



**Addressing Higher Education Barriers
for Early Childhood Educators**

Communique

Introduction

In 2016, the Children’s Forum engaged the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California at Berkeley to examine Florida’s system of Early Childhood Education (ECE) higher education programs and the extent to which they offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation. The results of the *Florida Higher Education Inventory* (Petig, Sukai, Austin, Edward, & Montoya, 2017) provided both confirmation of identified barriers communicated anecdotally and new knowledge to inform potential areas for improvement. Shortly thereafter, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® National Center offered an opportunity for states to competitively apply for assistance in developing plans to ameliorate barriers in higher education for those pursuing degrees and credentials in early childhood education. Informed by the CSCCE study (Petig, et. al, 2017), Florida prepared a response and was one of two states chosen for this intensive focus and technical assistance opportunity.

Among the responsibilities for participating states was the creation of a Steering Committee comprised of stakeholders to guide the development of a strategic plan. The agreed upon vision to reduce barriers, increase diversity, and improve the successful completion of higher education certificates and degrees for early childhood educators in Florida is ongoing.



The goals chosen for focus were amended in May 2020 in response to the pandemic and are as follows:

- Identify the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry and retention in the ECE field.
- Provide policy guidance to inform infant and toddler course content, field-based opportunities, and faculty preparation.
- Enhance the pipeline while leveraging state resources to facilitate the transition from high school career and technical early childhood education (ECE CTE) programs to higher education programs and the ECE workforce.
- Provide access and support to the early learning workforce to address the obstacles created by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide resources for early childhood educators to complete their degree requirements in mathematics and to become proficient in teaching math to young children in early learning settings.
- Time limitations prevented pursuing the mathematics goal to the fullest extent and should be considered for the future. Therefore, the following represents the progress towards meeting the remaining goals and the continuing work needed to improve systems of higher education for early childhood educators and subsequently their ability to be effective educators for Florida’s youngest citizens.

Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Early Childhood Educator Workforce

Issue: Early childhood educators of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity have historically experienced limited access to fair and adequate professional preparation and compensation. In Florida, 59% of children birth to 4 are of color or of Hispanic origin, whereas 35 percent of early childhood educators fall into these racial/ethnic groups. This suggests that more minority educators are needed to better represent the child population within Florida (USDOE, 2018). On a positive note, T.E.A.C.H. scholar diversity closely mirrors that of the child population with 57% of T.E.A.C.H. scholars being of color or Hispanic (Kalifeh, 2019). However, most T.E.A.C.H. scholars who are dual language learners report that they cannot find college courses in their native language (77%) or college advisors who speak their native language (61%). This aligns with CSCCE's study (Petig, et. al, 2017), which showed that only 25% of Florida's early childhood higher education programs offer tailored assistance for dual language learners. In fact, there are currently no fully bilingual degree programs in Florida. Moreover, dual language learners who hold degrees earn less than their English fluent degree-holding peers, according to a study of the early childhood workforce in Miami-Dade County, Florida (Children's Forum, 2020).

Goal: Identify the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry and retention in the ECE field.

Response: Miami-Dade College (MDC) served as an exemplar for an effective ECE higher education program designed to support dual language learners. This is the only program in Florida's State College and University systems that offers early childhood, for-credit bilingual courses. Interviews with the program coordinator identified key characteristics as well as an understanding of policies and practices related to bilingual education.

Outcomes: The practices and lessons learned in establishing and maintaining the bilingual programs offered at MDC can serve as a model for other colleges and universities wishing to develop similar programs. The for-credit bilingual early childhood courses at MDC were established to meet the needs of the diverse workforce in Miami-Dade County. Approximately 80 percent of early childhood educators in the county speak a primary language other than English and originate from a country outside of the United States. MDC offers credit courses toward the FCCPC, National CDA, and Infant/Toddler, Preschool, and Administration certificates in Spanish and Creole using a cohort model. These courses have the same content and standards as the English courses aligned with NAEYC standards. Students taking the bilingual courses also take accompanying ESL courses to simultaneously learn English. The goal of the English as a Second Language (ESL) requirement is to help the students better prepare the

children they serve for kindergarten and elementary school, understanding that children will be expected to speak English in public school settings. The ESL courses that the students in the bilingual cohorts take are contextualized for the early childhood field (vocabulary common to the field is used).

