

SAME WORK, DIFFERENT PAY

The Demand for Pay Parity for
Early Childhood Educators





INTRODUCTION

According to teacher shortage research by the Economic Policy Institute, teachers in the United States work significantly more hours than teachers in other rich countries and earn substantially less pay than other people in professions with a similar level of education.¹ This problem is exacerbated in the field of early childhood education. In Illinois, early childhood teachers are compensated differently despite job duties similar to those of other educators. Compensation disparities exist for teachers based on many factors, such as the age of the children, their geographic area, and their setting. Preschool teachers in a public school setting earn more than preschool teachers in a community-based organization (CBO).² In addition to a lower salary, early childhood teachers at CBOs are less likely to have health insurance and other similar benefits offered by their center. Turnover data from the Illinois Department of Human Services Illinois Salary & Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities: FY 2021 demonstrates that the turnover rate for community-based early childhood teachers has increased since 2019 and states “The top reason for [community-based] early childhood teachers to leave their jobs willingly was dissatisfaction with wages or benefits.”³

This is an issue because teacher turnover due to inadequate wages negatively impacts children in our state. CBOs are also vital to early learning options for families and are critical to a child accessing early childhood education and care services.⁴ CBOs may serve children as young as 6 weeks old, offer extended hours, provide year-round services, and connect families to wrap-around services.⁵ Many employed families depend on these services to care for and educate their children while they are at work. In Chicago, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and CBOs follow the same accredited curriculum and collectively try to enroll the 65,000 3- and 4-year-olds living in the city.⁶

We are a group of Teach Plus Illinois Early Childhood Educator Policy Fellows with experience working in both community-based and public school-based early childhood centers. We have experienced firsthand the compensation disparities that exist for the same job description and the impact that can have on a teacher’s willingness to retain the same position over time. As advocates, we know that we have a unique opportunity for change: the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Division of Early Childhood (DEC) is exploring two salary scales as part of their base wage level Workforce Compensation funded by Governor J.B Pritzker’s SMART START Illinois plan. Pending appropriation, these wage scales are scheduled to launch in FY2025, with the goal of creating more stability for the child care sector. In FY2026, the Smart Start Quality Support Program will also support higher salaries of child care workers.

In this brief, we explore CBO educators’ experiences with previous Illinois grants and gather their feedback on the Workforce Compensation Contract’s proposed salary scales. We offer recommendations that IDHS and center administrators should consider to ensure educators benefit from the new Workforce Compensation Contracts as intended.

Findings

1. Educators are unaware of what funds their centers receive and how those funds are being used, and are excluded from decisions on how they receive compensation.
2. Educators want a salary scale that exceeds a livable wage, reflects wage increases with each year of experience, and differentiates wages for different levels of education.
3. Educators desire transparency and predictability around compensation from their centers and the institutions that fund them.

Recommendations

1. The Illinois Department of Human Services, and other institutions that fund community-based child care centers, should inform educators of policy changes that impact their compensation, and make educator-friendly information public regarding compensation expectations.
2. The drafted salary scale for the Illinois Department of Human Services Workforce Compensation Contracts should be revised to clarify wage differences for educators with different years of experience and different levels of education beyond a bachelor's degree and/or Gateway Level 5 credential.
3. The Illinois Department of Human Services, and other institutions that fund community-based child care centers, should establish procedures with clear directions referencing how to compensate educators and establish a reporting system that would allow educators to file grievances if those procedures are not followed.

