



Day Care Council
of New York
Educated Children Are Our Future

Building a Stronger Child Care Workforce for New York City

Child care recommendations for a
thriving early childhood system

DECEMBER 2025

A photograph of a woman with dark curly hair, wearing a grey sweater, crouching and smiling as she plays with a young child with curly hair. They are surrounded by wooden blocks and toys on a wooden floor in a playroom. The background is slightly blurred, showing shelves with more toys and a wooden structure.

AUTHOR

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About DCCNY

For over 75 years, the **Day Care Council of New York (DCCNY)** has advanced early childhood education throughout the five boroughs, growing to New York City's largest membership body for city-contracted, community-based child care centers.

While impacting over 1,000 center-based and home-based ECE providers, we offer legal consultation, labor relations support, government reimbursement guidance, administrative support, professional development, and more for educators and business operators. Through these efforts, DCCNY works to reduce the operational challenges facing ECE programs, enabling early childhood professionals to focus fully on providing high-quality education and nurturing care to children. The majority of our services benefit traditionally underserved communities and neighborhoods with high percentages of low-to-moderate-income residents. We aspire to see a City where all children – regardless of socioeconomic circumstances – have access to high-quality care and affordable education.

DCCNY has also long served as a vocal advocate for the ECE industry. We work with elected officials at the City and State level to advance policies and programs that ensure all families have access to high-quality ECE programs regardless of income, ethnicity, or immigration status. As the management representative in labor negotiations with the City and the unions representing the child care and early childhood education workforce, DC 37 Local 205, and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, DCCNY has played a central role in securing meaningful wage increases for unionized child care educators working in City-contracted centers.

With this particular report, the Day Care Council intends to advocate, inform, and influence policy on behalf of child care providers, elevate the voices of a marginalized workforce, and strengthen the case for investment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Through this report, the Day Care Council of New York seeks to recognize and uplift the incredible work done by early childhood educators in classrooms and homes across New York City every day. You are shaping children's growth during an essential time in their development and deserve to be honored as the skilled professionals that you are. Child care workers are the workforce behind the workforce: New York City could not function without these essential workers.

Thank you to the many individuals and organizations who met with the Day Care Council of New York during the development of this report, including the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, Child Development Support Corporation, Children's Aid, Chinese-American Planning Council, Citizens' Committee for Children, Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), CUNY Professional Development Institute, ECE on the Move, Education Trust-New York, Grand Street Settlement, Good Shepherd Services, the Mayor's Office for Child Care and Early Childhood Education, Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, State Senator Jabari Brisport, UJA-Federation of New York, United Neighborhood Houses, and YMCA of Greater New York. Extra thanks to readers of early drafts for their detailed feedback, including Nora Moran at United Neighborhood Houses and Lauren Melodia at the Center for New York City Affairs.

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This report was primarily researched and written by Emmy Liss, an independent policy consultant and researcher. Shelby Lohr, Senior Policy Analyst at the Day Care Council of New York, provided support for the project and designed the report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York City's vibrant economy and the well-being of its roughly **500,000 children under five** are inextricably linked to a strong, stable child care system. Reliable child care is not merely a convenience but an essential service, enabling parents to participate in the workforce and driving the city's economic engine. Quality early care and education can change the trajectory of a child's life; **90 percent of brain development** occurs before age five. Yet, despite their pivotal role, the approximately 40,000 child care workers in NYC—predominantly women and, overwhelmingly, women of color—are systematically undervalued, underpaid, and undersupported. This foundational workforce is facing a crisis that threatens the entire child care infrastructure and, by extension, the city's future.

Key challenges threatening the child care workforce and the system at large include:

Pervasive Low Wages: Child care workers earn less than 96 percent of all other occupations in NYC, often falling below the poverty line despite the exorbitant fees families pay for care. This disparity is particularly stark for home-based providers. Pre-K teachers in community-based organizations earn less than their public school counterparts who perform the same work.



Limited Benefits & Financial Insecurity: A significant portion of the workforce lacks health insurance and retirement plans, leading to reliance on public benefits like Medicaid and SNAP. Many struggle to save for the future, with a substantial number of older workers having minimal retirement savings.

Challenging Work Environments & Burnout: The physically demanding nature of the job, long hours, lack of paid leave, and widespread perception of their work as "babysitting" contribute to high stress and dissatisfaction among educators. Frequent staff turnover and understaffing often leave remaining educators carrying disproportionate workloads, compounding burnout.

Aging Workforce & High Turnover: The field faces a "hollow middle," with a large number of young workers prone to high turnover and an aging population nearing retirement, leaving a critical gap in experienced, mid-career professionals. This leads to empty classrooms, long waitlists, and significant costs for providers due to constant recruitment and training.

Barriers to Entry & Advancement: The early childhood education system offers limited career mobility beyond the classroom, and existing education and credentialing pathways often fail to meet the needs of working professionals, disincentivizing continued education and professional growth. Low wages make it difficult for educators to afford pursuing advanced degrees, which may not necessarily lead to any increase in compensation.



~40,000 child care workers in NYC are systematically undervalued, underpaid, and undersupported.



96%

96 percent of the workforce identifies as female, and is mostly women of color; **82 percent of the workforce** identifies as a non-white or multi-racial woman.



500,000

500,000 children under five live in NYC, and the majority have all parents working outside of the home.

The impact of this workforce crisis extends beyond individual educators, directly affecting families, the quality of early education, and the city's overall economic health. The city has too few licensed child care slots to meet family needs – and thousands of them sit empty because of staffing shortages. As a result, parents face disruptions that hinder their ability to work, costing the city substantial economic output.

To secure an expanded public child care system and ensure New York City's long-term prosperity, a transformative, holistic investment in the child care workforce is imperative. This report proposes comprehensive policy solutions focused on:

Establishing Equitable Compensation and Benefits: Implementing a sustaining wage, defining a clear career ladder, and achieving true pay parity across all settings, including longevity bonuses and cost escalators, is fundamental. This should be paired with ensuring access to free or low-cost health insurance and robust retirement plans for all child care workers, alongside benefits like free child care for their own children and housing support.

Building a Robust Pipeline: Creating career exposure programs for high school students, offering loan forgiveness, making credentialing programs tuition-free, and developing accelerated pathways for experienced caregivers and mid-career changers will bring new educators into the field.

Enhancing Training and Support: Expanding community college training programs with flexible options and specialized courses, launching city-funded apprenticeship programs for paid on-the-job learning and credentialing, and experimenting with new pathways for teachers to build skills and be recognized for their expertise will help grow educators and their skills. These investments benefit new entrants to the field and experienced professionals.

Supporting Career Growth: Increasing flexible, compensated professional development opportunities, establishing mentoring programs, and expanding leadership development programs to provide clear pathways for advancement and sustained professional engagement will keep educators engaged and support retention.

Strengthening the Ecosystem: Launching a public campaign to elevate the profession's value, designating a lead city agency accountable for workforce development, and collecting comprehensive data to inform policy can ensure these investments have their intended impact.

Investing in our child care workforce is not just a matter of fairness; it is a strategic economic imperative. By prioritizing these dedicated professionals, New York City can unlock its full potential, ensuring every child has access to high-quality care and every parent has the opportunity to contribute to our vibrant economy. The time for decisive action to support those who care for our future is now.



1

SUMMARY OF POLICY PROPOSALS



To rebuild the child care workforce in New York City, we will need to think holistically. This will require us to:



Invest in providing early childhood educators with a living wage, benefits, and the supports to sustain themselves and their families

- Establish consistent expectations for pay based on experience
- Set a wage floor
- Use contracts to drive toward parity across settings
- Establish a wage fund



Build a more robust pipeline of future educators

- Create career exposure and dual enrollment training programs for high school students
- Launch loan forgiveness programs
- Create more opportunities for parents to become educators
- Recruit mid-career workers interested in making a career change
- Speed up the background check process for new staff



Create training programs that meet educators where they are to build necessary skills and competencies

- Reinvest in financial and academic supports to help child care staff complete their coursework
- Expand community college training programs
- Create multilingual training programs
- Experiment with new credentialing models
- Launch a city-funded apprenticeship programs
- Develop accelerated credential programs for experienced caregivers
- Expand which early childhood settings are eligible for student teacher placements
- Partner with institutions of higher education to offer more advanced degree programs



Support early educators to remain in the field and grow

- Expand on-the-job professional development offerings, with more flexible delivery options
- Launch formal teacher mentor programs
- Support 'study plan' teachers
- Create substitute teacher pools
- Expand leadership development programs



Make investments in the broader ecosystem

- Launch a massive public campaign to reframe child care as essential skilled work
- Ensure that building the child care workforce is a city government priority
- Collect data and track metrics on the child care workforce more systematically

INTRODUCTION

Child care is an essential service in New York City. There are roughly **500,000 children under five** living in NYC, and the **majority have all parents** working outside of the home. Child care is critical to ensure parents can work and support their families economically. When families cannot access reliable care, they miss work or drop out of the workforce altogether, and New York City's economy suffers.

Child care is, by necessity, a labor-intensive field – small adult-to-child ratios are necessary for health and safety, and to promote cognitive and social-emotional development in young children. Nothing is more important to the quality of an early education experience than the **interactions between children and their caregivers**. Nearly 40,000 people work as teachers and directors in the city's child care programs. Child care workers are the workforce behind the city's workforce; working parents rely on their trusted caregivers to report to work each day and to drive New York City's economy forward. Issues that New Yorkers come up against every day, whether it is a late bus or a canceled health care appointment, are because someone's child care fell through.



Despite their pivotal role in child development and our city's economic livelihood, child care workers have been systematically underpaid and underrespected. Child care workers earn less than nearly every other occupation in New York City. The workforce was recognized as essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the public attention on caregivers has waned.

We need more child care in New York City – **there are more than two children for every licensed child care slot** – and care needs to be accessible and affordable for families. Today, child care is treated as a market commodity; it should be a public good. However, child care access cannot grow if we do not tend to the workforce that makes child care possible. A crisis is already brewing just under the surface; hundreds of licensed child care classrooms in the city sit empty because there are no staff, and there is reason to fear the workforce will continue depleting if we fail to invest in educators.

If we want to maintain the services we have, let alone move to a more expansive vision for universal child care, we need to think in radically

different and new ways about how we attract, retain, recruit, retain, support, and grow the workforce. Fair and equitable compensation is at the core of this challenge, though a more holistic reimagining of how we rebuild the child care workforce is required.

To better connect the challenges to solutions, this report aims to tackle a few big questions:

- Who makes up today's early childhood workforce in New York City?
- What are the biggest challenges facing early childhood educators?
- What are the systemic challenges that are driving the overall staffing crisis in early education?
- Why does the early childhood staffing crisis matter?
- What are the policy solutions that city leaders can consider to address this crisis?

This report is intended as a tool for policymakers to better understand the issues and their root cause, but also to provide inspiration for how New York can move forward and more comprehensively support the early childhood education workforce. Our city's economic future depends on it.

A photograph of a woman and a young child in a park. The woman is crouching on the right, wearing a mustard-colored sweater and green pants, smiling at the child. The child is standing on the left, also wearing a mustard-colored sweater and grey pants, looking back at the woman. A white circle is drawn around the child's torso, containing the number 2. The background is a blurred park with trees and grass.

2

WHO MAKES UP NEW YORK CITY'S CHILD CARE WORKFORCE?

The Scale of the Child Care Workforce

For the purposes of this report, we define the child care workforce to include individuals working as teachers in licensed child care centers and home-based programs in New York City. Child care programs employ many individuals beyond classroom teachers - administrative staff, cooks, janitorial staff, and others - and their work is essential to the city's child care infrastructure. However, this report focuses principally on classroom teachers given they are at the center of the staffing crisis that will constrain the growth of our city's child care system.

We focus on child care workers who serve children from birth to five, though many of the challenges that apply to this workforce also impact individuals who care for school-aged children during out-of-school time. The data in this report largely does not include informal child care providers, including nannies, babysitters, and individuals who may care for relatives or neighbors in unlicensed, or 'legally exempt,' care settings. These caregivers perform essential work and their labor deserves greater compensation and public attention; the policy levers to support them may look different.

36,633

New Yorkers work in child care

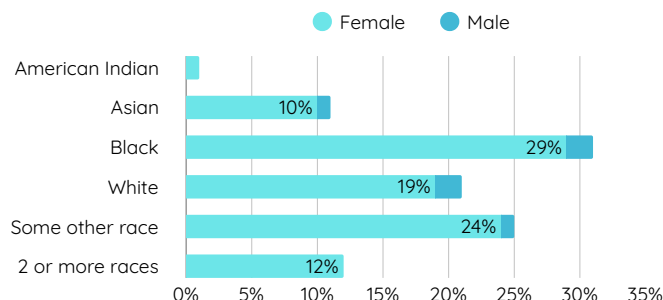
There is no single, definitive source on the total number of child care workers in New York City. However, based on data from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) 5-Year Estimates, we estimate a universe of 36,633 child care workers in New York City. This includes child care workers, teachers, and assistant teachers in child care settings, as defined by the Census Bureau.¹ Some other data sources suggest similar numbers; the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates 37,725 individuals work in child care in New York City. Throughout this report, we use the terms 'child care workers' and 'early childhood educators' interchangeably; different data sources utilize different language. See Appendix A for a more detailed description of the methodology used in this report.

Based on ACS PUMS data, we estimate an additional 2,941 people who work in child care settings as administrators. This figure includes directors at child care centers, as well as other administrators such as assistant directors and bookkeepers. This group is captured separately from child care workers in most data sources; where data is available on child care directors specifically, it is noted throughout this report.

