

Multi-Level Support for Early Educators

Maria Muñoz has been a teacher's assistant for the past three years at a preschool that provides subsidized services to low-income families. From the start, she has wanted to be the best early educator possible for the children in her classroom. She knew that doing so would require improving her teaching and her English language skills. So, when she heard about a local program that supports the professional development of early educators working with children from birth through five years old, she decided to check it out.

Through WestEd's Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards (CARES) program in California's Santa Clara County, Muñoz has received individualized academic advising and financial support that allowed her to enroll at San Jose City College and embark on a path toward a college degree in early childhood education.

"Through CARES, I've accomplished many things I didn't think were ever possible for me, especially being an immigrant and limited English speaker," says Muñoz. "The program helped me plan the courses I need to get a degree, and I've now completed several, including ESL [English as a second language] courses. I feel more comfortable speaking English in my preschool classroom, and I'm much more confident and independent."

Launched by WestEd in 2002, Santa Clara CARES is an early education workforce development program that supports local educators like Muñoz by providing education stipends and individualized education planning services to help them work toward obtaining college degrees. The program is predicated on a growing body of research that confirms what Muñoz already knows — children benefit tremendously, many going on to be more successful in school and life, when their early educators are well-trained and well-educated.

Santa Clara CARES helps fill a significant gap. While extensive systems of preparation and in-service professional development are provided for K-12 teachers, the same depth of support is not typically available to early educators. This deficit of opportunity often results in an early educator workforce characterized by low educational attainment, high turnover, and poor compensation.

"The challenge of working toward a degree in early childhood education is that it's not like other streams where you would complete your coursework and get your degree before entering the field," says George C. Philipp, Senior Program Associate at WestEd. "Many early educators are older or are English language learners who go back for coursework while working full time. Many feel lost and jump from course to course without receiving systematic support to ensure academic progress."

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Supporting Educational Progress

WestEd established the program in 2002 with funding from First 5 Santa Clara County, First 5 California, and the California Department of Education. The agency developed a collaborative local infrastructure in partnership with four local early education agencies that specialize in offering community-based support to early educators, every community college in the county, and two local four-year universities. The collaborative established clear, consistent guidelines for the transferability of courses — an essential step toward systematizing professional development for early educators.

Santa Clara CARES has an ongoing enrollment system — any educator who works with children up to five years old at a licensed early education program in Santa Clara County can apply to join at any time. To ensure local educators are aware of the program, Santa Clara CARES and its partners conduct extensive outreach that has been quite successful — an analysis of Santa Clara CARES conducted in 2010 by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) found the program had reached 85 percent (close to 5,400 individuals) of the county's early educators since its inception.

Word of mouth among participants has also helped the program grow. Muñoz says that because CARES motivated her to continue her own education, she was inspired to spread the word — she now finds herself regularly encouraging colleagues to tap into the program's extensive resources.

To participate in the program, early educators must complete an enrollment application and meet with a CARES-affiliated advisor from one of the partner colleges to create a Professional Development and Education Plan, an online record that outlines the coursework necessary for the participant to achieve a college degree. Each time participants work with advisors to complete or update their plan, they receive an electronic Participant Summary outlining their degree progress.

Without the direct advising support that comes through developing a personalized education plan, early educators often find it challenging to pursue a degree. California, like many states, lacks clear guidelines for what it means to be a "qualified" early educator, and systems for professional development and education are fragmented and confusing.

"Before CARES, I had a few college credits. I wasn't sure which courses to take, and I wasn't continuing my education," remembers CARES participant Tanya M. Wieber. "After creating a Professional Development and Education Plan, I've completed my core courses and administration courses, and I have a certificate from De Anza College for Home-Based Child Care. I've just started taking GE [general education] courses — achieving a degree is my next goal."

In addition to specifying necessary coursework, the Professional Development and Education Plan is used to allocate stipends based on the number of college units participants earn from approved courses.

"I used the stipends to pay for courses and books," says Muñoz. "Without them, I'm not sure I could afford to go to school." Muñoz says the financial assistance from Santa Clara CARES enabled her to take classes continuously during spring, summer, and fall semesters this past year, which has been crucial to keeping her on a degree trajectory.

While similar programs offer financial stipends for one-off workshops and trainings that don't necessarily lead toward a degree, Santa Clara CARES awards stipends only for unit-bearing credits that help participants progress toward a college degree. "Because we knew higher education levels



had higher impact on child outcomes," says Santa Clara CARES Director Yolanda Garcia, "we made a concerted effort to focus participants toward a degree path."

This emphasis has led to a more educated workforce in Santa Clara County. According to the 2010 REL West analysis, "all returning participants, independent of their number of years in the program, increased their total accrual of semester units," and 66 percent of the participants advanced to a higher California Child Development Permit level.

Using Data to Inform Programmatic Efforts

The Professional Development and Education Plans serve another crucial function by providing ongoing guidance that shapes what the program offers. Aggregated into an online database, the plans offer a rich portrait of early educators in the county, including detailed demographic, professional, and educational information. Early on, Santa Clara CARES staff realized the importance of leveraging this database to inform systematic change in early educator support.

"Before Santa Clara CARES began collecting and analyzing early educator data, we couldn't really define who was working with the children," Garcia says. "Once we developed a system for capturing this data, we could really understand their needs and plan our support accordingly."

Local colleges began to use information gathered in the education plans to learn what courses students were requesting most often and what specific supports the colleges needed to offer to ensure students' academic success. And Santa Clara CARES uses the information about participants to target the outreach and support that the program provides. For example, early data indicated that many Santa Clara CARES participants had received college education outside the United States, but their transcripts had never been translated or reviewed. This knowledge led CARES to develop a system for transcripts to be evaluated, providing a big jump in the degree progress of many participants – some even found that their original degrees were fully equivalent in the United States.

Another key piece of data indicated that a large number of Santa Clara County's early educators were English language learners, with particularly high numbers who spoke Spanish. In response, Santa Clara CARES engaged the National Hispanic University to help more fully support its Spanish-speaking participants. CARES also collaborated with local Spanish-speaking family-based educator networks to provide strategic counseling and advice for participants.

Now in its tenth year, Santa Clara CARES has become a robust model of collaborative, data-driven support, constantly reevaluating needs, and evolving to better serve local early educators. The benefits are both systemic and personal. "Completing these college courses has not been easy, especially because I work full time and have a young daughter," reflects Muñoz. "But CARES has connected me to wonderful support at the college and in my community, so I'm no longer alone with my goal of earning a degree."

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