

Sharpening the Focus: State Policy to Promote Effective Teaching that Improves Learning

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A special thank you to the Alliance for Early Success for their generous funding.



BUILD was founded by the members of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative and is staffed by a team of early childhood experts and experienced leaders.



About BUILD

BUILD supports the people who set policies, provide services and advocate for children from birth to age five.

Taking a systems approach, BUILD partners with state leaders working in early learning, health/mental health/nutrition, and family support and engagement. BUILD provides guidance, leadership training and capacity building.

BUILD also acts as a network that convenes state and community leaders, online and in-person, to share best practices, resources and strategies, with a focus on integrating family and child-serving systems, advancing quality and racial equity. BUILD leverages 50-state learning to provide customized technical assistance that is designed to meet the unique needs of states and communities.

Why it Matters

With increasing evidence from brain science, we know that the first five years of a child's life set the foundation for all future growth and development. We also know that investments in early childhood enable increased health, school readiness, and ultimately, the ability to be a part of an educated workforce critical for our future prosperity. Creating effective early childhood systems in states and in communities is the only way to ensure the healthy growth and development of each and every child.

Addressing Racial Disparities

Today, race and place are predictive of children's healthy development and for success in school and life. To address these disparities, systems-building work at all levels can be neither "colorblind" nor passive. It must intentionally level the playing field in terms of power so that public action, allocation of resources, and oversight are shared responsibilities of a representative leadership. In BUILD's systems work, all actions are assessed to ensure impact is equitable for children and families of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and for families of diverse socio-economic status.

Work with BUILD

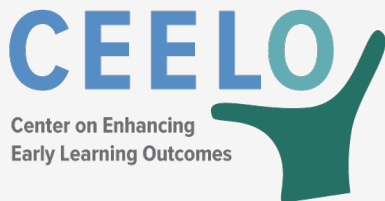
With a staff of seasoned experts including researchers and evaluators, BUILD provides customized and targeted technical assistance, financial support and professional development opportunities to early childhood leaders in the public sector and the private advocacy and foundation community.

For additional information, go to www.buildinitiative.org or contact Susan Hibbard, Executive Director, at info@buildinitiative.org.

About Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) will strengthen the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO will work in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) is the lead organization operating CEELO in partnership with Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

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I. The Purpose: What We Are Doing and Why

The BUILD Initiative (BUILD) and The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) support state policymakers with the implementation of early learning and development policies, programs, and practices that improve outcomes for all young children.

Together we have engaged in a project to strengthen prominent policy that promotes effective early childhood teaching and learning for each and every child, from birth through third grade.

This project is a collaborative effort of our organizations and selected state leaders and national experts. Our goal is to facilitate joint problem solving for stakeholders who are responsible for guiding early childhood policy and practice in their states. Over the past year, we have convened leaders to provide ideas, best practices, and resources that will inform “what” policies and practices most effectively advance teaching quality and “how” those policies and programs can be implemented to support great teaching and learning. With the support of the Alliance for Early Success, we convened a Think Tank on October 1, 2014, with national experts and state leaders, to share insights and expertise on the best opportunities for improving early childhood teaching. We then facilitated a six-month-long [Learning Table](#) in which we engaged leaders from six states¹ to participate in a two-day long face-to-face meeting and several facilitated webinars, to support one another as they developed action plans to improve policies that impact teaching quality.

This working paper has been used throughout the project to provide a springboard for our ongoing dialogue and collaboration. It has been revised as we learn more about the opportunities and challenges that state policymakers encounter when implementing early childhood policy. It is our intention that the paper will now be used as a tool to spark discussion and innovation, and will ultimately support policymakers and their partners in their ongoing efforts to provide young children with excellent early childhood education.

II. Our Focus: Professional Development and Accountability Policies

As BUILD and CEELO engaged a diverse group of partners to consider the policies that impact children’s development, we set the stage with Linda Darling-Hammond’s (2012) definition of teaching quality:

“In early childhood education, strong instruction cultivates children’s love of learning through a balance of child-initiated play and adult-guided hands-on experience; it is highly intentional, responsive, and developmentally, individually, linguistically and culturally appropriate.

