

Alleviating the Early Childhood Education Teacher Shortage Crisis in Illinois:

Recommendations From Teach Plus
Illinois Early Childhood Education Fellows



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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) classrooms in Illinois are facing a teacher shortage crisis, yet many educators who have experience but aren't certified as lead teachers are hungry for opportunities to become lead-teacher certified. Regardless of ECE program setting—the most common are embedded within local school districts, community-based organizations (CBOs), and home-based programs—it remains a constant struggle to staff ECE classrooms with state-certified lead teachers to provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate support to students and families. Without consistent staffing, the state of Illinois is failing to empower students, families, and communities with the early childhood education and support that research confirms has life-long benefits in a variety of domains.¹

A bright spot in this crisis is that lead teachers are not the only educators working within ECE classrooms. While lead teachers are charged with instructional planning and content, as well as the overall management and direction of the classroom, this work is supported by paraprofessionals or teaching assistants in each classroom, who play a critical role in the functioning of programs and the high-quality care and education of children. ECE paraprofessionals or teaching assistants are mandated to be staffed in every ECE classroom, and are expected to support instructional activities led by lead teachers, assist with classroom management, aid diverse learning students functionally and academically, sanitize the classroom, and more.²

We are a group of early childhood educators who work across the state in a variety of settings, including schools and community-based organizations. As Teach Plus Early Childhood Education Fellows, we're committed to finding solutions to alleviate the ECE teacher shortage crisis. We see a promising path to doing so by empowering the experienced, knowledgeable, and dedicated paraprofessionals and teaching assistants already working in classrooms with the additional knowledge and skills necessary to succeed as lead teachers. The Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD) and Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) are currently exploring competency-based teacher preparation pathways and assessments of prior learning, which is the first step on this path.³ As early childhood educators, we have seen paraprofessionals and teaching assistants' drive to become lead teachers, and know that they gain many skills related to leading a classroom through their work experience. In our research, we surveyed paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to ask what barriers were preventing them from becoming lead teachers, and what they would need in order to successfully obtain their certification.

In this report, we offer findings and recommend steps that key stakeholders in early childhood education across the state (including the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), institutions of higher education, and ECE programs) could take in order to alleviate the teacher shortage crisis in ECE by empowering the skilled paraprofessionals and teaching assistants already working in these classrooms to successfully pursue lead-teacher certification.

Through the survey, three findings emerged:

Finding 1. While many paraprofessionals and teaching assistants want to become lead teachers and have taken on many of the responsibilities required of lead teachers, there remain barriers toward obtaining lead-teacher certification.

Finding 2. ECE paraprofessionals and teaching assistants have a strong interest in pursuing alternative pathways to certification that integrate competency-based assessments and flexible coursework scheduling.

Finding 3. Even with flexible coursework scheduling and competency-based assessments in place, paraprofessionals and teaching assistants will still require educational assistance from institutions of higher education and their employers in order to successfully obtain lead-teacher certification.

Four recommendations for state leaders, institutions of higher education, and childcare agencies:

Recommendation 1. The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) should prioritize support and funding to develop accessible and flexible higher education programs that award credit for demonstration of prior knowledge and skill and offer flexible scheduling options for those paraprofessionals and teaching assistants currently working within early childhood classrooms.

Recommendation 2. The Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Community College Board, as part of the work to create early childhood teacher preparation competency-based courses, should align their ECE program requirements with the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Framework

Recommendation 3. Institutions of higher education should partner with local childcare agencies and school districts to build structures and collaboratives within which aspiring lead teachers can receive educational and professional support for program completion, while continuing to work full time. If a formal partnership is not possible, childcare organizations and schools should strive to create and maintain work environments that provide space and flexibility for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to both work full time and succeed in achieving career and educational goals.

Recommendation 4. The Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding should recommend stipends to employers to supplement the hours of work during which employees would pursue coursework, as well as to provide an incentive program for employees upon completion of a Gateways benchmark credentials, degrees, and certification.

BACKGROUND:

CURRENT OBSTACLES TO PARAPROFESSIONAL AND TEACHING ASSISTANT CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Early childhood lead teacher certification requires that educators hold a Bachelor of Arts and an additional Early Childhood Education Type 04 Educator's License. Some certification programs offer a B.A. in Early Childhood Education, thus embedding licensure coursework into its structure.⁴ The educational requirements to become an early childhood paraprofessional or teaching assistant are lower than that of the early childhood lead teacher. Paraprofessionals, who work in school districts, are required to hold a Paraprofessional Teaching License, which requires a high school diploma or GED, in combination with an associate degree, 60 semester hours of coursework, or minimum scores on state foundational skills tests. For entry-level teaching assistant positions in non-school based ECE centers, candidates must have a high school diploma or GED. Teaching assistants can advance in their career by completing higher education coursework and professional learning sessions. Both paraprofessionals in school districts and teaching assistants in non-school based programs must have a B.A. in order to advance to the lead teacher position, regardless of the skills and knowledge they gain through their hands-on work experience.

