in virtually every neighborhood in every community in Illinois rely on early childhood programs so they can work, and so their children can receive educational experiences so vital for optimal growth and development. Regardless of program type, philosophy, or setting, the single most important factor impacting the child’s experience is the quality of adult-child interactions.

An increase in the number of early childhood programs in recent years has brought with it growing concern about the stability and skill level of the early childhood workforce and the need for current data about practitioners. *Who’s Caring for the Kids?* was commissioned by the McCormick Tribune Foundation to provide a comprehensive look at the early childhood workforce in Illinois. This summary highlights the key findings of the report and recommendations for action.

*Who’s Caring for the Kids?* paints the big picture of the career development system of early care and education in Illinois. It is a picture of contrasts – large and small programs that may be regulated or unregulated, well funded or struggling, with highly trained or minimally trained staff – all presenting both encouraging and discouraging predictions for the future. Perhaps in no other profession are the contrasts so broad, the implications so critical, and the need to find solutions so immediate.

The findings of *Who’s Caring for the Kids?* underscore the disturbing conclusion that the early childhood career development system in Illinois lacks coordination and integration between and among its many parts. It is really more of a *non-system* lacking structure, vision, and coherence. The ramifications of this non-system are real, both in terms of the lost talent of dedicated workers who leave the field feeling unappreciated, and in terms of lost opportunities for children. When our youngest and most vulnerable citizens do not have access to well-trained, well-compensated teachers who provide educationally enriching experiences in a caring environment, the talents, skills, and abilities of these children are simply not developed and nurtured as they might be otherwise.
Stunning advances in neuroscience have increased the public’s awareness about the importance of children's early years and the critical role that adults play in promoting healthy development. For the 660,000 young children in Illinois who spend part of their day in nonparental care, the teacher or family child care provider is that person who is at the core of their daily experience. The expertise, passion, and commitment that an early childhood educator brings to the role can transform ordinary experiences into memorable moments that enrich a child’s life forever.

We know from previous research that …

➤ High-quality early childhood education positively predicts children’s language, math, and social skills in kindergarten and the early primary grades.

➤ Children with close relationships with their teachers and caregivers have better thinking and retention skills, better language skills, are more sociable, and show fewer behavioral problems.

➤ High-quality programs employ staff with more formal education, provide better wages and benefits, and experience less turnover.

Broad awareness of the importance of a child’s earliest formative years has not translated to an increase in professional recognition by way of higher compensation, better working conditions, or higher occupational status for the early childhood workforce. This disconnect is both troubling and serious. The field remains woefully under-funded and lacks a coherent and articulated career lattice. The disparities that exist in regulations and funding between different sectors of the field have only served to exacerbate the situation.
Tinkering at the edges will not improve the early care and education system in Illinois. Real, lasting reform will require a multifaceted, systemic approach that involves multiple stakeholders and constituents.

- **Early Childhood Practitioners** must promote high professional standards across all sectors of the field.

- **Teacher Educators** must support the development and implementation of a comprehensive career lattice with consistent nomenclature, training requirements, and clearly defined strands that promote the career advancement of early childhood practitioners.

- **Policymakers** must address disparities in funding and regulatory oversight that contribute to staff turnover and result in poor developmental outcomes for children.

- **Corporate Leaders** must increase investment in early childhood education as a workforce development issue.

- **Parents** must become educated consumers of early childhood services and demand that programs do more than merely protect children from harm.

The time has come to take action. The absence of consistent and high standards to guide professional practice, along with inadequate and inequitable funding to administer programs, has undermined the early care and education delivery system in Illinois. The findings and recommendations of *Who’s Caring for the Kids?* provide a clear path to elevate the early childhood workforce and the developmental outcomes for Illinois’ young children. A united effort by practitioners, teacher educators, policymakers, corporate leaders, and parents can make it happen.
**WHAT WE KNOW**

There are wide disparities in the qualifications required and the compensation paid for comparable work in different early childhood settings. These disparities, fueled by funding and regulatory inequities, are major contributors to the staffing crisis that negatively impacts the well-being of children.

- In Illinois, two individuals with the same job title and responsibilities may have vastly different requisite qualifications depending on the regulatory oversight of the program.
- The average wage for teachers in tuition/parent fee programs is $26.72 per hour. Assistant teachers average $25.79 per hour.
- State-funded Pre-K programs and federally funded Head Start programs are able to pay better wages and provide better benefits than programs that only predominantly rely on parent fees and/or OHS child care subsidies.
- Private nonprofit programs employing a teacher with a bachelor’s degree and teaching credential earn on average 47% less than what a credentialed teacher is paid in an ISBE Pre-K program housed in a public school.
- Less than one-half of teachers working in programs funded by parent fees receive health coverage.
- Fully 80% of ISBE Pre-K teachers who interviewed in the private sector indicated that salary was a deciding factor in their choice to work in a state-funded Pre-K program sponsored by a public school.
- There are currently no educational requirements for family child care providers.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Implement strategies to address current inequities in qualifications and pay. Convene a work group representing a cross-section of early childhood stakeholders to create an early childhood career lattice, including roles, requisite qualifications, and recommended salary ranges for different positions.

- **Practitioners**—come together to identify the roles represented in the workforce and develop standard qualifications and recommended salary ranges for such roles, regardless of funding source.
- **Teacher Educators**—differentially curate to support practitioners’ advancement on the career lattice.
- **Policymakers**—support initiatives to increase practitioners’ base pay. Expand funding for TEA.C.H. Early Childhood® Illinois to allow practitioners to secure additional education to advance on the career lattice. Fully fund Great START to ensure horizontal and vertical equity for individuals assuming different roles on the career lattice.
- **Corporate Leaders**—sponsor individual programs by underwriting their share of the TEA.C.H. Early Childhood® Illinois bonus, wage increase, or benefits.
- **Parents**—advocate for worthy wages on behalf of your child’s teachers.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Improve the leadership and management skills of early childhood practitioners by fully funding the Illinois Director Credential and supporting the development and articulation of early childhood management coursework and training.

