

Child care expansion takes a toll on poorly paid workers ^[1]

Author: Cohen, Patricia

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EXCERPTS

Carmella Salinas has worked steadily for 14 years as an early-childhood-education teacher, taking care of 4- and 5-year-olds at the nonprofit Family Learning Center in the hardscrabble community of Española, just north of Santa Fe, N.M. Even so, she rarely earns enough to cover all her bills, and has more than once received a disconnection letter from the water, gas or electric company. A few months ago, she arrived home with her 10-year-old son, Aaron, to find the electricity shut off.

"But Mom," she recalled Aaron saying, "don't they know it's your birthday?"

While the scramble to find affordable child care has drawn a lot of attention, prompting President Obama to label it "a must-have" economic priority, the struggles of the workers - mostly women - who provide that care have not.

Yet the fortunes of both are inextricably intertwined. "You can't separate the quality of children's experiences from the knowledge, skills and well-being of early educators," said Marcy Whitebook, director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley.

About two million caregivers look after 12 million children from newborns to 5-year-olds, and they are among the lowest-paid workers in the country, sometimes earning little more than minimum wage, said Ms. Whitebook, who is an author of a state-by-state comparison of the early-child-care work force that was released last week. Caregivers also get few benefits and scattershot training, and they are subject to a tangle of requirements and regulations that can vary from one program to the next.

Scientists established decades ago that the crucial first years of life, in the words of a 2015 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report, "provide a foundation on which later learning - and lifelong progress - is constructed." Blue states and red, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and children's advocates have moved toward supporting universal prekindergarten.

But as the academy researchers concluded, "Adults who are underinformed, under-prepared, or subject to chronic stress themselves may contribute to children's experiences of adversity and stress and undermine their development and learning."

Ms. Salinas, 43, knows such stress too well. After 14 years, she earns \$12.89 an hour, but her work week is capped at 32 hours. If she worked more than that, the nonprofit center would have to provide her with benefits, which it cannot afford. In past years, enough parents managed to pay tuition during the summer, but not this time. As a result, she is without a job until state funding for prekindergarten starts to flow again in September.

For a while, Ms. Salinas got a second job to supplement her paycheck, but the extra money meant she no longer qualified for food stamps and Medicaid.

Without public assistance, she was unable to afford the two inhalers - one was \$200, the other was \$75 - that she needed for her chronic asthma. "I was hospitalized last year from complications from asthma," she said. "I was rationing the medication. I am supposed to have four puffs, but I would think, 'Can I get by with one?'"

Nor could she afford enough groceries. When her food stamps came through a couple of weeks ago, she stocked the refrigerator. Unaccustomed to seeing such a crowd of yogurt, carrots, strawberries, lunch meat, milk and orange juice, her son asked, "Mom, are we rich now?"

"No, baby," Ms. Salinas recalled saying with a laugh. "We're really, really poor."

Ms. Salinas said she could not manage at all if she had not inherited her mother's house a few years ago. But staying on top of the bills is still tough. When her 1999 Dodge Durango broke down last year, it took her four months to save enough to get it fixed.

New Mexico, like some other states, provides limited stipends to help teachers earn the credentials they lack. But the money, Ms. Salinas said, is only enough to cover one class each semester. She has been taking weekend or evening classes since 2005 to get a bachelor's degree.

After eight years of similar part-time schooling, Mona Zamora, now 33, earned her diploma while working at a child care center in Las Cruces. At a job fair, she learned about an opening for a kindergarten teacher in Mesa, Ariz., where she is now moving with her two children. Her salary will be \$38,000 a year - almost a third more than she earned in New Mexico - plus health insurance and a retirement program.

"Once I graduated and got my degree, the job that I was working at for over eight years wasn't able to compete with the pay and benefits," Ms. Zamora said.

Public schools, even in poor states, generally pay better than nonprofit and private child care centers. At the same time, elementary school teachers tend to earn twice as much as prekindergarten teachers, and caretakers of toddlers and infants are further down on the income scale, according to the Berkeley report.

Ms. Whitebook at Berkeley acknowledged that while many mothers did not have a bachelor's degree, handling a roomful of children required different skills from caring for one's own. "The work of caring for and educating the youngest children is as complex and requires as much knowledge as working with kids 5 to 8," she said.

She commended states for focusing on improved training and qualifications, but said it was not enough. Child care workers need professional support in the classroom, she said, and "we need to raise the floor so people are making a living wage."

But using standards for teachers at public school as a benchmark troubles Katharine Stevens, an education policy researcher at the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

"It's a model that has largely failed disadvantaged kids," Ms. Stevens said, noting that early childhood education offers a particularly potent opportunity to help level the playing field for poor children, who can lag as much as two years behind by the time they start kindergarten. "This is a crucial area and we need people who are good at it," she said. "But a college degree may not be necessary to be a very good caretaker of infants and toddlers."

Child care workers deserve more than poverty wages, Ms. Stevens said, adding: "Leaping to a just-add-water-and-stir solution is going to backfire. We don't know what credentials or what training leads to child care workers and teachers being effective with very young children."

And raising wages would also make child care more expensive - putting it further out of reach for low- and moderate-income families, and stretching already tight state budgets.

The Berkeley researchers counter that the push to expand child care has come at the expense of the poorly paid women who do the work. "A major goal of early childhood services has been to relieve poverty among children, yet many of these same efforts continue to generate poverty in the predominantly female, ethnically and racially diverse early-childhood-education work force," the report states.

Despite all of her own financial hardships, Ms. Salinas in Española said there was no other job she would rather have. "I realized that this was my calling in life," she said, making the discovery after finding a part-time job at a day care center when her two older daughters were living at home.

Even so, Ms. Salinas and her colleagues have families of their own to support. On a trip to lobby for education funding at the state Capitol in Santa Fe, she remembered meeting with a senator who told her, "You don't get into this for the money; you're paid in love."

"Really?" she replied. "When my landlord comes, can I just give him a hug?"

-reprinted from The New York Times

Region: United States [3]

Tags: inequality [4]

childcare workforce [5]

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