

Chloe Learey: Why wages matter in child care

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Child care is a unique piece of the economic development puzzle because it impacts both the current and future workforce.

The availability of high quality, affordable child care makes it possible for people to choose to work. And, it supports the optimal development of the children who will be working someday. Part of the investment we need to make is in the people who provide the service. Early education teachers are a linchpin to making this system work.

Therefore, we need to invest to ensure the people doing this work are compensated in accordance with the value they provide.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has two classifications of early educators that are relevant to the topic of wages in the field — child care worker and preschool teacher (except special education). The median wage nationally for someone working in child care is \$10.72 per hour, not even close to what some deem a 'livable' wage. The median for preschool teachers is higher at \$13.94, although still not in parity with the wages paid kindergarten teachers who make \$26.07 (assuming 2080 hours worked per year at \$54,230).

Why are wages so low when child care costs are so high? Because the tuition charged does not cover the cost of the service. For example, let's look at an infant classroom in Vermont. You can have four infants per one teacher, with a maximum group size of eight. If tuition is an average \$12,000 per year, then that brings in \$96,000 annual revenue for the classroom (assuming an unlikely full occupancy 100 percent of the time).

This covers salaries and benefits for a minimum of two full-time and one part-time teacher (you have to cover breaks) as well as materials, rent, utilities, insurance, and

any other overhead needed to maintain a facility, even if a home-based business.

The math does not work. Why not just increase tuition? Because \$1000 a month is already unaffordable for many families, even if they receive some form of financial assistance. Raising tuition as a vehicle for increasing wages will cause the collapse of the system.

Another complicating factor in the wage picture is the increased expectations for early childhood teachers to have professional training, including at least some college credits in the field and ultimately requiring a bachelor's degree.

This increased professionalism is good and indicates that we understand the importance and value of these teachers. But this expectation requires compensation that reflects that level of training and low wages will serve as a deterrent for people choosing early education as a career. This will also contribute to the collapse of the system as it becomes more and more difficult to find qualified people.

If we want to leverage child care as a strong economic development tool, we will have to find a way to pay people more. This compensation may come in various forms, from paying education costs to offering free or reduced child care to housing allowances or other benefits which make it possible for excellent teachers to choose early education as their career of choice. Ultimately, that compensation will have to include increased wages since that is the mechanism our culture uses to demonstrate the relative value of a person's contribution to our economy. The research clearly demonstrates that investing in early childhood education brings significant returns for us all. We need to find a way to increase that investment by paying our early childhood teachers more.

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