Child care workers are women of color

The child care workforce is predominantly women, with 95 percent of workers identifying as female, and is mostly women of color; 75 percent of the workforce identifies as a non-white or multi-racial woman (Chart 1). The demographic make-up of the child care workforce is no accident: since the time of slavery in the United States, **Black women have been pushed toward caregiving roles for other children,**

Chart 1: Race and Gender Composition of NYC's Child Care workforce

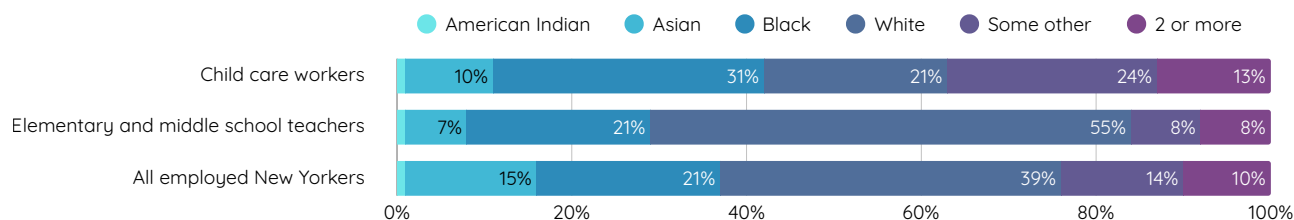


Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023); analysis performed by DCCNY with methodology outlined in Appendix 1

and their work has been systematically underpaid and undervalued. Child care workers are much more likely to identify as people of color than the average New York City worker.

While nearly half of all elementary and middle school teachers in New York City identify as white, just 15 percent of child care workers identify as white. Twice as many child care workers identify as people of color or non-white than the overall New York City workforce (Chart 2).

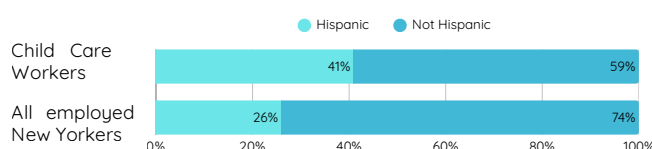
Chart 2: Race breakdown for child care workers and all employed New Yorkers



Source: ACS PUMS

Census data captures Hispanic identity separately from race. Child care workers are much more likely to identify as Hispanic than other employed New Yorkers, with over 40 percent of all child care workers identifying as of Hispanic origin (Chart 3).

Chart 3: Hispanic origin of child care workers and all employed New Yorkers



Source: ACS PUMS

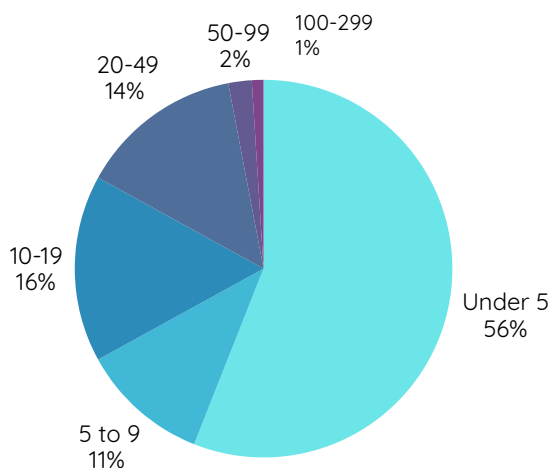
Child care workers are small business owners and employees

According to [state licensing data](#), there are a total of 10,135 unique licensed child care programs in New York City: 2,262 licensed day care centers, 1,568 licensed school-age child care centers, 5,569 group family day cares, and 736 family day cares. Child care businesses in New York City are typically very small; small family child care programs may not have any staff other than the owner and larger family child care programs typically have just one or two additional staff members. Many child care centers in New York City have only a few classrooms; smaller child care programs

are common in New York City given population density and real estate costs, particularly those that serve younger children. While there are some larger child care centers in New York City, including those affiliated with national chains, they are not necessarily the norm.

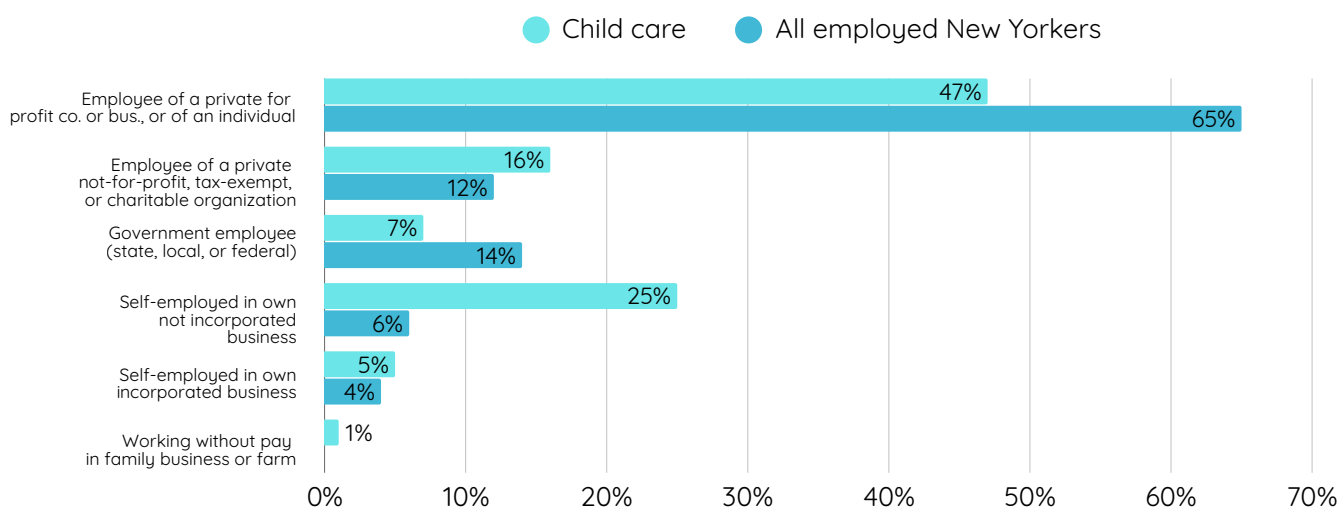
More than half of child care programs operating in New York City employ fewer than five people. Just three percent of child care businesses employ more than 50 people (Chart 4). The small scale of child care businesses has a few meaningful implications for workers. First, they are likely to be employed by

Chart 4: Child care businesses in NYC by employee size



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. "All Sectors: County Business Patterns, including ZIP Code Business Patterns, by Legal Form of Organization and Employment Size Class for the U.S., States, and Selected Geographies: 2023.

Chart 5: Type of employment for New York City workers



Source: ACS PUMS

organizations that do not have an obligation to provide health insurance or disproportionately likely to be self- other benefits because of their small size. Second, they are unlikely to have built-in coverage when they are sick or to enable them to take time off. This also means that an individual staff vacancy or two can have massive ramifications for child care businesses. Lastly, child care workers may wear many hats given the small number of staff at a site. The same person who teaches in a classroom all day may also be pitching in on administrative tasks, supporting families with enrollment, and preparing materials and food for the next day. Staff may or may not be trained to perform all those duties, and often work long hours to manage their additional responsibilities.

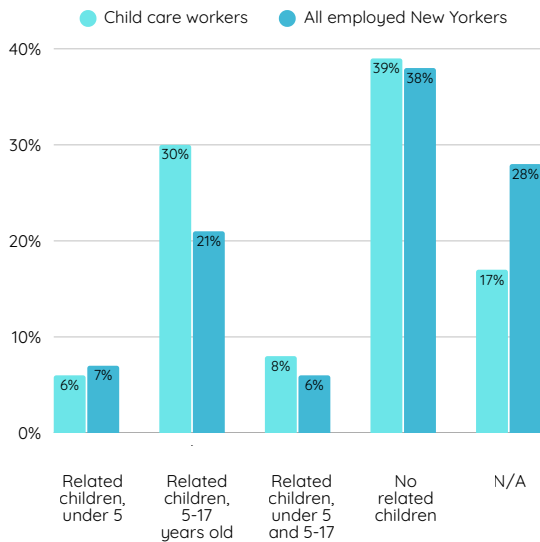
Child care workers in New York City are disproportionately likely to be self-

employed or to work in a nonprofit business (Chart 5). The high rate of self employment is a reflection of the large number of home-based providers in New York, though some center owners both own their business and work in the classroom. Many child care centers, including many DCCNY members, operate as nonprofits, some as part of larger social service agencies.

Child care workers are parents

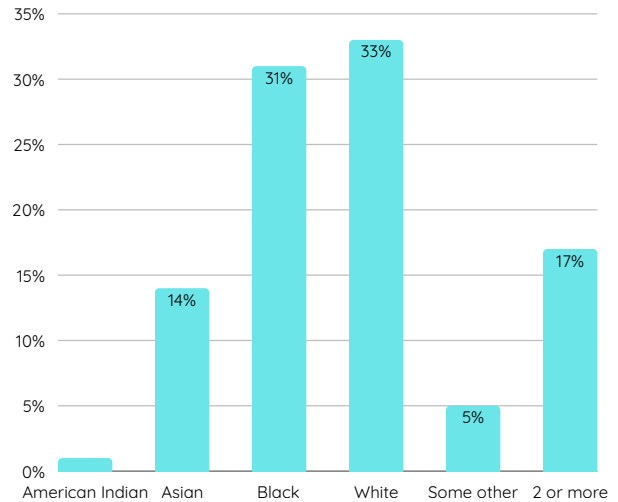
Close to half of all child care workers have their own children at home. In total, over 5,000 child care workers have a child under the age of 5 at home, meaning they are likely making use of some sort of early care and education themselves. Child care workers are more likely to have a school-aged child than the typical working New Yorker (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Age of related children residing in home



Source: ACS PUMS

Chart 7: Racial identity of child care directors



Source: ACS PUMS

Demographics of child care center directors

Like child care workers, center directors are predominantly people of color; 67 percent of child care administrators identify as non-white or multiracial (Chart 7). However, the share of people of color working as administrators is larger than the share of either group working in classrooms, suggesting that

not all demographic groups experience the same rate of career growth into leadership roles.

Additionally, child care directors are less dominantly female; 82 percent of child care directors are female, compared to 95 percent of child care workers. This again underscores that career advancement opportunities may not be equally available to all professionals.

A woman with glasses and curly hair is sitting on the floor in a classroom, reading a book to a group of children. The children are also sitting on the floor, looking at the book. The background shows bookshelves filled with books and a window with green frames.

3

THE CHALLENGES FACING NEW YORK CITY'S CHILD CARE WORKFORCE

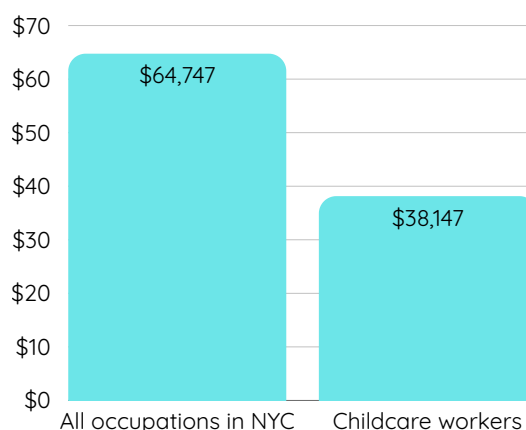
Child care work has always been challenging, but for those in the field, it is deeply, personally rewarding. However, the job has become hard for many to sustain with its comparatively very low wages and limited benefits, particularly when early childhood teachers could earn more money for similar work in other environments - or earn more in other sectors entirely. By choosing to stay in early childhood education, many are putting their families in or at the brink of poverty and are relying on public benefits to make ends meet.

Persistently low wages

Persistently low wages are the biggest challenge facing the child care workforce. These wages would place most child care workers just above the Federal Poverty Line. Many parents would argue the educators caring for their children do some of the most important work. And yet, child care workers are paid less than 96 percent of all occupations in New York City (Chart 8).

These wages would place most child care workers just above the federal poverty line. However, the poverty line does not represent the true cost of living in New York City. Based on [the United Way's estimates of the true cost of living](#), a New York City family with two adults, one school-aged child, and one preschooler needs to earn \$107,246 to sustain the cost of living in

Chart 8: The median wage in New York City



Source: NYS DOL Wage and Employment Data

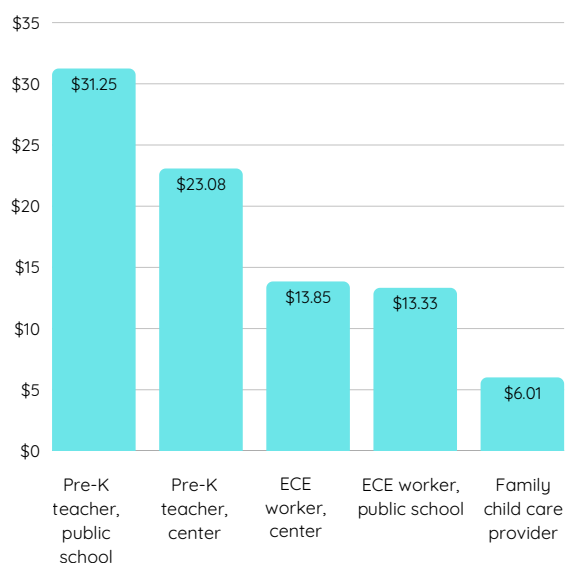
the Bronx and as much as \$151,722 to sustain the cost of living in Southern Manhattan. In no borough can a child care worker sustain their family on their income.

Within the child care sector, wages are not equitable. Child care workers earn less than public school teachers, even when they teach children who are the same age. Educators in home-based child care settings earn meaningfully less than those in center-based programs. Family child care providers are often self-employed owner-operators and do not necessarily have a salary; they pay themselves whatever is left over after all the other bills are paid. This leaves them, on average, with hourly wages well below the minimum wage (Chart 9).²

To the average person, the low salaries in child care feel vexing, particularly in the context of the exorbitant-feeling fees that

parents often pay out of pocket for care. How can families be spending over a third of their income on child care, only for their child care providers to be earning poverty wages?

Chart 9: Median hourly earnings for ECE workers by role and type of employer



Source: Melodia, Lauren. Dignified Pay for Quality Care: What New York's Family Child Care Providers Need to Thrive. Center for New York City Affairs, November 2025.

