K-State leading efforts for career pathway in early childhood care and education in Kansas

Grant project helps address issue that affects every county in the state

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Kansas State University is leading state-supported efforts to strengthen and align the early childhood care and education work force.

“It's a little bit like a Lego structure,” said Bronwyn Fees, associate dean for academic and faculty affairs in K-State’s College of Health and Human Sciences and professor in early childhood education.

“We are building on the workforce pieces our state developed – the resources, investments, and designs – and putting them together in a way that will help meet the needs of Kansas’ early childhood care and education professionals now and into the future.”

Fees is the principal investigator for Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities, or KCCTO, which received more than $5 million in initial funding from the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) for a collaborative project involving K-State.

According to Fees, these projects help meet the goals of the All in for Kansas Kids Strategic Plan and requirements of DCF’s Child Care and Development Fund around training progression and professional development opportunities.

She said the project aims to implement the Career Pathway for Kansas Early Childhood Care and Education Professionals (known as the career pathway) for those currently in the field and those thinking about entering it.

The Career Pathway was co-created and designed after two years of conversations and collaborations led by the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund and involving other state agencies (including DCF, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and the Kansas
As the leading early childhood workforce partner in Kansas, KCCTO is tasked with bringing the career pathway to life for the professionals and educators serving Kansas' youngest learners. Fees said several state groups are working with early childhood system partners to launch an awareness campaign, conduct a comprehensive workforce survey, support and enhance coaching and mentoring systems, and expand foundational partnerships with secondary and post-secondary institutions to offer credit and non-credit professional development opportunities.

“Our state early childhood leaders recognize the critical need to invest in our workforce.” Fees said.

Bradford Wiles, a child development specialist with K-State Research and Extension, said the project also seeks to capitalize on the statewide extension service by providing support to local agents who engage with early childhood care and education professionals in their area.

“We really want to honor and respect those (childhood care and education professionals) who have been in the field, and help them recognize that they are tremendous assets,” Wiles said. “We want them to recognize how important the work they do is, and provide them with opportunities for advancement, recognition and more.”

The initiative aims to provide training to college and high school students who may be considering careers in childhood care and education, he said.

“Currently, it can be a little difficult to get into the field,” Wiles said. “This gives us a chance to recruit and retain high quality professionals who see an opportunity to move up in their careers.”

In the U.S., the lack of available childcare is evident in every state, affecting families, businesses and local economies. Child Care Aware of Kansas reports that the Sunflower State has lost 1,952 childcare openings since 2021, and available openings meet the demand only 42% of the time.

In 2022, a Kansas early childcare and education professional earned $12.29 an hour, while nationally, the average hourly wage is $14.22.

Child Care Aware of Kansas also reports that a lack of educators is one of the primary barriers to filling childcare openings in Kansas.

“The strategy is to attack this issue from multiple angles,” Wiles said. “Career Pathway is focused on the workforce. Recruitment and retention can be very difficult components, particularly in rural areas. So this is an important piece of an overall picture that helps us bolster early childhood care and the education system in Kansas.”

The project aligns with the K-State 105 initiative, the university’s answer to the call for a comprehensive economic growth and advancement solution for Kansas. K-State officials say the initiative leverages the statewide extension network to deliver the full breadth of the university’s collective knowledge and solution-driven innovation to every Kansan where they live and work.
Fees adds: “It's a privilege to be able to have this opportunity through KCCTO and Kansas State University as it reflects our land-grant mission in partnership with K-State Research and Extension, to serve Kansans.”

Fees and Wiles recently spoke at length on the topic on the weekly radio program, Sound Living, produced by K-State Research and Extension. Their discussion is available online.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities, https://kccto.org/career-pathway-ecce

All in for Kansas Kids https://allinforkansaskids.org/

Child Care Aware of Kansas, https://ks.childcareaware.org

K-State 105, https://www.k-state.edu/105


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