

Nearly half the families of Michigan's child care workers rely on public assistance, report says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

While researchers regularly tout the importance of early childhood education, many of Michigan's preschool teachers and child care workers earn low, often unlivable wages, according to a new report.

Preschool teachers, for instance, earned a median wage of \$13.34 in 2015, down nine percent from five years earlier.

Child care workers fare even worse. They have a median wage of \$9.43, down 10 percent during the same period, according to the report, from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California-Berkeley.

Coupled with few opportunities for paid professional development, the meager wages make it difficult to attract and retain talent in the field, which is seen as critical for setting children up for success in kindergarten and well beyond.

"Without transforming policies that shape how we prepare, support, and pay early educators, the 21st-century goal of quality early learning opportunities for all children will remain elusive," said Marcy Whitebook, one of the study's authors.

"States will continue to struggle to attract and retain skilled educators. And, as a nation, we will continue to place unconscionable demands on the dedicated women who, day in and day out, do their best to support the learning and well-being of children, often against enormous odds."

Nearly half of child care workers are part of families that are dependent upon public assistance, such as Medicaid and food stamps, according to the report.

The study considers early childhood education to consist of center- and home-based child care and preschool for children ages five and under. In Michigan, there's about 23,900 people within the early childhood teaching workforce.

In Michigan, funding for early childhood education remains mixed, experts say.

Some areas, such as the Great Start Readiness Program, Michigan's state-funded preschool program for four-year-olds, have seen increases. Between 2012-13 and 2014-15, the program's budget more than doubled, to \$239.3 million, according to state documents.

That increase meant slots for 63,248 four-year-olds, nearly double the number in 2012-13.

However, the state is doing far less for children who are three-years-old and younger, said Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children.

"We have not seen anywhere near the level of investment that we have in our four-year-olds with our birth through three-year-old population," he said.

According to the Michigan League for Public Policy, a nonpartisan organization focused on reducing poverty, the number of low-income families receiving child care subsidies fell by 75 percent over the last decade, to 17,000 in 2015. The decline, according to the organization, is "partly the result of low child care eligibility and provider payment levels."

Those low provider payment levels make it difficult for quality, child care providers to stay in the field and make a living, Gillard said. It's also problematic because such pay makes early childhood education seem more akin to babysitting than a learning opportunity, he said.

"Kids are learning, from birth to age 5," he said. "No matter where they are, what they're doing, kids have the potential to be learning."

Here's a look at the report's recommendations for improving working conditions for early childhood educators:

- "Advancing the preparation of the workforce by establishing minimum educational requirements, developing well-defined career pathways, and ensuring that all members of the current workforce have access to foundational and advanced training and education."

- "Establishing work environment standards to reduce stressful conditions and promote effective teaching necessary for supporting children's optimal development and learning."
- "Implementing compensation and benefit guidelines for entry level to teacher leadership positions in line with education, training, and experience, with the stated intention of raising the current wage floor and achieving parity with the K-12 education system."
- "Developing a comprehensive, up-to-date workforce data system to gain a meaningful assessment of the reach and effectiveness of education and training opportunities and other supports for the workforce."

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