The work associated with today’s child care provider goes far beyond the “babysitting” of the past. Education reform initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have called for more rigorous training for child care providers to ensure school readiness. “Child care providers are expected to do far more than make sure that young children are safe, fed and cared for during the workday,” said Karen Karten, executive director of the Lower Shore Child Care Resource Center (LSCCRC). “They are expected to provide meaningful educational experiences and enrichment, in addition to adult supervision, while parents are at work.”

Child Care Career and Professional Development Fund

According to the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), the training and education level of a child care provider are the most important factors in providing quality child care. As programs strive to meet the changing expectations for the child care industry, some child care staff will choose to seek degrees. However, with the average annual salary of just $24,000, most providers cannot afford the cost of higher education. “One of the barriers faced by programs seeking accreditation is the high cost of education; child care staff simply can’t afford to go back to school,” explained Karten. “Having degreed teachers in the child care workforce will be an essential piece of the quality child care puzzle.”

Currently, child care providers must complete a 90-hour program consisting of two courses in basic child development and early child care curriculum, along with a few other courses to qualify as a lead teacher. “In the past, that was where many people stopped,” explained Karten. “Once they met the minimum requirement, few child care providers went on to advance their professional development or to earn a degree.”

Enabling providers to complete an early childhood degree is one way that the lower Eastern Shore region can prepare its child care workforce for the future of early care. For the past 11 years, the LSCCRC, through its unique partnership with Salisbury University, has received funding to help develop a
From Crib to College

Experts in the field of early childhood education agree that what happens before a child enters kindergarten can determine the outcome of an entire academic career and influence a child’s ability to grow into a happy and productive adult. Some experts have gone so far as to suggest that money invested in early care will now be saved later, with fewer individuals entering the justice system or relying on welfare. Karten believes that it is never too early to start preparing children for school.

“Maryland students are tested beginning in the third grade, but in reality, college and career readiness starts at birth,” she said. The first three years of life are the most critical, as that is when the brain is developing most rapidly. Most children are in child care during those crucial first years, so they need to be in a quality program.”

Stronger, better prepared early childhood workforce. Since 2001, the center has been working diligently to provide training and support for early care providers and increase school readiness among children ages 0-5.

“Our goal is to increase the educational level of our local providers. This doesn’t always mean that they have to obtain a college degree, but we work to provide them with educational opportunities so that they will continue learning new skills and gain more knowledge in the early care field,” explained Karten. “However, our region has several child care programs working on Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) accreditation and this process requires their staff to go back to school and earn a degree. The Career and Professional Development Grant is making higher education possible for our local child care workforce,” she added.

In addition to providing financial assistance to degree-seeking child care workers, the center’s affiliation with SU has enabled them to do something that is virtually unheard of in the child care industry – offer providers the opportunity to participate in professional development seminars facilitated by university professors and other experts in the field. Participants pay about $15-20 for each seminar, making ongoing professional development affordable.

School Readiness

Maryland implements the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) to determine whether or not kindergarteners are prepared for school. According to Karten, the state administers the Work Sampling System to assess what skills students learned prior to entering kindergarten. Through observation, data analysis and portfolio review, the MMSR measures the child’s cognitive, social and emotional development. “It provides parents and teachers with valuable information about the child’s basic academic skills and readiness to learn.”

Programs and resources provided by organizations such as Hooper and other experts in the field. – offer providers the opportunity to participate in professional development seminars facilitated by university professors and other experts in the field. Participants pay about $15-20 for each seminar, making ongoing professional development affordable.

Early Childhood Mental Health Program

School readiness can influence a lifetime of educational experiences. But what happens when a child’s first experiences outside the home are negative? Too often, children who display disruptive behaviors or lack the social and emotional skills needed for school are dismissed from child care, a traumatic event that can have a lasting effect on a child’s academic success and self esteem.

The resource center’s early childhood mental health program was developed to make sure that young children are ready for school so they can be successful throughout their academic careers. “We had a 3-year old who had been dismissed from care three times,” said Karten. “When such young children are dismissed from care, they often develop negative attitudes about school that remain with them well into adulthood. The students who are struggling or dropping out of high school are usually the same kids who were dismissed from child care or were not ready for school back in kindergarten,” she added.

Research also suggests that children who start school with a deficit may never catch up to their more school-ready peers. “That is what we are trying to do, reach those at-risk kids early,” commented Karten. Many of the kindergarten and pre-K teachers with whom the center works say that the most important success indicator for students entering their classrooms is not so much that they can read or count, but that they are socially and emotionally prepared for the school environment. They need to be able to sit with their peers and listen and learn. The reading and math will come, but not if they aren’t ready to learn.

