

Parents' Reflections on DC's Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund

Findings from the DC Child Care Policy Research Partnership

Soumita Bose, Eleanor Lauderback, Heather Sandstrom, Catherine Kuhns, and Michelle Casas

June 2023

KEY FINDINGS

Parents generally supported the Pay Equity Fund,

recognizing it as one step toward more equitable compensation and better retention for early educators.

Parents expressed their appreciation for the role early educators play in their children's education and development.

Parents discussed perceived reasons for staff turnover, including **low pay** in the context of **severe inflation** and **high cost of living** and **challenges brought about by the pandemic**.

Parents suggested additional strategies to help retain early educators: **expanded paid parental leave policies**, **smaller child-to-adult ratios to reduce stress**, and **a more positive work culture**.

In 2021, the DC Council established the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund ("Pay Equity Fund") to improve compensation for early educators in licensed child development centers and homes. The fund leverages a tax on individuals earning more than \$250,000 a year to sustainably fund supplemental payments to early educators in efforts to address longstanding inequities and achieve pay parity with public school teachers with a comparable degree. In FY 2022, early educators were eligible for a one-time direct payment equaling \$10,000 for a full-time assistant teacher and \$14,000 for a full-time lead teacher.¹ In FY 2023, direct payments to early educators are being made quarterly, with plans in FY 2024 to direct funding to child care operators who opt into the system, who will be required to use funds to raise staff compensation to a minimum level.² In contrast, other states have implemented wage boost initiatives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic but have typically relied on pandemic relief funding to make one-time bonuses rather than institute a long-term financing solution.

In spring 2022, we surveyed 137 DC residents who had newly enrolled a child in a licensed DC child care program. We held virtual focus groups with a subsample of 39 survey respondents in fall 2022, just as the first Pay Equity Fund payments were rolling out, to probe on specific survey findings around search process difficulty and child care experiences. During the focus groups, we asked parents and legal guardians about their experiences with staff turnover in their child care programs as well as their thoughts about the pay supplements and how their children's teachers could benefit. In this fact sheet, we summarize parents' thoughts on the Pay Equity Fund payments and their suggestions for additional ways the District could help child care programs recruit and retain qualified staff.

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH STAFF TURNOVER IN THEIR CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

When we asked parents about recent staff turnover at their child care programs in light of the pandemic, some reported that they had noticed staff leaving and that such changes noticeably impacted their children's behaviors. They shared that turnover can disrupt their children's routines and developmental progress. One legal guardian noted that turnover is especially difficult for children in foster care with a history of trauma who have experienced disruptions in the continuity of caregivers. Some parents reflected on why staff may be

¹ Danielle Hamer and Tazra Mitchell, "DC Makes Bold Progress on Fair Pay for Early Educators: Remaining Program Design & Implementation Should Be Laser-Focused on Racial Equity" (PDF), DC Fiscal Policy Institute, August 16, 2022.

² "Fiscal Year 2024 Minimum Salaries and Salary Schedule for Early Childhood Educators" (PDF), DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, accessed June 1, 2023.

leaving, including low pay and health concerns for their families. With rising inflation and the high cost of living in DC, parents explained that early educators' wages are inadequate. One parent shared,

At the [center], some of the teachers were complaining that they were underpaid and didn't get a raise for several years. They didn't want to leave because they loved the kids. [One teacher] talked to the manager to see if she could get a raise, and she had to go somewhere else.

PARENTS' THOUGHTS ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR PAY EQUITY FUND

Generally, parents reacted positively to the news that DC would be providing wage supplements to early educators. Most parents expressed opinions in favor of the Pay Equity Fund, while the remainder either expressed neutral views or did not comment. In addition to voicing their support for the initiative, many parents also expressed their gratitude for the work that teachers do in caring for their children and thought that the pay supplement was one way to recognize their efforts and role during a critical stage of child development. One parent said,

I think it's a good idea, because for so long teachers have been underpaid—teachers in day care...they're essential, and I feel like they should've been paid more...they care for our future doctors, our future lawyers, and they're at the bottom, way at the bottom with their pay—I just didn't think that was right. I'm glad they are finally being recognized in getting what's due to them...Because I feel like, you can pay millions to throw a ball across the field, but you overlook the ones that even gave them the mindset to be able to throw a ball across the field...I just think there's something really wrong with our America.

Other parents shared similar sentiments, saying,

I don't really know how to put a price tag on it necessarily. We're paying people to care for our children, and they're doing that, but [the work they do ultimately] cares for me, and cares for my wife also, and it's not something they really advertise—the peace of mind value—but it's really, really important...not having a lot of turnover, having people who seem to be happy or are satisfied with their jobs there...But I don't know how to promote or reinforce that other than thanking these people for working [with] my kids.

While parents were generally in favor of the wage supplements, some expressed that this should be a starting point in improving the pay and benefits for early educators. One parent stated, "The stipend is great, but there's a lot more to it that keeps staff happy and makes them feel that they are cared for."

The Pay Equity Fund holds promise for recruiting and retaining a qualified early childhood workforce, and these findings indicate that parents are largely supportive. Increasing pay not only encourages early educators to stay, but also attracts new workers to the field. To this end, one parent also wanted to ensure that the funds go directly to early educators instead of programs' nonpersonnel operating costs. Additional efforts may be needed to ensure working conditions and benefits are also supporting early educators.

ADDITIONAL READING

Toward Pay Equity: A Case Study of Washington DC's Wage Boost for Early Childhood Educators

Erica Greenberg, Victoria Nelson, Justin B. Doromal, Soumita Bose, Eleanor Lauderback, and Heather Sandstrom

<https://urbn.is/43Cvssr>

This summary was prepared with grant funding from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (Grant No. 90YE0221-01-00) for the District of Columbia Child Care Policy Research Partnership Study, totaling \$1.6 million with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents and views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, ACF/HHS or the US Government. The views should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples. Copyright © June 2023. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.

PARENTS' OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING EARLY EDUCATORS

Here is a list of some suggestions from parents on how child care employers and the DC government could improve staff retention:

- **improve benefits**, including more paid time off, paid parental leave, staff recognition programs, transportation subsidies, and professional development opportunities
- **improve working conditions**, including smaller child-to-adult ratios and more positive work cultures
- ensure that teachers have **employer and government support to take care of their own children**.

"Employees feel best when they feel that what they are saying is being heard and that they have time with their own children."