

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

Policy Brief

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By: Kate Tarrant with Lori Connors-Tadros, Jana Martella and Debi Mathias



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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

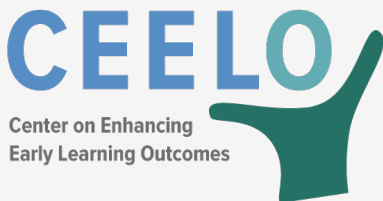
With a staff of seasoned experts including researchers and evaluators, BUILD provides customized and targeted technical assistance, financial support and professional development opportunities to early childhood leaders in the public sector and the private advocacy and foundation community.

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 to implement early learning and development policies, programs, and practices that improve outcomes for all young children. Together we have engaged in a project to strengthen policy that promotes effective early childhood teaching and learning for each and every child from birth through third grade.

The imperative to examine and strengthen the policies that aim to improve teaching quality comes from increasingly rigorous expectations for early childhood educators¹ to enhance children's development in order to reap the benefits of early childhood investments. Most stakeholders agree that children thrive when they have high-quality learning environments and educators who use developmentally and culturally responsive practice that nurtures children's critical thinking skills, curiosity, compassion, and creativity. Many early childhood educators are not equipped and supported to implement these practices and too many young children receive inadequate early education (Nores & Barnett, 2014).² To address this gap between policy and practice, policymakers must sharpen their focus on selected, proven professional learning and accountability policies.

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 have the responsibility to guide early childhood policy in their states. Over the past year, we have convened leaders to provide ideas, best practices, and resources that will inform “what” policies most effectively advance teaching quality and “how” those policies and programs can be implemented to support great teaching and learning.



II. Our Focus: Professional Development and Accountability Policies

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

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)³

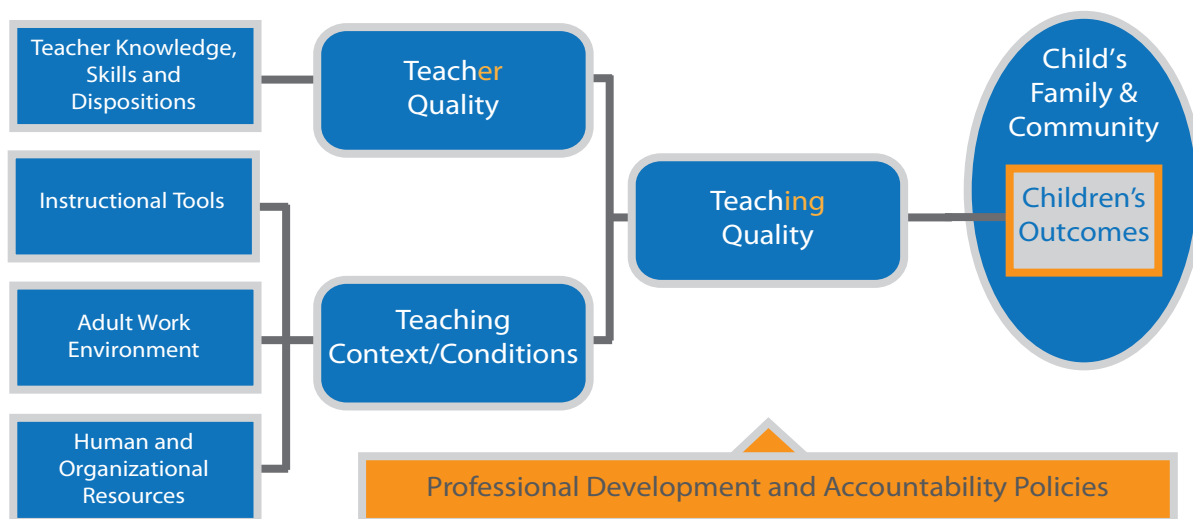
In early childhood education, *strong instruction* nurtures children's love of learning through a balance of child-initiated play and teacher-guided hands-on experience; it is highly intentional, responsive, and developmentally, individually, linguistically and culturally appropriate. Importantly, Darling-Hammond's definition of teaching quality extends beyond the individual educators' 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.

Based on deep discussion and an examination of the research and current practice, we agreed to focus on two policy levers that impact teaching quality: professional development and accountability policies. *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

¹ 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.”

² All references are available in the full version of the paper.

³ 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.



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 collaborative teaching environments in which educators and students excel.

Throughout the project, the following questions have guided our work:

- 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 the powerful and few core state policies that improve teaching quality and result in significant outcomes for children?

Through our collaboration with national experts and state leaders, we have begun to develop answers to these questions. First, we explore the consistent supports—professional development and accountability policies—that drive teaching quality and then we discuss recommendations for the powerful and few core state policies to promote effective early childhood teaching and learning for each and every child.



III. Consistent Supports and Sensible Accountability Systems Needed to Drive Teaching Quality

To arrive at an understanding of the consistent supports and accountability systems needed to drive teaching quality, we worked with states to explore the challenges that policymakers encounter as they implement professional development and accountability policies that impact birth through third grade teachers. We note that there are three factors that can determine whether policies are effective.

- 1 *Evidence-Based Policies and Practices:* The extent to which policies and practices are based on evidence that suggests they will reach the intended outcomes.
- 2 *State and Local Capacity:* The extent to which there is sufficient human and organizational capacity at the state and local levels to ensure that evidence-based policies and practices can be implemented with fidelity.
- 3 *Policy Coherence:* In what ways do evidence-based policies and practices fit together within the birth-third grade sector?

Our colleagues also raised particular challenges that influence the implementation of effective teaching for all children, in every setting, every day. More specifically, they surfaced four “problems of practice.”

1. Ensuring racially, culturally, and linguistically competent teaching for each and every child.

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 socioeconomic 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 an educator's 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.

2. Focusing professional development policies on effective teaching practices. 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.



3. Achieving coherence in educator accountability policy. 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). As a result, early childhood educators are faced with varied program standards and subjected to divergent monitoring procedures 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 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.

4. Integrating teaching conditions into states' professional development and accountability policies. 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.

IV. Guidance About the “Powerful and Few” Core State Policies that Improve Teaching Quality

Informed by the collaboration of state and national leaders, 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 children 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, they will need to (1) engage practicing educators, program instructional leaders, and higher education faculty in the process, (2) select policy tools with which to exert priorities and change practice based on their state's political context, and (3) invest in 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 embedding aligned expectations for teaching quality within the QRIS and other educator accountability frameworks. The policy requires the use of developmentally 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 and certifications that apply to 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.

V. Next Steps

BUILD and CELO have taken step towards underscoring key policy and practice challenges our field currently faces in our 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. As we look to the future, we intend to tailor supports to states specifically on the aforementioned policy recommendations. 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](#)