Once the cohort of students completes the first course, the college offers the remaining courses consecutively to the cohort of students even if some of the students drop out. This addresses the barrier of turnover in the early childhood field, which often results in the cohort being smaller each semester. Typically, courses at MDC do not continue to run without a certain number of students, but an exception is made for the bilingual courses. One of the elements that has allowed the MDC bilingual for-credit courses to be successful is support from the college dean in allowing this and other practices needed for the success of the bilingual programs.

The students in the bilingual cohorts are afforded the same supports from MDC as their English speaking peers attending MDC, including advising in their native language. Bilingual students being aware of and accessing the services available to them can sometimes be a barrier. To address this issue, the instructors of the bilingual classes are well informed of all of the resources available to the students to increase awareness and remove any apprehension around accessing the services.

Another barrier is that most textbooks for the courses are only available in English, so the instructors of the bilingual courses must translate the pertinent material from the text into the language of the course (e.g., Spanish or Creole). The instructors also translate the syllabus and find articles in the course language. This means that the instructors for these courses must be both bilingual and bi-literate (speak, read, and write in the course language). Thus, it is important to look for instructors with degrees in early childhood, ESE, as well as Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL).

Currently, MDC is working on converting the Infant/Toddler (12 credit hour) bilingual certificate into an online format that will articulate into an Associate of Science degree and to ECE programs throughout the state. This online programming is especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic for which Miami-Dade County is an epicenter. These efforts also help close multiple other gaps referenced in CSCCE's statewide higher education landscape study (Petig, et. al, 2017), which emphasized the need for more diverse faculty to mirror the diversity of the workforce, more courses centered on the infant/toddler age group, and more flexible and accessible learning formats for students. Furthermore, these efforts align with the next goal discussed given infant and toddler age group focus.

Sylvia Serrano

Lead teacher at RCMA South Dade Child Development Center, Homestead, FL

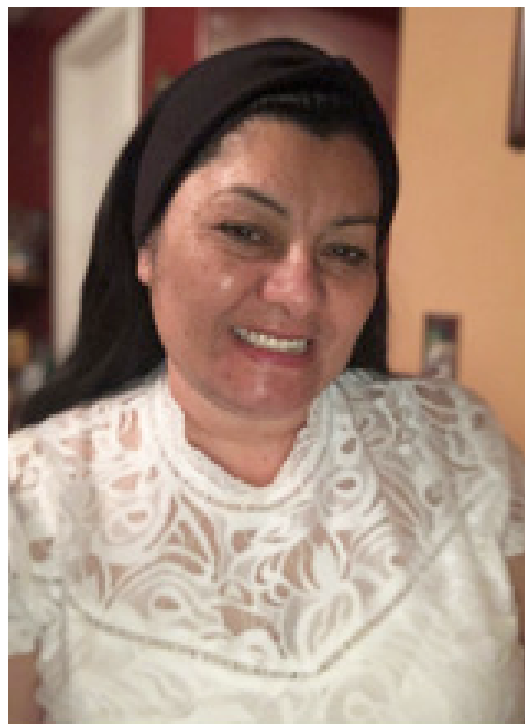
Originally from Mexico, Silvia Serrano began her educational journey in the United States by earning her GED, funded by a local scholarship program. She went on to earn her Infant/Toddler credential, FCCPC, and Director Credential through MDC's bilingual programs. Coupled with early childhood content instruction, English language supports are a key part of MDC's bilingual program. Progressing from Level 1 to Level 4 ESL courses, Silvia reflects on the positive impact of these supports.”

“I was in a low English level and now I can understand and communicate better with the children. This year I have better fluency in my conversations with the children and I feel more capable of helping them. It has helped me learn English and continue to study because now I can understand the material.”

She also credits MDC's bilingual program with increasing her professional confidence and motivation as well as her knowledge and competence in working with young children.

“It is a great security to have professors who speak your language. Each one of my professors has been very professional and has supported and motivated me to continue my studies. It has helped me to prepare my lessons plans to help children in accordance with each child's needs. It has made me feel more secure in the classroom to increase my knowledge and help the children according to their language. I feel confident and prepared with all the knowledge I have obtained. It has given me the opportunity to elevate my level as a professional and support my colleagues. My goal is to continue increasing my knowledge and continue learning.”