Child care providers run programs on razor-thin margins and face high fixed costs. The average child care program spends over 70 percent of their budget on personnel to meet the strict adult-to-child ratio requirements in each classroom. The remainder of their budget goes toward rent and utilities (higher in New York City than most places), business and liability insurance

(a rapidly growing cost driver that is becoming increasingly difficult for programs to secure), and classroom materials and food. The Center for American Progress mapped the budget for a hypothetical infant classroom in a child care program with monthly parent fees of \$1,300 and found that, "If the infant classroom is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., 10 hours a day, and has two teachers at all times, this translates into around \$31 per hour to cover the salary and benefits of not only those two teachers but also the nonclassroom personnel who support program operations." Their hypothetical classroom had a ratio of four infants to every adult; many New York City programs operate with a 3:1 ratio, further limiting the available revenue to pay teachers.

To fund staff salaries and other expenses, child care programs receive revenue from multiple public and private sources depending on the types of services that they offer. Some funding sources prescribe what staff should be paid. Many programs blend and braid multiple funding sources together to offer more comprehensive services and to maximize their revenue. The primary sources of income for child care programs in New York City include:

- **3-K and Pre-K Contracts:** Child care programs who work with the city to provide contracted early care and education, including 3-K, Pre-K, and some infant and toddler

care, are paid by New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) based on contract rates negotiated with the city. These contracts include a specific salary scale for workers, which is explored in more detail below. Most Day Care Council of New York members hold contracts with the city to offer 3-K and Pre-K services. Some 3-K and Pre-K programs operate for the school-day and year (September - June, 8 a.m. - 2 p.m.). Others operate for an extended-day and year (July - June, 8 am - 6 pm), and are primarily targeted at children whose families meet specific income requirements.

- **Head Start grants:** Some programs receive Head Start funding directly from the federal government; these grants come with specific provisions about what can be spent on staff salaries. Historically, programs could offer Head Start services through a contract with the city. Head Start contracts with the city **will expire** in June 2026 because the city's Head Start grant was not re-awarded. Programs who receive Head Start funding directly from the federal government are subject to a different competitive award process.
- **Child Care Assistance (Vouchers):** Providers who serve children eligible for the state's Child Care Assistance Program receive reimbursements through the city. Those rates are set by the state using a methodology that

Center-based programs would need close to \$12,000 more annually for each infant and toddler in their program in order be able to pay staff a living wage.

is not tied to the true cost of care; the amount they receive per child - known as market rate - is insufficient to pay sustaining wages. **In their 2022 analysis of the true cost of child care in New York State**, national experts Prenatal to 5 Fiscal Strategies found that on a per-child basis, center-based programs would need to be paid close to \$12,000 more annually for each infant and toddler in their program to be able to pay staff **a living wage**. Family child care providers faced a similar-sized gap.

- **Family fees:** Most families pay out of pocket for at least some child care costs and programs are able to set their own fees. Child care costs in New York City are among the highest in the nation, with families paying, on average, **25 percent of their income in child care expenses** for just a single child. The **NYC Comptroller found** that since 2019, child care fees in centers have increased by 43 percent. In home-based settings, fees are up 79 percent.
- **Philanthropic donations:** Some child care programs may draw on other revenue sources, like philanthropic contributions, to bolster their staff wages. This is not a sustainable approach nor is it available to all child care programs.

Programs often blend these funding sources together because no single funding stream provides enough to operate and compensate staff at a sufficient level. Public funding often does not come with cost escalators, meaning that providers receive the same funds every year to pay their workers with no regard to inflation or cost of living. Child care workers in many programs are losing ground, year over year, as their wages fail to keep up with the rising cost of living in New York.

Child care workers received a welcome bump in compensation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many programs used the state's Child Care Stabilization Grants,

which were funded by federal relief dollars, to augment wages and award staff bonuses. However, once those funds dried up, they were unable to sustain the same increase. For several years, the Empire State Campaign for Child Care has advocated for a permanent child care wage fund in New York that would supplement wages for all child care workers, closing the gap between what programs can afford to pay and what workers should earn to sustain themselves and their families. That priority has been supported in the state Assembly and Senate, but has fallen short of approval in Albany largely out of cost concerns.

“The best way to appreciate staff is to compensate them well, but we can’t do that.”

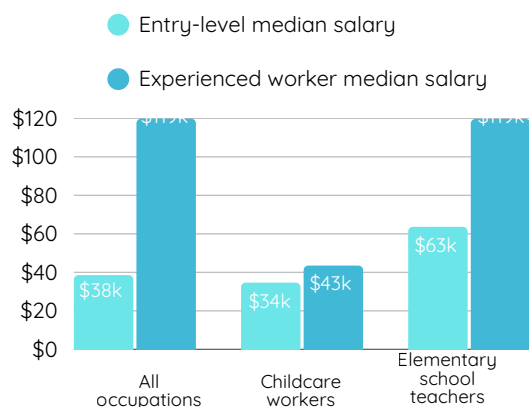
–Day Care Council member

Limited recognition for experience

Child care workers' wages start low and barely grow over time, despite similar education and credentialing requirements to those in public schools, especially for lead teacher roles. The median starting wage for an elementary school teacher in New York City is nearly twice that of a child care worker; the median wage for an experienced elementary school teacher is nearly three times that of a child care worker (Chart 10).³

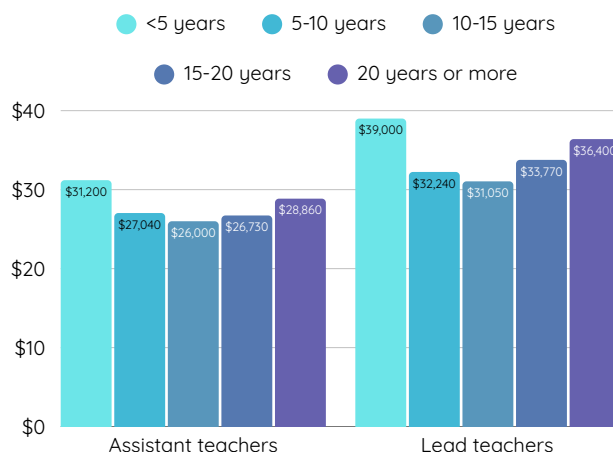
In [a survey of child care workers across New York State](#), the ASPIRE Registry - an optional registry for early childhood teachers that provides access to professional development - found that inexperienced teachers

Chart 10: Comparing entry-level and experienced worker median salaries



Source: NYS DOL Wage and Employment Data

Chart 11: Median wage by years of experience at current job



Source: https://www.nyworksforchildren.org/media/1205/data-story_edvi_winter24.pdf

were actually making more money annually than long-time teachers. This wage stagnation creates limited incentive for child care workers to persist in their roles - and creates a low-income trap for those who do stay (Chart 11).

Limited recognition for education

Child care workers are much less likely to have a Bachelor's degree or more advanced degree than other working professionals in New York City (Chart 12). This is a reflection of the staff qualification requirements in early education, and also reflects the limited incentive that educators may have to spend time and money pursuing higher education. (See Appendix for more detail on staff qualifications.)

Early childhood educators may not be motivated to pursue higher education beyond the minimum requirement because there is not a real correlating increase in compensation (Chart 13). There are many other reasons why educators may not pursue higher education, including the cost and the time commitment. Public policies may further disincentivize current or potential future child care workers from earning a degree. Based on new federal policies, child care workers may be ineligible for federal higher education loan programs because they are entering a field where their earning potential with a college degree does not justify the cost.

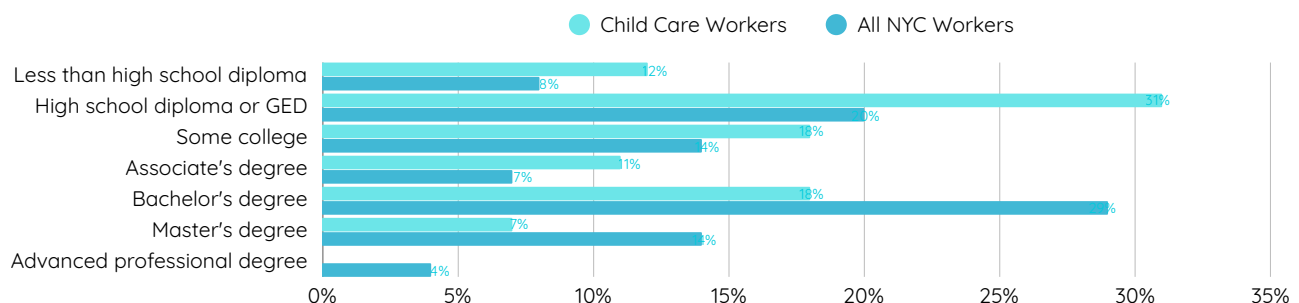
For those who do earn a more advanced degree, many then seek employment elsewhere where the wages feel more commensurate with their experience. Community-based organizations serve as a training ground for public school employment for many teachers. For child care programs, this is an especially painful reality, as they watch the teachers they invest in and train leave

“Younger staff are using us as a stepping stone. They know we need them.”

–Day Care Council member

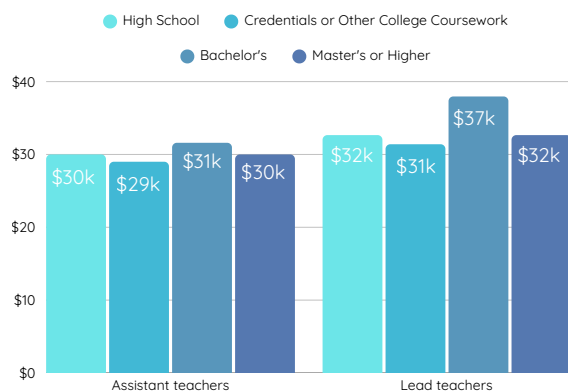
for neighboring district schools. City and state regulations further enable this pipeline: teachers may be employed as a lead teacher in a community-based setting before they are certified, so long as they are on a study plan toward certification; once they are certified, they can stay in their community-based program, but also become eligible for work in the public school system. Public school teachers can go on to earn steady wages, though public schools are hardly immune to the challenge of retaining talented professionals when the pay and benefits are so far below other professions.

Chart 12: Highest level of educational attainment



Source: ACS PUMS

Chart 13: Median wages by years of experience at current job



Source: https://www.nyworksforchildren.org/media/1205/data-story_edvi_winter24.pdf

The challenge of attracting and keeping teachers often begins in early childhood, but it continues throughout the learning continuum into elementary, middle, and high school.

Within the sector, there are some differences in level of educational attainment by role and by the setting that teachers work in. This is driven by minimum staff requirements for each role as established in health code (see Appendix B). Lead teachers in center-based programs are much more likely to hold a college degree than assistant teachers or family child care providers.

The same work for less pay

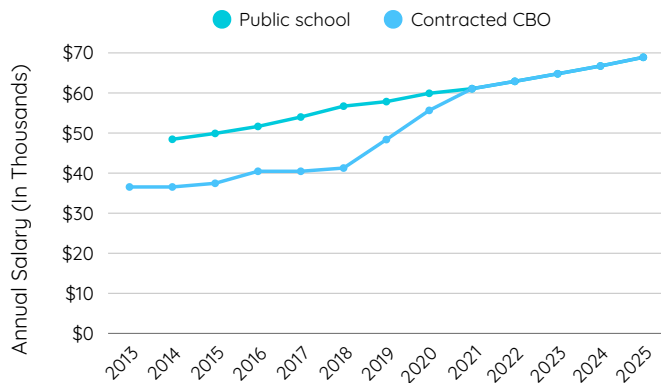
New York City's universal prekindergarten program relies heavily on community-based child care programs, with a **majority of the slots for 3- and 4-year-**

olds offered outside of the public school system through contracts with over 1,000 private programs. All pre-K classrooms are expected to meet the same expectations and teachers are held to the same standards. However, there are meaningful wage discrepancies between pre-K teachers in public schools and those in community settings - even when they have the same credentials.

At the start of the city's pre-K expansion in 2014, the **gap in starting pay** for a teacher with a bachelor's degree in a community setting versus a public school was over \$9,000. Though the city increased salaries for teachers in community-based settings to begin addressing the disparity, the subsequent ratification of a new contract for the United Federation of Teachers, the public school teachers' union, meant that the gap remained.

The yawning salary gap became a rallying cry for child care advocates and labor leaders. In 2019, the city reached a historic labor agreement that for the first time ever, would bring wages for pre-K teachers in child care settings to parity with starting wages for public school teachers. Teachers would see an immediate wage increase, with parity in starting salary achieved by 2021. In the most recent collective bargaining agreement signed between Local 205, District Council 37, AFSCME and Day Care Council of New York, with the City the annual wage increases for teachers match those in the UFT teacher salary scale (Chart 14).

Chart 14: Starting pay for a certified pre-K teacher with a B.A., 2013-2021



Source: For 2013-2021 data: The Road to and from Salary Parity in New York City: Nonprofits and Collective Bargaining in Early Childhood Education; for 2022-2025 data: UFT Teacher Salary Schedule, Agreement between Local 205, District Council 37, AFSCME and The Day Care Council of New York

Even with the historic victory achieved in 2019, functionally, wages are still far from equitable. Teachers in child care settings do not earn longevity bonuses like public school teachers. The Day Care Council’s November 2023 report with the New York City Council Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus, found that directors at community-based organizations lose more than \$2.2 million over the course of a 25-year career by remaining at a community program instead of moving to a public school. Certified teachers face a loss of \$1.7 million, while assistant teachers sacrifice over \$235,000 during that same period.

Teachers in child care settings also typically work longer hours and a longer year for the same pay, making

their actual hourly wages much lower than a public school teacher’s. Beyond wages, public school teachers earn meaningfully more robust benefits, including health insurance and pensions.

On the one hand, preschool teachers in community based programs earn competitive wages compared to some in the sector: teachers earn more in a pre-K classroom than if they work with infants or toddlers, and teachers in city-funded pre-K classrooms may earn more than teachers in privately-funded pre-K programs. There are pay gaps between center-based and home-based programs because of the

“Unless we can get pay parity with the DOE, this is a losing battle...

We have come to expect a massive staff exodus everywhere when the new school year starts.”

