

PERSPECTIVES

Power to the Profession Task Force Foundational to Early Childhood Education

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Hi, I'm Sarah LeMoine and I'm an early childhood professional. I'm a total package of complexities, a professional worthy of being viewed as a human being, not as a means-to-an-end only. As are early childhood educators! Their daily interactions with young children help shape the future. They are also highly motivated and essential community members, without whom the nation would cease to function. But between the thin lines that barely separate educator, parent, and paycheck, are the kids: The conundrum of how to work and raise children with a backdrop of minimally supported early childhood education programs is ongoing.

Since 1990 I've had the privilege to study, make contributions to, and agonize over early childhood systemic issues, particularly related to workforce development, standards, diversity, and resources. I've worked as an educator, mentor, consultant, researcher, and leader of national efforts, including in my current position at ZERO TO THREE as senior director of Professional Development and Workforce Innovations. I've stood, and still stand, on the shoulders of giants, hoping to form meaningful connections that lead to positive systems change for young children, their families, and the early childhood workforce. In the center of all of the work I've been part of, at least to me, is what professionals need to know, understand, and be able to do—what their competencies are, should, or could be, and how to move those competencies into sustainable practice.

Power to the Profession is a national collaboration working to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation. This initiative is led by a National Task Force comprised of leaders from 15 national organizations, including ZERO TO THREE, who

represent and engage with large groups of early childhood professionals (see Box 1). For more than 2 years, the Task Force met regularly to deliberate and come to consensus on shared recommendations for advancing the early childhood educator profession. ZERO TO THREE brought more than 40 years of professional development expertise and both cross-discipline and specific infant–toddler educator competencies into the initiative's discussions and work (LeMoine, this issue, p. 5). More than 35 national organizations with systems-level influence on early childhood professionals also helped inform and guide the work of the Task Force, as Power to the Profession Stakeholders. Thousands of early childhood educators, researchers, experts, and other invested individuals also contributed to this process.

At ZERO TO THREE, it's also been my privilege to support the Power to the Profession Task Force and related efforts to help advance the early childhood education field and its interactions with other disciplines. These professionals are all a team, but the stakes now seem higher than ever, with child poverty, health care, domestic violence, and immigration issues all pressuring human and social services. Those most at risk: the youngest children, as ever, and those professionals who serve them.

Despite the challenges, I'm optimistic about the increased focus on the early childhood education workforce and the possibilities offered through the Power to the Profession initiative. My excitement is not because the issues or strategies are "new," but because of the increased will-to-achieve within and external to the field. Attention is growing for what was previously seen as "extras" or "add-ons" and now viewed as essentials. The field has moved forward with broad ideas of professional preparation and development

systems, and it now increasingly explores simultaneous visioning and implementation realities and staging. The Power to the Profession initiative frames these opportunities at a key time when interest and evidence merge in support of early childhood education. How the field incorporates and implements the initiative's recommendations will of course be the ultimate test of efficacy.

The initiative's recommendations present a framework that is intentionally interwoven. Implementors must ensure that compensation is part of a packaged approach, and not just give lip service to the diversity of the workforce and families; no more add-ons, no more "special mentions" approaches. To build an authentic workforce—one that truly represents and is

part of the families and communities served—thinking needs to shift from the veneer of training the workforce on diversity issues to more strongly supporting the diverse workforce itself (yes, with all of its needed diversity). (See Box 2.)

The early childhood education field's strength lies in its professionals only if it bolsters resources, motivation, salaries, and promising practices, in the pioneering spirit that is vital for a relatively young professional discipline. Of course, the field must ensure and retain a social justice lens, for equity and inclusion are at the heart of evidence-based and methodological approaches—to ensure these aims are always explicit in all recommendations, strategies, and collaborations. The child is never the weakest link: adult politics being put ahead of strong, practical workplace techniques and workforce supports, is the elephant professionals must identify and ask to leave the room.

Rather, what is needed is politically neutral, professional criteria for advancement, within a clearer "field of reward" for improved study and practice. Any person's professional needs and wishes will likely include a "full package:" various career entry points, support for future learning, and (ah yes, at last!), a livable wage backed by a structured pay scale for advancement. Furthermore, it is vital not to forget (hold onto your hats now!) paid leave, health insurance, and a supportive environment at the entry level that values work-life balance. The basics of professional skilled employment, right?

