# Beyond Bachelor's:
## The Case for Charter Colleges of Early Childhood Education

Sara Mead and Kevin Carey[1]

*High-quality early childhood education has tremendous potential to improve children's and families' lives. Yet access to such education remains limited, and many early childhood educators lack the skills and credentials to improve quality in the field. To address these issues, advocates and a growing number of states have sought to extend the umbrella of K-12 teacher education and certification over the early childhood world. But that approach will surely fail to meet the needs of families, educators, and government. Instead, we propose that states create "Charter Colleges of Early Childhood Education"—research-driven, flexible, and accountable institutions that would help increase the supply of high-quality early childhood educators; provide those workers and their families with stable, well-paying jobs; and create a new model of higher education and credentialing that can be applied to other fields as well.*

"Brand-new organizations that specifically give early childhood workers the education they need would benefit children and also provide those workers with well-paying jobs. "

## I. Introduction

Every day, millions of American parents—roughly two-thirds of those with children under 6 years old—entrust their children to the care of someone else. Some are relatives and home-based childcare providers, while others work in childcare or preschool centers. The more than 1.3 million Americans—nearly all of them women—who make their livings caring for other people's children are doing critically important work. Yet far too many of these workers are under-educated and underpaid. As a nation, we have decided to entrust our young children to other people, but we are not giving those people the training they need or the compensation they deserve.

We used to see preschool and child care as simply providing a safe place for children while their parents worked. But increasingly parents, policymakers, and the public are demanding that preschool and childcare programs provide not just early child care but early childhood *education*—that they promote children's learning and prepare them for success in school. Research shows that high quality early childhood education can give students a critical boost—and that lack of it can leave underprivileged children so far behind that they never catch up to their better-off peers.

Good education requires good educators. And so, many early childhood advocates have called for extending the umbrella of traditional K-12 teacher policy over early childhood workers, by requiring preschool teachers to earn bachelor's degrees and state certification. The instinct to increase workers' education levels is the right one. But the old system is spectacularly ill-suited for the challenge of helping early childhood workers get the skills and salaries they need.

The current higher education system has an abysmal track record of serving individuals who fit the demographic profile of the early childhood field: low-income, nontraditional students, many working full time, many African American or Hispanic, and many with children of their own. Our existing colleges and universities are also woefully unprepared to give early childhood educators the specific skills they need. Less formal professional development offerings, meanwhile, don't translate into the credentials or higher compensation needed to raise the overall skill level of early childhood workers and retain higher skilled workers in the field.

What's needed instead is an entirely new approach—one that fosters multiple, diverse, and flexible models for improving the skills of early childhood educators; evaluates the impact of these models on teachers' skills and children's learning; and gives early childhood workers credentials that provide meaningful information about quality to parents, employers, and policymakers—the kind of evidence that the job market will reward with higher compensation.

This paper argues that states can fuel the development of such models by creating Charter Colleges of Early Childhood Education—brand-new organizations, built from the ground up specifically to give early childhood workers the education they need. By providing a range of new flexible options for early childhood educators to improve their skills, policymakers can increase the supply of high-quality early childhood educators, provide those workers and their families with stable well-paying jobs, and create a new model of higher education and credentialing that can be applied to other fields as well.

## II. The Policy Challenge

High-quality early childhood education has tremendous potential to improve children's and families' lives. Research shows that young children's earliest learning experiences can have powerful long-term effects on cognitive development, and that young children are capable of learning much more than previously believed.[2] Studies also show that high-quality early childhood interventions have improved student learning, increased their educational attainment and income as adults, and produced long-term reductions in unemployment, crime, and out-of-wedlock childbearing.[3]

Spurred by this research, as well as growing demand for childcare for working parents, policymakers have seized upon early childhood education as a strategy to improve student achievement and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Over the past decade, states have increased investments in state-funded pre-K programs, which now serve more than 1 million children (although these increases have been mitigated by spending cuts in recent budget cycles). Federal lawmakers provided an infusion of federal aid for Head Start and child care in the 2009 stimulus law—and sustained a portion of those increases in the 2011 appropriations package, even while cutting overall domestic spending. That same package also created a new federal early childhood program, the Early Learning Challenge Race to the Top program, to help states build their early childhood education systems.

Investments in early childhood education have been accompanied by increasing expectations. Speaking to a national audience of early childhood educators, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, "We have to raise the bar for early learning programs, just as we have to get dramatically better in the K-12 system … to accelerate the shift from judging quality based solely on inputs to judging quality based chiefly on achieving the best outcomes of children's development and school readiness."