ILLINOIS & EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PAY PARITY

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), pay parity, sometimes referred to as “compensation parity,” is defined as “parity for salary and benefits for equivalent levels of education and experience.”⁷ Many states have attempted compensation parity by using a combination of state- and local-level strategies. Some states such as Connecticut, Minnesota, and Rhode Island have proposed wage scales that would apply to early childhood educators in all settings.⁸

Illinois does not currently have an established salary/wage scale, which disproportionately impacts child care workers from CBOs. The lack of pay parity results in educators moving from center to center in search of raises as little as 50 cents or leaving the field altogether. According to a recent Illinois Early Childhood Education Workforce report, “Teachers were equally split between a new job in the field of ECE, a new job in public schools, and a new job in an unrelated field. Assistant teachers more often left for a job in an unrelated field (56%) compared to staying in ECE (31%).”⁹ Research has confirmed a link between less economic worry and better well-being of early educators and higher-quality interactions between teacher and child that are so crucial to facilitating young children’s learning and development.”¹⁰

It's hard for teachers to be fully present and give their best selves to the children they serve when they're worried about how they're going to meet their own financial needs. It's also crucial to recognize that this issue heavily impacts women and women of color in the profession: 96% of early childhood teachers are women and over 47% of early childhood teachers in CBOs are women of color (see endnote 2).

Lack of pay parity and subsequent turnover negatively impact centers and children. Providers are faced with direct replacement costs (e.g., hiring substitutes, advertising of the open position, etc), lost enrollment, lower staff morale, increased parental stress, negative consequences for children, and increased administrative workload. According to *The Right Fit: Recruiting, Selecting, and Orienting Staff*, "Changes in teachers create feelings of loss in children. When these feelings dominate a child's experience, the loss can trigger regression, behavior changes, and interrupted development progress."¹¹ Retaining teachers and teacher assistants in classrooms with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers is especially important because of the significant developmental gains they make from 0-5 years old.

METHODOLOGY

In the spring of 2023, Teach Plus Illinois partnered with the Illinois Department Human Services (IDHS), Division of Early Childhood (DEC), and Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE), to host a series of virtual focus groups with current early childhood educators from CBOs. We showed educators the Workforce Compensation Contracts scale drafts and asked them for feedback. We also asked educators about their experiences with previous Illinois grants. During focus group registration educators were asked to identify their organization type and role to ensure they met the target demographic. Participants also completed an online questionnaire (see Appendix). The term "educators" is used throughout this report to refer to classroom-based personnel including teachers and teacher assistants. Owners, providers, directors, assistant directors, and other administration professionals were excluded from this research.

We conducted 10 virtual focus groups with 55 educators.

- + 33 participants identified themselves as lead teachers and 12 as teachers assistants; 10 did not identify.
- + 15 participants had four to nine years of experience and 24 educators had 10-plus years of experience.
- + Of those who indicated a racial or ethnic identity, 23 educators were Black or African American, 12 were Hispanic or Latinx, and 9 were White or Caucasian.
- + The majority indicated that they currently make \$16-18/hr (\$33,280-\$37,440 salary).
- + 21 participants currently work in Chicago, 22 work in the Chicago Metropolitan area (i.e., Cook, Will, DuPage, Lake, McHenry, Kane, Kendall, Grundy, DeKalb, and Lake Counties), three work outside of the Chicago and Chicago Metropolitan area and nine are unidentified. Because the majority of our focus group participants work in Chicago or the Chicago Metropolitan area, our findings apply overwhelmingly to the Chicago Metro salary scale.

● ▲ ■ FINDINGS

1. Educators are unaware of what funds their centers receive and how those funds are being used, and are excluded from decisions on how they receive compensation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois utilized federal relief funding to offer grants like the Illinois Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants (SGCC) and the Child Restoration Grants (CCRG). These grants had to be applied for and were intended to support a variety of child care programs. For SGCC, those eligible were required to spend “at least 50% of their quarterly award on new investments to recognize, reward, and adequately compensate their workforce.”¹² This meant grant recipients would be expected to compensate their staff and could decide in-house how compensation changes would occur. Only one focus group participant said that they were included in the decisions for how additional compensation would be provided. The majority of participants who experienced changes in compensation had little to no knowledge of where the additional compensation came from and there were mixed messages from leadership regarding why they were receiving it. One teacher at a CBO said, *“I was unsure about the sources that supplied the monetary contribution and the intent for distribution.”*¹³

