



Child Care Workforce Focus Group Summary Briefing

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ABOUT THE
**RUTGERS CHILD CARE
RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE**

With funding and support from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, the Center for Women and Work, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, and the National Institute of Early Education Research have joined together to form the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative for the purpose of conducting research and facilitating community conversations that develop a broad and comprehensive understanding of New Jersey's child care landscape. Our research aims to increase understanding about the needs and interests of parents in New Jersey, the supply and motivations of the child care workforce, and the capacity of the child care sector to meet demand for child care today and into to future within our diverse state.



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INTRODUCTION

The availability and accessibility of high-quality child care in the state of New Jersey is an issue that has been, and continues to be, explored by the research community. New Jersey's child care landscape is underpinned by the child care workforce, which has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years. Launched into the spotlight in 2020, the child care workforce was revealed to be underpaid, undervalued, and thinly stretched, all of which were longstanding trends in the child care field before the onset of the global pandemic (Whitebook, 1999). The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey is working to explore the perspectives and experiences of those working in the field of child care and expand upon what is understood about the New Jersey child care workforce's motivations, barriers and challenges, and estimations of career planning. The Heldrich Center aims to gain a better understanding of the factors that affect the recruitment and retention of the child care workforce. Additionally, this research seeks to identify ways in which New Jersey can reduce barriers to entry to the child care workforce and improve retention of qualified, skilled workers.

The Heldrich Center is part of a multi-center collaborative project focused on child care in New Jersey and is working with the Center for Women and Work and the National Institute for Early Education Research with support and collaboration from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. Referred to as the Rutgers University Child Care Collaborative, the project consists of two primary components: a child care landscape evaluation and a child care workforce evaluation. The Heldrich Center is leading the child care workforce evaluation through the administration of a series of child care workforce focus groups and a child care workforce survey.

This brief summarizes the preliminary findings from the Heldrich Center's first series of focus groups with members of the child care workforce in New Jersey.

METHODS

For the child care workforce evaluation, the Heldrich Center is using a mixed-methods approach to assess the child care workforce in New Jersey. In this study, the Heldrich Center team first conducted a series of focus groups with the child care workforce to inform the development of a survey instrument. Later in 2024, the Heldrich Center will conduct a survey of child care workers in New Jersey, which will be followed by a second series of focus groups to clarify and expand upon the findings identified through the survey.

For the first round of child care workforce focus groups, the Heldrich Center research team conducted six focus groups in November and December 2023. Forty-five (45) child care workers participated in these focus groups. Participants included individuals from licensed child care centers, family child care providers, and individuals participating in Child Development Associate (CDA) classes. Focus group #1 was conducted with seven licensed center staff from Monmouth County. Focus groups #2 and #3 were conducted with CDA students currently working in child care and totaled 14 participants from Hunterdon, Sussex, and Warren counties. Focus group #4 was conducted with nine CDA students working in child care in Essex County. Focus group #5 was conducted with seven family child care providers from Monmouth County. Focus group #6 was conducted with eight Spanish-speaking licensed center staff from Essex County. Five of the six focus groups were conducted virtually and one was held in person. Individuals were recruited to participate in the focus groups with the assistance of the child care resource and referral agencies in the counties of Essex, Hunterdon, Monmouth, Sussex, and Warren. While the individuals who participated in the focus groups primarily represent the central and northern regions of New Jersey, the southern region of the state will be captured in the Heldrich Center's statewide survey of child care workers as well as the post-survey focus groups that will follow.

Semi-structured focus group protocols were used in this research. Focus group participants were asked questions about their motivations for working in child care, the workplace environment, career supports and planning, and perceived barriers and challenges. See the appendix for the full focus group protocol. All focus groups were attended by between two and four research team members, with one team member facilitating the discussion and the other(s) taking notes. Individuals received a \$50 Visa gift card for their participation in the focus groups. The criteria for inclusion in the focus groups were individuals who were over the age of 18 and currently working in the child care field. Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and coded topically by two research team members. These summaries were then reviewed by other research team members who observed the focus groups for feedback and a validity check.

FINDINGS

Topical coding of the transcripts was organized and summarized in line with the protocol deployed in this study: motivation, workplace logistics and support, career planning, and perceived barriers and challenges.

□ Motivation

The Heldrich Center research team asked focus group participants about their motivations for working in the child care field. Focus group participants cited various pathways into the child care field, including entering the child care field after experiences finding care for their own children, building on experience with raising siblings and/or family members, and having a strong desire to work with children as a profession. Others mentioned community connections, friends, and family members as having helped them get a start in the child care field when local licensed child care centers were hiring. Lastly, a few focus group participants noted having started as volunteers in classrooms and working their way up to be full-time staff. These members of the child care workforce entered the field through a variety of pathways and largely expressed no intention of leaving the field and/or pursuing other career options. In this vein, many focus group participants said they believed working with children was their “passion” or “calling,” the thing they were good at and supposed to be doing. As one focus group participant noted:

“I can’t imagine that I can fit in the other job. This is the one and only job I can fit in.”