Yet there's a striking disconnect between the rhetoric about the benefits of high-quality early childhood education and the reality of many programs, which states are now struggling to address.

**Access to high-quality early childhood education remains limited.** Only one-third of American preschoolers have access to publicly funded pre-K or the federal Head Start program, and about one-third of American youngsters receive no preschool education at all. Preschool quality is often low: According to a recent study, 16 percent of early childhood classrooms in California have quality so low they may be actively harming child development; and only 22 percent can be classified as "good."[4] State-funded pre-K programs are generally thought to have better quality, but a study of pre-K in 11 states found that 57 percent of classrooms ranked in the lowest level of instructional quality, and *none* ranked in the highest level.[5]

**Many early childhood educators lack the credentials to improve quality and pay in the field.** Just as in K-12 education, the quality of teaching is the most important determinant of quality in early childhood programs. But the average preschool teacher in the United States earns only $23,870 (and childcare workers earn even less at $18,000)—compared to a $51,009 annual salary for teachers in elementary and secondary public schools.[6] While virtually all of America's 3.5 million K-12 teachers have a bachelor's degree, and more than half have a graduate degree, less than one-third of teachers in center-based childcare have a four-year degree.[7] Educational attainment is even lower among childcare providers in less formal settings.[8] Not surprisingly, early childhood workers also turn over at

a faster clip, with 41 percent leaving their job in a given year.[9]

Over the past decade, early childhood advocates and a growing number of states have sought to improve teaching quality by raising the higher education credentials of early childhood workers. The universal pre-K movement has been, in large part, a movement to require early childhood educators working with 3- and 4-year-olds in preschool settings to hold both a bachelor's degree and state teacher certification—essentially, to extend the umbrella of K-12 teacher certification over the early childhood world. The majority of state-funded pre-K programs now require their teachers to have a bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education. And the 2007 reauthorization of the federal Head Start program required half of all Head Start lead teachers to earn a bachelor's degree in an early childhood-related field by 2013.

**Conventional strategies to upgrade early childhood educator credentials are wrong-headed.** The bachelor's degree strategy is simple to understand and implement, grounded in past practice—and almost surely wrong. First, there is no consensus in the academic research as to whether pre-K teachers with bachelor's degrees are more effective than those who lack them. The most comprehensive and sophisticated analysis of early childhood research did *"not provide convincing evidence of an association between teachers' [college] education or major and either classroom quality or children's academic gains."* [10] Even in the subset of studies that find positive impacts of a bachelor's degree, the effect sizes are small to moderate.[11]

Second, even if one were to posit that pre-K teachers who currently have a bachelor's degree are more effective than those who currently do not—an assumption with questionable empirical support—it does not automatically follow that forcing non-degreed teachers to earn degrees will make them better teachers. In fact, nothing we know about the quality of early childhood bachelor's degree programs—which are often a neglected component of schools of education—inspires confidence that they're up to this task. Requirements for early childhood bachelor's degree programs vary widely, the programs typically have fewer resources and less-qualified faculty than other education school programs, and they are often disconnected from both recent research and the realities of early childhood practice.[12]

Third, the higher education system also has an abysmal track record of educating low-income, minority, and non-traditional students—exactly the demographic from which many early childhood educators are drawn. Such students are far more likely to drop out than earn a bachelor's degree, and are increasingly left with tens of thousands of dollars in burdensome student loans.

Finally, the bachelor's degree strategy focuses only on one segment of the early childhood workforce—teachers who work with 3- and 4-year-olds in pre-K settings—and is thus woefully out of step with initiatives like the Early Learning Challenge that seek to improve quality across the entire range of early care and education settings serving children from birth through school entry. States have created scholarship and wage enhancement programs to encourage early childhood educators from a variety of settings to pursue higher education coursework and, in some cases, provide increased compensation for doing so—but because they rely on the traditional higher education system for credentials, these efforts suffer many of the same shortcomings as the bachelor's degree strategy.

The bachelor's degree strategy could force large numbers of workers through an overly-expensive, poorly-designed higher education system in order to earn credentials of little or no value that parents and public policymakers would have to find large amounts of money to pay for, diverting resources from other important purposes expanding access or hours to meet the needs of working families. Since there is little if any reason to believe that those credentials would actually lead to large gains in the quality of early childhood outcomes, the result would be a decline in the cost-effectiveness of the early childhood system, badly undermining the case for greater societal investment in young children.

