

Why aren't we paying early childhood educators what they're worth?^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In 2015, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) had just embarked on its first research project to understand the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of likely voters about early childhood education, and specifically the role of early childhood educators.

As part of the project, we conducted a series of focus groups with current educators and individuals interested in entering the field. Sitting behind a two-way mirror during one of these focus groups, I observed our facilitator skillfully engaging 12 panelists who had been identified as potential recruits to the early childhood education field. The panelists were animatedly explaining why they would love to be early childhood educators.

"I would get the opportunity to shape the minds and hearts of young kids."

"The chance to watch kids learn and grow."

"Starting so little, I actually have a shot at helping them to prepare them for school."

Midway through the session, the facilitator shared that, on average, early childhood educators earn \$10.72 per hour. That is less than most people earn working at a fast food restaurant. It was as though someone had driven a truck through the room. Participants stammered and cleared their throats.

"Well, I could do that just after college. But once I got serious about my career I would have to move on," said one participant. Another chimed in, "My wife and I want to start a family. There is no way we could make ends meet on that kind of pay." Their idealism and enthusiasm swiftly washed away.

That, in a microcosm, explains the child care crisis currently raging in America. Parents can't pay more and early childhood educators can't earn less.

For more than 20 years, neuroscience has provided clear evidence of the value of early childhood education. The most rapid period of brain growth occurs in the first five years of life, setting the foundation for all future development and learning.

The economic benefits are great too. By investing in these early years, there can be as much as 13 percent return on investment year-over-year. Children are more likely to graduate from high school, go on to earn post-secondary degrees, stay out of the criminal system and own assets. High-quality child care benefits children, but it's also critical for parents. When children are situated and safe in early childhood programs, their parents can go to work, contributing substantially to the overall growth of the United States economy.

While there is greater awareness about the value of high-quality early learning environments and, in many instances, increased investments, early childhood educators are still unable to make ends meet. Well over 40 percent of early childhood educators qualify for public assistance. Those in the field with bachelor's degrees are the lowest-paid college graduates. These conditions contribute to high turnover, which is the exact opposite of what is necessary for the type of consistency and bonding that needs to occur for children to thrive in the earliest stages of life.

The Results Are In. The Problem Isn't Public Perception.

Throughout the past two decades of my career, I've seen firsthand that likely voters understand the value of early childhood education and would support substantially more investment in it. However, NAEYC set out specifically to understand what it will take to convince likely voters to invest in early childhood educators, including recruiting and retaining the most talented workforce.

The results of our 2015 polls indicate that likely voters revere early childhood educators and value their role at the same level they value other everyday heroes such as nurses and firefighters. They reject the notion that early childhood educators are babysitters or that they

have easy jobs, and they understand the relationship between well-educated, well-paid early childhood educators and the quality of an early childhood learning environment.

Voters also recognize the compensation issues—in fact, 61 percent of voters believe that early childhood educators are paid too little and they would support increased funding being tied directly to salaries and wages for early childhood educators. In fact, they would be more likely to support the legislation.

These findings cut across all demographics and they represent a dramatic shift in public perception from 20 years ago, when likely voters didn't yet fully understand the emerging neuroscience on early learning and were indifferent to the plight of early childhood educators.

How Can We Make Progress?

As NAEYC's CEO, I have spent a lot of time with early childhood educators and they are passionate about their work. In our research, we've found that many would love to remain in the field for their entire career, but the lack of adequate pay and benefits often drive them out. Many also believe, despite the polls and often based on their daily experiences, that the public doesn't value their contributions.

There is room to change that perception with increased competency requirements as we make the case that early childhood educators must meet the field's professional preparation requirements. Early childhood educators, working in all early learning settings, are by and large supportive of that move if and when there are comprehensive scholarships to support their access to higher education and comparable compensation boosts during and after they increase their educational attainment.

But there are very real barriers to doing so. Early childhood educators of color, in particular, are clear-eyed about the ways in which the higher education deck can be stacked against their equitable access and career advancement.

In 2019, we published a report that shared the perspectives of early childhood educators of color on increasing qualifications. During our interviews one educator shared, "If we have to go back to school to get [an] associate or bachelor's degree, give us an incentive to do it. Help us pay for it. A lot of us cannot afford it." Another unpacked the challenges of balancing a career, continuing education and parenting: "It was very, very difficult for me to do," she shared, noting that she was late to class because she couldn't leave the classroom early and that there was an expectation that her course work would be done at home. "I don't have time to do that at home, because I have little ones I have to take care of," she explained.

Although this research was specific to educators of color, across our work, we've heard anecdotally that these kinds of barriers also impact educators working in rural communities, educators who speak a language other than English and educators working in family child care settings.

Yet despite the barriers, educators share the goal of being recognized for their complex, demanding and valuable work. The data is clear and the public is convinced, so how do we make progress?

Following our initial round of research, in 2015, we launched "Power to the Profession," an initiative spearheaded by 15 national early childhood organizations. Our vision is that from birth, every child has the opportunity to benefit from high-quality early childhood education delivered by an effective, diverse, well-prepared and well-compensated workforce. The initiative was designed to reach consensus on a unifying framework designed to create a professional field of practice for early childhood educators.

It's been three years of work through Power to the Profession. We've had thousands of early childhood educators weigh in on decisions for different aspects of the framework, and we're still collecting public feedback on our working draft. In March, we will collectively release a "Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession" that defines in detail a professional field of practice for early childhood educators. As a result, we no longer have to be subject to different standards, criteria, competency or salary requirements in every state, program type, age group or setting. Rather, there is a straight forward and aligned path to unify and professionalize, creating cohesive messages and policy, and uniting around expectations for increased compensation.

This is the same path nurses took to becoming recognized as core members of the medical team. Or how speech pathologists and audiologists claimed their space in the world of clinical therapy. We've studied the progression of these and other professions and we have learned a lot about how they have propelled their field forward and what changes they would make if they had it to do all over again.

Sometimes this work feels like rolling a boulder up a hill—at any moment it can roll back down. But, after nearly 25 years, I have observed and participated in dramatic moments of progress.

Today, there are unprecedented spikes in funding and increased awareness of and attention to the economics of early learning—not just the societal value of our work but the actual dollar impact that allows America to assert its place in a global economy.

This awareness still must translate to substantial financial gains for early childhood educators. The investment in compensation for early childhood educators will attract and retain top talent and create the best possible opportunities for young children and their families. The field must stay united, and we must be buoyed by the clear evidence that the public is with us.

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