



# Applying Knowledge to Practice

## How Degree Apprenticeships Support Early Educators

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**O**ver the past 125 years, the early education profession has been through several periods of redefinition, growth, and change. Today, the field is in the midst of another of those periods, with widespread calls for all teachers of infants through third graders to have associate or bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and to receive fair compensation.

But what will new higher education expectations mean for current teachers without college degrees? Can we simultaneously reach new degree goals and address the equity barriers in our college education system? Among the people most affected are current and future teachers who are of color, who are not proficient in English, who are supporting or living in low-income households, who are working full-time and can attend college only part-time, and who are first-generation college students. What supports need to be created and what structural and

systemic barriers need to be eliminated to ensure that new degree requirements are attainable for all? And if aspiring teachers succeed, will teacher compensation rise sufficiently to keep these newly degreed and in-demand teachers in the field? New approaches to registered apprenticeships for early educators are emerging to tackle these challenges.

“Even for teachers with talent . . . this would be impossible without the apprenticeship project. For many of us in the field, college wasn’t on the books; it had to become a dream that we adopted.” —**Kim, Center Director**

## On-the-job learning

Learning to teach through practice in the field is not a new idea. Research on ways to increase the quality of teacher education programs has long called for earlier and more substantive field or clinical practice; active learning embedded in practice; closer relationships between higher education programs, schools, and community partners; and investment in teacher education programs to support increased faculty time in the field (NCATE 2010).

On-the-job learning designed as career progression for those already working in education settings is not new either. For decades teacher residencies and Grow Your Own programs have helped aspiring K–12 teachers—educators who currently work as tutors, as paraprofessionals, and in other educational roles that do not require teacher education degrees or licensure—to make the transition to licensed teacher positions. Typically, these programs are partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education that closely integrate the degree coursework with on-the-job learning and practice under an experienced mentor teacher. Like apprenticeships, these programs are often part of a strategic plan to attract and retain more teachers of color and teachers who are bilingual and to also address some of the social inequities in child and adult education (Partee 2014; Muñiz 2018).

Teachers who have completed degrees, earned licensure, and begun working in the field also benefit from ongoing professional development. We know

that professional development is most effective when it incorporates active learning embedded in practice; creates time and space for teachers to collaborate with peers; offers a clear vision of and models high-quality teaching practice; and provides coaching and expert support tailored to individual needs. Effective professional development also encourages reflection, feedback, and change in teaching practice and is sustained for long enough that teachers have time to learn, explore, implement and change practices (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner 2017).

One way to engage experienced teachers and aspiring teachers in on-the-job training together is through apprenticeships. Both the mentor teachers and the apprentices benefit from being part of a peer learning community focused on reflection, growth, and change.

“I have been in this field for 17 years, in and out of college. It is a challenge to afford it and take care of my family at the same time. I was skeptical about this but decided it was worth another try. This time I have so much support. I can call for help anytime. I got a raise and a promotion to Head Start assistant teacher. And I used to be terrified about talking in front of people like this; now I can do it. This has given me confidence. Now I’m earning As and have a 3.57 GPA.”—**Rashied, Apprentice**

“I had no idea what I was getting into as a coach. This has really pushed me to work on my professionalism, how I speak to people, how I solve problems. My own education was a train wreck. It was like a jungle that gave me no idea where to start. Now we learn from each other. . . . I use those apprentice competency lists as a coach but also for myself in my own classroom. . . . Other teachers now come to Rashied when thinking about going back to school. Teaching is a science and the whole program is based on that. This helps us refine our skills—it’s not easy. I’ve also increased my confidence as a teacher and as a college student. Now I’m halfway through my master’s degree.”  
—**Tilea, Rashied’s Coach**

## Registered Apprenticeships

Formal apprenticeship programs are partnerships between employers, training providers, and the employee-apprentice; they provide on-the-job training and practice in the skills of a specific occupation and culminate in an industry-recognized credential. The apprentice is paired with a coworker mentor who already holds the credential. Not all apprenticeship programs are registered. Registered Apprenticeship programs are approved by the US Department of Labor through its state offices and may qualify for state and federal funding.

