Early educator compensation: Findings from the 2020 California Early Care and Education Workforce Study [1]

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Executive summary

As we enter yet another phase of a pandemic that has highlighted the essential nature of early care and education (ECE) services, California's ECE sector is experiencing dire staffing shortages that are due in part to the low wages of ECE educators. This report draws on findings from the California Early Care and Education Workforce Study to report income and benefits of licensed family child care (FCC) providers and center-based directors, teachers, and assistant teachers. This study is the first comprehensive examination of California's workforce in 15 years.

Despite a growing understanding of the importance of early learning and development and the expansion of quality improvement initiatives during this time, the wages we describe in this report reflect how little has been done to address the economic well-being of educators themselves. Early educators' wages are still low. In fact, we estimate that teachers with bachelor's degrees who work in California child care centers saw a decline in actual wages of 1 to 2.5 percent between 2006 and 2022, despite a 35-percent increase in the state minimum wage over the same period. To better understand variations and inequities in the system, we examine compensation by educator role and education level as well as program type and funding.

The historic undervaluing of care work, the work of women, and the work of people of color in our country (Gould et al., 2021; Austin et al., 2019) and insufficient investment of public resources have converged to make ECE jobs among the worst paid in the United States (McLean et al., 2021). Low wages limit the ability to recruit and retain a qualified ECE workforce, which in turn impacts the ability of parents to access the ECE services they want and need in order to work. Without an investment of public resources to address compensation, these challenges will persist.

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