Given that paraprofessionals and teaching assistants work full-time hours, often for minimum-wage compensation and while supporting their own families, completing coursework for a B.A. simply requires more time and money than they can afford. The existing pathways for becoming a certified lead teacher are inaccessible to our paraprofessionals and teaching assistants. If we are to mitigate the teacher shortage crisis by supporting paraprofessionals and teaching assistants in advancing into open lead teacher positions, we must understand the barriers currently preventing them from certification, and construct alternative pathways to certification that directly address and eliminate these barriers.

"It's a challenge to find the time involved to take 3-6 hours of additional college courses to be teacher qualified. ... There are younger, less experienced people where I work who have completed CDA training, are now teacher qualified, and get paid more than I do because they somehow had time to complete all the hoops you have to jump through. They get paid more and do less than I do. They have the certificate because our center rushed as many through as they could to look good to DCFS, but what we've gained is higher paid people with CDA certificates that ask people like me how to do their job or to just do it for them."

-CBO educator in Cook County

METHODOLOGY

We developed a survey to determine paraprofessionals' and teaching assistants' interest in becoming lead teachers, the barriers that keep them from pursuing lead teacher certification, and what solutions would help them achieve that goal. In particular, we sought to measure interest in the potential creation of new certification programs, which would combine successful demonstration of prior knowledge and skills through competency-based assessments and flexible program structures for

professionals currently working in the field of early childhood. There were a total of 74 participants.⁵ We coded the data to identify patterns in survey responses, regarding paraprofessionals' and teaching assistants' experience in the classroom and in the efforts in obtaining lead teacher certification, as well as what supports they would need to pursue this certification with success.

Given the multitude of contexts within which early childhood paraprofessionals and teaching assistants work across the state of Illinois and the differences that these contexts have in regards to educational requirements and work experiences, it is useful to understand who participated in the survey before discussing participants' responses. Educators who participated came from different teaching settings: 38 percent in community-based organizations (CBOs), 21 percent in school districts, 8 percent in home-based settings, and 33 percent in "other."⁶ In regards to the participants' highest level of education completed, 38 percent have a high school diploma/GED, 21 percent have an associate degree, 22 percent have a bachelor's degree, and 19 percent marked "other."⁷

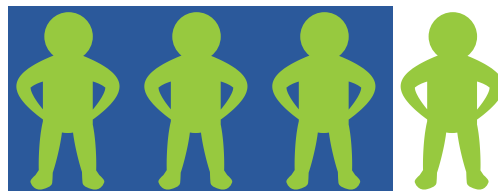
FINDINGS

1. While many paraprofessionals and teaching assistants want to become lead teachers and have taken on many of the responsibilities required of lead teachers, there remain barriers toward obtaining lead-teacher certification.

Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants want to become lead teachers. Eighty-four percent of all participants responded "yes" when asked whether or not they were interested in becoming a lead teacher, regardless of their work context and level of education and credentials.⁸ This response was across paraprofessionals and teaching assistants in all settings.

Further, while we had hypothesized that those who had already attained higher levels of credentials may be more likely to be interested in pursuing lead-teacher certification because they had fewer additional requirements to complete, this was not the case. Respondents' current Gateways credential had no bearing on their desire to pursue certification. Thus, no matter how far respondents were from obtaining their certification, the overwhelming majority of them aspired to this goal.

Figure 1. In your current position, are you ever asked to temporarily take on the responsibilities of a lead teacher?