Registered Apprenticeships must document the competencies apprentices are developing, the on-the-job training format and hours completed, and the assessment of apprentices' competency. In addition, they must provide and document wage or salary increases linked to improved skills—what's often referred to as an earn-while-you-learn model. Registered Apprenticeships include both on-the-job learning under a mentor coworker and related

classroom instruction. The length of registered apprenticeships ranges from one to six years, but all programs must result in a credential that is recognized in the occupation.

Registered Apprenticeships for early childhood educators are active in at least 11 states today (Lutton 2018). In early childhood education apprenticeships, an intermediary organization often sponsors the project, providing coordination across multiple early care and education employers. Apprenticeship competencies and training most often lead to the Child Development Associate credential (CDA) and higher education partners sometimes agree to award credits to those apprentices who choose to go on to degree programs.

## Designing apprenticeship for degree completion

Apprenticeship in the United States typically culminates in an industry credential and is most common in occupations that do not require an academic degree. Designing a degree apprenticeship requires consideration of additional higher education quality assurance concerns. These programs must meet not only the Registered Apprenticeship standards of the Department of Labor but also the requirements of state higher education systems, state approval of degree programs leading to teacher licensure, and national professional accrediting agencies.

Pennsylvania is engaged in some new thinking about partnerships, supports, and funding for apprenticeships as part of an accelerated pathway to degree attainment for early educators working in child care settings. Project partners are integrating an apprenticeship pathway into associate and bachelor's early childhood degree programs; aligning apprenticeship competencies and course outcomes with national standards of the profession; providing essential supports to apprentices as adult college students with full-time jobs; providing capacity-



building supports to community child care employers to meet their responsibilities as partners in a Registered Apprenticeship; and identifying what it will take to build and sustain an effective program over time.

To accelerate degree completion for early childhood teachers, apprenticeship programs must intentionally design supports that can address the degree completion gap and the stratification of the current workforce. Few teachers in any setting are paid salaries comparable to those of people in other professions with similar degree and licensure requirements in their home states—but teachers in early grades often make less than their peers in higher grades, and those working outside public school settings typically make even less. Likewise, in early care and education settings, infant and toddler teachers make less than those working with preschoolers. Few people working in early care and education have health insurance, and one in seven lives below the official poverty line (Gould 2015).

In addition to inadequate compensation, the early childhood workforce also has serious challenges with racial disparities. White educators are more likely than their Black and Hispanic colleagues to have access to higher education and therefore to higher-paying positions; and even after controlling for factors like credentials, a wage gap remains that advantages White early childhood educators (Ulrich, Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath 2016).

The stratification in the workforce is in part the result of the systemic and structural class, racial, gender, and linguistic inequities that persist in our underfunded education system from birth through post-secondary education. Higher education institutions across the country have been engaged in multiple initiatives to increase degree retention and completion. A number of promising approaches have emerged, yet over the past two decades the degree attainment gap between White and Hispanic students has not changed, and the gap between White and Black students has grown slightly. Students from low-income households and those who are the first in their family to attend college remain four times more likely than their more advantaged peers to drop out after their first year. Promising strategies for supporting degree completion are often designed for students who attend college full time, but first-generation students, students with limited resources,

and students of color are more likely to attend college part time while holding jobs that contribute essential financial support to their households (Mangan 2018).

Reaching a universal goal, like bachelor's degrees for all lead educators working across all early education programs, will require intensive and targeted efforts. The path for many early educators will begin with an associate degree from a local community college. Multiple strategies and pathways will be needed to meet needs and address barriers facing specific groups of students. One promising model is the Philadelphia Apprenticeship Project, which began with significant supports for members of the early childhood workforce who are working toward associate degrees and their employers.

“When done well, ECE apprenticeships that aim for degree attainment need system change across workforce, education, early childhood, and higher education systems. There has to be a willingness to work closely with new partners to develop new advocates from the field and [from] inside multiple state offices.”

