



Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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“The time is long overdue for society to recognize the significance of out-of-home relationships for young children, to esteem those who care for them when their parents are not available, and to compensate them adequately...”

— NEURONS TO NEIGHBORHOODS, 2000

The National Child Care Staffing Study (NCCSS) released in 1989, brought national attention for the first time to poverty-level wages and high turnover among early childhood teaching staff, and to the adverse consequences for children.¹ In the succeeding 25 years, combined developments in science, practice, and policy have dramatically shifted the context for discussions about the status of early childhood teaching jobs, and the importance of attracting and retaining a well-prepared workforce that is capable of promoting young children’s learning, health and development.

Today, the explosion of knowledge about what is at stake when early childhood development goes awry has coincided with powerful economic arguments for investments in high-quality early care and education. New evidence about the ways in which stress and economic insecurity challenge teachers’ capacity to provide developmentally supportive care and education is lending scientific support to the claim that child well-being depends on adult well-being not only at home but in out-of-home settings.² And, serious debate at the federal level, echoed in virtually every state, is underway about the vital importance of improving the quality of early education and the most productive strategies for ensuring that young children’s critical early experiences will promote, not undermine, their lifelong learning and healthy development.

This confluence of trends carries vast implications for what we expect of those teaching young children. It creates a crucial moment for re-examining the status of the early childhood teaching workforce, and rethinking how our nation is preparing, supporting, and rewarding these teachers.

Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages compiles evidence from multiple sources to provide a portrait of the early childhood teaching workforce today in comparison to 25 years ago. The need to rely on a variety of data sources to obtain this portrait reveals the absence of a comprehensive, regularly updated database on the status and characteristics of the early childhood workforce. In addition to examining trends in center-based teachers’ education, wages and turnover, the report includes new evidence examining economic insecurity and use of

public benefits among this predominantly female, ethnically diverse workforce. The report also appraises state and national efforts to improve early childhood teaching jobs, and offers recommendations aimed at reinvigorating a national conversation about the status and working conditions of the more than two million teaching staff who work in our nation's early care and education settings.

A Note on Terminology

The varying terms used to describe those who earn their living by caring for and educating young children reflect assumptions about the nature of the work, the skills it requires, and the purpose of particular programs and services.³ The term “child care teacher” used in the National Child Care Staffing Study encompassed those working in all types of center-based early care and education programs, but today, distinctions are often drawn between child care, public pre-kindergarten (pre-K), Head Start, and other early learning programs. In this report, we use the term “early childhood teacher” or “teaching staff” to encompass all those employed to work directly with young children in classrooms in center-based programs. We use more specific labels, such as “Head Start teacher,” when we are referring to a particular type of program. The term “early childhood workforce” is used to encompass both center-based teaching staff and home-based providers, with one exception. We refer to “childcare workers” when we relied on data specific to the subcategory of the workforce as defined and labeled by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Labor.⁴ Elsewhere in the report we refer to child care as two words.

Highlights of Findings

This report calls attention to persistent features of early childhood jobs that require a new policy approach, namely: low wages, the absence of a rational wage structure, the low value accorded to educational attainment, pervasive economic insecurity and extensive reliance on public income supports resulting from unlivable wages.

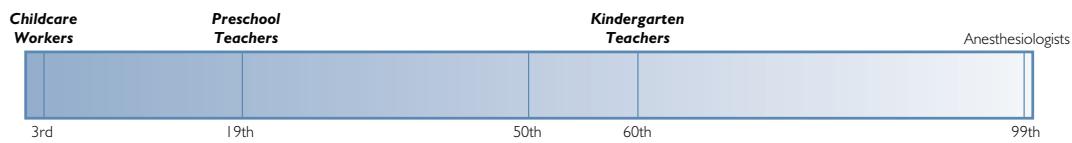
Inadequate Wages and Wage Structure

Despite a nearly two-fold increase in costs to parents for early childhood services since 1997, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, childcare workers have experienced no increase in real earnings since this time.⁵ Those who work as preschool teachers have fared somewhat better; their wages have increased by 15 percent in constant dollars since 1997.⁶ And, as was true in 1989, childcare workers still earn less than adults who take care of animals, and barely more than fast food cooks (See **Figure I**).

