



Think Babies Michigan

Statewide Cross-Sector, Prenatal-to-Three Workforce Strategy: Policy Recommendations

April 2021

Introduction

Building a strong, sustainable prenatal-to-three system is imperative to supporting the learning and development of young children. To provide our children with a strong foundation during their first three years of life, we must support and strengthen those with the skills to do so – the early childhood workforce. Michigan’s prenatal-to-three system includes child care, home visiting and *Early On*, and the workforce includes early childhood educators, higher education faculty, home visitors, technical assistance providers, early interventionists, mental health consultants, and more. To support a high quality, cross-sector workforce that supports young children prenatally to age three and their families, Michigan must develop a purposeful plan to support and uplift this essential workforce. In addition, a high-quality early childhood workforce is essential for working parents to participate in the labor force and is therefore necessary to ensure the overall health of the economy.

To move this work forward, Think Babies Michigan launched a workgroup in the Fall of 2020 to begin outlining a plan to support a statewide, cross-sector infant-toddler workforce. The following summarizes challenges and barriers, recommendations, and next steps for stakeholders in Michigan including professionals, policymakers, and advocates.

Challenges and Barriers

In consideration and exploration of improvement to the prenatal-to-three workforce, many challenges and barriers have been identified. There continues to be a lack of understanding of the scope of the early childhood workforce as a whole and a lack of recognition overall. The level of skill needed to care for and teach the state’s youngest children under age three demands much of the same effort as it does with older children—it only differs in the age-appropriate knowledge needed. The early childhood workforce isn’t valued as is indicated by the inadequate compensation based on qualification requirements. Michigan’s early educators are struggling, with those who have earned bachelor’s degrees being paid 22% less than their colleagues in the K-8 system; nearly 1 in 5 having incomes **below** the poverty line, and half of child care providers qualifying for some type of public assistance while lacking access to healthcare and paid sick leave. In fact, early childhood educators are some of the lowest paid professionals in Michigan, earning less than fast food cooks, laundry workers and animal caretakers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Home visitors and early interventionists also face similar inequities in compensation as it relates to their counterparts in K-12 and other service-focused systems. On average, home visitors earn less than the U.S. median earnings across all occupations of \$887 a week. Although, home visiting supervisors report slightly higher earnings than the overall U.S. labor force. A workforce that lacks resources to attain adequate, effective and sustainable training and credentialing contributes to vacancies and/or frequent turnover. Additionally, the prenatal-to-three

workforce face few opportunities for career advancement and lacks a streamlined career pathway with a supportive career ladder.

Equity, diversity and inclusion continue to be ongoing issues affecting recruitment, retention and growth opportunities. Higher compensated and credentialed positions are filled more by white staff compared to lower paid positions which employ more staff of color. Early childhood educators in child care are disproportionately women – many of color – who are paid less than their white peers in an already low-paying field. How we choose to support the prenatal-to-three workforce matters to infants, toddlers and their families and the entire Michigan community now and for years to come.

Recommendation 1: Recruitment

Develop a solid recruitment plan which includes the expansion of opportunities in high school and vocational classes; offering coursework and preparation programs in our colleges and universities for credentialing; and constructing and implementing a state-wide public relations campaign showing the value of the workforce and the need for improved compensation.

Sustainability of the prenatal-to-three workforce is dependent on an effective recruitment plan. The gap between the availability of qualified professionals and community need for these qualified professionals must be addressed. There are jobs available for professional candidates, but candidates either don't have the skills required to secure them or do not see the jobs as a viable opportunity. As a state, we must become more intentional about how we introduce early childhood as a career which includes an increase in wages and changing the process for attracting a new workforce generation. Specifically:

- Help our high schoolers, along with their counselors and family members that they seek guidance from, see the opportunities in early childhood as a viable profession. Additionally, expand opportunities in high school and vocational classes for Child Development Associate (CDA) completion.
- It is important to partner with institutes of higher learning to ensure that CDA work/credits transfer to actual college credits and make sure colleges offer coursework beyond the CDA to expand offerings that encompasses all professional roles in the prenatal-to-three workforce including home visiting and early intervention. This should also include credentials that incorporate equivalencies for experiential learning.
- Finally, there must be a public education campaign demonstrating the value of the prenatal-to-three workforce and the urgency for improved, more equitable compensation.

