

**Comments of Bob Siegel**  
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Due to a myriad of reasons, developing and sustaining the skilled workforce necessary for our early education systems that educate and care for young children in the United States has been a challenge following the growth of our field over the last two generations. Rather than take time to explore the many economic, social, and political reasons why this is true now, let's focus on where we are and what needs to happen in the future.

Currently, we have differing systems operating in the world of early childhood education: child care, public prekindergarten programs, Head Start, Early Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education, nursery school, Early Intervention, and other varieties of preschool programs. Together, we serve many of our nation's children from birth through age 5. Since we as a group of professionals better represent the idea of "First School" in modern day America, moving past the concept of only a *pre-school* experience, it would behoove us to create a system that contains and utilizes a better planned workforce that is ready to deliver what our children and families will need. The following are some of the current realities I urge you to consider in future planning.

In our field in recent years, there has been a rush to bring in more degreed teachers. On the surface, this seems to be without controversy or complication; however, the rush to higher education requirements is not without problems. One is simply a focus on educational qualifications instead of looking at teacher effectiveness. One can not simply substitute a credential and assume the skill goes along with it for every individual. Certainly there remains a good argument for this as a whole group and as a part of the solution regarding our early education system. It simply does not infer to each individual. Without taking this into account, we will lose the many highly skilled classroom staff that have been teaching our children, in some cases. For decades there are concurrent issues of race and class built into this argument as well. We need a system that recognizes our historical and current group of highly skilled teachers, and provides an alternative and equal path for them to remain as highly respected and engaged professionals serving our early childhood community.

One other unplanned (I would hope) consequence of this rush to degreed teachers is the pitting of one part of the early childhood system against another in competing for the degreed teachers. I welcome competition in early childhood education, but in this case the playing field is not level and the consequences for children are suboptimal. Both child care and preschool programs now end up hiring degreed teachers to meet regulations, upgrade their programs, or attempt

to meet quality and accreditation criteria. Within weeks or a few months, child care programs find that they then often lose those teachers to either public school or Head Start/EHS programs that offer considerably greater salary and benefits, and often a shorter school year. How does one compete with that? As a child care colleague of mine recently bemoaned, “I’m tired of being the training ground for our (public) schools”. Our children need stable arrangements, including continuity of teachers. We need a more integrated and fair system of qualifications and rewards that will run across and through all of our early education programs.

In conjunction with that, I urge all of us to focus on providing a high level of training – both in quality and quantity – for all our early education teachers. This must include both pre-service and in-service training efforts, and more attention to training that is specialized in early childhood development, substantive, and can be credited toward obtaining credentials and even degrees.. Even where staff have Bachelor’s degrees, knowledge and expertise in early childhood development can be lacking. Another training thought emanates from our knowledge within the child care field. There are three areas that continue to be either under or poorly-served by the industry. Those are families needing alternative hour care, infant and toddler care, and finally, children with disabilities or special needs. I have no workforce ideas on the issue of alternative hours. However training can play an integral and essential role in our improved service to both other populations. Teachers now do receive some training on working with infants and toddlers, but the amount is sorely lacking. In many colleges and training programs the main emphasis continues to be on preschoolers, sometimes to the total exclusion of the birth to three population. For working with children with special needs or disabilities, the situation is worse. Between 50 and 70 percent of ECE teachers have had no training or education in this area at all. Certainly, we can make progress in these areas now and in the future.

Our efforts must be inclusive and exhaustive moving forward. Too many of what we’ve tried to change recently have been “special projects” where we tried new approaches involving pilot groups, consultation practices, career incentives, and much more. Some were inspired and effective ideas, some were not. Too often, what they had in common was not being real longitudinal and real solutions. In some cases the costs were high and unrealistic, there was no potential for sustainability, or its very uniqueness made these program efforts unable to be replicated. Let’s begin with a blank page for our nation and fix this, for all of America’s children in each and every First School.

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