Silvia will undoubtedly meet that goal having taken many other early childhood trainings and moving from assistant to lead teacher as a result of her newfound knowledge and competence in the classroom.



“ It has given me the opportunity to elevate my level as a professional and support my colleagues. My goal is to continue increasing my knowledge and continue learning. ”

Infant-Toddler Focus in ECE Higher Education Programs

Issue: Based on targeted findings from the research study *Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children: Florida*, conducted with ECE faculty and program coordinators (Petig, et. al, 2017), course content related to strategies for teaching infants and toddlers is offered less frequently than other areas of study. In addition, less than 10% of faculty indicated they had worked as classroom teachers of infants and/or toddlers and, as a result, faculty indicated they would like more professional development in working with infants and toddlers.

Goal: Provide policy guidance to inform infant and toddler course content, field-based opportunities, and faculty preparation.

Response: The Children’s Forum compared the coursework for the 12-credit infant toddler certificate programs available in 10 colleges across Florida to address content consistency. This comparison revealed that the course titles offered by institutions that comprise the Infant/Toddler Certificate vary. Consistent course offerings for the Infant/Toddler Certificate in all colleges are essential to facilitate articulation between institutions and prevent unanticipated disruption for students.

The Children’s Forum also designed a survey to capture information about faculty experience and field-based opportunities for infant and toddler early childhood programs at colleges across Florida. Specifically, the survey addressed the experience, education, and training required of and available to faculty at infant and toddler higher education programs as well as barriers to desired professional development opportunities for faculty. In addition, the survey gathered information about field-based placements for students attending infant and toddler early childhood courses and programs. All Florida colleges with infant and toddler programs were invited to participate in the electronic survey sent via email in March 2020. The findings from the survey are summarized below.

- Faculty Experience, Education, and Training
 - o All responding colleges indicated that a master’s degree with a focus on or at least 18 credits in early childhood was required to instruct infant and toddler courses at their college.
 - o 57% require experience working with adult learners.
 - o 71% require experience working in an early childhood setting.
 - o Only one college indicated that prior experience teaching young children in the classroom is required.
 - o Each of the responding colleges indicated that their instructors are provided some type of professional development after they are hired.

Colleges indicated that travel distance and funding are common barriers to offering faculty desired professional development, and that more regional or virtual infant and toddler training opportunities in the state would be welcomed.

- Student Field-Based Opportunities
 - o 71% of colleges offer students a field-based experience within an infant and/or toddler setting.
 - o The most common challenge to placing students in infant and toddler field-based settings is finding sufficient placements for students who are not local to the college (for online trainings) or who live in rural surrounding areas.
 - o The number of hours of field-based experience required varies widely across colleges ranging from 10 to 20 hours, typically per course.

Outcomes: As an incentive to engage early educators to enroll in the Infant/Toddler Certificate offered through the state colleges, T.E.A.C.H. created a targeted Infant/Toddler Certificate Scholarship model that provides a more robust stipend and bonus compared to other T.E.A.C.H. models.



High School Career and Technical Education (CTE) as a Pipeline for Early Childhood Educators

Issue: Florida is experiencing a shortage of qualified early educators entering and remaining in the ECE field.

Goal: Enhance the pipeline while leveraging state resources to facilitate the transition from high school career and technical early childhood education programs to higher education programs and the ECE workforce.

Response: The education and employment outcomes for graduates of high school career and technical ECE programs who accessed a T.E.A.C.H. scholarship to earn their National CDA (N-CDA) credential were examined. By successfully completing the CTE programs, students met all of the eligibility requirements for the CDA, which is a competency-based, industry standard credential.

