

Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children

The State of Early Childhood Higher
Education in Arkansas

Highlights

Bethany Edwards, Abby Copeman Petig,
Lea J.E. Austin, & Elena Montoya

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Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Institute for Research on Labor and Employment
University of California, Berkeley



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Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Institute for Research on Labor and Employment
University of California, Berkeley
2521 Channing Way #5555
Berkeley, CA 94720
(510) 643-8293
<http://cscce.berkeley.edu/>

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) was founded in 1999 to focus on achieving comprehensive public investments that enable and reward the early childhood workforce to deliver high-quality care and education for all children. To achieve this goal, CSCCE conducts cutting-edge research and proposes policy solutions aimed at improving how our nation prepares, supports, and rewards the early care and education workforce to ensure young children's optimal development.

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Introduction

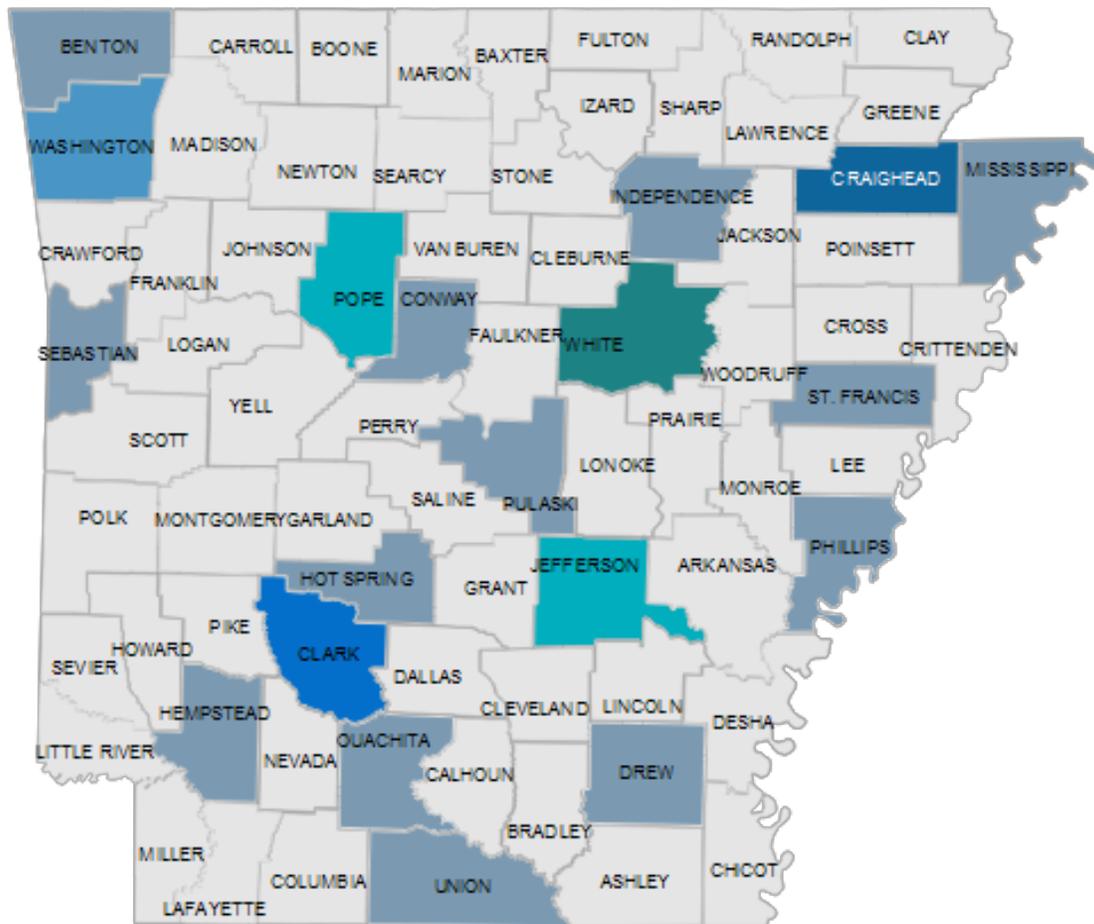
The importance of early care and education (ECE) to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic well-being is recognized up to the highest levels of government and in businesses, schools, and living rooms across the country. This understanding represents a dramatic shift from earlier decades and carries with it heightened expectations for what teachers of young children should know and be able to do,¹ especially in light of mounting evidence about inadequate and unequal educational quality for many children, particularly those of color and those living in low-income families.²

Arkansas is home to more than 217,000 children under the age of six, and 64 percent of these young children have all available parents in the workforce.³ In 2012, the state replaced its P-4 and 4-8 certifications with a single K-6 certification, causing early childhood advocates to express concern. Although this change has given elementary school principals more flexibility in hiring, it has also caused early childhood higher education programs to emphasize instructional strategies most compatible with teaching children in the later elementary grades and to de-emphasize the education of children before they enter the public-school system.⁴

Nonetheless, stakeholders and advocates in Arkansas remain committed to advancing strategies that improve ECE services, including workforce preparation and development in order to ensure that early educators have what they need to meet the complex needs of young children. Critical to these efforts is the establishment of a well-coordinated, comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can prepare and support an incoming generation of educators, while also strengthening the skills of the existing early education workforce. Institutions of higher education are crucial to meeting the evolving and increasing demands identified as improving developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population.

