
BUILDING BACK BETTER:

Advocacy for ECE

Child care has reached a tipping point. Still, early childhood teachers can—and must—meet the challenges they face. Just ask Shannon Marshall Mury, who works at Virginia Tech Child Development Center for Learning and Research, and recently won the 2021 Helen Marks National Teacher of the Year Award. She knows child development doesn't stop just because a pandemic is raging. Sure, the mask mandates, social distancing and sanitation demand extra effort. So, she used her weekends to do extra cleaning, found subtle ways to socially distance the children and dreamed up safe, new ideas for them to do the same activities they had before COVID. “We maintained everything so the children would feel nothing had changed,” she explained.¹

And Mury was eager to spread the word about what she and her colleagues had achieved because it offered her a way to advocate for her profession. “I want to highlight all we

did during the pandemic because nobody really knew we were here and still open,” Mury said. “This was a chance to get our story out because what we do is important. And the pandemic is when I realized this is how we can prove that we're more than just babysitters. We were not just watching the children. We maintained our curriculum. We maintained our high standards as though nothing had changed for us. We just wore masks,” Mury said. And stories like hers matter.²

FROM QUIET CAMPAIGN TO PRIME-TIME TOPIC

Change begins with one small voice. The more voices that say the same thing, the greater the impact. And it's crucial now for early childhood teachers to speak out for their profession. They have a historic chance since COVID has brought child care from the policy backwater to widespread public attention. Now President Joe Biden and the U.S. House have put forth the Build Back Better Act, which includes \$400 billion for child care and early learning investments over the next six years. If it's signed into law, it will transform early learning and care for nearly all families with young children and for the educators who serve them.

COVID has brought many child care providers to the brink of collapse and left frantic parents without the services they need. But the problems in the field—including the shortage of teachers and the high cost of care—are hardly new. There has been a critical gap in child care for some time, with about half of Americans living in child care deserts, areas with one spot for every three children needing care.³ What has long been a quietly whispered campaign for many child advocates and parents is now gaining prime-time attention.⁴

If there's a single moment when this sea change began, it was in 2019 when Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) announced a sweeping agenda for child care as part of her run for president of the nation. Warren's plan set out new quality standards for centers, capped families' costs at 7 percent of their income and raised the wages of early childhood teachers to closely match those of public-school teachers.⁵ These were proposals that gained widespread media coverage and forced other candidates to respond. Early childhood education was suddenly a hot topic in one primary debate after another.⁶

PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR POLITICAL ACTION

These developments directed public attention to child care long before anyone heard of COVID. Still, the dam

broke after the onslaught of the pandemic caused many early childhood programs to close, leaving even more parents without the services they need to work. Since then, stories of the child care crisis have filled local and national news.

Still, we didn't get to this point without the relentless work of advocates who've been beating the drum about child care for decades. In 1994, for example, the Carnegie Corporation issued a major report that deemed inadequate child care "the quiet crisis," and advocacy efforts like this planted the seeds for political reform.⁷ In 2017, thought leaders Julie Kashen and Katie Hamm coauthored "A Blueprint for Child Care Reform." And their paper offered a framework for the Child Care for Working Families Act, which came to be the foundation of Warren's plan.⁸

The Child Care for Working Families Act stalled in Congress when Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) first introduced it in 2017. Yet the following years did bring more investment in child care. In 2018, Congress injected about \$2.8 billion into the Child Care and Development Block Grant, a national funding program for low-income families. This infusion of cash brought the program's total funding to \$5.2 billion. And since the start of the pandemic, Congress has passed a set of temporary relief measures amounting to more than \$50 billion in all to help shore up providers.⁹ Now the Build Back Better Act has a bigger price tag and a bolder goal.

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President Biden’s ambitious plan aims to provide subsidies that will help millions of families get affordable child care by funding most or all the cost of care by licensed providers. The bill would also steer an influx of federal cash to boost wages for child care workers and spur the opening or expansion of child care programs. The bill would make high-quality education available to nearly every family, and it’s popular with the public.¹⁰ There is now more momentum and bipartisan support than ever before for an overhaul of the child care system, as experts explain. “The era of child care incrementalism is over,” said Elliot Haspel, author of *Crawling Behind: America’s Child Care Crisis and How to Fix It*. Meager subsidy hikes and drizzles of a few million now and then will no longer do.¹¹

So where do we go from here? The first step is to broadcast far and wide that the bar is higher. We should no longer let lawmakers call themselves champions for children without adopting a strong child care platform and clear path to child care for all. This is no longer a fringe position since COVID has caused millions of working parents, like providers, to reach a dangerous tipping point. Advocates should now use the momentum to convey a vision of high-quality, comprehensive child care that advances equity for young children. And some groups have already paved the way in getting the point across.