Teaching quality refers to strong instruction that enables a wide range of students to learn. Teaching quality is in part a function of teacher quality—teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions—but it is also strongly influenced by the context of instruction: the curriculum and assessment system; the “fit” between teachers’ qualifications and what they are asked to teach; and teaching conditions, such as time, class size, facilities, and materials. (p. 3)²

In early childhood education, strong instruction cultivates children’s love of learning through a balance of child-initiated play and adult-guided hands-on experience; it is highly intentional, responsive, linguistically and developmentally, individually, and culturally appropriate. Importantly, Darling-Hammond’s definition of teaching quality extends beyond the individual educator’s³ characteristics to include the teaching and learning environment. It encompasses the context of instruction, the school and early childhood program organizational conditions, and the community of families and educators that create the early childhood program’s culture. It is a definition that supports quality teaching for all children from birth through third grade.

Grounded in this definition of teaching quality, we engaged state and national leaders from the Think Tank and Learning Table to consider the policies that would best ensure young children have access to teaching quality. Throughout the project, the following questions guided our collaboration:

- What are the consistent supports and sensible accountability systems needed to drive teaching quality that will result in improved outcomes for children?

¹ The six states that participated in the Learning Table include Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Tennessee.

² It is important to note that this project focuses on excellent early education for children from birth through third grade. This definition however, was written in reference to teaching quality for the K-12 sector and uses terminology typically associated with education for school-aged children, such as the terms “students,” “classroom,” and “teacher.” In the early years, the terms “children,” “environment,” and “educator” are more universal terms for similar concepts.

³ In this paper we use the term “educator” to include the adults who care for and support children’s development from birth through third grade who work in schools and in early childhood programs and is inclusive of the terms “teacher,” “provider,” and “caregiver.”



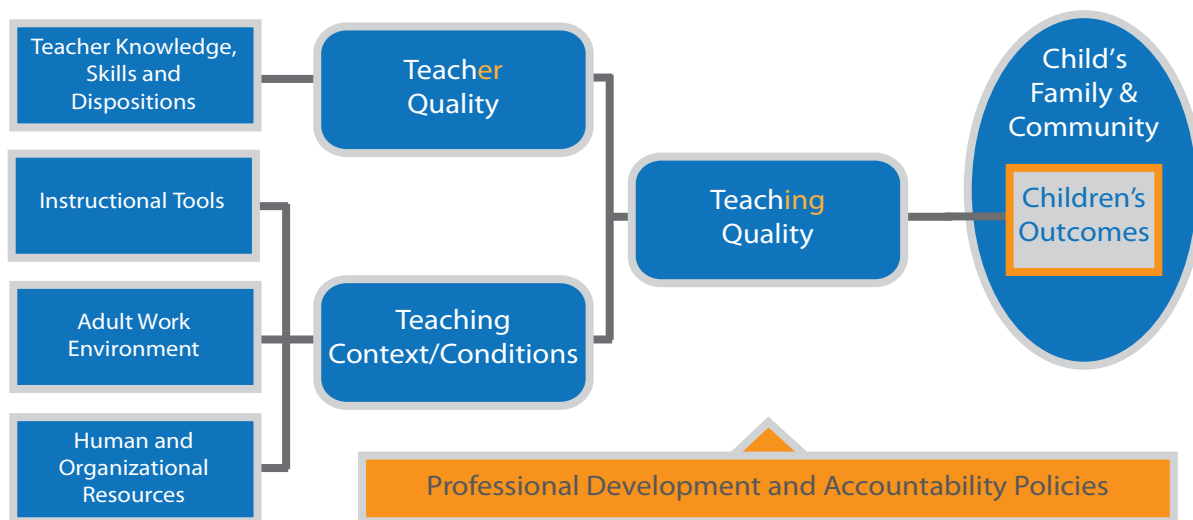


Figure 1. Theory of Change

- What guidance can we give to states about these powerful and few core state policies that improve teaching quality and result in significant outcomes for children?

Based on deep discussion and an examination of the research and current practice, we agreed to focus on two primary policy levers that impact teaching quality: professional development and accountability. The above figure displays the theory of change that we developed using Darling-Hammond’s definition of teaching quality and our focus on the two policy levers.

