



# A Comprehensive Evaluation of Florida's Early Childhood Professional Development System

Strengths, Challenges and Recommendations for Improvement

# Overview

The early childhood years are a remarkable period of human development that builds the foundation for lifelong social and emotional skills, literacy, curiosity, and approaches to learning. Hundreds of thousands of young children in Florida regularly attend early learning programs. The state's 23,000 licensed and license-exempt early childhood programs and licensed and registered family child care homes employ more than 55,000 early childhood professionals, who work as family child care providers, teachers, caregivers, directors, and support staff.

In 2011, during a time of growth and change in the state's early childhood professional development landscape, Florida's Office of Early Learning commissioned the University of Florida (UF) Lastinger Center for Learning to engage the voices of stakeholders in the state's early childhood professional development system and complete an analysis of this system's strengths and gaps. The Office of Early Learning sought to identify actionable steps to improve the quality, availability, affordability, and access to professional development.

To accomplish this goal, the UF Lastinger Center early learning study team listened to the stakeholders' needs, challenges, and successes related to professional development and gathered the opinions of providers and directors in for-profit, nonprofit, faith-based, school-based, Head Start, and family child care programs; trainers, early learning coalitions, provider associations, and higher education institutions; and they completed an exhaustive review of reports, minutes, and other documents about existing work at the state and local levels.

Throughout this process, the UF Lastinger Center study team invited feedback from leaders across the state to ensure that the analysis reflected their reality and that the resulting recommendations would make a measurable difference for early childhood professional development in Florida. More than 700 individual early childhood professionals contributed their ideas and feedback to this report.

## The study team:

- Organized the extensive feedback into a coherent summary of the state's professional development system
- Identified overarching issues that Florida's Office of Early Learning needs to address as it takes the next steps in professional development systems building
- Developed actionable recommendations for how Florida's Office of Early Learning can take bold steps forward in building a cutting edge professional development system for early childhood professionals in the state of Florida.

## The report includes:

- A detailed overview of the study
- Information on the early childhood workforce and primary deliverers of professional development in Florida
- An assessment of the early childhood professional development system
- Key issues facing professional development for early childhood professionals
- Detailed recommendations to strengthen the state's early childhood professional development system
- Extensive attachments documenting the conversations and work to date on early childhood professional development.

## Study Objectives

Florida's Office of Early Learning commissioned this study to:

- Provide an assessment of the state's early childhood professional development system through existing data and a comprehensive landscape analysis of providers, partnerships, and initiatives;
- Identify barriers to and opportunities for professional development, along with the strengths and limitations of the state's early childhood professional development system;
- Identify current articulation practices, including barriers and successful strategies;
- Issue recommendations for how Florida's Office of Early Learning can strengthen the early childhood professional development system.



## Overview of Florida's Early Childhood Workforce

To put this report in context, it is important to understand general information about the early childhood workforce in Florida.

- Of the 55,000+ early childhood educators in the approximately 23,000 child care programs (including licensed centers, license-exempt, licensed and registered family child care homes) across Florida, less than 4% report having college degrees.
- In the nation's largest Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program (VPK), with more than 165,000 children participating during 2010-2011, only 29% of Florida's VPK early childhood educators held a Bachelor's degree and 9% had an Associate's degree.<sup>1</sup>
- Although Florida's Head Start grantees are making good progress on meeting professional development/college degree goals (30% with Bachelor's or graduate ECE degrees and 17% with Associate ECE degrees in 2011),<sup>2</sup> they have not yet been met and many Head Start professionals continue to struggle with access to and completion of degree programs.
- Most early childhood professionals complete the ten hours of in-service required for licensing and do not exceed this requirement.

Without a statewide professional development registry, there is no detailed information on the credentials and training of the early childhood workforce in Florida.

## Barriers to Participating in Professional Development

A national assessment of the barriers to professional development noted the myriad of challenges related to economics, time, and educational limitations that the early childhood workforce faces in accessing high-quality professional development. Although no Florida-specific data are currently available, these national barriers mirror those heard during the listening tour.

