

A Strong 2-K System Requires a Strong Workforce

A Brief from *What Will It Take to Fulfill the Promise of 2-K?*

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The success of New York City's 2-K expansion will depend on the early care and education professionals who teach, nurture, and support the city's youngest learners every day. Family child care providers, teachers, assistant teachers, and program leaders are responsible for creating the relationships and learning environments that help two-year-olds thrive. But the early childhood workforce continues to face long-standing challenges that include low compensation, high turnover, and limited opportunities for professional advancement.

Building a successful 2-K system requires more than expanding access for families; it also requires sustained investment in the people responsible for cultivating high-quality early learning environments. Three themes emerged throughout the forum discussion of how to recruit, retain, and support a strong early childhood workforce:

1. the importance of fair compensation;
2. the need to reduce turnover and strengthen supportive working conditions; and
3. the value of recognizing and building on the early childhood education workforce's cultural and linguistic diversity.



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Fair compensation is essential for recruitment and retention

The success of 2-K depends on attracting and retaining skilled professionals, yet compensation for infant-toddler educators remains far below that of comparable professions. Expanding access to high-quality care will require financing strategies that enable providers to offer competitive wages, recognize educator credentials and experience, and support long-term careers.

The current early childhood funding system makes it challenging for employers to offer compensation that reflects providers' skills and responsibilities. Child care programs typically operate on slim margins, often with insufficient revenue from multiple funding streams. Infant-toddler teachers are among the lowest-paid professionals in the workforce: In New York City, infant-toddler lead teachers earn thousands less annually than their K-12 counterparts, and family child care providers earn similarly low incomes while also bearing the financial and administrative costs of running a small business.

These patterns are rooted in long-standing systemic inequities in how society values the work of caregiving and caregivers, particularly women and women of color. Addressing compensation disparities is not only an inevitable workforce challenge, but one of the clearest indicators of whether an early childhood system values the professionals responsible for its success.

Low pay leads to staffing shortages, which in turn leads to classroom closures. All 1,660 programs in a 2023 Empire State Child Care Campaign survey reported operating below their licensed capacity due to lack of staff, resulting in more than 750 unused classrooms in child care centers and afterschool programs.¹

The consequences of educators' low wages are also compounded by salary stagnation. Neither entering nor experienced educators have strong incentives to earn specialized credits and degrees when they do not lead to pay increases.

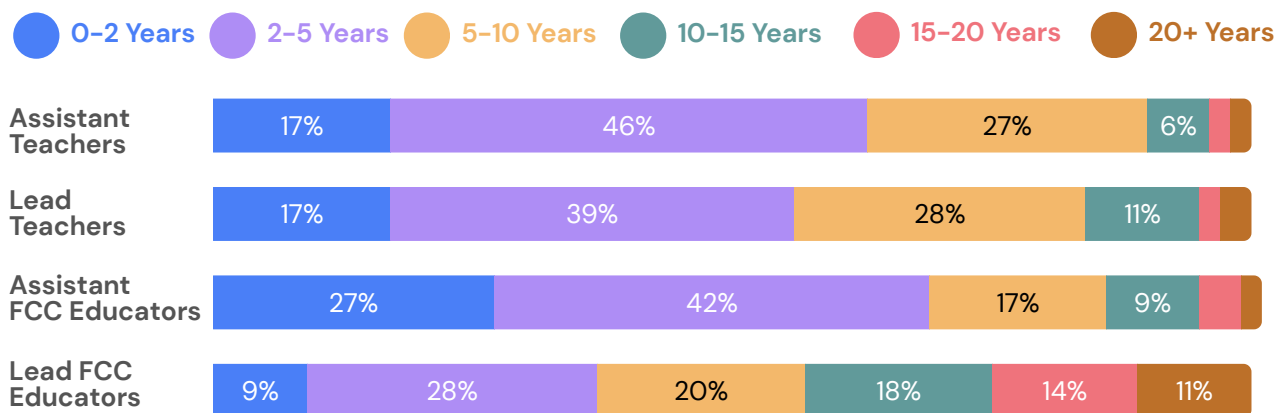
A revised career ladder and parity salary scale developed by the statewide Early Care and Education Workforce Collaborative, which creates a framework for higher compensation aligned to credentials, degrees, and experience, provides a promising path forward.²

Stable relationships require a stable workforce

Warm, nurturing relationships are key to high-quality early learning experiences.³

These stable, responsive relationships can be harder to build and maintain when educators are experiencing stress – which, among other factors, may be caused by low pay. Concerns about supporting themselves and their families may also cause some educators to change jobs or leave the field entirely. Almost 20% of New York City’s infant-toddler teachers have been in their current jobs for less than two years, and fewer than half have more than five years of experience.

