

Research Notes

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Investing in Teachers' Professional Development: A Comparison of Elementary Schools and Child Care Centers

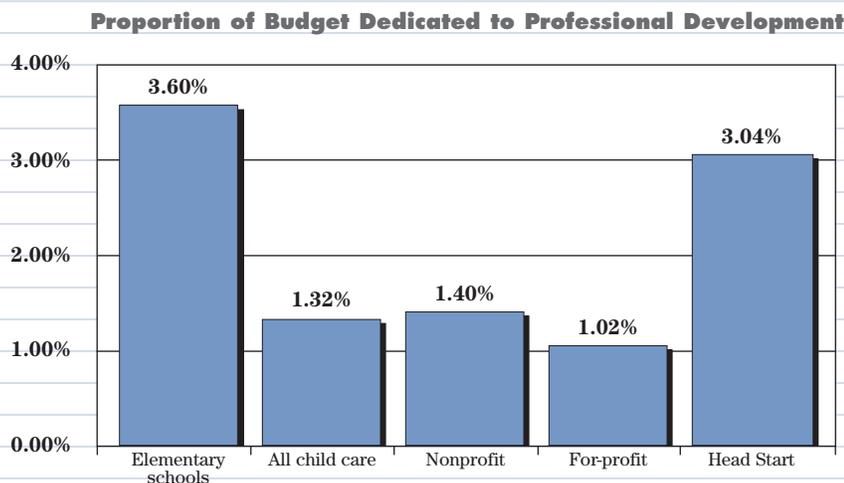
The professional development of teachers is a critical component of the nation's effort to improve school quality and student achievement. The importance of in-service training is emphasized in the National Education Goals and the relationship between teachers' level of training and student outcomes has been firmly established in research. Teachers at both the elementary and early childhood levels agree that their teaching significantly improves when they are provided opportunities to reflect on their professional practice.

While there may be uniform agreement among educators and policymakers alike about the importance of ongoing professional development, the rhetoric may not be matched by practice. In-service training in many educational settings is still viewed as a luxury, an "add on," rather than an integral part of the educational enterprise. The situation is most critical in the early childhood arena where teachers' professional development is not yet institutionalized.

Recently, the Center for Early Childhood Leadership conducted research to compare the budget allocations for professional development between elementary schools and child care centers. The sample included 150 early childhood programs in Illinois. Seventy-six percent of centers were nonprofit. Average center size was 144 children with 19 staff. The average operating budget of the centers in the sample was \$570,283. Comparison data on elementary schools was derived from research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and the Education Commission of the States.^{1,2}

Professional Development as a Budget Priority

As the graph below illustrates, elementary schools spend a larger proportion of their operating budgets on teacher professional development activities than do child care centers. Within the early childhood sector, Head Start programs spend more than twice as much as other nonprofit programs, and almost three times more than for-profit programs.



Continued on back page

In actual dollar amounts, an equivalent of 7% of an elementary school teacher's salary is allocated for professional development while an equivalent of only 2% of a child care worker's salary is similarly dedicated. With public school teachers' salaries ranging from \$26,315 to \$52,813³ and early childhood teacher salaries in the \$13,125 to \$18,988 range,⁴ the consequences are clear. Child care center staff committed to their own professional development have more out-of-pocket expenses than their public school peers.

Professional Development Allocations

Center directors were asked how they allocate their professional development funds. The three most common types of professional development were reimbursement for conference fees (77%), staff development resources (e.g., books, journals, videos) (72%), and consultants for staff development training (63%). Estimated dollar amounts in each category ranged widely from \$50-\$8,100.

Child care teachers spend a higher percentage of their salaries on professional development than their public school peers.

Public schools allocate 9% of their professional development funds for college coursework compared to only .3% allocated by child care centers.

Directors indicated their desire to support teachers' continuing education through tuition payments, paid time-off to attend class, and bonuses for teachers who completed coursework. However, only 52% of programs actually allocated money for college coursework, and the average amount was only \$100 per teacher annually. In contrast, elementary school teachers are compensated between \$300-\$800 annually for completing college coursework.

This research highlights a fundamental difference that exists in the early childhood and elementary education systems in this country. Indisputably, investment in the professional development of teachers is critical to improving the quality of services provided to children and families. While the commitment to teachers' professional development may be similar in both arenas, the economic realities of operating a child care center rarely permit the same size investments as in elementary education. Efforts to mend the disparity require a systems approach.

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1. Education Commission of the States. (1997, November). *Investing in teacher professional development: A look at 16 school districts*. Denver: Author.
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3. Educational Research Services. (1998). *National Survey of Salaries and Wages in Public Schools*. New York: Author.
4. 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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