

# Research Notes

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## Preschool Teachers in Two Settings: Issues of Parity

Until June of this year when she took a job as an elementary school principal, Mary Ellen Bleeden served as the Early Childhood Coordinator for the Des Plaines Public Schools. She administered parent-funded preschool programs in several of her buildings (licensed by DCFS) as well as state-funded prekindergarten programs (regulated by ISBE). In hiring teachers for her classrooms, she was keenly aware of the differences in compensation for similarly educated teachers. Teachers in her parent-funded classrooms with baccalaureate degrees and teaching certificates earned approximately \$14,700 on a 9-month contract compared to state prekindergarten teachers with the same qualifications who earned \$30,000.

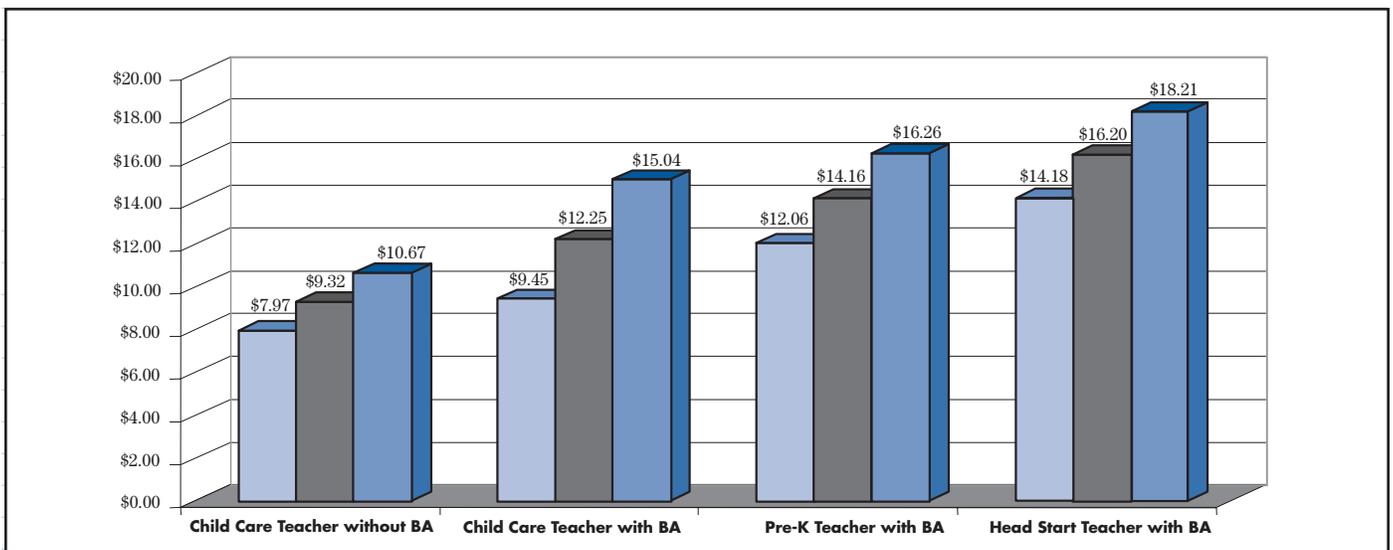
### Issues of Parity

Mary Ellen's former teachers are but a few of the real-life examples of the inequities resulting from the bifurcated regulatory system of early childhood care and education programs in Illinois. While preschool teachers in parent-funded, private preschools and state-funded programs perform the same job functions, they are rewarded quite differently. Illinois continues to regulate private preschool and child care programs as a social service funded largely through parent fee-for-service, while early childhood educational programs in the state's public school system are supported by tax dollars. It is, therefore, possible for people with similar credentials to work in different systems for vastly different rewards.

The implications for staff recruitment and retention in these two systems are apparent. Attracting talented teachers becomes an issue of dollars and cents. A teacher with a college degree is unlikely to take a position in a parent-funded program at half the pay and without the benefits that she would earn in a state prekindergarten program. Motivated by higher salaries, more attractive benefits, and better working conditions, the best and brightest early childhood teachers are being lured into the public school prekindergarten system.

The graph below shows the stark contrast between the financial rewards for individuals with similar education who teach in different sectors of the early care and education workforce.

**Starting, Average, and Highest Hourly Earnings of Teachers by Program Type**



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## Requisite Qualifications

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Leaders in the Illinois early childhood community have long bemoaned the minimal requirements for preschool teachers working in centers licensed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. According to the Licensing Standards for Day Care Centers,<sup>1</sup> an individual with no prior teaching experience need only be 19 years old and have two years of college credit with six hours of specialized course work in early childhood education to assume a teaching position in the classroom.

In contrast, the Illinois State Board of Education governing state prekindergarten programs requires a baccalaureate degree, 32 semester hours of specialized course work in early childhood education, successful completion of basic skills (reading, writing, and math) and early childhood subject tests, 100 hours of observation in early childhood settings, and a supervised student teaching experience.<sup>2</sup> The unintended result of these contrasting standards is that the state has differentiated the quality of educational experience preschool children receive based on the regulatory oversight of their program.

Research conducted over the past decade demonstrates the importance of general and specialized college-level course work in predicting high performance among early childhood teaching staff.<sup>3,4</sup> All four-year-olds deserve highly trained teachers. Yet the Center for the Child Care Workforce reports that teachers holding baccalaureate degrees represent only one-quarter of all teaching staff in non-publicly funded early childhood programs.<sup>5</sup>

For teachers working in private preschools, there is little incentive for continued training because most centers lack a system for rewarding higher levels of training with enhanced compensation and professional status. Attracting degreed professionals continues to be difficult for center directors seeking to implement high-quality programs. The existing labor pool for the low-paying teaching jobs they offer does not include a large number of college graduates.

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## What Can Be Done?

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The ramifications of this bifurcated regulatory system are far-reaching. Private preschools will continue to experience difficulty recruiting highly trained teachers until compensation and benefits rise to the level currently offered in the public sector. This will not happen until the funding base for early care and education across the two sectors is equalized and until the requisite qualifications for staff across both regulatory systems are standardized.

Educators and policymakers need to view early care and education as a unified and coherent system with consistent standards and compensation across funding auspices. Every preschool-aged child in Illinois deserves to be in an educationally stimulating environment staffed by highly trained teachers. This will not happen unless requisite qualifications for teachers are made consistent and individuals who hold comparable qualifications are able to receive similar compensation across educational settings.

1. Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. (1998). *Licensing standards for day care centers*. Springfield, IL: Author.
2. Illinois State Board of Education. (n.d.). *Minimum requirements for state certificates*. Springfield, IL: Author.
3. Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team. (1995). *Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers*. Denver, CO: Center for Research in Economic and Social Policy, University of Colorado at Denver.
4. Howes, C., Smith, E., & Galinsky, E. (1995). *The Florida Child Care Quality Improvement Study*. New York: Families and Work Institute.
5. Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1998). *Worthy work, unlivable wages: The National Child Care Staffing Study, 1988-1997*. Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce.

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For more information about research conducted by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership, please contact Donna Rafanello, Senior Research Associate, at (800) 443-5522, ext. 5132 or visit our website ([www.nl.edu/cecl](http://www.nl.edu/cecl)).

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