In our work, *professional development* policies address early childhood educator preparation programs and ongoing professional learning that transpires as educators hone their skills through college coursework, training, and job-embedded professional development that nurtures professional learning and peer collaboration. *Accountability* policies address how we assess and support educator and program/school quality and include educator evaluation systems, educator licensure and certification, program quality monitoring, and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). Foundationally, both professional development policy and accountability policy are aligned to state and national standards for children’s learning, professional practice, and program quality. Together, these two policy levers can cultivate great teaching and help to create col-

laborative teaching environments in which educators and students excel.

This project focuses on accountability and professional development policies because they aim to directly enhance teaching in order to support children’s development. Other factors, however, also significantly shape children’s well-being. Chief among them is a child’s family and community. Indeed, quality teaching must be responsive to children’s family and cultural contexts. It has been well established that a family’s influence on a child’s development is paramount and that high-quality early childhood programs, coupled with comprehensive support services that enhance children’s mental and physical well-being, combine to help young children thrive.

Adequate financing for the early childhood system is also critical. Current funding levels do not provide children from families with factors that place them at risk for school failure with sufficient access to quality early learning opportunities. In spite of their substantial and increasingly sophisticated responsibilities, the vast majority of early childhood educators continue to receive near poverty wages and non-existent benefits (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). Additional resources are needed to adequately compensate and support the early childhood workforce. System financing has significant implications for the recruitment and retention of effective educators as well. Sufficient funding is also needed to create supportive work environments where educators have time and resources to best meet the needs of the children in their care. Indeed, sustained attention to the financial conditions plaguing the early childhood workforce is needed to achieve the goal of quality teaching for all children.



Although comprehensive family and community engagement and system financing are fundamental to realizing the potential of high-quality early childhood programs to improve children's development, the policies that address these issues warrant focused attention in their own right and are beyond the scope of our work. The current project focuses strategically on specific opportunities within states' professional development systems and accountability frameworks that address teaching quality.

This working paper describes our thinking about the promising approaches for implementing policies at sufficient depth and scale to make a difference for young children. It begins with a brief review of research on effective early childhood teaching practices. We contend that professional development and accountability policies must have a laser focus on supporting educators to enact these practices. We then describe several "implementation factors" that determine whether policies actually support early childhood educators to consistently use effective practices on a day-to-day basis. The paper then delves into four particular "problems of practice" that state leaders are currently wrestling with as they strive to implement specific policies that affect teaching quality. We conclude the paper with a discussion of four powerful state policies that we put forth that can improve teaching quality and children's outcomes.

III. Effective Early Childhood Teaching: Key to Children's Learning

The imperative to examine and strengthen the policies that aim to improve teaching quality comes from increasingly rigorous expectations for early childhood educators to enhance children's developmental outcomes in order to reap the benefits of early childhood investments. Most stakeholders agree that children thrive when they have high-quality learning environments with educators who use highly intentional, responsive, and developmentally and, individually, linguistically, culturally appropriate practice.



Research is deepening our understanding about the teaching strategies that help children gain critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will support their overall success in school and in life, such as critical thinking, curiosity, compassion, and creativity. Specifically, educators are effective when they:⁴

- Develop trusting and responsive relationships with their students and families.
- Individualize teaching based on a deep understanding of each child's knowledge, culture, language, ability, and experience.
- Balance child-initiated play and adult-guided hands-on learning.
- Scaffold children's learning by encouraging, modeling, demonstrating, providing information, assisting, and giving children specific feedback.
- Use coordinated instructional tools, such as comprehensive curricula and formative assessment data, to set and achieve learning goals that are challenging and meaningful to each and every child.
- Focus on language, literacy, and communication throughout the day.
- Support the development of the home language and English language acquisition for dual language learners.
- Engage in ongoing reflection and personal growth by learning from the children in their care, reflecting on their own teaching practice, and collaborating with colleagues through job-embedded professional learning routines.

Although policymakers and practitioners are gaining clarity about teaching practices that nurture children's development, many early childhood educators are not equipped or supported to implement these practices and too many young children receive inadequate early education (Nores & Barnett, 2014). A major disconnect persists between what research shows, what policies promote, and what educators do. To address this gap between policy and practice, policymakers must sharpen their focus on selected, proven professional learning and accountability policies.