POWER TO THE PROFESSION

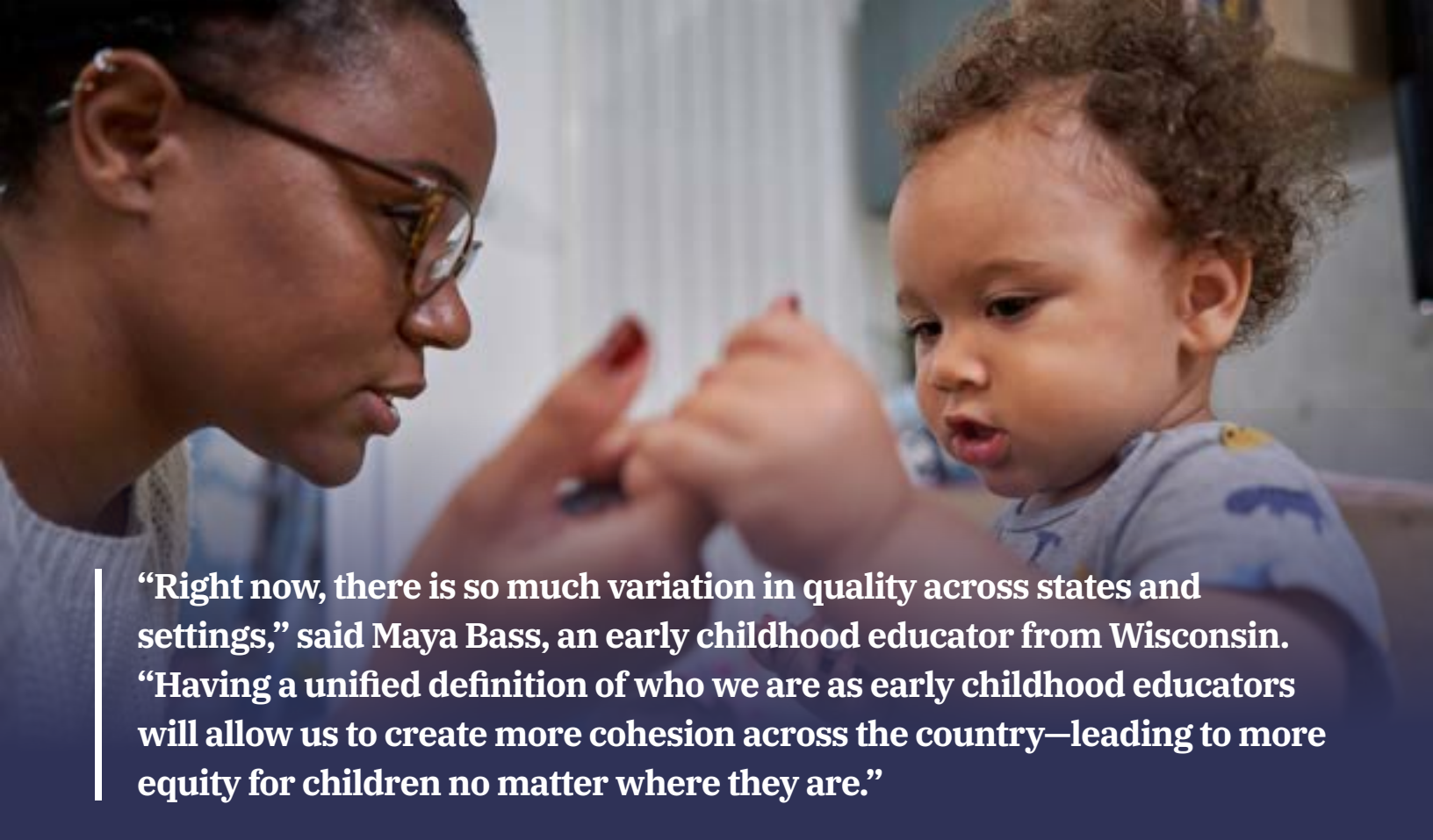
The National Association for the Education of Young Children and 14 other leading national organizations that represent members of the early

childhood field have formed a Power to the Profession Taskforce. Together, they have laid out a framework for career pathways, competencies, qualifications, standards and compensation designed to build a diverse, skilled workforce across all states and child care settings. The framework is the product of multi-year, profession-led process that placed the voices of early childhood teachers front and center. More than 11,000 educators across the nation participated in surveys, focus groups, information sessions, conferences, webinars and more to share their stories and their feedback on proposed recommendations.¹²

A focus of this work has been engaging with educators from communities of color and rural parts of the country, both areas where child care is especially scarce. “Right now, there is so much variation in quality across states and settings,” said Maya Bass, an early childhood educator from Wisconsin. “Having a unified definition of who we are as early childhood educators will allow us to create more cohesion across the country—leading to more equity for children no matter where they are.”¹³

