We know pre-k is essential, so why do the teachers earn only $28,000? [1]

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EXCERPTS

Experts and studies confirm it as fact: Placing toddlers in structured, quality preschool programs is the foundation of a good education, which in turn can help break the cycle of poverty.

Yet, a White House report released this week shows that despite preschool being critical to a young child's health, development, and school readiness, many early-childhood educators are earning half as much as elementary school teachers—paychecks low enough to qualify them for government assistance.

Education policy makers and public officials are giving short shrift to early childhood education, said Jennifer Keys Adair, an early-education professor and analyst at the University of Texas at Austin's College of Education.

Early childhood education "is more valued than ever, yet the overall quality of programs remains disconnected" from the knowledge base of what young students need, Adair said in an interview. A good pre-K program, she said, "requires a sophisticated understanding of learning and children" as well as respect for children and families, so "a qualified and engaged teacher that understands young children is hard to find, let alone retain."

Indeed, neuroscientists and child development experts have found that in a child's life, "the first five years—in particular the first three—have the greatest potential for setting a strong foundation for lifelong learning and health," according to the report, High-Quality Early Learning Settings Depend on a High-Quality Workforce.

At the same time, an overall lack of high-quality preschool programs threatens to undermine the educational foundation of poor children of color, whose families are most likely to depend on those programs—both to close the school readiness gap with their white peers and to ease the financial burden of child care.

But despite research that indicates a high-quality preschool program is "the single most important factor" for a young child's future achievement and well-being, "too many individuals within the early learning workforce earn low wages," the report's authors wrote. That's true "even when they obtain credentials and higher levels of education."

As a result, "we lose many wonderful teachers" who get better-paying jobs in elementary school, Adair said. "Often, teachers and administrators untrained in child development and early childhood issues think that pre-K and kindergarten should just be a mini version of third grade. This could not be farther from the truth."

Contributing to the problem: how young children learn and the perceptions that creates, said Marcy Whitebook, director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Learning in the early years largely occurs through interactions with adults, play with peers, and participation in daily routines, which require facilitation by trained educators," said Whitebook in an interview. "As a result, many are left with the false and harmful impression that specialized training comparable to that required in K–12 education is unnecessary."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, preschool teachers on average took home roughly $28,600 in 2015; by comparison, kindergarten teachers on average were making about $51,600.

"The median annual earnings of all child care teachers are particularly low. These earnings make many providers in every state eligible for public assistance," reads the report. "In fact, in 32 states, the median annual earnings for a child care worker is below poverty for a family of three" and runs at or near the federal poverty level, depending on the state.

When educators' pay is satisfactory and the learning environment is good, kids "spend more time engaged in positive interactions and developmentally appropriate activities with peers and teachers, which contributes to healthy development and school readiness,"

according to the report.

When the opposite is true, however, staff turnover is high, and "children's secure attachments and relationships are interrupted, which can influence their social-emotional and behavioral development," wrote the report's authors. "Turnover also affects the morale and culture of programs, which in turn affects the quality of services," particularly in low-income neighborhoods.

"Teachers are asked to do more than teaching in early childhood education; they are also asked to help parents and families connect to school and feel welcome," Adair said. "They are asked to help young children learn how to be a learner. This is hard work. And for many, many years, women of color have carried the torch of early childhood education, and they have not been rewarded. In fact, they are too often pushed out of the field because of credentials or financial imperatives."

Transforming early childhood jobs "requires transforming wider early childhood policies and infrastructure and embracing early care and education as a public good," said Whitebook.

"Until we are willing to align our policies with the science of early development, we will continue to deny the majority of children their developmental rights and shortchange the approximately 2 million early educators at work each day caring for and teaching young children," she said.

Adair concurred, adding that diversity also must become a goal.

"We need more incentives and support for these teachers already talented and experienced with young children to get their bachelor degrees," she said. "Our field of early childhood education would greatly benefit from experienced professionals of color" who get the opportunity to acquire credentials "and deepen their knowledge and tool kits to work with young children."

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Region: United States [3]
Tags: wages [4]
childcare workforce [5]
