

Opinion: D.C. recognizes how much early-childhood education matters ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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The District's policymakers have begun to recognize what the science of early-childhood education has been telling us for decades: Early-childhood education is the foundation of all learning for school and life.

The D.C. Council took bold legislative steps and made investments to ensure that early educators in the District are well-prepared and compensated for meeting the demands and joys of working with our youngest citizens. Those moves counter the historical racism that underpins care and education in the United States, and the ongoing dismissal of early-childhood educators as mere babysitters.

As with education from kindergarten through 12th grade, early-childhood education supports families' ability to work — but it also does much more. Studies consistently show that young children receiving high-quality early education develop expansive vocabulary, possess stronger language skills, and score better in math and science school-readiness assessments. Long-term benefits for children living in underserved communities are even more significant, resulting in increased high school graduation rates, college enrollment and incomes. Even when a child experiences stress in the formative years, a high-quality, positive environment with skilled and supportive adults can mitigate its lasting effects.

This science is why every child — not only those whose parents can afford it — should have equitable access to a knowledgeable, competent, nurturing, fairly compensated early educator who intentionally creates developmental plans and rich experiences. It's also why D.C. created a quality standard for educators to gain skills and competencies by earning degrees and credentials as part of a comprehensive effort to reverse a history of undersupporting, undervaluing and underfunding early-childhood education and educators. This history goes back centuries to when enslaved Black women were forced to care for plantation owners' children while leaving their own children without care. After slavery, with few other opportunities, many Black women continued to work as domestic help — underpaid, overworked and excluded even in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

Despite their essential status, as well as the increasing recognition of the skill, knowledge and commitment it takes, child-care providers have remained low-wage workers to this day. Early educators earn an average of about \$15 per hour nationally. Until recently, early educators in D.C. earned an average of about \$20, far below the livable housing wage of \$34 and the levels of compensation earned by teachers in public schools. In 2016, the D.C. Council supported the decision of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to increase the credentialing requirements for early educators. A court has agreed that D.C. can enact credential requirements that all lead teachers in early-learning centers and homes have a minimum of an associate's degree, assistant teachers have a child development associate certificate and center directors have a bachelor's degree.

The great news is that early educators and directors are already on their way to meeting these requirements. According to OSSE, as of August, 78 percent of directors of early-learning centers are now meeting their new educational requirements. Lead and assistant educators are at 40 percent and 34 percent, respectively, and 50 percent for home-based educators.

D.C. must continue to invest time and funding into ensuring that pathways to advanced credentials and education are readily and equitably accessible to educators in all settings. Now, for example, early educators working in birth-to-5 early-childhood education programs licensed by OSSE are eligible to receive comprehensive scholarships to several local universities and workforce development programs. Increased credentials — with the supports needed to obtain them — need not result in decreased supply. They do, however, need to result in increased compensation. That's why, with overwhelming public support, in 2021, the D.C. Council unanimously passed the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund to increase the compensation of those working in licensed early learning centers and homes.

The lack of child-care supply stems from poor compensation for the workforce. We can't fix that problem without recognizing and supporting early educators as the highly skilled and knowledgeable professionals they are — who should have the opportunity to work in a field with standards, credentials and compensation as in other professional fields. We certainly can't fix it by continuing to pit parents and

educators against one another; both want what's best for children, and neither can afford to subsidize the cost of quality child care and early learning on their own.

Delivering on quality has costs — but the benefits are public, and the investments must be, too. D.C. and its residents recognize this and are taking steps to support the field to make early education a sustainable career choice and provide children and families with quality options. Qualified educators help shape children who are compassionate critical thinkers, problem solvers, stewards of the environment and civic-minded. After centuries of undervaluing the profession and the science of early-childhood education, we are at a crossroads with the opportunity to lay the groundwork for a stronger future.

Region: United States ^[3]

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