

ACTION 3.12

Increase education standards and develop a sustainable plan (including wage incentives and loan forgiveness) to align birth-through-age-five educator compensation with that of K-12 educators.

INCREASE STANDARDS and COMPENSATION of BIRTH-THROUGH-AGE-FIVE EDUCATORS



In North Carolina, early educators with a bachelor’s degree are paid nearly 30% less on average than their colleagues in the K-8 system. Many early educators also do not receive benefits. Research shows that increasing compensation and standards of birth-through-age five educators improves the quality of care children receive. When educators are adequately trained and compensated, they are also more likely to remain in the profession.

There is no simple private market remedy to these issues because when providers increase wages they must also increase the cost of care, and child care already consumes an average of 24% of gross household income in North Carolina. Public funding in the form of wage supplements that are tied to quality and stability of care can aid in stabilizing the system for both providers and families.

WHAT WE KNOW

Many now argue that increasing professionalization, workforce stability, and quality of early care and learning requires a compensation-first policy approach. This is because educator pay is one of the greatest predictors of turnover in child care and early learning programs. Although many find happiness and fulfillment in these careers, they also need to earn a living wage to be able to remain in the profession long-term.

Reducing turnover among early childhood educators is critical because it disrupts the child-teacher relationship and cuts short the professionalization and skill development needed to provide high quality care and a developmentally supportive learning environment. Staff turnover has been linked to weakened language and social development in children birth to age five.

North Carolina early educators with a bachelors degree are **PAID NEARLY 30% LESS** on average than teachers in the K-8 system. **MANY ALSO DO NOT RECEIVE BENEFITS.**

Dive Into the Data

The [Teacher & Administrator Education and Compensation](#) page on the Pathways Data Dashboard provides an overview of key findings related to educator turnover, compensation, employer provided health insurance in counties across the state. Explore other indicators related to standards and compensation on the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#).

WHAT WE NEED

Several studies have shown that [increasing wages reduces staff turnover](#) and increases quality of care. WAGE\$, a North Carolina wage supplement initiative, found that in Mecklenburg county, [modest increases in wages resulted in a teacher turnover rate of 16%, much lower than the 32% statewide average turnover rate](#). It is important to note that the amount of the wage supplement was connected with education level of the staff member to encourage continued educational attainment among the child care workforce.

HOW TO SUPPORT

Despite research showing just how much [early care and learning matters for children's later schooling success](#), we have built a system in which educators working with infants, toddlers and other early learners receive dramatically different professionalization, working conditions, and wages than elementary educators. These working conditions include [“long hours, low pay, and \[none to\] limited benefits. Such work conditions lead to many early childhood educators living in poverty, struggling with depression, and facing food insecurity.”](#)

Legislators, nonprofit advocacy organizations, and families can champion change by insisting on publicly funded salary and benefits supplements and professionalization initiatives. Two that have shown promise are [WAGE\\$](#) and [T.E.A.C.H. for Birth-through-age-five Educators and Directors](#). Expanding WAGE\$ and T.E.A.C.H. can improve outcomes for staff, parents, children, and the economy.

The North Carolina Department of Commerce calls **child care and early learning educators “the workforce behind the workforce;”** without them many working parents, especially women, would have to exit the workforce.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



[Worthy Wages for Worthy Work](#) campaign is a program of the North Carolina Early Education Coalition

that is building a movement to support the early childhood workforce. Launched in March of 2020, this grassroots initiative has brought together thousands of child care teachers and providers, parents, and community advocates to build public awareness and policymaker support for improving compensation and benefits for early educators. This campaign is structured as a state-level initiative with regional, community-based, or organizational advocacy “hubs” that customize advocacy opportunities and messaging for their networks, allowing them to have a wide reach that is still targeted.



[Babies First NC](#) aids in increasing quality of care in infant and toddler classrooms by providing funding for

quality related improvements, funding to increase teacher compensation, and ongoing intensive technical assistance. They focus on quality enhancements established by research, NC Pre-K, and Early Head Start. Some of those quality enhancements include: reduced staff to child ratios, minimum required teacher education, scheduled teacher planning time, minimum teacher compensation, ongoing individual developmental assessment, and enrollment developmental screening and referral if indicated.

[Visit the Pathways Action Map](#) to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.