The quality of Michigan's prenatal-to-three programming is tied to our school readiness goals which are dependent on the attraction and retention of a highly qualified diverse workforce.

Recommendation 2: Retention

Commit to equitable recognition and compensation; maintain consistent and manageable caseloads across programs; and support leadership development for experienced members of the workforce.

Employee retention is critical to the prenatal-to-three workforce and is dependent on compensation, policies, benefits, and work environment. Michigan must provide sufficient funding to support equitable and adequate compensation, program capacity building, team building training and program management support for early childhood providers/teachers. Access to a variety of funding sources – particularly public funding sources – must be streamlined and increased to align compensation with similar workforce positions in health and public education systems of similar degrees and experience. And, adequate public funding would allow for prenatal-to-three programs to have improved staff-to-

child or staff-to-family ratios to deliver higher quality programming and services to Michigan's working families.

Additionally, expert professionals who work for many years add significant value to the early childhood system. One way to maximize the talent and retention of these professionals is to support leadership development across the early childhood field. Experienced prenatal-to-three workforce members have acquired important skills to effectively work with families and other partners. Offering leadership pathways with coaching and support will provide the prenatal-to-three workforce with a deepened sense of connection to their work, ultimately supporting retention.

Recommendation 3: Growth Opportunities

Incorporate professional development, clear career pathways and accessible credentialing for equitable opportunities for career development and advancement through a lens of equity, diversity and inclusion.

Reforming the early childhood system starts with addressing inequities. There must be targeted outreach to increase diversity in the prenatal-to-three workforce at all levels. Additionally, career pathways must include the identification of a portable skill track and registered apprenticeships across early childhood workforce positions. Pre-service training must be established in diverse settings including time with infants, toddlers and their families. Michigan can ensure that professional development and leadership pathways are reflected in growth opportunities and identify differentiated, specialized knowledge and competencies specific to each individual workforce role.

Program Specific Recommendations

While the above recruitment, retention, and growth opportunity recommendations are geared to the cross-sector prenatal-to-three workforce that supports child care, home visiting, and *Early On*, the uniqueness of these programs also means there are workforce challenges specific to each program. The recommendations below also align with recommendations from other Think Babies Michigan workgroups. For more detailed recommendations for each of these programs, please see the Think Babies Michigan website: www.ecic4kids.org/policy-thinkbabiesmi.

- ***Child Care:*** The child care workforce is consistently the lowest paid in the prenatal-to-three workforce. Increasing public funds to pay for the true cost of high-quality care that incorporates adequate compensation would better support the child care workforce, lead to more sustainability for child care businesses and increase stability of early childhood education for working families. Additionally, specific business training and education supports are needed for home-based child care operators as well.
- ***Home Visiting:*** Access to home visiting programs varies widely between counties and communities creating disparity and inequities in what families have available to them and how many families can receive services. Working to fund a continuum of home visiting programs in every area will support families in more likely being able to receive high quality services impacting positive outcomes for those families and children and result in a decreased burden on taxpayers.
- ***Early On:*** *Early On's* bifurcated two-tiered system has resulted in personnel disparities between staff serving *Early On* only children compared to staff who serve children who are eligible for *Early On* and Michigan Mandatory Special Education. Shifting *Early On* to a single-tiered, streamlined system will help mitigate these workforce inequities.

Next Steps

While the program specific recommendations are priorities for Think Babies Michigan in the current budget process, the Collaborative will continue to further develop and define the cross-sector prenatal-to-three workforce recommendations to better support recruitment, retention, and growth opportunities.

**Think Babies Prenatal-to-Three, Cross-Sector Workforce Strategy
Workgroup Members**

We are grateful for the dedication and work to develop these recommendations!

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