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LOSING GROUND IN CALIFORNIA EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1980-2004

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Introduction

“Parents can’t afford to pay, teachers can’t afford to stay, there’s got to be a better way” goes the lament of professionals in the field of early childhood education (ECE). This report shows that the California ECE industry has indeed struggled to attract and hold onto a qualified workforce since the 1980s.

The qualifications of early childhood educators matter because, first, high-quality ECE improves long-term academic outcomes for children and delivers benefits to the community that far outweigh the costs;¹ and second, high-quality ECE programs require educated and experienced teachers (Bowman, Donovan, and Burns 2000).

This issue brief relies on new data that track center-based ECE outside the public school system over a 25-year period (see **Note on the Data**). For home-based ECE, data are available for 2000-04.

Main findings

A lower share of center-based early childhood educators has a four-year college degree than in the 1980s. In center-based ECE programs, the share of California early childhood educators (teachers, directors, assistant teachers, and teacher aides) with a four-year college degree fell from 26% in the late 1980s to 16% in 2000-04.

NOTE ON THE DATA

The data analyzed in this issue brief come from the 1983-2004 Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of 60,000 U.S. households, and the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial U.S. Census. While our national companion study, *Losing Ground* relies exclusively on the CPS, the state-level issue briefs rely more on the Census because the Census contains more data for each state. The center-based industry on which this report focuses excludes school-based pre-kindergarten programs and is over 90% private sector. It includes for-profit and not-for-profit child-care centers, Head Start programs, and stand-alone preschools and nursery schools. This report looks at trends for two different groups of center-based staff. “Early childhood educators” includes all occupations with primary responsibility for children, such as center directors (also called administrators), teachers, assistant teachers, and teacher aides. The second group includes just teachers plus administrators. (The report pools all early childhood educators to increase sample size and combine teachers with administrators for the same reason.)

A higher share of center-based educators has a high-school degree or less. The share of California center-based educators with a high school education or less climbed from about 30% throughout 1983-93 to 37% in 2000-04.

By the year 2000, less than a third of center-based early childhood educators had a college degree in every one of 14 metropolitan areas. In Riverside-San Bernadino, Bakersfield, and Fresno, less than one in 10 center-based early childhood educators had a college degree. In Los Angeles, San Diego, Sacramento, and San Jose, one in six or less had a college degree.

Education levels are lower still in home-based ECE. In California home-based ECE, only 9% of staff members has a college degree or more and 26% do not have a high school degree.

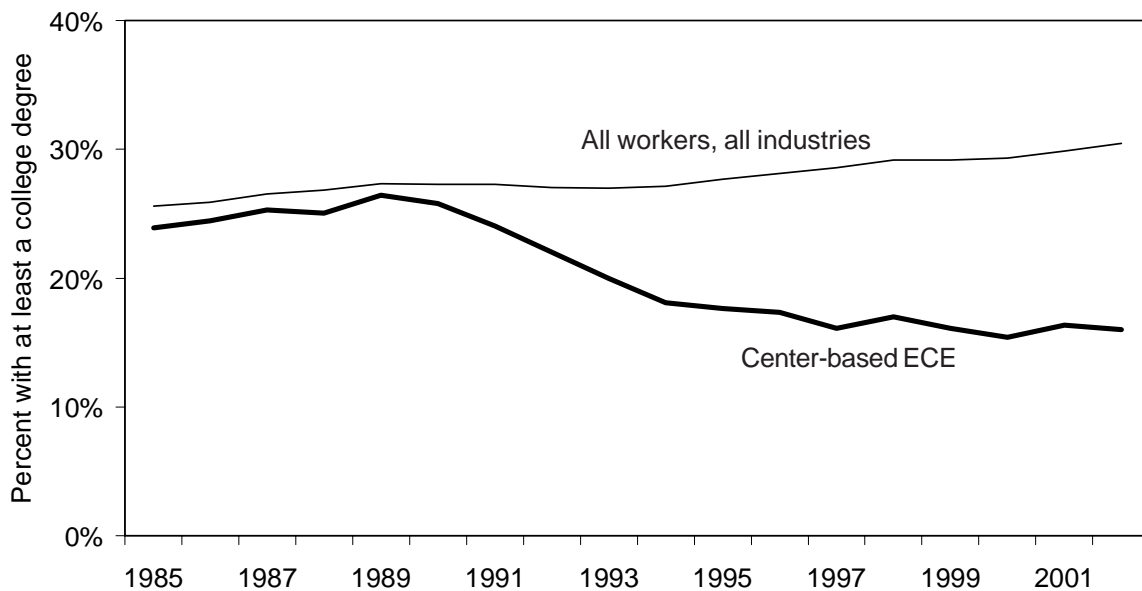
Low wages and benefits help explain ECE education levels. The fall in the education levels of center-based early childhood educators stems partly from median pay that remains about \$9 per hour—some \$19,000 per year for a full-time worker—and a lack of health care and pension benefits.

