

Early Education Professionals Deserve Good Wages and Benefits

By Tinsae Gebriel

Child care professionals have incredibly important jobs, but often do not earn a salary and benefits to match. They support working families and foster the healthy growth of infants and toddlers, a critical period in a child's development. However, the early education workforce is marked by very low wages and limited employer-sponsored benefits, like health insurance or retirement plans. Poor compensation and limited opportunities for long-term financial security weaken educational quality for infants and toddlers and jeopardize the economic stability of early educators in the District, who are overwhelmingly women of color¹.

DC leaders should invest in the well-being of our early educators by doing more to increase wages and improve health care and retirement benefits. Some major steps have been taken this year, including adoption of legislation intended in part to lead to higher pay. But those changes remain to be funded.

The average annual income of child care professionals in the District is \$32,000,² too little to provide economic stability in DC and significantly lower than entry-level public school kindergarten teachers' salaries. Racial wage disparities *within*

the early childhood workforce disproportionately impact women of color, with Latinx and Black educators in the region³ earning 74 cents and 84 cents for every dollar a white educator makes, on average.⁴ This disparity reflects both hourly wage differences between white educators and educators of color within the same role and greater access to higher paying roles like preschool teacher for white educators.

Beyond low wages, only 44 percent of early childhood educators in the District receive health insurance through their employer.⁵ Ninety-one percent of early childhood educators expressed concerns about having enough savings for their retirement in a study of the District's workforce by DC Applesed.⁶

Early childhood educators deserve a salary and benefits that reflect their qualifications and experience and the value they add to our city. As part of an ongoing effort to improve the quality of early education in the District, OSSE recently increased the minimum education requirements of the early childhood workforce. But without better compensation and benefits, good early educators may leave community-based organizations to teach older students in public schools or leave the field entirely.

The DC Council took an important step to provide comprehensive supports for toddlers and infants and the adults who care for them by passing [Birth to Three for All DC Act of 2018](#) earlier this summer. As part of the legislation, OSSE will develop a competitive salary scale for lead teachers and teacher assistants later this year. Yet the legislation is currently only partially funded. Full implementation of the bill, including



higher salaries for educators, rests on the commitment of the District’s leaders to raise the revenue to fund the legislation.

Beyond this, the District should take steps to ensure early childhood educators have health and other benefits that define a good job and are critical to economic security. To improve benefits for early childhood educators, the District can look on to [Oregon](#), the first state in the country to provide a state-run retirement savings plan for private sector employees who lack access through their employer. Innovative solutions like this would help early childhood professionals invest in their future without burdening child care centers with the costs of providing retirement benefits.

As we celebrate the upcoming competitive salary scale for early education professionals and advocate for fully funding the legislation to make those wage increases real, we should also work to provide comprehensive compensation benefits that are aligned with benefits in other fields.

¹ [Early Childhood Educator Compensation in the Washington Region, Urban Institute, April 2018.](#)

² [2018 State Child Care Facts in the State of: District of Columbia, Child care Aware America.](#)

³ To read about the areas included in the study, see page 4 of the report [here](#).

⁴ [Early Childhood Educator Compensation in the Washington Region, Urban Institute, April 2018.](#)

⁵ [Early Childhood Educator Compensation in the Washington Region, Urban Institute, April 2018.](#)

⁶ [White Paper: Results from a Survey of DC’s Early Education Workforce, DC Appleseed, September 2017.](#)