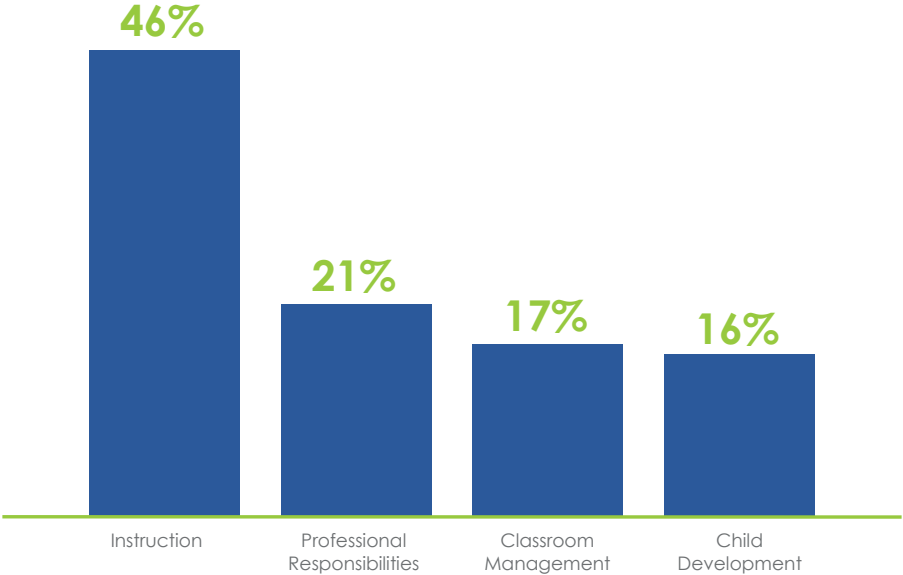


While previous research has shown that paraprofessionals and teaching assistants often take on the responsibilities of lead teachers in the classroom⁹, we wanted to know if our group of participants had this common experience as well. Overall, 77 percent of survey respondents reported that they have been asked to temporarily

take on the responsibilities of a lead teacher in their current position (see Figure 1).¹⁰ Context and level of education attained seemed to influence how often paraprofessionals and teaching assistants were asked to assume lead teacher responsibilities. Those working in non-school based programs were more likely to be asked to fulfill lead teacher requirements than school-based paraprofessionals and teaching assistants, and those with a B.A. were more likely than those with less advanced degrees to be asked to fulfill these responsibilities. Despite these differences, the majority of paraprofessionals and teaching assistants across all contexts and levels of education are frequently asked to fulfill lead teacher responsibilities.

Having established that paraprofessionals and teaching assistants are often asked to fulfill lead teacher responsibilities, it follows that these paraprofessionals and teaching assistants gain skills and knowledge required of lead teachers through their work. We asked paraprofessionals and teaching assistants if they believed they had gained these skills and knowledge, and, if so, in which domains they had grown. Reflecting on our own experiences and knowledge of early childhood classrooms and instruction, we asked specifically if paraprofessionals and teaching assistants believed they had grown in instruction (such as lesson and unit planning, delivering engaging lessons, etc), professional responsibilities (such as paperwork, co-teaching, partnering with families, etc), classroom management (such as building classroom culture, supporting social-emotional skills, etc), and child development (such as typical developmental milestones, understanding of the ways in which young children learn, etc).

Figure 2: Which knowledge and skill do you feel you have gained in your work experience?



The majority of respondents believed they had gained knowledge and skills related to becoming a lead teacher through their work experiences. There were a few differences in the domains in which paraprofessionals and teaching assistants built skill based on Gateways credential, work context, and level of education (see Figure 2). While Gateways Credential had no bearing on the skills paraprofessionals and teaching assistants reported gaining, participants with high school diplomas/GEDs

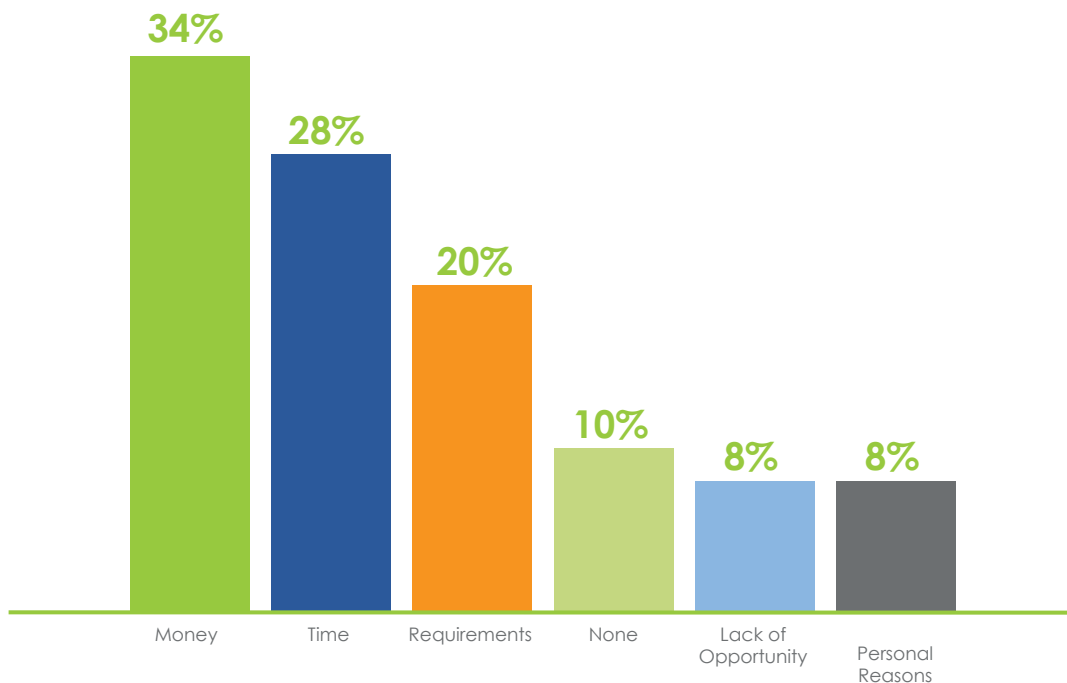
reported gaining child development knowledge more often than respondents with advanced levels of educational attainment. One educator said she had learned many skills during her time in the role of the lead teacher:

“How to prepare a lesson plan for the classroom, how to engage children in a classroom setting: I have gained the knowledge of how through reading we can help expand a child’s vocabulary, curiosity about their surroundings, and create activities based on reading themes. I have learned how vital it is to provide a stable, friendly, and nurturing environment that is safe for a child.”

-A home-based educator in Cook County

As expected, the most common barriers to pursuing lead teacher certification reported by respondents were money, time, or a combination of both (see Figure 3). This did not change depending on respondents’ education level, Gateways registry level, or setting in which they teach.

Figure 3: What challenges have you encountered, if any, in becoming a lead teacher?



Financial concerns centered on both the cost of tuition and coursework itself and the minimal return on this investment due to low wages in the early childhood education sector. One respondent powerfully responded:

“Paying back significant loans when I only make \$11 is disheartening.”

-CBO educator in DuPage County

Nearly 20 percent of respondents cited the complexity of the process as a barrier. They detailed struggles with understanding and navigating higher education and Gateways registry infrastructures, including paperwork requirements and transferring learning credits between institutions, which often leads to taking repetitive coursework at multiple institutions. Some respondents indicated that lack of opportunity (such as job availability) and personal reasons were the reasons why they had not been able to successfully pursue lead teacher certification. Fewer than 10 percent of responses indicated that assistants had not faced any barriers in their efforts toward becoming a lead teacher.

2. ECE paraprofessionals and teaching assistants have a strong interest in pursuing alternative pathways to certification that integrate competency-based assessments and flexible coursework scheduling.

Ninety-two percent of survey respondents who replied to the question asking whether they would consider taking competency-based assessments (CBAs) as a part of an alternative pathway toward teacher licensure said they would.¹¹ Many cited a clearer, shorter, more affordable pathway, improved future work improvement, and being granted credit for work experience as their reasons. It is compelling to note that there were no significant differences in the willingness to take CBAs as a part of certification based on Gateways Level, teaching context, or highest level of education completed. This suggests that despite these variances, paraprofessionals and teaching assistants across the state felt as though they had gained knowledge and skills that would empower their becoming an effective lead teacher.

An additional incentive to gaining credit for previous experience within alternative pathways to licensure was the potential for greater flexibility in course scheduling. Ninety percent of participants reported that they would be more likely to complete higher education coursework if the courses were offered online, in the evening, or on weekends, in combination with CBAs. Again, there were no significant differences across the respondents' subgroups regarding the need for and willingness to enroll in a more flexibly structured program.

Many respondents cited the conflict between class schedules and their working schedules. One respondent explained,

"Programs offered during nights and weekends would be extremely helpful. When I look at courses being offered the schedule of classes is often during the morning on weekdays. These are often a setback when working during traditional work hours."

