

2005

Policy Brief: Compensation of Early Childhood Teachers: What Value do we Place on Young Children?

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Thornburg, Kathy; Raikes, Helen; Wilcox, Brian; Edwards, Carolyn P.; Torquati, Julia; Hegland, Susan; Peterson, Carla; Summers, Jean Ann; and Atwater, Jane, "Policy Brief: Compensation of Early Childhood Teachers: What Value do we Place on Young Children?" (2005). *Publications of the Center on Children, Families, and the Law (and related organizations)*. 18.
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COMPENSATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS: WHAT VALUE DO WE PLACE ON YOUNG CHILDREN?

Findings from the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium show that better compensated providers provide higher quality care and education. Teachers of children ages 0-5 earn the least of all educators.

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Background

In 2001, university researchers and state program partners in four states (Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska) initiated the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium (MCCRC). The focus of the Consortium's work is to conduct a longitudinal study on a range of issues associated with early childhood program quality and the workforce. Across the four states, a random sample of 2,022 child care providers participated in the study representing licensed infant, toddler, and preschool centers as well as Head Start and Early Head Start programs, license-exempt centers, and licensed and unlicensed family child care homes. In Nebraska, 508 providers participated in telephone interviews and 85 of those programs were randomly selected for an observational quality assessment. The purpose of this policy brief is to present findings relating to child care provider compensation and benefits in Nebraska and the relation of these to quality.

State and National Workforce Statistics Compared

In Nebraska, a majority of providers regard child care as their profession, have been providing child care for over five years and intend to stay in the field. This is despite low full time earnings (averaging \$14,700 a year in Nebraska), which for many providers is below poverty level.

Compensation includes salary and benefits earned by early childhood teachers and providers. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that the compensation rate for the early childhood workforce has changed very little over the past several years. Adequate compensation is necessary to retain the most highly qualified and skilled teachers (Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001).

The following table lists the average annual salaries of child care teachers, Head Start teachers, preschool teachers, kindergarten, and elementary teachers in Nebraska.

Child care teachers	Head Start teachers	Preschool teachers	Kindergarten teachers	Elementary teachers
\$14,700 ^a	\$17,024 ^c	\$17,330 ^c	\$30,170 (2001-02) ^c	\$36,236 (2001-02) ^b

a: Midwest Child Care Research Consortium

b: <http://reportcard.nde.state.ne.us>.

c: <http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc02/reports/17teachqual-tld.htm>

Benefits and Quality of Care and Education

Three-quarters of center-based providers earn some type of employee benefits from their child care employers. However, only around half (52.4%) receive health benefits for themselves, and 40.6% receive health benefits for their families. A majority of providers receives paid vacation (91.4%), paid sick leave (75.3%), and reduced tuition for their children (62.4%), but only 35.8% receive retirement benefits. The total number of benefits that providers earn is significantly correlated with the quality of care and education that children receive. Providers who earn more benefits are less likely to be punitive or detached, demonstrate more warmth in their interactions with children, and provide higher quality care and education experiences.

Compensation, Teacher Turnover, and Children's Development

Across the nation, the early childhood field experiences an annual turnover rate of 30%, which is quite high when compared to the 6.6% annual turnover rate among public school teachers. In Nebraska, the MCCRC data indicate that approximately 40% of early childhood educators anticipate leaving the field within the next five years. However, Nebraska providers who earn higher wages report that they intend to stay in the field longer, and those who receive more benefits are less likely to choose other work if they had the opportunity to do so. Teacher turnover is harmful for young children, who need secure, stable relationships with caring adults. Classrooms with high teacher turnover also are characterized by poorer social interactions and lower levels of engagement in play and learning activities (Howes & Hamilton, 1993).

Adequate compensation for early childhood professionals is necessary in order to support a stable, highly qualified workforce charged with the responsibility of caring for and educating the youngest and most vulnerable citizens. In Nebraska and in the Midwest, our research found that early childhood professionals receiving higher compensation, including wages and benefits, provided *higher observed quality of care*. Providers receiving higher levels of compensation are more likely to provide positive developmental experiences for young children, such as activities promoting language and literacy, large and small motor (muscle) development, music, movement, and artistic expression, learning activities, and good social relationships. Such providers are also *more likely to be warm and nurturing, and provide a safe and healthy environment for young children*.

Policy Recommendations

Policies should function to support early childhood professionals so that they can provide high quality care and education for young children. Therefore we recommend that child care policy makers should:

- Provide economic incentives for early childhood professionals to enhance the quality of care and education in their programs
- Increase compensation for early childhood professionals providing *high quality* care for children whose tuition is paid by state subsidies
- Develop strategies to maintain competitive wages and benefits for providers in the child care workforce in order to retain the most talented professionals
- Encourage business and industry to invest in high quality child care as an investment in their own workforce

Howes, C., & Hamilton, C.E. (1993). The changing experience of child care: Changes in teachers and in teacher-child relationships and children's social competence with peers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8, 15-32.

Whitebook, M., Sakai, L., Gerber, E., & Howes, C. (2001). *Then & now: Changes in child care staffing, 1994-2000, Technical Report*. Washington DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce.

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