⁴ This list of teaching strategies draws from seminal resources such as NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) and the DEC's Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (2014), as well as from Think Tank participants' reviews and comments on earlier versions of this paper.



IV. Moving from Research to Policy to Practice: Addressing Implementation

There are many reasons early childhood teaching does not consistently or equitably reflect best practices. During our Think Tank meeting, state colleagues raised particular challenges that influence the implementation of effective teaching for all children, in every setting, every day. As we reviewed these challenges and literature on policy implementation, we noted that there are three factors that can determine whether policies promote quality teaching that supports children's learning. They are briefly described below:

1 *Evidence-Based Policies and Practices: To what extent are policies and practices based on evidence that suggests they will reach the intended outcomes?*

Early childhood education researchers are continuously learning more about effective professional development practices as they answer “what works for whom under what circumstances” (Tout, Epstein, Soli, & Lowe, 2015). A commitment to enact reforms that have a demonstrated track record of improving teaching and learning, especially with our most vulnerable populations of children, is needed to enhance teaching quality and change the status quo when existing strategies are ineffective.

2 *State and Local Capacity: To what extent is there sufficient human and organizational capacity at the state and local levels to ensure that evidence-based policies and practices can be implemented with fidelity?*

The field's capacity to consistently support best practice is uneven and often limited. This is due to variations in funding, as well as human and organizational capacity at multiple points in the early childhood system. At both the state and local levels, sufficient human capital and a strong infrastructure are necessary to support significant and sustainable implementation of effective policies and practices.



3 *Policy Coherence: In what ways do evidence-based policies and practices fit together within the birth-3rd grade sector?*

The complexity of the early childhood system of services for children from birth through third grade contributes to the challenge of implementing effective approaches. The programs young children attend are located in community-based organizations, Head Start programs, homes, and, increasingly, in public schools. The program requirements, funding, and accountability policies that are designed to improve the quality of early childhood education need to reflect distinct policy contexts yet provide a coherent focus on teaching quality. As such, they need to build on existing policies and allow for sufficient flexibility with local adaptation so policies can be integrated. This is particularly critical for ensuring coherence between efforts that address children birth to age five before they begin kindergarten, and efforts focused on instruction in the early elementary grades in the public school sector.

We recommend that attention be paid to each implementation factor in order to strengthen the links between research, policy, and practice. Indeed, these factors influence how four particular “problems of practice” that we describe in the following section are experienced at the local level.

V. Four “Problems of Practice”

Together with our Think Tank colleagues, we identified four specific “problems of practice” that state leaders and national organizations are working together to tackle as they strive to implement policies that will improve teaching quality:

- Ensuring racially, culturally, and linguistically competent teaching for each and every child;
- Focusing professional development policies on effective teaching practices;
- Achieving coherence in accountability educator accountability policy; and
- Integrating teaching conditions into states’ professional development and accountability policies.

When we engaged states to participate in the Learning Table, we asked them to consider the “problem(s) of practice” they were particularly concerned with. Then, each problem served as a provocation for our Learning Table sessions.

For each learning table session, we engaged national experts to spark ideas and problem-solve with the state policymakers and we also provided resources and discussion guides related to each problem. In the following pages, we share the discussion guide for each problem in which we pose a guiding question, describe the rationale for the problem, and provide questions to provoke examination of the relevant implementation factors.

Problem: Ensuring racially, culturally, and linguistically competent teaching for each and every child

Guiding Question

How do we encourage early childhood teaching that is effective and responsive to the rich diversity of culture, language, abilities of young children, and their families?

Rationale

Teaching and caring for young children necessitates a strong understanding of the culture and community context surrounding them in their classrooms and families. Educators' ability to honor children's differences with individualized teaching and learning is foundational for children's development and building positive dispositions toward learning. However, a great deal of early education policy does not explicitly address how children's identities—in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, ability, and socio-economic status—shape teaching and learning. As a result, accountability and professional development strategies may not adequately support culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and effective instruction for children with disabilities.

The ongoing reflective practice that is needed to support the development of this deep understanding of children is seeded in educators' preparatory work and grows through ongoing reflection and improvement in educators' practice,

with an intentional emphasis on cultural and linguistic diversity. Indeed, job-embedded support for educators as they engage in sustained learning about themselves and the children they care for is essential to nurturing our diverse young children's development.