-Home-based educator in Cook County

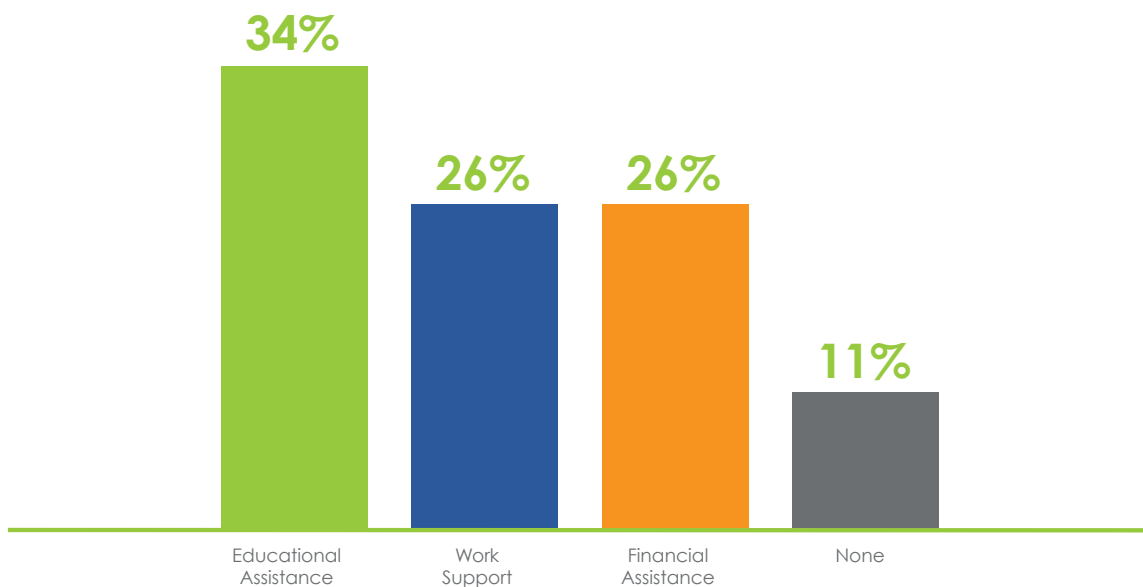
Other respondents reported that they have their own children at home to care for, and are unable to attend sessions in person or on a fixed schedule. They would be incentivized by flexible, online programs that could be completed at their own pace and on their own schedules.

Overall, survey respondents were excited and eager to pursue additional coursework to gain their lead-teacher certification, under the right conditions. This is a motivated and driven workforce, composed of individuals who are willing to work toward lead-teacher certification and career advancement, regardless of their current teaching context and their current levels of education and credentials. Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants will pursue lead-teacher certification when alternative programs that meet their needs are built and made accessible to them. These programs must be flexibly scheduled, including online, self-paced teacher preparation pathways, must be affordable, and must offer credit for prior work experience, which can be measured using competency-based assessments.

3. Even with flexible coursework scheduling and competency-based assessments in place, paraprofessionals and teaching assistants will still require educational assistance from institutions of higher education and their employers in order to successfully obtain lead teacher certification.

After explaining CBAs and flexibly scheduled and online pathways, we asked respondents to inform us about additional barriers that would still prevent them from pursuing their lead-teacher certification (see Figure 5). Promisingly, some respondents reported that these changes would remove all barriers and, in the words of one teacher, *“There would be no excuses then.”*

Figure 4: If competency-based assessments and a combination of night, weekend, and/or online coursework would not completely remove the barriers you are experiencing in becoming a lead teacher, what kinds of additional supports would you find helpful in order to obtain your lead-teacher degree or credential?



Many respondents did, however, report additional obstacles. The number one remaining need for respondents to be successful in lead-teacher certification obtainment was educational assistance, such as tutoring and advising services. Over one-third of respondents felt that they needed this in order to be successful. (see Figure 4) Given that most early childhood paraprofessionals and teaching assistants work full-time hours and often have their own families to care for, there is little time for most paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to devote to completing requirements, such as observation hours, student teaching, and collaborative study groups, outside of the educational and work contexts. Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants also reported work support (such as the ability to complete observational hours in the classroom in which they work), and financial assistance as additional needs. As one educator said,

“... Tutoring is always essential and speaking with individuals that have completed the program in order to keep the motivation going in obtaining the degree.”

-Home based educator in Cook County

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the survey, we recommend the following:

- 1. The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) should prioritize funding to develop accessible and flexible higher education programs that award credit for demonstration of prior knowledge and skill and offer flexible scheduling options for those paraprofessionals and teaching assistants currently working within early childhood classrooms.**

"There are no flexible options that take into account my current knowledge, abilities, and experience. I am not interested in going to school for years to get a degree that shows I have been 'educated' in topics in which I am already proficient."

