

Working for worthy wages: The child care compensation movement, 1970-2001 ^[1]

Author: Whitebrook, Marcy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a growing consensus that in order to improve the quality of child care services in the United States, the child care workforce must be better compensated, through the use of public dollars and other sources. This consensus was not present a decade ago, even within the child care community. In examining what led to such a change in climate, this paper describes the movement to improve child care compensation over the last quarter century as viewed by one of the leaders in that effort.

The paper focuses on three distinct phases of this history. Between 1970 and 1985, the first signs of a movement surfaced as the problem of poverty-level wages was identified and publicly articulated, primarily by teachers of young children. Between 1985 and 1995, researchers demonstrated the link between low wages and the quality of services, and community and labor organizing, public awareness campaigns and public policy initiatives chipped away at the wall of silence around the issue. Between 1995 and 2001, the movement achieved greater visibility through sustained grassroots organizing efforts and creative public policy responses, driven largely by a growing child care staffing crisis, an overall economic boom in the U.S., and the passage in 1996 of national welfare reform legislation. It was also invigorated and inspired by other burgeoning economic justice movements. While not yet drawn into the mainstream of U.S. public policy debates, the issue of inadequate compensation became a staple of discourse and activity within the child care field.

The author explores each phase of the movement with respect to:

- The economic and policy climate, including the level of demand for services, public resources dedicated to child care, the characteristics of the workforce, and larger social trends in employment;
- Key players, including their relations to others within the child care community, their links to other movements, and organizational structures and alliances;
- The primary assumptions and key strategies employed by activists, including short- and long-term goals, and organizing, policy and public education approaches;
- Accomplishments, missteps and challenges

These reflections have been synthesized from group dialogues and individual interviews with other players in the movement, and from historical documents such as newsletters, pamphlets and articles developed by various groups in the movement. The paper explores how each phase of the movement has influenced the next, and how the various challenges facing the movement have been resolved or have persisted. The final section of the paper focuses on the current tasks facing the compensation movement.

-reprinted from the Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment

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