With funding from the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Grant, the resource center provides training, intervention services, clinical referral or other resources, and support for child care workers and parents struggling with a child who is at risk of being dismissed from child care. Staff social workers conduct on-site observations as well as meet with providers and parents to give them the training, resources and strategies they need to reach the child. “We found that since we started the program, fewer and fewer children were being dismissed,” said Karten. “Of all the children who came through the program last year, which was about 80 kids, none of them was dismissed from child care. There are now 80 kids out there who are ready to succeed in school when they start kindergarten.”

With funding for an infant/toddler program, the center was able to hire an early childhood specialist who works specifically with providers who care for children ages 0 to 3.

Maryland School Readiness Report, in 2001, 49 percent of Maryland kindergarteners were entering school ready to learn; by
STEM on Wheels

According to the Maryland State Department of Education, children enrolled in formal early education programs tend to be better prepared for school. In fact, the data show programs like pre-K are extremely beneficial. In 2011-2012, readiness in the domain of scientific thinking rose to 71 percent fully ready, up from 24 percent in 2001. Despite these gains, 18,500 (29 percent) children in Maryland require considerable or targeted support to successfully complete work in science, the domain with the least readiness.

After attending a symposium on school readiness, Karen Karten, executive director of the Lower Shore Child Care Resource Center (LSCCRC), realized that there were few resources available on the Eastern Shore to help young learners increase their science readiness skills. To address this critical need, the resources center developed the Mobile Science Museum, a program that brings a science museum field trip and educational presentation right to the child care provider’s site. “This program grew out of what we saw as a big need in our community,” said Karten. “We noticed that readiness in the area of scientific thinking was very low, so we created a series of science exhibits that we pack into a trailer.”

The program began as a mobile hands-on science exhibit in which preschoolers investigate concepts related to the life sciences, chemistry and physics, but it has expanded into a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) program designed to engage very young learners in the STEM disciplines. The science unit sets up exhibits that encourage the children to freely explore and investigate, stimulating their natural curiosity. “It gives the providers a chance to interact with the children in a positive way and have scientific discussions that they might not otherwise have,” explained Karten. The program also offers training sessions in the area of early childhood science.

The Mobile Science Museum visits local child care programs and is currently under contract to provide STEM lessons at all the public schools in the tri-county area. It was created in 2009 with funding from The Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore and the PNC Foundation, and it is now a fee-for-service program at a cost of about $1 per child. “The providers love it;” said Karten. “It is much easier than going on an off-site field trip.”

2011, the percentage increased to 83 percent. “We believe that the resource center is part of that,” said Karten. “We are making sure that the child care providers have the resources they need to prepare children to succeed in school. Eighty-three percent is great, but our goal is to have 100 percent of Maryland students entering kindergarten ready and able to learn.”

So, what was child care like before educational reform? “Go back to 1998,” said Karten. “There was very little training available to child care providers; the requirements have changed a lot since then.” The Office of Child Care, a division of the MSDE, is responsible for issuing child care provider licenses. They review the program and inspect the facility. “It used to be that safety was their only main concern; you know, covers on all the electric outlets. As long as the children were safe, the program was approved,” explained Karten. Today, these standards have really changed.

Part the MSDE’s Race to the Top funding included an early child care grant. As a result, the state is now implementing Maryland EXCELS, a Quality Rating Improvement System. Child care programs will need to demonstrate new levels of quality. For example, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children under the age 2 should have no exposure to television at all, so the resource center advises child care providers to make sure that there are no televisions in use at their site for little ones. “We want to see meaningful educational experiences happening in child care,” said Karten.

“The children should have lots of new experiences that stimulate their curiosity. We teach the provider, who in turn, provides the child with his or her first educational experiences.”

Proven Track Record

The Lower Shore Child Care Resource Center is sponsored by SU, with funding from various sources including the MSDE. The mental health program also receives some of its funding from the Board of Education. “We also work with the Judy Centers of Wicomico and Worcester counties, and other organizations that share our goal of school readiness,” said Karten.

The resource center is the brainchild of Dr. Marvin Tossey, professor in the SU Social Work Department. He identified a strong need to provide area residents with access to quality child care programs and wrote the original proposal in 2001. The center has received funding each year since. “When we first opened our doors, we had three staff members; today we employ seven full-time professionals, as well as a part-time employee and student assistant. Students and interns use our library and resource room regularly. I come to work every day knowing that my work will be rewarding,” Karten said.

Karten has a background in early childhood education and worked as a teacher before joining the center as its executive director. She also teaches undergraduate courses in early childhood development in the University’s Education Specialties Department.

In a recent exit survey, graduating seniors who received bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education as part of the center’s grant funding indicated that their degrees were very important to their future, and that they plan to continue in child care, adding their new skills to the child care workforce. They also said that they would not have been able to get their degrees without the financial assistance provided by the center through the professional development grant.

The Lower Shore Childcare Resource Center is one of 12 resource centers in the state and is part of the Maryland Child Care Resource Network, a network of child care resource and referral agencies that provide services designed to improve the quality and availability of child care in Maryland.