

Hailed as 'heroes,' child care workers in some states are denied vaccine priority ^[1]

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Source: EdSurge

Format: Article

Publication Date: 21 Jan 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

For months, they have been labeled “essential workers,” celebrated for their sacrifices and hailed as heroes for their role in keeping the country going in the face of a deadly pandemic. But with vaccinations underway—and an end to the exhaustion, fear and suffering finally in sight—early childhood educators in some states have found themselves snubbed by the very people who once praised them for stepping up in a crisis.

In its recommended vaccination schedule, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that states vaccinate child care workers, K-12 teachers and educational support staff together—in Phase 1b, alongside other “frontline essential workers” such as grocery store workers, public transit workers, police officers and firefighters, and people over the age of 75. This group comes behind only health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities.

Yet the recommendations are just that. Each state gets to establish its own vaccination plan, choosing which groups to prioritize over others. Most have adopted the CDC guidelines: 39 states have said they will vaccinate all educators together. (Six states—Florida, Indiana, Maine, Texas, West Virginia and Wisconsin—have not yet specified when K-12 and early childhood educators will be eligible.)

Others have opted to veer from the CDC's recommendations. This includes at least five states—Kentucky, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah and Wyoming, plus Washington, D.C.—whose plans put early childhood educators in a lower priority group than their colleagues in K-12 schools.

The reaction from child care providers, teachers and advocates in those five states—which together comprise more than 75,000 early childhood educators—is a mix of indignation, frustration and discouragement. Many are also not surprised, saying that while they hoped for better treatment, they've learned to expect little from a public that thinks of them not as trained educators, but as mere babysitters.

'We Deserve a Lot More'

Mandy Young is familiar with the distinction that is often accorded to K-12 teachers but not early childhood educators. She taught in a public school for several years before transitioning to early childhood, and she learned quickly that although she'd made a “lateral move” in her career, “respect-wise, I took a dip.”

“People will treat me like I'm nothing when I tell them what I do now,” says Young, who is the administrator at CTK Kids Learning Center in northeast Ohio. “They'll go, ‘Oh ...’ Whereas when I was a kindergarten teacher, they'd be like, ‘Wow! That's amazing. Here's a discount.’ ... It's not acceptable. It's not acceptable at all.”

Young says she has been putting in 12- to 16-hour days since the pandemic began 10 months ago. Her staff often work 11-hour days. Her center never shut down. When the governor called upon child care providers to step up and serve the children of frontline workers, that's what they did.

“We didn't stop,” she says. “We didn't close one single day. My teachers didn't get time off. There was no staying at home or taking a mental health day. You had to keep going, with a smile on your face behind a fabric mask.”

They did it willingly, but not without fear or fatigue. They understood their role in this crisis was critical, that to stay open meant parents could continue to work, medical staff could treat COVID-19 patients and grocery store workers could keep shelves stocked.

“I personally sat at doors doing temperature checks, putting myself at risk to every single person who came through this building,” Young recalls, exasperated. “I'm a special needs mom. Putting myself at risk puts my children at risk. Our job itself is not heroic. It's the attitude we bring to this job that makes us heroes.”

Meanwhile, Young notes, many K-12 educators in Ohio have continued to teach their classes from home, where they and their families are safe. So when the Ohio Department of Public Health released details of Phase 1b vaccination distributions earlier this month and it named “adults/employees in K-12 schools” but excluded any mention of child care staff, Young was incensed.

“It’s a huge slap in the face to our industry and a huge slap in the face to our professionalism,” says Young. “It’s appalling. We deserve a lot more than we get.”

Many early childhood educators had feared this outcome and actively worked to prevent it. Kimberly Tice, executive director of the Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children, a group that supports the early childhood workforce, orchestrated the creation of a professional video in December, in which child care workers across the state urge Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine and his administration to prioritize early childhood educators for the COVID-19 vaccine. Tice and her colleagues also wrote letters to state leadership and public health officials, imploring them to consider the risks that child care workers face every day.

Tice learned on Jan. 13, from an email she received from the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, that early childhood educators had been bumped to a lower vaccination group.

“It’s frustrating. On the one hand, they’ve heard they are heroes and essential workers,” Tice explains. “And yet when the rubber hits the road and priority for vaccines comes along, they’re forgotten. ... This decision just seems to fly in the face of being identified as ‘essential.’”

Tice says she sees the argument for rushing vaccines to K-12 teachers and staff. Many public schools remain closed, denying students not only in-person instruction, but support services, meals and adult care and supervision that many of them don’t get otherwise.

“We do understand there is a scarcity of the vaccine, but we believe if you’ve prioritized K-12, those who are teaching children birth to age 5 should be in the same category,” she says, adding that this is, after all, what the CDC recommends.

What’s more, Tice argues, is that unlike their peers in K-12 schools, child care workers often lack access to employment benefits such as paid sick leave and health insurance, both of which would be helpful to fall back on should they contract the virus that has killed 400,000 people in the United States and sickened millions.

Like their peers in Ohio, child care workers and early education proponents in Kentucky began lobbying their state leaders about vaccination schedules almost as soon as an effective vaccine was announced.

On Dec. 17, Bradley Stevenson, executive director of the Child Care Council of Kentucky, sent a letter to Gov. Andy Beshear, appealing to him to include early childhood professionals among all other public educators in vaccination priority. “Child care teachers have risen to the occasion and answered the call,” Stevenson wrote.