Length of Time at Current Job, Infant-Toddler Educators



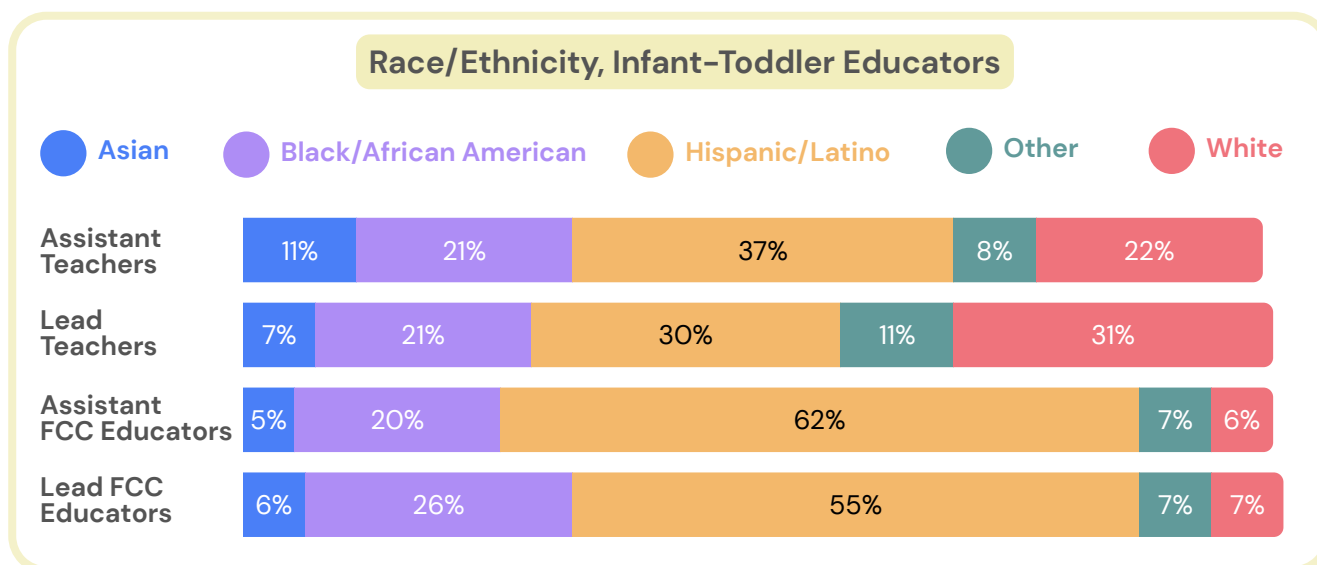
Source: Aspire Registry

Bank Street College of Education President Shael Polakow-Suransky opened the 2-K forum by describing the experiences of two different parents dropping off their children. To one, “the caregiver on duty is a stranger, to her and her baby”; to the other, “the caregiver greets them both by name [and] takes the baby into a soft carrier already strapped to her chest.” Each time an educator leaves the field, more relationships are disrupted and more parents must leave their young children with new, unfamiliar caregivers.

In addition to higher pay, strong organizational culture and responsive leadership can play a role in retaining educators. Investing in leaders in turn supports the development and growth of educators. Research demonstrates that center directors who receive training and support foster positive organizational climates that contribute to decreases in staff turnover and higher quality settings for young children.⁴ Family child care networks can support educators to create peer relationships and foster the program stability that leads to positive outcomes for children and their families.

Recognizing cultural and linguistic strengths

New York City's early care and education providers bring cultural, linguistic, and community knowledge to their work with young children and families. Many educators share languages, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences with the communities they serve, which helps foster trusting relationships and culturally responsive learning environments. The workforce also reflects the diversity of New York City itself: 69% of infant-toddler lead teachers and 93% of infant-toddler lead family child care providers are people of color.



