



How Lack of Pay Parity Impacts Illinois' Early Childhood Educators

From a teacher in a classroom, to the director of a center, to a home visitor, early childhood education and care services are provided by many professionals. As Illinois re-examines its early childhood education (ECE) funding, we need to ensure that we think about all of those who provide the care and education for our youngest learners.

Early childhood educators come to this field because of their love for children and to ensure that all children receive an equal chance at succeeding in life from their first moments. However, entering this field often comes as a risk to supporting their own families. Qualified educators, even those with advanced degrees, are sometimes paid minimum wage. That means many early childhood educators are living in or near the poverty line (household of two earners making \$8.13 an hour). The lack of support for the ECE profession creates instability not only for the educators and their families, but also for their students and their students' families.

Teach Plus Illinois Early Childhood Education Policy Fellows, who teach and work in a variety of early childhood settings across the state, took a look at their own and their colleagues' paths in the ECE field. Below are some of their stories that demonstrate how the lack of pay parity in ECE plays out.

Ann Harmon, Caring Hands Daycare and Preschool, LaSalle, \$9.50 an hour

My name is Ann Harmon. I teach Pre-Kindergarten. I work full-time - 55 hours at \$9.50 an hour - at the Caring Hands Daycare and Preschool in LaSalle, Illinois.

I love teaching. At one point I wanted to be a reporter but after watching a child stand alone in a courtroom as I was working on a story, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. That little boy was without support and afraid; from that moment on, I wanted to make a difference in a child's life and to fight for those everyone wanted to throw away. ... I want my students to see that they can do remarkable things even at four years old. I know I've succeeded when I see a child whom "experts" say will never do what other children do, start talking and riding a bike after suffering a stroke because I encouraged him to try and guided him when he struggled. I love working with students whom most teachers dread having. ...

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My family lives paycheck to paycheck. And the little extra money I have, I spend on my classroom. We can't afford dental or medical insurance and must rely on the state for that. Our budget only covers our needs; we do not go over it. We take no vacations and have no fun adventures - we live to survive.

My call to action is for you to realize that early childhood teachers like me play an important role in the education of our future leaders. I want early childhood educators to be recognized as professionals, and for the public to know that we have the same training as public school teachers, sometimes more. We have value and we are worthy of more than what we have. It should not be right for a teacher with a decade of experience to be making \$9.50 an hour.

Monica, work anonymous, Chicago, \$12.50 an hour

I wanted to become an educator because it is my mission to make a positive impact in a child's life regardless of their status. Being an educator not only benefits the child, but it also benefits their family. The reason I am still an educator, despite the financial strain, is because it is what I love to do. I love to be around children and their families especially within my community. ... I feel it is my obligation to help these children in their growth and development as well as witness their milestones. ...

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The current financial situation often makes me feel like I am not worth it. I wish legislators would take us into consideration when making policy because an educator once taught you something.

Sara Baldwin, Caring Hands Daycare and Preschool, LaSalle, \$9.25 an hour

I started at the center when my youngest child was a little over a year old. ... The best parts of my day are the small things, like when a child finally learns a color or a shape or when they use their silverware at lunch instead of their hands. It inspires me that these kids can learn and that I am capable of helping them do that! ...

My hope for the future is that people can see the value of what goes on in our daycare. We are more than butt wipers and babysitters. I care about the children under my care and have grown to treat them like my own. ... Since these kids are the future of our world, I feel like we should invest more in their lives and the lives of those who care for and teach them every single day.

Dannise Yates, Bolingbrook, \$9.65 an hour

My day starts at 6 a.m. and hopefully ends by 7:30 p.m.

As a child, I always knew that I would be a teacher. I became even more inspired when I had to take my own children to daycare centers while I either went to school or worked. I wanted to provide reliable care for my son and other children. I wanted something better for the children and I knew I could provide it. ...

My day starts at 6 a.m. and hopefully ends by 7:30 p.m. Many of the families receive state funds and do not pay their co-pay. It is really challenging to enforce the parents to pay. I have not let a child go because the parents did not pay their co-pay as I know that the families are in need of reliable care.

Teneisha, work anonymous, Chicago, \$18.75 an hour

I enjoy doing what I do, but now I realize, at the age of 36, it is at the expense of my family. I do not know how much longer I can continue and if I even want to at this point. We are the foundation of every [professional], the foundation of how they learned to read and how they learned to write, yet we are very much underpaid and viewed as a joke instead of the legitimate professionals we are. ...

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I became an educator because I have a voice that advocates on behalf of families. I am still an educator because the work is not done. Actually, the work has just begun.