

REACH
Readiness and Early Activities for Children from the Heart

The REACH project targets a specific low-income area in California in an attempt to improve the quality of early childhood education. A multi-foundation funded project, the ultimate goal of REACH is to improve Kindergarten Readiness in eight Child Development Centers within the 90806 zip code area in Long Beach, CA.

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REACH is designed to:

1. Promote the retention of Early Childhood Professionals who have made a commitment to their child care careers through advancement on the career matrix.
2. Provide Early Childhood Professionals with the opportunity to receive grants for classroom materials and supplies targeted to literacy development.
3. Encourage coordination in the delivery of courses to advance the on the career matrix.
4. Provide a formalized system of support to encourage Early Childhood Professionals to pursue professional growth and educational advancement.

Table 1
Demographics of the 90806 zip code, city of Long Beach, California, and the U.S.

Demographic	U.S.	California	Long Beach	90806
Latino/Hispanic	12.5%	32.4%	35.8%	43.6%
Black	12.3%	6.7%	14.5%	20.0%
Asian/Pacific Isle	3.6%	10.9%	13.1%	19.6%
Caucasian	75.1%	59.5%	33.1%	13.3%
Median Age (years)	35.9	33.3	30.8	27.6
Population Under 5	6.8%	7.3%	8.4%	9.6%
Free/Reduced Lunches			68.3%	74-99%
Credentialed Teachers			72%	52-54%
English as Second Language Students			34%	45-61%

Methods

The REACH project involves a five year longitudinal assessment of Early Childhood Provider retention and education. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of measurement and analysis are being utilized. Early Childhood Providers working in eight participating centers within the 90806 zip code completed questionnaires in 2004.

Results

Eighty-eight participants were surveyed. A majority of the child care professionals were female. Thirty-six percent of those surveyed were Latino, while 33% were African-American, 16% were Asian-American and 9% were White. The highest educational level for the majority was a high school diploma (41%), while 30% had earned an Associates degree, 14% a Bachelors degree, and 2% had completed post baccalaureate work.

Total annual family income ranged from \$9600 – \$110,000, 27% earned less than \$20,000, 22% earned between 20-\$29,999, 16% earned \$30-39,999, 8% earned \$40-49,999, and 13% earned more than \$50,000. The majority (62%) earned the primary household income in the family. The median family income for REACH early

childhood providers was \$28,900 compared to the California median of \$47,493 and the United States median of \$41,994.

Child care workers are underpaid when compared to other workers with similar or less education and training. In addition, “these predominantly female workers – many of whom are parents of young children themselves, better-educated than the general population, and/or women of color- suffer from a higher concentration of poverty-level jobs than almost any other occupation in the United States.”

Obviously, individuals who pursue careers in early childhood education do not do so for the money. Qualitative interviews of several early childhood professionals were conducted to expand on the quantitative data. Despite the low wages and low occupation prestige, these workers discuss their motivations for becoming early childhood educators :

Maria: *“I don’t see myself doing anything else...every day it’s like something new”*

Maria: *“It’s not babysitting. We’re working with the children, we’re helping them, we’re learning with them and they’re learning about us...”*

Cathy: *“Some people just say ‘oh you’re just babysitting’. No...there’s more to coming into a setting and ‘babysitting’ you know. These children are actually learning at four and five and I want to be a part of that. I wanted to be some part of their impact. You know make the impact in their life at an early age.”.*

Maria: *“I feel that if you’re working with children you need to be with them because you really enjoy it, because you like it. Not because you have to as a source of income. I don’t see myself doing it just because of income”.*

Alana: *“You can’t say you’re on this because of the money cause you’re not. We’re like the lowest pay you know. You have to like it, to be here. Cause if it’s like you’re just going to get it for the money, it’s like, forget it, you’re not. You’re in the wrong field!”*

We often hear “Children Are Our Future”, yet those who care for our children, Early Childhood Professionals, are employed in one of the lowest paid and lowest prestige occupations in the country. Recent research indicates a strong correlation between level of education of child care staff and quality of teaching. Current efforts are being made to increase ECP education and wages.

Endnote

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