

# Workforce Perceptions and Experiences with the Alabama Early Care and Education Salary Parity Policy

Tracy Gebhart, Julianna Carlson, Phoebe Harris, & Dale Epstein

## Introduction

To date, 29 public pre-K<sup>1</sup> programs in 23 states and one U.S. territory have established salary or compensation<sup>2</sup> parity policies to address low and disparate levels of workforce compensation in the early care and education (ECE) field (Friedman-Krauss & Kasmin, 2018). These policies aim to raise the pay or compensation of ECE teachers to the level of similarly educated or qualified teachers in K-12 settings.

Although there has recently been an increased focus on the benefits and challenges of implementing a salary or compensation parity policy, little has been written about how these policies affect the ECE workforce directly. The purpose of this brief is to describe the effect of salary parity on the experiences of pre-K teachers from community-based ECE programs in Alabama. First, we provide a brief overview of ECE parity policies and describe the salary parity policy in Alabama. Next, we describe our methodology and key takeaways from interviews with directors and lead teachers in Alabama.

Several key takeaways emerged from our conversations with ECE directors and teachers in Alabama.

- With salary parity in place, there is an increased interest among teachers in joining the ECE workforce.
- Salary parity may also be a useful strategy for increasing workforce retention.
- Salary parity improves teachers' economic well-being but does not include other supports that compensation parity could provide.

## Overview of ECE Parity Policies

In recent years, there has been an increased focus at the state, local, and national levels on raising the qualifications of the ECE workforce (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS] & U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2016). While these efforts have resulted in some initial progress toward a more qualified workforce, ECE teacher salaries have remained relatively stagnant over the past two decades (U.S. DHHS & U.S. DOE, 2016; Whitebook, et al., 2014). In fact, an exploration of post-graduate

---

<sup>1</sup> Public pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) is a publicly funded ECE program aimed at preparing 3- to 5-year-olds for kindergarten entry. Public pre-K programs are funded and administered at the city or state level and can be delivered via public school settings, community-based child care settings, or a combination of both settings.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this brief, we use *salary* to refer to the wages or pay an employee receives in return for their work. We use *compensation* to refer to the salary and benefits (e.g., healthcare, retirement, paid time off) employees receive in return for their work.

earnings identified the early childhood education major as having the lowest predicted lifetime earnings of all college majors (Hershbein & Kearney, 2017).

Low wages for the ECE workforce are particularly evident when comparing salaries of ECE and kindergarten teachers. For instance, despite having equivalent education, public pre-K teachers with bachelor's degrees working within a public school earn roughly 81 percent of the salary of similarly educated kindergarten teachers. Public pre-K teachers with bachelor's degrees working in community-based settings<sup>3</sup> fare worse, earning only 64 percent of kindergarten teachers' salaries, and preschool<sup>4</sup> teachers who do not work in public pre-K settings earn only 55 percent of what comparably educated kindergarten teachers earn (Whitebook, et al., 2014).

Low compensation negatively influences the ability of ECE settings to attract and retain experienced teachers and caregivers, resulting in high turnover rates. These high turnover rates can, in turn, negatively affect classroom instruction, teacher-parent and teacher-child relationships, program quality, and workplace environments (Cassidy, et al., 2011; Smith & Lawrence, 2019). Moreover, low compensation can prevent ECE teachers from securing adequate housing, food, medical treatment, or education for their own families (Whitebook, et al., 2014; Whitebook, et al., 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Estimates show that, from 2014 to 2016, over half of the ECE workforce was enrolled in some type of government assistance program,<sup>5</sup> compared to 21 percent of the overall national workforce (Whitebook, et al., 2018). Financial insecurity undermines basic psychological needs and is associated with higher levels of stress and depression (Weinstein & Stone, 2018). Increased levels of stress and depression in ECE teachers have been linked to negative learning environments (Hamre & Pianta, 2004). Alternatively, ECE teacher wage increases have been found to be positively associated with positive child behaviors in the classroom, and children with teachers who feel financially secure exhibit more positive behaviors than children with teachers experiencing financial insecurity (King et al., 2016).

