

Issue 3 – The Early Learning Workforce: A Challenge for Georgia

Issue Overview

Georgia Pre-K is a huge part of the state’s efforts to ensure a quality education for students that begins with early learning. Currently the program serves over 350,000 children ages 0-4. Almost one third of those students attend Quality Rated childcare facilities, which have been approved by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning for offering high quality early learning opportunities. Like most sectors, the workers in this field are affected by a variety of factors that contribute to the wellbeing and effectiveness of a professional workforce – compensation and benefits, staffing structures and advancement, retention, education level, and certification requirements are but a few examples.

In terms of compensation and benefits, the early learning industry is a relatively low-paying field. According to the Economic Impact study, in 2015 Georgia Pre-K lead teachers made, on average, \$16 per hour. This compares to \$9 per hour for classroom lead teachers in other early learning centers.

Hourly Median Wages for Teaching Staff at Child Care Learning Centers by Position

Teaching Position	State Hourly Average
Lead Teachers, non-Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$10.14
Lead Teachers, Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$16.45
Assistant Teachers, non-Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$8.85
Assistant Teachers, Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$9.68

Significance for Georgia

Young children thrive when they have secure positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable on how to support their health, development, and learning. Many of these relationships take place in high-quality early learning environments from infant age through kindergarten entry. Conversely, a lack of high-quality early learning opportunities and responsive interactions puts children at risk for poor mental and physical health, behavior problems, and school failure. Ensuring that the workforce for the early learning industry is strong and supported must be a priority to ensure high-quality early learning opportunities for Georgia students.

Action Steps for Georgia

Recent changes to Georgia’s Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program already ensures that payments to Quality Rated providers are higher. Higher quality simply costs more. There are recommendations resulting from the 2015 Governor’s Education Reform Commission to require a center to be Quality Rated to participate in the CAPS program. This is an attempt to expand the number of available spots for low-income children in Quality Rated centers. If this change is made, Georgia needs to fully fund the demand for the CAPS program at the level required by centers to operate to higher standards of quality. The Commission also recommended a combination of tax incentives for parents, teachers and centers to increase their own quality and help families pay for higher quality. These recommendations should be funded and adopted by the state.

The importance of early learning has become increasingly visible in recent years, only reemphasizing what educators have known for quite some time: high quality early learning is the building block for student success. Through time and resources spent on quality improvements and access across the Pre-K program, Georgia is once again leading the nation in providing this foundation to the state’s four-year-old population. Now is the time to establish a similar long-term commitment to the rest of the early learning industry.