There is a better way. In recent years, several promising training and professional development models have emerged that are showing real promise to build the skills of early childhood educators and improve the learning outcomes for the students they serve. They can be the foundation for a whole new way of organizing the education of early childhood workers.

## Innovative Approaches to Training Early Childhood Educators Are Working

The Texas School Ready! Project was designed to work with teachers in all three of the major public early childhood venues: Head Start, community-based child care, and state pre-K. It combines a research-based curriculum and materials, professional development, coaching and mentoring, and progress monitoring of student learning outcomes to improve the quality of instruction across the full range programs serving Texas preschoolers. Research shows that participation in the Texas School Ready! Project produces meaningful improvement in the quality of early learning experiences that teachers are providing to young children—as well as in children's early learning outcomes—regardless of teachers' prior education level.[13] In other words, teachers don't need a college degree in order to benefit from the training.

In another example, MyTeachingPartner provides early childhood teachers with intensive, ongoing professional development focused on effective interactions with children. MyTeachingPartner is based on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a measure of the quality of teacher-child interactions in early childhood programs developed by researchers at the University of Virginia. Research validates that children whose teachers score better on the CLASS learn more in preschool.[14] Teachers using MyTeachingPartner record video of themselves teaching and send the video to a coach, who reviews it and provides personalized feedback that highlights examples of both effective interactions and areas where teachers can improve. Coaches also direct teachers to video of other teachers demonstrating effective practices in areas where they need to improve, drawn from an extensive CLASS video library.

Meanwhile, a variety of organizations offer less formal professional development to early childhood educators. While some are of very high quality and others are quite poor, there is little formal quality control in the sector, making it hard for outside observers to tell the difference.

But while Texas School Ready!, MyTeachingPartner, and their ilk have research and classroom practice on their side, they can't award college degrees—meaning teachers' improved skills typically don't translate into higher earnings. Colleges and universities can award degrees, but they have a poor track record of improving teacher's skills. What young children and the educators who serve them need is a system that combines the best of both worlds—a system that we describe as "Charter Colleges of Early Childhood Education."

## III. A New State Policy Approach

The time is ripe for state policymakers to move beyond focusing on traditional degrees and professional development—which would at best be ineffective and at worst undermine the cause of greater investment in the well-being of young children. Instead, they should create brand-new organizations, built from the ground up specifically to give early childhood workers the education they need. We call these organizations "Charter Colleges of Early Childhood Education."

Like the charter school model in K-12 education, these charter colleges would be based on a simple bargain: Educational providers receive increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability to deliver results. This means that charter colleges of early childhood education could use a variety of strategies to help educators acquire necessary knowledge and skills. In exchange, they would be required to demonstrate that their students are actually delivering results in early childhood classrooms.

Creating charter colleges of education would require state policymakers to take a series of concrete steps:

1. **Set clear expectations** for what early childhood educators need to know and be able to do, based on state early learning standards and the currently existing body of research. The current higher education system has one kind of organizational model and degree but lets standards vary by college. Charter colleges would take the opposite approach, allowing experimentation and diverse organizational models built around common high expectations.
2. **Define credentials linked to skills and workforce needs.** Charter college credentials would reflect the variety of settings in which early childhood educators work and the differentiated roles they take on in those settings. Credentials would be "stackable"—meaning that teachers

could layer different credentials over time to build towards higher levels of knowledge, skills, and—critically—compensation. They would also be "searchable"—students and employers would be able to electronically query each credential to examine the knowledge and skills it represents and the specific evidence used to support granting it.

3. **Identify metrics of teacher knowledge and skills.** Unlike traditional postsecondary training programs, which confer credentials based on seat time and completion of coursework, charter colleges of early childhood education could confer credentials only when their students successfully demonstrate their effectiveness in applying new knowledge and skills to improve children's learning in early childhood classrooms.
4. **Create and empower the authorizers.** These entities—which could take a variety of forms—would be empowered to grant charters, enabling charter colleges of education to grant recognized credentials and access public funding sources, and would hold charter colleges of early childhood education accountable for their performance and use of taxpayer funds.
5. **Enforce constructive accountability.** Charter colleges of education would be held accountable for the collective impact of their students on young children's learning.