– Day Care Council member

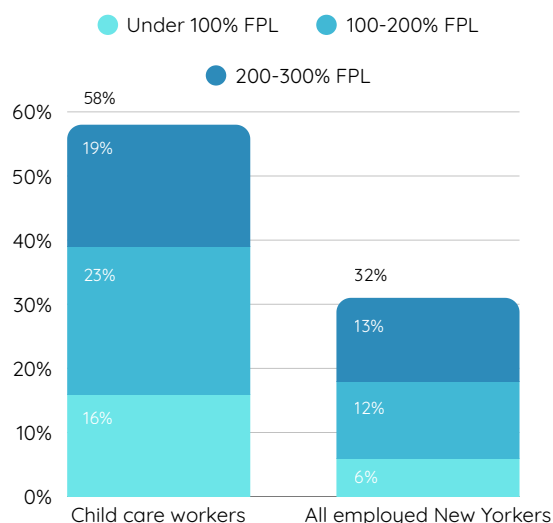
different financial models and constraints that programs face. However, the persistent gap between pre-K teachers in different settings - who otherwise do the exact same work - is hard to justify. It is understandable based on pure economics why teachers leave community-based settings for public schools, even if they prefer the smaller environment and relationships they have built with their colleagues and the families and children they serve.

Poverty and reliance on public benefits

Child care - particularly publicly-funded child care subsidies for lower-income families - were intended at least in part as an antipoverty program, creating the opportunity for parents to work while their children are cared for in developmentally-appropriate environments. It is somewhat ironic then that child care as a field is impoverishing its own workers, creating an entire class of working people who earn too little to provide for their families and are reliant upon other public benefit programs to make ends meet.

Child care workers are twice as likely to live in poverty as other employed New Yorkers. More than half of child care workers are living at or below 300 percent of the federal poverty line (Chart 15).

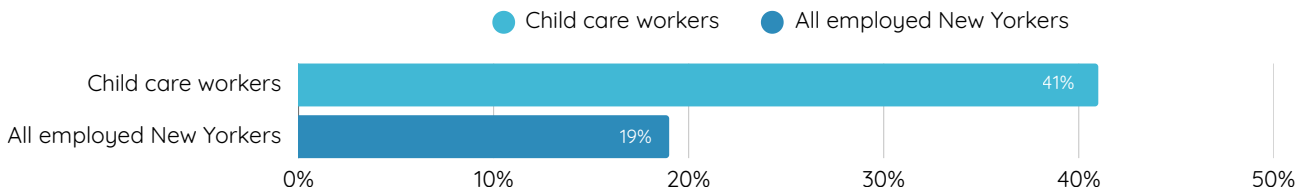
Chart 15: Workers living at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Line



Source: ACS PUMS

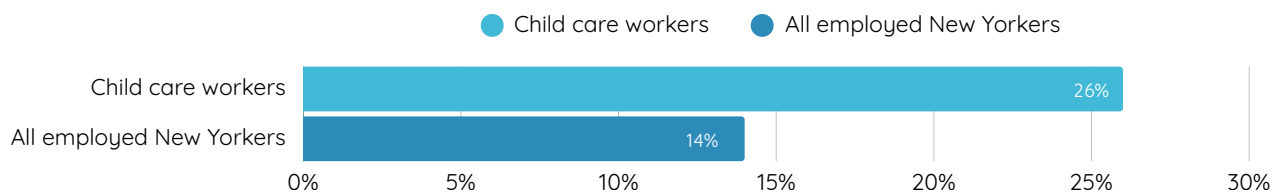
Based on Census data, child care workers are twice as likely as other employed New York City residents to rely on Medicaid for health insurance (Chart 16). The ASPIRE Registry reports that statewide, **about a third of teachers in child care programs receive health insurance through an employer-sponsored plan**; 15 percent of family child care providers have an employer-sponsored plan (meaning, they pay for it themselves). Analysis from the Center for NYC Affairs suggests this data is not fully accurate, and the actual share of family child care providers with health insurance is lower. The share of child care workers without any health care at all may soon rise with cuts to Medicaid and growing costs for private plans.

Chart 16: Share of New York City workers who receive Medicaid



Source: ACS PUMS

Chart 17: Share of New York City workers who receive SNAP benefits



Source: ACS PUMS

Child care workers are also much more likely to receive SNAP benefits than other employed New Yorkers (Chart 17). This **left the child care sector much more vulnerable** when the federal government shutdown led to a major reduction in SNAP benefits access in November 2025.

Challenging work environments

Child care is a physically taxing job. Educators are on their feet for much of the day, tending to the varied needs of the young children in their care - hands-on learning activities, feeding, diaper changes, and more. Child care workers have limited time for breaks, planning, or preparation during the work day.

Child care workers do not universally have access to paid leave or sick time. **According to data collected by the ASPIRE Registry**, 85 percent of lead teachers and 72 percent of assistant teachers at child care centers in New York State receive sick leave from their employer, while just 29 percent of family child care providers and 65 percent of assistants at family child care programs have paid sick leave. Employers in New York State with fewer than five employees are not obligated to provide paid sick leave; this includes many child care programs. In the ASPIRE Registry surveys, many staff noted they were unable to adequately care for their own health - a particular challenge given the high volume of germs in early childhood settings.

The share of teachers with access to paid time off is even lower – 63 percent.

This leaves child care workers with limited time for themselves. Even child care workers who do have paid leave or sick time have a hard time actually taking that leave because their programs will be placed in a bind without them.

Child care workers often spend more time working than their compensated hours. [Research from Cornell University](#) on child care in the Buffalo area of New York found that child care workers put in an average of 1,200 unpaid hours annually in prep time and other uncompensated activities. This was especially true of providers in home-based settings. Anecdotally, many child care center owners and family child care providers rely on the unpaid labor of their family members to manage the full load of running a program.

High staff turnover in early childhood settings exacerbates the stress that educators face; when positions are vacant, or filled by a rotating cycle of short-term substitutes, it places additional burdens on remaining staff and contributes to demoralization. It can also mean staff have fewer breaks or end up working longer hours, as employees

Just over half of child care workers reported they had saved some on their own for retirement.

are often needed to cover non-negotiable adult to child ratio gaps while managing their already heavy workloads.

Unable to save for the future

On average, fewer than half of center-based child care workers in New York State receive an employer contribution to their retirement, according to research from the ASPIRE Registry. Just over half of child care workers across settings [reported to the ASPIRE Registry](#) that they had saved some on their own for retirement. However, 36 percent of those between 45 and 55 years old have saved \$10,000 or less. Among those aged 55 and older, 23 percent had saved \$10,000 or less; an additional quarter of respondents were unsure how much they had saved at all.



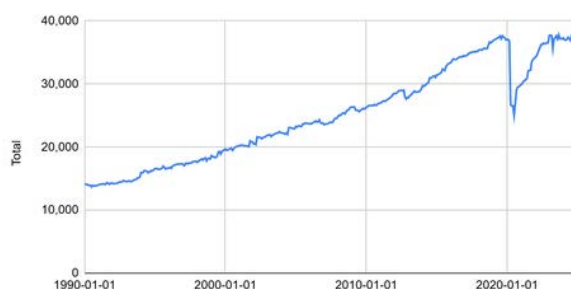
4

**FALLING OFF A
CLIFF: WHY THERE
IS REASON TO
WORRY ABOUT
THE FUTURE OF
THE WORKFORCE**

The child care workforce in New York City has grown significantly over the past several decades; since 1990, the **number of people in the workforce has nearly tripled** (Chart 18). This growth has enabled several positive trends: more adults with children are able to join the workforce and more parents are selecting formal care environments for their children, supporting their early development. COVID-19 delivered a seismic shock to the child care system as many programs were forced to close their doors, temporarily or permanently, throwing families into precarious makeshift arrangements and decimating the child care workforce. There were 30 percent fewer child care workers in summer 2020 than the prior winter, and the workforce today has only just returned to its pre-2020 levels. Prior to 2020, the number of child care workers was growing steadily to keep pace with the increasing demand from families. The stagnant growth over the past several years is not a reflection of decreased demand, but more likely a reflection of the sector's inability to continue growing the talent pool because of the challenges facing the profession. The sector has faced other challenges that may be artificially limiting growth, like the rising costs of operations and **delayed payments for city-contracted programs**.

The precipitous drop of child care workers in New York City after COVID-19 raised alarm bells for many; the pandemic had underscored how

Chart 18: Child care services employees in NYC, 1999-2025



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, All Employees: Education and Health Services: Child Care Services in New York City, NY [SMU36935616562440001SA], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SMU36935616562440001SA>, June 30, 2025.

essential child care work was, and without an influx of new workers, the sector would not return to scale. Though the child care sector has, five years later, rebounded to its pre-pandemic levels, the field has not grown despite increasing demand from families for care. If anything, the field is at greater risk of continuing to shrink. There are a number of significant warning signs that policymakers - and anyone who cares about child care in New York - should take seriously.

Aging workforce

The **median age of child care workers** in New York (~44 years old) is comparable to the citywide median for all workers (~42 years old). Looking only at median age however is misleading; child care workers are stratified by age. The share of child care workers who are

very young (less than 25 years old) and the share who are older is larger than the average for all New York City workers, while the share of child care workers in the 26-44 year age range is much smaller (Chart 19). The child care workforce is in a precarious position because of a hollow middle: the large share of young workers have relatively high turnover rates and the large share of older workers are nearing retirement. Without a stable base of mid-career workers, the child care sector risks a major loss in capacity.

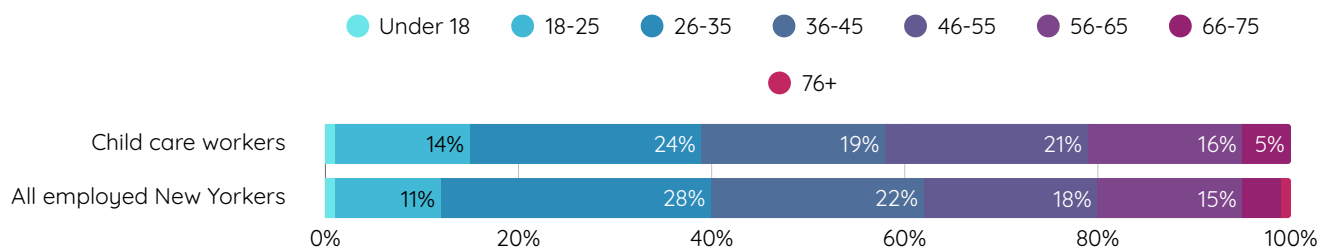
Prior [Day Care Council of New York](#) research found that over 40 percent of child care sites have at least one worker who has been at their program for 20 or more years, while over half of programs report that newly-recruited teachers leave within five years. With high turnover among younger teachers, experienced educators are unable to pass on their knowledge, limiting a broader opportunity for mentorship and to grow the next generation.

“Young staff come in with fresh ideas. They are enthusiastic, and ready to put ideas into practice. But then they get frustrated and we lose them.”

–Day Care Council member

There is variation in age across different [roles in child care](#). According to [national data from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of Berkeley](#), home-based educators tend to be older on average than center-based educators.

Chart 19: Age distribution of all employed New Yorkers and child care workers



Source: ACS PUMS

Nationally, over 50 percent of licensed home-based providers are over 50, whereas a quarter of center-based teaching staff are over 50.

Insufficient new entrants

New York State and City do not report data on how many new workers enter the child care profession every year. Anecdotal data from early childhood programs suggests there are an insufficient number – program leaders struggle to find new staff to fill vacancies without poaching staff from other programs.

Many institutes of higher education in New York City and nearby offer early childhood degree programs, including CUNY campuses and private colleges like Touro University and Mercy University. Most of these programs are relatively small, graduating a few hundred students each, at most. For example, in 2023, 180 Early Childhood Ed students graduated from Brooklyn College, with 105 students earning Bachelor's degrees and 75 students earning Master's degrees. The same year, 138 Early Childhood Education students graduated from Hunter College with 104 students earning Master's degrees, 29 students earning Bachelor's degrees, and 5 students earning Certificates. The relatively small numbers, combined with the fact that many students in degree

programs may already be working in the classroom, make it challenging to **assess in aggregate whether the supply is sufficient to meet demand.**

High turnover

Child care programs have much higher rates of turnover than other professions, including K-12 education. In **a survey of New York City child care programs**, 52 percent of child care centers reported that their new teachers leave within five years. United Neighborhood Houses, a membership organization of New York settlement house nonprofits, **found that 60 percent of its member programs had a staff vacancy rate of at least 10 percent.** More than half of respondents to their survey said it took at least six months to fill vacant positions. All of these organizations run multiple human services programs and report that filling early childhood teacher vacancies is more challenging than other roles.

Anecdotally, child care programs historically saw their departing teachers leaving for other jobs in the sector - either a job at a public school if they were eligible, or with another child care program. In recent years, more and more programs are seeing their teachers leave for jobs outside of child care. With the rise in minimum wage and the explosion of the gig economy,

former child care workers are able to work at places like Target or an Amazon warehouse, or as a driver for a delivery or ride share app, and earn just as much money with potentially less stress and greater access to benefits. Turnover in the child care sector is hardly just a New York City problem.

Nationally, turnover in child care is 65 percent higher than a typical job; preschool and kindergarten teachers have turnover rates more on par with the national average for a typical job.

Limited career mobility

There is no defined career ladder for child care workers; for classroom teachers, there are few options for advancement other than center director. Director roles often require a shift from teaching to administration, which is not appealing to all educators. Administrative roles may require different credentials and skillsets.

It benefits children and the system overall if experienced educators remain in the classroom. However, teachers may not be incentivized to stay without continued opportunity to grow as professionals.

Rising stress and dissatisfaction

Stress and dissatisfaction are at an all-time high for child care workers. While teachers were widely recognized and praised during the COVID-19 pandemic as heroes and essential workers, the

“When programs enroll kids with diagnosed or suspected disability, we make staff work harder with the same support.

...Teachers say their biggest challenge is, ‘I’m not a special education teacher,’ but half their class is children with diagnosed disabilities.”

– Day Care Council member

public praise has largely dissipated. In public discourse, early childhood teachers are often denigrated as ‘just babysitters’; there is limited understanding that early care and education is skilled work.