Overall trends and averages camouflage gaping disparities in wages across program auspices and between teachers of four year olds and their colleagues working with children three years old

and younger. The median hourly wage of center-based early childhood teachers working with children from birth through five years old, not yet in kindergarten, was \$10.60 per hour in 2012, according to the National Survey of Early Care and Education. Median hourly wages, however, were \$16.00 in school-sponsored pre-K; \$11.90 in Head Start funded; \$10.00 in other public pre-K; and \$10.00 in all other ECE programs.⁷ For-profit chains and independent for-profit centers have shown the largest increases in wages since 1990, but as they did then, they still continue to pay the lowest wages.⁸ Teaching staff working with children three or younger earn about 70 percent of what those working with children three to five years old, not yet in kindergarten, earn.⁹

FIGURE 1: Selected Occupations Ranked by Mean Annual Salary, 2013



SOURCE: Occupational Employment Statistics Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor: <http://stats.bls.gov/oes/>.

For more information on trends and current status of wages, turnover and education among early childhood teachers, see Chapter 3 of the full report. For state specific data see Appendix Table A3.1 in the full report.

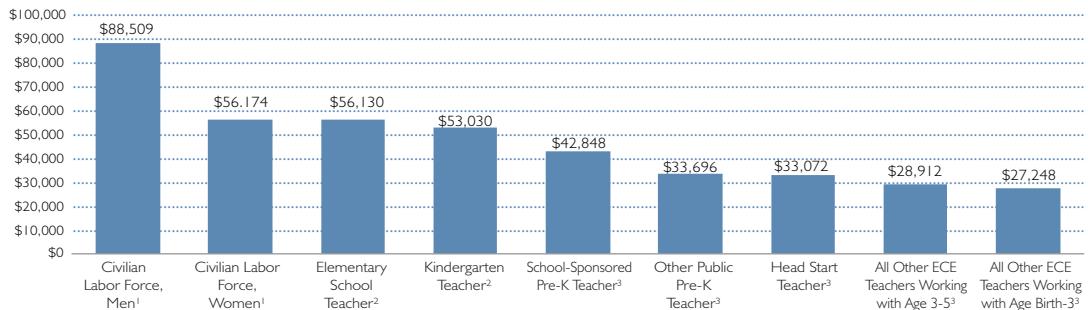
Lack of Premium for Educational Attainment

The disparities in wages of early childhood teachers in comparison to teachers of older children and others in the civilian labor force with comparable education are striking – a pattern that has endured over the last 25 years despite increases in earnings for some segments of the early childhood workforce. Preschool teachers with equivalent education earn about 60 percent of what kindergarten teachers earn (see **Figure 2**).

Many early childhood teachers who earn degrees, often while working full time, seldom find their earnings aligned with their qualifications. In fact, over the last 17 years, the share of Head Start teachers with an associate or bachelor's degree has increased by 61 percent, and the share of assistant teachers with a degree has increased by 24 percent. These sizeable increases in the educational levels of Head Start teachers have not, however, been rewarded with significant salary increases. Indeed, Head Start teacher salaries have not kept pace with inflation since 2007, when the Head Start Reauthorization called for at least one-half of Head Start teachers to obtain degrees.¹⁰

The most notable exception to this pattern is the Department of Defense (DoD) that sets teachers' salaries in their early care and education programs at a rate of pay equivalent to those

FIGURE 2: Mean Annual Salary of Teachers with a Bachelor's or Higher Degree, by Occupation and for the Civilian Labor Force, 2012



¹Current Population Survey (CPS), United States Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032013/perinc/pinc03_000.htm. Civilian labor force information was only for males and females over 25 years old.

²Occupational Employment Statistics Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor: <http://bls.gov/news.release/ocwage.htm>.

³National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team. (2013). *Number and characteristics of early care and education (ECE) teachers and caregivers: Initial findings, National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)*. OPRE Report #2013-38. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Tables 12 and 19. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nsece_wf_brief_102913_0.pdf. Annual wages calculated by multiplying the hourly mean wage by a year-round, full time hours figure of 2080 hours.

of other DoD employees with similar training, education, seniority, and experience. Over the twenty-five years this policy has been in place, the base pay of new hires among frontline early childhood teaching staff in military child development centers has increased by 76 percent and turnover has plummeted. Those with bachelor's degrees earn on par with other comparably educated military workers.¹¹

For more information on trends and current status of wages, turnover and education among early childhood teachers, see Chapter 3 of the full report.

