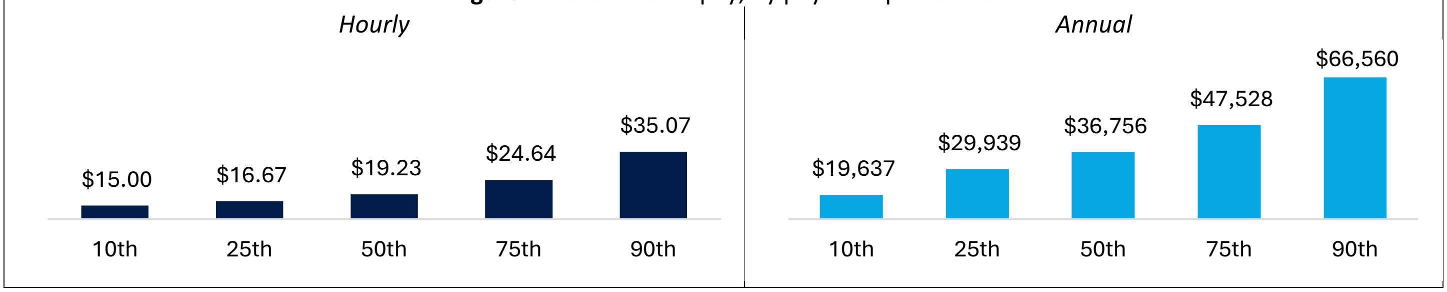
Data Snapshot: New Jersey Lead Teacher Compensation in Center-Based Providers

Research from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) provides a descriptive portrait of lead teacher pay and workplace benefits among those in center-based providers in New Jersey (NJ). These findings come from a statewide survey of lead teachers.[1] On average lead teachers reported an hourly pay of $22.20, and annual pay of $40K. **There was variability in lead teacher pay**, and only a quarter of teachers earned more than $24.64 per hour, or $47,529 annually (Figure 1):

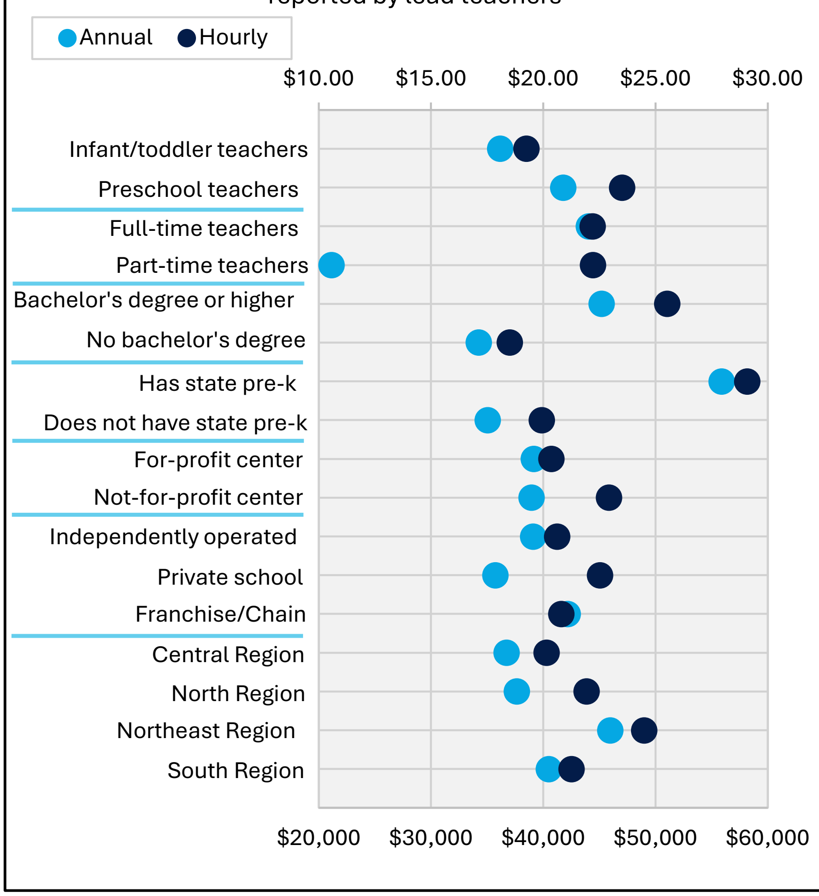
Figure 1. Lead teacher pay, by pay level percentile



There was also notable variability in hourly and annual pay along select characteristics of teachers and their centers (Figure 2):

1. Pay was highest among teachers of preschoolers, those with a bachelor's degree or higher, and those in centers with state pre-k.
2. Hourly pay was similar for full- and part-time teachers.
3. Pay also varied according to program auspice and type of organization.
4. Pay was highest among teachers in Northeast NJ.

Figure 2. Variation in average hourly & annual pay reported by lead teachers



Why this matters: Lead teachers play a vital role in shaping the quality of early childhood education for children. However, teachers receive levels of compensation that have remained stagnant and comparatively lower than other professions such as nursing assistants, laundry and dry-cleaning workers, retail salespersons, and landscaping workers.[2] Our research finds that 43% of lead teachers rely on their pay from child care work to make up between 75-100% of their households' income,[1] highlighting need to understand how what they earn contributes to their financial well-being.

There was also variation in terms of lead teachers' report of workplace benefits (Figure 3):

5. A smaller share of part-time staff received any benefits vs. full-time teachers.
6. The largest share of teachers receiving retirement benefits were in centers with state pre-k or franchise/chain organizations.
7. The largest share of lead teachers receiving paid vacation/time off were those that served infants and toddlers, worked in a franchise/chain organization, or located in South NJ.
8. There was little variation in the share of teachers who received paid sick leave.
9. A larger share of teachers with a bachelor's degree or higher, at centers with state pre-k, and those located in the Northeast region report receiving health insurance.