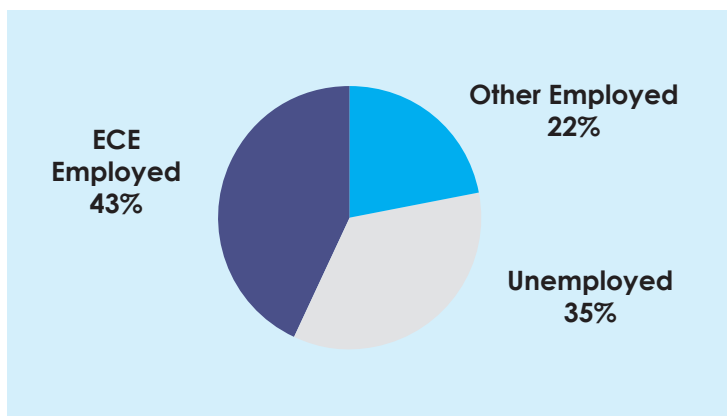
Outcomes: In partnership with T.E.A.C.H., almost 1,000 Florida students earned their National CDA as part of the ECE career and technical education program at their high schools (T.E.A.C.H. Florida, 2019). Based on data collected from survey respondents within this group (n=395) it appears that race and ethnicity did not play a significant role in whether CTE graduates pursued college right out of high school or chose to go directly to work. Family educational status played only a minor role in the post-graduation decisions of the CTE graduates. Demographic data from this study revealed a higher percentage of Hispanic CTE graduates than the overall Hispanic student population in Florida. This may be due to the fact that the majority of students who participated in this CTE-T.E.A.C.H. partnership attended high schools in three Florida counties with significant Hispanic populations.

Educational pathway: Most of the graduates (74%), enrolled in college immediately following high school, and for those who did not, about 90% of them said they plan to attend at a later date. A small percentage (12%) of those attending college directly following high school stated that they selected early childhood as their focus. It is important to keep in mind, however, that almost a third (30%) of the students enrolled in Associate of Arts programs for which a major is not typically declared. For graduates who plan to attend college at a later date, almost all of them were interested in careers in a helping field such as education or healthcare.

Employment pathway: Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the graduates were employed following high school and just under half of the CTE graduates who were employed at the time of the survey held positions in early childhood settings with the majority working as assistant teachers. However, about 20% of

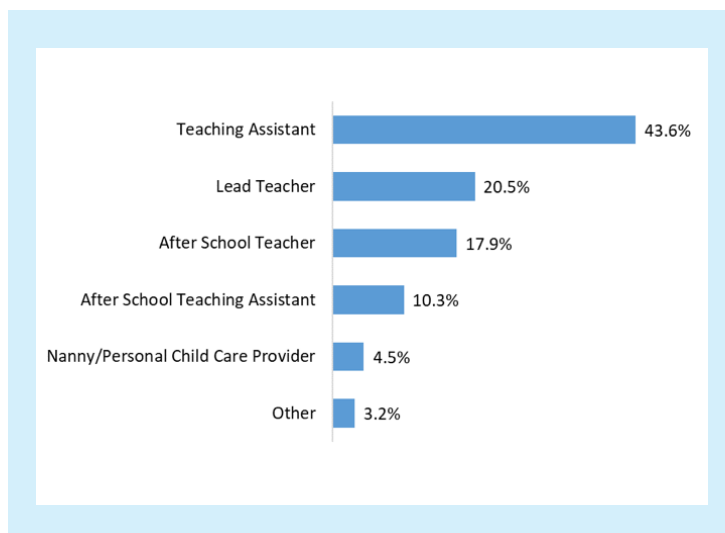
CTE graduates indicated they had been hired as lead teachers (Bishop, 2020).

The figure below shows the distribution of graduates who were employed in ECE positions, employed in positions outside of ECE (e.g., other employed), and not employed.



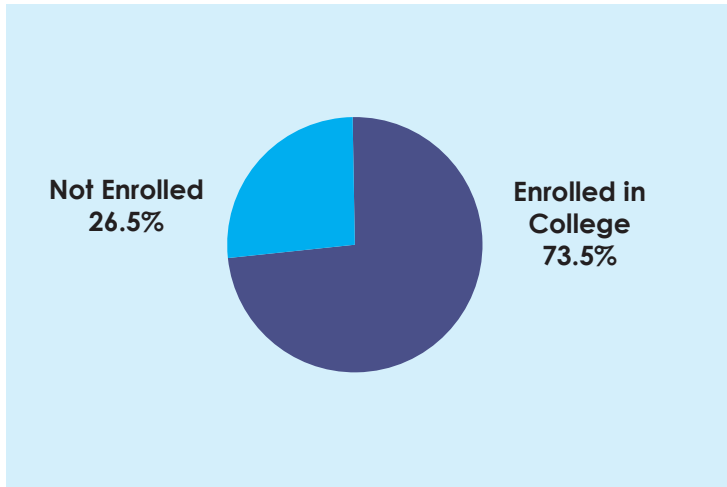
- 28% of CTE graduates who said they planned to go to college in the future specifically said they were interested in early childhood education.
- 57% of the CTE graduates who were employed outside of an ECE setting said they were looking for jobs within field.
- All of the CTE graduates said they felt prepared by their training programs for a position within the ECE field; in fact, 90% said they felt “Very Prepared.”