One way in which states and localities are attempting to address the lack of adequate compensation for the ECE workforce is through establishment of **parity policies that provide salary and benefits comparable to those received by K-12 teachers of similar education and experience levels**. By raising ECE teacher compensation to be on par with K-12 teachers, the ECE field may better employ and retain a professionally prepared and financially secure workforce. To date, most parity policies have been enacted through public pre-K programs (Whitebook, et al., 2018). Members of the ECE workforce caring for infants and toddlers, or providing private or home-based child care settings, are largely excluded from these initial parity efforts (Whitebook, et al., 2018).

While much has been written about the importance of ECE workforce parity policies and their implementation (Barnett & Kasmin, 2017; Friedman-Kraus, et al., 2019; Friedman-Krauss & Kasmin, 2018; McLean, et al., 2017; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Whitebook, et al., 2018; Whitebook & McLean, 2017), there is limited research as to how these policies affect the ECE workforce directly. To better understand how ECE teachers are experiencing parity policies, Child Trends conducted a case study of child care directors and teachers in Alabama First Class, one of just 10 public pre-K programs<sup>6</sup> in the nation implementing a salary parity policy for public pre-K teachers in both public school and community-based settings (Friedman-Krauss, et. al, 2019).

---

<sup>3</sup> Community-based settings may include child care centers, Head Start programs, and faith- or military-based programs.

<sup>4</sup> ECE provided to three- to five-year-olds generally (funded both publicly and privately) is referred to as preschool.

<sup>5</sup> Government assistance programs included the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

<sup>6</sup> The 10 pre-K programs are as follows: Alabama First Class Pre-K, Georgia Pre-K, Minnesota Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK), Missouri Preschool Program (MPP), Nevada State Pre-K Program, New Jersey Abbott Preschool Program, New Jersey Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), New Jersey Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI), Oregon Preschool Promise, and Rhode Island State Pre-Kindergarten Program (Friedman-Krauss, et. al, 2019).

## Compensation versus Salary Parity

**Salary parity** is a policy initiative intended to raise the ECE workforce's starting salaries and subsequent pay raises to the level of K-12 teachers with comparable education and work experience.

**Compensation parity** is a policy initiative intended to provide the ECE workforce with starting salaries, pay raises, and additional compensation benefits that are similar to those provided to K-12 teachers with comparable education and work experience. Benefits can include traditional payroll benefits (e.g., healthcare, retirement, paid time off), paid planning time, professional development, and salary payscales that account for additional levels of education. As public school teachers often work on a school year rather than a calendar year cycle (i.e., roughly 9 months rather than 12 months), this may also include adjustments to an ECE teacher's yearly salary to account for any additional hours worked above and beyond the traditional school year.

A parity policy does not necessarily equate to similar average compensation between ECE and K-12 teachers. As ECE settings face high rates of turnover and do not universally require post-secondary degrees, ECE teachers may still have lower average levels of experience or education, and thus compensation, than K-12 teachers (Friedman-Krauss & Kasmin, 2018).

## Alabama's Salary Parity Policy

Alabama First Class Pre-K provides pre-K services to 4-year-olds in a variety of settings, including public schools, private child care programs and schools, community-based programs, Head Start programs, faith-based programs, and military programs (Office of School Readiness [OSR], 2018). The program is funded through the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE) and monitored through ADECE's Office of School Readiness (OSR). During the 2015-2016 school year, Alabama enacted a salary parity policy<sup>7</sup> to raise First Class Pre-K teacher salaries to be on the same pay scale as staff in comparable positions<sup>8</sup> in public K-12 settings. The policy was introduced, in part, to combat high turnover rates in community-based settings that could not provide pre-K teacher salaries on par with those offered to teachers in school-sponsored public pre-K classrooms (McLean, et al., 2017).