The following pages highlight findings from the *Arkansas Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory* and the extent to which ECE higher education programs offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation. The full report, *Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children: The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Arkansas*, presents the full findings.

Distribution of Arkansas Early Childhood Degree Programs



Legend:

- No ECE Degree Program
- Associate
- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Associate and Bachelor's
- Bachelor's and Master's
- Associate, Bachelor's, and Master's

Part 1: Early Childhood Higher Education, Mapping the Scene

This section of the report examines program offerings, faculty characteristics, student supports, and institutional challenges.

FINDING ONE: PROGRAM OFFERINGS

Goals, Course Content, and Age-Group Focus

Most Arkansas early childhood degree programs identify their primary goal as teacher preparation. While these programs offer a range of topics related to child development and approaches to teaching, both associate and upper-level degree programs tend to require more content focused on preschool-age children than infants and toddlers or school-age children. Across degree levels, the availability of content related to administration and leadership is inconsistent.

FINDING TWO: FIELD-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Requirements and Age-Group Focus

Students earning both associate and bachelor's degrees in early childhood are required to complete practicum experiences. In contrast, students across degree levels are far less likely to be required to complete a student teaching experience. There is little consistency with regard to the duration and frequency of either type of field-based learning experience.

FINDING THREE: PORTRAIT OF FACULTY

Employment Status, Demographics, and Professional Background

Arkansas early childhood degree programs are staffed with a mix of part-time and full-time faculty, primarily women, white/Caucasian, and monolingual English speaking. Most faculty members reported having had academic preparation specific to early childhood, and faculty reported having worked in an array of ECE professional roles in the past decade.

FINDING FOUR: FACULTY PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERTISE

Faculty Perspectives on Course Content, Teaching Experience and Capacity, Professional Development Background, and Professional Development Interests

Arkansas early childhood degree faculty were more likely to consider important content related to preparing teachers to work with families of various ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, compared to other course content. In general, faculty members reported feeling most capable of preparing teachers to work with preschool-age children. Arkansas early childhood degree program faculty are particularly interested in professional development related to early childhood systems and policy, teaching practitioners developmentally appropriate practices in infant and toddler settings, teaching practitioners to work with children with special needs, strategies to supervise adult students in clinical/field experiences, and using child assessment effectively.

FINDING FIVE: SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Services Offered and Articulation

Arkansas early childhood degree programs offer multiple types of support services specifically tailored to help ECE students access resources and strengthen their academic skills. Associate degree programs are more likely than upper-level programs to offer computer and technology

training, tailored academic counseling, blended programs (combining online and in-person courses), and alternative class schedules for working adults. Across degree levels, programs offer little support for dual language learners and rarely utilize cohort models. Inconsistent articulation was reported as a challenge, and agreements appear to be limited to select colleges and universities.

FINDING SIX: PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Faculty and Program Needs

Arkansas early childhood degree programs experience challenges related to time and resources required to fulfill faculty responsibilities, as well as the need for faculty members with specific expertise, such as teaching dual language learners. The majority of program leads, especially those teaching

at the associate degree level, indicated that the low pay of the ECE field has led to challenges in recruiting and retaining students.

Part 2: Early Childhood Higher Education, An Evolving Landscape

This section of the report examines how institutions of higher education are adapting to emerging research in three key domains: family engagement, early mathematics, and dual language learners.

FINDING SEVEN: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider the inclusion of family engagement to be important in the preparation of early childhood teachers. Multiple topics related to family engagement are embedded in degree programs, with a consistent age-group focus on preschoolers. Associate degree

programs also focus on infants and toddlers, while upper-level degree programs also focus on school-age children. Faculty members expressed varied levels of interest in professional development in this topic area.

FINDING EIGHT: EARLY MATHEMATICS
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty were equally likely to rate the inclusion of early mathematics “very important,” compared to other content areas for practitioners working with preschoolers to school-age children. However, they were far less likely to consider early mathematics as very important for infants and toddlers. Most faculty

members considered themselves prepared to teach early math content to practitioners working with preschoolers, but faculty were less likely to be confident in their ability to teach early math to practitioners working with infants, toddlers, and elementary-age children. Interest in ongoing math-related professional development varied by specific topic area.

