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Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children:

The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Florida
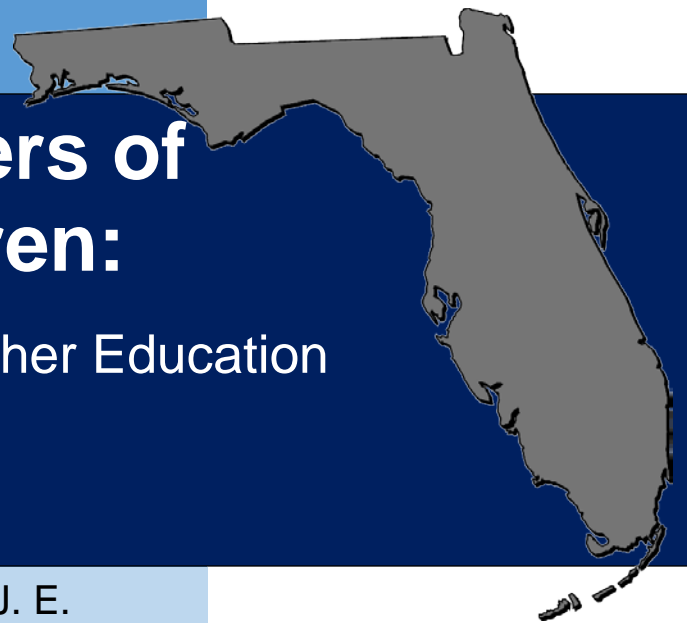
Highlights

By Abby Copeman Petig, Laura Sakai, Lea J. E. Austin, Bethany Edwards, & Elena Montoya

Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children:
The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Florida, Highlights

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) was founded in 1999 to focus on achieving comprehensive public investments that enable and reward the early childhood workforce to deliver high-quality care and education for all children. To achieve this goal, CSCCE conducts cutting-edge research and proposes policy solutions aimed at improving how our nation prepares, supports, and rewards the early care and education workforce to ensure young children's optimal development.

The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Florida was commissioned by the Florida Office of Early Learning and the Children's Forum.