The salary parity policy applies to both lead and auxiliary<sup>9</sup> First Class Pre-K teachers in *all* settings (i.e., not limited to public school settings). The policy ensures that First Class Pre-K teachers and K-12 teachers of comparable positions start at the same salary. First Class Pre-K teachers receive pay raises beyond that starting salary every year, whereas K-12 teachers receive slightly larger raises beyond that salary every three years. The rate of pay raises are calculated so that First Class Pre-K and K-12 teachers achieve the same salary benchmark every 10 years. For instance, despite receiving pay raises on different schedules, a pre-K teacher and a K-12 teacher starting their roles at the same time would each earn the same salary at the end of 10 years (McLean, et al., 2017; OSR, 2018). During the 2017-2018 school year, the policy expanded to provide higher starting salaries for pre-K teachers with master's degrees (McLean, et al., 2017). During the 2020-2021 school year, the policy will also provide a \$1,000 supplement to the base

---

<sup>7</sup> Alabama's parity policy addresses ECE teachers' starting salaries, incremental pay raises, and contract days, but does not include explicit guidance for benefit parity. Therefore, this brief refers to Alabama's policy as salary parity rather than a compensation parity policy.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the lead First Class Pre-K teacher position is most comparable to the teacher position in a K-12 setting. The auxiliary or assistant First Class Pre-K teacher position is most comparable to the teacher's aide position in a K-12 setting.

<sup>9</sup> An auxiliary teacher is responsible for reinforcing and supporting lead teachers' lessons or directions in the classroom and is often referred to as an "assistant teacher" in other settings.

auxiliary teacher salary for those teachers holding an associate degree (ADECE, personal communication, 2020).

The salary parity policy stipulates that First Class Pre-K teachers must receive one hour of daily planning time in addition to seven paid planning days a year, equivalent to similarly educated and experienced K-12 teachers (OSR, 2018). The policy does not require child care programs to provide specific benefits (e.g., healthcare, retirement) for their pre-K teachers. Instead, individual child care programs and school systems are responsible for determining the provision of these benefits.<sup>10</sup> Programs may choose to use OSR grants to provide benefits, although the actual funding mechanisms vary from program to program dependent upon operating budgets and funding sources (OSR, 2020).

See Table 1 for more detail about the education, salary, and additional benefit requirements for lead and auxiliary pre-K teachers in First Class.

**Table 1. First Class Pre-K teacher education, salary, and additional benefit requirements, 2018-2019**

First Class Guideline	Lead Pre-K Teacher	Auxiliary Pre-K Teacher
<b>Minimum education required</b>	Bachelor's degree or higher in an ECE-related field  OR  Bachelor's degree in an unrelated field plus an ECE certification	A Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential or equivalent
<b>Minimum salary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Community-based settings:</b> \$39,301</li> <li>• <b>Public school settings:</b> Salary as provided by local school system salary matrix</li> </ul>	\$19,223.18
<b>Contract period</b>	180 instructional days + 7 planning days (187 paid days)	
<b>In-service professional development and training</b>	30 hours, yearly	20 hours, yearly
<b>Additional benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 daily hour of paid planning time</li> <li>• <b>Community-based settings:</b> Payroll benefits as provided by individual child care setting; OSR funds may be used to provide benefits</li> <li>• <b>Public school settings:</b> Payroll benefits as provided by local school system</li> </ul>	

Source: OSR, 2018, Appendix A

Note: Information reflects guidelines from the 2018-2019 school year; current guidelines may differ.

<sup>10</sup> Pre-K teachers in public school systems are provided benefits in line with their local school system's compensation package.

## Funding and implementation

First Class Pre-K teachers in public school settings are compensated according to their local school system salary schedule. To ensure that pre-K teachers in community-based settings are also able to receive the specified pre-K salary, OSR awards supplemental grants to child care programs to help them comply with the salary parity policy (Ross, 2018). The OSR is further responsible for monitoring pre-K classrooms and financial statements to ensure that additional funding goes directly to pre-K teachers' salaries (OSR, 2020).

As with other First Class initiatives, funding for the salary parity policy is provided through the Education Trust Fund and through Alabama's federal Preschool Development Birth - Five Grant (PDG; McLean et al., 2017). In the 2015-2016 school year, the Alabama state legislature increased the budget of ADECE and OSR was able to guarantee the supplemental grants necessary to implement the salary parity policy in First Class (ADECE, personal communication, 2019).