Our focus group participants also indicated that they received different amounts and in different forms (bonuses, salary increase, benefits, one time payments, multiple payments, taxed versus untaxed, etc). Most participants experienced the compensation change in the form of a bonus, while some experienced it in the form of a salary increase or additional benefits (e.g., paid time off). Participants at different centers who received the same type of compensation (e.g., bonus), experienced it in significantly different ways. For example, participants at one center received a one-time bonus while participants at another center received a bonus every three months. Participants at the same center also experienced compensation changes differently. For example, within the same center, some participants found out they were getting less compensation or more compensation than their colleagues. Because they were not included in the decision-making for how compensation would be provided, participants had to make assumptions about the factors that contributed to the discrepancies. Some participants speculated amounts varied based on the differences in job titles or level of seniority, but none of the educators in our focus groups knew for sure.

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“Employees received different amounts and created conflict as we became aware of different amounts received.”

—CBO teacher¹⁴

2. Educators want a salary scale that exceeds a livable wage, reflects wage increases with each year of experience, and differentiates wages for different levels of education.

When asked about the Workforce Compensation Contracts' salary scale draft, our focus group participants disagreed. Currently, for the Chicago Metropolitan area, the target salary for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and professional educator's license (PEL) is set at \$61,000 and the target hourly wage for an assistant teacher with a minimum DCFS credential is set at \$18/hr.

Some believed the \$61,000 salary for teachers and the \$18/hr wage for assistant teachers was fair for those new to the field. However, some believed the \$61,000 wage for teachers was not competitive because it does not consider or attract teachers with multiple years of experience and advanced degrees. Some believed the \$18/hr wage for teacher assistants should be higher to compensate for the challenging roles and responsibilities of being an assistant teacher.

“Anything that’s going up is a positive, but it’s not making the ends meet. We’re wearing different hats, and it’s still not [enough] because of the work that we’re doing with the type of students we’re working with these days. It’s a start, but it’s still not enough and it’s more needed.”

—CBO Head Start teacher¹⁵

In addition, some focus group participants felt the wage for an assistant teacher did not reflect a livable wage and that they could obtain equivalent or better pay with less work in a non-education related job. Many participants referenced the increased cost of living since the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that teacher assistant duties can be very similar, sometimes equivalent, to the duties of a lead teacher.

Some participants believed the \$61,000 salary was not competitive compared to early childhood teachers in CPS. For example, a first-year teacher in CPS with a bachelor's degree and PEL receives a starting salary of \$61,900 with annual salary increases for each year of experience and additional salary increases for advanced degrees.¹⁶ Educators with knowledge of the CPS salary scale and benefits expressed increased feelings of frustration during our focus groups and desired, at minimum, pay parity with their neighboring public schools.

“I mean, we can’t even compare a regular teacher like in CPS. They’re making that, but they still get summers off. They get spring break. They get different holidays, and we don’t get that. So you talk about this salary based on 12 months going the whole time. So you want my five teachers to stay at my center community based and versus going to CPS. They want to go to CPS, because they can make the \$61,000 plus. And they get summers off, two months off and they get spring break off. That’s a huge difference. We’re already at a loss just based on that.”

—CBO Head Start preschool teacher, Chicago¹⁷

3. Educators desire transparency and predictability around compensation from their centers and the institutions that fund them.

The participants in our focus groups want to restore trust in their employers and the institutions that fund their workplace. When we asked them what the state could do to hold their centers accountable, the top suggestion was to audit centers with special attention to payroll, followed by requiring centers to share that information with staff. Other suggestions included paying teachers directly, establishing a regulatory committee, and making information public with opportunities for input. For example, one CBO lead preschool teacher in Chicago asked, *“Could there be some sort of transparency rule where they have to tell us how much is being allocated. ... I just felt like ours was held from us by the administration, and those are the people that we trust to take care of us and make the choices to take care of us.”*¹⁸

Another CBO teacher was even more specific about the type of transparency she thought would be useful: *“Require center directors/assistant directors to submit reports that show how much each teacher is making based on years of experience, education, etc. They should also be required to report how funding is being allocated, as in a budget that shows exactly where all the funding is going and how it’s being used.”*¹⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Illinois Department of Human Services, and other institutions that fund community-based child care centers, should inform educators of policy changes that impact their compensation, and make public educator-friendly information regarding compensation expectations.