The views presented in this report are those of the authors only and do not reflect the opinions of the report's funders.
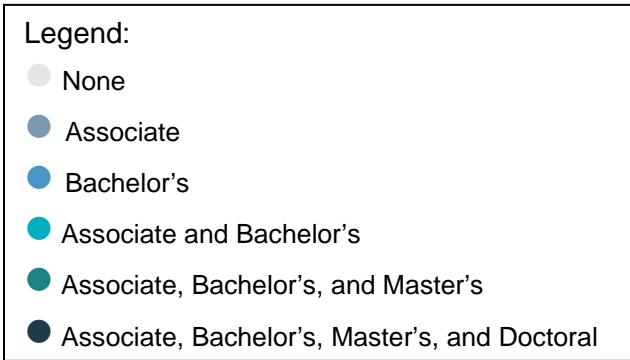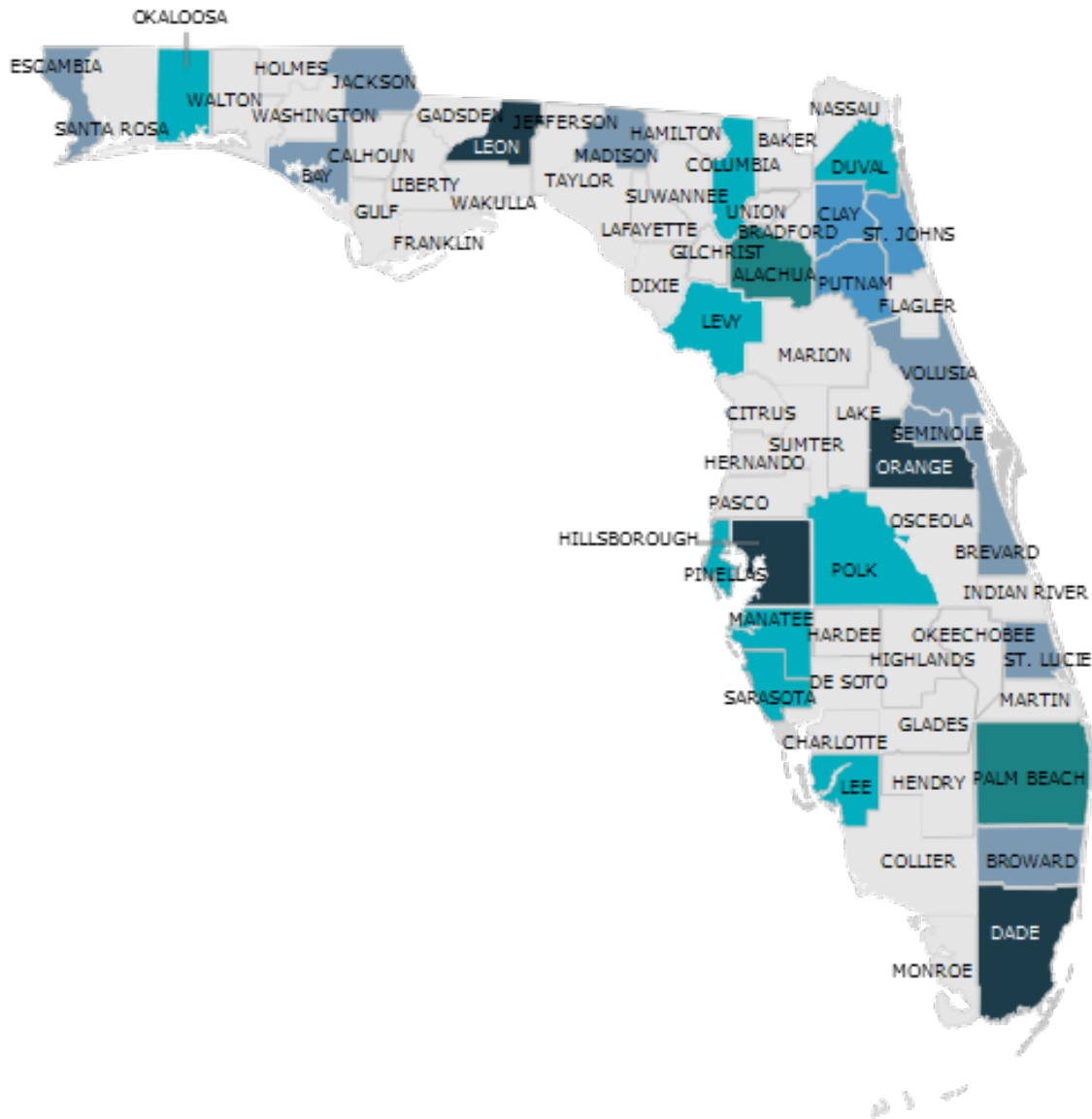
Introduction

The importance of early care and education (ECE) to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic well-being is recognized up to the highest levels of government and in businesses, schools, and living rooms across the country. This understanding represents a dramatic shift from earlier decades and carries with it heightened expectations for what teachers of young children should know and be able to do,[1] especially in light of mounting evidence about inadequate and unequal educational quality for many children, particularly those of color and those living in low-income families.[2]

Florida is home to more than 1 million children under the age of five, nearly 70 percent of whom attend some type of early care and education program.[3] Like many states in recent years, Florida has committed public and private resources toward multiple efforts to improve early care and education services and to ensure that teacher education degree and certification programs can better prepare their graduates to meet the complex needs of young children.[4] Critical to these efforts is the establishment of a well-coordinated, comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can prepare an incoming generation of educators while also strengthening the skills of the existing early education workforce. Institutions of higher education are critical to meeting the evolving and increasing demands identified to improve developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population.

The following pages highlight findings from the *Florida Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory* and the extent to which ECE higher education programs offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation.

Distribution of Florida Early Childhood Degree Programs

Legend:

⬤ None

⬤ Associate

⬤ Bachelor's

⬤ Associate and Bachelor's

⬤ Associate, Bachelor's, and Master's

⬤ Associate, Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral

Part 1: Early Childhood Higher Education Today

This section of the report examines program offerings, faculty characteristics, student supports, and institutional challenges.