When he still hadn’t heard anything three weeks later, he organized an online letter-writing campaign where nearly 800 early childhood educators and families sent emails to the governor, the lieutenant governor and the state’s public health administrator, saying, in part, “As vaccines are being distributed in Kentucky and plans are being created to prioritize groups to receive the vaccine, I am requesting that child care teachers/staff be prioritized with all other public education staff.”

But when eligibility for Phase 1b was announced in Kentucky, the only educators counted among them were K-12 teachers and staff.

“I have talked to so many child care providers who showed up, and their teachers showed up, day after day after day, in the midst of a pandemic, to provide essential services,” Stevenson says. “For them not to get that recognition, it really disappointed me. But I probably should not be surprised or shocked. It’s a respect issue. There’s a devaluation on the profession as a whole. ... Prioritizing those educators with K-12 educators would have made a statement about the absolute importance of early care in education.”

A spokesperson from the Utah Department of Public Health provided a statement to EdSurge explaining the agency’s decision to vaccinate K-12 educators first.

“Utah, like all other states, has tried to implement a COVID-19 vaccine plan that does the most good for the most people,” the statement reads. “With limited vaccine doses available, we have had to make difficult decisions about who gets the vaccine and when. ... Utah’s K-12 schools have been significantly impacted by COVID-19, and vaccinating teachers will help ensure schools can continue to fulfill the important role they provide in our society.”

Some distribution plans have been complicated by limited availability of the vaccine. The District of Columbia originally planned to vaccinate K-12 teachers and child care workers together, but recently reordered them to prioritize school staff, citing the urgency to reopen school buildings, as The Washington Post first reported.

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‘We Owe It to Them’

Among the states that adhered to the CDC’s recommendations for vaccination distribution are Minnesota and Oregon.

On Jan. 18, Gov. Tim Walz of Minnesota announced a pilot program, beginning this weekend, that would vaccinate 6,000 educators, including 2,000 early childhood educators.

“Educators and child care workers care for the mental and emotional well-being of our children, and we know that child care workers are disproportionately women of color, who have been some of the hardest hit by the pandemic. We owe it to them to support their health and safety,” said Minnesota Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan in a statement about the pilot program.

Chad Dunkley, president of the Minnesota Child Care Association and CEO of New Horizon Academy, a network of about 70 child care centers in the state, said he “never questioned” that the state would prioritize early childhood and K-12 educators equally. Still, he and his staff wrote letters outlining what they believed to be the most compelling arguments for vaccinating child care workers early.

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In one letter, he wrote: “Teachers have put themselves at risk—when working with children, social distancing is not an option as they need our physical, emotional and intellectual support at this critical age.”

In an interview, Dunkley expounds on what he meant by that: “Younger children get bottle fed. They get their diapers changed. And they need physical contact with adults, [such as] hugs when they fall down. Many early educators can’t physically distance from their students,” he says. “In many ways, child care providers should almost be a higher priority.”

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown chose to include child care staff with other educators in Phase 1b, and Melanie Mesaros, communications director for the Oregon Department of Education’s Early Learning Division, explained the decision in an email: “Child care has remained open throughout the pandemic in Oregon. Providers were asked to follow increased safety and health protocols to serve families and essential workers. Early childhood educators have been taking on greater risks, and it’s important they have access to the vaccine so they can continue their critical support to families.”

Mesaros added that the governor also considered issues of equity when determining vaccination priorities. “The families who have been most impacted are disproportionately families of color and low-income families, with the biggest impacts felt by working mothers. Many child care providers themselves are from the communities that have been most impacted by COVID-19,” nodding to the fact that 40 percent of early childhood educators nationwide are women of color.

Ashley C. Williams, a senior policy analyst at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, says the states that are decoupling early childhood educators from their K-12 counterparts illustrate not only the “societal dissonance” that exists between the two sectors but also the underlying equity issues rooted in history.

“What is it about this workforce of women that they are expected to shoulder the burden of a pandemic, with their own health and wellbeing and their economic dignity on the line? What is it about this group that continues to be undervalued?” Williams asks. “I think it dials me back to issues of inequity and injustice for the people performing this work. Child care in this country has deep roots of oppression

and roots in slavery, where Black women were caring for white women's children and having to prioritize those children's needs over their own. That is a deeper conversation and a deeper perspective that we need to have."

Overall, this trend among some states is "very distressing" and "follows a pattern" of disrespect for the field, says Calvin E. Moore Jr., CEO of the Council for Professional Recognition, which oversees the Child Development Associate, the most widely recognized and accepted credential in early childhood education.

In Ohio, early childhood educators have not given up hope, even though the state has so far excluded them from the next phase of vaccination distribution.

"We're still continuing to try to have people raise their voices," says Tice, the Ohio AEYC director, because if she's learned anything over the last 10 months, it's that circumstances during the pandemic can shift quickly.

"What is true today," she says hopefully, "may change tomorrow."

This story was updated at 9:52 a.m. on Jan. 25, 2021, to reflect the recent developments in Washington, D.C.'s vaccine distribution plan.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: workforce ^[4]

health and safety ^[5]

COVID-19 ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2021): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/01/hailed-%E2%80%98heroes%E2%80%99-child-care-workers-some-states-are-denied-vaccine>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/01/hailed-%E2%80%98heroes%E2%80%99-child-care-workers-some-states-are-denied-vaccine>

[2] <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2021-01-21-hailed-as-heroes-child-care-workers-in-some-states-are-denied-vaccine-priority>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865>

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