-A CBO educator in McHenry County

To support paraprofessionals and teaching assistants in obtaining lead-teacher certification, we must develop flexible, online, and in-person program structures which provide educational credit for demonstrated prior skills from work experience in order to reduce the course and tuition burdens. Programs that cater to traditional students with in-person classes scheduled during the day, and that do not award credit for prior knowledge, are simply not accessible to our current paraprofessional and teaching assistant workforce. Especially given the prevalence of low wages in early childhood across the state, it is usually not feasible for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to leave their current positions in order to enroll in lead-teacher certification programs full time, especially with the additional financial burden of tuition costs. Further, paraprofessionals and teaching assistants are often already balancing their careers with caring for their own families. Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants are more than willing and motivated to pursue lead-teacher certification to improve their practice and obtain certification, but existing program structures simply do not meet their needs.

Programs that cater to traditional students with in-person classes scheduled during the day, and that do not award credit for prior knowledge, are simply not accessible to our current paraprofessional and teaching assistant workforce.

Assessments of prior learning can be a valuable tool in assessing paraprofessionals' and teaching assistants' prior skills through their work and educational experiences. Our findings show that paraprofessionals and teaching assistants feel as though they have gained knowledge around many of the responsibilities related to being a lead teacher, including classroom instruction, professional responsibilities, classroom management, and knowledge of child development. Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants do not want to invest more time and money into taking coursework that is redundant to their work experiences. By integrating assessments for prior learning into lead-teacher certification programs, institutions of higher education will be able to capture and quantify the skills with which each prospective student is entering the program, and to then easily identify in which skills the students must continue to grow. Having competency-based courses can then allow students to be awarded credit for skills they already have, and required to take only the courses directly related to the competencies they still need. This differentiation for each student will not only help to eliminate barriers of time and money for



many paraprofessionals and teaching assistants, but will also empower these paraprofessionals and teaching assistants with the recognition that they are skilled early childhood practitioners, and that their knowledge and experience is valuable, thus increasing the likelihood they will pursue certification.

"... I feel that would help so many great teacher assistants that like me would love to one day be leads. It would help us get one step closer towards seeing our dream come true, because unfortunately not many of us make enough money at our jobs to pay for a bachelor's degree and that is what gets in the way of pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. We love our jobs with the children but our pay is not enough to pay for a degree."

-A school Head Start classroom educator in DuPage county

2. The Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Community College Board, as part of the work to create early childhood teacher preparation competency-based courses, should align their ECE program requirements with the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Framework

In May 2020, the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies put out a request for proposals to the Illinois Higher Education community for those that would be willing to participate in the Illinois Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Competency Project. The goal of this project is to utilize the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credentials to create online early childhood teacher preparation competency-based courses through which participants can earn ECE credentials to advance toward becoming a lead teacher.

Most childcare centers already utilize the Illinois Gateways to Opportunities registry to track their employees' professional development and course credit. These credentials are aligned with an extensive set of 56 competencies, which incorporate 347 benchmarks, related to working within the early childhood context. These competencies can easily be translated into the learning standards used by institutions of higher education to structure their certification programs. These standards can be measured by the CBAs that students take upon their enrollment in certification programs, thereby providing the program with clear data on which competencies have been attained through work experience, and which must be gained through additional coursework, for each individual student.

By using the existing Gateways structure that paraprofessionals and teaching assistants already use to measure their professional learning within the context of certification programs, IBHE and institutions of higher education can streamline the process of gaining certification through a combination of coursework and work experience. If institutions of higher education go further and adopt the online, self-paced courses created through the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Competency Project, this would further simplify the process, and alleviate many of the barriers preventing paraprofessionals and teaching assistants from pursuing certification.

A further benefit of these courses rooted in the ECE Credential Framework is that if they are adopted across the state by institutions of higher education, students will be able to more easily transfer their previous educational credits between institutions. Many of the survey respondents reported that one of the barriers they had faced in their previous efforts towards becoming a certified lead teacher was the difficulty

they had transferring credits between institutions, and their having to retake coursework when they transferred. This increases both the time and financial burden of becoming a lead teacher for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants, stalling their progress and demotivating them from advancing. Because the paraprofessional and teaching assistant workforce is composed of non-traditional students, who are more likely to need to transfer credits between institutions, the use of the same courses in institutions of higher education across the state will facilitate a direct pathway to certification for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants.