– Cheryl Feldman, *The Training Fund*

## The Philadelphia Apprenticeship Project model

The Philadelphia Apprenticeship Project, which is currently being adapted and expanded across the state of Pennsylvania, is a leader in new thinking about the goals, design, and funding of early childhood apprenticeship programs. The model is designed to coordinate and support capacity building across multiple child care employers and to meet the needs of early educators who must work full time while completing college degrees and who often face the challenges common to first-generation, low-income college students. As a Registered Apprenticeship and a degree apprenticeship, it is designed to ensure compliance with Department of Labor standards and Pennsylvania teacher education standards; it is also designed to support those degree programs which hold or are pursuing accreditation from the NAEYC Commission on the Accreditation of Early Childhood Higher Education Programs.

## Advancing the Profession

The National Association for Nursery Education (NANE), founded in 1929, changed its name in 1964 to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to encompass the growing profession of educators for children from birth through age 8. Over the next two decades, NAEYC and other members of the field engaged in lively work and debate about our profession and professional development. The CDA and Council for Professional Recognition were established in the 1970s. During the 1980s, NAEYC launched accreditation for early learning programs serving young children and issued guidelines for associate and bachelor's degree programs and advanced early childhood teacher education programs, which were quickly adopted by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education and incorporated into state licensing systems. Later, NAEYC held the first Institute for Professional Development (now Professional Development Institute, PLI). States began work on core bodies of knowledge, competencies, and career pathways for early educators, especially for those working in child care and Head Start. And the first apprenticeship training program for early educators was established in West Virginia in 1989.

Today NAEYC offers national accreditation to both associate and bachelor's degree programs, and the profession of early education is in another period of progress. For educators working in early childhood education settings, the goal line is moving from a CDA to a college degree, underscoring the need to improve early childhood teacher training and education programs and to enhance state requirements for early childhood teacher licensure. As state and community initiatives expand, apprenticeship projects can provide critical supports for the completion of high-quality degree programs for working early educators.

The goal is a practical, meaningful career pathway for the early childhood workforce: the Philadelphia area project began with an apprenticeship pathway through one associate degree program that already had program-to-program articulation agreements with bachelor's-level teacher certification programs. It is now expanding, with additional community college partners and a new university partner that offers a bachelor's degree program apprenticeship pathway. While the model is evolving as it expands in response to local conditions in new communities, some components are critical for successful replication. In the remainder of this article, I describe the Philadelphia model by explaining its essential partners and supports.

### Essential partners

The Philadelphia model relies on three essential partners working closely together: the intermediary organization, higher education programs, and worksite technical assistants. Each partner is supported and funded to take on critical work to sustain the project and address challenges. While each has a primary set of responsibilities, they work collaboratively to solve problems as they arise while remaining focused on their core workforce development goals.

The *intermediary organization* operates the multiemployer Registered Apprenticeship program. Recognizing the capacity challenges that face early care and education employers, and the need to engage many small employers in one unified project, it is the primary liaison with the Department of Labor and takes on the responsibility of ensuring that the project is in compliance with the state and federal requirements for Registered Apprenticeships. It recruits early care and education employers, works closely with them to retain participants in the program, provides a central contact person to support apprentices, and leverages public and private workforce development funding to deploy the supports needed by apprentices and their employers. In Philadelphia, the District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund (The Training Fund) serves this role. The Training Fund brings extensive experience in workforce development, registered apprenticeships across multiple occupations (including experience with CDA apprenticeship), and adult education programs such as bridge programs that prepare working adults for college entry.

The *higher education programs* design the apprenticeship pathway through their specific degree programs, determine which courses or program components can be completed through on-the-job learning, and provide individualized and cohort semester-by-semester course maps and advising to guide apprentices to degree completion; in addition, they are developing quality assurance processes that are aligned with institutional, state, and accrediting agency requirements and articulation agreements relevant to their teacher education programs. They also work with the intermediary organization to identify and recruit new employers, to prepare for each new cohort of apprentices, and to monitor and support the progress of current apprentices. In the Philadelphia area, the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), Delaware County Community College (DCCC), and Arcadia University have current cohorts of apprentices enrolled in degree programs. Both community colleges offer revised and contextualized developmental general education coursework with early childhood content. Although these developmental courses generally do not result in college credit, they are designed to support success in the courses that do lead to the associate degree.