Not in early childhood education. Not for early childhood educators. Sue Russell, executive director of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® National Center, and colleagues most notably introduced the "package" approach for the early childhood education workforce through T. E. A. C. H. The field still hasn't managed to take that concept to full systemic scale, despite quality improvement efforts like Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) which include workforce-related items. However, the core values are in place, and are being enhanced by initiatives like T. E. A. C. H. and the more than 35 organizations working together on the Power to the Profession initiative.

Box 1. Power to the Profession Task Force Members

The National Task Force consists of 15 organizations who represent and engage with large groups of early childhood professionals. The Task Force is chaired by Karen Ponder.

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
Breanne Skultety, Labor Economist

American Federation of Teachers
Megan Stockhausen, Assistant Director, Educational Issues

Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators
Debra Murphy, President

Child Care Aware of America
Lynette Fraga, Executive Director

Council for Professional Recognition
Valora Washington, Chief Executive Officer

Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children
Peggy Kemp, Executive Director

Early Care and Education Consortium
Celia Sims, President

National Association for Family Child Care
Louis A. Finney, President

National Association for the Education of Young Children
Rhian Evans Allvin, Chief Executive Officer

National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators
Kelly Baker, President

National Association of Elementary School Principals
Earl Franks, Executive Director

National Education Association
Shyrelle Eubanks, Senior Policy Analyst

National Head Start Association
Yasmina Vinci, Executive Director

Service Employees International Union
Kursten Holabird, Campaign Support Coordinator

ZERO TO THREE
Matthew Melmed, Executive Director

Box 2. ZERO TO THREE's Values in Action

At ZERO TO THREE, in addition to deep expertise and commitment, we bring our hearts; we believe that who we are is as important as what we do. Intentional action and self-awareness underpin ZERO TO THREE's efforts to make the world better for young children and families, for example:

- ZERO TO THREE's work is grounded in the Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children, and Families (Irving Harris Foundation, n.d.).
- ZERO TO THREE is proud to support and to have been part of the workgroup which developed the *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education*, a position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2019).

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Intentional action and self-awareness underpin efforts to make the world a better place for young children and families.

The challenges are ongoing, but the field is now at least hyper-aware of new practical opportunities. The current debates are long-standing and fractious, but very rich for positive outcomes. It's interesting to try to assess what predominantly drives a field forward: the barriers to the field that raise excellence and improve standards, or the achievements within the field once people can express their skills? At the same time there are the more social-political questions of identity and inclusivity (i.e., who the field appears to serve when viewed from the outside). Here is a triple threat, but perhaps offering a trio of social benefits—how (high) educational standards, (quality) care and education in the field, and (wider) social equality could all be served by enhanced resources for ECE. You want increased qualifications? Show me the money. You want increased compensation? Show me the qualifications. Social impasse? Temporary. Why can't the field, and nation, advance all three and more?

Why is the field still arguing about the same issues today? Well, frankly, because they aren't resolved. Despite the decades of work, advocacy, and research, early childhood education still hasn't seen the kind of broad systems change needed to support each of its educators—as a whole person, balancing their professional and life needs—let alone even “dent” the most urgent benefits a workforce needs. Until the field can resolve these tensions with one voice, or at least, one chorus, there will not be widespread change in this newly re-forming field.

You know the truism: if all you have is a hammer...every problem looks like a nail, but it's a truism because sometimes you need to use a hammer for a twisted problem. So this problem should be treated like a nail with only a hammer available to fix it, because access to resources is a fundamental challenge. Have you ever heard of another field that questions whether its workforce would benefit from a profession-specific, competency-based, sequenced program of study?

I am done with some of these discussions, personally. I want to keep the focus squarely on the implementation of interventions that are competency-based, promising or proven, and show clear impacts and improvements. Yes, early childhood educators need intentional, specific, competency-based sequenced preparation and the field needs to be clear about what that preparation can provide, and hold all levels of the preparation systems (e.g., higher ed, community-based) accountable. There must be strong related systems for tailoring advising, career plans, and compensation that support the true needs of the diverse workforce. And no one can expect that even the best prep program will fully prepare educators to be supported, well-equipped, and effective. No one piece of the loosely linked professional preparation, development, and improvement system is going to realize all the goals by itself. The reason? For too long, the field has glazed over the real institutionalized, systemic biases and injustices that have so desperately impacted the workforce and dressed them up as socio-political injustices around human identity sensitivities, as though these biases are fundamental problems endemic to the field rather than wide social debates that continually spin their wheels.

