

Is this as good as childcare gets? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

“Money has been a constant struggle,” says Kim Silva of her 30 years as an early-education teacher in Massachusetts. “One unexpected expense can put you in the hole for months.”

Silva, 46, is the lead teacher in a preschool classroom at NorthStar, a childcare center in New Bedford, Massachusetts, that largely serves children whose parents’ income is low enough that they are eligible to receive financial subsidies from the state to help pay for care. Silva has worked there since she was 15, moving from aide to teacher to lead teacher. Yet after more than three decades—and a newly acquired college degree—she makes only \$11.91 an hour. That’s \$25,000 a year.

Silva speaks with an unqualified passion for the work she does. But she is also a single mother who has scraped and scrambled to support herself and raise her daughter, now 21, on an early educator’s salary. Silva has had to move back in with her own mother at times and has always been on food stamps. To afford even basics like food, clothing, rent, and utilities, Silva works on weekends as a personal care assistant—cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and running errands—a position that, at \$13.68 an hour, pays more than her job as a lead teacher.

Like the majority of early-childhood educators, Silva exists on near-poverty wages, on par with fast-food cooks and bartenders and making less than bellhops, janitors, and parking attendants. In 2015, the median wage for childcare workers in Massachusetts was \$12.01 per hour. Thirty-nine percent of the state’s childcare workers are on public assistance. And despite calls in the state for childcare workers to get college degrees, the Department of Labor still groups them with personal service providers such as valets, butlers, and fitness trainers, rather than other education-related occupations.

Despite the very real struggles of Silva and other childcare workers like her in the state, Massachusetts actually ranks as one of the best states in providing affordable, high-quality, and accessible early care and education in the Care Index, a data and methodology collaboration between Care.com, the largest online market for care, and New America, a nonpartisan think tank. Though quality is difficult to measure, 38 percent of centers and family homes are nationally accredited for quality, one of the higher rates in the country. And indeed, Massachusetts has made positive moves toward improving its early care and education system. It was one of the first states to form a dedicated Department of Early Education and Care so childcare could be monitored and funded as an aspect of education. The state has had a Quality Rating and Improvement System in place since 2011, setting guidelines for what is believed to be high-quality childcare.

However, The Care Index found that the cost of childcare in Massachusetts is extremely high, averaging \$13,208 a year in childcare establishments, nearly equal to the average cost of rent in the state, even as the caregivers still earn poverty wages. The cost for infant care is even higher—\$16,682 a year, more than a quarter of the state’s median household income, and nearly 90 percent of a minimum-wage worker’s earnings. This high cost presents serious challenges to parents struggling to pay for care and to providers, who often operate on paper-thin margins to survive.

That the state may be rated as one of the most successful early care and learning systems in the country, yet still have such high cost and poverty wages for caregivers, says more about what’s lacking in the rest of the country than what’s thriving in Massachusetts. It is indicative of the nationwide state of childcare that neither the providers nor the parents nor the teachers feel the system works well for anyone.

In Massachusetts, low caregiver wages, low unemployment, and relatively low state investment in childcare have led to teacher shortages. The state reimbursement rate to providers who accept children qualifying for subsidies remains significantly lower than the 75th percentile recommended by the federal government. These rates have a huge impact on what local providers who take any subsidized children can pay their teachers and on the quality of education they are able to provide.

For example, two years ago, Nurtury Boston opened a state-of-the-art center in a public housing facility in Boston. They had seven infant rooms, with families able to pay full tuition lining up for spots. But the center was unable to fill the rooms because they couldn’t find

qualified lead teachers.

“We either didn’t have applicants or those we had couldn’t work for money offered,” said Wayne Ysaguirre, the Nurtury president and CEO. Nurtury was offering a lead teacher with a BA between \$15.64 and \$18.66 an hour, depending on experience—between roughly \$32,000 and \$38,000 a year. In contrast, the average yearly salary for a kindergarten teacher in Massachusetts is \$67,170 a year.

By its very nature, childcare is expensive. And it all comes down to people. The cost of labor makes up 80 percent of childcare costs. That’s because, compared to elementary school, where one teacher is responsible for about 21 students, one teacher can care for four to six infants or six to 10 toddlers and preschoolers. Early educators bear the brunt of the burden when providers like Nurtury hit financial struggles.

“I am having to make choices I never want to make,” Ysaguirre admits. He’s stripped benefits from the staff in order to make ends meet, including cutting the portion of health care Nurtury pays, and no longer contributing to teacher retirement funds. He is even considering ending paid lunch breaks and raising the teacher-child ratios. “I hate having to put this on the backs of these folks who are already so low paid. These are terrible choices for everyone.”

Silva’s experience and those of other caregivers in Massachusetts reflect that of an entire nation of childcare workers. The median hourly wage for childcare workers in the U.S. is \$9.77 an hour, which places them in only the second percentile of wage earners when all professions are ranked, making it one of the lowest paid professions in the country. Close to half (46 percent) of childcare workers, compared to about one quarter (26 percent) of the total U.S. workforce, are on public assistance. Low wages can lead to high teacher burnout, high levels of teacher stress, and high teacher turnover; the national turnover rate for childcare workers is 13 percent, significantly higher than the 3.4 percent turnover rate for all non-farm jobs. All of this compromises the consistency of care parents require and the quality of care children need.

“Don’t tell me we don’t subsidize childcare in the United States,” said Mary Brown, who has spent 30 years as a childcare center director and childcare consultant. “We do. It’s the teachers, mostly women, who’ve been subsidizing childcare all along.”

In 2014, Marie St. Fleur, the president and CEO of the Bessie Tarrt Wilson Initiative for Children, became the driving force behind the Put Massachusetts Kids First Coalition. The coalition is a group of over 70—and growing—organizations from across the state that came together with the hope of strengthening and stabilizing the early-education workforce. “We had to make the legislature understand that they cannot simply ignore the workforce who are building our next generation,” St. Fleur said. “It’s shameful, but society still has not figured out how to deal with this issue.”

Although the coalition initially asked for an investment of \$40 million, the state allotted only about a quarter of that, \$12.5 million, in the 2017 budget. For St. Fleur, the hope is that this partial success story can serve as a critical wake-up call regarding the crippled state of the entire childcare economy.

“We need a better model, one that is going to work for all the children in every community,” St. Fleur said. “It’s a big conversation, but I think we are ready to have it. There’s momentum now. We need to seize it. If we blink, who knows when we’ll have another chance.”

For Silva, who has spent her entire adult life learning to want less and compromise more, some days it is difficult to leave her financial stress at the door and fully engage with the classroom. She has to dig deep inside herself to find a way. But despite all the hardship and financial sacrifice, Silva can’t imagine doing any other kind of work. “I remind myself that I am so lucky to go to a job every day, knowing I am doing the most important work there is,” she said. But she would never ask the next generation of teachers to live the kind of life she’s had to. “Something has to change.”

-reprinted from The Atlantic

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