

State, union agree to contract for 4,000 home-based child care providers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Home-based child care providers caring for the state's poorest children would receive a 10 percent rate increase over the next three years under the terms of a first-ever contract negotiated with their union and the state.

The state Department of Early Education and Care and the union representing 4,000 workers reached an agreement last week, capping 10 months of negotiations.

The contract between the state and the Service Employees International Union Local 509 of Watertown also requires professional development and new quality standards for early childhood workers caring for children up to age 5, officials said.

The three-year contract, reached last Tuesday, comes just a year after Governor Deval Patrick signed into law a bill that allowed home-based child care workers to join a union. "This is an historic agreement," Jason A. Stephany, a union spokesman, said in a phone interview Saturday afternoon. "This is a formal recognition of the valuable role early childhood educators play in our communities."

Thomas L. Weber, commissioner of the Department of Early Education and Care, said the agreement is a fair deal for the state.

"It's a very fair and reasonable agreement," Weber said in a phone interview Saturday. "They were tough but fair negotiations; that meets my criteria for success."

State licensing requirements emphasize early literacy, basic science, and other early education components for all providers, he said.

"We've evolved from focusing exclusive of providing child care," Weber said. "It has now been infused with a much more education component. The ages zero to 5 are critical developmental years for a child."

The state subsidizes child care costs for children of families earning 50 percent or less of the state's median income. Currently, the rates paid to providers range from \$30.10 to \$45.25 per day, depending on the age of the child and the location of the provider, according to state data.

Under the contract, those rates will increase 4 percent in the first year, and 3 percent in each of the final two years of the contract. For the current fiscal year, the contract will cost about \$5.6 million, or about 1 percent of the department's \$520 million budget, Weber said.

The tentative agreement, still must be approved by workers. Voting will start across the state this month, and the results should be known in January, Stephany said.

"This contract gives [early childhood workers] a voice, for the first time, a voice in the decisions that impact the families they service," Stephany said.

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