

2020 Early Childhood Workforce Index ^[1]

Author: McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K.L.

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Excerpted from press release

BERKELEY, Calif. — The U.S. child care system is collapsing under the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, with early childhood educators especially hard hit. A new report from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California, Berkeley, shows that the collapse will likely continue without public investment and fundamental policy reform.

The report will be available to view Feb. 23 at 1am PST. Reporters are invited to attend a brief press call on Feb. 23 at 8:30am PST featuring early educators and report co-authors.

The biennial 2020 Early Childhood Workforce Index finds that state by state, child care workers earn a national median wage of just \$11.65 an hour for one of the most important jobs in the nation. The report highlights the few bright spots of progress on state policies, such as COVID-19 pandemic crisis measures. For example, North Carolina and New Mexico provided monthly bonus payments ranging from \$350 to \$950 per month to help keep early education staff afloat.

Even before the pandemic, the Index finds, progress toward better compensation has been limited and uneven across states and among different classifications of early educators:

In the majority of states, wages fall short of the living wage for a single adult.

For a single adult with one child, median child care worker wages do not meet a living wage in any state. Many early educators are parents themselves, with children at home.

Early educators experience poverty at nearly eight times the rate of K-8 teachers.

“The turnover in the profession is outrageous,” said Davina Woods, director of Excel Christian Academy in Burlington, North Carolina. “No one wants to stick and stay because the salary and compensation package is so low. By county standards, we’re paying very well, and yet I have members of my team that receive food stamps. Out of the 14 full-time staff that are a part of my team, five of them have second jobs at places like Target.”

The Early Childhood Workforce Index shows the lack of action by most states to ensure that early educators earn a living wage. In California, for example, the state budget earmarks funds toward professional development but does not address poverty-level wages, which will continue to drive qualified teachers out of the profession and do nothing to reduce the closures of child care facilities.

The report offers guidance to advocates, states, and the federal government on the policies that require attention and includes interactive maps and detailed tables on state workforce policies, initiatives, and wages. “Early educators’ poor working conditions are not inevitable, but a product of policy choices that have typically let down the women and men who are doing this essential work,” said co-author Dr. Caitlin McLean.

The Early Childhood Workforce Index shows why a comprehensive national child care strategy is needed, said co-author Dr. Lea Austin. “Parents are footing the bill for most child care in this country, and the market-based system means there’s just not enough resources to ensure that early educators are paid a living wage.”

Recommended policies include:

Invest in direct public funding to provide early educators with a living wage, health care, and safe and supportive work environments. For

an estimate of a values-based budget for each state, see Financing Early Educator Quality.

Prioritize appropriate compensation as an essential component for rebuilding the early care and education system, targeting wages/salaries as well as benefits (e.g., health insurance, retirement plans). Include early educators working in both center- and home-based child care settings.

Improve compensation by setting local or statewide wage and benefit standards to address wage inequity. Standards should account for job role, experience, and education levels and calibrate up to parity with similarly qualified elementary school teachers. Ensure regular adjustments for cost of living and changes in educational attainment.

The new Biden-Harris administration offers the opportunity to create and properly fund a public system that provides living wages for this essential workforce and makes child care affordable for all.

“The stakes are high,” said Dr. Austin. “Chronic underinvestment in child care is harming working mothers, it’s harming the women who are doing this work, and it will drive greater economic hardship for everyone.” The harm is not borne equally. Previous CSCCE research has shown that women of color and those working with infants and toddlers face distinct wage penalties.

Introduction

The existing early care and education (ECE) system does a disservice to the educators — largely women and often women of color — who nurture and facilitate learning for millions of the nation’s youngest children every day. Despite their important, complex labor, early educators’ working conditions undermine their well-being and create devastating financial insecurity well into retirement age. These conditions also jeopardize their ability to work effectively with children.

As we find ourselves in the middle of a global pandemic, child care has been hailed as essential, yet policy responses to COVID-19 have mostly ignored educators themselves, leaving most to choose between their livelihood and their health. Unlike public schools, when child care programs close, there’s no guarantee that early educators will continue to be paid. Even as many providers try to keep their doors open to ensure their financial security, the combination of higher costs to meet safety protocols and lower revenue from fewer children enrolled is leading to job losses and program closures. Many of these closures and lost jobs are expected to become permanent. Over the course of the first eight months of the pandemic, 166,000 jobs in the child care industry were lost. As of October 2020, the industry was only 83 percent as large as it was in February, before the pandemic began.

Why is the ECE workforce expected to shoulder so much of the care and education crisis in this country, with so little concern for their own safety and well-being? It is no coincidence that this expectation falls on early educators, who are poorer, less organized as a workforce, and more likely to be women of color than teachers of older children.

Related link: Webinar: A guide using the 2020 Early Childhood Workforce Index ^[8]

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