ISSUE BRIEF · OCTOBER 2026

Educator Compensation

Stable, fairly paid early educators are the foundation of quality care and a working economy.

Smart Start
of Mecklenburg County

$12.31
median hourly wage for NC early educators, below the $15.82 living wage for a single adult[1]

4.8×
more likely to live in poverty than NC elementary and middle school teachers[1]

$14.00
typical starting hourly wage for NC childcare teachers[2]

The Issue

Early educators do some of the most important work in our community: caring for and teaching children during the years when the brain develops fastest. Yet in North Carolina, the median early educator earns $12.31 an hour, well below the $15.82 an hour a single adult needs to cover basic costs.[1]

The problem is built into how childcare is funded. Most programs rely almost entirely on tuition and run on very thin margins. Raising wages usually means raising prices that families already struggle to afford, so low pay and high costs exist side by side.

Why It Matters

North Carolina's 2023 workforce study found that many early educators earn too little to meet their basic needs, and more teachers are leaving their jobs, with many planning to leave the field altogether.[3] Every departure disrupts the relationships young children depend on, and when centers cannot hire, classrooms close.

This is why educators are called the **workforce behind the workforce**. When classrooms close, parents cannot work. Childcare-related turnover and absenteeism cost NC employers an estimated $4.29 billion a year.[4]

What's Working

The 2023 workforce study points to proven strategies: increasing compensation, expanding wage supplements that reward education and retention, and building clear career pathways into the profession.[2]

In Mecklenburg County, **MECK Pre-K** classrooms are taught by licensed teachers and highly qualified assistant teachers, showing what a well-supported early education workforce can look like.[5]

How You Can Help

- **Recognize educators.** Thank the teachers in your life, especially on Provider Appreciation Day each May.
- **Share the data.** Help neighbors and employers understand that low pay drives classroom closures.
- **Invite a visit.** Ask a local official to spend time in a classroom and meet the educators.
- **Tell your story.** If you are an educator, share what it takes to stay in the field you love.

Advocacy tools:
smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy

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Sources 1. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, *2024 Early Childhood Workforce Index*, via NC Newsline (Oct. 2024). **2.** Child Care Services Association, *Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina: 2023 Workforce Study*. **3.** NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, "North Carolina releases new ECE workforce study." **4.** U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Untapped Potential in NC* (2024). **5.** Mecklenburg County, "MECK Pre-K Graduates Record Number of Children in 2026."

Smart Start of Mecklenburg County is a nonpartisan nonprofit. This brief is provided for public education and does not endorse candidates or take positions on specific legislation.

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