

# Essential But Still Undervalued

## A Snapshot of New Jersey's Child Care Workforce During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Introduction

As New Jersey's economy reopens, it has become evident that child care teachers are "the workforce behind the workforce," essential in supporting working families and educating the minds of young children. Yet often operating on razor-thin margins, child care ranks among the hardest-hit and under-valued industries. For the child care workforce, composed mostly of women and more diverse than its K-12 counterpart, the COVID-19 pandemic has added even more work to their already-filled plates, at a time when many continue to be paid low wages while risking their health and the health of their families. As a result, finding and retaining staff can be a disheartening and daunting experience for providers.

To gain a deeper understanding of how Covid-19 has impacted the child care workforce, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) surveyed 270 child care center owners and directors from around New Jersey between July 1, 2020 to August 15, 2020. The results of the survey provide a brief snapshot of the experiences of child care staff during Covid-19, what has happened as centers began to reopen and recommendations to better support child care teachers.

### Staffing and the Pandemic: A Snapshot

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the existing struggles of New Jersey's child care industry in its attempt to pay its workers salaries that reflect the important work they accomplish daily. In late March 2020, as part of his stay-at-home executive order to stop the spread of the novel Coronavirus, Governor Phil Murphy mandated the closures of all child care programs, except for those serving children of essential workers .

Child care centers that remained open as emergency centers were mandated to follow strict health and safety requirements. At the end of May, Governor Murphy announced that all child care programs could start reopening beginning June 15th, with reduced capacity and continuing to adhere to increased safety guidelines.



Occupation	Median wage
Child care worker	\$11.51
Preschool teacher	\$15.57
Center director	\$26.27
Kindergarten teacher	\$35.96
Elementary teacher	\$37.87
All workers	\$20.43

#### Earnings by Occupation

- In 2017 the median wage for child care workers was \$11.51, a **5% increase since 2015**.
- For preschool teachers the median wage was \$15.57, a **10% decrease since 2015**.
- For preschool or child care center directors, the median wage was \$26.27, an **8% increase since 2015**.

Source: Early Childhood Workforce Index 2018 New Jersey (2018). Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

They include:

- temperature and health checks of both staff and children entering the building,
- increased cleaning to remain in compliance,
- Face coverings worn by all employees and children over the age of 2 "whenever feasible,"
- limiting building access solely to staff and children,
- reduced group sizes remaining at 10 children in a classroom, and
- no mixing of students and staff between classrooms.

## Key Takeaways

At the beginning of July and through August 15, ACNJ distributed a survey to child care directors in order to better understand their staffing experiences during this period of the COVID-19 pandemic. ACNJ received 270 responses from 20 of New Jersey's 21 counties. After reviewing the data and comments, three main takeaways became evident.

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*"The equation of risk, low pay and high credentials does not balance and this is making finding qualified staff very hard."*

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**1. The \$600 additional unemployment insurance was often higher than staff salaries.** The executive order to close child care centers, except for those serving essential workers, resulted in staff lay-offs and furloughs. Some programs were able to retain employees during the months of closure using loans or continued subsidy payments. In ACNJ's survey, a little more than half of the respondents whose programs remained open as emergency child care centers said that they laid-off or furloughed some staff. For centers that closed, nearly half said that they laid-off or furloughed all staff.

Child care employees who were laid off were able to access an additional \$600 a week through unemployment funding provided through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. This helped many teachers stay afloat during this time as unemployment benefits for minimum wage pay would have provided little support.

However, those same funds also made it difficult to bring staff back to work. As one program director explained, "...[workers] made more money on unemployment than if they worked. So why take the risk?"

Emergency care centers experienced even greater challenges, with increased enrollment and a smaller workforce. "I am afraid staff will not want to return to work when needed because they are making more money on unemployment with the federal \$600 additional weekly payment. Working staff are bitter they are not receiving the same benefits as non-working," one director commented.

Unfortunately, most programs did not have the finances to pay their working staff additional money. As another director explained, "Staff are discouraged because of all the health and safety requirements put in place while still receiving low wages. Some professions have been receiving hazard pay while working but there is nothing for child care workers. Also, staff were asking to be put on unemployment so they could get the extra \$600/week that many have been getting while they were unemployed...who can blame them?!? With all the increased

supply costs [and] reduced capacity numbers, there is nothing left in the budget to cover a staff bonus or wage increase (hard to say if we will be ok for the mandated minimum wage increase that is coming in January)."

