



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog
www.dcfpi.org

March 30, 2016

Guest Blog: DC Must Act to Better Support Child Care Workforce

By Amber Rieke, DC Appleseed

This guest blog comes from Amber Rieke, policy analyst with DC Appleseed.

Teachers and staff in DC's early care and education (ECE) centers perform demanding and critical jobs, yet they are among the lowest-paid workers in the economy. On average, they earn \$26,470 annually or less than \$13 an hour. Inadequate compensation for their skills and credentials leads to high turnover at ECE centers and an inability to attract new talent, putting stress on an already fragile system. District policymakers must act to ensure that DC's infants and toddlers continue to have access to high quality learning environments, and this means better supporting the ECE workforce.

DC Appleseed and DCFPI recently partnered to [study the true costs of providing high-quality ECE to District children from birth to three](#). Through interviews with nationally-accredited providers who participate in the District's child care subsidy program for low-income families, we learned of the many challenges providers face to keep the doors open at current payment rates from the city. While there was very little consistency across centers in how these businesses are managed, one clear pattern was low wages for staff. Reported salaries were often below a living wage and lacked alignment with credentials – for example, teachers with an Associate's Degree may start at a higher wage in one center than a teacher with a Bachelor's Degree at another.

The effects of underpayment and limited opportunities for growth are felt at all levels of the system: by the providers, government, and staff themselves – but also the children they serve. Quality ECE environments with experienced caretakers are essential to support healthy cognitive, social-emotional and physical development from birth to three years, especially for children from low-income homes. Providers told us that they want to increase wages for staff because it is good for business and for their employees, yet lack of sufficient revenue prevents them from paying more. Owners and managers of centers know they are losing degreed staff to public schools and other fields. The District's



investments to increase quality in ECE classrooms, including programs like Healthy Futures, cost more and deliver lower returns when training and technical assistance must be repeated indefinitely as staff turns over.

In order to reinforce and expand a sustainable and qualified ECE workforce in DC, we recommend the District first increase reimbursement rates for the child care subsidy program. We also recommend that the District introduce a new initiative to directly supplement salaries for child care workers. One model is the [Child Care WAGE\\$ program in North Carolina](#). WAGE\$ has documented success using supplemental funding for ECE teachers to improve retention and recruit new talent, encourage higher education among workers, and improve outcomes for children. The District should also consider creating specialized professional development tracks with associated incentives for staff and providers to increase their capacity in certain areas – like serving children with special needs.

One provider in our study said “[W]e want quality for our children, but we also want quality for our staff.” This should be the District’s mantra for its child care economy. One cannot be separated from the other – quality care for infants and toddlers depends on adequate wages for their teachers.

--

For our full report, see [here](#).

Read more on our recommendation for increased payment rates for providers participating in the District’s child care subsidy program for low-income families [here](#).