

If only we appreciated early educators enough to pay them worthy wages ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In addition to Teacher Appreciation Week, this week also marks Worthy Wage Week during which teachers, parents, and advocates across the country are calling attention to the need to pay early educators—those teaching children ages birth to 5—livable wages that are worthy of their work.

Early educators are quite literally shaping the future - our children's future, our families' future, and the future of our economy—and they're a key part of our nation's teaching workforce. Indeed, the National Academies of Sciences asserts that working with children under five requires as complex knowledge and skills as teaching older children. Yet our nation's early educators are often struggling to feed their own families due to stagnant, unlivable wages.

Many child care workers earn only the minimum wage. The median wage for all child care workers didn't reach \$15.00 per hour in a single state. Not surprisingly, early educators report high levels of economic worry. A study in one state found that nearly 50 percent of teachers reported worrying about having enough food for their families, including many teachers who had a college degree. According to the most recent, comprehensive national study, the median wage for an early educator with a bachelor's degree or higher working in center-based programs was just \$13.50 per hour.

Nearly one half of those employed as child care workers live in families relying on at least one federal income support, such as food stamps, to augment their low wages and meet their families' needs — this is double the national average for workers in the U.S. Reliance on these supports is highest among those with children under five.

Early care and education services, designed in large measure to ameliorate poverty and support the well-being of children and families, are in fact generating poverty for many early educators and their families. The irony is particularly striking considering these educators often cannot afford child care for their own children.

Additionally, high quality early care and education largely hinges on the positive and sensitive relationships early educators establish with children to promote their learning and development—made even more challenging without reliable and livable wages. High-quality early care and education and higher wages for early educators go hand in hand - we can't have one without the other, a fact well-established by research conducted over the last quarter-century.

This isn't to say that there hasn't been progress. Wages have risen between 15-19 percent for lead pre-k teachers since 1997 and states like New Jersey, and cities like Boston now require salary parity for public pre-k teachers with K-12 teachers. But piecemeal steps are not enough—we need progress on the national level towards worthy wages for all early childhood jobs, not just for some depending on their state and zip code.

To that end, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley will be releasing the first State of the Early Childhood Workforce Index in June that will highlight states' investments, or the lack thereof, in the ECE workforce as well as other policies, like paid sick leave, that contribute to the well-being of workers across occupations, particularly low income workers.

Beyond the statistics, the lived experiences of early educators and the families they serve underscore the case for a national solution that fundamentally shifts the way we think about early childhood jobs and how we prioritize working with young children. Our ability as a nation to provide high quality early learning and care to all children without overburdening families with the cost of early education depends on this.

2016 provides a unique opportunity to make progress as our country engages in a national debate about our priorities for the future. Now is the time to amplify efforts to ameliorate the early care and education crisis plaguing our children, families, and workers, and demand bolder and better solutions. No one should have to work full time and still not be able to make ends meet, particularly early educators - that's not teacher appreciation.

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