FINDING ONE: PROGRAM OFFERINGS
Goals, Course Content, and Age-Group Focus

Most Florida early childhood degree programs identify their primary goal as preparing students to be teachers or administrators, though the age-group focus varies by degree level. While these programs offer a range of topics related to child development and approaches to teaching -- a reflection of their program goals -- associate degree programs tend to require more content focused on children birth through age five, and bachelor's degree programs require more content related to children in preschool or higher grades. Across degree programs, the availability of content related to administration and leadership is inconsistent. In addition, few programs reported offering courses related to the provision of professional development services.

FINDING TWO: FIELD-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES
Requirements and Age-Group Focus

Students earning a bachelor's degree in early childhood are typically required to complete a student teaching experience *and* participate in additional practica. In contrast, most students completing an associate degree in early childhood participate *only* in practica. Across degree levels practica experiences varied by duration, frequency, and required elements of the experiences vary. About one-half of programs require students to work with preschool-age children, but fewer require experiences working with other age groups. Bachelor's degree programs are more likely to have specific requirements in terms of the types of experiences students have during practica; for example, working with children who are dual language learners or children who have disabilities.

FINDING THREE: PORTRAIT OF FACULTY
Employment Status, Demographics, Professional Background, and Professional Development Interests

Florida early childhood degree programs are staffed mostly by part-time faculty. While Florida's early childhood workforce closely reflects the racial, ethnic, and linguistic composition of the state, the faculty members are predominantly white and monolingual. Between one-third and one-half of faculty members across degree levels identified Spanish as a language they would like to know in order to communicate better with students. Most faculty members report having had academic preparation specific to early childhood, and most dual-level faculty members report having worked in an array of ECE professional roles in the past decade. Most faculty members, however, have not had recent experience teaching children, particularly infants and toddlers. Florida early childhood degree program faculty are particularly interested in professional development related to working with infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and children experiencing trauma; utilizing teacher and child assessments effectively; and mentoring/coaching adult students.

FINDING FOUR: SUPPORTING STUDENTS
Services Offered and Challenges

Florida early childhood degree programs offer multiple types of support services specifically tailored to help ECE students access resources and strengthen their academic skills. Associate degree programs are more likely to make coursework accessible in multiple formats by offering courses online or during alternative hours, such as evenings and weekends. A primary challenge for many degree programs includes difficulty recruiting and retaining students due to the low pay that graduates can experience in the ECE field.

FINDING FIVE: PROGRAM CHALLENGES
Faculty and Program Needs

Florida early childhood degree programs experience challenges related to time and resources required to fulfill faculty responsibilities, including having sufficient full-time faculty to adequately support students. Other challenges include the need for faculty members with specific expertise, such as expertise related to teaching children who are dual language learns, and who represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Early childhood higher education faculty members are likewise in need of resources to support their ability to participate in program planning and their own professional development.

Part 2: Early Childhood Higher Education, An Evolving Landscape

This section of the report examines how institutions of higher education are adapting to emerging research in three key domains.

FINDING SIX: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Self-Assessment, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider the inclusion of family engagement to be very important in the preparation of early childhood teachers and rank its importance on par with the domain of socioemotional development. Multiple topics related to family engagement are embedded in all types of degree programs, with some variation in age-group focus by degree level and topic. Faculty members expressed varied levels of interest in professional development in this topic area.

FINDING SEVEN: EARLY MATHEMATICS
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Self-Assessment, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Early childhood higher education faculty consider the inclusion of early mathematics to be less important than other domains in the preparation of teachers. Nevertheless, multiple topics of early mathematics content are embedded in required course content, with variation among degree level by topic and age-group focus. Faculty members across degree levels were more likely to report that they felt prepared to teach early math content related to preschool age children than to infant and toddlers. Interest in ongoing math-related professional development varies by degree level and topic area.

FINDING EIGHT: DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Self-Assessment, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider the inclusion of teaching young dual language learners to be important in the preparation of teachers, but not as important as socioemotional development or family engagement. Multiple topics focused on dual language learners are embedded in required course content, with variation among degree level by topic and age-group focus; associate degree programs were more likely than bachelor's degree programs to require that content include a focus on infant and toddlers. Many faculty members consider themselves prepared to teach topics related to dual language learners. Interest in ongoing dual language learner-related professional development varies by degree level and topic area.