- **Practitioners**—encourage directors to pursue the Illinois Director Credential.
- **Teacher Educators**—expand opportunities for specialized training in program management.
- **Policymakers**—require level 1 of the Illinois Director Credential for DCFS-licensed programs that serve more than 50 children. Provide financial incentives for individuals to pursue the BCD.
- **Corporate Leaders**—develop a Leadership Endowment Fund to support the training and professional development of early childhood directors, especially those from underrepresented groups.
- **Parents**—inquire about the qualifications of your child’s center director and encourage directors to obtain the Illinois Director Credential.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Implement a statewide, public/private partnership to support center accreditation. Expand higher reimbursement rates for accredited programs.

- **Practitioners**—pursue accreditation.
- **Teacher Educators**—equip a cadre of accreditation mentors to support directors in their quality enhancement endeavors. Develop an accreditation mentor certificate.
- **Policymakers**—provide financial incentives for centers and family child care homes to pursue and maintain accreditation. Provide quality enhancement grants to programs implementing changes to achieve accreditation.
- **Corporate Leaders**—support public/private partnerships to achieve the goal of accrediting 30% of centers and 50% of family child care homes in Illinois by 2020.
- **Parents**—seek out accredited early childhood settings and support providers going through the accreditation process.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Create a statewide registry to track early childhood coursework and offerings that lead to a degree as well as monitor practitioners’ progress on the career lattice. Create a cadre of master-level career advisors to mentor and guide individuals as they advance on the career lattice. Expand options for specialized training for infant/toddler and school-age child care teachers.

- **Practitioners**—pursue training that promotes career advancement.
- **Teacher Educators**—explore articulation agreements between two- and four-year training institutions. Train a cadre of master-level career advisors to mentor and guide individuals as they advance on the career lattice. Expand options for specialized training for infant/toddler and school-age child care teachers.
- **Policymakers**—fund the development of a statewide registry to track and monitor practitioners’ career advancement.
- **Corporate Leaders**—develop a Leadership Endowment Fund to support the training of Professional Growth Advisors.
- **Parents**—inquire about the credentials of those who care for your child just as you would inquire about the credentials of those providing medical or other professional services.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Expand the Quality Counts program to train all license-exempt providers, who serve children receiving a publicly funded child care subsidy, in basic health and safety, individual and group guidance, and program management.

- **Practitioners**—educate parents and community members about the importance of high-quality care and education, specifically staff qualifications and health and safety standards.
- **Teacher Educators**—expand specialized training opportunities for infant/toddler caregivers in licensed and license-exempt settings.
- **Policymakers**—implement minimum training requirements and health and safety standards in license-exempt settings serving children whose families receive a publicly funded child care subsidy. Expand capacity of licensed settings for infants and toddlers.
- **Corporate Leaders**—underwrite the cost of training initiatives that support providers moving from unregulated to regulated status.
- **Parents**—encourage providers in unregulated settings to seek specialized training in child development and early childhood education.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Accreditation has a positive impact on overall program quality by reducing staff turnover and creating a more stable workforce.

- Less than 10% of early childhood programs in Illinois have achieved center accreditation, meeting the standards established by the profession for high-quality programming.
- Turnover for assistant teachers in accredited programs is 11% lower than in nonaccredited programs; turnover for teachers is 8% lower.
- Accredited programs pay teachers better wages.
- Accredited programs have a more positive organizational climate and quality of work life than nonaccredited programs.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

A one-year leadership training program boosts early childhood directors’ confidence and positively impacts program quality.

- Directors with advanced degrees are more likely to pursue and achieve center accreditation.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Illinois lacks a coherent system of initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and career counseling for teaching, administration, and support staff in early childhood programs.

- Each year 700 students attain an associate’s degree, and another 700 receive a bachelor’s or advanced degree in early childhood education. The number of graduates annually is insufficient to keep up with the demand for trained early childhood staff.
- Individuals with associate’s degrees in early childhood face obstacles when continuing their coursework toward a bachelor’s degree.
- Most practitioners need basic technology training.
- There is a severe shortage of practitioners with specialized training in infant/toddler and school-age care.
- Most practitioners receive little guidance about career planning or how to access different training opportunities.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Many caregivers operate outside the established early childhood regulatory system and thus do not have access to technical assistance or professional training.

- In Illinois, 338,000 children are cared for in informal care settings where there are no staff qualifications or minimum standards for health and safety.
- More than one-quarter of license-exempt caregivers receiving OHS child care subsidies, and 70% of all infants and toddlers, are cared for in informal, unregulated settings.

Less than one-fifth of the preschool-aged children in center- or school-based settings have teachers who are required to have a bachelor’s degree and teaching credential.
“Low morale caused by constant turnover, poor wages, and lack of training has hurt the effectiveness of our program. Our children need and deserve the best from the people who care for them.”

Exie Hall, Director
Morgan Park Children’s Center

Who’s Caring for the Kids? is a joint project of the Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National-Louis University and the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA). The report combines statistical data from the Center, INCCRRA, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). It also draws on data from approximately 18 other state and national reports. In addition to tapping existing data sources, three statewide surveys were conducted to gather information regarding compensation and turnover, preferred nomenclature, and Pre-K teachers’ career decisions.

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