

Labor report shows early childhood education must become crucial investment ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's past time to boost our investment in early childhood education. Educators who care for our children from birth to third grade have a pivotal role in preparing our children for school, but as a society we're letting them down.

A recent report issued by the U.S. Department of Labor suggests that low wages in the early childcare workforce are undermining the quality of early childhood education. Across the country, teachers are underpaid, but the data from the report highlight what early childhood advocates know to be shockingly true.

Pay for the early childcare workforce is shameful.

A childcare worker trying to support a family of three would be earning below the poverty level in 32 states, according to the report. How can that be? How can we tout the value of early education while paying some of our educators little more than a parking garage attendant?

The research on the value of high quality early childcare is clear. Children with positive early experiences are more likely to demonstrate long-term success, both socially and academically. This is especially true for economically disadvantaged populations, for whom early learning experiences may be particularly critical. Yet the financial investment needed to support this effort is glaringly absent.

Consider the salaries of early childhood educators in school-supported settings. Teachers in these programs are the highest paid educators serving children birth to age 5. Their salaries, a bit over \$20 an hour, are comparable to their colleagues serving children in the higher grades. Yet, they only represent 6 percent of all early childhood educators.

The remaining 94 percent are working in settings with less public funding. Teachers in Head Start and public pre-k programs, both publicly funded at lower rates than school-supported programs, average about \$4 an hour less than their school-supported counterparts.

The largest proportion of early childhood educators, nearly 60 percent, are employed at community-based early learning centers that receive little to no public funding. Keep in mind that this suggests that most of the children across the nation from birth to age 5 are served by this population of teachers. Teachers in these centers are earning nearly \$14,000 less per year than their publicly funded counterparts.

Why such a glaring discrepancy?

What currently exists is a largely private system of early childhood education supported by working families. Childcare center owners and directors are not mismanaging their funds or choosing not to pay their employees. In fact, many center directors are earning low wages as well.

Rather, the wage gap is a symptom of the overwhelming lack of investment in early childhood education across the nation. A private system funded by working families is not sustainable at the level of quality that research has indicated to be of value.

Instead, the current system marginalizes populations that cannot afford private school tuition and creates internal competition driving the best, most qualified teachers to leave community childcare centers for a public system that will provide them with better pay and benefits.

This system, although the best we currently have, is not in the best interest of children, not in the best interest of families, and certainly not in the best interest of society.

Economists have long indicated early childhood education has a strong return on investment. So let's invest! It's time for the community to come together and encourage legislators to fund early childhood education.

Businesses understand that high quality, reliable childcare offers working parents the peace of mind to be present and effective at work every day. Families understand that the great pre-k teacher they want their child to experience before they enter kindergarten will be accepting a public school position as soon as she finishes her bachelor's degree. No one understands it more than early childcare providers

who do their job out of love because today, it certainly isn't for the money.

When legislators and candidates speak about the value of a high quality early childhood education, ask them about their plans to increase pay for early childcare providers. This is a bipartisan issue. Let's fight for the teachers that play a great role in the lives of our children. Show them their worth and argue for true investment in early childhood education.

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