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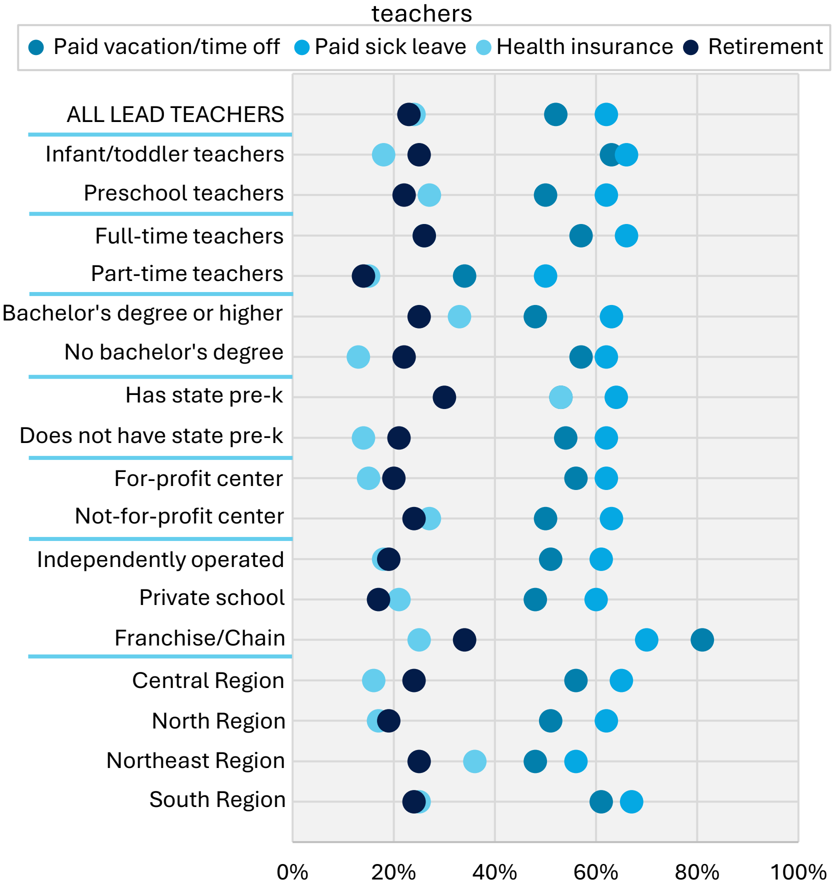
Why this matters: Benefits are integral components of compensation that offer additional financial support and stability, and have been linked to center turnover and retention.[2] For this reason, workplace benefits play a significant role in shaping job desirability.

Figure 3. Variation in workplace benefits reported by lead teachers



Where do we go from here? Strengthening efforts to stabilize NJ's early childhood education workforce are important for supporting lead teachers. This may include efforts to ensure consistency and competitive compensation across child care programs. **There are several next steps to consider:**

First, this research highlights the utility and continued need to collect data and monitor teacher compensation and workforce experiences. **Second,** NJ could learn from promising efforts to increase workforce pay from other states. For instance, the Great Start Compensation program in Minnesota[3] involved the state passing legislation to develop a wage scale that establishes a target level of pay based on teachers' credentials. This effort also included payments issued to programs to help fund increases in teacher compensation, which was signed into law as a permanent, noncompetitive program for eligible providers in 2023. These wage supplements combined State Funds, the Child Care and Development Fund, and the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five program. **Third,** states can also support teacher compensation by identifying strategies that increase access to benefits. Colorado is one example of progress in this area, as they are building upon existing policies to support their child care workforce.[4] And **fourth**, some states are conducting pilot studies to evaluate the impacts of compensation increases. Illinois's ExceleRate pilot program[5] is one example investigating how their salary scale increased providers' ability to recruit and retain staff with higher credentials, and exploring how increases in compensation can be sustained through cost modeling. Virginia is another example that has increased child care subsidy payments rates to programs based on cost models that include target levels of pay for teachers.[6]

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[1] **Data Source:** In 2024, 1,074 lead teachers of children ages 0-5 years at licensed center-based providers across NJ were surveyed. More information on the results of this survey can be found in the full report: Stephens, C., Friedman-Krauss, A., Nores, M., & Kent, A. (2025). *Child Care Lead Teachers in New Jersey: Full Report.* New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/nieer_nj_lead_teacher_report_9.24.25.pdf

[2] Schneider, A. (2025). *A 2024 Review of Child Care and Early Learning in the United States.* Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/a-2024-review-of-child-care-and-early-learning-in-the-united-states/

[3] Lee, H., Muñoz, S., & McLean, C. (2026). *Progress Through Persistence and Partnership: Minnesota's Collaborative Effort to Advance Early Educator Compensation.* Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/MN_CaseStudy_Final_Tagged_1.pdf

[4] Colorado Department of Early Childhood (2024). *Colorado Early Childhood Benefits Research Study*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OfcyY7HLWM4aPVDWv1yd3VmHFvr60HcO/view

[5] ExceleRate Illinois (2024). *How the ExceleRate Pilot is Strategically Funding Quality Improvement in Early Learning in Illinois*. https://celfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CEL24-006-Excelerate-Proof-Point-Piece_REV.pdf

[6] Virginia Department of Education (2023). *Estimating the Cost of High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education.* https://www.childcare.virginia.gov/reports-resources/research-reports-and-resource/virginia-s-cost-estimation-model

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