We asked 8 child care workers about their joys and frustrations. Here's what they said [1]

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EXCERPTS:

Staffing shortages and high turnover have been challenges in early education and child care for years. But the pandemic has taken those issues from bad to worse.

The child care workforce in Massachusetts is about 12% smaller today than it was before the start of the pandemic, according to a recent analysis from the University of California, Berkeley.

Fewer workers mean providers can't care for as many kids. According to a Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care report released in May, the state is operating at about 92% of its pre-pandemic capacity — with around 640 fewer licensed providers available.

WBUR checked in with eight current and former child care workers about the joys and challenges of working in this industry, and why some are leaving the profession.

Here's what they had to say:

Bernadette Davidson

Over the span of a 50-year career at the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, Bernadette Davidson has seen a lot of change. As the center's director of child care, she's overseen a move and the introduction of several learning programs. But she says, for the last few years, staying staffed has been her greatest challenge.

"After the COVID-19 pandemic, we were hit with more staffing shortages," says Davidson. "Today, it's three times as bad as pre-pandemic."

You can see the impacts of the labor shortage throughout the center she oversees. There's at least one part-time substitute teacher staffing each classroom. A 20-student toddler room currently sits vacant. Davidson says the decision to close that classroom was tough, but necessary after losing five full-time teachers this year.

"After the COVID-19 pandemic, we were hit with more staffing shortages. Today, it's three times as bad as pre-pandemic."

Bernadette Davidson

"In some cases, teachers have gone to centers that might pay a dollar or two more in the suburbs," says Davidson. "And in some cases they've just left the field. They're doing something else now. Because they can't survive."

Kiya Savannah

Kiya Savannah and her 2-year-old daughter wake up at 5:30 each morning. They eat breakfast, get dressed. Then comes a 45-minute drive from Brockton to Boston to get to Ellis Early Learning, where Savannah teaches 4- and 5-year-olds, and where her daughter attends child care.

Savannah has worked at Ellis for the last seven years — and she loves what she does. But staying on this career path has become harder since the birth of her daughter. The hours and commute are challenging, but it's the pay that's causing the biggest problems.

"I am a single mom," explains Savannah. "So with one income, you're expecting me to pay $300 a week [in tuition], and I'm making less than $40,000 a year? How? How is that possible?"

Savannah tried to make the math work but couldn't make ends meet. Finally, she opted to cut her hours, so she would qualify for financial assistance from the state. While this compromise did allow her to access child care, she's still struggling financially.

"Even though I don't need the money to feel more appreciated, it would help my personal life out a lot," she says, adding that her budget doesn't allow her to put money into savings each month or afford extracurriculars for her daughter.

"Is it something I really want to do? It's not. I love teaching at this level."

Kiya Savannah, on leaving the child care industry

Savannah says she plans to stay at Ellis Early Learning for now. She has a good routine worked out, and she appreciates the high quality of the program for her daughter. But the arrangement will likely be temporary. When her 2-year-old turns 5 and goes to kindergarten, Savannah plans to leave this center, and the early education field altogether.

"Is it something I really want to do? It's not. I love teaching at this level," Savannah says. "But my daughter is getting older and things are becoming more expensive. ... Things are going to get harder for me, so I have to make that move, unfortunately."

Vanessa Pashkoff

Leaving early childhood education in 2021 was a gut-wrenching decision for western Massachusetts resident Vanessa Pashkoff.

"There's just a huge amount of guilt that comes with that," Pashkoff says. "I love what I do. I love taking care of other people's children and contributing in that way to our community."

The decision to step away came down to finances. The cost of child care for Pashkoff and her husband's first child landed them in debt. When another baby was on the way, they decided something had to change.

"I love taking care of other people's children and contributing in that way to our community."

Vanessa Pashkoff

"I can't afford to put my own kids in care on an early childhood salary," she says.

It's hard for Pashkoff to speak those words out loud. Looking back at her 15-year career in the classroom brings up a lot of memories. She says the vast majority of them are good. One of her favorite memories came from her early days as a teacher. One of Pashkoff's students was building a tall structure out of plastic blocks. She asked him what he was making — and she says his response was unforgettable.

"He put his hand on his hip, and he was wearing a boa. And he flipped the boa over his shoulder and said, 'It's the statue of Little Bee! Duh! In New York City,' " recalled Pashkoff. She says she loved moments of confidence and confusion with the kids.