The most prominent topic that emerged when discussing motivations for working in child care was workers’ love of children, specifically caring for, teaching, and watching the children develop. Many focus group participants spoke of the self-fulfillment they derived from their work as the primary motivating factor for continuing to work in the profession, despite other obstacles, such as the rate of pay and availability of benefits, that they may have encountered. Moreover, many focus group participants expounded upon the gratification of helping children learn and grow and watching the children’s development flourish. In this way, identifying personal satisfaction and feelings of fulfillment as motivating factors to work in child care are critical in understanding what draws people to the profession, and what ultimately influences them to stay in the profession. These two factors (love of children and personal fulfillment) are one piece of a broader narrative around individual career planning; however, it is helpful to understand how child care workers speak of what influences their decision-making processes.

In conversation, many focus group participants cited feelings of being underappreciated and undervalued in their work environment, particularly stemming from the attitudes of parents, directors, and other co-workers at times. Despite the undervaluation, there was dedication and resilience among focus group participants to keep doing a good job because of their love of children.

As such, the gratification of helping children learn and grow was the most common aspect of the job that child care workers liked, appreciated, and kept them going on a daily basis.

□ Workplace Logistics and Support

When discussing their work environments, many focus group participants shared their feelings about workplace logistics, such as their hours and rate of pay, as well as if they felt supported in their current positions by supervisors and management. Most focus group participants had reliable hours week to week and were paid hourly. Relatedly, focus group participants spoke highly of engaging in training classes, such as CDA classes, for the substantial hourly pay increase they would receive once they completed their certification. A minority of focus group participants indicated that they had health benefits through their employment, and a majority mentioned wanting health benefits. The other employment benefit discussed with focus group participants was paid time off. While most participants reported having access to paid time off, a few participants noted having difficulty in taking time off and finding adequate coverage for their classrooms. To this end, one focus group participant noted:

“It can be tough when you’re so stressed and you’re down numbers on teachers or substitutes and you’re constantly being pulled in every which direction.”

In terms of having adequate coverage, a few focus group participants noted the difficulties they faced in their classrooms with the student-to-teacher ratio. One focus group particularly referenced the 12 students to one teacher ratio as being a challenge, noting difficulties in keeping up with classroom demands, even though the ratio meets the guidance set by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (n.d.). While the ratio of students to teachers varies by age group, members of this particular focus group spoke of not feeling that they could effectively manage the needs of 12 students and ensure that all students received the attention and support that they required. Moreover, focus group participants spoke about the lack of coverage that they sometimes face in the classroom, and a related fear of making a mistake and/or doing something that could be interpreted by others as a mistake, due to being stretched too thin. As one participant remarked:

“I wish there was a way to get, like, aides.”

In this way, focus group participants spoke of aides in the classroom as a helpful set of additional hands, ears, and eyes to ensure that students were properly attended to, and that the teacher did not miss anything due to being pulled in other directions.

Adding to coverage issues, focus group participants broadly discussed how it can be difficult to find people interested in working in child care. A few focus group participants explained the difficulties of hiring and operating short-staffed, particularly citing difficulties in the past three to four years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, some participants remarked about how different the current employment landscape is from 10 to 15 years ago when employment in the

field was perceived to be more desired and competitive. Relatedly, other focus group participants spoke of being “fast tracked” in their child care jobs, having only a few months of experience and working their way up to a lead teacher role to meet the needs of their respective child care centers. The accelerated trajectory and quick opportunities for advancement were appreciated by focus group participants, who simply noted that they did not expect to be lead teachers so shortly after entering the child care field.

Lastly, most focus group participants felt supported by their supervisors, but not all felt supported by their directors and/or the institutions where they worked. Focus group participants referenced anecdotes of being put in difficult situations when there was an issue in their classroom, or with a parent, and not feeling that they had the support of their center’s director and/or upper management when handling the situation. Focus group participants working in family child care specifically noted that they felt supported by their local child care resource and referral agency and the classes and assistance available to them. As one individual noted:

“They are 100% supporting us. I really appreciate the CCR. Really helpful anytime if I have a question, I quickly email, I quickly call them, so they always provide information. Really appreciate them.”