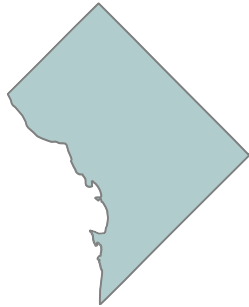
Source: Aspire Registry

These strengths are especially important in a city where families speak many languages. For example, one in five infants and toddlers in New York City lives in a Spanish-speaking household. Ensuring that families can access care that aligns with their needs, preferences, and values requires a workforce that is equipped to communicate effectively and build strong relationships across diverse communities.

Professional development, credential pathways, and coaching opportunities should reflect this linguistic and cultural diversity to build on educators' existing strengths and expertise. Investing in these supports can help retain skilled educators in 2-K programs while strengthening the quality and responsiveness of care for children and families.

Promising models for workforce retention and support

At the June 16 forum, representatives from Washington, DC and New Mexico discussed strategies and programs in their regions that NYC may be able to learn from.



Washington, DC

Pay Equity Fund & Health Link

Washington, DC established a Pay Equity Fund, which brings all teachers, assistant teachers, and family child care educators to parity with their K-12 counterparts according to the credential or degree they possess. The fund establishes minimum salaries based on role and credential and provides “top-up” payments to centers and family child care providers to enable them to pay the minimum salaries.⁵ The Urban Institute, which is studying implementation of the fund, has found these payments have reduced turnover, increased the quality of care, and improved the mental health of educators.⁶ In addition to higher pay, DC’s Health Care 4 Child Care program provides free or low-cost health insurance premiums for employees of licensed child development centers and homes through DC Health Link, the District’s Affordable Care Act Marketplace.⁷



New Mexico

Reimbursement Rates

To address compensation challenges, New Mexico offers a higher reimbursement rate to providers who commit to providing an \$18 per hour wage to their employees, which has been taken up by 46% of providers as of March 2026.⁸ Although implementation of a proposed wage ladder and career ladder was ultimately vetoed by the governor, the state committed an additional \$60 million toward reimbursement rates to support higher wages.⁹

New Mexico’s approach to universal care prioritizes parental choice, using a voucher system: Once a family identifies a provider, the state enters into an agreement to pay on behalf of the family. New Mexico is also piloting contracted infant-toddler slots.

Policy Opportunities for 2-K Implementation

Building and retaining a strong workforce through 2-K implementation can chart the path toward a broader system of universal child care in New York City.

- 2-K financing strategy should establish higher salaries for both new and experienced educators. Raising the minimum compensation without also ensuring wage growth for educators as they gain experience, credentials, and expertise contributes to wage compression and exacerbates workforce challenges as highly qualified educators leave for other roles.
- Beyond pay, the city can increase educator retention and well-being by fostering supportive work environments. Tailored support for center directors and FCC network directors can encourage positive work environments.
- Creating accessible, culturally- and linguistically-responsive professional development and credentials can recruit and retain educators who reflect their communities while creating higher quality care.

SPOTLIGHT:

Programs to Support and Retain Diverse Educators

Prior to implementing the Pay Equity Fund, Washington, DC developed a CDA program specifically for Amharic speakers to serve educators from Ethiopia and Eritrea, a growing immigrant population in the city. The University of the District of Columbia developed a Spanish-language associate degree program in early childhood education to serve Spanish-speaking educators; Potomac University offers a fully-online associate degree in early childhood education entirely in Spanish.

The [***New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute***](#) (CUNY PDI) is a public-private partnership at the City University of New York that works to provide accessible systems, initiatives, and services for the early childhood workforce.

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On June 16, 2026, Bank Street's [**Straus Institute for Thriving Children and Families**](#), the [**New York Professional Development Institute**](#) at CUNY, and [**Trust for Learning**](#) convened a daylong policy and research forum to support New York City's public child care expansion for two-year-olds (2-K).

Findings and recommendations from the forum are examined in a [**series of companion briefs**](#) addressing specific themes that emerged during the forum discussions.

The event brought together policymakers, researchers, and educators to discuss the demographics, workforce development, and cultural responsiveness required for high-quality toddler care. It also shed a light on the true costs of high-quality care. Ultimately, the forum identified key themes important for 2-K's success, including:

- High-quality care for two-year-olds relies on stable, responsive relationships, which may be threatened by low wages and high staff turnover.
- Integrating early intervention service, and tailoring outreach for trust-building within communities is critical for children's development and program reach.
- Higher education reforms in support of early educators should include student-centered programs and resources, such as paid internships and business training.

Citations

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