The story that emerges from the data is that the position of ECE in the California labor market has changed for the worse since the late 1980s. As the field has expanded, female college graduates have enjoyed expanding career opportunities in other fields and, in some families, greater economic need (over 95% of the ECE workforce is female). As a result, center directors often find that they must hire individuals with low education levels and no specialized training in early childhood development.

California and the nation as a whole need a new approach to preparing early childhood educators who can help children succeed. The new approach must establish high standards for all teaching staff and increase compensation to attract and retain teachers who can meet high standards.

FIGURE A

California ECE educators with a college degree, 1985-2002



Note: Figures are five-year averages; e.g., figures for 2002 are averages produced after pooling data for the years 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004.

Source: KRC analysis of the Current Population Survey (CPS).

This issue brief is a companion to *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education*, a study of national trends, which is available on the Web sites of the Economic Policy Institute (www.epi.org), the Foundation for Child Development (www.fcd-us.org), and Keystone Research Center (www.keystoneresearch.org).

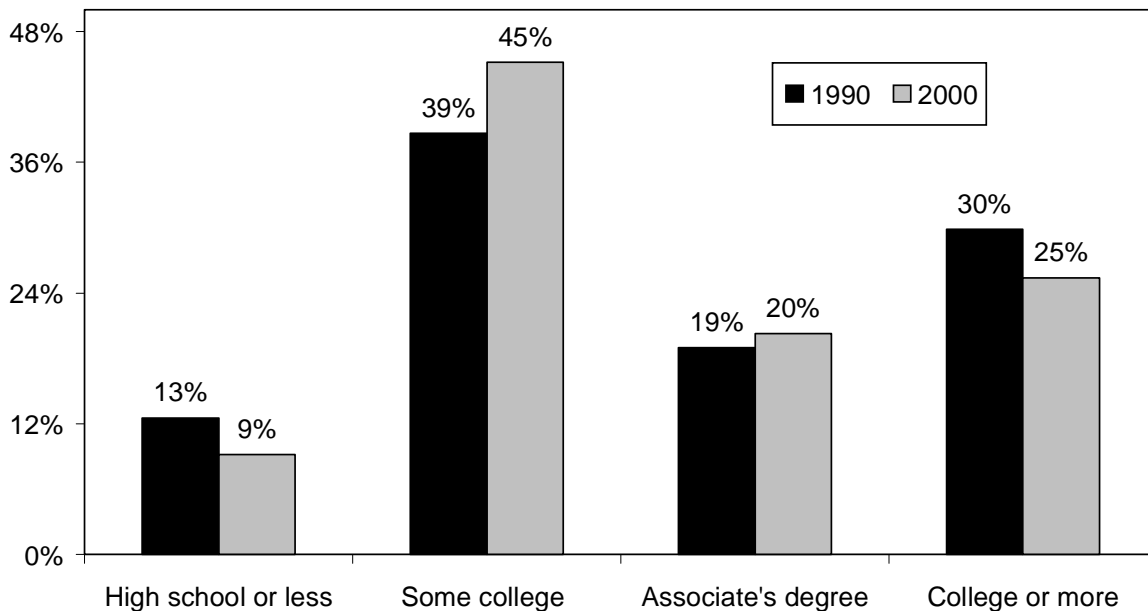
Educational levels in center-based ECE down since the 1980s

In California, as in the United States, the educational attainment of center-based early childhood educators has declined since the 1980s.

- According to the CPS, the share of these California educators with a four-year college degree fell from about 24% in the mid-1980s and 26% in the late 1980s to about 16% today (**Figure A**).² (Figure A and other analysis for California using the CPS in this issue brief rely on five-year moving averages to increase sample size and the reliability of our estimates.) The introduction in California of smaller classes in kindergarten through grade three beginning in 1996 (which impacts the “1994” five-year average) may have contributed to the last part of this decline by expanding opportunities for ECE college-educated staff to become elementary school teachers. A second factor that began with the 1992 five-year average was the decline in unemployment from 9.3% in 1993 to 4.9% in 2000.