Educators reported wanting more information about the amount of money they were earmarked to receive from the grants and the factors that program administrators used to determine how much compensation educators of different titles, years of experience, and/or degrees held should have received. Because educators we spoke with lacked this information, they did not feel equipped to advocate for themselves when issues arose. Moving forward, educators want both grantors and their centers to keep them informed about compensation expectations and policy changes. *“In my experiences, teachers talk amongst themselves about pay disparities, and when an employee finds out they’re being significantly underpaid, they can harbor a lot of resentment, which doesn’t serve anyone positively, especially the students.”* –CBO Teacher²⁰

To better inform educators of policy changes that impact their compensation, we recommend the following:

- + **Utilize existing websites, online systems, and listservs to reach early childhood educators directly.** Websites that educators frequent and are already familiar with should prominently feature the workforce compensation contract salary scales, and all other information relevant to their compensation. Emails connected to the Gateways to Opportunity Registry (Gateways) and Educator Licensure Information System (ELIS) should also be utilized to get information into educators’ inboxes.



“The state can send out notices to the educators about the funds they will be receiving and the amount of the funds to the educators. Because we are not getting paid.” —CBO teacher²¹



- + **Require centers to display signage that discloses their participation in the workforce compensation contracts.** Centers should make compensation-related signage visible in high-traffic areas of a center, similar to how a program might display an accreditation sign. Visible places include, but are not limited to, by the entrance, near the time clock, in the break room, and on widely referenced communication boards. Centers should also disclose this information to prospective hires and to new hires as part of the onboarding process.



“More information and awareness of distributions can serve to keep individuals informed about what they are entitled to within the range of their training and years of experience.” —CBO teacher²²



- + **Incentivize centers that receive funds to educate their staff about their center’s budget.** IDHS, and other grant awarding institutions, should help program administrators educate their staff about how their compensation is funded and other general budgeting. For example, the state could provide budget 101 training videos for staff as part of their onboarding tasks and create educator-relevant information sheets about the Workforce Compensation Contracts.



“Have some sort of [policy] that requires centers to advise their staff when there is a grant to be given.” —CBO teacher²³



At the programmatic level, we recommend center providers, directors, administrators, and other people in positions of leadership keep educators informed about their center’s finances. We recognize providers and directors work hard to navigate multiple funding streams and paperwork necessary to maintain those streams. Educators do not underestimate the complexity of balancing a budget and most do not wish for the burden; however, some educators would like access to that information. We believe access to the information with opportunities for educator input would mutually benefit providers and educators.



“Directors should definitely be more transparent with teachers. In my experiences, teachers talk amongst themselves about pay disparities, and when an employee finds out they’re being significantly underpaid, they can harbor a lot of resentment, which doesn’t serve anyone positively, especially the students.” —CBO teacher²⁴



2. The drafted salary scale for the Illinois Department of Human Services Workforce Compensation Contracts should be revised to clarify wage differences for educators with different years of experience and different levels of education beyond a bachelor's degree and/or Gateway Level 5 credential.

Of the 20,520 early childhood teachers in the Gateways Registry, “44.1 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.”²⁵ This means that over 9,000 early childhood teachers exceed the licensing standard required for their position. We recommend adding to the drafted salary scale a credential level/degree attainment level labeled “Masters + ECE Level 5” and “Masters + PEL” for educators who've obtained a master's degree.