## Methodology

Child Trends' researchers used a case study methodology to learn more about the effects of Alabama's salary parity policy on First Class Pre-K teachers. Specifically, we conducted a series of phone interviews with center-based teachers, directors, a regional director, and state administrators. The purpose of these interviews was to hear directly from the teachers and administrators who experience Alabama's salary parity policy firsthand, and to learn more about their perceptions of how the policy has been implemented. Four lead teachers and five directors were interviewed, from five center-based community programs across the state. These programs all received funding to support one or more First Class Pre-K classrooms. Three of these sites utilized a mixed delivery system, with a combination of First Class Pre-K classrooms and private pay classrooms, meaning that some teachers received salary parity with kindergarten teachers while others did not. Two sites had only First Class Pre-K classrooms and all teachers received the salary parity.

To gain a deeper understanding of this policy's effect on programs, Child Trends aimed to interview a lead teacher and director from within the same program. In four of the five programs, we spoke to both a director and lead teacher; in one program, only the director was available for an interview. Additionally, Child Trends interviewed state administrators at ADECE and a regional director for First Class to better understand the broader context and implementation of the policy for this case study.

During these interviews, we asked stakeholders about their perceptions of the salary parity policy, including if and how the policy had resulted in any changes in their professional or personal life. We asked teachers and directors about components of the salary parity policy that may influence their well-being, such as their own financial status and workplace environment, which research suggests have a connection to overall well-being (Smith & Lawrence, 2019). To ensure that our conversations addressed aspects of well-being specific to the ECE workforce, we adapted closed-response items of two validated measures—the Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning (SEQUAL; CSCCE, 2014) and the Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory (CCW-JSI; Curbow, et al., 2000)—into open response interview questions. As this study was focused on respondents' perceptions of their personal and professional well-being, we did not use the measures in full to calculate a well-being score for each interviewed program.

## Directors' and Teachers' Experiences

This section describes the key takeaways from interviews with five directors from center-based community child care programs with classrooms receiving First Class Pre-K funding, and four First Class Pre-K lead teachers. The themes from these interviews represent a snapshot of how the salary parity

policy affects pre-K teachers and directors in the Alabama First Class Pre-K program. The experiences reported here are not intended to be representative or reflective of the larger First Class workforce; rather, they offer a case study of how these policies are implemented within programs and represent perceptions of how such policies affect the workforce.

## Policy background and implementation

To explore the extent to which teachers and directors understand the salary parity policy, we asked interview participants to describe the policy overall and explain how specific elements were implemented within their programs.

### Understanding the policy

We asked interviewees to describe the salary parity policy in their own words. Teachers and directors conceptualized the salary parity policy similarly, stating that the policy is intended to level salaries between public school teachers and pre-K teachers in Alabama. However, while the policy does include salary parity for auxiliary teachers, only one of the five directors we interviewed indicated that auxiliary teachers at their First Class Pre-K site were included in the policy; all four teachers interviewed said that only lead teachers qualified to receive the salary. Most people interviewed had worked in First Class since the salary parity policy was enacted in 2015.

When asked whether they thought the policy would expand in the future to include all preschool-age programs in Alabama—and not just First Class Pre-K programs—both directors and teachers were unsure but doubtful that the policy would expand. And when we asked about the potential effects of expanding the policy to include preschool-age programs operating outside of First Class, three directors expressed concern that the higher salary requirements would put a financial burden on child care programs if they did not have state grant money to support them. One director was concerned this burden might be passed on to child enrollment fees. However, two directors and three teachers reported there would be benefits if the policy was expanded, such as more interest in the ECE field, more qualified staff, and higher program standards.

### Experiences with implementation

All directors interviewed received grants from OSR to cover teacher salaries, and indicated that the state office was also responsible for monitoring the grant spending to ensure it was allocated to teachers as intended. Most directors explained that they did not receive specific instructions on implementing the policy changes within their programs. Two directors discussed difficulties implementing the policy during the first few years, with one reporting challenges integrating a new budget into their center and another reporting challenges filing paperwork. Two of the four teachers interviewed shared that they were not informed about the policy, citing a disconnect between the “higher-ups” and themselves. The other two teachers reported satisfaction with the policy implementation process, indicating that their director or First Class regional coach and monitor explained the changes to them.

### Salary and benefits

When asked whether their salary had changed because of the policy, two teachers reported that they had experienced no change while the other two reported that their salaries had increased. No teachers reported a decrease in pay as a result of joining a First Class Pre-K classroom. One teacher who did not experience a change in salary noted that she had switched into the community-based First Class Pre-K classroom from a public school when the policy was implemented, so her salary neither increased nor decreased.