Any state can begin to create charter colleges of education today, but the concept can be most fully realized in states that have in place other elements of a high-quality state early childhood system, including:

- Clearly defined early childhood educator competencies;
- Integrated data systems that link data on early childhood educators, the children they serve, and the professional development and training programs they participate in;
- Comprehensive assessment systems that provide information on children's learning and development outcomes in pre-K programs; and
- Robust Quality Rating Systems that include valid and reliable measures of observed instructional quality in early childhood settings

These are exactly the systems that the Early Learning Challenge Race to the Top program encourages states to put into place. States seeking to compete for Early Learning Challenge Grants should consider creating charter colleges of early childhood education as part of their strategy to create a great early childhood workforce.

In addition to supporting the development of state early childhood systems, federal policymakers can support the development of charter colleges of education by:

- Encouraging inter-state collaboration in the development of standards, assessments, and other early childhood system components;
- Providing start-up funding to seed the development of promising models to build early childhood educators' skills, and growth capital to replicate success; and
- Supporting early childhood research and development. Many of the most promising models building the skills of early childhood educators grew out of federally-funded research efforts. The federal government should continue providing R&D funding for early childhood to support the further development of effective models

Federal policies should also avoid creating barriers to the work of charter colleges of education, by ensuring that quality standards in federal programs recognize credentials awarded by state-charter colleges of early childhood education—not just those from traditional higher education institutions.

Local policy makers can also support states' moves toward establishing and empowering charter colleges of early childhood education by:

- Becoming authorizers. Because the market for early childhood care and education, and the labor market for early childhood professionals, is a largely local one, local authorities are particularly well-positioned to recognize and respond to those needs and to integrate these efforts with broader city or metro-wide workforce development strategies;
- Using local workforce development funds to pay for coursework to enable early childhood educators to acquire CDA child development credentials, associate's, or bachelor's degrees through charter colleges;

- Rewarding new credentials in city or county childcare facilities, encouraging workers in these facilities to pursue professional development offered by charter colleges of early education and providing them with increased compensation for certain types and combinations of credentials; and
- Establishing local Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), in states without such systems, to provide parents with information about the quality of different early care and education options and support and encourage quality improvements

## Conclusion

Ultimately, charter colleges of early childhood education are an answer to a multi-level human capital dilemma. Children from disadvantaged households often enter kindergarten with academic and developmental deficits that persist or widen throughout their school careers, greatly diminishing their ability to go on to higher education and productive careers. A major source of economic disadvantage in their communities is lack of marketable skills and good jobs among heads of household, most of whom are women. High-quality early childhood education is the solution to both of these problems, providing both education for children and good jobs for parents.

But that goal can't be reached without a flexible, modern training system for the early education workforce—one that is designed from the ground up with their needs in mind. By building such a system, policymakers can go a long away toward solving several pressing problems at once. President Obama and others have made high-profile calls in recent years for the United States to quickly ramp up production of post-secondary credentials. This cannot be accomplished simply by adding more students and more money to the same inefficient and expensive system, especially in times of enormous fiscal restraint. Newer and better models are needed.

Early childhood happens to be among the ripest opportunities to do so. The scale of the problem is large, encompassing hundreds of thousands of adults and millions of children. The people in question—disproportionately working women and mothers from low-income and minority backgrounds—are among those who struggle the most to earn credentials through the current system. Early childhood educators are low-hanging fruit for college completion. They want and need valuable credentials. They just don't have colleges designed to provide them.

And once we help them, why stop there? The principles undergirding charter colleges of early childhood education—modular, information-rich credentials; close ties to research and the workplace; flexibility around means combined with rigorous accountability around ends—are equally applicable to many other elements of higher education. Once the charter colleges are established, the ideas behind them could be spread far and wide.

If that happens, the there will be one more human capital benefit to this idea. Young children will not only get the kind of high-quality educational environment they need before they start formal schooling, and grow up in households enriched by the compensation that well-trained early childhood workers should receive. They will also, two decades later, have far more and far better options of their own when they choose to start higher education themselves.

## Endnotes

1. Sara Mead is an associate partner at Bellwether Education Partners. Kevin Carey is policy director at Education Sector. This brief is derived from a longer report of the same name, available online at **www.brookings.edu/projects/state-metro-innovation.aspx**.

2. See Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 2000).

3. Lawrence J. Schweinhart and others, *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool study through age 40* (Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press, 2005); Craig T. Ramey and others, "Persistent effects of early intervention on high-risk children and their mothers." *Applied Developmental Science* 4 (2000): 2–14; Arthur J. Reynolds and others, "Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest: A 15-year follow-up of low-income children in public schools." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285 (2001):2339–46.