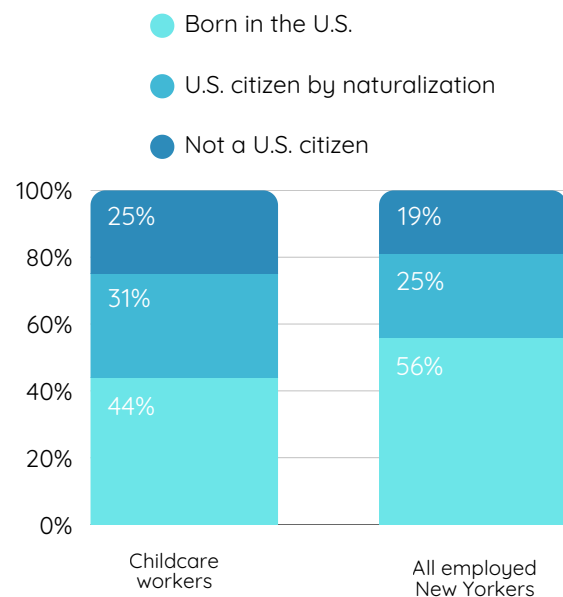
A 2022 survey of over 2,000 early childhood teachers nationally found that 45 percent were suffering from severe stress and burnout. A **more recent survey of pre-K teachers specifically** found they experienced work-based stress at nearly twice the rate of other working professionals.

The share of young children with developmental delays and disabilities and challenging behaviors is driving stress for the child care workforce as well. Early educators have not necessarily been trained to meet the diverse needs of the children under their care; even those who are fully certified may have taken only a single broad survey course on special education. Without the skills and resources to effectively support the children in their classroom, early childhood educators find themselves in high-stress situations and do not have the support they need. The city's push toward inclusion, which aligns to developmental and instructional best practice for children, has not been met with the resources needed for teachers to succeed.

Fears from immigrant workforce

Child care workers are disproportionately likely to be immigrants. More than half of child care workers were born outside of the United States, though many are naturalized or legal permanent residents (Chart 20). Across the country, concerns about immigration raids are creating fears among child care workers, particularly since the revocation of policies that protected sensitive places like schools. **Reports of deportations of child care workers** has the sector broadly on edge, and may create instability in a field that relies heavily on immigrant labor, especially in certain communities.

Chart 20: Citizenship status



Source: ACS PUMS

A woman with dark curly hair tied up, wearing a grey sweater, is smiling and looking at a young child with curly hair, also in a grey sweater. They are sitting at a wooden table in a room that appears to be a classroom or daycare, with shelves of toys and supplies in the background.

5

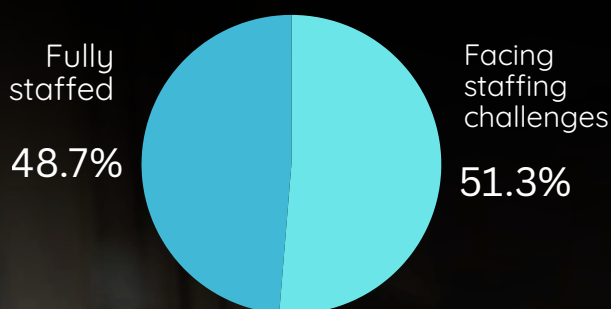
FROM THE VOICES OF DAY CARE COUNCIL MEMBERS

The Day Care Council membership includes over 120 organizations, operating more than 250 child care centers in all five boroughs. Some operate small, single-site programs; others manage a dozen or more different child care centers and offer a range of comprehensive services beyond child care. Across all members though, staffing is a constant topic of concern.

In a recent survey of Day Care Council members, 51% said they are currently facing staffing challenges (Chart 21). Many have seen staff leave for jobs at public schools because of the comparatively better pay and benefits, and cannot attract new staff because of the low pay. One site in the Bronx with 12 teachers reported that six teachers left the prior year for jobs with NYCPS schools. A member with two sites, one in Queens and one in Manhattan, reported they had five teaching vacancies across their two sites the prior year; it took 1-2 months to fill the first three and about 12 months to fill the other two.

For members, staffing challenges have a direct relationship to their ability to enroll and serve children. Multiple sites referenced specific staffing vacancies, including lead and assistant teachers, that would prevent them from enrolling classrooms to their full capacity; they do not have the workforce to remain in compliance with adult-to-child ratio requirements. One member shared in a focus group that a last-minute teacher resignation forced the site to delay the start date for one of its classrooms. Some parents waited, but others could not and had to find other centers.

Chart 21: Which best describes your 2024-2025 staffing status?



A photograph of a woman with grey hair, wearing a patterned cardigan, sitting on the floor and reading a book to three young children. The children are also sitting on the floor, looking at the book. They are in a library or bookstore, with tall wooden bookshelves filled with books in the background. The lighting is warm and soft.

6

THE IMPACT OF A REDUCED CHILD CARE WORKFORCE & THE INVESTMENTS WE NEED TO MAKE TO BUILD A STRONGER FUTURE

The impact of a reduced child care workforce

New York City's fragile child care system is already suffering as a result of the challenges facing the workforce. This is not just a challenge felt by the people working in this field; there are real costs to families, the early childhood system, and the economy.

All across the city and state, licensed child care classrooms are sitting dormant because there are insufficient teachers; thousands of children sitting on waitlists could be served if all positions were filled. Statewide, **more than 16,000 children** cannot be served in child care programs because staff positions are vacant. More than half - 57 percent - of child care programs statewide are short-staffed. A majority of them have to reduce capacity or close classrooms on short notice when staff are absent, leaving families to scramble for care or miss work. Child care disruptions impact parents' - and especially mothers' - ability to work. Research conducted by Robin Hood found that **half of all working mothers in New York City experienced a job disruption because of child care gaps**, negatively impacting their income and creating financial hardship for their families.

Teacher turnover is costly for child care programs; **national estimates** suggest

that replacing a teacher can cost 20 to 40 percent of their annual salary, when recruitment, training, and lost productivity are factored in. These costs can be devastating for child care programs given their low operating margins.

High rates of staff turnover at child care programs cost the city money, too. The city's investments in boosting the quality of early education programs are compromised when staff leave. **National studies** have found that program leaders have less time to work with their remaining teachers when they are distracted by constant hiring activities to fill vacancies. Not all programs suffer from teacher turnover at the same rate, but for those that have recurrent vacancies, improving quality can become a significant challenge.

On an individual level, teacher turnover in child care settings has **a direct and negative impact on children**. The loss of a trusted caregiver **impacts a child's sense of security and attachment**, which can undermine their sense of safety. Children in classrooms with higher teacher turnover typically display more behavioral challenges. Staff turnover may also impact the quality of learning, as instructional continuity is disrupted. Research has shown **a direct relationship** between higher turnover and reduced cognitive and social outcomes for children.

The investments we need to make to build a stronger future

Over the past several years, the idea of a ‘universal child care system’ for New York City - one that provides free or very low-cost care to all families with children under five - has been gaining traction. There are multiple definitions of what ‘universal child care’ could mean, but they all share a vision for a dramatically expanded system of care in the city with much more public investment than today.

In the lead-up to the 2025 mayoral election, universal child care became even more of a rallying cry for voters and candidates. **Nearly all of the candidates** in the Democratic primary stood with the parents and would-be parents who make up New Yorkers United for Child Care to endorse their **roadmap for a universal child care system** in New York, and several candidates released their own detailed plans. Free child care for all was **one of the central campaign planks** for Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani and **a motivating issue for many voters**. In the days leading up to and **immediately following** his election, Mamdani emphasized child care as his top priority.

Meanwhile at the state level, Governor Kathy Hochul has continuously named child care as a priority. Following Mamdani’s victory in the Democratic

primary, Hochul said multiple times that she saw child care as **an area where the city and state could collaborate**. She has **committed to include child care** in her 2026 State of the State and Executive Budget. There are several pieces of legislation pending in Albany that could meaningfully expand public investment in child care, and it is likely to be a hot topic again in the 2026 legislative session.

The focus on child care is welcome - and overdue - but we must be pragmatic about what is required. If New York City and State want to meaningfully expand access to child care for all families, it is critical that we invest in strengthening and supporting the workforce. Too often, resource scarcity leads the field to pit the needs of families against educators. Some critique that every dollar invested in the workforce is money that could have gone to creating access for another high-need family. However, this is a false dichotomy: we cannot create access for more children if there are no educators to teach in their classrooms. On the other hand, advocates for the child care workforce have struggled to build sufficient buy-in with budget-conscious policymakers who are wary of making a big investment in the workforce because of the high cost and the perceived sense that it will require trade-offs with expanding access. It will be critical as we move forward and move toward an expanded system of care that policymakers and advocates see the direct connection between broad goals for family access and the need to grow the workforce.

For New York City to have a truly universal child care system that serves children from birth to five in licensed child care settings, we would need at least 30,000 additional child care workers.⁴ This sum is not insignificant; that would mean close to doubling the workforce we have today. However, the system has massive hiring needs even without a major expansion; based on average turnover rates in early childhood classrooms, the city needs an average of at least 5,000 new early educators every year.⁵

To put this in perspective, **New York City hires 4,000 to 5,000 new public school teachers across grades pre-K through 12 in an average year.** For 2025-26, the city had to hire 7,000 to 9,000 new teachers to fill typical vacancies and meet new class size requirements. This was considered to be an unprecedented challenge in its scale – and even led to changes in staffing flexibility for early childhood programs out of fear that this level of teacher hiring would displace so many early educators.

According to researchers at the Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab, public investment in child care would generate one of the highest job-creation rates of any sector. That’s not to mention the number of New Yorkers who are caregivers and could join the labor force themselves if they had access to care. But for New York to recognize these labor market gains, we need to build the next generation of early childhood educators.

30,000 additional child care workers are needed for a universal system

For the child care workforce to scale up to meet the demands of today - and the future - we need to transform the way we attract, train, recruit, retain, support, and grow our educators. It is critical that we address compensation; until early childhood educators are paid a living wage and recognized as professionals, we cannot solve the staffing crisis in the field. But, it is also important to recognize that compensation alone is not a silver bullet. We need to think holistically about how we build a pipeline of new child care workers, build their expertise, and sustain them as professionals. Fair compensation is a critical lever at each step, but it must be part of a broader set of solutions.

Few of the policy ideas we have outlined in this report are new. Many have been tried in other cities and states, and several have been proposed or even piloted in New York before. Together, this suite of policies represent a holistic approach to building the child care workforce that New York City needs.

A photograph of a woman with dark skin and dreadlocks tied up, smiling and holding a young child with curly hair. They are in a classroom setting with large windows in the background. The image has a dark, moody overlay.

7

POLICY SOLUTIONS

To rebuild the child care workforce in New York City, we will need to think holistically. This will require us to:

1. Invest in providing early childhood educators with a living wage, benefits, and the supports to sustain themselves and their families
2. Build a more robust pipeline of early childhood educators
3. Expand training programs that meet educators where they are to build the necessary skills and competencies
4. Support early childhood educators to remain in the field and grow
5. Make investments in the broader ecosystem

1. Invest in providing early childhood educators with a living wage, benefits, and the supports to sustain themselves and their families

Create an equitable pay scale for early childhood educators

Addressing the low compensation in early childhood education will be critical to any effort to recruit and retain the workforce. There is no way around this reality: if we want high-quality professionals to stay in the classroom, we need to treat them like professionals and compensate them appropriately. Incremental, short-term measures like one-time retention bonuses that do not increase annual salaries will not address the core issue; New York City must commit to a living wage and true

pay parity for early childhood educators to sustain and grow the sector.

Given the fragmentation of New York City's early childhood landscape and the mix of public and private funding, multiple strategies will be required to address gaps in compensation in the near to medium term.

Establish consistent expectations for pay based on experience: Moving to an equitable pay scale for early childhood educators requires a defined career ladder for early childhood educators and an articulation of appropriate compensation at each rung of that career ladder. There are efforts underway now, being led by the CUNY Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (PDI), to bring the field together around shared definitions that could underpin a universal salary scale. A career ladder with clear expectations for what teacher qualifications should be tied to different levels of compensation would help solve a few problems: first, it would help reconcile differences in expectations between different city and state agencies. Second, it would create transparency for child care workers about what is required for them to move up in pay over time. And third, it would help create greater respect for child care as a profession, with pay increases linked to experience and knowledge.

Set a wage floor: The city can define a minimum wage for child care workers that recognizes their labor and the skill required. This would in particular benefit

teaching aides and staff in other support roles whose salaries are currently pegged to the citywide minimum wage. There are multiple campaigns underway in the city to adjust the minimum wage for certain categories of workers that could impact child care workers, including **#JustPay**, which is pushing for a \$21/hour minimum wage for human services workers, and **BUMP**, which is advocating for pay raises in New York City's nonprofit sector. (The Day Care Council of New York has signed onto the #JustPay campaign.) A new minimum wage for child care workers has to be recognized within the rates that the city and state pay to child care programs so that programs can afford to pay at this level.

Use contracts to drive toward parity across settings: While not all staff in child care programs are represented, any program that contracts with the city receives funding aligned with the contract between the Day Care Council of New York and District Council 37 (DC37) for center-based child care workers. The city can work with labor and management to address inequities in the current collective bargaining agreements. Notably, future contracts should include longevity increases comparable to what United Federation of Teachers (UFT) members earn to encourage workers to stay in their programs over time and provisions to address the longer day and year that many child care center teachers work. While the most recent Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) includes a stipend for staff who work over the summer, this additional pay does not

change base salaries and the income is not pensionable. Certified teachers should be earning wages at true parity with their certified counterparts in public schools. Contracts should include cost escalators so that salaries can keep up with inflation and the rising cost of living.

Future labor negotiations must also address wages for teachers who were excluded from prior wage agreements, including those who work in programs specifically for children with severe developmental delays and disabilities, and uncertified teachers, including teaching aides and lead teachers on a study plan. Additionally, the city must revisit its contract for child care center directors, which is negotiated with the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), to address gaps in their wages.

Family child care rates in the city are pegged to the state's market rate process, and negotiated with the Family Child Care bargaining unit of the UFT. The city, state, and UFT could work together to meaningfully increase these rates so that providers are able to operate their programs and take home a living wage. Alternatively, the city could set a rate for home-based providers in its contracts independent of the state market rate.

