

Getting Compensation for Child Care Workers on the Policy Agenda in Massachusetts: An In-depth Look at Advocacy Efforts—Executive Summary

by

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Even with a strong economy and low unemployment throughout the 1990s, child care programs in Massachusetts have had difficulty attracting and retaining staff. Fewer people are selecting child care as a career, and an increasing number of educated and experienced child care workers are exiting the field for better-paying jobs. This situation has led to a staffing crisis and brought attention to the effect of low wages on the stability of the child care market and the quality of care children received.

This case study looks at how advocates in Massachusetts are building public support for better compensation policies for child care teachers, including how they frame the issues, mobilize workers, and shape policy tools for improving the quality of child care programs. The data were obtained from interviews with key players who are addressing the issue of child care worker compensation in the policy arena; reviewing materials generated by state agencies, researchers and advocates; and attending selected child care policy meetings.

For over twenty years, Massachusetts has been in the vanguard of the movement to increase compensation for child care workers. Leadership for the movement has been inspired by the national Worthy Wage campaign and locally-driven efforts to unionize child care workers. The movement has grown over the past decade, and now includes “unlikely allies” from business, public education, higher education, and religious institutions.

Findings

There are several initiatives underway in Massachusetts to increase compensation for child care workers, each using a different policy framework, such as:

Child care is education for young children.

Two key policy initiatives frame child care as education for young children, taking advantage of the public support in Massachusetts for education and a concern about children’s academic success. The Early Education for All campaign advocates for universal education for three-, four- and five-year-olds in a system that is designed and funded to train, recruit, and retain qualified staff. This initiative has amassed widespread popular support. The Governor’s Commission on School Readiness released a report in 2001 that posits school readiness for young children as an investment in the future workforce. Included in its proposal are recommendations to attract and retain child care teachers. Advocates from these two initiatives—Early Education for All and the Governor’s Commission on School Readiness—say they want to coordinate efforts.

Child care quality needs to be improved.

Under this policy frame, advocates link compensation of child care workers to the quality of care they provide. If wages are not increased, they argue, the problem of attracting and retaining high quality workers will continue, and the lack of consistent care and understaffing of programs will negatively affect quality. There are several initiatives in Massachusetts that frame the

compensation issue as a quality issue, including reimbursement rate increases, the Quality Aid bill, and professional development efforts.

Child care is an economic issue. Finally, some advocates cast compensation for child care workers as an economic issue and seek meaningful change in the wage structure. Several strategies that promote this economic argument include: a “living wage” campaign, aimed at setting a floor for wages in government-funded programs; comparable worth, linking the work of child care workers to that of public school teachers; workforce development, promoting child care as a labor issue; and a shut-down day for child care programs, intended to draw attention to the importance of the work provided by child care providers and their need for adequate compensation.

Current strategies to increase compensation receive support from different groups of advocates and show mixed results. For example,

The campaign to provide universal education for young children has amassed widespread popular support, but after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, proponents have delayed introducing a bill into the state legislature because of the challenging economic and political climate.

Increasing reimbursement rates for state contracted child care programs has had a limited impact on increasing workers’ wages because the additional money is not always used to enhance wages. Supporters of rate increases recognize its limitations but argue that they are working on “what is winnable,” which sends a “positive message and helps a

Development of a “career lattice,” as proposed in the Quality Aid bill, would provide funding directly to centers and earmark some of these funds for training and compensation of child care workers.

Advocates of this approach are trying to build incentives for child care workers to remain in the field through college-credited educational opportunities.

Workforce development strategies have garnered diverse support from state government, business, labor, academics, and members of the child care community. Because such initiatives are often cast in different ways (e.g., the Governor’s Commission on School Readiness and various union organizing efforts), they attract different groups of supporters.

Advocates in Massachusetts face a myriad of complex challenges in their efforts to increase child care worker compensation.

Some challenges may be within their bounds to effect, such as the poor public perception regarding child care work as little more than babysitting, the lack of legislative support for increasing wages for a particular group of workers, the lack of consensus among advocates regarding use of strategies, and the lack of leadership within the child care community. Other challenges may be beyond advocates’ control, such as conflicts among state agencies and the high cost of care. Child advocates need to determine where and how to intervene in such situations to maximize their resources and effect change. They also need to be aware of the environmental context in which they work to overcome the fragmentation that often exists within the child advocacy community.

Implications

What lies ahead will depend in large part on what happens to the Massachusetts economy and, in particular, to women workers. Given the recent weakening of the economy, the case for increased compensation may be more difficult to advance if jobs become scarcer, unemployment rises, and the demands for child care declines. The findings of this case study suggest that

advocates should consider the following steps to effect long-term change:

Develop concrete proposals. There is a strong desire among many advocates we interviewed for a comprehensive policy proposal that will coalesce the varied forces in Massachusetts. At the moment, it appears that the Early Education for All campaign has elicited the most confidence among the broadest range of stakeholders. Some believe “the jury is still out,” however, on whether this campaign will unite the key players in addressing the compensation issue, and how it will be financed.

Empower child care teachers and develop leadership. Historically, Massachusetts teachers have increased their compensation through several efforts, including union organizing and the Worthy Wage campaign. The leadership for child care issues in Massachusetts is going through a gradual transformation as seasoned advocates make room for newer faces who are being recruited through the efforts of groups like the Leadership Empowerment Action Project, the Boston Child Care Alliance, the Inner City Day Care Directors, and local Department of Education’s Community Partnerships for Children Councils.

Broaden support. Child care advocates are beginning to recognize the importance of securing support from multiple stakeholders, including business, higher education, unions that represent public school teachers, and religious institutions. The Early Education for All campaign has followed this model, increasing the likelihood that a successful policy will be developed.

Although some policy analysts worry that having several initiatives in motion simultaneously may dilute the impact of individual efforts, our findings suggest that there can be a positive and cumulative effect of multiple initiatives. Many of these efforts involve the same players, many of whom are building bridges as they work together. Despite tensions between and among some groups, a growing cohort of advocates are eager to find a comprehensive solution that addresses the problems of attracting and retaining qualified child care teachers.

At the same time, some advocates are frustrated with the long, drawn-out struggle to improve child care workers’ wages, and are discouraged that no immediate solution lies on the horizon. As one advocate said, “What’s happening may look good to the outside—to bureaucrats or academics—but the fact is that (the issue of) compensation has been stagnant.” For now, the problem of low wages persists; the two main state agencies that deal with child care policy are still struggling to work together; and child care advocates must recognize their own fragmentation and seek to become more unified. Moreover, until the economy improves, a meaningful comprehensive solution will be hampered.

Given the pervasive nature of the child care staffing crisis in Massachusetts, the issue of compensation is firmly on the policy agenda. Over the next year, several key initiatives will release proposals addressing the need to attract and retain a qualified child care workforce. It is not yet clear how well these efforts will be coordinated, and whether they will gain widespread support. What is clear is that advocates are ready for change.

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