

Early Childhood Educator Compensation



We know early childhood education matters. But in Illinois, we are not adequately supporting one of the most important factors in early childhood education: **the educators.**

The Early Childhood Educator Workforce

Early childhood educators are the assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, lead teachers, family educators, teacher administrators, and directors caring for and educating young children in homes, centers, and schools across Illinois. Their work is complex and sophisticated, and it forms the foundation of children's success. The early childhood professional's role is to support children's academic and social development by focusing on reading a child's cues and responding in a way that makes a child feel safe and loved while also supporting their learning.

Research shows that strong positive relationships between children and their educators not only help a child learn but also can protect against stress and trauma a child might experience outside the classroom. For this reason, educator stability directly supports improved outcomes for young children and people. Yet the early childhood workforce is severely undercompensated and faces significant challenges to attaining higher credentials and degrees that could lead to more livable wages. As a result, Illinois is facing an early educator workforce crisis that threatens to undermine our ability to reach more of our young children with the high-quality early learning experiences we know are pivotal to their success in school and life.

- Statewide educator turnover is 37%, while it's only 11% in K-12. On average, ECE positions tend to remain vacant for 2-3 months before they are filled.

Compensation for the Early Childhood Educator Workforce

Who are early childhood educators?

- Nearly all school-based educators have a BA or higher; nearly three-quarters of all educators have an associate's or higher; and nearly half of all educators have a BA or higher. All must fulfill annual training requirements.
- The field is almost exclusively female and more racially diverse than that of K-12 educators.

How do their wages compare?



- **Approximately half** are eligible to receive public benefits such as food stamps
- **Less than half** have access to a complete workplace benefits package
- Working in a community-based organization instead of a school can come with a **33% wage penalty**
- Educators working outside of school earn wages in the **2nd percentile of annual earnings**, and these **wages have remained stagnant since 2015.**
- **Wages are similar to other low-wage professions**, such as manicurists, cashiers, and hotel desk clerks for educators working outside of schools and bank tellers and receptionists for preschool teachers working in schools. Kindergarten and elementary teachers may have similar qualifications but earn significantly more.

When I first started working, I had an Associate's degree and I still qualified for a medical card and food stamps. I couldn't go to work where I had a passion, I had to go where I could find a livable wage.

Illinois early childhood educator

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Recommendations for Change

There is an urgent need to address the low rates of compensation in early care and education in order to pay educators and others in the field commensurate with the importance of their work and their education, training, and expertise. Immediate action steps include:

- Analyze and implement an increase in Child Care Assistance Program reimbursement rates to support minimum wage increases (and related growth for non-minimum wage staff) between FY20-FY24.
- Analyze and implement an expansion of compensation parity requirements from Preschool for All – Expansion to Preschool for All and Prevention Initiative (where they are currently encouraged but not required).
- Consider further expansion of Child Care Assistance Program eligibility to support affordability for families paying for care.
- Consider incorporating compensation supports into public funding streams through contracting requirements and incorporation into ExceleRate, Illinois' quality ratings and improvement system.

If Illinois wants to expand access to high-quality ECE, we need to attract and retain good teachers. If we can't find and keep teachers, we won't have quality care because we won't have anybody working there.

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