

'Little band-aids' won't fix the child care industry. New report proposes an overhaul. ^[1]

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EXCERPT

The current child care system in the United States is broken, and everyone involved—the children, their parents and especially the workers supporting them—are suffering as a result, according to a new report from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California, Berkeley, which was released Tuesday.

Despite a pandemic that has labeled child care workers “essential” and raised public awareness of the importance of early care and education, the industry remains “woefully” underfunded and overlooked, says Caitlin McLean, senior research specialist and co-author of the Early Childhood Workforce Index 2020. Stopgap solutions such as expanding the child care tax credit may help in the short-term, she notes, but anything short of a complete overhaul of the system would be like “adding a new floor to a condemned home.”

The report, which compiles state-level data on poverty rates, wage gaps, qualifications, workforce data and more, finds that early childhood educators across the country earn, on average, \$11.65 an hour. (The lowest median wage, in Mississippi, is \$8.94 per hour, and the highest, in Washington, D.C., is \$15.36.)

“Even in the best of times, pre-pandemic, early educators are among the lowest paid workers in the country,” says McLean, adding that they are among the bottom 2 percent of professions by salary.

Single child care workers with no children make a living wage in just 10 states, according to the report. Single child care workers who have at least one child, which is the reality for many who work in early care and education, do not meet the threshold for a living wage in any state.

“These poor working conditions are not inevitable,” McLean explains in an interview. “They are a product of policy choices that have consistently let them down.”

Davina Boldin-Woods, director of Excel Christian Academy Preschool in Burlington, N.C., manages 14 staff who care for more than 50 children between the ages of 3 and 5. She says she knows many educators who work multiple jobs and receive public assistance and “are still barely able to make ends meet.”

Salaries for K-12 educators have attracted plenty of attention in recent years for being inadequate. Still, they are higher than what their peers in early childhood receive—by almost double. While U.S. kindergarten teachers earn an average annual salary of \$56,850, child care workers make \$24,230 and preschool teachers earn just over \$30,000, according to the report, which uses data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

During a call with reporters, Boldin-Woods said she often sees skilled child care workers leave the field to join the public school system, where they're eligible to make more money, receive employer-sponsored benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave, and be treated with more respect. Findings in the Workforce Index support her observations: Poverty rates are nearly eight times higher for early educators than for K-8 teachers.

Boldin-Woods described an early childhood educator who came to her program with just a high school diploma. “For eight years, I taught her everything I know,” Boldin-Woods said. “She became an amazingly gifted early education teacher.”

Over the years, at Boldin-Woods' urging, that teacher earned her associate degree, and then her bachelor's degree. The month after she received her four-year degree, she was hired as a child development teacher at a local high school.

“Within a year of taking a position in the public school system,” Boldin-Woods said, “she went from Section 8 housing and food stamps to owning her own home, getting married and having a baby.”

She added: “It was a tragic loss for our entire profession. Pre-K was indeed her gift. She would be the first to say [that].”

To stymie the rapid turnover and replenish the shortage of child care workers, the field needs to reimagine its policies, starting with its

funding sources, McLean says.

Currently, early care and education is funded primarily by private parent tuition. One of the key policy changes recommended by the report authors is greater direct public funding for early education, similar to the way K-12 education is funded.

“We need to treat it like a public good and stop having parents shoulder the cost burden,” McLean says.

“I don’t think it’s as radical as people make it out to be,” she adds, pointing to cities like New York and states like Alabama that have implemented successful programs that fund public preschool services. “We know how to do it. We just need to understand that early care and education isn’t just about 4-year-olds. The science of child development tells us these are services important to have from infancy through preschool age. If we’re starting at 4, we’re starting too late.”

President Joe Biden’s proposal for universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds is “already hands above what we’ve had in the past,” McLean says. But she cautions anyone who thinks that only funding early care for 3- and 4-year-olds is the solution.

“That can cause disruption to services for infants and toddlers,” she says. “It further entrenches the disparities we have for working conditions between educators. We don’t want to say, ‘In order to work with young kids and make a living wage, you have to work with 4-year-olds.’”

The Workforce Index, which has been published by the CSCCE every two years since 2016, did find that median child care wages in 34 states have increased since its last report in 2018. But a 10 percent increase on \$10 an hour, McLean points out, is still a poverty-level wage in most states.

Though much of the Index captures the state of early care and education prior to the pandemic, the report highlights several policies that states put in place to provide a cushion to early childhood educators, many of whom have faced closures, job losses, health risks and other stressors caused by COVID-19. Among the stopgap measures: Several states, including North Carolina and New Mexico, provided educators a sort of “hazard pay,” in the form of monthly bonus payments ranging from \$350 to \$950.

Kyra Swenson, a long-time infant and toddler teacher and co-founder of the advocacy group Wisconsin Early Childhood Action Needed, said the findings in the Index validate what she and many of her peers have experienced working in this field.

“Major change needs to happen,” Swenson said during the press call, “not just these little Band-Aids here and there. We really do need systemic change.”

McLean notes that continuing to ignore this field is “a little bit like being penny-wise and pound foolish,” given how many studies have come out in recent years underscoring the long-term benefits of early care and education and the significant return on investment it provides.

There is a perception in the public, McLean adds, that women—and the workforce is almost entirely women, nearly half of whom are Black and brown—continue to do this work out of love for children and love for the profession.

“But it’s a job,” McLean emphasizes. “Folks need to understand that without better support for this workforce, this industry, it just may not be here in a year.”

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