

Face It to Fix It

Why the Start of the New School Year Requires Us to Resist “Normalcy,” While Continually Constructing a Climate for Change

by Valora Washington, Brenda Gadson, Amanda Storth, and Ivy Wong

As we begin the 2022-23 academic year, our nation has not yet recovered from the “Great Resignation” and the “She-cession”—phenomena that describes the record numbers of people, especially women, who left their jobs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both public and private employers

are reevaluating their strategies for recruiting and retaining talent in response to a job market in flux.

Similarly, COVID-19 put a national spotlight on the fact that the sector which employs “The workforce for the workforce”—as child care staff are tagged—has a hard time recruiting and retaining skilled and experienced teachers. Immediate workforce remedies included financial incentives,

stabilization grant programs, and policy adjustments to ease the field’s administrative burden (The Hunt Institute, 2021).

Now as we enter the third year of the pandemic, the public strongly desires “normalcy,” and putting the pandemic in the rear-view mirror (Gramlich, 2022). Yet, we resist the call to normalcy since it has never been an effective strategy for our profession, or for the children and families with whom we work. As other industries move toward COVID-19 recovery, our field-wide challenges persist and our forward progression is stalled. That is why continuous construction of a climate of change is needed now more than ever.



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Face It: Our Field's Forward Progression is Stalled

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

—James Baldwin

There are at least five indicators that our field is stalling: 1) low job recovery; 2) continued high turnover; 3) the pay penalty; 4) higher education challenges; and 5) the misalignment of professional standards and practitioner voices with public investment in the true cost of quality.

Being “stalled” is not a descriptor of the people who do the work—rather, the issue of stalling results from structural inequities and systemic social undervaluing of the work that teachers do so passionately.

Stalled Job Recovery

Since initially losing one-third of its workforce at the outset of the pandemic, the child care industry has experienced a slow and halting job recovery, largely due to stagnant wages and benefits (Banerjee et al., 2021).

Currently, this translates to a nationwide net loss of 117,000 jobs since February 2020—just 88 percent of pre-COVID capacity (Center for the Study of Childcare Employment, 2022). Indeed, actual declines may be even steeper, because the data excludes sole-proprietorships, such as many family child care businesses, which have experienced a disproportionate rate of closure (Datta, 2021).

Stalled Progress in Staff Retention

Low wages are a clear driver of staff turnover. An analysis found that across

all program settings, high turnover rates were associated with lower wages (Caven, 2021).

For ECE staff who wish to remain in education, many seek employment in K-12 school systems that offer defined work schedules and compensation. Yet other ECE educators leave the field entirely: a pre-pandemic Louisiana study found that about 50 percent of child care teachers leave their program every year, and most left the profession entirely (Bassok, 2021). Many staff can secure better wages and more attractive lifestyle benefits through large retailers and service industries (Monteros, 2021).

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Stalled Resolution of the “Pay Penalty”

For years, educators have been encouraged to seek higher degrees as a pathway toward higher pay. Indeed, the proportion of educators with degrees increased alongside new regulations (Katz & Loewenberg, 2019). Yet, there is a pay penalty for ECE educators: they earn less than their peers with comparable degrees and experience (Center for the Study of Childcare Employment, 2020) and being designated “essential workers” during the pandemic has not yet paved the road to equity.

Stalled Impact of ECE Higher Education

Although more degrees are being earned, minimal state requirements for degrees, low compensation regardless of degree status, and limited employer capacity to retain degree holders stubbornly persist.

Consequently, some of our nation’s 2,000 ECE preparation programs are moving away from offering ECE coursework (Koenig, 2022) amid questions about the role, relevance, and opportunities for reinventing ECE credentialing programs (New America Compendium, 2019).

According to a May 2021 survey of 400 colleges offering ECE coursework conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, almost two-thirds had enrollment declines, more than one-third had graduation declines, 30 percent experienced budget cuts, and 2 percent closed (Koenig, 2022).

Stalled Public Investment in the True Cost of Quality

Even as many educators remain committed to the field of ECE, for decades the public has declined to pay for the true cost of care for either the children or the people who educate them (Workman, 2021).

Cost impacts both access and quality. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) predicts that pandemic recovery will continue to find most children without access to publicly-funded preschool programs; and that adequately funded programs that meet basic quality standards will remain even less common (Friedman-Krauss, 2022).

Clearly, early childhood educators have not been silent in the face of pre- and

post-pandemic challenges to quality. The voices of practitioners—and the misalignment between professional standards and public funding—have reached a straining point as a result of laboring in a field unable to align its internal passion with the level of public engagement required to meet high quality standards.

Fix It: Continually Create a Climate for Change

The case for a fundamentally different ECE system was already quite strong prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed, compounded, and exacerbated the field-wide program quality and workforce issues that previously existed, making the work of ECE educators even more difficult.

During the pandemic, many advocates worked tirelessly to support the aspirations of the Build Back Better legislation, a vessel that seemed to be a long-awaited passageway to progress as we plowed through the agony of COVID-19. Similarly, the Inflation Reduction Act ultimately passed without any funding for child care. Both of these proved to be yet more detours. Then, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 promised some hope for advocates but ultimately passed without a single dollar for childcare.

