

EDUCATION

The Crisis Facing America's Preschool Teachers

Efforts to fill centers with better qualified early-childhood workers are threatening the jobs of those who can't afford to get their college degree, and some states are turning to apprenticeships to solve both problems at once.

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Jameelah Jones is relieved to be working again. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015,

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Jameelah Jones is relieved to be working again. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015, she had to take leave from her job at the Parent Infant Center in west Philadelphia where she was the head teacher to a class of 3-year olds. With her cancer in remission she was able to return to work last year, but she was barred from going back to the same classroom: The center had raised the qualifications for its head teachers, requiring that they now have an associate's degree. Jones doesn't have one, so she had to take a position in the infant room instead, caring for children ages 2 and younger.

Jones, who recently turned 50 and has lived in Philadelphia since immigrating there from Guyana at age 10, has spent most of her adult life working with

children. She has watched the childcare field evolve over the course of her career, from an emphasis on making sure young children mind their manners to one on helping them develop rich vocabularies before they start kindergarten. “I used to teach the children to say, ‘No thank you’ to anything they didn’t want or like. I must have said it a thousand times a day,” she said, chuckling. “Now, if a child doesn’t want something, I encourage them to say exactly what they mean; ‘No, I do not want to share my block with you.’ Or ‘No, I do not want to eat the carrots.’ The more words the better.”

Jones believes that long-time workers like her do need more training in the theory and practice of early learning. In fact, she has tried many times over the last two decades to complete a college degree, and she is still paying off over \$8,000 in student loans from those attempts. But thanks to various obstacles—raising her two daughters, the deaths of her nephew and then her sister, or her recent battle with cancer—she was never able to finish. By now, she has run through her eligibility for Pell grants and can’t afford any more debt.

With so many new requirements popping up, time is running out for many long-time childcare workers, particularly those like Jones for whom going back to school seems all but impossible.

But thankfully for Jones, her employer is keen for her to stay and willing to help. It’s partnering with a program that equips early-education workers who lack college degrees with the training and qualifications they need to remain competitive. This spring, Jones enrolled at Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), as part of the apprenticeship program, organized by a local nonprofit dedicated to building the skills of the city’s health and childcare workers. The organization, the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, is partnering with CCP and more than 20 childcare centers across the city to provide apprenticeships to people like Jones, who along with 32 fellow apprentices is on track to earn an associate’s degree in early-childhood education.

Jones is optimistic about finishing because it’s easier to combine working and learning through the apprenticeship approach than it is through traditional degree programs. In this program, she is a “registered apprentice,” a designation

defined in federal law for a particular class of workers that confers a set of specific rights and responsibilities on her and her employer. Jones's rights include access to structured, paid, on-the-job training and a worksite mentor. She also has six hours a week of release time to attend classes at CCP, and is entitled to a series of pay raises as she meets key benchmarks. Her responsibilities include working closely with her mentor, passing her courses, and abiding by all the workplace rules she was already subject to at PIC. In addition, she has to demonstrate mastery of a set of core, on-the-job skills; she gets college credit once she does.

In other words, Jones is making progress toward her degree just by coming to work every day and learning on the job. And by the time she finishes next year, she'll not only have an associate's degree—she will also be making \$2 more per hour than she currently is, and be no deeper in debt.

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The early-education field is in a difficult period of transition. Grounded in solid evidence that early learning can help reduce educational achievement gaps among children and generate a host of other lasting positive effects, the field is still struggling to distinguish itself from traditional childcare. Early education is arguably the most effective part of the educational system for mitigating the toxic effects of poverty, but it also receives much less funding than other levels of schooling. While advocates seek to position early education as a natural extension of the K-12 school system, it is still delivered primarily through private childcare centers and paid for by parents who can afford it. The public funding that is available exists primarily through Head Start and block grants and is distributed as vouchers to low-income families; states are increasingly funding early education, too. But waiting lists are often long and demand far outstrips supply.