**2. Hiring is more difficult than ever before due to low wages and extra job responsibilities.** While hiring new staff has always been a challenge for programs, directors faced additional burdens finding new employees during this time. About 60 percent of respondents that were operating as emergency care centers said that they needed to hire additional staff. For programs that closed, about half said that they needed to hire additional staff as they prepared for reopening. Whether programs stayed open or closed, approximately 70 percent of both groups said it was difficult to find new employees.

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*"Because our programs have so many financial needs, even when there are additional funds made available, our staffs rarely see any of it. There are too many other bills to pay first."*

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- Meghan Tavormina, President of the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children

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**3. Program finances continue to be unstable.** Financial instability has always been an issue largely due to the overall lack of steady funding streams, particularly for those programs that rely on private-pay tuition and those accepting child care subsidies based on the rate of attendance as opposed to enrollment. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this instability made it difficult for programs to increase compensation and offer benefits. Now, that instability has been exacerbated, particularly for private-pay programs, as enrollment has remained low due to parent unemployment and fear of exposure to the virus in a group setting. Child care subsidy rates have continued to be paid at the "emergency" enrollment rate, but that will likely change in January 2021.

"I have to add staff due to regulations and I don't know if I will have enough money from enrollment to support it," explained a director.

Daily staffing became difficult because it was impossible to predict that day's attendance. "The number of children attending is low and not consistent. It is hard to maintain a fixed amount of teachers needed since the number of children fluctuate like never before. One day I'm okay. The next, there are too many teachers for the number of children attending the center," one director commented. Additionally, many teachers with children of their own struggled to commit to schedules.

"As of now half of the staff cannot commit to work until they have their children's school schedules," noted another director.

With the limited group sizes, many programs could not even afford the return of their full staff.

As one director stated, "With the 10 child/class restriction, I cannot rehire many of my teachers. I'm afraid they will look for other work and not be available when I do need to rehire them." At the same time, the increased health, safety, and cleaning protocols created a need for additional staff. "Now that we are open for all children, more staffing is going to be needed to cover the new guidelines for teachers staying with the same group and having enough staff for breaks and lunch," one director explained. "With new protocols, it takes more people to get children in the building and out at night, and to clean, and before or aftercare," commented another director.

This instability is most evident in programs' inability to offer health care to their employees. Of all of the survey respondents, slightly less than half reported that they do not offer health insurance to any of their staff. However, the increased instability since the COVID-19 pandemic has made it hard for programs to even figure out how they will staff their centers. Of the programs that closed, only 20 percent reported that all of their staff would be returning.

All of these factors, combined with increased costs for cleaning supplies and PPE gear have left child care programs devastated. As one director explained, "We continue to run on a skeletal staff due to the issues of Covid-19. The staff that I do have work everyday. The issues of low classroom sizes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on class sizes have almost crippled us financially. We need some type of monetary relief to continue operating."

## Conclusion

Child care workers are more than just the workforce behind the workforce. They are the teachers shaping and molding young brains - the future of our world. If we do value them for caring for our children, we must also adequately compensate them. But because child care programs are already running on such thin margins, the increased costs of cleaning and PPE supplies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made salary increases for teachers unattainable. Many programs simply do not have the money.

But it is more than salaries and benefits - this is an equity issue. Child care workers of color are more likely to be employed in lower positions and with younger age groups, both of which earn lower rates of compensation. While ensuring that every child has access to a quality early childhood educator in order to reach their full potential, we must also ensure that this diverse workforce is equitably compensated for the essential work they do in caring for and educating our children.

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### **More Voices from the Field**

*"We continue to run on a skeletal staff due to the issues of COVID-19. The issues of low classroom sizes due to the pandemic and the restrictions on class sizes have almost crippled us financially."*

*"With enrollment restrictions, we will need to reduce staff to make ends meet."*

*"Many are worried if they will be able to work in the fall if public schools don't reopen and their own children need to be homeschooled."*

*"I have to add staff due to regulations and I don't know if I will have enough money from enrollment to support it."*

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