

Trying
together



Early Childhood League Policy Recommendations

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A project of the Early Childhood League made by parents for parents



Introduction

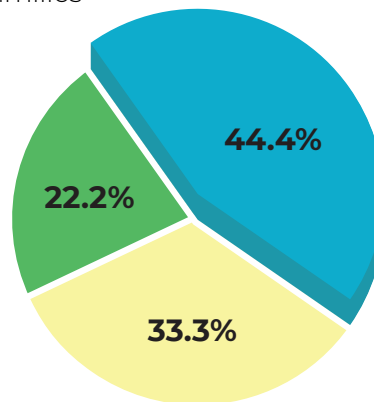
In Southwestern Pennsylvania, children from birth through age five receive child care in a variety of settings, including licensed child care centers, family child care homes, and group child care homes. Though the type of institution may differ, the teachers working there have one major thing in common — they're underpaid.

There are many topics within early childhood education (ECE) that warrant attention and policy change. For this paper, we felt compelled to focus on compensation for ECE professionals for the following reasons:

- A survey was sent out at the beginning of the ECE League to gauge participants' interests. Participants were asked to choose their key advocacy issues among 17 options. The top three interests were:
 1. Compensation for ECE professionals (highest percentage)
 2. Maintaining and increasing funding for child care, home visiting, pre-k, early intervention, or family support
 3. Affordability of care for parents/families

What is your #1 Early Childhood Education Issue?

18 Responses



- Compensation for ECE professionals (highest percentage)
- Maintaining and increasing funding for child care, home visiting, pre-k, early intervention, or family support
- Affordability of care for parents/families

- Conversations from committee meetings and personal stories shared by league members and mentors
- National media attention on the role of early childhood educators in the wake of COVID-19



Setting the Stage

The interactions we have with infants shape the way they learn for the rest of their lives. We also know that education is the foundation of a thriving economy and a key to getting families back to work following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before their K-12 counterparts opened for in-person learning, child care centers were here to support families - all without any promise of increased funding or support.

For years, Pennsylvania early childhood professionals looked forward to their “education and retention award” (ERA), which served as an additional monetary award based on their program’s Keystone Stars level, their own personal educational attainment, and time served in the field. As long as providers met the site specific requirements within the Keystone Stars regulations, their program staff were eligible to receive a \$290 to \$4,000 reward yearly. A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, in Spring 2021, the early learning field learned that the funds typically used for ERA would permanently end. These funds were reallocated to the Pandemic Relief Award, a one-time payment of \$600 to a

larger group of child care workers. In the 2019-2020 school year, about 9,200 child care teachers and directors across Pennsylvania received ERAs. The Pandemic Relief awards were offered to approximately 33,000 child care staff across the commonwealth. While we support the move to reward all child care providers, educators need sustainable financial incentives that encourage and motivate them to remain in the child care industry over time.

In Allegheny County, starting salaries for preschool teachers average \$23,090 compared to their K-12 counterparts who earn an average of \$50,220. The gap increases for experienced teachers, with preschool teachers earning an average salary of \$29,590 and K-12 teachers earning an average salary of \$86,090. When considering the salary and wages of child care workers, those specializing in infant and toddler care, most of these educators earn the least. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment calculated that the median wage for child care workers in PA is \$10.69 an hour. **Low-pay creates systemic issues around recruiting, recognizing, and retaining early childhood teachers.**



Ultimately, this impacts access to quality child care for families. According to Pre-K for PA's [Invest in Quality: A Case for Paying Closer to What High-Quality Pre-K Costs report](#):

“Due to the inadequate compensation the turnover rate is high for pre-k teachers in this critical work. Nationally, the annual turnover rate for early childhood educators is 30%, with low compensation cited as the top reason for leaving the field. High teacher turnover in early childhood programs undermines quality and is a financial burden on programs. High turnover of pre-k teachers can be detrimental to the quality of the environment and the development of young children, just as it would be for schools to lose and replace teachers in the middle of the year. Teacher turnover impacts the quality environment of the classroom and directly impacts the connection with children and their families. When programs lose and replace teachers, this can trigger stranger anxiety in pre-k students, which hinders

the potential for growth in their early learning environment. The constant teacher turnover and struggle with retaining highly qualified professionals also has a detrimental impact on the program as it takes time to rehire a qualified professional and often causes staffing shifts. Often times certified pre-k teachers leave child care center-based classrooms for school districts or leave the education field altogether.”

In an August 2021 survey from the National Association for the Education of Young Children ([NAEYC](#)), which gathered feedback from 306 Pennsylvania Child care providers:

- 79% reported a staff shortage
- 78% noted the struggle with recruitment is due to low wages

It should come as no surprise that even the most passionate of educators and child care workers might consider pivoting to a new industry.