FIGURE B

Educational attainment of California center-based ECE teachers and administrators, 1990 and 2000.



Source: KRC analysis of Census data .

- The share of center-based California early childhood educators with a high-school education or less climbed from around 30% through the entire 1983-93 period to 35-37% in the 1998-2004 period.³

The educational attainment of center-based early childhood educators has dropped even more relative to the education of the workforce as a whole (Figure A).

- In the mid-1980s, the share of early childhood educators with a bachelor's degree was comparable to the same share in all industries. Today early childhood educators in California are about half as likely to have a college degree as workers in all industries.

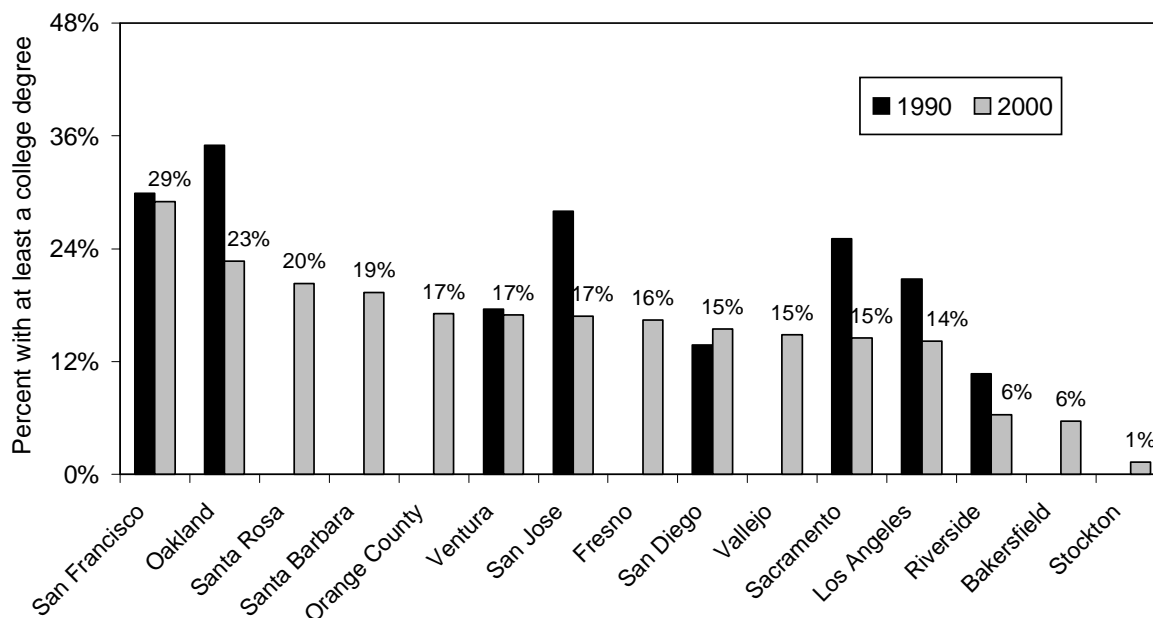
College degree attainment also lower among center-based teachers and administrators

The trends in educational attainment are more mixed when the focus is narrowed from all center-based early childhood educators to just teachers and administrators.

- College degree trends in California are similar to those for all early childhood educators. That is, the share of California teachers and administrators with a college degree was stable in the 1980s and early 1990s, but has since fallen. According to the Census, the share of center-based ECE teachers

FIGURE C

Decline in the share of California center-based ECE educators with at least a college degree by metropolitan area, 1990 and 2000



Note: San Francisco includes San Francisco, Marin, and San Mateo; Santa-Rosa includes Santa Rosa and Petaluma; Santa Barbara includes Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, and Lompoc; Ventura includes Ventura, Oxnard, and Simi Valley; Vallejo includes Vallejo, Fairfield, and Napa; Los Angeles includes Los Angeles and Long Beach; Riverside includes Riverside and San Bernadino.

Source: KRC analysis of Census data.

and administrators with a four-year college degree in California fell from 30% in 1990 to 25% by 2000 (**Figure B**).⁴ The 2000 figure compares with a national level of 30%.

