

Executive Summary

Early Childhood Educators: Advancing the Profession



“What nobler employment, or more valuable to the state, than [those] who instruct the rising generation...”

– Cicero, 106-43 B.C.

Convinced by the science, the outcomes, the economics, and their own needs and experiences, parents, voters and policymakers across America are calling for investment in early childhood education. Results from a new large-scale market research project undertaken by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) tell us even more about their demands: they are calling specifically for investment in early childhood educators.

Coming on the heels of the Institute of Medicine’s seminal report on “Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8,” this critical research adds to the increasing focus on our nation’s early childhood professionals, and provides an initial roadmap for achieving NAEYC’s vision of a profession that exemplifies excellence and is recognized as vital and performing a critical role in society. Equally as important, however, are the ways in which this work is emblematic of NAEYC’s commitment to elevate educators’ voices, helping them serve as the foundation for the coming collective process of policy-making, public will-building and market-branding efforts that will define and advance the early education profession.

Conducted with early educators, potential educators and American voters on behalf of NAEYC by a bipartisan team of researchers including Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) and Public Opinion Strategies¹, and with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Richard W. Goldman Family Foundation, the extensive data yields findings in three discrete yet interconnected areas: (1) the image of the profession; (2) paths to define and grow the profession; and (3) voters’ commitment to investing in

the profession.

The Image of the Profession

Buoyed by an understanding of the importance of the earliest years in child development, American voters overwhelmingly view early educators as essential parts of our education system and as important members of our communities - nearly on par with firefighters and nurses. Far from seeing them as equivalent to babysitters, voters recognize early childhood educators as professionals who have complex and demanding jobs and responsibilities. They understand the evidence-based connection between having high-quality educators and having high-quality education – and they believe that compensation and professional development are critical components of ensuring quality.

Defining and Growing the Profession

Like voters, early childhood educators themselves believe there are key qualities, including patience and passion, which define a high-quality educator. Having entered the field based on a love of working for children and a commitment to their school readiness, over half of educators have come to believe that an academic background in child development is essential to the definition of an excellent early educator. Indeed, educators are very open to the concept of increased requirements; 83 percent believe it is fair to require current and future early childhood educators to meet a baseline set of qualifications in order to receive higher salary and benefits, even as they remain nearly evenly split on the question of specific degree requirements.

¹ Methodology: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) and Public Opinion Strategies (POS) conducted an online survey of 3,750 current and former early childhood educators throughout the country. The survey was conducted August 6-12, 2015. Survey participants were recruited from among the members of NAEYC and several other national and state early childhood education organizations.

Educators, the vast majority of whom want to make early childhood their long term career, understand and place high value on their ability to make a difference in the lives of young children. Yet they also continue to believe they are unappreciated and undervalued by the country and communities in which they live. Eighty-four percent of educators identify low pay as a significant challenge facing the workforce, while a full 72 percent also call out a lack of respect for the importance and difficulty of their work - data that is at odds with voters' apparent appreciation for them and their jobs. Educators of color were more likely to report an even-greater range of obstacles, including college inaccessibility, and lack of career guidance, mentoring and training, which has significant implications for efforts to define and grow the profession equitably and effectively in a country of rapidly changing demographics.

Investing in the Profession

Sold on the science, voters overwhelmingly believe that increased access to early childhood education will produce broad benefits and have particular faith in those that are short-term and child-focused. Importantly, they translate this belief into a call for public investment. Support for increased federal and state investment in early childhood education is high across the political, geographic, and demographic lines that frequently divide American voters. Significant majorities of Democrats, Republicans and Independents favor investment. Support remains high across gender and age ranges, where even the lowest level of support is recorded at an impressive 68%, coming from men over age 50. Non-parents are nearly as supportive of investment as parents. And Americans

of all races support these investments by huge margins, ranging from 79% of Whites to 86% of Latinos to 95% of African-Americans.

Critically, voters continue to support increased public investment at the same high levels when presented with a scenario in which the investment will be primarily dedicated to increasing educators' wages. Likely predicated on data indicating that 61% of voters believe that early childhood educators are paid too little (with another 18% saying they don't know), strong majorities support raising wages for early educators working across all settings, and with all ages of children from birth through age 8. Like educators themselves, however, voters are split on whether educational standards or wages should be raised first.

Even with these high levels of support, there remains room for movement and progress. In response to hearing compelling messages about early childhood educators, for example, there was a 14% jump among voters saying early childhood educators were extremely important. Voters are also clear that both the message and the messenger matter, expressing a high level of trust in K-12 teachers, parents, and child development experts.

Societies have known about the value of educators for millennia. We have known about the brain science behind their critical role in the early years for decades. We have known about the economic benefits of investing in high-quality early childhood education for years. It is past time for our policies and our investments to catch up to what we know and make early childhood education and educators a priority, for today's rising generation, and for those to come.



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