



# Underpaid and Unequal

## Racial Wage Disparities in the Early Childhood Workforce

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# Introduction and summary

More than 3 million children younger than age 6 regularly attend center-based care and education.<sup>1</sup> Formal care arrangements—such as child care centers and preschools<sup>2</sup>—are an increasingly prominent part of children’s lives: 65 percent of young children have all available parents in the workforce.<sup>3</sup> Policymakers, recognizing the importance of these early care and education environments—not just as a work support for parents but also as a means to promote children’s learning and development—are looking for strategies to boost program quality.

Experts know that effective teachers are central to quality early care and education.<sup>4</sup> It is no surprise, then, that many quality improvement efforts have focused on increasing education requirements for teachers and bolstering access to professional development and training.<sup>5</sup> Children’s learning and development is supported by thoughtful instruction and warm, engaging interactions.<sup>6</sup> It takes a skilled and effective workforce to provide the level of instruction necessary to promote positive outcomes—including social skills and early literacy and numeracy skills—but the United States continues to pay most early childhood educators embarrassingly low wages.<sup>7</sup> Preschool teachers and child care workers rank in the bottom 20th percentile for mean annual salaries.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, many teachers lack access to important benefits such as health insurance and paid leave.<sup>9</sup>

New analyses presented in this report suggest that poor compensation and benefits are felt most acutely by African American women in the early childhood workforce. On average, African American female teachers working full time make 84 cents for every \$1 earned by their white counterparts.<sup>10</sup> White teachers working full-time make an average of \$13.86 per hour: This 16 percent wage gap means an African American teacher would make \$366 less per month and \$4,395 less per year, on average. When differences in educational backgrounds, years of experience, and employment characteristics are taken into account, the wage gap between African American and white female, full-time teachers is reduced to roughly 93 cents on the dollar. However, this is still a meaningful difference in a workforce that makes less than \$30,000 per year, on average.<sup>11</sup>

Addressing compensation for the early childhood workforce as a whole must be a priority for policymakers, as the low wages and lack of benefits available to the workers—predominantly women—who care for and educate our nation’s youngest citizens stand in stark contrast to the significance of their work. Early care and education is a necessity in today’s society, as families increasingly include dual earners or a single working parent. Efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs without addressing teachers’ low wages and stressful working conditions are unlikely to bring about the long-term benefits and return on investment associated with high-quality programs. Poor teacher compensation is associated with lower job satisfaction and higher turnover rates, which can affect children’s learning and development.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of increased wages and benefits, the early childhood field will continue to struggle to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, policies that aim to increase compensation must ensure that early care and education programs are not perpetuating the same systemic inequalities among educators that they seek to break down for children. Relative to the broader population, women of color are overrepresented in the early childhood workforce, but racial and ethnic diversity tends to decline as credential requirements increase.<sup>14</sup> This is likely a consequence of the systemic barriers that hamper access to higher education and training for people of color, as well as the more implicit biases that continue to affect wages and upward mobility within a given career field. As the population of children entering early care and education becomes increasingly diverse, maintaining diversity across all roles in the early childhood workforce is especially critical. Research on the K-12 education system shows that teachers of color are linked to improved student outcomes and increased self-esteem for students of color because they serve as models of professional success.<sup>15</sup> Thus, efforts to increase teachers’ educational qualifications must recognize and address the barriers to higher education in an already low-wage workforce—particularly among teachers of color.

A comprehensive approach to child care reform is necessary to address chronically low wages and an underfunded child care system that ultimately hurts children, families, and the economy. The Center for American Progress recommends that the United States establish a High-Quality Child Care Tax Credit, which would provide low- and middle-income families with up to \$14,000 per year to purchase child care.<sup>16</sup> This approach would establish a well-funded child care system that includes adequate wages and benefits for the early childhood workforce. A large public child care investment will provide resources to improve teacher pay across the board and reduce inequities that leave teachers in some early childhood settings, particularly child care programs, with comparatively lower pay.

Short of comprehensive reform, policymakers should consider other interim strategies toward improving compensation and benefits for all early childhood educators, including: enhancing scholarship programs for teachers seeking degrees; targeting teachers of color; establishing pay parity across early care and education settings, as well as pay equal to that of K-12 educators; and increasing wages for Head Start teachers in the next Head Start reauthorization. Additionally, leaders in the early childhood field must access education and training that facilitate conversations about race and address how to manage implicit biases in the workplace.

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