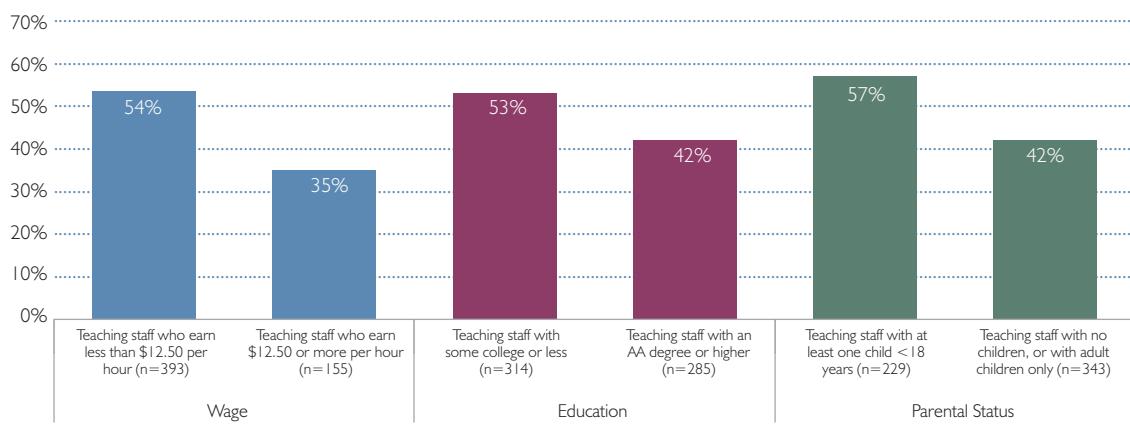
Economic Insecurity

More than 600 center-based teaching staff surveyed in one state expressed worry about their family's economic well-being, as well as about workplace policies that influenced their earnings.¹² Importantly, these staff, nearly one-half of whom had an associate or higher degree, were employed in a relatively high quality sample of centers that included for-profit, non-profit, Head Start, and public pre-K programs.

Those who earned less than \$12.50 per hour and those with dependent children expressed more worry than their colleagues earning higher wages and those without children or with adult children only. Even teachers with associate or higher degrees reported economic worries, such as not having enough food for their families, or being sent home without pay due to an unexpected closure or low attendance (see **Figure 3**). Significantly lower overall worry scores were found among teaching staff employed in higher-quality programs and those that

were publicly funded. Overall worry expressed by teaching staff was significantly higher among those working in for-profit compared to non-profit programs.

FIGURE 3: Percentage of Teaching Staff Worried¹ about having Enough Food for Their Families, by Wage, Educational Level, and Parental Status²



¹Teaching staff classified as "worried" about a particular item indicated that they somewhat to strongly agreed with a given statement, as represented by a 4 or higher on the Likert Scale.

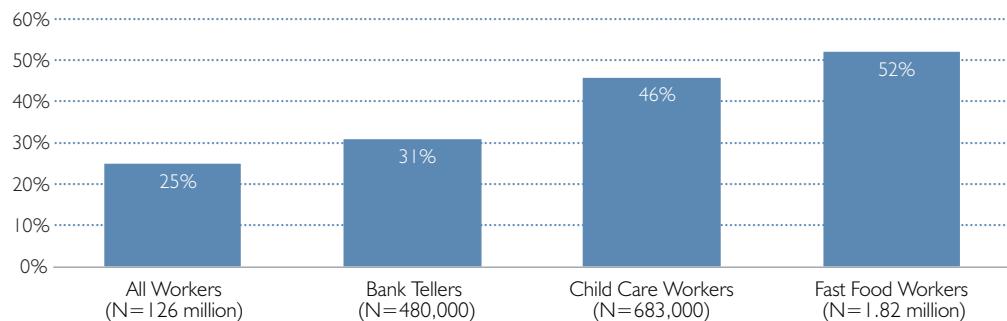
²The sample was drawn from one state's for-profit, non-profit, and public early care and education programs. See endnote #12.

