



Improving Early Childhood Education Through Adequate Teacher Compensation

The average salary for a child care center teacher is less than \$16,000 a year. One-quarter to one-half of teachers have no health insurance and one-third of teachers have had to rely upon one or more forms of public assistance. The majority are women with children of their own. Quality in early

childhood programs is directly related to level of education and level of compensation of the teachers. Quality of early childhood education experiences is also strongly related to many developmental outcomes for children. To improve early childhood programs and developmental outcomes in children, teachers must be adequately compensated.

policy brief

The Importance of Quality in Early Childhood Education

Many young children in the United States spend a significant portion of their time in early childhood education programs. The most recent National Household Education Survey reports that 61% of children under age 4 regularly attend early childhood programs, including 44% of infants under 1 year, 53% of 1-year-olds, and 57% of 2-year-olds. In studies of quality, six out of seven early childhood programs are rated as being of mediocre or poor quality. One out of three infants and toddlers in home care is in a situation that is actually harmful.

The quality of early childhood programs is directly related to children's developmental outcomes. Children in higher quality programs tend to:

- have greater mathematical abilities
- have better verbal skills
- have better thinking and attention skills
- have fewer behavioral problems
- be more likely to succeed in school

Effects of High Turnover Rates on Quality

The low quality of many early childhood programs is due in part to the alarming rates of teacher turnover for early childhood professionals—31% as compared to 6% for public school teachers. Children in early childhood programs with high turnover rates tend to engage in fewer social activities, less age-appropriate play with peers and have slower rates of vocabulary development. Furthermore, programs of higher quality tend to have lower turnover rates than programs of lower quality.

Teacher Compensation is Vital to Reducing Turnover

High turnover rates are related to jobs that have low wages, few benefits, and limited opportunities for professional advancement. The number one reason professionals cite for leaving is the opportunity for better pay. Until early childhood professionals' wages are commensurate with educational attainment, early childhood programs will remain low in quality, and teacher retention will suffer.

Well-Prepared Teachers are Crucial to Quality

The best predictor of the quality of children's experiences is teacher preparation and education. Well-prepared teachers understand how children learn and grow, recognize the importance of appropriate learning environments, and pursue ongoing training. Teacher compensation is related to the level of education teachers have and their willingness and ability to pursue further education. Early childhood programs with higher quality ratings tend to have teachers who are better compensated and have attained higher levels of education.

Teacher Compensation Programs in the States

Some states are committed to improving retention of well-educated and effective early childhood professionals. Currently nine states- California, Georgia, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin- have publicly funded initiatives to improve compensation and retention.

Missouri's OPEN Initiative is implementing the WIN Project, a research-based project designed to address teacher and director recruitment and retention in early childhood programs through the provision of bi-annual incentive payments. This program is currently being implemented in seven counties in Missouri and is supported primarily by a grant from The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

These programs target the quality of early childhood programs by providing supplemental wage increases based on professional development to teachers who are credentialed and who have been in early childhood education for a minimum period of time. Supplements increase with educational attainment. Initial reports indicate that salary supplements are reducing turnover rates. North Carolina surveys show significant drops in teacher turnover, with rates falling from between 32% and 44% to between 8% and 12%.

Selected References

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