



## The Labor Force for Needed Investments in Public Child Care Already Exists

Mary King, Portland State University

The COVID-19 pandemic powerfully clarified what most families have known for decades: Reliable, quality child care is essential to the round-the-clock functioning of the U.S. economy. Equally important, good child care is critical to the future and wellbeing of the nation's children. Decades of **strong research** shows that publicly provided high quality early childhood education and care improves life outcomes, reduces poverty and economic inequality, diminishes economic disparities by race and gender, strengthens local economies and yields high returns to taxpayer investments. Yet public investment in child care in the states lags decades behind other wealthy countries despite the extensive evidence.

The quality of preschool and child care critically depends on a skilled, experienced, dedicated laborforce that is strongly motivated to work with young children. Yet the vast majority of skilled caregivers and teachers abandon work with young children for other employment before age thirty. This is true at all levels of education, including those with college degrees. This "lost" workforce could be recalled and retained if early preschool and childcare policies are designed to address the low pay, sparse benefits and challenging working conditions that currently lead to high attrition and turnover.

## The Untapped Reservoir of Qualified Early Childhood Education and Care Workers

**Women account for more than 97 percent of employed, college educated people with college majors in early childhood education. More than 4 of 5 of them do not work with young children.** By contrast, 78 percent of employed women with college degrees in nursing are actively working as nurses.

Just 18 percent of employed women with college degrees in early childhood education work with young children as preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, or childcare workers. Women with associate's degrees and certificates in early childhood education and development also leave the field in much larger numbers than in other occupations.

## Low Pay and Poor Working Conditions Drive Away Early Childhood Workers

Public investment should remove the biggest obstacle to keeping trained people: the **combination of low pay and difficult working conditions**. These conditions include frequent short-staffing and lack of paid time to prepare for class or to meet with co-workers. More than a quarter of those who remain in the field in their thirties have managed to find positions as preschool or kindergarten teachers in K-12 schools, where conditions are better than in free-standing preschool and childcare workplaces.

In 2020, the **median hourly wage of childcare workers** in the U.S. was \$12.24, meaning an annual salary of \$24,480 if full-time, year-round work were available. Benefits are poor, or non-existent. Preschool teachers are not compensated much better, with a median hourly wage of \$15.35 in 2020, which translates to \$30,700 annually if full-time. Elementary school teachers, by contrast, earn a mean annual salary of \$65,420.

Unsurprisingly, turnover rates are high in the early childhood labor force, harming quality and wasting the training, experience and dedication of people who've made significant investments in preparing for a career in early childhood education. More than half of women in their 30s with early childhood college majors are working as teachers in the first through twelfth grades.

*At 40 with two kids to support, I wanted a job in the public schools, which gave me more money, benefits and time off, without the headache of trying to hire people at rock-bottom wages or the long days finishing my Director's duties after being pulled into the classroom to cover for a sick teacher.*

*- Avril Munro, retired master elementary school teacher*

### **Only One in Six Early Childhood Majors Remain in the Field by Age 30**

Women with college degrees in early childhood education shift out of work with young children as they age and their responsibilities to support their families increase. Just one in six remain in the field by age 30.

It's not only low pay and meager benefits that push people out of early childhood education. It's also the limited scope for advancement in our fractured, largely private childcare system, which is unconnected to schools for older children.

*It wasn't just the low pay and lack of support, although I did want to be able to buy a house, raise a child and pay for childcare. It was also that I wanted to work in a bigger arena and to have a greater impact, so I enrolled in an MBA program offered in the evening. I spent the rest of my career directing a nonprofit focused on improving STEM education, but my passion has always been early childhood education.*

*- Jennifer Bruckner, retired non-profit director*

In short, policymakers and advocates should focus less on expanding the pipeline of people coming from educational and training programs in early childhood education. **They need to focus much more on keeping experienced people in the field by creating good jobs that reward early childhood educators for the value of the contribution they are making.** If good jobs are available, students will recruit themselves into our educational programs and remain working in the field they were drawn to and invested in as young adults.

**Read more in Lisa Dodson and Mary C. King, "Oregon's Unmet Childcare Needs," Family Forward Oregon, September 2019; and Catherine J. Weinberger, "Where Did They All Go? A Closer Look at the Labor Markets for Preschool Teachers and Childcare Workers," The Institute for Social, Behavioral and Economic Research, University of California Santa Barbara, 2021.**