- At the low end of the educational attainment spectrum, only 9% of center-based California teachers and administrators had a high school degree or less in 2000, down from 13% in 1990.⁵ On this measure, California's share in 2000 was far below the national figure of 24%.

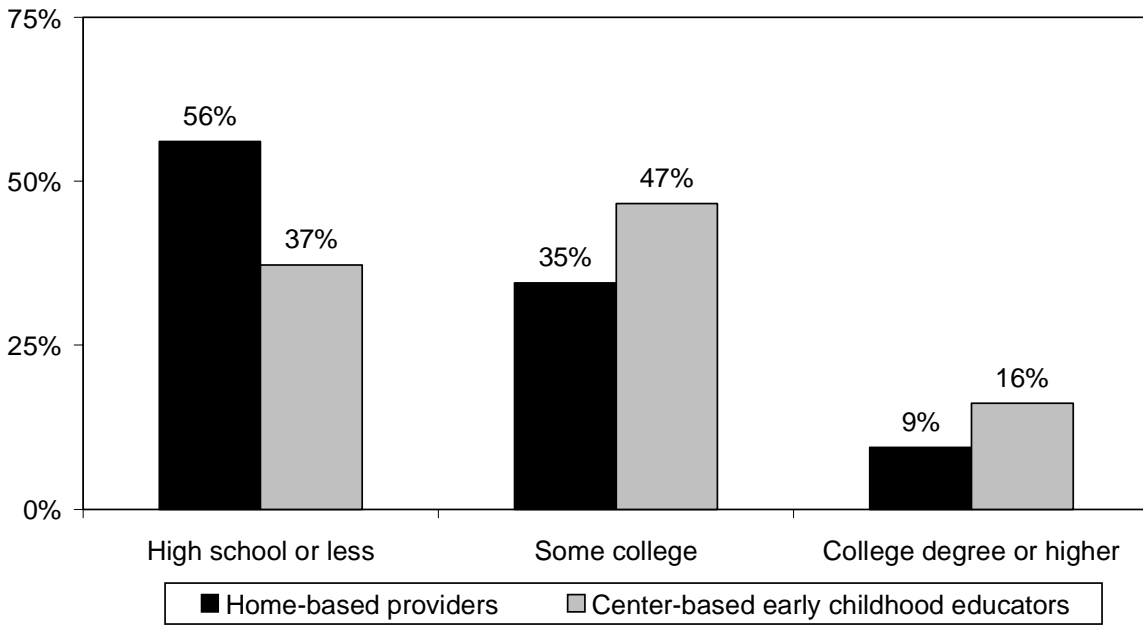
In 2000, California had low shares of center-based teachers and administrators with either high or low levels of education, and 65% of ECE workers in the middle of the spectrum, with more than a high-school education but less than a four-year degree. However, less than a third of those in this intermediate range—20% of all teachers and administrators—had completed a two-year associate's degree in 2000. Adding this group to the college educated one, only 45% of center-based ECE teachers and administrators had completed a two-year degree or more in 2000.

Education levels falling in all California metropolitan areas

By the year 2000, according to the Census, less than a third of center-based early childhood educators had a college degree in every one of 14 California metropolitan areas for which data exist (**Figure C**).

FIGURE D

Educational attainment of California home-based early childhood educators



Source: KRC analysis of the CPS Basic Monthly Survey.