Moving Toward Solutions

Questions about evidence-based strategies: As policy-makers strive to ensure the early childhood workforce has the capacity to enact racially, culturally, and linguistically competent teaching practices, some important questions for state partners to consider include:

- In what ways do existing professional development and accountability policies reflect best practice in meeting the individual needs of diverse children?
- Do existing policies on English language learners support the latest research on dual language programs?
- What sources of evidence, including data, are used to track progress and improve racially, culturally, and linguistically competent teaching?

Questions about capacity: In order to move from policy to practice, there must be attention to the state and local capacity of programs and stakeholders to enact reforms. Some important questions for state partners to consider in this area include:

- Do recruitment, retention, and professional development strategies pay sufficient attention to how the early childhood workforce supports the diversity (e.g. race, culture, and language) of children?
- In what ways do state and local policies facilitate culturally competent instructional leadership?
- How are the supportive partners, such as higher education and professional development and technical assistance providers, positioned to support educators' and instructional leaders' practice?

Questions about coherence: New policy initiatives need to fit together with existing policies and practices in the birth-third grade sector. As policymakers consider how to install and sustain new approaches, some questions to consider include:

- In what ways can existing policies reinforce or limit states' goals and strategies to improve teaching for each and every child?
- What may be the unintended consequences of current and proposed policy initiatives for the diversity of the workforce and quality teaching for all children?



Problem: Focusing professional development policies on effective teaching practices

Guiding Question

How can early childhood professional development systems promote teaching practices that are most critical for advancing children's development?

Rationale

Given the diverse experience, qualifications, and job responsibilities of the early childhood workforce, a multifaceted yet targeted approach to professional learning is needed to support early childhood educators. Early childhood education researchers are continuously learning more about the best ways to support teaching quality (Neuman & Kamil, 2010). For instance, numerous studies have found that coaching focused on particular curricular objectives yields promising results for teaching and children's learning (Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, & Lavelle, 2010). Research suggests that rigorous preparation, professional learning that is grounded in educators' experiences, and supportive teaching conditions that promote collaboration can boost teaching quality.

Moving Toward Solutions

Questions about evidence-based strategies: As policymakers implement professional development approaches that successfully promote effective teaching, some important questions for state partners to consider include:

- Do early childhood educator preparation programs meet the early childhood education profession's national standards and provide students with a combination of rigorous early childhood content knowledge and rich and diverse field-based opportunities to hone their teaching skills?
- Do faculty at universities and colleges receive professional development that focuses on effective teaching practices?
- Do states' professional development standards hone in on the core features of effective teaching of young children?
- Is job-embedded professional learning, such as coaching and collaboration, used to support quality teaching?
- Do quality improvement and accountability policies include sensible expectations that educators use developmentally, individually, linguistically, and culturally appropriate instructional tools to inform their teaching?

Questions about capacity: In order to move from policy to practice, there must be attention to the state and local capacity of programs and stakeholders to enact reforms. Some important questions for state partners to consider in this area include:

- Do instructional leaders have knowledge about highly effective early childhood teaching strategies and the capacity to support educators to implement these practices?
- Are sufficient resources directed to evidence-based, job-embedded professional development approaches?
- Are professional learning strategies implemented with sufficient intensity and frequency to positively impact teaching practices?
- What is the right balance of investment toward staffing, instructional leadership, and job-embedded professional development compared to direct service?
- How are the state-level and local-level infrastructures equipped to ensure that high-quality professional development strategies are available and accessible to the local early childhood workforce?
- What sources of evidence, including data, are used to evaluate and continue to improve professional learning opportunities focused on effective teaching?

Questions about coherence: New policy initiatives need to fit together with existing policies and practices in the birth-third grade sector in order for educators and administrators to make sense of the policy and integrate new practices, resources, or approaches into their daily practice. As policymakers consider how to install and sustain new approaches, some questions to consider include:

- What professional development policies currently impact teaching quality?
- How would a new effort reinforce existing approaches?
- Does the policy or practice have sufficient flexibility and support to accommodate variations in the capacity and culture of different communities throughout the state?
- Does the policy or practice have flexibility to meet the needs of the diverse early childhood workforce?