When asked whether benefits were included in the parity policy, many directors and teachers understood that benefits were not an explicit component but were chosen by directors and centers. Most of the interviewees offered or received health insurance, but teachers' benefit premiums varied between programs. Of the four teachers interviewed, two were satisfied with the benefits their program offered (50%); this may be because their programs are embedded within a larger site. (Their directors stated that these high-quality benefits packages were only possible because of the shared cost.) Directors shared that they struggled to afford and provide competitive benefits packages to teachers (60%); one director explained that they had lost a teacher to public schools offering a better benefits package.

*“When I find a teacher who doesn’t need insurance I’m very excited. That’s a lot of money out of my budget that I could have put towards something else... It really impacts how we can spend our money.”*

*-Director*

## Perceptions of the policy's effects

To better understand how the salary parity policy is enacted in practice, we asked teachers and directors about some potential direct effects of the policy that they had experienced, both at their programs and in their personal and professional lives.

### Teaching supports and professional development

Interviewees were asked whether policy implementation was associated with the availability of materials, supports, or services in their classroom or program. The majority of directors and teachers reported that there were no changes in the availability of materials. Only one director and their lead teacher reported an increase in classroom materials. Furthermore, the teacher shared that she noticed a difference between the quantity of materials available in her classroom versus private classrooms (i.e., classrooms not a part of First Class) at her site.

While the salary parity policy does not provide funding for specific professional development opportunities, it does require paid planning time for teachers. As a program, First Class requires a minimum number of yearly training hours, hosts a mandatory annual conference, and provides regional coaches and monitors for all teachers. When asked how the salary parity policy has influenced their professional development, almost all interviewees spoke about opportunities that are part of the First Class Pre-K program but not a direct result of the salary parity policy. For instance, four of the five directors and three of the four teachers mentioned the required annual First Class Pre-K Conference as a great learning opportunity that staff look forward to attending each year. Directors indicated that they have to allocate money from their OSR budget to help fund professional development for their staff, including conference fees, classes, or other opportunities. To facilitate that process, regional coaches and monitors ensure that each program reserves enough money for teachers to travel to and attend the yearly conference (OSR, 2020).

### Leadership and teamwork

Two directors stated that the policy has had a positive influence on their leadership abilities by making it easier to recruit high-quality teachers or, more generally, by improving their quality of life and their teachers' quality of life. One director reported that preparing finance and budget monitoring forms for the policy detracted from time she could spend on other administrative tasks, while another reported that there were no changes in their leadership abilities as a result of the policy.

Given that First Class teachers may work in mixed-delivery programs that have private pay classrooms where teachers are not guaranteed salary parity, we asked teachers and directors how the policy affects teamwork. All teachers and directors stated that they experienced little to no conflict among staff because

of salary differences, regardless of whether their program was mixed-delivery or had only pre-K classrooms. One teacher acknowledged some resentment from pre-K auxiliary teachers who are paid less than pre-K lead teachers, despite working similar hours. Notably, the salary parity policy accounts for the more advanced education requirements for lead teachers (compared to auxiliary teachers) when establishing base salaries for each role. Two directors explained that salary is not often discussed, so people may not know about the disparities. Additionally, two directors noticed an increase in positive teamwork resulting from either joint participation in professional development opportunities, or increased retention and consistency in staff teams.

## Workforce retention and participation

All directors and teachers saw more retention and stability in staffing at their child care centers as a result of the policy, but also identified challenges with retaining auxiliary staff. For instance, one director explained that her program's ability to provide a better benefits package—in addition to salary parity—makes her pre-K program more attractive to potential teachers than other pre-K programs. On the other hand, another director reported difficulty retaining auxiliary staff, who are likely to be drawn to the benefits offered in public schools—and in particular, to the lower monthly employee premium costs that may be available through public schools that insure larger group policies.

Interviewees were asked if they had noticed a change in the workforce composition as a result of the parity policy—both in terms of who had left and who had entered. One director reported that teachers are more likely to search for a job in a First Class Pre-K classroom, rather than in other child care programs or public schools, because of the salary parity policy. Similarly, three teachers shared that they had seen an increase in interest from public school teachers in joining the pre-K workforce after the salary parity policy was introduced. Interviewees explained that public school teachers might be drawn to the opportunity to earn a similar salary in an environment with fewer constraints (e.g., public school requirements such as standardized testing). Two directors did not see a change in workforce participation.