The *technical assistants* provide on-site support to the apprentices, the employers, and the coworkers identified as the apprentices' mentors. In Philadelphia, technical assistants help the mentors develop strengths-based strategies for working with apprentices and deepen the mentors' understanding of the competencies that the apprentices need to develop and how these on-the-job competencies are aligned with the apprentices' college coursework. This onsite work can include providing technical assistance to the center directors too, with the goals of strengthening human resources departments' processes and manuals, introducing the apprenticeship to staff, aligning earn-while-you-learn wage increases for apprentices with centers' salary scales, and developing a leadership team of increasingly skilled and qualified early educators.

### **Essential supports**

It's important that apprenticeship programs leading to associate degrees be designed specifically for part-time college students who are already working in early care and education. The Philadelphia model includes the following eight supports for both apprentices and their employers.



- 1. Help with on-site apprenticeship functions:** Due to the underfunded and fragmented nature of the current early care and education system, employers operate with very tight budget margins, high staff turnover, and a shortage of well-qualified teachers. They rarely have the capacity to provide on-site professional development, qualified and stable on-site mentors, or the wage increases required by registered apprenticeships. To address these issues, the intermediary organization hosts periodic meetings of participating center directors and takes responsibility for data collection and reporting, assuring that the project is in compliance with federal and state Registered Apprenticeship requirements.
- 2. Assistance with the costs of college:** To be eligible for participation, employers must be enrolled in the T.E.A.C.H. Teacher Education and Compensation Helps Early Childhood Pennsylvania Scholarship Program. This program covers most of the cost of tuition, books, and transportation for apprentices. It also covers most of the cost of release time so that apprentices can attend class, study, and handle personal needs that otherwise cannot fit into school and work schedules. To protect employers' investments in their staff, T.E.A.C.H.

requires that scholarship recipients agree to continue working in their current early childhood programs for one year after each scholarship year.

- 3. Assistance with college readiness:** To be eligible for participation in the degree apprenticeship, apprentices must have completed a CDA and meet the admission requirements of the degree program. The colleges and intermediary organization work as partners to provide college preparation and bridge courses as needed, facilitate study groups, and help apprentices navigate the higher education system. In both community colleges, the early childhood and general education faculties partner to contextualize developmental (usually non-credit-bearing) courses, using early childhood content in English and math courses.
- 4. Increased compensation:** To be eligible for participation, all employers must agree to sponsor employees in the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program, which requires that they provide release time

and either a stipend or a raise at the end of each scholarship year, aligning with the Registered Apprenticeship earn-while-you-learn model. The Philadelphia project designed four wage increases for the apprentices based on hours worked, progress in the on-the-job competencies, course credits earned, and degree attainment. Each apprentice's coach also receives a stipend. (The stipend covers the additional responsibilities related to mentoring and monitoring progress; coaching meetings occur during regularly scheduled work hours, time that is already paid.) The intermediary organization works with employers to monitor, strategize, and problem solve as they implement these compensation requirements.

- 5. Counseling:** The T.E.A.C.H. office provides a designated personal counselor for all scholarship recipients to assist with scholarship management and career development. Higher education programs provide faculty advisors for all students to assist with course selection, progression through degree completion requirements, and accessing financial aid and other campus student support services. Faculty advisors create individual semester-by-semester course maps that allow apprentices to complete on-campus (or online) courses on a part-time schedule and simultaneously complete additional courses during work hours through the apprenticeship program. As a result, apprentices can progress at a full-time pace, completing an associate degree in as quickly as two-and-a-half years. As with all college students, the need for developmental coursework, repetition of a course, or pauses in course progression due to life events will increase time to degree completion. Along the way, faculty advisors assist the apprentice with course selection and registration as prescribed in the individualized course map, working with apprentices to adjust the map and to access tutoring and other student supports as needed. The intermediary organization also provides a counselor to support the apprentice as they navigate workplace and college requirements.
- 6. High-quality degree programs:** Both the Community College of Philadelphia and the Delaware County Community College are participants in the Achieving the Dream project, which is committed to improving the education, services, and inclusiveness of the nation's community colleges. DCCC's early childhood associate degree