For more information about this examination of economic insecurity among early childhood teachers, see Chapter 4 of the full report.

Utilization of Public Support

In 2012, nearly one-half (46 percent) of childcare workers, compared to 25 percent of the U.S. workforce, resided in families enrolled in at least one of four public support programs: the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).¹³ Participation rates in public support programs varied little by whether childcare workers were employed full- or part-time, but rates varied considerably by childcare worker wage level. Childcare workers who earned less than the proposed \$10.10 federal minimum wage were 1.5 times more likely to reside in families participating in public support programs than were those in which the childcare worker earned more than \$10.10 per hour. At every level of worker education, participation in public support programs was higher for childcare worker families than for the families of all other U.S. workers with comparable education, again revealing the low premium placed on education within this workforce. Participation rates in public support programs were highest among single parent childcare workers and among workers with at least one child under five years old. The estimated cost of reliance on public benefits by child care workers and their families is approximately \$ 2.4 billion per year (see **Figure 4** and **Table 1**).

FIGURE 4: Participation Rates in Public Support Programs, by Selected Occupations, and for All Workers and Their Family Members
(Annual Averages, 2007-2011)



Source: Authors' calculations from 2008–2012 March Current Population Survey (CPS), 2007–2011 American Community Survey (ACS), 2011 Occupational Employment Survey (OES), program administrative data.

TABLE I
Enrollment Rates and Costs of Public Support Programs for Childcare Worker Families
(Annual Averages, 2007-2011)¹

Program	Number of Workers with Families Enrolled	Percentage of Workers with Families Enrolled	Average Program Costs per Enrolled Family	Total Cost Across All Enrolled Families (in millions)
Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)	281,000	41%	\$2,620	\$729
Medicaid (adults)	103,000	15%	\$7,500	\$760
Medicaid/CHIP (children)	127,000	19%	\$4,440	\$555
Food Stamps	128,000	19%	\$2,580	\$328
TANF	14,000	2%	\$3,110	\$42
Enrollment in one or more selected public programs	311,000	46%	\$7,860	\$2,410

¹Of 683,000 estimated year-round child care worker families in the United States with at least one member enrolled in one or more public support programs.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from 2008–2012 March Current Population Survey (CPS), 2007–2011 American Community Survey (ACS), 2011 Occupational Employment Survey (OES), program administrative data.

Note: All costs are reported in 2011 dollars. Rows and columns may not sum due to rounding.

For more information see Chapter 5 of the full report; for information about participation rates and associated costs for select states, see Appendix Table A5.1 of the full report.

Policy approaches to improve early childhood jobs

Numerous investigations over the last 25 years have confirmed the NCCSS findings linking teacher qualifications, pay and working conditions and the quality of services for young children.¹⁴ Yet, quality improvement policies targeting the early childhood workforce, at both the federal and state level, have focused almost exclusively on professional preparation and development. With the notable exception of the DoD and some public pre-K programs, which impact only a small segment of early childhood teachers, the task of creating intentional, sustainable policies to address compensation for the workforce as a whole has gone unaddressed. Improving compensation has been left to discretionary and sporadic initiatives, characterized by insufficient funding.

Current initiatives, while not without important impacts, tend to be limited in scope, to compete for quality improvement funds with professional development and other pressing priorities, and to rely on one-time or short-term funding. Most early childhood teachers are also unaffected by efforts, such as the scattered QRIS and stipend compensation initiatives, which seek to benefit teachers of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The need to develop a well-defined strategy for financing early care and education services that would address the need for equitable teacher wages, aligned with educational levels, across ECE settings for children from birth to 5 years, while also relieving the tremendous cost burden that so many working families face, awaits attention.

For more information about federal and state policy efforts to improve early childhood teaching jobs, see Chapter 6 of the full report.

Recommendations

We call for a focused and comprehensive reassessment of the nation's early care and education policies. Its aim should be to address the entrenched, yet intolerable conditions affecting the early childhood teaching workforce, while ensuring that teacher well-being does not come at the expense of the equally urgent economic needs of families, already overburdened by the high cost of early care and education. We call upon policymakers at all levels, in concert with other stakeholders ranging from business and finance leaders to early childhood teachers and parents to undertake the following:

- To identify and mobilize a sustainable, dedicated source of public funding to upgrade the compensation of those who care for and educate our nation's young children.
- To prepare a rational and equitable set of guidelines for determining regionally-based entry level wages and salary increases based on education and training, experience, and seniority within the early childhood field.