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<sup>1</sup> Children's Movement. (2011). Voluntary Prekindergarten Program. Miami, FL: author.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy. (2010). Florida Head Start by the Numbers. Washington, DC: author.



## Early Learning Professional Development Delivery In Florida

There are a number of organizations that deliver early childhood professional development in Florida.

### EARLY LEARNING COALITIONS

The Early Learning Coalitions are one of the primary providers of professional development to early childhood professionals in Florida. The 31 coalitions vary widely in the professional development offered, the degree to which providers and other stakeholders are engaged in helping to plan the professional development offered, and financial and other resources to support professional development of providers.

### PROVIDER ASSOCIATIONS

Six provider associations are important sources of early childhood professional development in Florida, primarily through their conferences; associations also offer trainings and other non-conference-related professional development.

### CHILDREN'S SERVICES COUNCILS

In 2010-2011, Florida's 11 Children's Services Councils collectively invested more than \$370 million in hundreds of local programs and services for children and their families, primarily in prevention and early intervention programs.

### HEAD START GRANTEES

More than 60 Head Start/Early Head Start grantees in Florida serve 42,667 low-income children and their families: 4,040 children starting in pregnancy with Early Head Start until the child's third birthday and another 38,627 children ages 3-5 in Head Start. Grantees are significant providers of professional development.

### THE FLORIDA CHILDREN'S FORUM

Among the diverse work the Florida Children's Forum contributes to the state of Florida, the Forum administers the Florida Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Scholarship Program. The Florida Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Scholarship Program works with 48 colleges, universities, and vocational technical schools, and 14 community-based training institutions and since 1998, more than 22,000 scholarships have been awarded.

### COMMUNITY AND STATE COLLEGES

Of the 28 community and state colleges in Florida offering two-year and four-year early childhood degrees, some institutions offer more than one degree option, providing 38 degree associate and bachelor options for early childhood degree programs.

# Partnerships Working to Improve Florida's Professional Development System

Florida has two statewide partnerships that work to support the development of a statewide early childhood professional development system.

- Professional Development Initiative (PDI)
- Florida Community College Early Childhood Educators' Network (FCCECEN)

## Status of Professional Development in Florida

A detailed summary of the early childhood professional development system in Florida includes the following conclusions:

- Florida has no statewide professional development system.
- There are major issues related to quality, accessibility, content and pathways to pursue credentials or degrees.
- The lack of a system is inefficient and ineffective for meeting the state's goal of improving school readiness and lifelong success.
- Local pockets of excellence and innovation exist in Florida, providing a strong foundation upon which to build a statewide system.
- Previous attempts to build a professional development system need to be refined and implemented statewide to meet needs throughout Florida.

## Synthesis of the Key Issues Facing Florida's Early Childhood Professional Development System

Given this feedback from practitioners, directors, family child care providers, faith-based providers, Head Start programs, provider associations, trainers, higher education faculty, early learning coalitions, and other stakeholders, the UF Lastinger Center identified the following overarching issues for Florida's Early Childhood Professional Development System:

### QUALITY

- The state must improve the quality of early childhood professional development without creating a burdensome bureaucracy or limiting local flexibility to respond to local needs.
- Trainings and training organizations need mechanisms to share content and promising practices efficiently.
- Training organizations and coalitions need tools to support trainers.
- Strategies are needed to create mechanisms to spread excellence (and stop mediocre or bad professional development).

### CONTENT

- Florida should develop and share high-quality content designed to build core competencies and support the early learning and development standards.
- Trainers and training organizations need resources to meet the needs of providers, particularly specific audiences, such as family child care providers or those serving particularly vulnerable populations: infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and dual-language learners.

### DOCUMENTATION

- Providers and directors want a summary of training/credentials. Technology solutions that support an efficient, dynamic, and robust registry and professional development system are needed.