HAILING THE CHAMPIONS OF HOPE

Equity was also a thread that ran through Tools of Hope, a virtual learning series for early childhood professionals in Detroit. The idea for the program took root in 2018 when the Kresge Foundation partnered with Detroit Public Television and School Readiness Consulting to design an intense, cohort experience that would develop leadership and advocacy in the early childhood field. Kresge and its partners began by scanning the need for



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professional learning in the city, and they were well into planning the series in spring 2020, anticipating a fall launch. Then the pandemic struck, so the partners switched gears and began to think about how to help providers deal with program closings, virtual learning, loss of staff and new safety standards. The goal of the program expanded to include a collaborative process that would support early childhood teachers by providing practical guidance on getting through the pandemic.¹⁴

In addition, Tools for Hope put a spotlight on the work of providers, many of whom went to spectacular lengths to support families of essential workers while also caring for families of their own. DPTV took the lead and highlighted the stories of a dozen educators in a video series shared widely on Facebook and broadcast on DPTV’s multiple channels. Each story starred an

outstanding teacher as an Early Learning Champion for Detroit.¹⁵ By the end of the 2020-21 school year, the Champion videos had received more than 5,000 views online, generating more than one hundred shares on social media and over two hundred positive comments.¹⁶

The heroes who appeared in the stories advanced equity by working with underserved youngsters, including many children of color. And equity was also a thread that ran through the program’s virtual learning series for early childhood educators and directors. School Readiness Consulting worked with community advocates to help educators use language and literature to build positive racial identity in young children, the focus of a train-the-trainer session, Representation, Black Joy and Activism.¹⁷

Sessions like this gave early childhood leaders from across the city a chance to meet, collaborate and plan virtual experiences for teachers. Many of the providers had never met, so they were glad for the chance to build ties that could lead to partnerships in the future. They also benefitted by learning new ways to build literacy into virtual programming for young children and left with ideas for supporting families through parent cafes, play groups and book clubs. In addition, they had the chance to give feedback, and many expressed the wish to learn more ways to advocate for their profession in the future.¹⁸

KNOCKING ON DOORS IN NORTH CAROLINA

One key way to speak out is for early childhood advocates to show up at lawmakers' offices with budget requests, as a group of educators did this year in North Carolina. The group was organized by the NC Early Education Coalition and included Cyndie Osborne, a community college instructor and president of NC ACCESS, part of a national group of early childhood faculty in community colleges. In the 1990s, Osborne was an early childhood teacher—a job she could stick with, she explained, because of wage supplements that offset the financial trials that came with her profession.¹⁹

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Now she has joined a group of early educators, directors and advocates in knocking on North Carolina House members' office doors to support early education budget items, including expansion of wage supplements through the Child Care WAGES\$ program. “Here I am today educating other teachers and trying to help them remain in the field,” she said between

office visits at the legislative building. “I just think it’s so important. Of course, we can’t do it overnight. The system has to change, but in the meantime, WAGES\$ will support those teachers remaining in the field.”²⁰

Her colleagues agreed as they pressed for higher pay, especially after more than a year of serving young children and their families throughout the pandemic. “We’ve been working since March, risking our lives working with children each and every day, and families and teachers,” said Cassandra Brooks, owner and director of Little Believer’s Academy, a child care program with locations in Garner and Clayton, NC. She stressed the importance of paying teachers a fair wage so they can afford to remain in the field. And other advocates stressed just how essential child care is to their state’s economic growth. “If parents don’t have anyone to watch their kids, how are they going to work?” said Kelly Dulin, a mother of two, former early childhood teacher and soon to be center director in Iredell County. “Our voices matter,” Dulin explained. “Lawmakers need to know how we feel.”²¹

COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

And Philadelphia's early learning community spoke out this year with support from the BUILD Initiative, which assembled a seasoned team, including two center directors, one family child care owner and two people with broad experience in policy and management knowledge. Together, they developed ideas to build and bolster a system of quality improvement. The team also worked closely with three key sets of stakeholders—early learning providers, organizations that deliver quality improvement services, and public and private funders of the child care field. A highly interactive process ensured that the early childhood teachers affected by the recommendations played a key role in shaping them. And discussions with all the stakeholders brought out areas of the joint effort that required more work:

- **Communication**—Making plans and updates without knowledge of what other people and groups are doing in the field of child care
- **Coordination**—Listening and considering other viewpoints on how to best serve children and their family members
- **Collaboration**—Independent organization coming together to create mutual frameworks and methods to reach common goals
- **Integration**—Making joint decisions and investments in planning, implementation and reporting.²²

In addition, quality improvement organizations admitted that they often failed to involve providers when making plans, though providers wanted the chance to chime in early on about how to make quality better. It's a matter of fairness, as one early childhood teacher pointed out. "Not having a voice makes us disgruntled sometimes. No one ever asks the educators what they think. It is unequal and leads to inequity for us."²³

EVERYDAY ADVOCACY FOR ECE

Many educators already face bias since a disproportionate number of our child care professionals are immigrants or women of color. They receive low wages and have no sick leave, lack retirement benefits and health insurance. Yet these women keep our economy and communities running by caring for our youngest children. There must be a better way ahead and early educators are ideal advocates, according to the Council for Professional Recognition.