Establish a wage fund: A majority of child care workers in the city are employed by private programs and would not be covered by any adjustments to city contracts or collective bargaining agreements. In recent years, the Empire State Campaign for Child Care **has pushed at the state level** for a

dedicated fund to increase child care worker compensation. Members of the State Senate and Assembly have championed this proposal and it was included in both bodies' one-house budget proposals. A fund like this could close the gap between what families are able to afford to pay for care and what programs need to appropriately compensate their workforce.

There is precedent for this type of program. **Washington, D.C.** passed a local tax on high-income earners to make a significant investment in early childhood educators' wages. In 2022 and 2023, the city made one-time payments between \$10,000 and \$14,000 to the city's over 3,000 child care workers working with infants and toddlers. Beginning in 2024, any child care program that opts into the salary scale for early educators defined by the city receives funds from its **Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund** to cover a portion of staff wages. **Early findings** from an evaluation of DC's program have been quite positive: new educators entered the field, with employment in the child care sector growing by 7 percent, and there are signals that retention will improve, with two-thirds of DC educators saying they will continue working in early education longer than previously expected.

Some skeptics have pushed back against a workforce compensation fund as a handout. Child care workers are not looking for free money; they are seeking

equitable, sustainable wages for the work they do, and additional public funding is needed to address a market failure. The government has stepped in to support other industries in moments of crisis, including financial institutions during the recession and airlines during the pandemic. Why not child care?

In the long term, as New York moves toward universal child care, it is critical that the city and state consider what the reimbursement model for programs looks like under that approach. The state should move away from its current rate-setting methodology for subsidy care - **market rate** - which is based on the fees that families are able to pay to programs, and should move toward a methodology that takes into account the **true cost of providing quality early care and education** with sustaining wages for the workforce. This rate should adjust as costs rise, so that programs can sustain their operations.

Provide universal health insurance coverage for child care workers

Today, many child care workers pay steep out-of-pocket prices to access health insurance or rely on Medicaid. The city could expand health care coverage for child care workers across all settings by providing access to free or very low-cost insurance plans for those who are not eligible for Medicaid or might prefer

another option. Given threats to Medicaid, there is even more of an imperative for the city to consider alternative coverage options.

In **Washington, D.C.**, employees of licensed child care facilities and home-based programs and their dependents can access premium-free health insurance if they live within the city. Known as HealthCare4ChildCare, **the program is open to all full- and part-time staff at child care programs**, regardless of income or immigration status. To ensure staff know about the program and are able to enroll, trusted community organizations conduct outreach to eligible employees and provide individualized assistance to help them enroll. **Washington State** offers health insurance with no premium to employees at licensed child care facilities, whether or not they receive public funds, and has partnered with a nonprofit organization to facilitate enrollment for eligible workers.

In the past, the city had a health insurance program that community-based organizations could opt into. The city should revisit this model and determine how it could be made more effective.

Expand access to pension plans

A majority of early childhood educators do not have access to employer or

union-supported retirement plans, and are unable to save for retirement themselves. There are some existing publicly-supported retirement systems; the Cultural Institutions Retirement System (CIRS) already includes some child care workers – primarily those working in city-funded centers that hold DCCNY memberships and whose members are unionized. The city could work with CIRS to expand eligibility criteria, allowing more private child care programs to opt in for their employees. In partnership with labor unions, the city and/or state could create a retirement program specifically for home-based providers, many of whom are self-employed. California recently became **the first state to fund a retirement program for home-based educators**; this was the result of collective bargaining with Child Care Providers United, an affiliate of SEIU representing early educators in the state.

Provide housing support

The city's high cost of living prevents people from joining or staying in the child care workforce. The City has not acted on the opportunity to support housing options for child care workers like it does for other low-income workers. City workers are already **eligible for priority in affordable housing lotteries**, including public school teachers. However, this priority does not currently include child care workers.

Similarly, the [city unveiled a plan in 2024](#) to spend \$1 billion on affordable housing for essential workers, including teachers, firefighters, and paramedics. Child care workers were not explicitly included in this plan either.

The City could create specific priorities within the Department of Housing Preservation and Development's affordable housing lotteries to ensure that child care workers have the same priority as other categories of essential workers. These benefits could be geographically targeted to areas of the city that are child care deserts or broadly applied. As many new rental buildings are scheduled to come online soon through recent zoning deals, there is an opportunity to prioritize child care workers proactively rather than after the apartments are already rented. The same priority structure could be applied to Housing Development Fund Corporation cooperatives (HDFC coops), giving child care workers a more affordable opportunity for home ownership.

Make access to child care benefits automatic

Many child care workers leave the field when they have families of their own because they cannot earn enough to support their children. In a city where [child care costs are often a family's greatest expense](#) - even more than rent - providing educators with free child care for their own children could be a significant incentive

to stay in the sector.

Multiple states have implemented policies that make child care workers categorically eligible for free or deeply subsidized child care through their state subsidy program. Kentucky was the first state to guarantee child care workers access to child care subsidies, regardless of household income, and [research has shown](#) that the policy encouraged educators to stay in the workforce and supported recruitment. More than [a dozen additional states and communities](#) have initiated similar policies, including Arkansas, Iowa, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Rhode Island, and Washington.

Because New York has expanded eligibility to child care subsidies in recent years, many child care workers may already be eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program. However, granting them automatic eligibility without forcing them through an arduous application process would be both a substantive benefit and a signal of respect.

2. Build a more robust pipeline of future educators

It will be critical to build out a more robust pipeline to bring people into the child care workforce. This will require enticing people who had not been considering early childhood education careers, and removing barriers for those who want to

join the profession. Child care has not historically been included in many workforce development programs, in part because the salaries for full-time jobs are so low compared to other fields. Proposals like these will only succeed if the underlying working conditions and compensation for child care workers also change.

Create career exposure and dual enrollment training programs for high school students

As NYCPS continues to expand opportunities for workforce development and career exploration in high school, there are opportunities to expose high school students to child care work and give them opportunities to work in early childhood programs. High school students could receive training, gain on-the-ground experience with year-long and summer placement opportunities, and potentially earn credit toward a credential (like the Child Development Associate, CDA) or degree program in early childhood education. High school graduates looking to work while in postsecondary education might choose to stay in the early childhood classroom for longer. Programs like this have the dual benefit of attracting new people into the child care workforce, while also filling immediate gaps in staffing. (Implementing a program like this would require some revision to the background check process to allow students under 18 to work in child care

centers.)

This is a model that other states and localities have experimented with already; Milwaukee [offers a dual enrollment program](#) for high school students to begin pursuing early childhood education licenses and provides job placements. Minnesota [passed state legislation in 2023](#), “Credit for Caring Careers,” which grants high school elective credit hours to students in their junior and senior year of high school who work in a variety of care settings, including child care centers. In [South Dakota](#), CDA-coursework is offered statewide in high school settings; students can earn high school credit for pursuing their CDA and work in child care centers to earn credit for on-site work.

Launch loan forgiveness programs

In Vermont, the [Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Early Childhood Educators](#) provides up to \$4,000 annually to reduce debt for early childhood educators actively working in licensed programs in the state. New York could also consider a program like this to support child care workers who are already in the field and are at risk of leaving because of their inability to pay back their debt.

Additionally, New York could also consider addressing the issue of student loans and debt further upstream. Rather than wait

for child care workers to accrue debt and forgive it later, the city could launch a program in partnership with CUNY to allow prospective early education teachers to earn their credentials without any upfront cost. Participants would be required to work in licensed early education settings in New York City for a certain number of years after graduating or would owe funds back to the city. This would allow child care workers to graduate from college debt-free and to immediately start earning money, setting them on a stronger path toward financial security in child care.

Create more opportunities for parents to become educators

Since Head Start was launched as a multigeneration antipoverty program in 1965, one of its explicit strategies to support parents has been to train them as educators. Many Head Start teachers and leaders **were first introduced to the program as parents**. The path to becoming an educator started for many as a classroom volunteer or as a paid assistant.

Child care programs more broadly could adopt this approach. The city could develop and disseminate resources to help programs structure opportunities for parent engagement in the classroom that can lead to training and employment. This could be paired with free- or low-cost opportunities for parents to build up the relevant credentials to grow as early childhood educators.

Create a ‘care worker visa’ for immigrants interested in entering the profession

Child care is a profession that already attracts an outsized immigrant population. The city could capitalize on this by offering pathways to residency or work permits for immigrant child care workers as part of a “care worker visa” model. The city could potentially serve as the sponsoring employer for people seeking a visa in programs that are funded by the city; more likely, individual child care programs would be the sponsoring employer and the city could provide support and technical assistance. The city would also need to play a large advocacy role; a policy like this would require state and federal government buy-in, which could be challenging in the current national political climate. However, the scale of the child care workforce gap and its impact on the economy could compel policymakers to consider creative solutions.

Recruit mid-career workers interested in making a career change

There may be untapped opportunities to recruit people who are already in the workforce into child care. Teacher recruitment programs like NYC Teaching Fellows have successfully brought mid-career professionals interested in more fulfilling roles into teaching; the city could launch a similar program specifically focused on early childhood education. As

many workers in other sectors become displaced or are threatened with displacement by AI, child care offers a compelling alternative: there will always be jobs in child care and there is no technological substitute for the human connections in work with children. The city could launch a large-scale campaign, targeting workers most at-risk of job loss because of technological advances, and offer support to those workers to make a transition into early childhood education, including access to training and job placement support.

Speed up the background check process for new staff

Child care workers must go through a city-run background check process before they can begin employment at a licensed child care program. This process can take months at a time; while it has sped up somewhat in the past few years, **potential staff can still be stuck in limbo for 60 days or more**, according to some programs. The prospective staff member cannot start working until their background check clears, meaning they are without income and the program is without a teacher. Many prospective teachers give up and seek out jobs outside child care, or go to programs that are comfortable skirting the regulations.

The city must continue to focus on expediting this process so that teachers can begin working in programs faster.

The city should also explore making background checks portable. Currently, educators must go through the background check process again if they start at a new program, which may inhibit some educators from staying in the field. There is some precedent for expanding portability; staff can work in different sites operated by the same organization currently. Moving to full portability would require state action.

3. Create training programs that meet educators where they are to build the necessary skills and competencies

Depending on their role and the setting in which they work, child care providers require different levels of credentialing; some roles require a BA and additional advanced coursework, while others require a CDA or no credential at all. (See Appendix B.) Child care workers at every level may be looking to advance in their career, either by gaining the credentials to move into a different role or by building new skills that will support them in their current role. This list of policy ideas would support child care workers who are already in the field, though some of them may apply to individuals just entering the profession. Not all of the proposals listed here apply equally to all child care roles.

Reinvest in financial and academic supports to help child care staff complete their coursework

The Day Care Council of New York previously administered the City's **Early Childhood Career Ladder Program** in partnership with DC37 Local 205 (and previously District Council 1707). This program lasted through 2022. It offered multiple types of support to union members working in child care programs: 1) scholarships for associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees in early childhood education; 2) free CDA coursework at Bronx Community College; and 3) supports to address the barriers that educators face in completing their degrees, including certification exam preparation workshops, an internship program to match CDA students with day care placements, and writing and math clinics. City funding for this program has expired; the program could be renewed and reinvigorated. The Day Care Council of New York and its partners learned critical lessons from implementing this program that could be applied to future cohorts to ensure greater uptake of the support and benefits.

Expand community college training programs

To meaningfully expand the field of early childhood educators, the sector will need

to bring in new high school and college graduates, as well as working adults. This will require an examination of who our teacher prep programs are designed to serve and whether they are meeting the needs of all adult learners. While many New York City colleges do offer credential and degree programs for early childhood educators, they are not necessarily tailored toward the needs of working professionals. Most degree programs still require in-person participation during working hours, which limits participation. By offering more coursework during the evenings, on weekends, and with online, asynchronous options, colleges may be able to boost enrollment and completion rates. Some CUNY campuses already **offer early childhood education coursework on nights and weekends**; these opportunities should be expanded and more comprehensively marketed to those in the field.

Colleges should also continue to grow programs that train educators with specialized skills. In 2023, Borough of Manhattan Community College **launched a partnership** with several other area community colleges to train more preschool special education teachers with federal grant funding. It is critical that programs like this are maintained, if not expanded further.

Other existing programs at New York's public colleges could be expanded to include more early childhood educators. For example, **the CUNY Reconnect Program** offers free tuition to students who return to school and finish their degree with over 120 degree programs included.

There are two early childhood education programs available, one at Bronx Community College and one at Borough of Manhattan Community College. These could be expanded and more aggressively marketed to potential students.

Create multilingual training programs

Educators looking to earn their Child Development Associate (CDA) in New York have the option to take coursework in English or Spanish only. In other cities, training programs have successfully reached new students by offering early childhood teacher training programs in a broader array of languages other than English. **North Seattle College offers early educator training in Arabic, Mandarin, Somali, and Spanish**, and demand has been significant; the language-specific cohorts have waitlists, with both current and prospective educators looking to join. The City should also place pressure on the Council for Professional Recognition, which administers the CDA, to proactively offer the exam in a more diverse set of languages. Currently, candidates pursuing a CDA **must apply to the Council** for approval to complete their CDA assessment in languages other than English and Spanish. (In some recent years, teachers in New York were told they could only take the exam in English, which generated some concern and confusion.)

Experiment with new credentialing models

Across the country, including **elsewhere in New York**, community colleges are introducing new stackable **microcredentials** to support current or aspiring early childhood educators who are looking to enhance their qualifications, but may not have the time, budget, or interest to work toward a full degree. These credentials or certificates can be focused on specific topic areas, like infant/toddler care, inclusion, or dual language instruction. When students complete these microcredentials, they receive a certificate that they can use to market themselves during hiring processes or potentially even to receive a pay bump. For students who do go on to pursue a degree, these credentials can accumulate toward their credit requirements.

With buy-in from the city that microcredentials could be tied to pay increases for early childhood educators, community colleges and child care programs could work together to develop coursework that addresses specific learning gaps they are seeing in the workforce. For child care workers, this could be a mechanism to build particular skills and be compensated for it.