FINDING NINE: DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider the inclusion of teaching young dual language learners (DLLs) to be important in the preparation of teachers; however, not all faculty members feel prepared to teach this topic. Similarly, while faculty members have an interest in participating in professional development related to DLLs, many

of them have not recently done so. Various DLL topics are required in degree-program curricula, but there is a higher focus on preschool-age children than on infants and toddlers and school-age children.

Recommendations

Here, we outline an approach to strengthening early childhood workforce development in Arkansas, with an emphasis on higher education. The efforts should be coordinated among key stakeholders in Arkansas, including the Arkansas Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education and the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, and are predicated on identifying new resources from state, federal, and philanthropic sources.

1. Unify expectations for early childhood workforce preparation

- Establish a more uniform system for certifying teachers and administrators throughout the state that reflects foundational knowledge for early educators across age groups and auspices aligned with the Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards, the Arkansas Academic Standards for Math, and the Arkansas Guide for Promoting Family Engagement and that articulates a streamlined pathway for lead and advanced teacher, administrator, and professional support roles;
- Align early education degree program course requirements with state standards and competencies, such as the Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards; and
- Establish a certification that begins at birth and goes through preschool, with the potential option to overlap with the early elementary grades. To support this effort, we suggest drawing upon existing information and lessons learned from other states regarding changes they have made to early education and overlapping credentials.

2. Strengthen program content and equity across the age span

To strengthen required content and align it with child development and teacher preparation research and to equalize required content for all children across the birth-to-age-eight continuum, we recommend that resources be provided to develop and support participation in faculty professional development to enable faculty members across degree programs and institutions to collaborate with other experts to enhance program standards related to:

- **Child development and pedagogy**, preparing teachers to work with children of different ages, including infant development and learning across multiple domains.
- **Early mathematics**, addressing:
 - Children’s mathematical understanding from infancy through early elementary grades; and
 - Developmentally appropriate pedagogy for early mathematics instruction, in particular for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children; and
- **Dual language learners**, emphasizing:
 - Recognition of the value and importance of supporting children’s home-language development as they also learn English, with an emphasis on very young children;

- Strategies for using observation and assessment in teaching young dual language learners and strategies to support the mathematical, literacy, language, cognitive, and socioemotional development of young dual language learners; and
- An understanding of the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry into and retention in the ECE field.

3. Provide increased access and supports for students in attaining their degrees

- Implement or expand the following supports for early childhood students across the state to ensure that a diverse current and incoming workforce can successfully meet standards and attain competency:
 - Blended and non-traditional formats for degree programs;
 - Alternative class schedules and locations;
 - Academic counseling;
 - Cohort models; and
 - Financial resources for students.

4. Establish partnerships among and improve articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions

- Guarantee that all community colleges have an articulation agreement with at least one four-year institution that is geographically accessible to students attending the community college; and
- Reference successful articulation agreements in other states to ensure that Arkansas articulation agreements are comprehensive and that students have all the support needed to take full advantage of the agreements.

5. Strengthen the application of field-based learning experiences

- Provide resources and support to faculty members across degree programs and institutions to develop degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, with opportunities focused on children from infancy through preschool and the differentiation of experiences for pre- and in-service students; and
- Provide field-based learning opportunities for students to engage with:
 - Infants and toddlers;
 - Children with special needs;
 - Children who are dual language learners;
 - Families; and
 - Community organizations that support children and families.

6. Build a leadership pipeline

- Identify the appropriate course of study and degree level (associate, bachelor's, graduate) for each leadership role based on specific skills and knowledge;
- Identify options to create leadership pathways and/or programs;

- Ensure an adequate number of degree programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level that offer the appropriate course content;
- Investigate strategies used in other professions (e.g., health, education, social welfare) to create faculty development programs — such as a fellowships or grants — intended to increase diversity among faculty, particularly in key leadership positions; and
- Establish required professional development experiences focused on working with children and families from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

7. Increase faculty supports

- Develop strategies to support an increase in the number of full-time faculty members, with sufficient release time, who can share in administrative responsibilities;
- Establish an ongoing fund with well-articulated expectations for faculty members' professional development honoraria and program improvement grants;
- Cultivate professional development opportunities that align with faculty interests and areas of identified need, such as early mathematics and developmentally appropriate practice in infant and toddler settings; and
- Ensure adequate resources, including funding, staffing, and dedicated time for program planning and improvement.

Endnotes

A complete list of references can be found in the full narrative report.

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