"Be the spokesperson for your setting," the Council urges in its *Essentials for Working with Young Children*. "As an early childhood professional, you should be able to communicate your program's story—its philosophy and research-based practices. Because you already represent your setting to families and community organizations, you are well equipped to explain the importance of high-quality early education to funders and policy makers," the Council points out and it sets out a number of everyday ways to show support for the early childhood profession:

- Team up with our colleagues to form your own advocacy group.
- Join forces with school boards and other organizations.
- Promote and plan local events for NAEYC's Week of the Young Child, a yearly event that focuses public attention on the needs of young children and recognizes the early childhood programs that meet those needs.
- Vote in state and national elections for candidates who support children and families.
- Introduce the families you serve to advocacy opportunities.
- Start or join letter-writing campaigns to urge all elected officials to support stronger and better child care legislation.
- Invite policy makers to visit your program and plan ahead to maximize the benefits of the visit.
- Start a blog about your work in the field by writing letters to the editor or op-eds for publication in magazines, journals and newspapers.²⁴

COMMUNITY SERVICE OR SMALL BUSINESS

Get the word out about your needs, like Pam Tatum did this fall when she talked about ways to fix child care in Georgia. As CEO of Quality Care for Children, she urged policy makers and the public to take a more realistic approach to her field by making its funding stable. "The thing that's hard for people to understand about child

care is that it's a business," she said. "No one is getting rich, but child care providers have to make enough money to keep the doors open, and they have to make enough to pay themselves and their staff. People think of it as a community service, and while it does have a lot of the characteristics of community service, it is fundamentally a small business. If we're going to educate our children through a small business, we have to treat it like one," she explained. So, she urged state and federal governments to give her field the strong, consistent support it needs.²⁵

It's an investment that pays off, as Shannon Marshall Mury pointed out when she accepted her award as Helen Marks National Teacher of the Year. "What we do is so often overlooked and underappreciated that being recognized for our hard work is awesome," she exclaimed. "We have made a commitment to advocate for developmentally appropriate high-quality early education, while providing a safe environment and fostering relationships with children and their families. What we do lays the foundation for how a child learns throughout their life."²⁶

That's the major reason for early childhood teachers to speak out for their field. The goal of early childhood advocacy is to improve the lives of children and families by influencing what lawmakers think and do. To carry out their duties, our public officials need advice from the well-informed folks who do the actual, daily work with our youngest learners. More than ever, early childhood professionals must be the voices that join to sing the praises of high-quality care and professionalization of the field.²⁷

LAWMAKERS ARE LISTENING NOW

Decision makers are paying more attention to what educators have to say, as they recently did in New York, where state officials embarked on a nine-week child care listening tour. The purpose of the tour was “to hear directly from child care providers and parents in our community,” explained State Senator Jabari Brisport who has acknowledged the plight of our early childhood teachers, “a dramatically underpaid workforce, overwhelmingly women of color, who are paid wages that leave the majority in near poverty.” So, he lent an attentive ear when he joined State Senator John Brooks, Assemblyman Andrew Hervesi and Assemblywoman Judy Griffin during a tour of Innovative Daycare in Freeport, NY. The day care is owned by Janna Rodriguez, who spent over two hours taking the officials through her building and introducing them to the children she serves.²⁸

Rodriguez is accustomed to speaking with politicians since she keeps in regular touch

with U.S. Rep. Kathleen Rice (D-NY), along with other elected officials in her state. She has spoken out for her field because she’s concerned about our youngest learners and the early childhood programs that serve them. “Day care programs are closing for lack of employees in need of higher wages,” she pointed out. “They’re leaving our sector to take on jobs that are paying them more, that are offering the benefits we can’t. And now who’s going to support our children?”

We need solutions, so Rodriguez is a strong advocate of the Build Back Better Act, now before the U.S. Senate. “What the Build Back Better Act would create is a sustainable child care sector and a universal child care system for birth to five years,” Rodriguez said. Parents who can’t afford child care would be able to apply for it, and that would be a “true blessing” since it would allow her to expand her program to serve more children. Like many others in the child care field, she knows that one of the ways for our nation to build back better is by investing in our young. So, educators must meet, mobilize—and make their voices heard.

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