Utilizing the same online, self-guided learning courses will also benefit institutions of higher education across the state. By universally adopting these online courses, which will teach and assess Gateways-aligned competencies and have embedded assessments of prior learning to measure prior knowledge, institutions of higher education will create the program structures that the early childhood paraprofessional and teaching assistant workforce demands, while eliminating the majority of the usual financial costs of doing so. Establishing universal competency-based courses of learning across institutions of higher education will also allow for this transition in program structure to happen more quickly than it would be if the institution were making this shift alone. Accelerating the timeline for this transition will then allow paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to take coursework, obtain their lead teacher certification, and enter the classroom as a lead teacher more quickly than they would be able to in a traditional program. The teacher shortage crisis in Illinois is current and urgent; getting qualified lead teachers into the classroom as soon as possible must be a priority, and the adoption of universal courses by institutions of higher education will facilitate this.

The RFP and awarding of grants to five institutions of higher education for the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Competency Project is a promising start to the push for more accessible and responsive lead certification programs for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants across the state. IBHE and ICCB should highlight the courses in which competencies are represented across multiple courses. This will allow paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to choose courses that will most directly lead to their mastery of each competency without needing to complete coursework for competencies that they have already mastered through their work experience. IBHE and ICCB should encourage the use of these same courses in additional institutions of higher education to both ease institutions' transitions from existing program structures into this hybrid program structure, and to ease the ability of non-traditional students to transfer credits between institutions.

- 3. Institutions of higher education should partner with local childcare agencies and school districts to build structures and collaboratives within which aspiring lead teachers can receive educational and professional support for program completion, while continuing to work full time. If a formal partnership is not possible, childcare organizations and schools should strive to create and maintain work environments that provide space and flexibility for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to both work full time and succeed in achieving career and educational goals.**

In order to encourage paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to apply to and successfully complete lead-teacher certification programs, school districts and childcare organizations should develop cohort-model partnerships with local institutions of higher education. Built into these partnerships could be the ability for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to conduct observational hours within

their work environment, and space for them to collaborate with and learn from one another as they progress through their coursework.

Many paraprofessionals and teaching assistants reported that even if there would be a reduced course load and program cost facilitated by the use of CBAs, they would still require financial assistance in order to successfully complete a lead teacher certification program. Given this, we recommend that partnerships between ECE programs and local institutions of higher education include tuition discounts to encourage employees to enroll in their programs. ECE employers can offer additional financial support to their paraprofessionals and teaching assistants participating in these partnerships by committing to advancing the employees' position at work as the employee meets benchmark criteria as they complete certification coursework.

Local childcare agencies and school districts partnering with institutions of higher education will not only benefit from paraprofessionals and teaching assistants pursuing lead-teacher certification; agencies and school districts and institutions of higher education will benefit as well. Even when offering tuition discounts, institutions of higher education will benefit from increased profits, because their student enrollment will increase and they will be attracting, and thus collecting, tuition funds from more students than they would have otherwise. Local childcare agencies and school districts will be filling empty lead teacher positions with qualified candidates who are already a part of their communities and therefore have a cultural knowledge of and strong relationships with students and families. By empowering those already working within their classrooms with greater knowledge and skill in early childhood pedagogical practices, childcare agencies and school districts will be improving the educational experience of students and families.

4. The Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding should recommend stipends to employers to supplement the hours of work during which employees would pursue coursework, as well as to provide an incentive program for employees upon completion of a Gateways benchmark credentials, degrees, and certification.

In order to facilitate the partnerships between local childcare agencies and school districts, and institutions of higher education detailed above, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding should recommend the allocation and awarding of funds to employers who are willing to embark on these partnerships and to provide financial incentives and advanced positions to their employees upon certification completion. Local childcare agencies and school districts are already underfunded, and many struggle to find the financial means to staff open positions with qualified candidates even without additional funding.

Employers should also receive additional funding in cases when the partnership between institutions of higher education and ECE workplaces causes an employee to use work time in a way that prevents them from fulfilling their regular duties. This may include activities such as observing a classroom other than their own, or completing lab hours. As most ECE programs already struggle with existing funding, additional funding should be provided to ECE programs engaged in such partnerships to offset the cost of hiring additional employees or providing substitute coverage.

Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants reported they need financial support in order to be incentivized to enroll in and complete lead-teacher certification

programs. If the goal is to alleviate the teacher shortage crisis in early childhood education across the state in order to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn and grow in a high-quality, equitable learning environment, the state must allocate more funds to efforts to support paraprofessionals and teaching assistants in their obtainment of lead-teacher certification. When childcare agencies and local school districts have funds available to create these incentive programs within their existing staff community, paraprofessionals and teaching assistants will have greater opportunities for educational and career advancement. Students and families will benefit from having more qualified teachers in these classrooms, especially those with whom they already have strong relationships and who are familiar with the cultural community of the childcare agency or school.

