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Speaking Up and Speaking Out -- The Director as Advocate for the Early Childhood Workforce

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Research Notes

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Speaking Up and Speaking Out: The Director as Advocate for the Early Childhood Workforce

As a field we have several decades of accumulated research about the early childhood workforce. A reoccurring theme across studies is that early childhood practitioners are not compensated as well as workers with similar qualifications in other occupations. Meager benefits, poor working conditions, low professional standards, and limited support for professional development are some of the additional challenges facing the early childhood workforce. These issues clearly impact recruitment and retention and other concerns that early childhood center directors face. In such a climate, what steps are directors taking to advocate for change?

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership recently conducted a study to explore the role of the director as an advocate for the early childhood workforce. The study sought to determine the workforce issues that directors believe to be the most important, their self-perceptions related to advocacy, and the specific actions they have taken related to workforce issues. Additionally, the study sought to illuminate the characteristics of the most engaged advocates.

Sample

Data were collected via an online survey distributed to approximately 6,000 individuals in the McCormick Center's database. Individuals were encouraged to pass the survey link on to directors they knew. In addition, the link was reposted online by the National Head Start Association. A total of 897 directors from 47 states and the District of Columbia completed the survey.

The sample was mostly female (97%), between 40 and 59 years of age (62%), and represented the racial and ethnic diversity of the early childhood workforce. Respondents worked in the field for an average of 21 years, and in their current administrative position for an average of 12 years. Twenty-seven percent of the directors reported they held an advanced degree, and another 22% indicated they had a baccalaureate degree. Over one-half of the directors (61%) indicated they had majored in early childhood, and less than one-half (43%) had a director's credential.

Findings

Workforce issues perceived to be most important

When asked what early childhood workforce issue was most important to them, one-half of the respondents indicated the need for greater compensation. Increased opportunities for professional development was mentioned by 21% of directors, and staff qualifications was noted as the most pressing early childhood workforce issue by another 18%.

Directors' self-perceptions related to advocacy

Directors were asked to report how informed they considered themselves to be on different workforce issues. Only one-fourth of directors (28%) stated that they considered themselves to be well informed. These directors stated that they relied on national professional organizations and their local affiliates as their primary source for information about workforce issues.

When asked to characterize their level of engagement as advocates for the workforce, only one-fifth of the sample identified themselves as being either an active or an outspoken and engaged advocate. Just over one-half of the sample (56%) reported they occasionally spoke out on workforce issues, and one-fourth stated that they were not engaged in any advocacy efforts.

When this subsample of directors was asked why they did not engage in more advocacy efforts relating to workforce issues, the three most common reasons cited were: *I'm too busy with other things* (63%); *I don't know how to get started* (38%); and *I don't feel like I know enough about early childhood workforce issues* (24%).

Nearly one-third of respondents reported that in the past year they had not engaged in any advocacy actions related to the early childhood workforce.

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Specific advocacy actions taken to support the workforce

Directors were asked what specific actions they had taken to advocate for the workforce during the previous year. Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) reported that in the past year they had not engaged in any advocacy actions related to the early childhood workforce. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of advocacy actions taken by the remaining directors in the sample ($n = 610$). The mean number of advocacy actions taken by this group was 4.13.

Table 1. Frequency of Advocacy Actions Taken ($n = 610$)

During the past year...	<i>f</i>	%
I voted for a candidate who supported strengthening the quality of the early childhood workforce.	306	50
I distributed resources related to an early childhood workforce issue.	281	46
I posted articles on the center's bulletin board about the importance of a highly trained workforce.	276	45
I addressed the topic of the cost of high-quality care and education at a parent meeting.	260	43
I wrote a letter or e-mail to an elected representative about an early childhood workforce issue.	200	33
I met with a community or business leader about an early childhood workforce issue.	192	32
I attended a meeting or legislative hearing about an early childhood workforce issue.	164	27
I used social networking (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to raise awareness about a workforce issue.	142	23
I made a phone call to an elected official about an early childhood workforce issue.	140	23
I participated on a public policy committee focused on an early childhood workforce issue.	124	20
I participated in an electronic discussion group about an early childhood workforce issue.	86	14
I met with a legislator about a workforce issue.	81	13
I shared resources about the Worthy Wage Day.	76	13
I wrote a letter to the editor of my local paper about the importance of a workforce issue.	32	5
I helped draft legislation relating to an early childhood workforce issue.	17	3

* Percentages do not equal 100% since directors were asked to check all responses that applied

Characteristics of directors who are active and engaged advocates on workforce issues

An analysis of the subsample of directors who perceived themselves to be active or outspoken and engaged advocates on early childhood workforce issues ($n = 182$) revealed they differed from other directors in the sample in several significant ways. First, their perceptions of themselves as advocates matched their behaviors. Their specific advocacy actions during the previous year were more than double those of the other respondents in the total sample of 897 directors ($M = 6.61$ vs. $M = 3.25$, $p < .001$). Second, they were more likely to have taken a course or received formal training in advocacy (71% vs. 40%) and to report they had been mentored in learning advocacy skills (53% vs. 23%). These individuals were also more likely to report serving in a leadership role in an early childhood professional organization (54% vs. 30%).

Implications for leadership development

While most directors acknowledge the importance of advocating for the early childhood workforce, a far smaller percentage of directors follow through with actions to support their beliefs. One-third of directors in this study reported they did not take any action to speak out on behalf of the workforce during the past year. The results of this study provide compelling evidence that mentoring and focused training in advocacy are effective strategies that make a difference in promoting action to speak up and speak out about workforce issues. This research underscores the importance of including opportunities for advocacy skill-building in early childhood leadership training programs.

For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 847-947-5060. To access additional Research Notes go to <http://cecl.nl.edu/research/rn.htm>. Funding for the McCormick Center's Research Notes is provided by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.