FACE IT TO FIX IT:

ECE WORKFORCE CRISIS

CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the "Great Resignation", "she-cession", and massive layoffs in the United States, COVID-19 has lead to a fluctuating job market in many industries. The field of early childhood education (ECE) earned a national spotlight during this time, highlighting both its role as an economic linchpin as well as its ongoing struggle with staff recruitment and retention.

Since losing one-third of its workforce at the outset of the pandemic, the child care industry's job recovery has largely been stalled due to the low wages and lack of comprehensive benefits characterizing the sector[1].

Drawing upon the knowledge and experience of participants in CAYL's 2021 Staffing & Compensation Workgroup*, this paper outlines issues that must be faced alongside potential solutions to create a pipeline of skilled educators to support the ECE field.

FACE IT

1. **Workforce retention in ECE has been a long-term challenge.**

   Pre-pandemic, the national ECE workforce turnover rate ranged from around 9-16%, with some reporting averages as high as 30%. A 2020 Neighborhood Villages (NV) workforce survey found that turnover in Massachusetts had increased to over 20%, with some programs reporting between 50-70%[2].

   A 2022 Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) statewide survey found that hiring and retention continued to be a primary challenge in programs, and has led to permanent classroom closures. Notably, 73% of Massachusetts licensed program closures from 2020-2021 were Family Child Care (FCC) programs[3].

2. **Massachusetts educators have gained credentials, but compensation and professional recognition remain low.**

   Extremely low compensation is a key driver of the ECE workforce crisis. Workforce analysts typically link higher credentials with higher pay. However, one analysis found that nationally, the proportion of child care workers with college education had increased by 22% from 1994 to 2014 while overall compensation remained stagnant[4].

   Massachusetts mirrors this trend[5] of a gap between education and pay. A 2022 EEC survey of community-based ECE programs found that of educators leaving the sector, 34% left for public school positions[6] with higher pay, likely more highly credentialed and experienced teachers.

Concerns with low wages and benefits are underscored by the continued lack of state-supported career lattices to ensure a minimum wage floor for the industry. Though Massachusetts is rated as a top paying state for child care wages, teachers still typically earn below the state's living wage[7]. 98% of ECE programs may offer paid time off, but low staffing likely constrains use of this benefit[8].

3. **Massachusetts falls short on ECE quality and funding standards.**

Several national guidelines establish funding and quality guidelines for ECE programs. Massachusetts typically falls short of meeting these guidelines.

Though the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) ranks Massachusetts 3rd and 14th overall regarding preschool access for 3 and 4 year olds, Massachusetts meets only 5.5 out of 10 quality benchmarks[9] and ranks 43rd on overall state spending on preschool.

Also, the federal government recommends setting the reimbursement for child care vouchers within the 75th percentile of the market rate, though Massachusetts reimbursement rates have generally been below the 50th percentile[10].

"We worked really hard to get everyone Bachelor's degrees, but what we didn't anticipate is that we wouldn't get compensated for it… So what happened? They left … there was no incentive to stay… You can't live on the love of children to pay your bills."*

FIX IT

Addressing the Massachusetts ECE workforce crisis requires a long-term strategy that highly prioritizes data, funding, and systemic change in the state. At their core, solutions would include areas such as the following:

1. **Professionalize the field through salary reform.**

Benefits for children and the commonwealth depend on making ECE a profession in which staff can earn a living wage. Salary reform, including development of career ladders tied to compensation, must be the first step in ECE reform.

There is ample evidence that programs are doing what they can to recognize the need for salary reform. An early 2008 assessment of the Boston UPK effort noted that over 80% of grantees reported using funds to increase staff salaries or provide bonuses, directly impacting their ability to retain highly qualified staff[11].

"Early Childhood Education supports and upholds communities, not just businesses."*

In 2022, a statewide Commonwealth Cares for Children grant survey revealed that providers again prioritized spending on teacher recruitment efforts like increasing salaries and bonuses, alongside the crucial operational spending needed to keep programs running[12].

However, this is unstable short-term funding, and short-term solutions are no longer sufficient to address the crisis of poverty-level wages that characterize the field. Professionalizing the field and taking on the cost burden of gaining additional credentials is out of reach for too many educators[13].

"$15 per hour as a salary floor is unsustainable for working mothers in a female dominated field."*

"We need to address compensation first. Without making this a "yes, and.." strategy we will replicate problems of the past – focusing on degree attainment and not coming through with tying that to a career ladder associated with higher wages has led to the staffing crisis we are in."*

2. Create a system of universal ECE to create financial and programmatic stability.

At CAYL our vision is a nation where the right to high quality early care and education is embedded in public policy, professional practice, and parental engagement. The path towards this goal is through universal ECE.

Beyond the extensive benefits of ECE for young children and society at large, consistent access also has the potential to affect the sustainability of ECE programs and teaching staff more broadly by introducing financial stability into the funding model.

In the context of workforce recruitment and retention, teachers would benefit from a system able to support a career lattice tied to a consistent salary scale, driven by stable funding. Higher wages and professional advancement are both significantly linked to retention in ECE[14].

CONCLUSION

While some industries may recover from COVID-19 with human resources schemes, we must recognize that ECE has at its core an unstable funding model, insufficient to meet the needs of its stakeholders, that began disintegrating before the pandemic. Solutions must dig deeper and examine fundamental issues characteristic of ECE.

EEC commissioned an alignment study[15] in 2013 which, if continued, provides the groundwork for creating a system of standards to align with professional qualifications and fair compensation for the ECE workforce.

ENDNOTES

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CAYL STAFF

Dr. Valora Washington	CEO & President
Brenda Gadson	COO
Amanda Storth	Networks Program Manager
Ivy Wong	Program Associate

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CONTACT US

www.cayl.org
(617) 354-3820
info@cayl.org

ABOUT CAYL

The CAYL Institute, or **C**ommunity **A**dvocates for **Y**oung **L**earners, is a non-profit organization with the vision of a nation where the right to high-quality early care and education is embedded in public policy, professional practice, and family engagement.