The figure below shows the positions held by the 43% of CTE graduates who were employed in ECE positions:



High School Career and Technical Education (CTE) as a Pipeline for Early Childhood Educators

The figure below shows that almost three-quarters of the high school CTE graduates went directly on to college.



These outcomes offer clear evidence that the high school early childhood CTE programs available throughout Florida coupled with the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® scholarship program, which offers financial support for continued education, provide a viable pipeline to a career pathway in early childhood education.

Findings suggest that more focused communication with the CTE program coordinators and classroom teachers may help to connect students with post-secondary career and educational options, thus strengthening the pipeline even further. Developing structured opportunities for these young educators to receive mentorship in quality early care and education programs may prepare them for leadership positions in the near future.

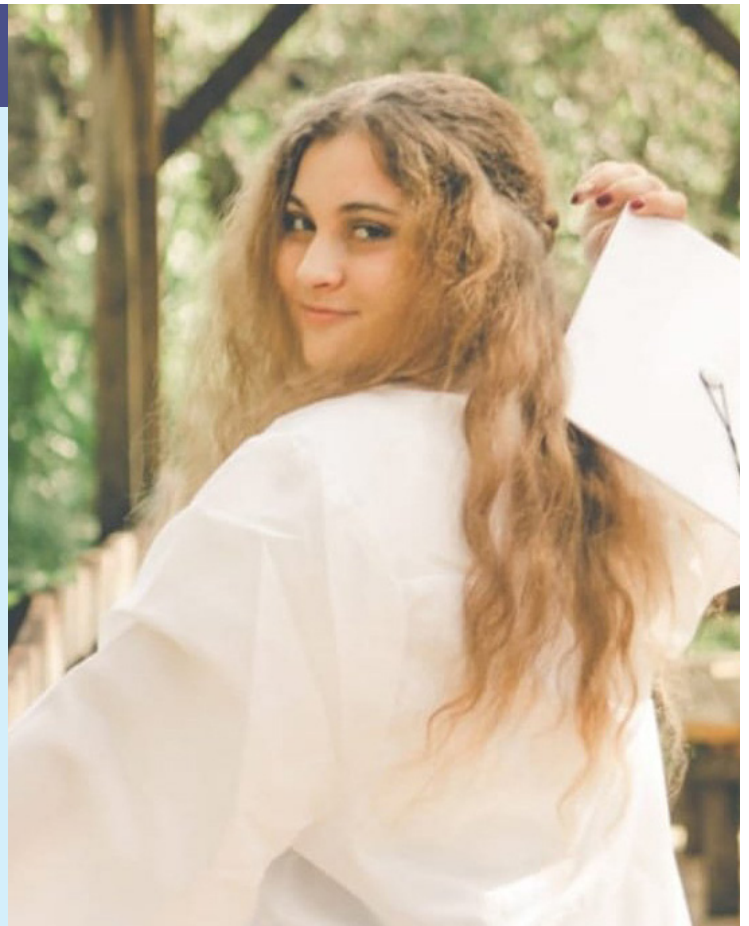
Spotlight

Heather Gnoflo

CTE high school graduate 2019

“Ever since I was little I knew I wanted to be a teacher. When I discovered the ECE program at Merritt Island High, I was eager to join. I attended this program starting my sophomore year till my senior year and graduated with my ECPC and CDA. I wanted to teach and inspire young minds. Those “I get it now” moments when children understand what they learned is what I looked forward to every day. The ECE program was my favorite class and during my senior year, all of my electives were filled up by being in the program.

