

What a pay raise would mean for early childhood education teachers ^[1]

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Source: Wbur

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 Mar 2017

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For nearly 25 years, Nathalie Gaston has traveled an hour each morning, from her home in Maynard to Jamaica Plain, where she is the lead preschool teacher at the Nurtury, a childcare center for low-income families.

Gaston lives so far from work because it's more affordable — and she says the long trip is worth it. The best part of her day is hearing her 2- and 3-year-old students giggle, and catching the first glimpse of their faces each morning.

"This is my passion," she says. "The love that they don't receive at home, we're able to do it for them."

Gaston does all of this even though her pay isn't that great. She holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, so she makes about \$44,000 a year, which is well above the state average for childcare workers (about \$26,000). Even still, with four boys of her own, Gaston's salary doesn't go very far.

"I have to work a second job in order for me to meet my family's needs," Gaston says. She gets home from her second job every night around 11 p.m.

"We cannot abuse the passion that our teachers have by not paying them what they need to be paid," says the Nurtury's chief operating officer, Paul Leech.

The Nurtury receives a subsidy from the state to help serve low-income families in five Greater Boston locations. It's a constant challenge, Leech says, to lure and retain good teachers. At any given time, the Nurtury has about 20 teacher job openings.

Leech says he hears a lot of politicians talk about the importance of early childhood education, but the money to support it continues to dwindle. "People will say that, and yet ironically, less and less money is being put toward it over the last 10 or 15 years," he says.

Leech was ecstatic to hear that Gov. Charlie Baker is proposing devoting \$28 million toward increasing early education teacher pay by 6 percent. Right now, half of all early childhood centers in Massachusetts receive subsidies from the state. The subsidized centers serve about 65,000 children.

Massachusetts Association of Early Education and Care Executive Director William Eddy points out that 37 percent of daycare workers are also on public assistance. And he says, the average daycare center in the state experiences a 30 percent annual turnover rate. Imagine, Eddy says, what it would be like if there were three teachers that cycled through a first grade class each year.

"Parents would never put up with that. They'd be storming the school committee," he says. "Yet, for children who are two years younger in preschool, with brain development even greater, it is a normal occurrence to have three preschool teachers in that classroom a year."

Eddy's organization has been working with House Speaker Robert DeLeo, who has called for more state funding to compensate childcare workers. Other legislators are calling for measures like a statewide tax on earnings over \$1 million to help fund early education. The \$28 million Baker is proposing would come from a savings by the state education department when it implemented a new computer system to streamline workflow.

Gaston looks forward to the idea of a 6 percent pay raise, but stresses she doesn't do it for the pay.

"There's a lot of kids that don't have a stable home. So when they come here we spend time with them. We play with them. We talk to them. We nurture them," she says. "So at the end of the day I see they smile on their face and that makes me happy."

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