□ Career Planning

When speaking about career planning and having access to supports that would help them get ahead, most focus group participants felt that they had access to the training that they needed (CPR, first aid, Grow NJ Kids training, etc.), except at least one participant from every focus group mentioned wanting and/or needing training to work with children with special needs. The topic of wanting additional tools and/or supports to work with children with special needs carried throughout all the focus groups in different ways, but a request for more training was universal. Focus group participants presented career advancement opportunities as being fairly limited in their respective child care centers, which in turn did not appear to be a significant motivating or demotivating factor. When asked about their career plans, many focus group participants spoke about their interest in earning more money for what they do, as opposed to focusing on career pathways and/or job titles. As previously mentioned, focus group participants spoke highly of the ability to take classes that would allow them to advance in their profession and earn more money. CDA classes were specifically cited as extremely helpful and impactful service offerings, such as those offered at Norwescap child and family resource services in Hunterdon, Sussex, and Warren counties and Programs for Parents, Inc. in Newark.

All focus group participants communicated their plans to continue working in child care, inclusive of both individuals working in licensed child care centers and family child care providers. As one focus group participant remarked:

“I love what I do. So, for me, this is it for the future.”

Similarly, all the family child care providers expressed their intentions to continue operating their child care businesses and were unanimous in having no intention to work in a licensed child care center. The freedom to “be their own boss” and still have support in their work from their local child care resource and referral agency was portrayed as the ideal situation for the focus group participants working in family child care.

□ Perceived Barriers and Challenges

When asked about the challenges and barriers associated with entering and continuing to work in the child care field, the most common challenge was the rate of pay. As two focus group participants explained:

“Pay is a huge deterrent for people staying in child care if they don’t have another income in the home. Teachers, in general, don’t get paid enough.”

“Yeah, the pay is a real struggle. Fortunately for myself and the majority of our teachers, we are not relying on our salary because there’s no way we could live off of that salary alone.”

As evidenced in the quotes above, some focus group participants went on to explain that they were only able to continue working in their child care jobs because they also had the financial support and/or income of another family member. Focus group participants clarified that their salaries were unable to sustain a family, especially if they lived in a single-income household. Further expanding on their displeasure with their rate of pay, some focus group participants explained how it would be more profitable for them to work in a Starbucks or Target, specifically jobs that did not have the added responsibilities and pressures of caring for young children.

When asked about the barriers to entering the child care field, many participants felt that the rate of pay was a significant factor keeping people out of the profession. This was coupled with another key deterrent: the demands of a job working with young children. To this end, focus group participants spoke of the significant responsibility of caring for young children, and the stressful environment that is created in trying to ensure that children are safe, cared for, learning, and happy. Taken together, focus group participants suggested that the child care field was not seen as an appealing career path for multiple reasons.

Difficulties with disengaged or uncooperative parents were also cited as common challenges across all focus groups. Focus group participants spoke about working with parents who were uninterested or too busy to participate in their children’s learning and/or development. This was commonly framed as a challenge in the way that it could cause tension or disagreements with parents, and overall was regarded as both a disappointment and disadvantage for the child. Moreover, when speaking about the relationships with parents, some focus group participants felt that parents, as well as society at large, did not have respect for the teaching and/or caregiving profession. This was seen as a twofold

challenge with both an absence of understanding and a lack of respect. Some participants mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic briefly changed this dynamic, when individuals were forced to stay home and provide education for their children; however, in more recent times, this continues to be a difficulty.

For family child care providers, the two primary challenges mentioned were setting boundaries with the families they work with and requiring additional resources to properly support their child care operations. Family child care providers felt that parents would sometimes take advantage of their child care arrangement and not regard the family child care provision as a business with rules and policies, just as those that one would expect from a licensed child care center or any other business. Lastly, family child care providers spoke of the financial burden of ensuring their family child care business had all the supplies and resources needed to properly care for children. Family child care providers expressed interest in finding other avenues of financial support from the state to continue running their businesses.

CONCLUSION

These focus groups suggest that the child care workforce in New Jersey is largely comprised of hard-working professionals who derive immense satisfaction from working with children and nurturing their development and growth daily. These individuals enter the child care workforce through a variety of pathways, but commonly stay for a reported love of the profession and the opportunity to work with children. The child care professionals who participated in these focus groups were typically paid hourly, had reliable schedules, and were able to take time off as needed; however, many lacked healthcare and other critical benefits. Advancement opportunities and training were viewed positively, and particularly seen as critical stepping stones in achieving higher rates of pay. Local child care resource and referral agencies were seen as effective and beneficial by the focus group participants who were incredibly grateful for the resources, classes, and supportive services they were able to access through these organizations. Focus group participants characterized the challenges they faced in working in the child care field as an insufficient rate of pay, the demands of working with young children, and parents' lack of respect and/or appreciation for the profession. Despite these challenges, the focus group participants communicated no desire to leave their profession. Focus group participants cited the supports — particularly financial supports — of their own families and partners as a critical factor enabling them to continue in the work, specifically noting the importance of having a dual-income household.

