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# IDEAS

Newsletter | Vol. 3 | No. 4



## The Early Childhood Workforce and the URGENCY OF NOW

*By Sharon Easterling*

There is no greater challenge for the early childhood education sector right now than addressing our workforce crisis. According to a workforce survey conducted by NAEYC in November 2022:

- 46% of programs are serving fewer children than pre-pandemic levels.
- 70% of these cite staffing shortages as the reason for lower enrollment.
- Almost half (45%) of respondents new to the field (1 year or less), say they are considering leaving the field; a trend with dramatic consequences for the workforce pipeline.

Because the Early Care and Education sector has lived so long with scarcity, it is difficult for many providers to believe change is possible, or to know where to begin. Throughout the second half of 2022, OppEx has been relentlessly pursuing the idea that we *can* meet this challenge, that we have more power in our hands than we often realize, and that **Shared Services** and **business automation** tools are critical resources to bring about needed change.

Several important ideas have emerged from our quest, which included convening a community of practice, a three-part webinar series, and a presentation at the 2022 NAEYC Conference. These

include:

**We must do the math.**

Raising wages begins with creating a salary scale that defines compensation levels in alignment with definitions from the Unifying Framework of the Power to the Profession initiative, ECE Levels I, II, and III. We must name the numbers and build budget scenarios with these staff wages. This will tell us and policy makers how much is needed to fix the broken system. Sharpen your pencils!

**Health Insurance is a must have.**

The new infusion of subsidies in the Affordable Care Act means that everyone working in child care can access free (or very low cost) health insurance. We need every available resource to fund educator salaries, so all child care businesses should ensure that their staff can access the Marketplace. Providers struggling to pay for private health insurance should transition to the Marketplace and re-deploy resources to salaries and other important benefits.

**Revenue can increase.**

Some states are raising reimbursement rates based on cost modeling, and not market rate surveys. Others are expanding eligibility so that no family pays more than 10% of household income on child care. One state is making all child care staff in licensed programs eligible for fully subsidized child care benefits. These and other efforts, coupled with strong business management support linked to [Iron Triangle](#) metrics, are ushering in the sea change we need and long for.

There is no question that the challenges are daunting. It is true that we need system level change that includes a massive re-structuring of how early childhood services are funded. But it is also true that we need change at the provider level. We have to stop assuming that we have no power to re-structure budgets and priorities at the program level. We need to sharpen our ability to understand and articulate the cost of care—especially as it relates to workforce compensation and benefits.

As a field we have been reluctant to speak the truth about cost because the number feels too big. That must change. We need to do the math ourselves, at the program and system level, and we need to embed those larger budget numbers in policy and practice.

**Change is possible.**

**Change is on the horizon.**

**We are the ones we've been waiting for.**

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