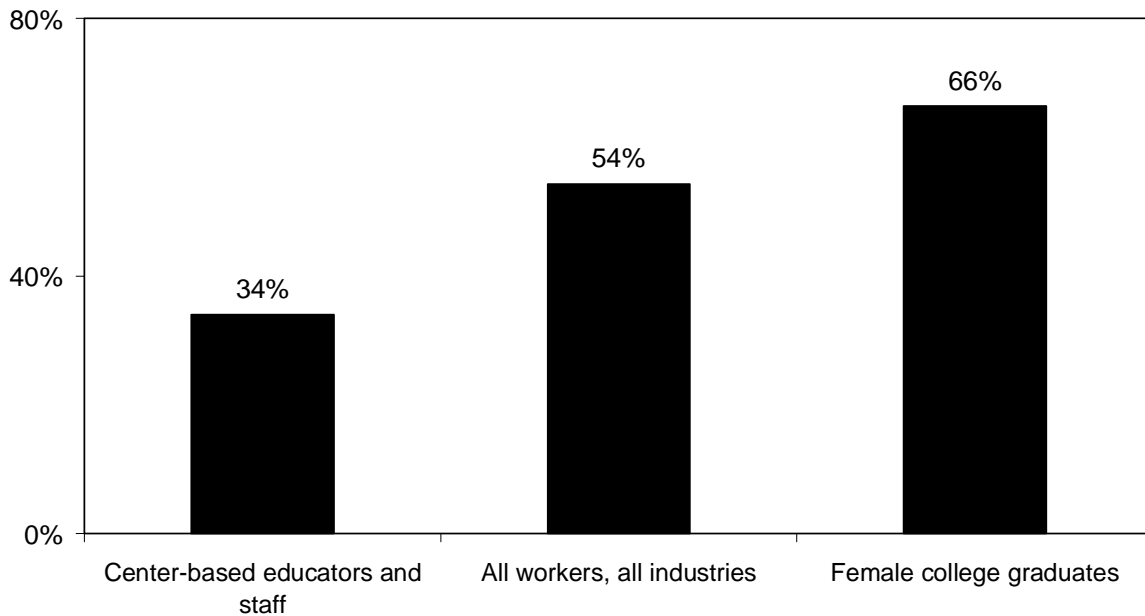
- In Riverside-San Bernadino, Bakersfield, and Fresno, less than one in 10 center-based early childhood educators had a college degree.
- In four additional large metropolitan areas—Los Angeles, San Diego, Sacramento, and San Jose—only one in six or one in seven center-based early child educators had a college degree.
- Out of the eight areas for which data exist in both 1990 and 2000, Oakland and Sacramento experienced the largest drops in the college degree share of center-based early childhood educators—from over a third to less than a quarter in Oakland and from a quarter to 15% in Sacramento.
- Of the smaller metro areas, Stockton and Bakersfield have the lowest college degree shares among center-based educators—one out of every 20 staff members or fewer.

Education levels even lower in home-based ECE

Education levels are even lower in home-based ECE than center-based (**Figure D**). Moreover, home-based ECE workers are less well-educated in California than in the United States over all. This is especially significant because home-based California ECE, with a workforce of about 86,000, is almost as large as center-based California ECE (with a workforce of 98,000).

FIGURE E

Percent of California workers with health care coverage through their own employer



Source: KRC analysis of the March CPS.

- Only 9% of California home-based ECE workers have a college degree or more, compared to a U.S. share of 11%.
- Whereas 21% of U.S. home-based ECE workers have less than a high school degree, this same share in California is 26%.

Low wages and benefits help explain educational attainment in ECE

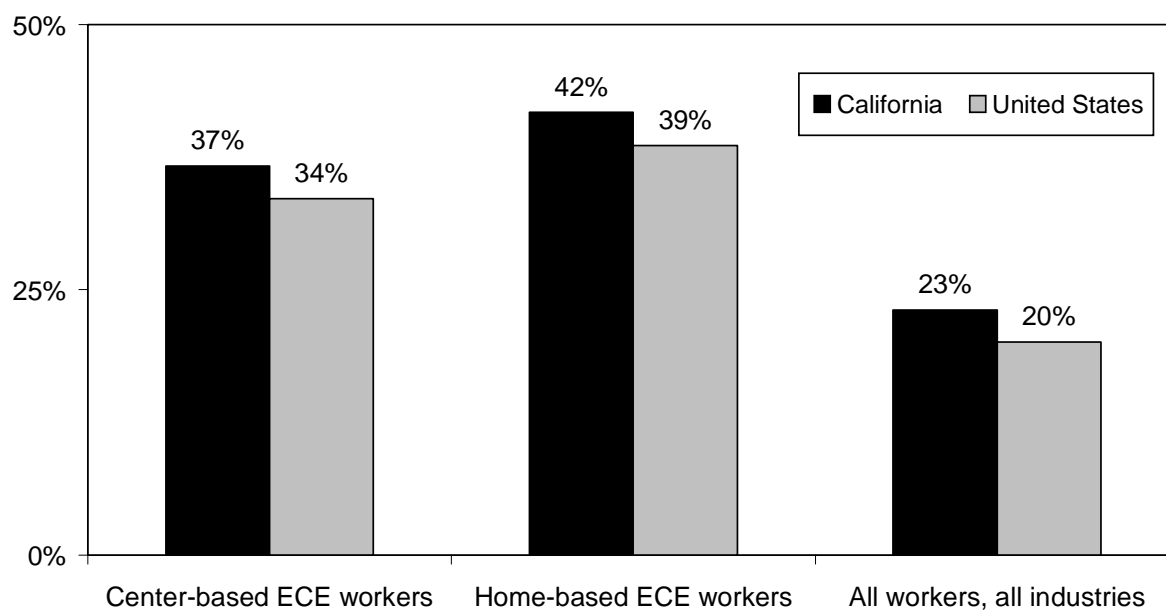
Since the mid-1980s, the wages and benefits of center-based ECE staff in California have remained stagnant relative to those of other workers in other industries:

Wages

- Center-based early childhood educators have consistently earned roughly 60% of the wages of all California workers. In 2000-04, early childhood educators earned \$9 per hour, compared to \$14.44 for all California workers.
- Even early childhood teachers and administrators earned a median wage of only \$11.29 in 2000-04, just 52% of the \$21.56 median wage of all female college graduates.

FIGURE F

Percent below the 200% poverty threshold



Source: KRC analysis of Census data.

Health care and pension benefits

- About a third of California center-based early childhood educators obtains health insurance through their job compared to 54% of all workers in all industries and two-thirds of female college graduates (**Figure E**).
- Twenty-two percent of center-based early childhood educators had no health insurance coverage versus 9% of female college graduates.
- Only 19% of California center-based early childhood educators participate in any kind of pension plan at work, versus 42% for all workers and 58% for female college graduates.

Share of workers below a necessity income

- In 2000, 38% of California center-based early childhood educators were living below 200% of the poverty threshold compared to 23% of all California workers (**Figure F**). Two hundred percent of the poverty line is considered roughly equivalent to a minimally adequate basic income high enough to cover the cost of basic necessities without public assistance.
- For all workers employed in home-based care, the share living in poverty is 42%.
- Teachers and administrators in ECE were three times as likely to have incomes below a basic necessity income (27% versus 9%) as female college graduates generally.

Conclusion

National data reveal that the most educated age cohort in ECE today is in its 50s, having entered the industry in the 1960s and 1970s. With opportunities for educated women expanding and more families highly dependent on women's earnings, it has become harder to attract and retain qualified teachers into ECE. As many of the better-educated early childhood women retire, the difficulty of maintaining an adequately qualified ECE staff will grow even more difficult. Industry demographics make it imperative that state and national policymakers act now to ensure the high teacher standards essential to long-term benefits from ECE programs.

A pragmatic and systemic approach to raising staff qualifications should mandate higher standards but also include phase-in periods, research, and evaluation that deepen our understanding of the long-term benefits of different approaches to teacher education and professional development. (See the national companion study, *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education*, for elaboration of this recommendation at www.earlychildhoodworkforce.com.)

Any approach to improving staff standards in ECE will fail unless it also raises compensation to keep more qualified people in the field. The present reality will persist, with many ECE staff having low education levels, no meaningful training in early childhood development, and no opportunities to learn from experienced and qualified peers. It is well past time to recognize that society can't afford not to pay more for ECE teachers. Only with public investment can the community as a whole reap the long-term benefits of high-quality early childhood education.

Endnotes

1. These benefits include lower costs for subsequent education, increased taxes paid once children mature and enter the workforce, and reduced social costs (Lynch 2004).
 2. The Census shows a similar trend—from 23% in 1980 to 21% in 1990 to 15% in 2000—although without the late 1980s peak since data are only available for Census years.
 3. The Census data show a higher share with a high school or less share in 1980—40%—before the start of the CPS series. The Census shares of center-based educators with a high school degree or less in 1990 (27%) and 2000 (35%) are consistent with CPS data.
 4. While the text relies on the Census when analyzing center-based teachers and administrators, CPS data for California show similar trends. According to the CPS, the college degree share for California teachers and administrators ranged from 34%-36% in all five-year periods starting after 1982 and ending before 1995. This share falls to 23%-25% in the four five-year periods starting after 1993 and ending before 2002. There is then an uptick, also seen in the national data, to 29% in 1999-2003 and 2000-04.
 5. Again, the CPS trends going back to 1983 for California are comparable, although the numbers are volatile from year to year. From 1983-89, the high school and less share averaged 16%-17%. From 1998-2004, this share averaged 14%.
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References

- Bowman, Barbara T., M. Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, eds. 2000. *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Report of the Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. pp. 161-176.
- Lynch, Robert. 2004. *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal, and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.