- To establish workplace standards necessary for teachers to engage in professional practice, such as paid planning time, and to alleviate conditions that cause teachers' stress, such as undependable work schedules and inadequate staffing.
- To develop a strategy and timeline for requiring that all ECE programs and providers receiving public funds comply with the compensation guidelines and work standards within a reasonable period of time.

Besides these long-term goals, there are immediate opportunities that offer fertile ground for making inroads into improving early childhood employment and services within the current system. Progress on this shorter-term agenda would also provide evidence and insights to inform the work outlined above. We recommend that:

- States, through their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), and entities such as the National Institute for Early Education Research that provide guidelines for improving state ECE policy, strengthen these existing vehicles for encouraging quality programs by including workplace and compensation policies among their quality criteria.
- The next reauthorization of Head Start include a plan, with an associated request for increased and earmarked federal funding, dedicated to bringing Head Start and Early Head Start teaching staff salaries in line with Head Start teachers' dramatically increased qualifications.
- Federal and state policies regarding quality improvement funds should be revised to ensure that professional development and compensation efforts, rather than competing with each other, be linked with appropriately dedicated funds.
- Funds be made available to help states build, strengthen and sustain data systems, such as workforce registries, that provide comprehensive data on wages, benefits, educational levels and turnover rates for all teaching staff across ECE settings receiving public dollars, and that capture the extent to which members of the ECE workforce participate in education and professional development activities, receive compensation increases, and remain in the ECE field.
- Researchers who study early care and education policy, and both the developmental and societal impacts of ECE, renew attention to the adult work environment and teacher well-being as critical elements affecting (a) developmentally supportive practices in ECE settings and (b) cost-benefits of these settings' impacts in the short and longer-term.

A Path Forward

We set the stage for this report by examining the altered landscape on which discussions about the status of the early childhood workforce are now taking place. Developmental scientists, economists, and business leaders have lent early care and education a prominent position on this landscape in shaping children's development and, ultimately, the health of the economy. This focus raises the stakes considerably on the need to ensure the sensitivity, skill and well-being of early childhood teachers. The response thus far has been to make notable, although uneven, strides in improving the education and training levels of the workforce. But efforts to link these improvements to policies that address teachers' own economic well-being have been largely optional, selective, and sporadic. The result is a highly uneven playing field on which the wages of teachers depend more on where they work and the ages of the children they teach than on their qualifications.

Economic insecurity, linked to wages, is endemic, especially among teachers who have children of their own. The economic cost to society of continuing along these same lines is considerable. The cost to families is felt in skyrocketing payments for early care and education that are going somewhere other than to their children's teachers. The costs to children of less than optimal services are largely uncalculated.

This reality calls for a major restructuring of how we finance and deliver early care and education in the United States. We need, in the words of the 1990s Worthy Wage Campaign, to find a "much better" and "more equitable" way to help parents pay and to attract teachers and help them stay – something that our Department of Defense, a handful of state pre-K programs, and most other industrialized nations, have managed to accomplish.¹⁵ It is our hope that the new evidence reported here will spur the nation to not only aspire to, but to achieve livable, equitable, and dependable wages for early childhood teachers, of whom we expect so much, but to whom we still provide so little.

ENDNOTES

¹Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1989). *The National Child Care Staffing Study: Who cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America. Executive Summary*. Oakland, CA: Child Care Employee Project.; and Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1990). *The National Child Care Staffing Study: Who cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America. Full Report*. Oakland, CA: Child Care Employee Project. Retrieved from <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/csce/2010/who-cares-child-care-teaching-and-the-quality-of-care-in-america/>.