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Vanessa Pashkoff

Still, she admits, the job came with some serious physical challenges. It was long hours on her feet without a guaranteed bathroom break. Pashkoff says dealing with students' poop, blood and vomit was "beyond common." She distinctly remembers one occasion when a 3-year-old student threw up all over the oversized button-down shirt she was wearing that day.

"And the pockets filled with vomit," she recalls. "I remember being like, 'This is happening!' But, you know, he's not fazed by it, so I'm not going to react to it."

She says she's torn when asked to speak about the job — because while there were good reasons why she left, it's a career she deeply loved.

Kimberly Artez

Kimberly Artez, 61, lost her job as a director of a child care center when the program closed during the pandemic.

She spent the next 18 months applying for similar positions. When she finally got an offer, it was to be a lead teacher in a toddler classroom.

“I went from a corner office to a classroom closet,” Artez says.

Artez knows her way around a classroom. That’s where she spent most of her 25 years in early education before she was promoted to director.

She took the lead teacher position after her unemployment benefits ran out. But she worries about whether she’ll be able to get back up the ladder she worked so hard to climb. The most frustrating aspect of working in early education for Artez is the lack of opportunities for advancement, especially for Black women like her.

Artez is a military veteran with four college degrees, including two master’s degrees, in education and criminal justice. In 2006, she received her director’s certification, which required completing additional college credits. But it took another decade to land a position as a director. It was a long path.

“If you can’t package all of that together to make something happen, then I have to say to myself maybe this is not the field for me,” she says.

Nationally, Black early educators on average earn $0.78 less per hour than their white peers, according to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley. And although people of color make up at least 40% of the child care and early education workforce, they are less likely to have higher paid positions like directors.

Even as director, the highest annual salary Artez ever made was $38,000.

“You get these warm fuzzies. But I don't think there are enough warm fuzzies to overcome the challenges.”

Kimberly Artez

Artez is still deeply passionate about early education. Her dream is to remain in the field and work to fix its problems from a policy side. She wants to help make early education better for teachers and workers. The inability to retain staff, she believes, goes beyond low pay. Fixing it will involve helping people move their careers forward.

For Artez, there are some rewarding moments. Parents often voice praise and appreciation for her work.

“You get these warm fuzzies,” Artez says. “But I don't think there are enough warm fuzzies to overcome the challenges.”

Llanet Montoya

It's been almost 19 years since Colombia native Llanet Montoya opened up a child care business on the first floor of her Worcester home.

Montoya is one of almost 5,000 people in Massachusetts who hold a family child care license, which allows them to care for up to 10 kids in their personal residence. Together these providers make up about 17% of the child care slots in Massachusetts.

Montoya loves working in this field. Caring for kids who have disabilities is one of her specialties, and she enjoys helping them meet milestones.

"This is something that I love," Montoya says. "I'm very passionate about working with the community."

But, the pandemic introduced some challenging new circumstances.

Montoya stayed open during the early part of the pandemic as an emergency provider for the children of essential workers. She was happy to be of service, she says, but all of the safety protocols took a toll on her home. She recently had to replace the kitchen floor, which was damaged from the chemicals she used for daily sanitization.

Lately, inflation is straining her budget. Montoya estimates her food costs have doubled since this time last year. Energy costs are up, too. To keep the business afloat and continue paying the certified assistants she works with, Montoya has stopped paying herself a salary.

"I don't have insurance. I don't have vacation time. I only have five personal days that I can take each year."

Llanet Montoya

"Thank God I have my husband's salary," says Montoya. She adds that her family income is also supported by training work she does for organizations like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

A state grant program created for child care providers during COVID has helped her business remain open.

As long as Montoya can keep her business running, she plans to remain in early childhood education. It's her passion. Still, she is hoping that state policymakers can find a way to make the system work better so that she again can afford to give herself a salary and basic benefits that most other full-time jobs offer.

"I don't have insurance," says Montoya. "I don't have vacation time. I only have five personal days that I can take each year."

Montoya has been encouraged by all of the political attention early education is getting. New state and federal funding programs created during the pandemic have been helpful, but she feels the government could do more.

Anna Rogers

Many teachers have a niche talent in early childhood education. For Anna Rogers, it was helping infants build basic skills. She loved watching those "aha" moments that opened the floodgates to more complex abilities.

"I know it takes babies three months or four months to be able to sit, but when they finally do, it's the best thing ever," says Rogers. "They get this new sense of independence, all by just sitting up."

Rogers doesn't work in child care anymore. She left a 10-year career in February to take a job in the Westwood Public School District.