Launch a city-funded apprenticeship program

New York City could develop a city-funded apprenticeship program that matches current and aspiring caregivers with existing home-based or center-based programs to give them paid, on-the-job learning opportunities while simultaneously matching them to low-cost or tuition-free credential programs. New York already has [a robust infrastructure in place](#) to support apprenticeships across sectors. Given the fragmentation in child care and the small scale of most child care programs, an apprenticeship program would likely have to be driven at the sector level by the city or an intermediary rather than by individual child care programs.

Many states and localities, including Honolulu, HI, Santa Fe, NM, and Kalamazoo, MI, have [launched formal apprenticeship programs](#) with institutes of higher education to create opportunities for child care workers to gain formal credentials while remaining in their jobs and to earn credit for their work experience.

In 2021, the Day Care Council of New York partnered with Bronx Community College to implement a pilot apprenticeship program, called the Early Childhood Associate (ECA) Apprenticeship Program, through which participants pursued their CDA. This program received support from the New York State Department of Labor. To meet the diverse needs of its participants, the program

offered courses in Spanish, and classes were available in the evenings and online

Develop accelerated credential programs for experienced caregivers

There are thousands of New Yorkers who care for children, but do not necessarily have formal education or work experience in a formal setting. Data from the American Community Survey suggests there are more than 14,000 people working in child care in private households as nannies or babysitters. The actual number is likely higher as many nannies and babysitters do not report their work. For some of these individuals, early childhood education is a calling and their long-time profession, but they have not necessarily had the incentive or seen the pathway to take a role in a more formal setting. The city could work with CUNY and other higher education providers to launch an accelerated training program specifically targeted at people with years or even decades of on-the-ground and practical early childhood experience, and develop structures to award academic credit for life experience.

Expand which early childhood settings are eligible for student teacher placements

A [Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education in New York](#) requires practical student teaching experience. Students are typically steered toward public school

districts to complete their student teaching placement. If colleges were to place student teachers in community-based early childhood settings, it would provide a welcome boost in short-term staffing to the program and potentially expose new educators to a more diverse set of career opportunities. There are some examples already of CUNY schools that partner with early childhood education programs – for example, Hunter College places some of its students with Goddard Riverside, a multi-site early childhood program in Manhattan. This model could be replicated at other campuses and with other providers.

Partner with institutions of higher education to offer more advanced degree programs that enable career growth

For early childhood educators who are already working in formal settings, programs like **Bank Street College's Early Childhood Advanced Standing Program** create a faster on-ramp to advanced degrees. Bank Street's accelerated 16-month Master's program is targeted at teachers already in the classroom, with a reduced number of credits required to graduate and significant scholarships available to participants. Expanding the number of programs like this, and partnering with a

more diverse array of institutions to offer them, could increase their accessibility.

4. Support early educators to remain in the field and grow

For their own professional development and personal fulfilment, and to benefit the children they serve, early childhood educators need opportunities to learn and grow on the job. Professional development can lead to new skills and potentially new credentials, which could in turn create opportunities for career advancement and salary growth. There are structural barriers often for working professionals to participate in professional development. By tackling these barriers, the city can support educators as professionals and strengthen the quality of early childhood instruction.

Expand on-the-job professional development offerings, with more flexible delivery options

Child care workers are required to participate in annual professional development courses to retain their credentials. Most of the required professional development courses are tied to health and safety topics. For many educators, keeping up with required hours is a challenge. Working an 8-10 hour day leaves little time available for coursework and many of the continuing education courses have fees.

Beyond merely maintaining their credential, to continually grow in their roles, and to deliver high-quality education, teachers need access to a more nuanced array of professional development topics. There is a direct relationship between training, satisfaction, and retention: teachers who feel ill-equipped to work with young children who have behavioral issues, for example, are **more likely to experience burnout and leave their roles**. Most teachers take just one course on diverse learning needs in their formal pre-service training. In the classroom, teachers are likely to encounter children with a wide range of developmental needs.

To support more teachers to complete relevant professional learning, professional development opportunities could be:

- Offered during the work day, with support available to programs to cover teachers' classroom responsibilities (e.g., access to a shared pool of substitute teachers)
- Delivered flexibly, through online asynchronous courses that can be accessed as short modules
- Paired with on-site coaching, to ensure teachers understand how to apply the learnings from the professional development courses
- Compensated, to recognize the time commitment. In **Denver**, teachers and directors at private preschool programs that complete professional development receive financial remuneration

- At minimum, available for free, without cumbersome application processes for child care workers to qualify for scholarships

Launch formal teacher mentor programs

Michigan **recently launched a Mentor Teacher Credential** for early childhood educators to recognize experienced leaders in early childhood education and support educator development across early education settings. The state is working with early education experts to develop the credential program; educators who opt in to become mentor teachers will receive training and support, plus a stipend upon completion. State leaders believe the program will support retention and growth of the mentor teachers, while also creating more opportunity for those experienced educators to coach newer teachers. In New York City, the UFT contract has a master teacher position for K-12 education that includes formal responsibilities for mentoring fellow teachers. This model could be replicated within the DC37 contract for center-based early childhood teachers and could follow a similar compensation framework.

Support 'study plan' teachers

About half of teachers in pre-K classrooms in community-based programs are on a 'study plan,' meaning they are not yet certified, but working

toward their credential. State education law permits teachers to work in the classroom while working toward their degree for up to three years. At the end of that period, they need to earn their certification or move on. Some have theorized that this time limitation, plus the promise of a higher salary once teachers are certified, will motivate staff to work toward their degree.

However, this theory has not borne out. Many study plan teachers face challenges completing their certification, particularly given the cost and time commitment of higher education. The share of teachers on a study plan has not meaningfully changed in the time since Pre-K for All launched in New York City in 2014. State waivers have allowed teachers to stay on a study plan longer than the originally prescribed three years, though many fear the city will start to enforce the timeline. This could have devastating implications for programs' ability to staff their classrooms in the near term.

It is critical therefore that the city and state continue to enable study plan teachers to work in their roles, and take steps to support this specific population of teachers to earn their credentials. Many of the other ideas in this report would benefit study plan teachers, like loan forgiveness and training programs delivered at more flexible times. Study plan teachers would also specifically benefit from a mechanism to recognize their past teaching experience with college credits.

The state could create some tool to measure the existing competencies that experienced teachers have and grant credit toward a degree program, similar to how colleges grant credit for Advanced Placement exams and other preexisting work.

This issue was previously explored by the Day Care Council in even greater detail in [a 2019 memo](#); the majority of the issues named remain relevant.

Create substitute teacher pools

When a child care worker is absent, programs typically have to scramble; few child care programs have a deep reserve of substitute teachers they can access with last minute notice. Child care centers that contract with the city can access NYC Public Schools substitute teachers. However, they are required to pay those substitutes the UFT-negotiated rate of about \$50 an hour, which is more than centers can afford - and highly problematic internally when their own substitute teachers and support staff earn minimum wage (or \$18 per hour, if subject to DC-37's CBA). Governor Hochul [previously committed](#) to fund and implement a statewide child care substitute pool, though this has not yet come together in practice. As of the publication of this report, it is not clear New York City will be included in the pilot.

Several states and regions have put or are putting child care substitute pools into place, which reduce program burden when

staff are absent and enable staff to take time off for personal reasons, as well as professional development. In rural New Hampshire and Vermont, a workforce development organization has **launched a program** that trains early educators and requires them to participate in a substitute pool while doing so. This gives the teachers-in-training access to credentials and paid work, while also systematically filling a gap for over 100 child care programs. Alameda County, California **plans to launch** a substitute pool for child care workers with new dedicated revenue for early care and education.

New York City could launch its own substitute pool, in collaboration with the state or on its own. This could fill a major gap for programs, and would be much more efficient than every program scrambling independently to find and vet substitute teachers. In the long term, this would help grow and sustain the workforce – it might introduce new people to the idea of working in early childhood and could increase retention for child care teachers, who might be more able to take time off when they need to.

Expand leadership development programs

Leading an early childhood program is very different work than teaching in an early childhood classroom; there are a

suite of administrative and management skills that are required. When teachers move into leadership roles without proper training, it can create challenges for everyone involved: directors are not set up for success and tensions between teachers and leaders may rise as a result. Not all teachers necessarily understand what is involved in leadership, and may not have the information to make informed decisions about whether moving into leadership is right for them.

New York City already has some leadership development programs in place, including a certificate program at CUNY and training offered through NYCPS. These offerings could be expanded and marketed more systematically to early childhood educators. Training programs should include opportunities for teachers to shadow leaders, so they can make more informed choices about whether leadership is an appropriate pathway for them. Offering these training programs for free, or even providing a stipend to participants, could increase uptake.

At the same time, leadership development programs should work with child care programs and labor unions to ensure that the right skills are being taught in these programs. Center directors need a wide array of skills to be successful, ranging from instructional coaching to fiscal management to staff oversight.

5. Make investments in the broader ecosystem

As the city increases its focus on the early childhood workforce, there are systemic investments needed to ensure the efficacy of this work. By focusing on governance, accountability, and public awareness, the city can build long-term support for the child care workforce and ensure that public funds are spent in a more coordinated and intentional manner.

Launch a massive public campaign to reframe child care as essential skilled work

The city could launch a major media campaign to reframe child care as essential skilled work, using storytelling, testimonials, and data to boost its cultural and economic value. The campaign could highlight the impact of early educators on children during the most critical years of brain development to increase respect and demand for the profession, and to underscore that early childhood education is the foundation of a child's learning continuum. Rich early childhood experiences shape cognitive, social, and emotional development, which directly influence later academic performance. Highlighting early educators as integral to the learning continuum reinforces that the skills they bring (building relationships,

monitoring development, fostering curiosity) cannot be replicated by technology or artificial intelligence. This campaign could have the dual benefit of boosting morale for existing educators and serving as a recruitment tool for new potential educators.

Early childhood teachers often feel 'less than' when compared to teachers in older grades; for example, many retail stores offer teacher discounts, but these rarely apply to child care workers. As part of its public campaign, the city could encourage retailers and others to acknowledge early childhood educators and child care workers as teachers by being more inclusive of child care workers in their support of educators - a modest, but meaningful, signal that early childhood educators are just as valued.

Ensure that building the child care workforce is a city government priority

There is no single city agency or mayoral office that holds responsibility for the child care workforce today. While the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is responsible for licensing and staff background checks, they do not play an explicit role in expanding the workforce. NYC Public Schools provides some support to contracted early childhood programs in staff recruitment and hiring and works with some institutes

of higher education on building the pipeline. However, their work exclusively benefits programs who contract with the city and many programs are wary of competing with the public school system for teachers. The Administration for Children's Service administers child care vouchers, but does not have any responsibility to increase the number of programs. Child care subsidy reimbursement rates - which could incentivize people to join the field, if they paid a thriving wage - are set by the state. Within the [The Mayor's Office for Child Care and Early Childhood Education \(OCCECE\)](#), several sectors are explicitly named as priorities; child care is not one of them. The Mayor's Office of Child Care posts some resources for child care educators on its website, but the workforce is otherwise a limited focus.

The city will need to take greater responsibility for supporting the growth of the early childhood workforce if leaders are serious about expanding access to care. While many agencies have a role to play, a single entity should be empowered and accountable for driving forward initiatives focused on boosting the supply of early childhood teachers. Executing on the policies outlined in this report and ensuring that goals are met will require a singular focus. OCCECE should be empowered with more formal authority and have the ability to hold other agencies accountable for their work on expanding the child care workforce. Key workforce metrics could

be added to the Mayor's Management Report to ensure that city leaders are monitoring progress and using data to drive accountability.

Collect data and track metrics on the child care workforce more systematically

For the city to focus on the child care workforce in a more holistic and systematic manner, leaders need comprehensive, accurate, and current data. There is no single record today of people who work in child care in New York City. Many choose to enter their data with the ASPIRE Registry, though this data is not inclusive of all child care programs and is maintained outside of government. NYCPS has some data on teachers who work in programs that contract with the city, but their information is limited to city-funded classrooms. The city could build out its data infrastructure to collect more information about staff as part of the licensing process that the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) leads for center-based programs; similar data could be collected by the state, which oversees licensing for home-based providers. This data could be updated on a semi-regular basis as programs renew their license and as city and state agencies perform monitoring visits.

Maintaining a singular source of information on the entirety of the child care workforce will help city leaders better understand trends, track challenges, and

assess whether policies and investments are working to address the underlying challenges. More comprehensive, accurate, timely data would be critical to implementing any kind of workforce compensation program.

Conclusion

New York City's child care system is at a critical juncture. Despite serving as the backbone of our economy, enabling parents to work and children to thrive, the child care workforce faces systemic undervaluation, insufficient compensation, and a lack of comprehensive support. This report has laid bare the stark realities: a predominantly female workforce, largely composed of women of color, earning poverty wages, struggling to access basic benefits, and enduring challenging work environments. The looming threat of a shrinking workforce, driven by high turnover and a lack of new entrants, jeopardizes the entire system, impacting families, economic stability, and the developmental outcomes of our youngest New Yorkers.

However, the path forward is clear. To build the robust, equitable child care system New York City needs, we must commit to a holistic strategy that prioritizes fair compensation, universal benefits, and robust professional development. By investing in living wages, offering accessible health insurance and retirement plans, and fostering clear career pathways, we can attract and retain the dedicated educators essential to our city's future. Most immediately, we should focus on increasing compensation and building up the workforce pipeline to ensure we are growing the field and providing the appropriate incentives for new educators to stay in the field. This isn't merely an expenditure; it's a vital investment in our children, our families, and the long-term prosperity of New York City. The time to act is now, to ensure that those who care for our future are cared for themselves.



Endnotes

Footnote 1: The Census defines the Child Care Services industry as: “This industry comprises establishments primarily engaged in providing care and early learning opportunities for infants and children. These establishments generally care for children from birth through school age and may also offer pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and/or before- or after-school educational programs. The care and early learning provided by these establishments may include opportunities for development in health, social and emotional learning, and family engagement.” See Appendix for more detail on methodology.

Footnote 2: This analysis was published by the Center for New York City Affairs and incorporates data from CNYCA’s 2025 survey of family child care providers and CNYCA’s analysis of American Community Survey 2023 5-Year Data. “ECE worker” includes lead and assistant educators. “Centers” include non-profit and for-profit programs. The “Center/private” ECE worker includes those who work in FCC settings as well, but not the provider herself. “Family child care provider” includes family child care and group family child care providers.

