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Low Wages = Low Quality Solving the Real Preschool Teacher Crisis

by W. Steven Barnett

Recruiting and retaining good teachers ranks as one of the most significant roadblocks to solving the preschool quality crisis facing this country. Evidence points to the low wages and benefits offered to preschool teachers as the single most important factor in hiring and keeping good teachers.

Despite the importance of their responsibilities, American preschool teachers are paid less than half of a kindergarten teacher's salary — less than janitors, secretaries, and others whose jobs require only a high school diploma and a few years experience. Pay and benefits for assistant teachers are even worse, with the full-time average wage too low to keep a family of three out of poverty.

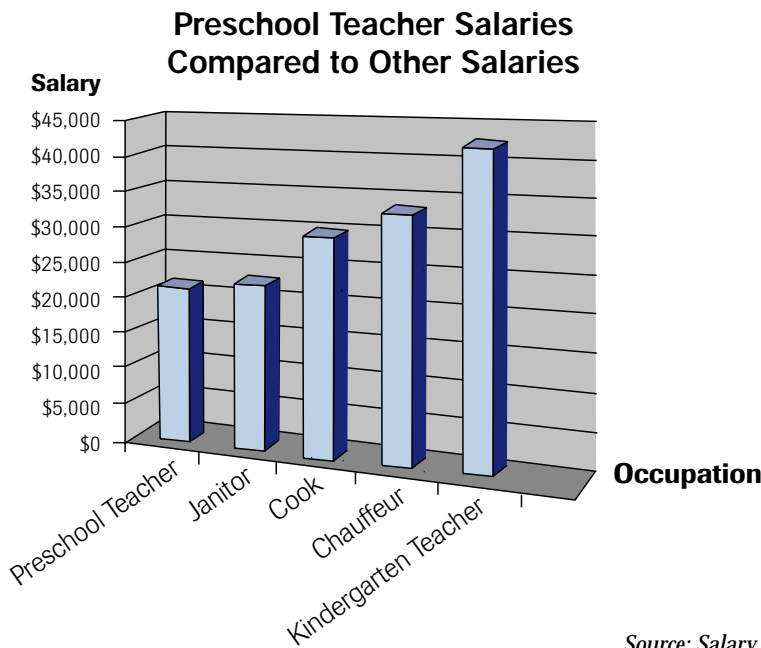
The significance is clear. The social, emotional, educational and economic advantages from high quality preschool programs translate to better lives for children, their families, communities and society as a whole. Yet, poor pay and benefits threaten the delivery of these very high quality programs that can make such a dramatic difference for the nation and its children.

What We Know

- **Poor pay and scant benefits prevent preschool programs from hiring and keeping highly effective teachers.**
- **Inadequate teacher compensation lowers preschool program quality and leads to poorer cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for children.**
- **Preschool teachers are poorly paid compared to all workers and especially so compared to professionals with similar qualifications.**
- **Public policies to improve teacher compensation together with higher standards and accountability can improve preschool program quality and child outcomes.**
- **State policies to encourage improvements in preschool teacher quality and reduce turnover are too poorly funded to produce large, widespread gains.**

Policy Recommendations

- **Substantial increases in preschool teacher salaries and benefits are required to improve the educational effectiveness of public preschool programs.**
- **Head Start could raise teacher qualifications and compensation to the level of K-12 education in public schools with only modest annual increases in funding.**
- **State prekindergarten programs must have enough funds to ensure adequate and comparable pay in public schools and private contracted programs.**
- **State policies to subsidize the supply of good preschool teachers will succeed in the long run only if other state policies also support adequate pay and benefits.**



Low pay, low quality

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that poor pay and low benefits for teachers in preschools both directly and indirectly harm the quality of early education for our children. Studies repeatedly find preschool teacher compensation directly associated with educational quality. Teacher qualifications, behaviors, morale and turnover are often consequences of poor compensation. These attributes, in turn lower educational quality.

Low pay and benefits

Preschool teacher pay is low compared to salaries in other occupations and compare even more poorly to the salaries of workers with similar qualifications. The pay and fringe benefits gap widens as teacher education levels increase compared to workers with similar levels of education.

In September 2002, the median American preschool teacher's salary was \$21,332 – less than half of the median kindergarten teacher salary of \$43,152

and less than the median salary of janitors whose jobs required only a high school diploma.

Assistants paid less

Teacher assistants in K-12 schools were paid a median salary of only \$16,299 in 2002. Teacher assistants in preschools, a widely-used staffing option, earn even less -- \$14,162 in Head Start in 2001 -- making them more poorly paid than parking lot attendants.

Other preschool pay

Although preschool salaries and benefits are low everywhere, some preschool programs pay much less than others.

Preschool programs in public schools pay the best, followed by Head Start preschool teachers who were paid an average of \$21,287 in 2001. Private programs pay the least and offer the fewest paid benefits. Childcare centers paid teachers an average of \$12,118 and provided minimal benefits in 2000.

Policy Action: Comparable Pay

Preschool teacher salaries must be raised to the level of K-12 teacher salaries if preschools are to have a comparably qualified and stable teaching force. Specifically:

Head Start

Head Start quality could be vastly improved by:

- requiring every Head Start classroom have a teacher with a BA degree in early childhood education; and
- increasing teacher pay from \$21,000 to \$43,000 per year.

This proposal could cost about \$1.2 billion annually. Phase-in over 6-8 years would require annual increases of less than \$200 million.

State-Funded Pre-K

State-funded prekindergarten programs need to ensure that teacher qualifications and pay are comparable to those of K-12 teachers.

Child Care

Programs that provide mainly child care can only reach the goal of providing three- and four-year-olds with teachers who are comparable to those in K-12 by raising the entire salary and benefits schedule substantially.