A Teacher's Story:

Teaching has always been in Jenea's blood. With family members working across the education ecosystem, it was no surprise she gravitated towards working with children. After graduating from college with a degree in Psychology, Jenea spent seven years in the Early Childhood Education field, working her way up from a part-time assistant to a full-time lead teacher. Early Childhood Educators - those working with children from birth through the early elementary years - set the foundation for the way kids learn for the rest of their lives. Jenea's students were the reason she got out of bed each day, especially on the days she worked 11-hour shifts. From 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., she not only served as a teacher, but as a parent and child advocate, social emotional learning expert, brain builder, program manager, and

community partner. Her students' joy brought her joy. But as a single mother, joy couldn't sustain Jenea's goals of owning a home or saving for life's ups and downs.

Compensation for child care providers and educators in the early education field is woefully low and radically undervalues the role they play in a child's development and a family's support system. Two years ago, Jenea left the early child care center where she launched and grew her career. She now teaches Prevention & Intervention courses at public schools across Allegheny County. She shares that she misses and thinks about her "babies" daily, but until salaries and benefits increase to match rates at the K-12 level, she cannot consider a return.



A Center Director's Story:

Becky leads one of the oldest and most recognized child care centers in Pittsburgh. It is a Keystone STAR 4 rated program and is NAEYC Accredited. The school serves a mixed population of students, both in terms of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic background. With a starting teacher salary of \$14-\$17 an hour for qualified, often degreed teachers, it also offers one of the highest child care center salaries in the city. Currently, staffing constitutes 85% of the center's overall operating budget. Becky knows the pay she offers is not even close to reflecting the importance and demands of the work, or achieving parity with similarly credentialed elementary school teachers.

Becky has had to fill 30% of her teaching positions in the last two months due to turnover, and she is spending the majority of her days recruiting and interviewing candidates while deprioritizing her other responsibilities. Her teachers are either leaving her center for higher paying roles in K-12 or seeking positions outside of the education/child care field. Many of these teachers lament that they wish pay was higher at the center so that they could stay. In her conversations with center directors across Pittsburgh, she finds the struggle to hire and retain educators is universal. Without additional investments from the state into Pennsylvania's subsidized child care program Child Care Works (CCW), center directors like Becky are unable to increase teacher pay.



Becky feels passionately about increasing teacher pay in child care centers. Doing so would allow her and her fellow child care center directors to continue attracting, hiring, and retaining high quality teachers, which would then allow her to extend operating hours and student seats to reflect the needs of Pittsburgh’s working parents and serve even more families.

Policy Recommendations

Short Term:

- We recommend that Trying Together amend the Pre-K Teacher Turnover survey questions they created in 2020 with the policy committee’s additions (listed below). This survey was meant to go out in March 2020. However, it was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In August and September 2021, the Start Strong PA campaign conducted a survey about the staffing crisis from the impact of COVID-19. The teacher turnover survey will provide more quantitative data to demonstrate why teachers leave and the difficulties with recruitment.
- Mobilize child care providers to advocate at the state level and provide meaningful input about how they could use funds to support the early childhood workforce (i.e. “I need funds to…” “...help my teachers get certified,” “...give my teachers bonuses,” etc.).
- Create a Workforce Commission at the state level and make data about the workforce more accessible. We understand the Start Strong PA campaign is currently in the process of speaking with legislators and we support this effort.



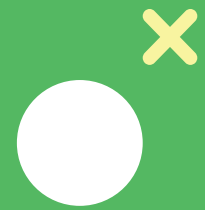
Long Term:

- We need parents, teachers, and school directors to mobilize together to ask policy makers to invest in child care, especially in the workforce. It will be impactful for policymakers to hear how retention and recruitment issues impact access for families.
- We advocate that state-level policy makers invest in increasing funding toward early childhood providers with a focus on wages, including raising minimum wage to \$15. This increase in wages should come from public investment - it should not be the burden of parent payments or provider budgets. We also recognize that moving to the minimum wage is only a starting point. The early childhood profession must become a valued and desirable field - one where the pay matches the expertise, skills, and credentials.
- Create a state-wide database of pay rates and salaries by geographic region that is accessible to the public.

**Recommended Questions for Pre-K Teacher Turnover Survey*

- What was the hourly rate before/after COVID-19?
- How has COVID-19 impacted your ability to find, hire, and retain high-quality talent?
- How many staff members do you have who are degreed (BA or higher)?
- How do you show your staff you appreciate them (bonuses)?
- Did you pay your staff even when you were closed or did they file for unemployment?
- How has people movement/relocation due to COVID-19 impacted your demand (enrollment), and are you able to meet the demand?
- Do you offer paid professional development or apprenticeship?
- What are the backgrounds of the Director (ECE certified?) ?
- What do pay scales look like for different roles within child care centers (teaching versus admin, summer camp staff)?
- Do you have a different salary schedule based on teacher credential/education or years of experience?
- Do you offer benefits (medical, dental, paid time off)?
- Do you offer subsidized child care to staff?

Start Strong PA



Because every child deserves an equal opportunity to a quality educational foundation that will prepare them to grow, learn, and succeed, Start Strong PA is calling on Pennsylvanians to focus on the most important years of a child's development; the first three years of life.

In order for every child to grow, learn, and succeed, we must attract, compensate, and retain additional talented adults to become early childhood educators.

Families and child care providers can share their stories at <https://startstrongpa.org/share-your-story>

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