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New Strategies for Supporting Early Educators and Improving Quality at Scale: Lessons from Louisiana's Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate Program

Decades of research indicate that high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs can have a profound impact on a range of both short- and long-term outcomes. It is increasingly recognized that early educators are the most critical driver of quality in ECE settings, and it is therefore problematic that the ECE workforce in the United States is characterized by low levels of education, limited training related to children's development, very low pay, and, in turn, high levels of poverty, stress, and turnover. Further, the professional learning opportunities available to the ECE workforce are criticized for their lack of standards, insufficient basis in the science of adult learning, and lack of opportunities for applied practice. There are now widespread calls for bold new strategies to ensure the ECE workforce has access to the training and resources needed to provide young children with warm, responsive early learning opportunities.

In 2014, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), passed a policy requiring that by July of 2019 all lead teachers in centers that receive public funding must attain a new educational credential called the Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC). For the large number of Louisiana child care teachers who do not already have a degree or credential, the ECAC aims to provide foundational training that is well-aligned with best practices, focused on teacher-child interactions, and anchored in opportunities for practice. To ensure the quality and accessibility of the ECAC program, LDOE leveraged federal Child Care and Development Block Grant dollars to (1) provide start-up funds to support the development of programs to provide the ECAC, (2) fund scholarships so that pursuing the degree was free to teachers, and (3) offer tax credits through which teachers with an ECAC could receive up to \$3,300 per year.

Although thousands of Louisiana's early educators have attained the ancillary certificate since it was introduced in 2014, to date there is no empirical evidence on the link between this novel approach to professionalizing the child care workforce and key outcomes of interest. Further, many of the teachers who begin pursuing the ECAC drop out prior to completion, highlighting the need to better understand the unique challenges early educators face when pursuing professional learning opportunities, and to find practical strategies for addressing those barriers. The proposed project tackles two aims: (1) to understand the extent to which completing the ECAC is linked to developmentally- and policy-relevant outcomes including: teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and wellbeing; the quality of teacher-child interactions; and rates of teacher turnover, and (2) to identify key barriers early educators face when attempting to complete the ECAC, and evaluate a low-cost strategy to support these educators through the ECAC completion process.

Through a longstanding research-practice partnership between the University of Virginia and LDOE, the proposed four-year project combines secondary analysis of administrative data, new primary data collection, and a low-cost randomized controlled trial to help Louisiana iteratively refine their ECAC program and to inform other states' early childhood policymakers as they consider how to best support the professional growth of early educators.