

# LA's child care workforce hasn't recovered, low wages mean even more might leave the field <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

A sign in the window of the Growing Place's Lab School in Santa Monica reads: "Hiring early childhood teachers and assistants."

"We're at a point now where we really would like to open three more classrooms, but the workforce is so scarce that we have not been able to do so," said executive director Pauline McPeake.

Throughout Los Angeles there are still nearly 10% fewer people working in child care centers and preschools than before the pandemic. Analysis from UC Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment suggests it could get even harder to find early educators.

"These educators are struggling to become homeowners, they're struggling with food insecurity, and many of them are just one fender bender away from falling into debt," said Anna Powell, the lead author of a new research brief analyzing a 2020 survey of more than 7,500 California early educators.

- Among the findings in the brief:
- Of early educators who say they are leaving the field, the most likely to do so work in child care centers, as opposed to home-based providers and administrators.
- About one-third of home-based child care providers and center-based teachers use at least one form of public assistance, including Medi-Cal, WIC or SNAP.
- Home-based child care providers and center-based teachers were more likely to face food insecurity than the average Californian.
- Most estimated they could only pay for a \$400 emergency by taking on debt.

"Without substantial public investment, really, across the board in these different settings of child care, you won't be able to change that fundamental problem," Powell said.

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— Anna Powell, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

That foundational problem is low pay, pushing people out of the field.

"You will love what you do. People will love what you do. But the resources? They're not there to support you," said Maywood preschool teacher Rita Perez.

She said her job in the Los Angeles Unified School District offers more benefits and pay than the private sector, but that she's currently pursuing a teacher credential and the higher salary that comes with working in K-12.

## Balancing Teacher Salaries, Parent Costs

The Growing Place Lab School opened on the Santa Monica College Campus in September 2021.

The spacious, light-filled classrooms are stocked with blocks and books, and each one has a pair of "talking chairs" where children are encouraged to work through their disagreements.

The starting pay for assistant teachers is about \$17 an hour, and teachers with bachelor's degrees make more, McPeake said. These salaries are well above the \$13.43 average for child care workers in the state. (The average was calculated before the state minimum wage increase went into effect on Jan. 1.)

There are unique challenges to staffing the Growing Place's West side campuses.

McPeak said more than half of the staff commute 30 minutes-plus each way to work, and 90% rely on the income of a partner or have a roommate to make ends meet.

The non-profit is grappling with how to raise its wages.

"We do our best, but at the same time, we're at the mercy of tuition," said Losmeiya Huang, who oversees the Ocean Park campus. "When you raise tuition, the parents bear the cost of that and so there's an equity question of who can afford to pay."

California parents pay, on average, \$956 per month for a four-year-old's child care. Tuition for an infant is even more expensive, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

As we've reported before, high-quality care costs more than any one source — whether that's parents, philanthropy, or the government — currently provides.

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment recommends that California lawmakers increase direct funding for child care providers and consult the workforce about future policies.

"It's an imperative that we change the economic reality in order to provide sufficient childcare for California," Powell said.

### An Uncertain Future For Early Educators

The pandemic changed Chris Lazo's job at La Cañada's Child Educational Center. Now his day starts with temperature checks and coronavirus-related questions for arriving families, and includes driving kids to the after-school program.

His favorite moments still happen in the classroom where he's greeted by little voices asking: "Are you going to be my teacher today, Chris?"

He's worked at the center for six years and in the field for almost 10. Lazo said he earned an associate's degree in child development and was working on his bachelor's until recently.

I really think that by the time I have kids, there's not going to be a way for me to still work in child care and afford to give them the life I would want to give them.

— Chris Lazo, early childhood educator

"My center pays better than others do," Lazo said. "I'm not making much more than minimum wage and I just don't know how sustainable that is for a future."

Lazo is saving up for an engagement ring and said it made him realize just how tight his budget is.

"I really think that by the time I have kids, there's not going to be a way for me to still work in child care and afford to give [my kids] the life I would want to give them," Lazo said.

Child Education Center executive director Tashon McKeithan said losing teachers to another job that "fills their soul" is bittersweet. Losing staff because they can't afford to work with kids any longer is "heartbreaking."

"I think any administrator that you've talked to will say, We want to take care of our folks," McKeithan said. "We're just trying to figure out how."

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care workforce <sup>[4]</sup>

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