

Are our preschool teachers worth more than they were two months ago? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

On March 17, television producer and author Shonda Rhimes tweeted “Been homeschooling a 6-year old and 8-year old for one hour and 11 minutes. Teachers deserve to make a billion dollars a year. Or a week.” Six hundred thousand likes and 100,000 retweets later, it is safe to say her message resonated with the public. Now, as we venture into the third week of homeschooling, this sentiment has only grown—especially for families with young children. Singer-songwriter John Legend gave voice to this during the opening of James Corden’s late-night show, “You gain a new respect for what preschool teachers do for five, six hours a day. They find a way to keep them active and stimulated and we’re struggling.”

Despite our new appreciation for early childhood teachers, they remain seriously underpaid for the work they do. Educators of our youngest children are paid an average of \$11 dollars an hour—just about the federal poverty level or the same wages as the average doughnut maker. On a list of professions from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, they rank right between laundry and dry-cleaning workers and parking lot attendants. The median salary of CEOs in the United States is approximately \$800,000 per year, almost 27 times the median salary of preschool teachers. These figures strongly suggest that we do not value the education of our children nearly as much as the exchange of our currency. One could argue that our early child care professionals care for the nation’s greatest resource.

Let’s use COVID-19 as a wake up call that teachers and child care professionals are the backbone of our economy.

Policy advocates and researchers have petitioned tirelessly to have teachers recognized and compensated for the incredible job that they do. Reports by the Bank Street College of Education, National Institute for Early Education Research, and the United States Department of Education emphasize that low pay undermines the quality of early childhood education and contributes to teacher stress, which has a direct impact on child outcomes. Early education has garnered enormous bipartisan support for its incredible impact—recent studies demonstrate impacts of high-quality early child care and education well into adulthood on outcomes such as educational attainment and earnings. Benefits even extend to the children of those who experienced high-quality care, suggesting intergenerational impacts.

The research shows that high-quality care is the real difference-maker, particularly for children from low-income backgrounds. Providing high-quality care requires excellent educators who are well versed in child development, early childhood teaching and learning practices, and have a bachelor’s degree or a specialized certification in early childhood. Further, it is not enough to merely recruit these top-notch early childhood educators: We have a major issue retaining teachers, with estimated annual turnover rates as high as 25 percent, four times higher than turnover rates in K-12 settings. This instability is particularly troublesome in early childhood, as young children require continuity to build strong attachments.

To attract and retain these talented professionals, we must compensate them in a way that signals the respect and gratitude we feel for how they nurture and cultivate the future citizens of our society. Now is the time to demonstrate how we value our early educators. They are charged with educating the nation’s greatest resource. How can we show the value we place on what they do? We can start by offering competitive wages that convey the message that early childhood education is a fruitful career path, vital to the success of our nation.

After spending much time in our collective homes with just one or two preschoolers, it might seem unimaginable that teachers control well-behaved classrooms of 10 to 15 children every day, and accomplish what seems impossible when we try to homeschool. At a time when we are all looking for silver linings amid a global pandemic, let’s create one. Let’s use COVID-19 as a wake-up call that teachers and child care professionals are the backbone of our economy. And let’s pay them accordingly.

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