My goals are to finish my AS degree in Early Childhood Education and obtain my Florida director credential in the process. T.E.A.C.H helped me earn my CDA and I was able to work at a preschool right out of high school. This was my first job and has been my current job for two and a half years! T.E.A.C.H is amazing at aiding students reaching their goals within Early Childhood Education!”



Impact of the Pandemic for T.E.A.C.H. Scholars

Issue: COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the early education workforce in Florida, negatively affecting children, families, educators, and program administrators. At the height of the pandemic, 58% of Voluntary Prekindergarten and school readiness programs were closed. As a result of the pandemic, all state colleges and universities moved to a virtual learning platform, which affected all T.E.A.C.H. scholars.

Goal: Provide access and support to the early learning workforce to address the obstacles created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

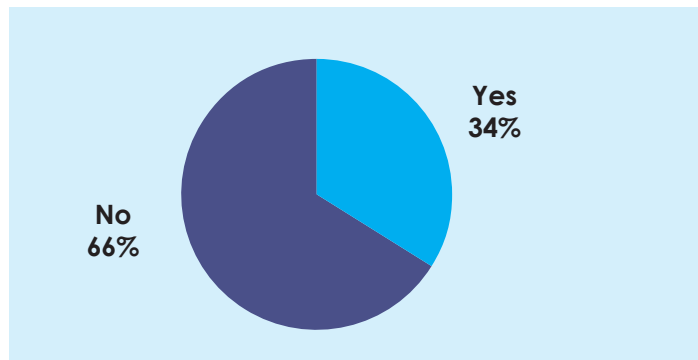
Response: T.E.A.C.H. proposed an initiative to reimburse the purchase of computers up to \$500 for active scholars. Information regarding data needs gathered from T.E.A.C.H. scholars and sponsors revealed the challenges faced in the current environment. It was evident that access to technology was critical for scholars to continue their education online. Information about additional supports that might be available through the CARES Act was also provided.

Outcomes: 550 scholars accessed this benefit and purchased technology to remove barriers to their online learning.

The following data were collected through items included on the electronic evaluation survey sent to all T.E.A.C.H. sponsors and scholars.

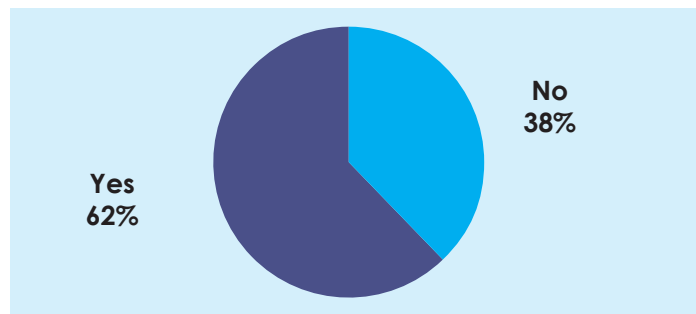
Sponsors:

“Have you had to lay off staff because of the Coronavirus pandemic?”



Note: 106 sponsors responded to the sub-question, “If yes, what needs to be in place for you to rehire staff?” Of these, 63% cited higher enrollment, 7% said social distancing restrictions needed to be lifted, and 4% were having trouble finding staff to hire. 22% reported they had already rehired their staff, and 4% of the responses were unclear.

“Have you applied for funds from the CARES act?”

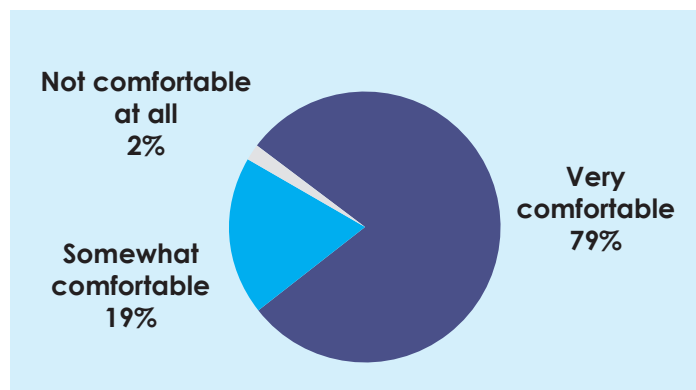


Note: 183 sponsors responded to the sub-question, “If yes, was your application approved?” Of these, 80% reported “Yes.” The rest were in process (9%), were not approved (3%), the sponsor did not know (3%), or the comments were unclear (5%).

