



Center for the Study of  
Child Care Employment  
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# Executive Summary

## From Unlivable Wages to Just Pay for Early Educators

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### Providing Guidance to Growing Demands for Compensation Reform

Teaching in early care and education (ECE) programs is one of the lowest-paid occupations in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, median wages for early educators ranged from \$10.72 per hour (or \$22,290 full-time per year) to \$13.94 per hour (or \$28,990 full-time per year).<sup>2</sup> These are quite literally poverty-level wages: the federal poverty threshold for a family of four in 2017 was \$24,600.<sup>3</sup>

Low wages for early educators are not a new challenge. Compensation has been low in this field since its inception, but only recently have the public, policymakers, and other stakeholders begun to appreciate the full ramifications of paying such low wages for this crucial work — work that is performed mostly by women, nearly half of whom are women of color.

As a result of this increasing awareness of the problems of low wages, a growing consensus within the early childhood field recognizes that something must be done to improve compensation. *Yet, little consensus exists on the primary reasons for compensation reform, what compensation reform looks like, and how to achieve compensation reform.* To provide clarification and guidance, this report summarizes recent research on wage standards and critically assesses existing initiatives intended to address the problem of low wages in ECE. The report also outlines the position of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) on the following three core areas of debate:

- **Why we need compensation reform:** Real compensation reform is required as a matter of social justice for early educators themselves and not only because it will also benefit the children in their care.
- **What compensation reform looks like:** Compensation reform should aim for a minimum of livable wages for anyone working with young children and for wages at least on par with educators of older children for early educators with higher qualifications and greater responsibilities. Real compensation reform requires increases in actual wages and salaries paid for performing the normal work of early educator jobs. Early educators need reliable, predictable boosts in their hourly wages or annual salaries in order to plan their financial futures and ensure economic security.
- **How to achieve compensation reform:** A combination of increased and more stable public funding for the ECE system as a whole, explicit requirements for minimum compensation standards, and an organized collective voice for early educators offer the most promising way forward.

## Recommendations for Compensation Reform

- ▶ Articulate long- and short-term goals for increasing ongoing earnings of early educators as distinct from financial relief and educational support.
  - Ensure educators play a leading role in articulating goals and setting interim steps.
  
- ▶ Establish compensation standards for starting and ongoing wages, benefits, and non-contact time for professional responsibilities, including:
  - Pay scales for all teaching and auxiliary roles and education levels, using living wage/self-sufficiency standards such as those included in this report as a minimum; and
  - For lead teachers with bachelor's degrees, regardless of setting, the compensation standard should be at least parity with K-3 teachers.
  
- ▶ Ensure adequate public funding is available to meet articulated compensation standards.
  - Using the best available data, estimate the cost of long-term compensation goals and use the estimate to determine intermediate steps as needed.
  - Build increased compensation into existing initiatives/program standards as a condition of public funding rather than creating separate *ad hoc* programs.
  - Use classroom- or program-level funding, such as contracts or grants rather than child-level vouchers or tax credits, to ensure that classrooms and programs are sufficiently funded to support teachers with adequate wages and benefits.
  - Include accountability mechanisms to ensure that funds intended for compensation reach the workforce.
  
- ▶ When proposing financial relief initiatives, frame advocacy messages to clarify that they are an interim strategy and not a long-term solution to achieve appropriate wages and benefits.
  
- ▶ Elevate compensation as an essential component of state workforce strategies and educate policymakers and the public at large about the importance of better pay in ensuring a skilled and stable early educator workforce.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE THE FULL REPORT:**  
**[FROM UNLIVABLE WAGES TO JUST PAY FOR EARLY EDUCATORS](#)**

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## Notes

1 Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2018*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <http://cscce.berkeley.edu/topic/early-childhood-workforce-index/2018/>.

2 Whitebook et al. (2018); \$10.72 refers to those classified as “child care workers,” and \$13.94 for those classified as “preschool teachers,” according to the Standard Occupational Classification used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

3 Office of Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2017). 2017 Poverty Guidelines. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2017-poverty-guidelines>.