Footnote 3: The Department of Labor defines ‘experienced wage’ as the average of the top two-thirds of wages in an occupation.

Footnote 4: We estimated this figure based on the following assumptions: We used population estimates from the Citizen’s Committee for Children to approximate the number of children in New York City in one-year age cohorts between 0 and 5. We estimated the number of children who would participate in a universal child care program based on the age-specific uptake rates in the universal child care roadmap published by New Yorkers United for Child Care – 80% of 3- and 4-year-olds, 60% of 1- and 2-year-olds, and 50% of children under 1. For 3- and 4-year-olds, we subtracted the number of children who are served in public school slots in the city’s 3-K and Pre-K programs; in doing so, we assumed that public school capacity will remain static and to assume there are teachers in those roles already who do not show up in our estimates of child care professionals. This gave us age-cohort specific estimates of the number of children who would be served in a universal child care program. We then estimated what share of each cohort would be served in center-based settings versus home-based settings based roughly on how each age-cohort is served today; infants are predominantly served in home-based programs, whereas four-year-olds are predominantly served in centers. We then estimated how many classrooms or home-based programs there would need to be to serve all children, using the DOHMH adult-to-child ratios. We added 10% to the total given the need for some slack in the system to match supply to demand. Because the allowable adult-to-child ratio in a family child care program varies based on the age of the children, we have to assume a range. We identified a total teacher need of about 68,000. If every single person currently working in child care stayed in the profession, that would mean a need of just over 30,000 additional educators. We did not differentiate between lead and assistant teachers in these estimates; a mix of personnel with different levels of certification would be required.

Footnote 5: This is a loose estimate based on the assumption that 20-30% of early childhood staff positions turnover annually. About half of people who leave their role stay in the early childhood field, so that means the other half of positions that turn over need to be filled by new entrants into the field. We estimate 3,700 to 5,500 educators are needed annually to fill vacancies. That assumes a static sector. If there is growth in the field, the number of new educators needed is even higher; if the sector grows by 2%, the number of new educators needed is in the range of 4,440 to 6,290. The figure included above, 5,000+, is the rough midpoint of this range.

Appendix A: Methodology

This report includes multiple original analyses conducted using public data sources and proprietary survey information. The below includes a detailed description of each source used and the methodology for our analyses.

American Community Survey Data

To analyze all child care workers in New York City, we look at the American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). We reference the 2023 5-Year Estimates for our analysis. ACS PUMS is the same source used by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at University of California, Berkeley, for [their most recent analysis of child care workers nationally](#). CSCCE is one of the leading research institutions on the child care workforce and the only organization to undertake a regular, comprehensive analysis of the workforce. The NYC Comptroller's Office also used ACS PUMS data for their [2023 report on care workers](#) in New York City broadly.

ACS PUMS does not have a clear definition of child care workers. Identifying child care workers requires an analysis of the multiple occupation and industry codes that the Census Bureau uses across its measurement tools. Our methodology to dissect the ACS PUMS borrows heavily from CSCCE, which provides a [detailed methodology appendix](#) to its 2024 report. CSCCE performs its data analyses at a state level; ACS PUMS data is also available at the local level, allowing us to look specifically at New York City.

The universe of people we include in our analysis are three occupation groups - preschool & kindergarten teachers, child care workers, and teaching assistants - in the child care services industry. We filtered further to include only those individuals who are currently employed and working. The universe of people who identify as child care workers, but may be temporarily not working or unemployed, is larger. Additionally, we looked at people in the Education & Childcare Admin Occupation within the Child Care Services industry.

The Census Bureau defines [the Child Care Services industry](#) as: "This industry comprises establishments primarily engaged in providing care and early learning opportunities for infants and children. These establishments generally care for children from birth through school age and may also offer pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and/or before- or after-school educational programs. The care and early learning provided by these establishments may include opportunities for development in health, social and emotional learning, and family engagement."

Together, these groups (which are highlighted in the chart below) include child care workers and administrators, respectively, in the types of programs that Day Care Council represents. This group likely includes home-based child care providers, though it may not include all home-based providers; since many FCC providers are program owners and teachers, they may identify their occupation differently (e.g., identify as self-employed).

In its analyses, the CSCCE includes childcare workers in private households in its analyses; this group broadly refers to nannies. We excluded this group from the Day Care Council’s analysis because the issues impacting nannies are different from those impacting staff at DCCNY member organizations. The relative size of the nanny population in New York City is much larger than national averages.

CSCCE includes childcare workers at elementary and middle schools in its analysis; we exclude them here because these individuals play a different role and function than DCCNY members – they are likely school-based afterschool caregivers. CSCCE also includes childcare workers at religious organizations in its analyses; this group does not show up in a statistically significant way in the ACS PUMS data for New York City (and is less relevant to DCCNY membership), and so we exclude them here.

Child care - and child care adjacent - workers in New York City

	Industry, as defined by the American Community Survey			
Occupation, as defined by the American Community Survey	Elementary & Secondary Schools	Child Care Services	Religious Organizations	Private Households
Preschool & Kindergarten Teachers	5,243	9,269	64	0
Childcare Workers	2,474	22,680	0	11,479
Teaching Assts	41,470	5,009	92	31
Total: Combined Child Care Services group		36,958		
Education & Childcare Admins	14,396	2,941		

Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023)

Day Care Council of New York member input

The Day Care Council of New York issued its annual member survey in summer/fall 2025. The survey was sent to all DCCNY member organizations and 42 programs responded. Their survey responses on workforce-related challenges and current staffing levels are cited in this report. Additionally, a focus group was held with a small group of providers in November 2025 to receive input for this report.

Other data sources

The ASPIRE Registry team provided access to data to supplement our analyses. While the ASPIRE Registry does not include all early childhood educators in New York City, it provides a helpful complement to the broader analyses completed with Census data. References to the ASPIRE Registry data are cited accordingly.

This report also leverages data from the U.S. Department of Labor, the New York State Department of Labor, and other Census Bureau instruments, among others. All data sources are cited within the report.

Where possible, this report also leverages the analyses completed by other organizations, which are cited accordingly.

Appendix B: New York City Staffing Requirements

The maximum group size and staff-to-child ratio for licensed child care programs in New York are regulated by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). In New York City, The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), Bureau of Child Care is the direct licensing and oversight agency for group child care centers (day care centers) and school-based programs. OCFS oversees home-based programs in New York City. Programs that participate in the city's 3-K and Pre-K initiatives are subject to some additional requirements established by NYCPS.

Staffing requirements for center-based care in New York City

Age Group	Maximum Group Size	Required Staff-to-Child Ratio
Under 12 months	8	1 adult : 4 children (Ratio of 1 adult : 3 children is required for children under 12 months during an emergency)
12-24 months	10	1 adult : 5 children
2-3 years	12	1 adult : 6 children
3-4 years	15	1 adult : 10 children
4-5 years	20 Maximum group size of 18 in Pre-K for All programs	1 adult : 12 children

Source: Source: DOHMH, [What Group Child Care Providers Should Know](#)

To serve the maximum group size, classrooms require two teachers with the age appropriate designation to serve as a group teacher or one lead teacher and an assistant.

Minimum teacher and director qualifications are also regulated through the health code. The qualifications differ somewhat based on role and the age of children served.

In August 2025, DOHMH made emergency amendments to its staffing rules for center-based child care programs (programs with an Article 47 license) to provide additional flexibility to programs on the number of consecutive days for which a substitute teacher can be used to satisfy supervision requirements. This flexibility was granted in the context of major teacher hiring efforts for K-12 education ahead of the 2025-26 school year that might have threatened early childhood center staffing levels. These amendments do not impact the underlying staff certification requirements.

Staffing Requirements for center-based care for infants and toddlers

Title	Duties	Qualifications
Educational Director	Supervises staff and oversees training Develops and implements education curriculum Conducts daily health inspections Outlines duties for staff not specified in Article 47 Participates in hiring Cannot have teaching duties if >40 children in care	BA Early Childhood Education or related field and 1 or more years' experience as a group teacher or provider for children under 24 months or 6 college credits in infant/toddler coursework or Health Department approved study plan leading to 6 credits
Infant/ Toddler Group Teacher	Plans activities Cares for and supervises a specific group of children	At least 21 years old with Associate (AA or AS) degree in Early Childhood Education or Child Development Associate certification and study plan for AA or AS within 7 years or High school diploma or equivalent and various combinations of college credits, work experience and study plan specified in the Code
Assistant Teacher	Assists in activities and supervises children at the direction of the Group Teacher and Educational Director	At least 18 years old with High school diploma or equivalent and Various combinations of college credits, experience and/or study plans as specified in the Code

Source: DOHMH, What Group Child Care Providers Should Know

Table X: Staffing Requirements for Center-Based Care for Preschoolers

Title	Duties	Qualifications
Educational Director	<p>Supervises staff and oversees training Develops and implements education curriculum Conducts daily health inspections Outlines duties for staff not specified in Article 47 Participates in hiring Cannot have teaching duties if more than 40 children in care</p>	<p>BA Early Childhood Education or related field and State certification and 2 or more years group teacher experience for children under 6 years old (47.13)</p>
<p>Preschool Group Teacher</p> <p>Note: An educational director or individual group teacher may be employed temporarily pending certifications or approval from the State Education Department. Pending status means a person has taken all three exams required for certification and is awaiting State Education Department confirmation.</p>	<p>Plans activities Supervises a specific group of children</p>	<p>BA Early Childhood Education or related field and State Department of Education certification or Equivalent certification accepted by State Department of Education or BA in Early Childhood Education and 2 years supervised experience or Health Department-approved accredited study plan to qualify within 7 years: An Associate's (AA or AS) Degree in early children education, practicum included or 90 or more undergraduate college credits and one year of classroom experience teaching children in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or grades one to two</p>
Assistant Teacher	<p>Assists in activities and supervises children at the direction of the Group Teacher and Educational Director</p>	<p>At least 18 years old with High school diploma or equivalent and Various combinations of college credits, experience and/or study plans as specified in the Code</p>

Source: DOHMH, [What Group Child Care Providers Should Know](#)

Staffing Requirements for Home-Based Care in New York City

There are two types of licensed home-based care settings in New York:

- **Family day care** allows for up to six children, ages 6 weeks through 12 years, plus two additional school-age children. There must always be one caregiver for every two children who are younger than 2 years old.
- **Group family day care** programs may have up to 12 children, ages 6 weeks to 12 years old, plus four additional school-age children. These programs must have a primary on-site caregiver and at least one assistant. There must be one caregiver for every two children who are younger than 2 years old

No degree or formal coursework in early childhood education is required to operate or work in family child care. The main requirement is training hours and health and safety clearances.

All staff in any type of child care program must pass a comprehensive background check before they can work on site.

Appendix C: A To-Do List for City and State Policymakers

Early childhood policy in New York City is driven by an interconnected web of city, state, and federal regulations. Of the recommendations outlined in this report, some policy changes are fully within the city’s control to change, some require state policy change, and some could be addressed through either city or state policy change.

The table below outlines how each policy solution can move forward and the conditions needed to make it happen. It highlights:

- Who can act: whether the city can act independently or needs the state to make the change
- What it takes: whether new investment or policy changes are required

Policy change is complex and some details have been oversimplified here; in some cases, city and state action are required. There are other policy areas where the city could act without the state, though the solution might be easier or more efficient if the state also took action.

Policy Solutions to Build a Stronger Child Care Workforce	Can this be implemented through city action? (policy change, new program, etc.)	Is new investment required?	Can the city act without the state?	Is state policy change required?
Invest in providing early educators with a sustaining wage, benefits, and the supports to sustain themselves and their families				
Create an equitable pay scale for early childhood educators	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Provide universal health insurance coverage for child care workers	Yes, for expanding access to Metro Health Plus	Yes	Yes, for expanding access to Metro Health Plus	Yes, if pursuing access to Medicaid, which requires state approval
Expand access to pension plans	Yes, if through CIRS	Yes	Yes, if through CIRS	Yes, if pursuing a state pension plan

Continued...

Policy Solutions to Build a Stronger Child Care Workforce	Can this be implemented through city action? (policy change, new program, etc.)	Is new investment required?	Can the city act without the state?	Is state policy change required?
Provide housing support	Yes	No	Yes	No
Make access to child care benefits automatic	No	Yes	No	Yes
Build a more robust pipeline of future educators				
Create career exposure and dual enrollment training programs for high school students	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Launch loan forgiveness programs	No	Yes	No	Yes
Create more opportunities for parents to become educators	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Create a 'care worker visa' for immigrants interested in entering the profession	No	No	No	Federal policy change required
Recruit mid-career workers interested in making a career change	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Speed up the background check process for new staff	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Create training programs that meet educators where they are to build the necessary skills and competencies				
Reinvest in financial and academic supports to help child care staff complete their coursework	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Expand community college training programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Create multilingual training programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Continued...

Policy Solutions to Build a Stronger Child Care Workforce	Can this be implemented through city action? (policy change, new program, etc.)	Is new investment required?	Can the city act without the state?	Is state policy change required?
Experiment with new credentialing models	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Launch city-funded apprenticeship programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Collaboration with the NYS Dept. of Labor required
Develop accelerated credential programs for experienced caregivers	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Expand which early childhood settings are eligible for student teacher placements	No	No	No	Yes
Partner with institutions of higher education to offer more advanced degree programs that enable career growth	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Support early educators to remain in the field and grow				
Expand on-the-job professional development offerings, with more flexible delivery options	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Launch formal teacher mentor programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Support 'study plan' teachers	No	Yes	No	Yes
Create substitute teacher pools	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Expand leadership development programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Continued...

Policy Solutions to Build a Stronger Child Care Workforce	Can this be implemented through city action? (policy change, new program, etc.)	Is new investment required?	Can the city act without the state?	Is state policy change required?
Make investments in the broader ecosystem				
Launch a massive public campaign to reframe child care as essential skilled work	No	Yes	Yes	No
Ensure that building the child care workforce is a city government priority	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Collect data and track metrics on the child care workforce more systematically	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

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