Research shows that teaching experience increases teacher effectiveness which, in turn, improves student achievement.²⁶ If we want to decrease teacher turnover and increase teacher effectiveness, we also recommend adding years of experience to the drafted salary scale for both teachers and teacher assistants. Because our focus group respondents made several comparisons to the CPS salary scale, we recommend starting the “Bachelors + PEL” minimum salary at \$61,900 and adding years of experience that reflect a 1-2% increase per year of service. Without this change, we risk sending the message that educators at community-based child care centers in Chicago/Chicago Metro who do the same job are less valued.

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*“Well, we should be paid like pre-K teachers like in a CPS school, we're doing the same thing as they are and we're not getting compensated for that either. We're making the same lesson plans, we have [children] the same amount of time, even longer, sometimes some of these babies are here from six to six at my school and we're still teaching them from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Not to put down CPS teachers or anything like that, but I feel like we should be equal. I earned what I got. And I'm p****d because I'm not getting paid. To the point where I'm about to move on.”*

—CBO teacher²⁷

3. The Illinois Department of Human Services, and other institutions that fund community-based child care centers, should establish procedures with clear directions referencing how to compensate educators and establish a reporting system that would allow educators to file grievances if those procedures are not followed.

In order to minimize room for interpretation and improve outcomes for educators, we recommend the following:

- + **Equity of Distribution:** Create concrete, uniform standards for distribution. IDHS should decide on the factors and benchmarks that influence the amount an educator can receive, the manner of distribution, and the frequency. This will provide educators with clarity as to the what, when, and why of the compensation they have received and help to ensure fair allocation.
- + **Audits and Accounting Systems:** Keep detailed records and descriptions of received funding and the disbursement of that funding. Funders should conduct an annual provider audit to ensure that all distribution and usage guidelines have been followed. Auditing provides transparency that is essential to building trust and predictability, and safeguards against misunderstanding of policies and procedures.

- + **Grievance Procedures:** Create a formal process for filing and resolving issues of misinterpretation or misapplication of compensation policies. Such a process would include step-by-step instructions on how, to whom, and when formal and written complaints should be filed. We recommend including educators further in this process as it gets established.

BEYOND COMPENSATION: A NOTE ON OTHER BENEFITS

Although salary and wage increases are an imperative, so are other forms of compensation such as health care benefits, retirement, paid time off, and child care coverage. While understanding how early childhood educators feel about these benefits is beyond the scope of this brief, we encourage decision makers to consider how to use them to create equitable alignment and pathways towards pay parity. The salary scale may continue to improve as compensation differences are made for educators who work extended hours, work year-round, and are not offered benefits through their employer. Pay parity that is inclusive of comprehensive wages, benefits, bonuses, and other perks is essential to confronting racial inequity in the profession, addressing the state-wide teacher shortage, justifying the push towards more qualified staff, decreasing the amount of financial stress teachers experience, and increasing the desirability of being an early childhood educator.

CONCLUSION

The creation of the Workforce Compensation Contracts is a step in the right direction as it provides a framework for fairly compensating teachers and teacher assistants throughout Illinois. We now must take the next step and ensure that the contracts are executed equitably, and that there is accountability to ensure that the goal of this initiative is met. By implementing our recommendations, Illinois policymakers can create transparency and alleviate educators' lack of confidence in their programs and the field. As this work progresses, we urge the Illinois Department of Human Services to do additional outreach to educators in other parts of the state that are going to be impacted by the "Balance of the State" salary scale. Moving forward, stakeholder engagement should continue to target and prioritize educator voice as decisions impacting educator compensation are made.



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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org



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APPENDIX

First, educators in attendance were asked questions about their experiences with previous Illinois grants such as The Illinois Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants (SGCC) and The Child Restoration Grants (CCRG). Then, participants were informed about the new IDHS DEC Workforce Compensation Contracts and shown the contract's salary scale draft. The contract's draft, created in partnership with CELFE, consists of two separate salary scales: a Chicago Metro scale and a Balance of the State scale. The target salary/wages differ between the two scales but pay increases for additional credentials such as ESL/Bi-lingual endorsements and Infant/Toddler credential are the same.

