

Why did the child care teacher cross the road? To get to higher pay^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Every day, early educators leave child care settings across the country for the same reason: low pay. Like Shania Bell, who was the best teacher Jordyn Rossignol, director and owner of Miss Jordyn's Child Care and Preschool, ever had. Now Shania works in a hardware store right across the road in Caribou, Maine. She still parks in the same lot she used as a toddler teacher at Miss Jordyn's. And she still comes by to say hello to the kids she used to teach before starting her shift at the store.

When asked why she left, Shania said she loved being an early childhood educator but it was hard for her to stay because she couldn't financially support herself.

This child care worker exodus has left families in dire straits, unable to find slots for their kids. It is why President Biden's American Families Plan calls for raising the pay of the child care workforce and why so many legislators are seeking to strengthen the care economy.

"We invest in child care to not only help individual families, but to also create a stronger American workforce and remain globally competitive," Rep. Katie Porter (D-Calif) told us. "To have a strong, stable, and accessible child care network that grows our economy for everyone, any investment we make in the care economy should lift up those who do the important work of caregiving."

Early educators were struggling to live on poverty-level wages even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Those in child care settings are among the lowest-paid workers in the country, earning just \$11.65 an hour on average. In Marin County, Calif., one of the wealthiest communities in the country, a 2020 study from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, UC Berkeley, where one of the co-authors works, showed that three-quarters of center-based child care staff worried about paying routine monthly bills, including housing, and more than one-third worried about having enough food for their families.

With that sort of economic instability, it's no wonder so many early educators walk away. A new national study, which one of us helped author, shows that the turnover rate at child care centers can be predicted based on the wages they pay their teachers. The lowest-paying centers, which paid about \$8 an hour, had turnover rates 70 percent higher than all other centers, which paid an average of \$16.73 an hour.

These low wages disproportionately harm women of color, who make up approximately 40 percent of the early educator workforce. Black educators in particular are more likely to be employed in centers with the lowest wages (39 percent) compared to White educators (27 percent). Individually, Black early educators are paid, on average, \$0.78 less per hour than their White peers.

For many years, the needs of children and the needs of their teachers have been pitted against each other with the claim of "there's not enough money." But when early care and education programs can't keep qualified teachers, then children, families and the economy suffer, too. A lack of child care costs families as much as \$35 billion in income per year, when parents (especially mothers) are forced to leave their employment or reduce their work hours.

Investments in the field must prioritize increased wages for early educators or they will continue to walk out the door in search of better paying jobs. We call it "the hole in the bucket" problem: Investment in the early care and education system is lost as long as poverty wages keep driving qualified teachers out of the field. In order to reap the benefits of state and federal dollars, funds must be used to boost wages and staunch the flow of talent from early care and education.

As COVID-19 brought new financial devastation to the early care and education system, there have been commendable efforts to stem the crisis with new federal funding. But more and sustained investment is needed. We can start by ensuring that a portion of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) program grants be applied to compensation increases, while planning for long-term investment and reform to child care funding.

When asked if she would return to working with young children if she could earn the pay and benefits of a kindergarten teacher, Shania said, "Absolutely. I definitely would go back."

Let's plug the hole in the bucket with sustained public investment in educator wages and benefits. This strategy will keep skilled early educators working with children, instead of forcing them to leave for higher-paid jobs. Teachers like Shania will be able to wave goodbye to their toddlers at the end of the day, knowing they can put food on the table that night.

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