## PATHWAYS

- Many providers will not pursue credentials and degrees. For the many others who want to, the appropriate partners in the state must create efficient and streamlined paths from credentials to two-year and/or four-year degrees.
- Credentialing and degree-granting institutions need tools to share good practices across the state.

## DELIVERY

- There are many talented entities working in the early childhood professional development space. An inclusive system designed to play to the strengths of different partners needs to be designed and supported.
- Strategies for coalitions, provider associations, and independent training organizations to work together are needed to ensure providers have a rich array of content available to support their professional development needs.

## ENGAGEMENT

- Providers and partners should be actively and consistently involved in identifying professional development content and effective delivery so professional development offerings can improve over time.

# Recommendations

After carefully confirming with early childhood leaders in the state through multiple rounds of public feedback that these were the key issues, the UF Lastinger Center identified high-impact recommendations built from best practices in Florida and other states. Based on the needs of early childhood professionals, feedback from early childhood stakeholders throughout the state, and the current professional development infrastructure of existing initiatives, the study team challenged itself to answer two key questions:

What are the most cost-effective and capacity-building actions that Florida's Office of Early Learning can take to improve the availability, affordability, and accessibility to high-quality professional development for Florida's 55,000 early learning educators?

- What additional steps can Florida's Office of Early Learning take to support the development of a statewide early childhood professional development system that serves providers and business owners in ways that enhance the care and education they provide to young children?

The study team designed recommendations answering these questions that involve cross-cutting solutions and that holistically address the issues identified. The recom-

mendations were vetted multiple times with key leaders throughout the state to ensure there was widespread agreement and clarity about the recommendations. After each instance of sharing, the study team further refined and modified the recommendations to represent the full feedback of the stakeholders.



## RECOMMENDATION #1

*Work with stakeholders throughout Florida to create an Early Childhood Professional Development Challenge Fund that will ensure sustained, predictable professional development funding for a statewide early childhood professional development system. This public-private partnership should include federal, state, and local investment as well as opportunities for foundations and businesses to invest in systemic solutions for early childhood professionals.*

## RECOMMENDATION #2

*Build a powerful online professional development system that connects early childhood professionals throughout the state, provides high-quality training to early childhood professionals, and ensures effective content is available to every early learning coalition and to other professional development providers across the state. This system should contain a robust, multifaceted professional development registry that not only documents the professional achievements of providers and trainers but also supports the availability and quality of professional development in local communities.*

## RECOMMENDATION #3

*Support the creation of seamless, more consistent Career Pathways throughout the state that build on best practices in local Florida communities and nationally.*

## RECOMMENDATION #4

*Create an advanced credential for early childhood professionals in Florida.*

## RECOMMENDATION #5

*Develop and implement strategies to improve the quality of trainers to ensure that trainers implement professional development experiences that provide rich content, utilize best practices for engaging adult learners, and are designed to improve practice.*

## RECOMMENDATION #6

*Provide examples of promising practices of engaging providers to inform professional development offerings and delivery and to ensure offerings meet the needs of early childhood professionals. Through the Early Childhood Professional Development Challenge Fund, offer competitive grant opportunities to communities/coalition areas that want to expand their provider engagement in new ways.*

## RECOMMENDATION #7

*Expand professional development options for specific populations of providers: family child care providers, infant-toddler caregivers, caregivers serving children with special needs, and caregivers working with dual-language learners. Develop at least 20 hours of new content available statewide for each population.*

## RECOMMENDATION #8

*Create tools to support the creation of intentional partnerships among coalitions, provider associations, and other partners to provide coordinated professional development to early childhood professionals.*

## Conclusion

The recommendations in this report are grounded in the needs of the field and reflect the current reality of professional development capacity in Florida. Implementing these recommendations will make dramatic progress toward the goal of ensuring that the state's 55,000 early childhood professionals receive appropriate, high-quality, and timely professional development opportunities.

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