As governments invest, they also need to ensure that public dollars are flowing to high-quality programs—which means to centers staffed by qualified teachers. Efforts to professionalize the field have focused on increasing the education level of the workers in the centers, with the eventual goal of putting them on par with

those of elementary-school teachers, who in public schools are required to have bachelor's degrees.

Increasing the credential requirements for early educators, however, is raising a host of equity concerns as longtime workers like Jones face the prospect of losing their job if they are unable to complete college. Fewer than half of educators working with children ages 3–5 in center-based settings in 2012 had a bachelor's degree. That figure drops to 19 percent for those working with infants and toddlers.

Then there's the fact that increasing the educational levels of early-education workers has had almost no effect on their wages. The average pay for a childcare teacher in the United States is just \$9.70 an hour, and many lack access to benefits like health insurance or paid leave. Pay is low even for early-education teachers with bachelor's degrees, who make around \$30,000 per year on average. In fact, according to Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, a bachelor's degree in early education generates the lowest lifetime earnings of all college majors. Imposing degree requirements for workers like Jones without a strategy for increasing her wages could mean early-education advocates are just trading off greater equity at one end of the spectrum for more inequity at the other.

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Most of the efforts to professionalize the early-education workforce have been built around providing workers access to financial aid so they can afford college. Philadelphia's early-childhood apprenticeship initiative is going one step further and bringing college into the workplace, allowing participants to work toward their degree during work hours. Attending online classes at night after a long day caring for children, or taking a course or two a semester at a local community or for-profit college, is not the same as learning on the job; the classmates are not coworkers, the teacher is not a supervisor, and the content is often generic. Apprenticeship, at least in theory, allows participants to leverage their everyday experiences on the job to integrate theory and practice.

Childcare workers don't come to mind when most people think about apprenticeship. Images of blue-collar workers in the building trades—or a reality TV show starring well-dressed celebrities—probably come to mind. But over the last decade, apprenticeship has been expanding into industries such as healthcare, finance, IT, and even cybersecurity. The Obama Administration invested more than \$250 million in efforts to double the number of American apprentices, and the Trump Administration issued an Executive Order in June calling for the expansion of apprenticeship into new industry sectors. Governors in Colorado, South Carolina, Washington, and Maryland have all launched programs aimed at growing their apprenticeship systems.

Apprenticeship is appealing for all kinds of reasons. For employers, it's a proven strategy for addressing skill shortages. For policymakers, it is an effective workforce-development strategy that leverages public and private investments. For the apprentices, it is an opportunity to get valuable skills and credentials without going through traditional college. All three of those factors make apprenticeship a particularly good fit for professionalizing early-education workers: Childcare centers need more teachers with degrees, policymakers want to expand access to quality early education without increasing the cost to families, workers need affordable pathways to degrees.

The Philadelphia apprenticeship program is designed specifically for childcare workers who have experience in the field but lack an associate's degree. The apprentices will take a series of courses at CCP. They will also participate in structured, on-the-job learning, mastering a set of skills identified by the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children (DVAEYC) and aligned with national quality standards for early educators.

The courses have been designed to complement the on-the-job learning. The general-education courses—in math, English, and computer literacy—have been contextualized around the work of early education. For their English requirement, for example, the apprentices are reading *Play*, a book that explores how play can support early learning, and writing a paper on early-childhood

development. They are learning to use Excel and PowerPoint in ways relevant to solving problems that might come up at work.

Putting the program together has not been simple. The Training Fund recruits the employers and manages a complex web of relationships among apprentices, mentors, the community college, and state and city agencies. For now, the program is financed through a mix of public and private funding sources. Employers commit to four pay raises and to paying 10 percent of an apprentice's tuition at CCP (about \$500 a year). The apprentices also pay 10 percent of tuition. The rest of the tuition, fees, and materials costs are covered by Pennsylvania T.E.A.C.H. scholarships.