

# OPINION

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## Re-examine BA Requirement for Preschool Staff

We agree, rule will narrow path to diversity



BY FRANCES SALLAH AND MOLLY DAY

As the co-directors of Early Learning Multnomah, we add our support to the call for a re-examination of the Bachelors of Arts degree requirement for Preschool Promise providers. “Preschool Promise Conflict, New Requirements Fail Kids of Color,” Portland Observer, July 20.)

We do not have enough affordable high-quality preschool in Multnomah County. With

funding from Preschool Promise, a state-funded initiative administered by United Way of the Columbia-Willamette and Multnomah County, Early Learning Multnomah is able to support the creation of 192 high-quality preschool opportunities for low-income children. It is a small step forward in providing preschool for the thousands of children who would benefit from this important foundation for school success. We want to make this first step a smart one.

In our work with families from communities of color we hear time and again their desire for teachers and caregivers who mirror the communities they serve. Families want to send their children to high-quality preschools staffed by teachers who speak the language of the children, share their racial and ethnic backgrounds and reso-

nate with the families’ life experiences. We want to be able to use Preschool Promise funds to reach that goal.

Unfortunately studies and reports from the Center for American Progress, Brookings Institution, and others highlight the challenges of achieving a diverse preschool teacher workforce. African American early childhood teachers make 84 cents for every dollar earned by their white peers, who are already among the lowest paid professionals in this country with an average salary of \$30,000 year. Wage parity and strategies to attract and retain minority teachers must go hand in hand with the demand for a highly-educated teacher workforce.

Ron Herndon, director of the Albina Head Start Program and Kali Thorne-Ladd, founder of

Kairos PDX have effectively argued that a B.A. requirement for providers will narrow, rather than expand the path for those who are best able to meet the needs of our underserved communities. (“Well Intended, but with Devastating Consequences,” guest opinion piece, Portland Observer July 20 issue.)

We agree. That is why we will continue to push for in-classroom experience as a proxy for a formal educational degree and work to offer continuing education opportunities and training to raise the profile and pay for those who do this important work.

In a statement addressing teacher diversity, U.S. Secretary of Education, John B. King Jr. said, “Achieving a diverse teacher workforce must be a long-term policy goal with a suite of long-term strategies put in place to help

minorities succeed in college and to encourage them to return to the classroom to help the next generation of students. Our failure to do so will keep us stubbornly in the same vicious cycle in which low teacher diversity contributes in a myriad of ways to low minority student success in K-12 and college, which results once again in low teacher diversity.”

We hope that others interested in educational success for all students will join us to advocate for achieving a diverse teacher workforce and will re-examine the B.A. degree requirement for Preschool Promise providers.

*Molly Day and Frances Sallah are co-directors of Early Learning Multnomah, one of the state’s Early Learning Hubs that work within Oregon’s Early Learning Division to support young children and families to learn and thrive.*

## Make Sure Every Student is in School Every Day

Every child needs to feel welcome

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

As a new school year begins, parents, teachers and administrators are all thinking about how to make it the best year ever. One of the keys to student success sounds very



simple but can make a profound difference: making sure every student is in school every day. This is not the case in many schools and school districts across the country. The Department of Education estimates that five to seven and a half million students miss 18 or more days of school each year or nearly an entire month or more.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days in a school year for any reason. As part of the President’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative, the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice have joined together to launch Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism.

I was honored to participate in their national symposium to share what the Children’s Defense Fund has learned since our first report in 1974, Children Out of School in America.

We found from examining census data at the time that at least 2 million children were out of school for at least 3 months, including 750,000 between 7-13 years old. We learned that the large number of

these children had physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. Another large group were children pushed out by discipline policies who never returned to school.

In Holyoke, Mass., we found children who had recently migrated from Puerto Rico staying home when it got cold because they had no winter coats. In rural Maine, we found children who couldn’t afford the local school district’s transportation fees and were unaware that the state would reimburse the local district for transportation costs. In other states like Kentucky the key barriers were book fees.

We wrote: “If a child was not white, or was white but not middle class, did not speak English, was poor, needed special help with seeing, hearing, walking, reading, learning, adjusting, growing up, was pregnant or married at age 15, was not ‘smart enough’ or was ‘too smart,’ then, in too many places, school officials decided school was not the place for that child. In sum, out of school children shared a common characteristic of differentness by virtue of race, income, physical, mental or emotional ‘handicap,’ and age. They were for the most part, out of school not by choice but because they had been excluded.

We’ve made enormous progress since then, especially for students with disabilities. But we haven’t solved the children out of school crisis. Children on the margins re-

main at greatest risk for some of the same reasons we documented more than 40 years ago.

A recent National Public Radio story on absenteeism featured Johns Hopkins scholar Robert Balfanz, who studies chronic school absenteeism, and a high-poverty elementary school in Baltimore making strides tackling the problem: “[Balfanz] has studied high school dropouts for years, and in his research he kept seeing a red flag: chronic absences in elementary and middle school. Students who miss a couple days a month fall behind in reading — and if they can’t read, they can’t pass tests.

*“To miss a month of school when you’re 11 and 12, there’s got to be something behind that. The list included things like tooth decay, mental health issues, and not having a winter coat. — Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins scholar*

“To miss a month of school when you’re 11 and 12, there’s got to be something behind that,” Balfanz says — and at Wolfe Street Academy, there was. “The list included things like tooth decay, mental health issues, and not having a winter coat.”

The Department of Education sees chronic absenteeism as: “a primary cause of low academic achievement and a powerful predictor of those students who may

eventually drop out of school.”

Chronic absenteeism is not to be confused with the problem of children being truant from school. Often when a child skips school, he is labeled as a discipline problem and ends up being suspended or expelled and sometimes even referred to law enforcement for action. We must prevent suspensions and expulsions for truancy. I have never understood why we put a child out of school for not coming to school instead of finding out why the child is not in school.

The Department of Education is now collecting the right data and doing something about chronic ab-

senteeism by promoting ideas we know work. One common sense idea goes all the way back to our days of knocking on doors: More school districts are starting each morning by having staff call or visit every family whose child is absent from school to find out why.

Others also connect with families as the school year begins. Some schools are making strides connecting eligible but unenrolled children with health insurance as

they enroll in school, allowing those children to get the regular care they need to stay healthy and ready to learn. Some are partnering with health clinics to allow children to be treated on-site for chronic conditions like asthma that contribute to days of lost class time and which can now be addressed in a few minutes out of class.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development is partnering with the Department of Education to promote housing stability for families so children aren’t kept out of school when they move frequently and lack necessary school records. Wraparound services also help keep children in school. Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore, for example, provides a box of donated coats and other clothes in the cafeteria and like other community schools, provides mental health and dental services and a wide range of programs encouraging parents to get involved in their school community.

Many schools provide mentoring services to make sure students feel supported, nurtured, and encouraged to be there. The simple truth is every child needs to feel welcome at school and know that they will be missed by someone at school if they miss a day. Schools must make learning engaging and fun and always keep the children at the center. Those are the schools every child will look forward to going to every day.

*Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children’s Defense Fund.*