



CHILD CARE & EARLY LEARNING

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION POLICIES MUST ADDRESS LOW-WAGE WORKING PARENTS' NEEDS

Millions of parents across the country work in jobs with low wages, challenging scheduling practices, and minimal benefits. More than six million workers in the low-wage workforce are parents with children under 18—and three-quarters of these working parents are mothers. **The challenging schedules in many low-wage jobs can leave parents struggling to arrange and afford the high-quality early care and education their children need to succeed in school and beyond.**

Early care and education investments and policies that will help low-wage working parents meet both work and family obligations while improving outcomes for their children can make a real difference in working families' lives.

High-quality early care and education benefits children, particularly children from low-income families.

- **Research shows** that children who were in higher-quality care before age 5 had math and reading achievement at ages 4.5 to 11 similar to their higher-income peers—indicating that high-quality early care and learning experiences can moderate the effects of poverty.
- **One large national research study** found that children in higher-quality child care had slightly better language and cognitive development during the first four-and-a-half years of life, and showed slightly more cooperative

behavior during the first three years of life, than children in lower-quality care.

- Stable, high-quality child care—including well-qualified providers who offer one-on-one attention to children and have meaningful interactions with them, and books, toys, and materials to create a rich learning environment—could ameliorate the stress parents in low-wage jobs feel and position their children for success in life.

The conditions of low-wage work can make it difficult for parents to access high-quality early care and education for their children.

- Parents working in low-wage jobs often cannot find high-quality, affordable child care that matches their work schedules. Most child care programs do not operate during the evening, overnight, or early morning hours that many of these parents work. And most programs are not flexible enough to accommodate work schedules that are constantly shifting, often at the last minute.
- Parents working in low-wage jobs frequently struggle to afford the cost of average-priced care, much less higher-quality—and typically higher-cost—care. Parents whose income fluctuates because of variable schedules may also find it hard to secure and pay for child care.
- While there are federal and state programs available to help families afford child care or to allow children to attend preschool at no cost, parents with low-wage jobs often cannot access the programs due to sorely insufficient funding and other barriers—and may not even know such programs exist.
- Because of these challenges, many families rely on care provided by family members, friends, and neighbors (FFN

providers) who they know and trust and who are flexible enough to accommodate their work schedules; however, this option is not always available.

Investments and policies at the federal, state, and local levels can expand families' access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education, ensure that child care and early education programs accommodate the needs of low-wage workers, and increase compensation and professional development opportunities for child care workers.

- **Increase funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)** to make child care assistance available to more low-income families and their children, raise child care provider payment rates and compensation, and support activities to strengthen the supply and quality of child care.
- **Provide tax assistance to help families meet the high costs of child care.**
- **Increase investments in high-quality early education programs**, including federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs and state prekindergarten programs, so that more children of parents working in low-wage jobs can participate.
- **Design child care and early education policies and programs to meet the needs of families with parents working in low-wage jobs.** For example:
 - Allow families to remain eligible for child care assistance and other early care and education programs for a full 12 months without having to recertify their continued eligibility for assistance, even if there are temporary changes in their work hours or job status.
 - Take into account fluctuations in income in determining a family's eligibility so that a temporary spike in income does not disqualify the family.
 - Offer state-funded prekindergarten programs in a variety of settings, including public schools, child care centers, and community-based settings, and offer programs in low-income neighborhoods.
 - Fund early education programs to offer full-school-day programming.
 - Encourage coordination between prekindergarten programs and child care providers to meet the needs of parents whose work hours extend beyond, or do not overlap at all with, the prekindergarten program's hours of operation.
- **Support FFN care as an option for families** who prefer it or lack other options by:
 - Permitting families who receive child care assistance to use that assistance to pay for FFN care.
 - Enabling FFN providers to receive benefits and supports

through other federal programs, including programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

- Investing in initiatives that provide education and training, mentoring, networking opportunities, home visiting, leadership development, financial assistance, assistance accessing other resources, and other supports to FFN providers to help them improve the quality of care they offer as well as their own economic security, including through technology and social media.
- **Provide financial incentives and technical assistance to encourage child care centers and family child care providers to offer care during nontraditional hours.**
- **Increase child care providers' compensation and professional development opportunities** and give them a greater voice in the policy-making process.

When advocates for children and families collaborate with low-wage workers and their advocates, as well as with private sector representatives, they can craft promising two-generational policy solutions and strategies that hold real potential for supporting low-wage working parents and their children. **By working together, we can set families up for success.**

*For data, workers' stories, and all source information, see NWLC's report, **Set Up to Fail: When Low-Wage Work Undermines Parents' and Children's Success.***

*For detailed examples of child care and early education policies, see NWLC's agenda for action, **Set Up for Success: Supporting Parents in Low-Wage Jobs and Their Children.***