Draft Salary Scale | Chicago Metro



Position	Credential Level/Degree Attainment	Target Hourly	Target Salary Annualized (12 mo.)	Notes
Teacher	Bachelors + PEL	\$61,000		Min salary set at parity with K-12 (12-month, BA teacher)
	Bachelors + ECE Level 5	\$26.50	\$55,120	Min salary set at 20% above AA
	Associates + ECE Level 4	\$22.25	\$46,280	Min salary set at 15% above Level 1
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$20.75	\$43,160	Min salary set at 7.5% increment above Level 1
	DCFS minimum/ECE Level 1	\$19.25	\$40,040	\$1.25 pay differential between Teacher/Ass. Teacher
Assistant Teacher	Associates + ECE Level 4	\$20.75	\$43,160	Min salary set at 15% above Level 1
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$19.25	\$40,040	Min salary set at 7.5% increment above Level 1
	DCFS minimum/ECE Level 1	\$18.00	\$37,440	Min salary set at 20% above Chicago's minimum wage or 10% above Chicago's living wage Approximate \$5/hour increase from current average wage

Pay increases for additional credentials include *ESL/Bi-lingual Endorsement: \$1.00 increase; Infant/Toddler Credential: \$0.50 increase*

Draft Salary Scale | Balance of the State



Position	Credential Level/Degree Attainment	Target Hourly	Target Salary Annualized (12 mo.)	Notes
Teacher	Bachelors + PEL	\$49,522		Min salary set at parity with K-12 (12-month, BA teacher)
	Bachelors + ECE Level 5	\$22.75	\$47,320	Min salary set at 20% above AA
	Associates + ECE Level 4	\$19.00	\$39,520	Min salary set at 10% above Level 1
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$18.00	\$37,674	Min salary set at 5% increment above Level 1
	DCFS minimum/ECE Level 1	\$17.25	\$35,880	\$1.25 pay differential between Teacher/Ass. Teacher
Assistant Teacher	Associates + ECE Level 4	\$17.50	\$36,608	Min salary set at 10% above Level 1
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$16.75	\$34,944	Min salary set at 5% increment above Level 1
	DCFS minimum/ECE Level 1	\$16.00	\$33,280	Min salary set at ~35% above IL minimum wage or ~23% above the Balance of the State's living wage Approximate \$5/hour increase from current average wage

Pay increases for additional credentials include *ESL/Bi-lingual Endorsement: \$1.00 increase; Infant/Toddler Credential: \$0.50 increase*

Finally, participants were asked about their ideas for an accountability system to ensure that educators receive the increased compensation as intended.

1. Have you worked in programs that received Child Care Restoration Grants and/or Strengthen and Grow Grants?
2. Did you and those you work with experience changes in compensation?
3. In what form did that compensation change come?
4. How were you, as an educator, included in the decision for how additional compensation would be provided?
5. What worked well about how any additional compensation was provided to you?
6. What were the challenges with how additional compensation was provided to you?
7. Any other thoughts or comments on these programs?
8. What are your thoughts on the beginning wage for assistant teachers with minimum credential and educational requirements? Is this an attractive salary in your area? Please explain.
9. What do you think about the \$1.25 pay increase between assistant teachers and teachers? Does that seem right to you? If not, why?
10. What are your thoughts on the top of the scale (i.e. wages for teachers with the highest level of credential and education)? Does this seem competitive with the K-12 system in your area? (As a reminder, this would be \$49,522 for most of the state, and \$61,000 for the Chicago metro area).
11. Moving from the AA to the BA, we see the biggest shift because as a field. For example, in the balance of the state there is a \$3.75 increase and in Chicago Metro there is a \$4.25 increase. Does that feel like a substantial enough increase from one degree to the next? Why or why not?
12. What could the state do to hold centers accountable to ensure funding is used as intended?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share with us in regards to the salary scale, or transparency/accountability measures?

ENDNOTES

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