

Child care work in North Carolina still pays little, study finds [US-NC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Education levels among North Carolina's child care workers have grown dramatically in the past eight years, yet half still earn less than \$16,000 a year, and one in three has relied on public assistance to get by.

A survey of 18,000 child-care providers, more than half of the state's total, found that education levels among teachers had risen from 39 percent with a high school diploma and some college education in 1998 to 60 percent with those credentials today. The report, released Monday, showed that wages were so low it pays more to drive a bus and that nearly one in three child care workers leaves the profession every year. But that attrition rate has fallen since 1993.

"You cannot raise a family on these kinds of incomes. It's pathetic," said Karen Ponder, executive director of N.C. Partnership for Children, which runs Smart Start, the state's early childhood program. "But you either have to have another way of making a living, or a husband who makes money."

Citing studies linking a child's healthy development to experienced care givers, Smart Start officials said the low wages will continue to drive qualified teachers into better paying jobs. In North Carolina, 220,000 children are in licensed day care, and new mothers are re-entering the work force in greater numbers.

The \$294,000 study, funded by Smart Start, portrayed child care workers who have gone to night school to improve their skills but have little to show for it in their paychecks. Benefits aren't much better. Officials said 42 percent of centers do not offer a single day of sick leave, despite workers' frequent exposure to sick children. Only 16 percent offer full health insurance. Only 12 percent provide free child care to their employees' children.

According to the report, 99 percent of the workers are women; 71 percent have children of their own; 22 percent are single mothers.

"You get the sense of this work force being made up of, often, poor women with children struggling to make ends meet," said Sue Russell, executive director of Child Care Services Association, a nonprofit agency in Chapel Hill that conducted the study. The number on public assistance grew in just three years, from 26 percent to 34 percent.

At a news conference Monday, Russell and Ponder said raising tuition would not fix the problem, but instead would threaten to price parents out of a day care market that already costs more than college tuition.

The bill for sending a 3- to 5-year-old child to preschool in the state averages \$5,000 per year; it's more than that in the Triangle.

"And what if you have two children?" Russell asked.

Russell said not-for-profit centers, which made up 16 percent of centers in the study, tend to offer the best wages and benefits, and even for them, making ends meet is a stretch.

Anne Carver, director of the Jordan Child and Family Enrichment Center in Raleigh, said her center, which opened a year ago, received a \$1 million grant from Smart Start to build its facility on Glenwood Avenue. Starting salaries for teachers with a four-year degree is \$25,000. It costs the center \$1,200 a month to care for infants, she said. The center charges \$850 and swallows the difference.

The Jordan Center can afford to do that only because its not-for-profit program is part of the Methodist Home for Children, whose endowment covers the extra costs. The only other way to make budget is to charge more.

"And then you're beginning to serve the elite," Carver said. "And it's hard for the middle class people to pay for quality care."

Ponder credited the rise in educational attainment to two key programs funded by Smart Start. A scholarship program pays teachers to go back to school and earn everything from a child care credential in community college to a master's degree. Another program offers stipends of \$200 to \$3,000 a year for teachers to stay at their preschool -- the amount of the stipend depends on education.

Those programs have already helped lower the attrition rate, which has fallen from 42 percent in 1993 to 31 percent, Ponder said.

In their news conference, Ponder and Russell used the report to argue against further cuts to Smart Start. The program took a \$69 million hit in this year's round of budget cuts, which left it with a \$202 million budget.

"Our goal is to make sure we don't take any more losses," Russell said. "If we do, then we'll really see a cut in services, and some of the gains will be lost."

Sitting in the back of the room during the news conference, Sandra Wright nodded her head. She has worked in five day-care centers over the past 19 years, helping to rear hundreds of children. At 49, she does not own her own home. She has no retirement plan. She has never owned a car. She takes a taxi to work every morning. But from her vantage point, things are getting better. "Realistically, it is depressing," said Wright, the mother of five.

"But they are noticing the needs of the child-care field, and that makes me feel better."

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