The hours played a big role in her decision to leave. Her daughter will be starting kindergarten soon, and the public school schedule didn't jive with her hours at a local child care center.

Low pay was a huge factor, too.

"You cannot work in child care and have your own house," explains Rogers. "You can barely, if you're lucky, have an apartment to yourself. It's impossible to do this job without another support system."

"The burden on the parents needs to be lifted, and the burden on the workers needs to be lifted."

Anna Rogers

Rogers says she doesn't blame center owners or directors for the low wages. She knows they are under pressure from parents to keep costs down.

"The only way I can see this working is if it gets subsidized somehow," Rogers says. "The burden on the parents needs to be lifted, and the burden on the workers needs to be lifted."

Now that she works in a public school, Rogers has noticed she gets more respect from parents than when she worked in child care.

Still, Rogers says she misses the baby room. And if, somehow, state officials can work out a way to pay early educators a higher wage, she'd return in a heartbeat.

Kitt Cox

Kitt Cox, now semi-retired, began his career in early education in the late 1970s when he answered an ad in a newspaper promising “high creativity and low pay.”

“Now there’s a job for me!” Cox laughs.

Cox began as a preschool teacher and eventually became a center director.

Over the last four decades, he witnessed a remarkable evolution in early education. A wealth of new research showed the importance of the first few years of life for a child’s brain development, and how it shapes their adult lives. This research has informed much of today’s training in early education.

“We’re much, much better. Much smarter,” he says. “Nowadays, especially in Massachusetts, we’ve built a system that requires people to know something about kids and know something about parents.”

Although Cox has seen early education jobs require more training, many other aspects, such as pay and quality of life, have stagnated.

“We used to joke it would be much easier to say, ‘Would you like fries with that?’ than to be doing what we were doing,” he says.

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Despite the daily physical and mental exhaustion that comes with teaching young kids, Cox hangs onto many remarkable moments. Once, he and one of his students, a young girl, flipped through an encyclopedia. When she saw the pictures were almost exclusively of men and boys, she angrily exclaimed, “Who writes these things anyways!"

Men make up fewer than 5% of child care workers and teachers, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. For Cox, who was usually the only man in the room, the job was often isolating. There were times when parents refused to let him teach their children. Some administrators flat out refused to hire men. Other times, he says, there was false praise.

“Men are not invited enough into the field,” Cox says. “Men can be gentle. Men can be playful. Men can change diapers. And they need to be something besides the PE coach, and they need to be something besides the principal.”

Stacia Buckmann

As a child care center owner, Stacia Buckmann wears a lot of hats. On any given day, she may be found helping kids with minor scrapes; she also manages payroll and does her best to keep up her center's social media account. Lately she's been knee-deep in grant applications.

Buckmann became the owner of Tiny Town Children's Center in Plymouth in 2018 after her grandparents, the original owners, passed away.

She says making the business her own has been a "magical experience." But it's also come with a lot of uncertainty, especially during the pandemic.

Buckmann closed her center in March of 2020, when Gov. Charlie Baker ordered most providers to shut down temporarily.

"We thought it was going to be a two-week thing and we'd all come back and everything would be fine," she says. "But it turned into six extremely long months."

Buckmann applied for unemployment and other pandemic-related government assistance and her business survived, but reopening later that year came with new challenges. At first, the COVID protocols from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care were very strict: No mixing classrooms. No sharing toys. Changing diapers required a lot of protective gear, like masks and gloves.

"I work late into the night often doing paperwork. My husband hates it and tells me to leave work at work. But I tell him I can't, it's 24/7."

Stacia Buckmann

"I feel that we did everything the best we could and tried to be very careful," says Buckmann. "And it didn't matter what we did, we still ended up having to close classrooms [for COVID outbreaks]."

She's also been hit by staffing shortages and higher-than-normal turnover. And the lack of consistency is proving hard for her students, too. Many of them have returned with significant trauma.

"These kids, I've noticed, have had a lot of speech delays and a lot of [challenging] behavior," says Buckmann. "It's been a traumatic time in the whole world, and you never know what happens behind closed doors at home with a lot of these kids."

For now, Buckmann still feels lucky. She's getting by financially with assistance from state grants that were launched mid-pandemic to help providers stabilize their budgets after the closure. Buckmann is hopeful the state will come through with even more funding in the coming years, which could afford her a better work-life balance than she has now.

"I work late into the night often doing paperwork," says Buckmann. "My husband hates it and tells me to leave work at work. But I tell him I

can't, it's 24/7."
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