Problem: Achieving coherence in educator accountability policy

Guiding Question

In what ways can the requirements of current early childhood accountability systems be better aligned and streamlined, so that educators in school, community, and home-based settings have coherent and equitable expectations for effective practice?

Rationale

Numerous accountability policies affect the birth-third grade early childhood workforce. Currently, early childhood accountability policies are set at different levels of government (i.e., federal, state, and local), apply to different sectors (e.g., child care and education) and target different components of early childhood education programs (i.e., program, classroom, and educator). The accountability policies for educators who work with children before they begin kindergarten include child care licensing regulations; Head Start program performance standards; state-funded prekindergarten program standards; state Quality Rating and Improvement System frameworks; and the Office of Special Education Program's rules and regulations. Within the public school sector, accountability policies include teacher licensure and endorsements to be certified to teach; and once employed by a public school, educator evaluation systems that assess teaching practices based, in part, on students' progress.

As a result of the current accountability context, many early childhood educators encounter multiple demands that focus on different aspects of their practice. This challenge is particularly acute for educators in state-funded prekindergarten programs and in early childhood special education classrooms because the public school teacher evaluation frameworks may apply to them, but the frameworks may not be grounded in early childhood best practice. When accountability reforms are perceived as inappropriate and disjointed, educators and other stakeholders may question

their value, resulting in confusion and lack of commitment to improvement.

To enhance young children's development and learning, our policies should focus on the key indicators that reflect a shared definition of teaching quality and provide meaningful information to educators. Policies should be used to promote professional learning and educator leadership, with multiple measures of assessment to inform teaching and learning. Streamlined accountability for early childhood programs is essential so that scarce resources—most importantly, educators' and leaders' time—may focus on providing each and every child with deep learning opportunities.

” Accountability policies should focus on the key indicators that reflect a shared definition of teaching quality and provide meaningful information to educators.

Moving Toward Solutions

Questions about evidence-based strategies: As policymakers streamline accountability approaches that promote effective teaching, some important questions for state partners to consider include:

- Do state and local stakeholders have a shared vision for what young children should learn and the best strategies to support children's progress toward those learning goals?
- Are there mechanisms for early childhood and PreK-12 to learn from each other's best practices, mistakes, and lessons to develop coherent support and accountability systems for early educators from birth-third grade?
- In what ways do accountability policies support educators' ongoing growth and encourage peer collaboration?
- Is there a mechanism to continue to plan, develop, and improve the accountability systems in each sector and track and align progress coming from each sector?

Questions about capacity: In order to move from policy to practice, attention must be paid to the state and local capacity of programs and stakeholders to enact reforms. Some important questions for state partners to consider in this area include:

- Are there policies in place to promote collaboration among the stakeholders who are responsible for designing and enacting accountability policies at the state and local levels?
- Are resources devoted to the implementation of coordinated accountability approaches across sectors or systems?



Questions about coherence: New policy initiatives need to fit together with existing policies and practices in the birth-third grade sector. As policymakers consider how to install and sustain new approaches, some questions to consider include:

- What federal, state, and local accountability policies are used to assess and support teaching quality—for which educators, in which settings?
- Are educators’ voices included in decisions about accountability policies?
- Are accountability systems implemented with sufficient flexibility to support the state’s diverse communities and instructional approaches?

Problem: Integrating teaching conditions into states’ professional development and accountability policies

Guiding Question

How can existing policies and practices promote teaching conditions that enhance educators’ abilities to improve their practice and support children’s optimal development?

Rationale

Supportive teaching conditions are essential for educators to implement practices that will help children reach significant developmental milestones (Almy & Tooley, 2012). Fullan (2007) argues that children’s learning depends on “every teacher learning all the time” (p. 1) and that supportive teaching conditions are critical to promote a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and sustained professional learning in which teachers and children thrive. Indeed, research shows that early childhood educators “seek work environments that have a high level of staff cohesion and collaboration, effective administration, and opportunities for teacher leadership” (Whitebook, 2014, p. 13).

