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Caring for the Caregivers: Policy Support for Child Care Professionals

By Alex McWard and Andrea Belgrade | Sept. 22, 2021 |

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Asked to name the biggest challenge facing home-based child care providers right now, the executive director of the National Association for Family Child Care Providers didn't miss a beat.

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“Compensation,” Lanette Dumas said. “Compensation that is relevant to the experience and the number of hours [worked] and the amount of training and expertise that’s being delivered for families.”

The pandemic exacerbated the ongoing problem of low pay for child care professionals. As parents kept their children home or no longer required care due to job losses, child care providers—many of whom are self-employed small-business owners—saw their incomes decrease even further. As Dumas explained to the NCSL Early Childhood Fellows this summer, “Limited enrollment means limited dollars.”

The 2020 Early Childhood Workforce Index, a biennial report from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, indicates that child care professionals continue to earn poverty-level wages at an average of \$12 per hour. Compounding the issue of low wages, equally qualified professionals working with infants and toddlers, and especially Black, Latina and immigrant women, are paid disproportionately less than their counterparts who are white or working with 4- or 5-year-olds. Low pay and poor working conditions contribute to high staff turnover and unstable child-provider relationships.

A Long Way to Go

While the federal government released close to \$50 billion in aid for states to stabilize and support child care professionals during the pandemic, the workforce index notes that states have a long way to go toward providing adequate compensation and other support necessary to create a sustainable early childhood workforce. In response to these issues, some states are addressing salary parity, compensation standards, scholarships and more:

- Hawaii, Nevada, New Jersey and Rhode Island improved salary parity for publicly funded pre-K teachers, ensuring that pre-K professionals earn as much as equally qualified elementary school teachers.
- Washington, D.C., Delaware, Illinois, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington state all articulate compensation standards for early educators. While these standards apply only to state-funded programs, the goal is to ensure child care professionals earn a living wage and are adequately compensated. Delaware introduced SCR 36, creating a state target compensation scale and professional career pathway for early childhood care educators.
- Arizona, New Jersey and Oklahoma expanded scholarship programs to help early educators earn bachelor’s degrees. This year, North Carolina legislators considered SB 456, which would appropriate \$250,000 to fund an apprenticeship program for child care professionals while they work to obtain a child development associate degree.
- Massachusetts and Washington enacted legislation to support early childhood professionals in other ways. Massachusetts’ HB1304 established an individual retirement account program for personal care attendants and family child care providers. Washington’s SB 5237 made sweeping

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changes to the state's early childhood system, including funding health insurance for child care professionals and increasing compensation, professional development opportunities and access to a substitute caregiver pool.

Early Learning Workforce Project

To support legislators working on these issues, NCSL is hosting a two-year project on the early learning workforce. Over the course of the project, legislators will consider ways to improve workforce preparation and ongoing professional development, enhance the quality of practice and professionalize the field.

Compensation and other supports for the early learning workforce were the focus of the project's first meeting. Caitlin McLean, who has a doctorate in social policy and was the lead author of the Early Childhood Workforce Index, reminded attendees what is at stake.

"Early educators, regardless of where they work, are engaged in nurturing young children and helping them learn during a really crucial stage of their development," she said.

If you have questions about this article or the upcoming webinar, please contact Jennifer Palmer.

Additional Resources

- [Early Care and Education Legislation](#)
- [State Legislatures News](#)