The preliminary findings outlined in this brief are part of an initial effort and do not comprehensively define the entire child care workforce in the state. These preliminary findings offer helpful guidance for how to frame the thinking and language around the core topics of interest in this research study. The Heldrich Center will use the insights identified through these focus groups to inform the development of a survey instrument. As such, the Heldrich Center team will continue its child care

workforce evaluation with the administration of a survey to child care professionals across the state, as well as conduct a second series of focus groups with the child care workforce. Taken together, this work will offer a set of policy recommendations for New Jersey to consider to improve the supply, preparedness, quality, and working conditions of the state’s child care workers.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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The [Heldrich Center for Workforce Development](#) is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

References

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APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative
John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development
Focus Group Protocol - Round 1 (Pre-Survey Focus Groups)
Teachers and Caregivers

Icebreaker Question:

Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and where you work and how you became a child care worker?

Major Question:

What were some of the reasons that motivated you/brought you to work with children? What were some of the on-ramps/entry points into child care employment?

Probe Questions:

- How did you come to work in child care?
- Would you recommend this job to others who are exploring different job opportunities?
- Why do you want to work in child care?
- How did you come to enroll in this CDA training to get a job in child care?

Major Question:

What do you like about your work with young children and what don't you like?

Probe Questions:

- What aspects of your job are most satisfying to you? What do you find least satisfying/dislike? (What are the best parts of your job? What are the worst parts of your job?)
- Has your satisfaction improved over time (post-pandemic, with experience, with a higher-level position)? Do you like your job more or less since you started? Why?
- What could your employer do, if anything, that could improve how happy you are with your job?
- What aspects of the job seem most appealing to you?

Now, we would like to hear from you about your work environment about how your workplace supports you as an employee.

Major Question:

Can you tell us about your workplace? How does your workplace affect your attitude/feelings about your current role as a child care worker (teacher/caregiver)?

Probe Questions:*Workplace Logistics*

- Do you have reliable hours from week to week?
- How satisfied are you with your pay? How does pay factor into your future employment in child care or elsewhere?
- How satisfied are you with your employment benefits in your job (healthcare, paid time off, hours, and flexibility)?

Workplace Supports

- Do you feel supported at work from supervisors?
- Do you feel like a valued employee — by supervisors and/or by families for whose children you care? By your co-workers and peers in your child care setting?
- Do you feel prepared to do your job? (Do you feel like you have the knowledge and skills necessary to do your job well?)
- What kinds of training do you get to work with young children? Can you give me some examples of trainings like workshops, conferences, coaching, etc.?
- What, if any, training did you get to be a child care worker? From what type of institution?

Career Planning

- Is this your first job in child care and, if not, how does your experience now vary from previous jobs in child care? What is better or worse about your current job situation?
- Do you intend to stay in the child care field in the short term (one year) or longer term? In your current position or another position? What are your future plans as it pertains to being a child care worker?

Now, we would like to hear a little more about your job/career trajectory, and what, if anything, you feel is a barrier or challenge for you in your career pathway.

Major Question:

If you intend to stay in the child care field, what might be the next step for you? Do you see a clear career pathway/pathway to advancement? What is your ultimate career goal in child care, if any?

Probe Questions:

- Thinking about your job in child care, what does your career pathway look like as a child care worker (teacher/caregiver) and how do you attain upward mobility in child care work, if you want it? How do educational requirements change as you advance in your child care employment and what is your access to further education?
- Do you have access to (know about schools in your area for training) training for advancement in child care?
- Do you feel that your workplace supports your career advancement? If yes, in what ways does your workplace support your career advancement?
- What, if anything, do you think would make you leave the child care field? {What changes to your employment situation would make you want to stay?}
- What role does public school employment play in your career considerations? Would you prefer to work in the public school system? Why?

Major Question:

What are the biggest barriers to entering, and staying, in the field of child care for you?

Probe Questions:

- Can you talk about other barriers that you or your co-workers experienced to becoming child care workers?
- What are some of the barriers/challenges you face as a child care worker? (i.e., working conditions, pay, health benefits, career advancement, access to professional development, etc.)
- What do you think are the barriers to advancing in your job in the child care field?
- What other barriers do you experience to work (transportation, child care, work hours, physicality of working in your job)? Does your job in child care allow you to meet your personal responsibilities at home?
- Would you say that you are financially struggling despite your job as a child care worker? Have you had to consider any public benefits to financially sustain you and/or your family?
- What are the barriers for you in participating in this training?

Final Question:

If you could wave a magic wand, what is the one thing you would change about recruiting and retaining child care workers in New Jersey?

- How would you recommend we get in touch with other teachers and caregivers in the state of New Jersey?