## Economic well-being

All five directors and all four teachers indicated that there had been positive changes to teachers' economic well-being as a result of the policy. Examples of positive economic outcomes that teachers reported included the ability to save more money, the ability to make investments (e.g., purchasing a house), and a general feeling of greater economic security. All teachers were comfortable with a single income source and did not feel they needed a second job to supplement their income. Two teachers explained that, while their economic well-being has increased due to the salary parity policy, the policy did not have a direct effect on their day-to-day functioning or the quality of care that they provide to children.

## Personal well-being

Two teachers spoke about positive changes in their self-worth as a result of the salary parity policy. They stated that being paid at an equitable rate to K-12 teachers made them feel more valued, confident, and recognized for their hard work.

Teachers did not believe the policy had had an effect on the way community members viewed them. One teacher explained that community members would likely be confused if they found out that pre-K teachers are receiving the same salary as public school teachers, because of prevailing ideas about the value of working in early care and education. This teacher felt that such a perspective would only change when people directly witnessed their work, as she had witnessed with several parents at their site.

## Successes and challenges

When directors were asked their perceptions of teachers' job satisfaction, each reported that their teachers were happy about their salaries, felt they were being paid at an equitable rate to K-12 teachers, and were more motivated to stay in their positions. Teachers reported satisfaction as well, stating that the standardized pay rates gave them confidence that they would not be underpaid, no matter which First Class Pre-K classroom they worked in.

One director was grateful for the policy because it helped them ensure that their staff are paid equally to public school staff. However, because the salary parity policy did not require a universal benefits package across pre-K programs, there may be differences in programs' abilities to provide competitive compensation packages. This may lead to uneven distribution of turnover across First Class programs. For example, one director stated that offering benefits in addition to the salary adjustment makes teachers more likely to work at their site than at other First Class Pre-K sites that only offer salary parity. This director shared that, in the past, prospective employees chose their center over other places of employment because of the benefits they were able to offer.

All directors and three teachers interviewed reported that teachers have been more interested in working at their program since the policy was implemented. One director specified that clear expectations from the OSR make it easy for teachers to manage their staff and classroom. Two directors and one teacher believed that the parity policy attracts high-quality teachers into their center, and that yearly salary increases help motivate teachers to stay in the same program, rather than move around.

Despite more interest from teachers who want to work at their program, one director said that it could still be difficult to find highly qualified staff to fill open positions. This director also expressed concern that there is a wide discrepancy between what First Class lead teachers and auxiliary teachers make, which might cause auxiliary teachers to move into other positions where they might receive a higher salary.

*"If other states can afford [a similar policy], they need to do it. It's the best way to get high-quality teachers. That's a child's first teacher! If they get a good start with a quality teacher, they'll be good to go."*

-Director

Two teachers cited the challenge of communicating with staff at higher levels of the system (e.g., state-level staff administering First Class Pre-K) about the implications of the policy. For example, teachers did not feel well-informed about how salary rates were set and expressed the need for more information about the scheduled salary increases.

## Directors' and teachers' recommendations

Directors and teachers shared recommendations for ways in which Alabama may be able to expand or enhance the existing salary parity policy to better support teachers.

- Communicate changes to the policy clearly and directly with lead teachers.
- Provide mentorship to directors during the first year of policy implementation. For example, help new directors build a system for monitoring the supplemental grant associated with the policy.
- Expand the policy beyond First Class Pre-K to reach teachers in other settings, such as private and community-based classrooms that are not participating in First Class Pre-K, or child care settings that serve infants and toddlers.

## Discussion

While much has been written about compensation and salary parity policies at the state or national level, few studies have explored the effects of these policies by speaking directly with those who are most affected by them. The goal of this case study was to learn more about the firsthand experiences of First Class Pre-K teachers and directors who experience Alabama's salary parity policy. By conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a small sample of teachers and directors, this study has yielded rich, qualitative information about the potential effects of salary parity policies on the ECE workforce, as well as the successes and challenges of Alabama's specific salary parity policy.