Scholars:



“How comfortable are you with online learning?”



Impact of the Pandemic for T.E.A.C.H. Scholars

T.E.A.C.H. Scholar “I Am Essential” Sticker and Appreciation Letter Campaign

Each year, T.E.A.C.H. Florida Counselors attend 10 or more local early childhood conferences across the state, from the panhandle to Miami. These conferences are perfect opportunities for program outreach and allow our Counselors a chance to meet some of the scholars they assist over the phone and via email daily. Our T.E.A.C.H. Counselors generally share program information, recruit participants, and distribute promotional materials at these conferences. Many attendees look forward to visiting our exhibit tables and collecting tchotchkes.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of our spring and summer ECE events were cancelled, as were our opportunities to share resources and materials. Although we could not meet face-to-face with scholars, we found a way to acknowledge their hard work and commitment over the last few months and provide them with a little gift.

New Opportunity – Computer Reimbursements

In June 2020, T.E.A.C.H. Florida was granted approval from its funder, Florida Office of Early Learning (OEL), to assist scholars with the purchase of essential technology equipment including computers, laptops, and tablets. Per OEL’s authorization, scholars can be reimbursed (up to \$500) with proof of receipt indicating a purchase date during their active scholarship period.

This approval has been valuable and timely, as many degree and training programs have shifted to virtual learning in 2020. In less than three months, T.E.A.C.H. Florida has provided 550 scholars with these vital reimbursements. In reference to this new program incentive, one scholar stated:



“I completely love the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Program! I recommend it to everyone I know. It has been a lifesaver in so many ways. I am a mother of a two-year-old boy and a preschool teacher, so any extra financial help that I can get is amazing. When I was on furlough due to COVID-19, my laptop died right after taking a test online. I had to buy a new one immediately to

In July 2020, we mailed more than 5,500 appreciation letters and stickers – 1,726 to program directors/owners and 3,825 to individual scholars. We hope this gesture demonstrated to our T.E.A.C.H. scholars and all early education providers just how important, appreciated, and essential they are.



continue with my classes. A week later, I received the laptop reimbursement announcement and instantly felt so much relief.

The T.E.A.C.H. Program Counselors helped me through the reimbursement process, which was so easy. Since I started with my scholarship, the Counselors have been super encouraging. I am currently taking FCCPC classes (Florida Staff Credential), and because of T.E.A.C.H.’s support, I plan to take the course for my Director’s Credential as well. I am so happy that my director introduced me to the T.E.A.C.H. Program!”

- Amber D., Teacher at Bayside Preschool

550
computer
reimbursements
to scholars

Summary and Next Steps

The intentional focus on higher education barriers for the early childhood educator workforce is productive, as doing so requires exposing and examining the impeding factors carefully and addressing them strategically. The timeframe of this intensive effort was valuable but was not sufficient in addressing all of the barriers identified (e.g., the focus on mathematics preparation for students pursuing higher education degrees and competence in teaching mathematical concepts appropriately with young children). However, the progress that was made provides a solid foundation and a clear direction for continued work. The impact of the pandemic required an immediate shift in action to address one of the most pressing needs for T.E.A.C.H. scholars.

Examining the barriers in higher education for early childhood educators should be sustained and recommended as a part of the work within the mission of the Florida Professional Development Task Force. Input and feedback from stakeholders should be solicited to ensure the educator voice is captured in the analysis. Data collected from T.E.A.C.H. scholar surveys will help inform the evaluation.

The results of an annual evaluation should be distributed to stakeholders and policymakers to improve awareness of the challenges that early childhood educators confront when pursuing their higher education goals. Solutions to address the challenges should be elevated to key policymakers to encourage systemic reforms. The outcome of these efforts will aid in moving Florida in improving early childhood educator preparation as recommended in the *Transforming the Workforce Report* (2015). Doing so will help ensure that young children are afforded every opportunity for success with competent early childhood educators in all education and care settings throughout the state.



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