

# Prolonged Financial Malnutrition

## Impact On Our Field

by George C. Philipp

It is an amazing time to be in the early education field. In every state and community we see new funding opportunities and innovative approaches to supporting young children. Public acceptance of the importance of the first few years of life continues to spread rapidly. But watching the dramatic evolution of our field over the last few decades, I find myself haunted by a fundamental question. On the surface, we seem to be making great progress. Public policy is catching up with the wealth of new research on child development. New initiatives and funding opportunities are cropping up all over the country. Yet despite this, our field still seems to be struggling. Why is that?

In my mind, historically and presently, one persistent core issue has prevented us from creating a high-quality system for all children. That issue is the fact that we have never received adequate funding to achieve our goals. And even when policy makers acknowledge that our field is currently underfunded, they fail to take into account the effects of



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decades of previous inadequate funding. My diagnosis: the early education field is suffering the effects of *prolonged financial malnutrition*.

A person suffering from prolonged malnutrition would exhibit the following symptoms: constant hunger, weakness, confusion, stress, depression, and desperation. Analogously, these are all conditions that plague our field. And just as a person suffering from prolonged malnutrition needs to be put on a long-term recovery plan, so, too, our field needs a long-term, comprehensive solution that will allow us to recover from decades of poor funding.

Generally, there are two key things you need to do to be healthy: 1) eat a well-balanced and appropriate diet, and 2) get plenty of exercise. As we think of a healthy, high-quality early education workforce, we should start with a healthy diet that includes:

- good compensation.
- appropriate education/training.
- a supportive work environment.

In conjunction with this, we need a regular exercise program that includes:

- an appropriate amount of time for planning and reflection.
- opportunities and support to transfer theory into practice.
- peer-to-peer learning.

In this article I will examine each of these components in relation to the current realities of our field, building the case for how prolonged financial malnutrition has impeded our progress as a field and our intended outcomes for children and families.

Let's begin with protein. Without adequate protein, we simply cannot function well. And let's think about compensation as the protein in our diet. Early education funding has never addressed the poor compensation and working conditions facing people in our field. Even though protein is a critical component to a healthy diet, we have not supplied it to our field in a systematic and dependable way.

There are some great support programs out there like T.E.A.C.H. that provide stipends and reimbursement to support early educators. These programs are like a protein bar that provides some critical sustenance, but only temporarily alleviates real hunger. These types of programs are great to keep our energy

up between meals, but should not be considered a replacement.

As we know, inadequate compensation doesn't just affect individuals in our field. Through high turnover and a limited ability to recruit talented staff, it also degrades the stability of our field as a whole. In the words of the recently released *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*, we need "to identify and mobilize a sustainable, dedicated source of public funding to upgrade the compensation of those who care for and educate our nation's young children."<sup>1</sup>

Now let's think about exercise. A good exercise program for our field would allow early educators the time and support they need to be exceptional teachers. This is another area where our current efforts fall short. Many current initiatives include some funds to provide staff release time, but these are usually short-term options that require programs to twist and contort their schedules to free up staff. Exercise shouldn't be something we are constantly trying to squeeze into our schedule. It should be a regular component, like free play or staff meetings. We don't need a source of limited funding to free up a few staff to reflect on their recent training. We need stable funding to hire permanent additional staff so everyone gets the reflection and planning time they need. Policy makers need to understand that if you suffer from severe malnutrition it takes a long time to get healthy again. You need to start slow, eat a carefully monitored diet, and gradually enhance your exercise to increase strength and stamina. The reality of our field today is that intermittent, short-term support doesn't allow us to improve our daily practice in an intentional way over time. Interventions are often so sporadic that during the long breaks from one to the next, we lose momentum and cannot make the connec-

tions that would allow us to scaffold our professional development experiences.