Due to the small sample size and nonrandom sampling method for this study, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of pre-K teachers receiving salary parity in Alabama, or elsewhere in the United States. Instead, further research could draw upon the themes identified in the present study to conduct a more systematic and rigorous exploration of the effects of salary and compensation parity policies on the ECE workforce.

One limitation of the current study is that it was sometimes difficult to tease apart perceptions of First Class Pre-K requirements versus those regarding Alabama's salary parity policy. While the two are closely related, they are not the same. First Class provides a number of additional supports and benefits beyond what is articulated in the salary parity policy. Therefore, some of the findings detailed in this report may be reflective of teachers and directors who perceive specific benefits or challenges with the salary parity policy that are, in fact, a result of First Class Pre-K program requirements.

## Key takeaways

Through interviews with directors and teachers directly affected by the salary parity policy in Alabama, Child Trends identified the following key takeaways:

**With salary parity in place, there is an increased interest among teachers in joining the ECE workforce.** Teachers interviewed for this study stated a greater interest in working for a First Class Pre-K classroom, as well as a perceived increase in interest from other teachers. Directors noted that the salary parity enabled them to attract and retain teachers with more advanced education, often from public school settings. This matches findings from state administrators in Alabama, who reported an increase in interest on the part of kindergarten teachers in working in pre-K classrooms after the implementation of the salary parity policy (McLean et al., 2017). Together, these findings suggest that salary parity policies may be a useful tool for helping fill critical shortages in the ECE workforce, where demand for qualified ECE professionals continues to grow (Cheng, I., et al., 2018). Additionally, these policies may provide an incentive for students interested in pursuing a career in education to focus on early childhood.

**Salary parity may also be a useful strategy for increasing workforce retention.** Teachers and directors interviewed for this study reported little, if any, staff turnover in their First Class Pre-K classrooms. In more than one case, the lead teachers at a site had remained consistent since the inception of the policy in 2014. While this may not be true across all First Class Pre-K classrooms, it is an encouraging sign. These responses also support findings from existing research, including state workforce surveys, which suggest that turnover rates in the ECE field may be negatively associated with wages, and that better pay might be a significant motivating factor for staff to stay in their jobs (Cassidy et al., 2011, Child Care Services Association, 2015, & Roberts et al., 2017).

**Salary parity improves teachers' economic well-being but does not include other supports that compensation parity could provide.** Everyone interviewed for this study shared examples of how the salary parity policy improved teachers' economic well-being. However, interview participants identified challenges with other aspects of compensation, such as benefits. Different programs often did not have the same ability to provide benefits for their staff, unless they were part of a larger organization that could afford to cover the associated costs. In some cases, directors who could not afford to offer competitive benefits packages worried that they might lose staff to other sites, especially public schools. Other directors expressed concerns about the financial burden of offering benefits, especially in smaller community-based sites. Compensation parity—focused on providing equitable wages *and* benefits—may represent a more comprehensive approach to improving ECE workforce recruitment, retention, and overall well-being.

## Acknowledgments

The Child Trends team thanks our colleagues at the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, along with the directors and teachers who participated in interviews. Their generous time and thoughtful perspectives were invaluable for this report.

Child Trends is also grateful to the Foundation for Childhood Development for providing the financial support to develop this brief.