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⁴For more information about the categorization of the early childhood workforce, see: Committee on Early Childhood Care and Education Workforce. (2012). *The early childhood care and education workforce: Challenges and opportunities, a workshop report*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

⁵Lauhlin, L. (2013). *Who's minding the kids? Child care arrangements: Spring 2011*. Current Population Reports, 70-135. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.; Lauhlin, L. (2010). *Who's minding the kids? Child care arrangements: Spring 2005/Summer 2006*. Current Population Report, 70-121. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.; and Smith, K. (2002). *Who's minding kids? Child care arrangements: Spring 1997*. Current Population Reports, 70-86. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

⁶Bureau of Labor Statistics. (1997, 2013). Occupational Employment Statistics Survey. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <http://stats.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm>.

⁷National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team. (2013). *Number and characteristics of early care and education (ECE) teachers and caregivers: Initial findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)*. OPRE Report #2-13-38. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Table 14. This source also includes information about mean wages by program type in 2012 for all center-based teaching staff working with children from birth to five. For information about mean wages for lead teachers and teachers working with children three to five, see Chapter 3, Table 3.4 in the full report.

⁸Kisker, E. E., Hofferth, S. L., Phillips, D. A., & Farquhar, E. (1991). *A profile of child care settings: Early education and care in 1990*, Vol. 1. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; National Survey of Early Care and Education Team. (2014). National Survey of Early Care and Education, original analyses conducted for this report.

⁹National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team. (2013). *Number and characteristics of early care and education (ECE) teachers and caregivers: Initial findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)*. OPRE Report #2-13-38. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Tables 15 and 16.

¹⁰Office of Head Start. (1997, 2007, 2013). *Head Start Program Information Reports (PIR)*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Calculations of 1997 Program Information Report data from Office of Head Start, sent via email, September 1, 2104. Public Law 110-134, Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 42 USC 9801 et seq. (Dec. 12, 2007). Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/law_hs_act_2007.pdf.

¹¹Personal communication, Barbara Thompson and Carolyn Stevens, Sept. 15, 2014. See also http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/salary-tables/pdf/2014/GS_h.pdf for 2014 salary structure and <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/#>.

¹²From late 2012 to early 2013, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment examined economic insecurity among center-based teachers and assistant teachers using a subscale of a longer questionnaire examining staff perceptions about workplace policies that affect their teaching practice: *Supporting Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning (SEQUAL)* measure (Unpublished document, Whitebook, M., & Ryan, S. (2013). *Supporting environmental quality underlying adult learning [SEQUAL]*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley). For more information about the methodology, see Chapter 4 of the full report.

¹³Among the 683,000 U.S. childcare workers included in this analysis, all worked "year-round", defined as working at least 10 hours per week and at least 27 weeks per year, each year between 2007 and 2011. Approximately one-third worked in private households. The unit of analysis for the results reported here is a childcare worker family, which includes both single and married childcare workers with and without children. Eligibility for support programs is based on income, which is set at various levels for different family configurations. This report combines data from three sources: 1) aggregate government administrative data about annual enrollment and annual benefits paid for each of the four public support programs named above for all 50 states and Washington, D.C.; 2) the March Supplement of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey (CPS); and 3) the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). For more information about the methodology, see Chapter 5 of the full report.

¹⁴Cassidy, D. J., Lower, J. K., Kintner-Duffy, V. L., Hegde, A. V., & Shim, J. (2011). The day-to-day reality of teacher turnover in preschool classrooms: An analysis of classroom context and teacher, director, and parent perspectives. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 25(1), 1-23.; Phillips, D., Mekos, M., Scarr, S., McCartney, K., & Abbott-Shim, M. (2001). Within and beyond the classroom door: Assessing quality in child carecenters. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15, 475-496.; Phillipsen, L. C., Burchinal, M. R., Howes, C., & Cryer, D. (1997). The prediction of processquality from structural features of child care. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 281-303.; Scarr, R., Eisenberg, M., & Seater-Deckard, K. (1994). Measurement of quality in child care centers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9, 131-151.; and The Cost-Quality and Outcome Team. (1995). *Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers: Final report of the Cost, Quality and Outcome Study*. Denver, CO: University of Colorado.; and Whitebook, M., & Sakai, L. (2004). *By a thread: How centers hold on to teachers, how teachers build lasting careers*. Kalamazoo, MI: Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

¹⁵Whitebook, M. (2002). *Working for worthy wages: The Child Care Compensation Movement, 1970-2001*. Retrieved from <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/csce/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/worthywages.pdf>.

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