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Arkansas Early Childhood Educators Lack Health Insurance and Other Benefits

House Bill proposes to help improve child care sector, in turn benefiting Arkansas's workforce at large

Half of Arkansas's children are in non-parental care at least 10 hours per week. Before kindergarten, many will spend 11,500 hours in child care and pre-K. That's more time than they will spend in school from kindergarten through ninth grade. Early childhood educators literally shape children's brains to become Arkansas's future students and professionals.

But the quality of early childhood education in Arkansas is compromised by low teacher compensation. A 2022 UAMS workforce study reported: "Although 77% of Arkansas [early childhood] teachers work full time; many still do not earn enough to pay for basic necessities." This has led staff to take other jobs in the service sector, child care programs in Arkansas closing classrooms, and family child care homes closing their businesses.

In 2021, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation report cited that absences and employee turnover cost employers \$665 million per year in Arkansas, and an estimated \$200 million in tax revenue is lost annually due to child care issues.

Arkansas **House Bill (HB) 1158** aims to address these issues in the state's child care sector. It is modeled after Louisiana's School Readiness Tax Credits, enacted in 2007. Their system has become an effective lever in promoting small business development, improving teacher preparation and retention, and creating greater access to higher quality care for all children. Each dollar spent on Louisiana's early care and education sector returns \$1.78 to local economies.

The newest brief from the *Child Care in Crisis: Texas Case Study* series focuses on the instability in the child care industry. "In a representative statewide survey, child care program directors overwhelmingly point to hiring and retaining high-quality early childhood educators as their biggest challenge (with 97% reporting major hiring challenges). Directors identify low industry pay as the root cause behind staffing challenges." This data from our neighboring state seems identical to the challenges faced by child care owners in Arkansas.

"Just this week, one of our very talented early childhood teachers made the choice to leave the classroom and work at a convenience store," said Renee Philpot, Director of Pediatrics at Friendship Community Care. "She will make significantly more standing at a cash register than teaching young children."

Rachel Parker, Director of Ferncliff Nature Preschool, said, “Our program strives to provide care that aligns with the research on early years brain development. We know that highly qualified caregivers are crucial during those years, but our program struggles to retain them or support them in making this a viable career path. To do so would mean passing those costs on to families who are already at the threshold for what they can pay for care.”

“COVID completely changed our world in early childhood education,” said Paige Majors, Director of Second Presbyterian Preschool. “We increased wages and still have fewer applicants. At the same time, we have parents that are barely hanging on due to the higher cost of living, if it were not for the federal grants we received, we would be closed.”

Jill Wilson, Director of Open Arms Learning Center said that “Teachers are the biggest part of providing high quality and developmentally appropriate care on a daily basis. One of the greatest struggles has always been to hire, train, and retain staff in the childcare workforce. It’s impossible to pay them for the important brain building job they do, while keeping it affordable for working families.”

“As employers in the early childhood education industry, we are unable to pay teachers the wages they deserve because it would result in an increase in tuition, and therefore would be a burden on many families,” said Michelle Barnes, Executive Director of the Helen R. Walton Children’s Enrichment Center. “Government subsidy and tax credits are the only way to stabilize the early childhood workforce and ensure children are Kindergarten ready.”

The [Arkansas Early Childhood Association](#) (AECA) is a non-profit organization, comprised of 1,200 early childhood professionals who share a common concern about the well-being of young children and their families. AECA has worked for more than 50 years to promote quality care and education for the children of Arkansas. AECA’s Executive Director Paul Lazenby said, “We are at crossroads in Arkansas. There is a demand throughout our state for more quality child care options, but without qualified staff we cannot meet that need. Early childhood policymakers have worked tirelessly on possible solutions. At this point, we believe the answer must come from outside the sector. A question we should ask ourselves – why do we consider the education of a kindergartener a common good and paid for with public dollars. But the education of a three-year-old, during which time is the fastest for brain development, is dependent on the ability of families to pay?”