Several tools exist to help leaders organize school and program environments so that educators have key supports, such as time to plan, collaborate, and provide instruction. Support for adult well-being, fair compensation, collaborative professional development, mutually respectful leadership, and coherent instructional guidance are also aspects of a productive and positive work environment. As part of this project, BUILD and CELO have developed a [teaching conditions discussion guide and crosswalk](#) of several tools to help stakeholders examine early childhood teaching conditions and identify the organizational supports needed for educators to best support their children’s development. As

policymakers look to advance teaching quality, it will be critical to embed these key constructs into states’ professional development and accountability policies.

Moving Toward Solutions

Questions about evidence-based strategies: As policymakers integrate teaching conditions into professional development and accountability approaches, some important questions for state partners to consider include:

- In what ways do existing state early childhood policies promote or inhibit productive and positive teaching conditions?
- Is there an equitable distribution of resources to support all educators in all settings, including compensation, benefits, and flexible staffing and work days?
- Are staffing levels sufficient to ensure educators have the time and support to enact effective teaching strategies?
- What are the multiple sources of evidence, including data, used to track progress and continue to improve and understand teaching conditions in all the sectors?

Questions about capacity: In order to move from policy to practice, attention must be paid to the state and local capacity of programs and stakeholders to enact reforms. Some important questions for state partners to consider in this area include:

- Do instructional leaders across the sectors have the human and organizational capacity to provide educators with supportive work environments?
- How much funding is needed to ensure attention and support for educators’ mental and physical well-being?

Questions about coherence: New policy initiatives need to fit together with existing policies and practices in the birth-third grade sector. As policymakers consider how to install and sustain new approaches, some questions to consider include:

- How can tools that assess and support work environments and teaching conditions be integrated into professional development and accountability frameworks?
- In what ways can policies that address teaching conditions reinforce states’ goals and strategies to improve teaching and learning?



VI. Where Are We Now: Four Powerful State Policies to Improve Teaching Quality and Child Outcomes

At the outset of this project we had two core questions:

- What are the consistent supports and sensible accountability systems needed to drive teaching quality that will result in improved outcomes for children?
- What guidance can we give to states about these “powerful and few” core state policies that improve teaching quality and result in significant outcomes for children?

We began with a working definition of teaching quality that addressed individual educator characteristics and conditions that affect effective teaching. Linda Darling-Hammond’s definition was a useful guide to begin our work with state leaders and helped to frame our examination of the specific conditions of early childhood teaching. Our work with states, in turn, led to further articulation of the problems of practice they encounter when implementing professional development and accountability policies for birth-third grade educators. In the previous sections of this paper, we describe an approach for identifying the “consistent supports and sensible accountability systems” to improve teaching quality and outcomes for children.

Here we propose an answer to the second question: What guidance can we give to states about these “powerful and few” core state policies that improve teaching quality and result in significant outcomes for children? We have identified four policies that we suggest represent the highest value and most coherent set of policies, the powerful and few, that can improve teaching and learning for all children, from birth through third grade.

As policymakers look to customize these recommendations to their state context, it will be essential to take stock of their state’s early childhood system. To do so, practicing early childhood educators and program instructional leaders, as well as higher education faculty, will need to be actively involved in the formulation and implementation of policies designed to enhance teaching quality. Additionally, states will need to examine the different tools with which to

exert priorities and change practice, including regulations, legislation, and administrative rules written by the range of agencies that influence the early care and education system (i.e., state departments of education, health, human services, and professional standards boards). In consideration of these four policy recommendations, we urge policymakers

to carefully select the policy tools that make sense within their state context. Finally, we

also urge that serious attention be given to the supports and resources that will be needed to assure there is sufficient capacity to enact these policy reforms; while policies are an important first step, dedicated funding and staffing will be necessary to achieve many of the policy reforms needed to significantly improve teaching quality for all young children.

“ We also urge that serious attention be given to the supports and resources that will be needed to assure there is sufficient capacity to enact these policy reforms.

1. States have a professional learning policy that promotes positive teaching conditions for all roles in the birth-third grade workforce.

The policy requires using appropriate measures, methods, and tools to design individual professional learning plans for each role in the early childhood workforce, including educators, paraprofessionals, instructional leaders and coaches, and administrators. In addition, the policy ensures there are sufficient resources for professional learning to be meaningful, useful, timely, relevant, and job-embedded. The state policy supports the implementation of positive teaching conditions that include operational flexibility and sustained supports for continuous improvement. The policy promotes adult well-being and a culture of collaboration and emphasizes the importance of providing educators with sufficient time to work together as they design differentiated instruction that builds on a deep understanding of children’s strengths and abilities. It also encourages teaching that is responsive to culturally diverse families and engages and supports families in the teaching and learning process.