CONCLUSION

The current Illinois teacher shortage crisis in ECE has a solution: the skilled paraprofessional and teaching workforce already in our classrooms. These paraprofessionals and teaching assistants are motivated to become lead teachers, but are unable to do so within the current structure of advancement. We must construct new, alternative pathways to certification that directly address the needs of these paraprofessionals and teaching assistants, including flexible, online scheduling and coursework, CBAs to award educational credit for previous experience, reduced tuition, and additional educational and work supports.

We recommend that the Illinois Board of Higher Education work with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, INCCRRA, and the ECEC Funding Commission to fund and build such alternative pathways to licensure that can be streamlined and adopted by institutions of higher education across the state. Doing so will empower already skilled ECE paraprofessionals and teaching assistants to obtain their lead-teacher certification, thus expanding the pool of certified lead teachers across the state. Further research should be conducted to identify specific needs and obstacles of paraprofessionals based on their teaching context, as well as demographic information (including racial identity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status) to ensure that the pathways created are equitable, responsive, and accessible to all. When these pathways are implemented and more paraprofessionals are able to obtain their certification, ECE programs across the state will grow in their capacities to support and empower students, families, and communities with high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood programs that will establish robust foundations for our children's bright futures.

ENDNOTES

¹ McCoy, D.C., Yoshikawa, H., Ziol-Guest, K. M., Duncan, G. J., Schindler, H. S., Magnuson, K., Yang, R., Koepp, A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (2017) Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium-and Long-Term Educational Outcomes. *Educational Researcher*, 46(8), 474-487. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0013189X17737739>

² Early childhood centers often have varying job titles for supporting teachers, such as teaching assistant, classroom aide, assistant teacher, paraprofessional. Throughout this paper, we will refer to the group of professionals working in these roles as paraprofessionals and teaching assistants.

³ See Illinois Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Competency Project Request for Proposal: <https://www.ilgateways.com/docman-docs/professional-development/higher-education-programs/higher-education-opportunities-and-information/1959-early-childhood-ece-credential-competency-rfp/file>

⁴ See ISBE PEL Lead Teacher Requirements: <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Professional-Educator-License-Teaching-Endorsements.aspx>

⁵ Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and schools going to remote learning, the survey was delayed in being sent out. This has impacted the number of participants in the survey.

⁶ Question: "What type of child care setting are you a teaching assistant in?" Responses: (n = 73) "Community-Based Organization." (38.4 percent), "Home-based Setting." (8.2 percent), "School District." (20.6 percent), "Other, please explain." (32.9 percent).

⁷ Question: "What is your highest level of education completed?" Response: (n = 72) "High School Diploma / GED." (37.5 percent), "Associates in Art." (5.6 percent), "Associates in Applied Science." (15.3 percent), "Bachelor's Degree." (22.2 percent), "Other certification / diploma not mentioned." (19.4 percent).

⁸ Question: "Are you interested in being a lead teacher?" Responses: (n = 73) "Yes." (83.6 percent), "No." (16.4 percent).

⁹ Ratcliff, N. J., Jones, C. R., Vaden, S. R., Sheen, H., & Hunt, G. H. (2011). Paraprofessionals in early childhood classrooms: an examination of duties and expectations. *Early Years*, 31(2). 163-179. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09575146.2011.576333>.

¹⁰ Question: "In your current position, are you ever asked to temporarily take on the responsibilities of a lead teacher?" Responses: (n = 73) "Yes." (76.7 percent), "No." (23.3 percent).

¹¹ Question: "The state of Illinois is considering adopting "competency-based assessments" to provide students with an opportunity to earn course credit for demonstrating knowledge and skill gained with prior work experiences when completing a credential, degree, or licensure. These competency-based assessments could include a combination of performance tasks (such as teaching a model lesson), artifact submissions (such as writing a lesson plan), online multiple choice and open-response questions, and observations of classroom practice. Existing examples of competency-based assessments can be found on the IL Gateways to Opportunity website here. One's score on the competency-based assessments could award students with course credit for demonstrating knowledge and skills gained during previous work experiences, thus: Reducing the number of course required for credential or degree completion Reducing the cost of a credential or degree for students Reducing the time it takes to complete a credential or degree for students. If higher education programs across the state offered this competency-based assessment, would you consider taking assessments as part of the requirements to becoming a lead teacher? Please use the comment box to explain why or why not." Responses:(n = 71) "Yes." (91.6 percent), "No." (8.5 percent).