program holds accreditation from NAEYC with multiple successful renewals. CCP's program is engaged in accreditation self-study work. In both programs, on-the-job competencies are closely aligned with college courses and with the 2009 NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation. All of the Philadelphia-area higher education partners are engaged with the new statewide higher education apprenticeship network in developing a quality assurance framework for apprenticeship processes and outcomes. They are also planning ahead to keep the state-approved on-the-job apprenticeship competencies aligned with updated NAEYC competencies and standards for early educators, which are expected later this year.

**7. An effective higher education pathway:**

The ability to offer substantial, high-quality early childhood content and practice in an associate degree that transfers is key to this apprenticeship model. Both CCP and DCCC associate degree programs include 30 credits of early childhood coursework, which make up approximately 50 percent of the program. Both have articulation agreements with bachelor's-level early childhood teacher education programs; these, in turn, offer pathways to state Pre-K-4 teacher licensure. The new bachelor's degree apprenticeship program at Arcadia University is part of an accelerated BA program designed for transfer students already employed in child care, Head Start, and Pre-K settings.

**8. Steady and sustaining funding:** While early childhood apprenticeship is not new, few projects have proven to be sustainable over time or to be effectively integrated into degree programs. Steady, sustaining funding for each partner and for student scholarships is essential to successful outcomes. The Philadelphia Apprenticeship Project is now part of a Pennsylvania apprenticeship project that leverages both public and private workforce development and early childhood education dollars, at both local and state levels, with support from the Philadelphia Mayor's Office of Education, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor, and the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. All of the project partners bring expertise in workforce development and early childhood; but even strong partners need substantial, ongoing project funding to support staff engagement in designing and



sustaining the project, identification of specific barriers to degree completion for the apprentices, and delivery of supports that target those barriers. Because the early childhood workforce is not adequately compensated, steady sources of funding must be identified to ensure that current and aspiring educators of young children do not bear the financial cost of earning degrees (NASEM 2018).

## Conclusion

Almost 10 years ago, a report from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) supported transforming teacher education to include more clinical practice faculty, more job-embedded learning, and closer and more strategic partnerships between higher education programs, schools, and early learning programs. But the report pointed out that this would require changes in program structure, faculty staffing, and financing that will not happen without specific investment (NCATE 2010).

Early childhood apprenticeship programs that are embedded in early educator degree programs hold great promise as a strategy to enhance the knowledge and



skills of the early childhood workforce. Well-designed and well-funded apprenticeship programs can be part of a larger effort to

- › Develop and sustain education and compensation strategies that address the racial, economic, and linguistic inequities which continue to divide and stratify the early education workforce
- › Strengthen higher education programs and their partnerships with community children's centers and schools
- › Build administrator and teacher leadership capacity within centers and schools to improve program quality for children and job quality for early educators
- › Build local, state, and national pipelines for the future early educators and early education faculty that we need

Apprenticeship programs provide invaluable supports for members of the early education workforce now and enable them to see the early care and education profession as one where they have a future. In the words of one apprentice, Caitlyn,

I started and stopped so many times, discouraged. This time I could see a way to finish an associate degree, but I didn't have BA on my radar. Now I do. And the sequence of raises mean I no longer have to work a second job. One concern was leaving my second job to take more courses. I needed help with time management. It is so helpful that our coaches have been through college—they know how it feels when looking at that paper deadline. And there is an impact on kids and our program; now we really focus on quality assurances. A teacher's best resource is other teachers. Talking together, we are always reminded of our core values. It's all scaffolding, it's all linked. We spend a lot of time talking about what quality looks like. When a teacher has the confidence to set a bucket and two cups in front of a child and articulate the fine motor skills, the math concepts and science concepts that we're exploring, you know, then everything changes.

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