One of the dangers our field currently faces is that we are imposing rapidly increasing expectations for what teachers should know and be able to do, without providing the necessary support and time to adapt to these heightened expectations. Think about athletes preparing for a marathon. They take their time building up their endurance and eat a carefully developed diet to support their workouts. Now think of a malnourished, out-of-shape person who trains and eats well for a week and then tries to run a marathon. Isn't that what we're doing in our current system — running a marathon when we are no condition to do so?

Many of the quality improvement initiatives try to satiate us with certain types of food that will supposedly make us healthy overnight. We get a plate of 'superfoods' but no main course and not enough time for adequate digestion. Sure, these limited meals may alleviate our current pangs of hunger and sustain us for short periods of time, but without a main course are we really going to get healthy? Nutritionists always talk about the importance of a balanced diet that includes the variety of foods our bodies need. They don't say that you can substitute more carbohydrates if you don't have any protein available.

Financial malnutrition is not just about being hungry and needing a good meal, it also affects our mood and how we behave. It makes us feel desperate, which leads to poor decision-making and engaging in activities that only provide short-term relief without long-term benefits. Yes, a great training series with follow-up coaching and reflection time can improve a teacher's practice, but it is not enough to create systemic change. We feel good because we got a healthy meal and a chance to exercise, but this effect is temporary and doesn't get us on a path to long-term health. Just as good

nutrition requires a steady and consistent plan of healthy eating, high quality programs require adequate compensation and integrated time for planning and reflection.

The desperation caused by financial malnutrition also leads us to accept things that we know are not good for our health. Like the empty calories in soda and candy bars, we invest precious time and money on trainings and projects that have no real impact on our skills or competencies. You know the feeling of sitting in a training and thinking to yourself, "Really, this is what I spent my money and time on?" Even worse, you know what it's like to participate in a useless activity because it is a requirement of a larger initiative in which your program is involved. When staff give up their valuable personal time in these situations, it takes a toll on their already poor state of health.

The long-term effects of our malnutrition have made us complacent and we have become accustomed to accepting whatever is offered. What we need to do is demand better. Not just better trainings; better infrastructure that creates a stable, healthy diet and exercise program. You know what happens when you eat junk food all the time? You get addicted to the short-term effects and disregard your long-term health. Do you know what happens when you are on a healthy diet for a long time? You lose your appetite for junk food.

In our field today, no one feels the pain of financial malnutrition more than directors. They are responsible for our programs and have to make the tough decisions on how to utilize limited funding to support their program and staff. They live under the constant stress of not being able to provide what is needed due to lack of funds. Think of a low-income parent who is hungry and has a family to feed. What do many low-income families end up buying at the

grocery store? They look for what they can afford and provides the most meals; they don't have the luxury of buying the healthiest foods. They cannot afford the high cost of fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables. Directors deal with a similar challenge every day.

In addition, directors have to bear the burdens that come with quality initiatives just to squeeze out some extra support for their site. They spend their precious time completing data requests, having their site assessed, attending implementation meetings, and monitoring their staff to make sure they are complying with requirements. So again, you have a malnourished person being asked to do more exercise without the food they need, which only adds to their stress and poor overall health — not to mention those directors who need to manage multiple funding streams, each with their own requirements. Using the low-income parent analogy, these directors have to travel from store to store to pick up a few items at each, or work two or three jobs just to earn a little more money. Directors do all of this extra work to obtain subsidized funding for their families. Funding that doesn't usually meet the true cost of care. This sacrifice costs them valuable time they could be spending on their own health and the health of their staff.

It is not just people in our field who suffer from prolonged financial malnutrition. All of the organizations that support our programs suffer from it as well. In this arena the effects of malnutrition are even more pronounced. Organizations compete for limited funding, get very territorial, and often fight with one another. A common side effect of competing for funding is raising the expectations for what can be achieved. These high expectations are then passed on to the programs that participate. Wouldn't it be refreshing if all of the funders and initiatives out there said, "Wait a minute, first we are going to address compensation and staff needs to get the entire field at a basic level of good health, and then we can start intensive training and raise expectations." Instead, they try a quick fix to quality issues through some new approach to training and support. These initiatives would be a great way to support a healthy early education system. The problem is our current system is not healthy. It makes me think of all the quick fix fad diets and programs like PX90 that claim you can lose weight and have a completely 'ripped' body in 90 days. It just doesn't work; and it wastes precious time and money because we are not starting at a place where they can be effective.

