

To: Senate Education Committee
From: Dana Hepper, Director of Policy & Program, Children's Institute
Date: Thursday, February 9th, 2017
Re: Support for Senate Bill 182, relating to professional development for educators in early learning through grade 12

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of expanded professional learning opportunities for early childhood educators as proposed in Senate Bill 182. My name is Dana Hepper, and I'm the Director of Policy & Program for the Children's Institute. Children's Institute's mission is to move research into action by supporting public and private investments in our youngest children birth to age eight.

The importance of high quality early learning experiences

Children thrive in high-quality early learning environments with teachers who are well-trained and equipped to cultivate essential foundational skills for later school success. Before children enter Kindergarten, their brains grow to 90% of its adult size. The quality and continuity of a child's early experiences during this critical period of brain growth is particularly important as it sets the foundation for all future learning. Early childhood education benefits children from all socio-economic backgrounds, but it is especially beneficial for low-income children, children of color, children with developmental disabilities, and English language learners.

Early learning educators are a key component of high quality early learning

The quality of early learning is largely determined by the quality of the educators. As Oregon increases investments in early learning, we must simultaneously develop a highly skilled workforce that will support children when their brains are rapidly developing. Research shows that continuing education and on-going professional development improve the quality of teacher-child interactions and improve early childhood learning environments. Early educators need professional development in constructing enriching classroom environments designed to intentionally expand vocabulary, nurture social, cognitive, and physical development, and foster a lifelong love of learning.

Professional development also improves retention of staff in early childhood programs. Teacher retention is critical for positive child outcomes. Constant adjustments to new staff and routines can negatively impact cognitive development in children.

Senate Bill 182 supports early childhood educators across multiple settings

Section 3 of Senate Bill 182 supports alignment between professional learning for early childhood educators and K-12 educators by ensuring the Early Learning Division is at the Council table. The early learning workforce is becoming increasingly essential to improving Oregon's education system. For children transitioning from early childhood environments to Kindergarten, they need to experience common expectations across the two settings to thrive. This requires opportunities for educators across settings to have a common understanding of developmentally appropriate practice and shared professional learning opportunities. For the over 50 school districts across Oregon who are running preschools in their district, it is critical that they can support their preschool teachers to do their best work with kids. Creating the Council for Educator Advancement with the Early Learning Division at the table is an important step toward meeting these needs.

Section 11 of Senate Bill 182 also acknowledges the distinct needs of early childhood educators that may be distinct from K-12 educators. The early care and education workforce is quite diverse racially, culturally, and linguistically – something that should be celebrated and intentionally preserved. Early learning occurs in a variety of settings (including homes, centers, schools, Relief Nurseries, and more). Providers across these settings have varying degrees of access to professional learning and higher education. A one-size-fits-all approach would be misguided. The legislation smartly calls out expanding access to continuing education for all providers. We know what works to make continuing education accessible to this diverse workforce, including creating professional development cohorts, increasing access to scholarships, and providing mentoring. This legislation addresses the range of early childhood educators, whether they are a lead preschool teacher in an elementary school or an in-home family childcare provider. We have children in all of these settings, so we must support educators across these settings.

We request your support for SB 182 and for new funding to expand professional learning opportunities for early childhood educators. A skilled workforce that is purposefully aligned to K-12 will ensure our youngest children are prepared for school and help to ensure that our investments are sustained through their educational continuum.

Resources

Whitebrook, Marcy (2014). Building a Skilled Teacher Workforce: Shared and Divergent Challenges in Early Care and Education and in Grades K-12. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

<http://cscce.berkeley.edu/building-a-skilled-teacher-workforce/>

Investing in Young Kids = Investing in their Teachers. (2008). Children's Institute.

http://www.childinst.org/images/stories/ci_publications/ci-investing-in-young-kids-2008.pdf