Consequently, as we enter this new academic year, we must continually resist the public norms around early childhood education, by actively and continually constructing a climate for change. Forward progression requires multiple integrated change strategies to position ECE as a priority for public action. The field must demand infrastructure, distinguish ECE from other COVID-19 recovery industries, advocate for universal access, and center practitioner voices in change initiatives.

Climate for Change #1: Demand Infrastructure

What makes ECE different from other COVID-19 impacted industries is the fact that our challenges are long-term, deeply persistent, and substantially devoid of the financial resources or infrastructure from which sustainable institutions draw to “recover.” Despite these limitations, early educators established a remarkable array of mutual self-help collaborations and workarounds to facilitate emergency responses.

A sustainable infrastructure can provide the intellectual and financial capital needed to offer a foundation from which professional standards, predictable program quality, and technical assistance can be delivered, assessed, and supported as a system.

ECE educators begin this new year once again without access to sufficient resources or infrastructure, and therefore are significantly reliant on both short term public initiatives or parents’ capacity to pay (Center for Education & Workforce, 2019).

Sustaining a climate of change will require the construction of permanent mechanisms—infrastructure—that can support field-wide planning, staffing, communication, coordination, and accountability, not as a result of individual or collective herculean efforts.

Climate for Change #2: Distinguish and Reframe ECE

Gaining the massive infusion of new financial resources needed to create the field’s infrastructure (Backes & Allen, 2018) will in part result from the extent to which we can distinguish ECE from other industries impacted by COVID-19. How our issue is framed within the public sphere will require clear articulation of these distinctions.

The Frameworks Institute reminds us that the way we frame our issues—the values, metaphors, examples, and tone we use—influences public thinking about them (Kendall-Taylor, 2019). Crafting effective frames is challenging and critical work. To move forward, the field needs to better define its professional identity, clarify ambiguities about our purpose, and specify the accountabilities we will claim in exchange for public support (Goffin & Washington, 2007).

Climate for Change #3: Advocate for Universal Systems

Framing and infrastructure matter most because they set a foundation for universal accessibility for all children and families. While some initiatives recognize the need for infrastructure, they typically target resources based on defined criteria such as income. While these initiatives are typically welcomed when they expand resources or stakeholders, these non-universal initiatives have unintended consequences. They may fragment our advocacy focus toward projects rather than a comprehensive profession; deepen compensation and professional development inequities based on who has access to limited funding; focus attention on special populations without a longer term vision to support all children; and even spawn individual rivalries, as staff in a single setting have access to different rates of pay or program resources.

In our view, credible infrastructure development and advocacy must have a universal vision in mind—and, if we listen to practitioners, that plan must begin with an extraordinary focus on staff compensation. Indeed, there is no quality program, continuity of care for children, or system stability without a skilled workforce.

A universal system enables communities to think more holistically

about the number of children to be served, the number and types of staffing required, and the support teams needed to ensure continuous quality. This new thinking moves early childhood education from the realm of being a family consumable budget item towards recognition that it is a public good that should be financed with tax dollars.

As a public good, universal systems could therefore create equity and clarity around workforce compensation, career lattices, required credentialing, and professional recognition.

Climate for Change #4: Establish the Principle of Centering Practitioner Voices

“If you want to bring a fundamental change in people’s beliefs and behavior ... you need to create a community around them, where those new beliefs can be practiced and expressed and nurtured.”

—Malcolm Gladwell

As should be evident, creating a continuous climate of change requires internal work within the field, as well as external work with the public. We will need to engage and persuade a broad range of citizens to actively support our cause.

The first principle of change must be that practitioner voices are central to the design, implementation, and evaluation of any change initiative.

We have said it before (Washington, 2019) but it bears repeating: the first principle of change must be that

practitioner voices are central to the design, implementation, and evaluation of any change initiative. Although they can play important roles, creating a climate of change cannot emerge from the will of the field’s intellectual elites. Our next stage of leadership must engage practitioners substantially in activities that mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, refocus, and rejuvenate their attention on activities that advance the field.

Supporting staff voices begins with acknowledging their distress. Following the intensity of the pandemic, gravitating toward “normalcy” could lead us to retreat to the maladaptive circumstances that have characterized the field. We help our field move forward by acknowledging the stress, articulating a vision for change, and ensuring that the workforce can use their strong voices to identify their needs and potential solutions.

Conclusion

As our field enters into this new academic year, many early childhood educators remain unbowed, undefeated, and unceasingly determined to seek justice and equity for children, families, and the workforce. Despite all of the stalled progressions, the field sustains with an enduring hope—a dream of a better, stronger profession with the resources to offer all children high quality educational experiences.

At the CAYL Institute, we continually hear practitioners desire to move from a “new normal” to “Not now and never again!” To accomplish this, we must strengthen our culture of competence and courage, embrace complexity and conflict, and use our communities of practice to engage in the strategic work required to advance both child outcomes and the profession of early

childhood education (Washington et al., 2015).

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