Selected Recommendations

Here, we outline an approach to strengthening early childhood workforce development in Florida, with an emphasis on higher education. The efforts should be coordinated among key stakeholders in Florida, including the Early Learning Advisory Council and representatives from the higher education community, and are predicated on identifying new resources from state, federal, and philanthropic sources.

1. Unify expectations and strengthen competencies for early childhood workforce preparation

- Establish a more uniform system for certifying teachers, administrators, and other practitioners across age groups and auspices throughout the state;
- Provide clear roadmaps to identify whether the course of study is intended to prepare practitioners for the demands of teaching young children and/or for leading ECE programs or whether the course of study is designed for other purposes;
- Convene stakeholders (e.g., state regulatory agencies, representatives from the state colleges and universities, advocates) to review and revise standards and educational requirements for professionals caring for and educating young children;
- Align early education degree program requirements with revised state standards, including foundational knowledge and skills for incoming educators and progressively greater knowledge, skills, and competencies for educators in leadership roles; and
- Provide resources and supports to ensure that a diverse current and incoming workforce can successfully meet standards and attain competency.

2. Strengthen program content and equity across the age span

To strengthen required content and align it with child development and teacher preparation research and to equalize required content for all children across the birth-to-age-eight continuum, we recommend:

- **Child Development and Pedagogy:** Provide resources and support to enable faculty members across degree programs and institutions to collaborate with other experts to develop program content standards and/or faculty professional development related to preparing teachers to work with infants and toddlers, including:

  - Infant development and learning across multiple domains; and
  - Methods of teaching and pedagogy for children of different ages;

- **Early Mathematics:** Provide resources and support to enable faculty members across degree programs and institutions to collaborate with other experts to develop program content standards and/or faculty professional development related to children's mathematical understanding, including:

  - Children's mathematical understanding from infancy through early elementary grades; and
  - Developmentally appropriate pedagogy for early mathematics instruction, in particular for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children;

- **Dual Language Learning:** Provide resources and support to enable faculty members across degree programs and institutions to collaborate with other experts to develop program content standards and/or faculty professional development related to preparing teachers of dual language learners, including:

  - Recognition of the value and importance of supporting children's home language development as they also learn English;
  - Working with children from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, with an emphasis on very young children; and
  - Understanding the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry and retention in the ECE field.

To strengthen the application of field-based learning experiences, we recommend:

- Provide resources and support to faculty members across degree programs and institutions to develop degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, with opportunities focused on children from infancy through preschool and the differentiation of experiences for pre- and in-service students; and

- Provide field-based learning opportunities for students to engage with:

  - Children with special needs;
  - Children who are dual language learners;
  - Families; and
  - Community organizations that support children and families.

3. Build a leadership pipeline

- Establish a process to identify the specific skills, knowledge, and competencies needed for common leadership roles in ECE (teacher leaders, coaches, site administrators, program/quality improvement managers, and teacher educators);
- Identify the appropriate course of study and degree level (lower division, upper division, graduate) for each leadership role based on the specific skills and knowledge identified above;
- Identify options to create leadership pathways and/or programs, particularly at the master's degree level;
- Ensure an adequate number of degree programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level that offer the appropriate course content; and
- Investigate strategies used in other professions (e.g., health, education, social welfare); create a faculty development program, such as a fellowship, intended to increase diversity among faculty members, particularly in key leadership positions; and develop a diversity plan tailored to the ECE field.

4. Increase faculty supports

- Identify the number of full-time faculty positions needed to allow for adequate advising and time with students;
- Calculate the costs associated with a proposed increase in full-time ECE faculty positions and propose strategies for securing potential sources of public and private funds to address the faculty shortages;
- Establish an ongoing fund with well-articulated expectations for faculty members' professional development honoraria and program improvement grants; and
- Ensure adequate resources, including funding, staffing, and dedicated time for program planning and improvement.

Endnotes

A complete list of references can be found in the full narrative report.

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