

Research Notes

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A Profile of Early Childhood Center Directors

Research conducted by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership and other organizations provide rich data on the professional world of early childhood administrators. Here is some of what we have learned.

- Most directors were promoted to their current positions because others saw their leadership ability and encouraged them to pursue the position.

Approximately 90% of directors have been classroom teachers, but only one-fifth report that they always knew they wanted to become a director of a center and actively pursued the position. In a study of 840 Illinois directors, 55% indicated that they were encouraged (and often coaxed) to take on the director's job.¹ The lack of a well-articulated career ladder in the field means that most directors serendipitously fall into their positions; few follow a planned career path.

- State licensing standards do not require adequate formal preparation for center directors. Few directors have had training in program administration, staff management, fiscal and legal issues, organizational change, or group dynamics prior to assuming their administrative roles.

Illinois, for example, does not require directors to take a single course in the administration of early childhood programs. Only four states require any specialized management training for center directors prior to their assuming their administrative roles.² A 1989 study of 990 directors found that 38% of directors had not had a single course relating to the management of educational programs in preparation for their job.³

- Few opportunities exist for directors to receive specialized training in program administration. When in-service training is made available, it is usually fragmented, seldom addresses directors' site-specific concerns, and almost never includes follow-up.

The lack of professional development programs for early childhood administrators that are tied to college credit and career advancement is a pervasive problem across the country.²

- Directors lead frenetic lives and are eager for support. Many report that they feel ill-equipped to handle the range of tasks essential for effective program administration. Time pressures make pursuing professional development difficult.

Three-fourths of directors indicate they were not prepared for the kinds of issues they encountered when they first became directors. Directors overwhelmingly believe that they could benefit from additional support, networking, information, and training to help them do their jobs better.¹ Over one-half of directors characterize their jobs as challenging, demanding, and never-ending. Time constraints are noted as a key frustration contributing to job stress.¹

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- Directors of early childhood programs are poorly paid. They lack the discretionary income to pay for their own professional development and their agencies rarely provide financial incentives for pursuing advanced training.

The level of pay and benefits for directors more nearly resembles that of workers with a high school diploma in the general work force.⁴ Although the starting hourly wages for Illinois directors increased between 1992-1997, directors earn between \$11-13 per hour on average.⁵ Public funds to support training are extremely limited, sporadic, and largely uncoordinated.²

- Although few incentives exist, increasing numbers of directors are pursuing college degrees and majoring in early childhood education.

Between 1992 and 1997 the percentage of Illinois directors with bachelor's degrees increased as did the number of directors who majored in child development or early childhood education. Although college degrees are not required by state licensing standards, about 90% of Illinois directors have a college degree;⁵ approximately 72% have a four-year degree.¹

- Directors are deeply committed to the field of early childhood education. Many have passed up higher paying jobs in other fields because of the satisfaction they receive from working with and supporting children and families.

Fully 80% of directors intend to remain in their administrative role for at least three more years.¹ Most directors are likely to leave their current positions for others within the field rather than for higher paying jobs in related fields.⁵

- Directors are the least likely to leave their jobs when compared with other child care personnel.

For every 100 director positions in Illinois, 24 new directors had to be recruited and hired due to turnover over a two-year time period.⁵ Directors' reasons for leaving included: low pay, low benefits, working conditions, and personal reasons.^{1,5}

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