



Executive Summary

K-3 MARKET RESEARCH

One of Us

K-3 Teachers Are Early Childhood Educators

According to brain and developmental sciences, the years from birth through age eight are a coherent and unified stage of life; yet the educators who, alongside families, are responsible for children’s learning, growth, and development during these critical years are not part of a coherent and unified profession. They are tied together by the skills, knowledge, and competencies required to deliver on the science of early learning, but fragmented by educational requirements, accountability, and compensation, among other factors. As such, educators working in elementary schools in particular, with children in grades kindergarten through third grade, may not be seen—nor see themselves—as a meaningful part of the early childhood education continuum.

Results from a new market research project led by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), however, offer hope for change, as a majority of K-3 educators indicate that they value preparation in child development, consider themselves early childhood educators, and express comfort in being part of a unified

system with educators of children ages birth to eight. They are clear-eyed about both the challenges and benefits of creating this unified system, but believe that both higher wages and greater respect are the most important potential outcomes.

Conducted via interviews and surveys with teachers in kindergarten through third grade on behalf of NAEYC by a bipartisan team of researchers including Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) and Public Opinion Strategies,¹ and with support from the Richard W. Goldman Family Foundation, the data yield findings about what it means to these teachers to be an early childhood educator; what it takes, in terms of their professional preparation and ongoing support; and how they feel about deepening connections between K-3 and 0-5 educators. As with NAEYC’s previous market research, this data elevates early childhood educators’ voices, helping them serve as the foundation for the decision-making efforts to define and advance the entirety of the early childhood education profession, birth through age 8.

1 Methodology: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) and Public Opinion Strategies (POS) conducted an online survey with a nationally representative group of 537 teachers who currently or recently taught in grades K-3; in addition to online focus group interviews with 14 educators currently teaching in grades K-3. The survey was conducted August 23 - October 3, 2017; the online focus groups were conducted August 1-3, 2017. Participants were recruited from among the members of NAEYC and several other national and state early childhood education organizations, and a commercially-available database.

Meaningful and Challenging

What It Means to Be an Early Childhood Educator

K-3 educators and educators who work with children 0-5² share similar views about the importance of their jobs; more than 70% of both groups say it is extremely important to them to feel good about the impact they are having on children and their community. K-3 educators worry, however, about their capacity to meet the needs of the children they serve, particularly with the increasing and varying demands and expectations placed on their profession.

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They chafe against the focus from administrators on assessment and testing, with nearly 80% identifying that as the biggest challenge they face. While low pay is also a significant challenge, which has led some teachers to switch to other grades or switch professions altogether, it is ranked lower by K-3 teachers, 65% of whom say it is a big challenge, compared to educators of children 0-5, 84% of whom identify it in the same way. While this difference is not surprising, given the lack of parity in compensation, it is instructive to note that educators with incomes below \$60,000, as well as those living in the South of the United States, are those most likely to identify low pay as one of the biggest challenges.



² Data on educators working with children from birth through age 5 was collected in a previous study, and referenced frequently here for the sake of comparison.

What It Takes

An Assessment of Professional Preparation & Ongoing Support

The majority of teachers approved of their own professional preparation, with more than half of them identifying “being in a real classroom” and “child development coursework” as the two elements deemed “very helpful.” Yet, the areas in which teachers felt that they did not receive effective training—classroom management, inclusion, and dual-language learning among them—are the exact areas they wish they had. As we look ahead, it is important to get professional preparation right—not only for the purposes of quality teaching, but also for the sake of retention. This research found that the quality of a teacher’s preparation is correlated with his or her plan to persist in a teaching career; teachers who are more positive about their preparation are more likely to say that they plan to stay.

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When selecting and then remaining in their working environment K-3 teachers prioritize having leaders who trust and support their teachers—a full 83% identified this issue as extremely important. Educators working with children 0-5 generally prioritized different characteristics, with differentials of 20% or more separating them from their K-3 counterparts on a range of issues, including “promoting positive social and emotional development,” selected as extremely important by 92% of 0-5 educators, compared to 69% of K-3 educators. As we consider a more unified profession, the “pushing-up” of the importance of social and emotional development may prove to be a critical opportunity.

When asked about a series of possible strategies for addressing the needs of early elementary teachers in particular, strong majorities of those educators agreed that increasing pay, principal knowledge, and public support were all “very good” ideas. Of the seven strategies presented, which also included ideas such as improving mentoring and support services and increasing scholarship funds, the sole strategy to receive significantly less support was expanding alternative certification, which



only 20% of respondents described as a very good idea. Non-white teachers were twice as likely as white teachers to support it, but it remained the idea with the least amount of support overall.

Unified

Deepening the Connections Between K-3 and 0-5 Educators

The delicate balance of agreement and dissention continues when it comes to the connections between K-3 and 0-5. Importantly, two-thirds of K-3 educators, on average, view themselves as an “early childhood educator.” This includes a high of 93% of kindergarten teachers, with the percentages declining each year to 52% of third grade teachers. A majority of K-3 educators (76%) are in agreement with the general argument in favor of creating a unified and aligned system of early childhood education birth through age 8, though they are divided on the question of whether lead educators of children birth through 5 should be required to hold a Bachelor’s degree.

The support and engagement of K-3 educators who see themselves as early childhood educators will be critical to deliver on the promise of early childhood education.

Only 11% of educators would be uncomfortable about being part of a unified system with educators working with children who are 3-4 years old; that percentage increases to 18% when considering birth to age 3. Yet this unity masks differences: there is a significant drop-off in comfort level for second and third grade teachers when asked about a unified system with educators of children 0-3. Teachers who consider themselves “early childhood educators” are nearly 20-points more likely to be comfortable with a unified system from birth through third grade than those who do not. Teachers with degrees in early childhood education are more likely to be comfortable—perhaps given their knowledge about the scope of child development.

Regardless of their opinions on whether we should have a unified system, huge majorities of educators agree that there are important potential outcomes from such a system, including “more developmentally-appropriate standards for students,” “higher wages for teachers,” “better alignment and integration of training for teachers,” and “greater level of respect for the work of early childhood educators.”

Previous research has shown that 88% of voters view early childhood educators as essential parts of our education system and as important members of our communities—



**EDUCATORS
ARE
heroes!**

Nearly **90%** of voters say early childhood educators are important members of their communities, on par **with firefighters and nurses.**

nearly on par with firefighters and nurses. Yet the theoretical valuing of that work has not yet translated into its literal valuing, through significantly increased investments in early childhood education and increased compensation for early childhood educators. Changing this reality is neither simple nor easy. But it is necessary—and the support and engagement of K-3 educators who overwhelmingly see themselves as early childhood educators will be critical to its success, and to the ability of our country to deliver on the promise of early childhood education.