

The early education field in Illinois is grappling with difficulty recruiting and retaining educators. In recent years, Illinois increased educator standards, implementing some of the highest preschool teacher qualification requirements in the nation for their publicly funded preschool classrooms, known as Preschool For All (PFA). Before passage of the legislation, the state failed to address higher education barriers and low wages for teachers, causing educators to leave the field for higher paying careers. Although the state’s goal was to provide preschool students with a high-quality learning experience, the state exacerbated barriers for its early childhood workforce and only recently worked to address them.

Barriers to Workforce Recruitment and Retention

In 2018, Illinois increased teacher qualification requirements for its PFA classrooms.¹ Previously, PFA teachers were only required to hold a teaching license with a coursework focus on early childhood. State law now requires all PFA teachers to have a Professional Educator License (PEL)² and an early childhood education endorsement,³ beginning with the 2024-2025 school year. To obtain a PEL through a teaching program, aspiring educators must pass the edTPA assessment. Curriculum experts have criticized this test as a poor indicator of teacher quality and ability. Students of color have also experienced lower passage rates compared to their peers.

	Head Start	Preschool For All (PFA)
Preschool Teacher Qualifications for Publicly Funded Programs in Illinois	At least an associate or bachelor’s degree in child development or early childhood education, or otherwise meet the requirements of section 648(a)(3)(B) of the Act. Nationally, at least 50 percent of HS teachers must hold a bachelor’s in the disciplines listed above (Office of Head Start 2016).	*Starting in the ’24-’25 school year, teachers must hold a PEL with an early childhood endorsement. Until then, those with only a PEL and those with a bachelor’s plus classroom experience, may teach in PFA classrooms (Illinois General Assembly 2018).

**Pending legislation in the Illinois General Assembly seeks to extend the teacher qualification flexibility for an additional five years due to workforce recruitment and retention issues.*

Despite the enhanced requirements, higher education barriers in Illinois went unaddressed for several years, exacerbating the teacher shortage. First, there was a fundamental disconnect between community colleges and four-year universities regarding the transfer of coursework. When students attempted to transfer early childhood coursework between institutions, the course credit was oftentimes not accepted. Combined with the high cost of higher education, some aspiring educators

¹ Teacher qualification requirements for child care classrooms are lower than PFA classrooms. At minimum, a lead teacher in a child care must only hold a Child Development Associate (CDA).
² A teaching license in Illinois, which is necessary to teach within public school settings, including PFA. A PEL may be obtained through a bachelor’s degree teaching program.
³ After obtaining a PEL, an individual can acquire endorsements to be qualified to teach specific grade levels (i.e. birth – grade 2) and/or specific populations (i.e. ESL/Bilingual students). Endorsements are stacked onto a Professional Educator License. Obtaining an endorsement requires specific coursework and passing a content test. Multiple endorsements may be acquired.

postponed attainment of a degree altogether. Overall, there was little-to-no incentive for aspiring PFA teachers to obtain the new teaching qualifications.

Benefits of a Diverse Workforce

In Illinois, approximately 34% of young children ages zero to five, “have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English” (Tú Nhi Giang and Park 2022). Research has shown that enrollment in high-quality early education programs leads to better outcomes, but children of immigrants may receive greater benefits (Gelatt, Adams and Huerta 2014). Another report demonstrated that young children who receive bilingual education services in full-day pre-K have better long-term educational outcomes (de la Torre, Freire and Blanchard 2021). This research uplifts the need for and benefits of a linguistically diverse workforce.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is an emerging pedagogy and in December 2022, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) adopted administrative rules for the Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards. They must be incorporated into all teacher licensure programs, including programs for preschool teachers. The standards include acknowledging that systems of oppression exist, upholding students’ unique experiences, and requiring teachers to reflect on how their biases impact their teaching styles (Illinois State Board of Education 2022).

CRT may overall help teachers better understand young children’s attitudes and behaviors. For example, black boys have historically been suspended and expelled from pre-K programs at higher rates than their peers, largely due to perceived behavioral challenges. A CRT lens has the potential to allow teachers to better understand the root causes of these perceived behavioral concerns and redirect the child’s energy elsewhere.

Strategies To Build a Diverse Workforce

Grow-Your-Own Programs: Many early childhood programs have created Grow-Your-Own (GYO) workforce programs to aid in recruiting and retaining staff members, focusing on people with diverse skills and attributes. For entry-level positions, GYO programs recruit community members, such as parents, to provide them with the necessary resources and support to obtain the proper qualifications to ultimately become employed by the organization. Some programs also support current staff to obtain the educational requirements to teach in PFA classrooms. GYO is a professional development tool that more programs are turning toward to keep classrooms open.

The Carole Robertson Center for Learning (CRCL) launched a GYO program in November 2021 to leverage families and community members as local assets. Their family support specialists partnered with families enrolled at CRCL to discuss their strengths, goals, and identify those who were interested in early childhood careers. CRCL provided training, professional development, and educational experiences to help them obtain credentials⁴, like the Child Development Associate. Since the inception, CRCL has hired

⁴ Credentials are typically obtained in Illinois as professional development options for the child care field. The child care workforce can obtain these voluntary credentials through a mix of educational courses and work experience.

over 40 candidates, the majority of whom have diverse backgrounds and linguistic abilities.

Streamlining Pathways for Credential & Endorsement Attainment: In 2009, Illinois required ESL/bilingual students in PFA programs to be taught by an educator with a PEL and bilingual endorsement. Not until the summer of 2022 was the state able to launch an ESL & Bilingual Credential for early educators within the existing framework of our child care credentialing system. This credential encompasses multiple levels in which the individual must develop specific educational competencies, paired with work experience, to move onto the next level. At the highest level, the individual has earned a PEL and an ESL & Bilingual endorsement – which allows them to qualify more closely to teach a bilingual PFA classroom. This was a critical gap because members of the child care workforce did not have a streamlined path toward a PEL and bilingual endorsement prior to last year.

Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE): In 2021, the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation with the goal of retaining the incumbent ECE workforce and strengthening the teacher pipeline. It required all public colleges and universities in Illinois to participate in ECACE. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) were a critical partner during bill negotiations, securing a quarter of the \$200 million in total funding to support the consortium. Below are some of the most critical components of ECACE:

Strengthens Articulation Agreements: Requires junior-level status to be granted at transferring institutions if the student has obtained their Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in early childhood and has early childhood work experience. It also requires all AAS course credit earned to count toward completion of a bachelor's degree.

Awards Child Development Associate (CDA) Credit: Requires member institutions to provide a minimum of 6 hours of college credit in early childhood for CDA holders. Awarding this credit cannot be contingent on the student completing additional activities, courses, or assessments.

Provides Scholarship Funding: Scholarships are available, up to the cost of attendance, for students seeking early childhood degrees, credentials, or endorsements.

Creates Higher Education Navigators & Mentors/Coaches: The navigator program helps the incumbent workforce understand their higher education opportunities before enrollment occurs. The mentors/coaches are housed within IHEs to support the student enroll in the appropriate coursework and complete the higher education program.

Lastly, the Illinois Department of Human Services is exploring the creation of a state-wide early childhood apprenticeship program. The early learning workforce is more diverse than the k-12 workforce and in creating an apprenticeship program, they hope to recruit and retain a high-quality linguistically and culturally diverse workforce that is more representative of the children served across Illinois.

References

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