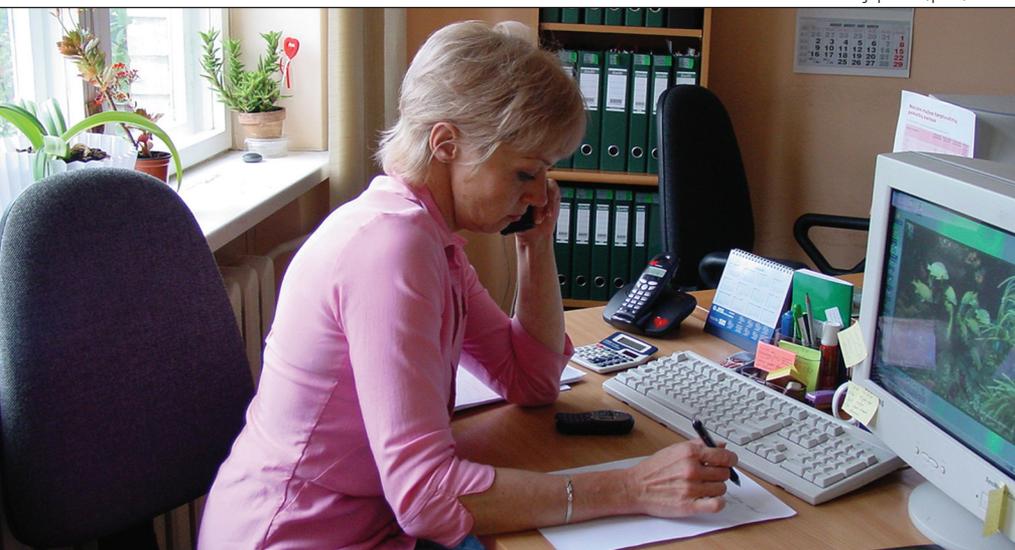
The responsibility for getting our field healthy does not rest solely on policy

makers. We need to actively work to improve the situation. Imagine if someone gave you a subscription to a service that provided you with healthy food and a gym membership. You still have to eat the food and go to the gym to get healthy. Even if you don't get everything you need, there are always small lifestyle changes that you can make that add up to big differences. In our field today, we see many inspirational programs that do incredible things under the most challenging of funding circumstances.

I have painted a pretty grim picture of our field in this article, but if we are going to get healthy we need to be very clear about what is really holding us back. This article highlights a few areas of our field that are impacted by financial malnutrition. Coaches, trainers, higher education programs, and other areas also suffer from inadequate funding. We need to stop accepting short-term efforts that do not support the long-term health of our field — and also stop accepting that a large-scale sustainable funding stream to improve compensation and support is not viable.

There are programs, communities, and states that are making great progress towards better health. Why? Because they follow the basic ideas behind good health, understand that it will take a long time to create the system they want, and are creating stable, long-term funding streams to reach their goals. At one point in our history, our country made a critical decision to invest in public education. Now we need the same level of large scale, sustainable investment in our early education system. We need to take a stand and be clear that we are on a long road of recovery to reach the ultimate goal of providing high-quality programs for all children. Taking a page from basic child development theory, kids must first and foremost be healthy, feel safe, and have the time to explore and learn in a high-

Photograph: [sxc.hu/profile/mmmmm](http://sxc.hu/profile/mmmmm)



quality environment. Shouldn't we insist on the same basic foundation for early educators?

## Endnotes

1 Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Berkeley: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

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