2. States have an educator evaluation policy that promotes professional learning for all roles in the birth-third grade workforce.

States review and refocus educator evaluation and accountability approaches with the explicit goal of developing comprehensive, and intentional professional appraisal processes that support professional growth as well as children’s development. With this policy shift, states will promote coherence between birth-5 and PreK-12 systems by em-

bedding aligned expectations for teaching quality within the QRIS and other educator accountability frameworks. The policy requires the use of developmentally, individually, linguistically, and culturally appropriate measures, methods, and tools to assess the professional competencies of a highly effective professional that is relevant for each role/setting in the early childhood workforce. The policy specifically requires the use of a valid and reliable measure of children's growth for birth-third grade educators (e.g., portfolio or other framework) and *bans the use of standardized measures* that have not been specifically designed or validated for the children being assessed. This approach uses appropriate methods of considering the adult's role in children's learning as *one* indicator of effectiveness and the working conditions and child/family characteristics that influence teaching quality and children's learning. The policy provides sufficient resources to ensure that those responsible for evaluating teaching quality have the skills needed to fairly evaluate early childhood educators and for the findings of the ratings to be meaningful, useful, timely, and relevant to the specific role. Further, results are used to support educators as they reflect on their practice and develop individual professional development plans; negative consequences are minimized.

3. States embed expectations for the use of developmentally, individually, linguistically, and culturally appropriate instructional tools within QRIS, PreK, and other program standards.

States encourage the use of comprehensive and integrated curricula and formative assessments that support educators as they enact highly intentional, responsive, and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices. State policy should *not* mandate the use of one set of instructional tools or prescribe curricula. Rather, policy should empower instructional leaders and educators to work together to select and implement tools that facilitate individualized and rigorous instruction that helps culturally, linguistically, and ability-diverse children and families to thrive. It is vital that instructional tools be meaningful and valid; they must build on the experience, content knowledge, and abilities that young children bring to their learning.

4. States amend early childhood educator and leader credentialing and licensure policies to assure the birth-third grade workforce has demonstrated competence specific to early childhood education and culturally responsive teaching.

States review and amend workforce competency standards, credentials and certifications that apply all roles in the birth-third grade workforce. Accordingly, states also examine and strengthen the capacity of early childhood educator preparation programs and support faculty that have the knowledge, skills, and experience to teach candidates about culturally responsive practice. Faculty have the experience and expertise to support educators and leaders through preparatory field experience and coursework to meet new requirements. It is essential that practicing educators and higher education faculty be actively involved in this process.

VII. Next Steps

BUILD and CELO have taken step towards underscoring key policy and practice challenges our field currently faces in its goal to dramatically improve the quality of early childhood teaching and young children's learning. But we know change happens incrementally, and, therefore, will continue to tackle these challenges together with our state and national colleagues. The first step in supporting policymakers was our joint facilitation of a state policy Learning Table with six state teams. Together, states developed [action plans](#) to improve the development and implementation of policies that support teaching quality. For example, plans include reviewing and revising educator and leader competencies, developing new endorsements for educators, and improving professional learning opportunities for leaders, so they are better equipped to support culturally responsive practice and effective teaching conditions. As we look to the future, we intend to engage another Learning Table that will build on lessons learned from the first, and will be tailored to states focused specifically on the aforementioned policy recommendations. In this working paper, we strive to document our collective thinking, problem solving, and promising policies that can enhance early childhood teaching quality. Together we will continue to champion strategic policymaking that advances quality teaching and learning.

To learn more, please review the related resources that have been developed for this initiative:

1. [Sharpening the Focus: State Policy to Promote Effective Teaching that Improves Learning](#)
2. [Sharpening the Focus: State Policy to Promote Effective Teaching that Improves Learning – Policy Brief](#)
3. [Teaching Conditions Discussion Guide and Crosswalk](#)
4. [Teaching and Learning Resource List](#)
5. [Learning Table Landing Pad](#)

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