4. Lynn A. Karoly and others, "Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Aged Children in California" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

5. Diane Early and others. "Pre-Kindergarten in 11 States: NCEDL's Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten & Study of State-Wide Early Education Programs (SWEEP), Preliminary Descriptive Report" (Chapel Hill, NC: National Center for Early Development and Learning, 2005).

6. American Federation of Teachers, "Survey and Analysis of Teacher Salary Trends, 2007" (Washington: American Federation of Teachers, 2007); Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook.

7. Jared Coopersmith and Kerry Gruber, *Characteristics of Public, Private, and Bureau of Indian Education Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results from the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey* (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

8. Stephen Herzenberg, Mark Price, and David Bradley, "Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education: Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1997–2004" (Washington: Economic Policy Institute, 2005).

9. Marcy Whitebook, Carollee Howes, and Deborah Phillips, "Who Cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America. Final report: National Child Care Staffing Study" (Oakland, CA: Child Care Employee Project, 1990).

10. Diane M. Early and others, "Teachers' Education, Classroom Quality, and Young Children's Academic Skills: Results from Seven Studies of Preschool Programs." *Child Development* 78 (2)(2007): 558–80.

11. Pamela Kelley and Gregory Camili, "The Impact of Teacher Education on Outcomes in Center-Based Early Childhood Education Programs: A Meta-Analysis" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

12. Laura Bornfreund, "Getting in Sync: Revamping the Preparation of Teachers in Pre-K, Kindergarten, and the Early Grades" (Washington: New America Foundation, 2011); Marcy Whitebook and others, "Time to Revamp and Expand: Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs in California's Institutions of Higher Education" (Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Childcare Employment, 2005); Sharon Lynn Kagan, Kristie Kauerz, and Kate Tarrant, "The Early Care and Education Teaching Workforce at the Fulcrum: An Agenda for Reform" (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

13. Susan H. Landry and others, "An Experimental Study Evaluating Professional Development Activities within a State-Funded Pre-Kindergarten Program." *Reading and Writing* 2010: 1–40.

14. Andrew J. Mashburn and others, "Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills." *Child Development*, 79 (3)(2008): 732–49.

## For More Information

Sara Mead
Associate Partner
Bellwether Education Partners
**sara@bellwethereducation.org**

Kevin Carey
Policy Director
Education Sector
**kcarey@educationsector.org**

## For General Information

Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings
202.797.6139
**www.brookings.edu/metro**

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank Bruce Fuller, John Gasko, William Gormley, Bridget Hamre, Ron Haskins, Rick Hess, Linda Jacobson, Susan Landry, and Marcy Whitebook for their assistance and insights on this complicated topic. The views expressed in this paper, as well as any errors, are entirely those of the authors.

The Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for its support.

## In the Series

- *Delivering the Next Economy: The States Step Up*
- *Job Creation on a Budget: How Regional Industry Clusters Can Add Jobs, Bolster Entrepreneurship, and Spark Innovation*
- *Boosting Exports, Delivering Jobs and Economic Growth*
- *Revitalizing Manufacturing with State-Supported Manufacturing Centers*
- *State Transportation Reform: Cut to Invest in Transportation to Deliver the Next Economy*
- *Community Colleges and Regional Recovery: Strategies for State Action*

## About the Brookings-Rockefeller Project on State and Metropolitan Innovation

This is part of a series of papers being produced by the Brookings-Rockefeller Project on State and Metropolitan Innovation. States and metropolitan areas will be the hubs of policy innovation in the United States, and the places that lay the groundwork for the next economy. The project will present fiscally responsible ideas state leaders can use to create an economy that is driven by exports, powered by low carbon, fueled by innovation, rich with opportunity, and led by metropolitan areas.

## About the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution

Created in 1996, the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program provides decision makers with cutting-edge research and policy ideas for improving the health and prosperity of cities and metropolitan areas including their component cities, suburbs, and rural areas. To learn more visit: **www.brookings.edu/metro**

## About the Rockefeller Foundation

The Rockefeller Foundation fosters innovative solutions to many of the world's most pressing challenges, affirming its mission, since 1913, to "promote the well-being" of humanity. Today, the Foundation works to ensure that more people can tap into the benefits of globalization while strengthening resilience to its risks. For more information, please visit: **www.rockefellerfoundation.org**

*Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any donor is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities sponsored by its donors reflect this commitment and neither the research agenda, content, nor outcomes are influenced by any donation.*

BROOKINGS | THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION