



Registered Apprenticeships: A Viable Career Path for the Early Childhood Workforce



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

EARLY CHILDHOOD, SEPTEMBER 2019

The early childhood workforce includes 2 million individuals who care for and educate 10 million children from birth to age 5.¹

The Bipartisan Policy Center would like to thank the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous support of this work.

A young child's healthy development requires stable, caring, interactive, and positive relationships with their parents, family members, and other caregivers. These adults help shape a child's earliest experiences, which affects their chances for success throughout life: The emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive and linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, the workplace, and in the larger community.

In today's economy, an increasing number of children from working families are benefiting from relationships with caregivers outside of the home. These individuals have an undeniable impact on shaping a child's successful development, as demonstrated by decades of neurological and child development outcomes. Additionally, these caregivers allow parents to work and go to school to provide for their families.

Yet child care workers remain in the near-bottom percentile (second to last) when all occupations are ranked by annual earnings.² The average national median hourly wage for child care workers was \$10.72 in 2017, falling from \$13.74 in 2016. These wages are below the poverty line in nearly every state.³ More than 50 percent of child care workers, compared with 21 percent of the overall U.S. workforce, were enrolled in at least one public-support or health care program.⁴

Improved parent knowledge and information about quality, an increased market for child care, and changing program requirements drive the demand for a highly qualified and highly skilled workforce.

Even as wages decrease, demand for a highly educated early childhood workforce is increasing. Unfortunately, acquiring a degree or improving skills while on the job is a challenging task for the current and future early childhood workforce. A 2018 Department of Labor (DOL) report showed the early childhood workforce faces significant barriers to higher education and professional-development systems.⁵

In order to advance the healthy development of children and the strength of communities, it is crucial that the United States develops innovative solutions to improve the quality of the early childhood workforce. One innovative model is well-established in other industries: registered apprenticeships.

Defining Career Pathways

Registered apprenticeships (RAs) that are a part of a “career pathway,” as defined by the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA), present a compelling option for states to support their early childhood workforce. Career pathways are a workforce-development strategy used to improve transitions from education into the workforce, provide employees with continuous education and skill attainment, and support advancement in their field. This strategy has been adopted at the federal, state, and local levels to improve education and training opportunities for the current and emerging workforce, particularly in high-demand occupations.

While career pathways have existed for decades, WIOA, passed with broad bipartisan support in 2014, formalizes their use by establishing a common definition and outlining the essential elements of such pathways.⁶ WIOA also expanded the purpose of states’ adult education systems to include assisting working adults through career pathways.

States play a significant role in implementing WIOA and are required to develop WIOA State Plans, as well as local and regional sub-plans that are responsive to local community workforce needs.⁷ Workforce Development Boards at both the state and local level are tasked with enacting the plans and identifying communities’ in-demand occupations for targeted funding.⁸

In 2017, more than 20 million Americans accessed WIOA training and employment services.

Registered Apprenticeships— A Viable Way Forward

A defined career pathway, as highlighted in WIOA, presents a promising road map for the early childhood workforce, particularly for the existing worker. Opportunities are furthered when a career pathway specifically incorporates RAs. RAs combine classroom instruction, on-the-job training, and mentorship to create a holistic program with an earn-while-you-learn approach.⁹ RA programs offer a flexible model for early childhood educators to improve their knowledge and skills with the goal of acquiring a state-defined credential, a child development associate (CDA) credential, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree, all while improving the quality of the early childhood workforce and increasing their wages.

A DOL study on effective career pathways for the early education workforce found that “apprenticeships, which combine classroom instruction with on-the-job training, offer another comprehensive approach to helping early childhood educators enter and advance along the [early childhood education] pathway.”¹⁰

Every RA has a sponsor responsible for the overall operation of the program. Sponsors can be a business, a workforce intermediary, a community college, or a community-based organization. Regardless of who serves as the sponsor, apprenticeships are always employer-driven and employers are involved throughout the process. To establish and implement an RA program—and to be eligible to receive WIOA funding—sponsors must incorporate five key elements stipulated by WIOA in their RA programs:

1. *Business Partnerships.* Incorporating businesses as partners is essential; it allows apprentices to learn while using their improved skill set. For early childhood apprenticeships, early care and education programs serve as the employer for apprentices.
2. *On-the-Job Training (OJT).* OJT allows apprentices to apply what they learn in a real-world setting. Sponsors often give apprentices a mentor to advise and support them throughout their OJT.
3. *Related Instruction.* Classroom-based related instruction is curriculum-driven content designed to supplement OJT; a community college or other relevant classroom setting can provide the instruction.
4. *Wage Steps.* Increasing rewards for skill gains are known as wage steps, or wage bumps. Apprentices must gradually receive increases in pay as their skills and knowledge levels grow.
5. *Credential.* Apprentices must receive a credential indicating they can satisfactorily perform an occupation. Within existing early childhood RA programs, this often transfers as a CDA, an associate's degree, or another credential.

State Registered Apprenticeship Examples

Some states have adopted RA programs for the early childhood workforce that demonstrate the promise of a flexible career pathway for early childhood educators.

West Virginia

West Virginia's Apprenticeship for Child Development Specialist (ACDS) program is the nation's first early childhood RA. The program is a collaborative partnership between the West Virginia Office of the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training and River Valley Child Development Services.¹¹ Other partners include the West Virginia Department of Education, the West Virginia Early Childhood Training Connections and Resources program, and vocational schools across the state.¹²

Potential apprentices must be at least 18 years old with a high school diploma, or equivalency, and employed for a minimum of 20 hours a week at a child care center, Head Start, or preschool program.¹³ ACDS is a four-semester training program that includes 300 hours of coursework and between 3,200 to 4,000 hours of OJT.¹⁴ Classes are held once a week at night and cost \$25 per semester. The ACDS program also provides financial assistance through scholarship programs and mini-grants to offset the cost of classes.¹⁵ Each apprentice is given a mentor to help track goals and monitor progress in the apprentice's OJT. Mentors receive a stipend for their time and attend a one-day training session.¹⁶

Upon completion of the program, apprentices receive the title of "journey person," coined by the DOL. Nine West Virginia colleges and universities count a journey person certificate toward a bachelor's or associate's degree. These colleges offer flexible opportunities for apprentices to continue their studies through hybrid and online classes.

Pennsylvania

In Philadelphia's CDA-to-Associate's Degree apprenticeships for early child care educators and pre-kindergarten teachers, employers partner with the District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund, a Philadelphia-based labor and management workforce-development group.¹⁷ The organization designed the program to fit Philadelphia's unique workforce needs, ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations and leveraging private and public workforce-development funding.¹⁸ District 1199C has several other prominent partners, including the Community College of Philadelphia and Delaware County, which provide coursework and college credit; First Up, which provides mentorship; and the Pennsylvania Apprenticeship & Training Council, which works with the DOL at the state and federal level to license and register apprenticeship programs.¹⁹ Philanthropic partners also support the CDA-to-Associate's Degree apprenticeship program.

Potential apprentices must have a CDA credential before applying to the apprenticeship program, and they must have an employer who is willing to sponsor them for at least one year.²⁰ The program offers resources to prepare apprentices for college-level coursework through college-preparation placement courses, academic advising, tutoring, and study groups. College coursework is contextualized for relevant application in an early learning setting. The program includes an accelerated associate's degree program, as well as 4,000 hours of on-the-job training at their child care or Head Start program. Apprentices and employers are each required to pay \$500 toward the \$12,000 degree.²¹ District 1199C provides scholarships through federal Child Care and Development Fund-supported tuition programs.

Each apprentice receives an on-site coach who helps ensure OJT learning requirements, goals, and progress are met. On average, apprentices will earn a \$2,000 wage increase on completion of the program. District 1199C is working on implementing the program in southeastern Pennsylvania and supporting other regional partners to implement it across Pennsylvania.

Colorado

Colorado's Red Rocks Community College and the state's DOL, along with partners at several other community colleges in Colorado, lead the Child Care Development Specialist Apprenticeship. It is administered through the Red Rocks Child Care Innovations program, which provides services to improve and support child care and education for children, families, and educators.

Potential apprentices must be at least 16 years old to apply and should be employed (or ready to be employed) full-time at an early childhood program in the state.²² The two-year program offers grants to support apprentices; the grants include funding for community college courses and other training, books and other relevant expenses, payment for mentors who advise apprentices, and substitutes to fill in for apprentices when needed throughout the program.²³ The Child Care Development Specialist Apprenticeship program requires apprentices to complete 4,000 hours of OTJ training and over 300 hours of course instruction. Every apprentice is assigned a "mentor teacher" who has completed a training program and has at least three years of early childhood experience.

Once apprentices have fulfilled all requirements for the Colorado Early Childhood Professional Credential, they earn the designation of "child development specialist" from the DOL. Colorado's RA program is set to expand, as the initiative recently received a grant from Early Milestones Colorado, an organization dedicated to improving early child care in the state.²⁴

Recommendations

While the examples above demonstrate how career pathways and RAs provide options to increase the quality and wages of the early childhood workforce, too few states and local regions are taking advantage of these mechanisms. While many WIOA state plans do identify child care as a workforce support, it is largely absent from WIOA planning and implementation at state and local levels as a workforce sector. To successfully assist states and communities with developing WIOA-supported career pathways and RAs, government agencies at the federal and state levels must work together, along with local communities, philanthropic organizations, and higher-education institutions. Below are several recommendations for how to achieve this.

Nearly all existing resources for apprenticeship programs are aimed at the health care and labor industries, and with scarce funding and limited best-practice guidance available to start new early childhood apprenticeships, leaders do not have the resources or information to get programs off the ground.

Congress:

- Congress should consider funding start-up costs for states to develop and accelerate RAs as part of an early childhood career pathway.

Federal Agencies:

- The DOL and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should consider actively promoting RAs as a part of a WIOA-defined career pathway for the early childhood workforce.
- HHS should consider expanding their early childhood professional-development technical assistance to include workforce expertise in career pathways and RAs.
- HHS should consider including career pathways and RAs in the 2022-2024 Child Care Development Fund Plan preprint.

States:

- States should consider charging their WIOA task forces with developing a WIOA-defined early childhood career pathway and RA program, and they should include this work in their WIOA state plans.
- States should consider including early childhood apprenticeships as part of their workforce funding.
- States should consider using systems-building grants, such as the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five, to fund higher-education institutions to develop and monitor content, coursework, and related instruction in RAs.

Philanthropic Organizations:

- Philanthropic organizations should consider providing incubation funding for start-up opportunities for RAs and should support expansion of RAs to underserved educators, such as infant-toddler teachers, family child care providers, dual-language teachers, and those in rural and tribal communities.

Community-Level Leaders:

- County and municipal leaders should consider partnering with local workforce-development boards to support early childhood educators as an in-demand occupation.
- Community colleges should consider working with RA programs in their region to create content responsive to community demographics and need.
- Municipalities and regions should consider developing regional early childhood RAs that are responsive to community early childhood workforce needs and coordinated with one another in support of statewide implementation and fidelity.

Endnotes

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