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Pennsylvania Makes Degree Apprenticeships Part of its Strategy for Preparing a Qualified Early Learning Workforce

BLOG POST



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In late April, Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) convened 11 of the state's institutions of higher education that prepare the early childhood education (ECE) teachers. The convening took place on the heels of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Economic Summit, highlighting the critical role that quality ECE plays in children's social-emotional development, academic success, and career trajectories. It was part of a broader state-wide effort to build ECE registered apprenticeships for incumbent and future early childhood professionals.

Increasing the knowledge and skills of early educators is essential to providing young children with high-quality learning experiences during their formative years. But this workforce development goal is complicated by the fact that wages in the sector are extremely low. On average, an ECE teacher earns about \$14 per hour. Low pay makes it difficult to attract college-educated workers to the sector or to expect incumbent workers to return to school for an associate or bachelor's degree.

In Pennsylvania, degree apprenticeships have emerged as an innovative and affordable strategy for preparing early education workers and equipping them with the postsecondary degrees required for career entry and advancement. A degree apprenticeship is a program delivered by an institution of higher education that integrates apprenticeship - paid, structured, on-the-job learning and mentorship - into an associate or bachelor's degree program. Individuals who participate in a degree apprenticeship earn progressive wage increases as they acquire skills. This provides an affordable way for adults already working in early education centers to get a degree, and also to make a bit more money along the way.

While degree apprenticeship programs are increasingly common in countries with large apprenticeship systems (think Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), they are relatively rare in the United States. Even more rare are programs that provide apprentices with college credit for the competencies they build on the job, in addition to what they learn in the classroom. This is an area where Pennsylvania ECE apprenticeship programs are excelling. For example, Carlow University, the first 4-year institution to offer a registered apprenticeship in the state, allows apprentices to earn 27 of the 120 credits needed to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in Early Development and Learning through on-the-job learning. A university supervisor and on-site coach conduct classroom observations to confirm that apprentices are building the same competencies they would acquire in a traditional classroom setting.

What's the significance of this approach? Degree apprenticeships like the one at Carlow, the Community College of Philadelphia, Delaware County Community College, and other institutions in Pennsylvania reward ECE professionals for their experience and reduce the amount of time it takes to obtain a degree. Furthermore, Rae Hirsh, Director of the Early Childhood Program at Carlow, notes that the structured supervision and coaching support offered to apprentices is having a positive impact on the teaching practices of other educators in early learning centers and the quality of teacher/child interactions.

To scale ECE apprenticeships in Pennsylvania, OCDEL has encouraged the formation of six regional apprenticeship partnerships with representation from higher education, intermediary organizations and a growing number of ECE employers. And under the leadership of Governor Tom Wolf, the state recently awarded more than \$700,000 in PAsmart grants to support the expansion of ECE registered apprenticeships.

Degree apprenticeships are a promising strategy for helping the ECE field reach its goal of creating a more qualified workforce. By creating more equitable and affordable pathways to college degrees and leveraging the diverse pool of early educators already working in the field, degree apprenticeships can yield better teaching and learning for students.

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