## References

- Barnett, S. and Kasmin, R. (2017). *Teacher compensation parity policies and state-funded pre-K programs*. New Brunswick, NJ: the National Institute for Early Education Research and Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- Cassidy, D. J., Lower, J. K., Kintner-Duffy, V. L., Hegde, A. V., & Shim, J. (2011). The day-to-day reality of teacher turnover in preschool classrooms: An analysis of classroom context and teacher, director, and parent perspectives. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 25(1), 1-23. Retrieved from [http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/D\\_Cassidy\\_Day\\_2011.pdf](http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/D_Cassidy_Day_2011.pdf).
- Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2014). *Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning (SEQUAL)*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- Cheng, I., Koralek, R., Robinson, A., Russel, S., Schwartz, D., & Sarna, M. (2018). *Career pathways in early care and education*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates. Retrieved from: <https://www.abtassociates.com/insights/publications/report/career-pathways-in-early-care-and-education-career-pathways-design>
- Child Care Services Association (2015). *Working in early care and education in North Carolina: 2015 workforce study*. Chapel Hill, NC: Child Care Services Association. Retrieved from: <https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2015-Workforce-Report-FNL.pdf>
- Curbow, B., Spratt, K., Ungaretti, A., McDonnell, K., & Breckler, S. (2000). *Development of the child care worker job stress inventory*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(4), 515– 536. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(01\)00068-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(01)00068-0).
- Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Kasmin, R. (2018). *NIEER data report: Lead teacher workforce qualifications, pay and parity*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from [http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Yearbook-Data-Snapshot\\_Workforce\\_5.29.18.pdf](http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Yearbook-Data-Snapshot_Workforce_5.29.18.pdf).
- Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G. & DiCrecchio, N. (2019). *The state of preschool 2018: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from <http://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks/2018-2>.
- Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2004). Self-reported depression in nonfamilial caregivers: Prevalence and associations with caregiver behavior in childcare settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19, 297–318;
- Hershbein, B. & Kearney, M. (2014). *Major decisions: What graduates earn over their lifetimes*. Washington, DC: The Hamilton Project. Retrieved from [https://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/major\\_decisions\\_what\\_graduates\\_earn\\_over\\_their\\_lifetimes](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/major_decisions_what_graduates_earn_over_their_lifetimes)
- King, E. K., Van Schagen Johnson, A., Cassidy, D. J., Wang, Y., Lower, J. K., & Kintner-Duffy, V. L. (2016). Preschool teachers' financial well-being and work time supports: Associations with children's emotional expressions and behaviors in classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 44(6), 545-553.
- McLean, C., Dichter, H., & Whitebook, M. (2017). *Strategies in pursuit of pre-K teacher compensation parity: Lessons from seven states and cities*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley and New Brunswick, NJ: The National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from <https://csce.berkeley.edu/files/2017/10/Strategies-in-Pursuit-of-Pre-K.pdf>.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *Transforming the financing of Early Care and Education*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17226/24984>.
- Office of School Readiness (2020) *Monitors' guide to support Alabama First Class Pre-K programs, 2020-2021*. Montgomery, AL: Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education.

- Office of School Readiness (2018). *Office of School Readiness program guidelines, 2018-2019*. Montgomery, AL: Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Retrieved from: <http://children.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/06/2018-2019-First-Class-Pre-K-Program-Guidelines.pdf>
- Roberts, A. M., Iruka, I. U., & Sarver, S. L. (2018). *Nebraska early childhood workforce survey: a focus on providers and teachers*. Lincoln, NE: Buffet Early Childhood Institute. Retrieved from: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/-/media/beci/docs/workforce-survey-report-final.pdf?la=en>
- Ross, J. (2018). *Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education annual report*. Montgomery, AL: Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Retrieved from: <http://children.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/08/DECE-Annual-Report-July-2018.pdf>
- Smith, S., & Lawrence, S. M. (2019). *Early care and education teacher well-being: Associations with children's experience, outcomes, and workplace conditions: A research-to-policy brief*. Child Care & Early Education Research Connections. Retrieved from <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-ngw9-n011>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *High-quality early learning settings depend on a high-quality workforce: Low compensation undermines quality*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (DOE). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/ece-low-compensation-undermines-quality-report-2016.pdf>
- Whitebook, M., King, E., Philipp, G., & Sakai, L. (2016). *Teachers' voices: Work environment conditions that impact teacher practice and program quality*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2016/2016-Alameda-SEQUAL-Report-FINAL-for-Dissemination-v2.pdf>.
- Whitebook, M. and McLean, C. (2017). *In pursuit of pre-K parity: A proposed framework for understanding and advancing policy and practice*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley and New Brunswick, NJ: the National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from [http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Pre-K-Parity-Brief\\_Final-1.pdf](http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Pre-K-Parity-Brief_Final-1.pdf).
- Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Early childhood workforce index – 2018*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <http://cscce.berkeley.edu/topic/early-childhood-workforce-index/2018/>.
- Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2014/ReportFINAL.pdf>.
- Weinstein, N., & Stone, D. N. (2018). Need depriving effects of financial insecurity: Implications for well-being and financial behaviors. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(10), 1503-1520. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000436>.