There are many “owners” of the various moving parts (e.g., preparation systems, training, regulatory and fiscal agencies, and funders) that need to be linked before the field can move forward, or early childhood education professionals will continue to be their own worst enemy, creating internal barriers. Leadership at all levels of the early childhood education field must be brave in letting go of what is not working, in order to find the common ground. Yes, there is not enough funding to support all that educators need right now. And yes, the nation is capable of better allocation of the limited funds available. As is the early childhood field; it is still spending its all-too-few dollars on singular, non-linked professional development events, tools, and initiatives. So, why is it surprising that we don't see even partial outcomes fulfilled? Why sink more money, time, and effort into non-systemic and non-holistic efforts that don't advance the profession's goals? How can leaders in this field ask for more money to do these heavy lifts, when they aren't spending their current dollars wisely and haven't come together yet with a choral voice and new song that will stick in everyone's head (and hopefully soothe listeners, too)?

Early childhood educators are humans, with complex and worthy professional needs. Until the rest of society recognizes these professionals at the center of early childhood education efforts as whole human beings—along with the positive outcomes wanted for children and families—the field will keep missing the mark at affecting change at the individual, program, and systems levels required to meet the profession's goals. Now is a time for real steps forward that advance these internal debates and unity in the early childhood education field, to the benefit of its related disciplines: the early childhood field must throw the stone that makes the ripples of change for a pond all early childhood disciplines share. The Power to the Profession initiative presents an unprecedented opportunity to seize this

moment and garner national efforts to advance a field-defined profession with appropriate competencies, policies, and accountability. Any limits to self-determination are removed or should be. Members of the early childhood education field must mix it up together—work it out within the field for the profession. It's time to give up what isn't working and focus on getting the vision that can crystallize inside the minds of the workforce, and the nation. Today and together, early childhood professionals must be the brave learners and leaders crucially needed by the nation's communities, families, and children.

Sarah LeMoine, MS, is senior director, Professional Development and Workforce Innovations at ZERO TO THREE. In this role, Ms. LeMoine advances ZERO TO THREE's education strategy and coordinates these efforts with international, national, and state partners. Ms. LeMoine has focused her career on early childhood professional development systems and workforce issues. She holds a master's degree in leadership and policy with 30 years of extensive experience ranging from direct service teaching and mentoring to national-level research and writing, technical assistance and training, policy analysis, advocacy, and leadership. Previously, she directed the National Center on Child Care Professional Development and Workforce Systems Initiatives at ZERO TO THREE, jointly funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Offices of Head Start and Child Care and the National Association for the Education of Young Children's State Workforce Systems Policy, and she held leadership and technical assistance positions with the National Child Care Information Center and the Wheelock College Center for Career Development. Ms. LeMoine is proud of her service on numerous national and international advisory boards and workgroups to advance early childhood professional systems and practice.



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Early childhood educators are humans, with complex and worthy professional needs.

Learn More

ZERO TO THREE Professional Development and Workforce Innovations
www.zerotothree.org/PDWI

ZERO TO THREE is actively engaged and representing infant–toddler educators as the Power to the Profession initiative moves from recommendations to implementation of its shared vision: “early childhood educators are members of a prepared, diverse, effective, equitable and well-compensated profession, and able to play a central role in defining and shaping that profession.” Your input is vital to the future of the early childhood education profession. Make sure your voice contributes! Stay engaged as a ZERO TO THREE member
<https://www.zerotothree.org/membership>

Find the latest updates on Power to the Profession at
www.naeyc.org/our-work/initiatives/profession

References

Irving Harris Foundation. (n.d.) *Diversity-informed tenets for work with infants, children, and families*. Retrieved from <http://imhdivtenets.org/tenets>
LeMoine, S. (2019). Defining competencies for the early childhood workforce. *ZERO TO THREE Journal*, 40(3), 5–10.

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