



No Filter: Early Childhood Workforce Compensation

A Discussion with Shannon Rudisill



For the first issue of ITEACH, we interviewed Shannon Rudisill, former Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development at the Administration for Children and Families at the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. At the time of her interview, Ms. Rudisill provided oversight to all federal programs related to child development. Ms. Rudisill, an avid T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood @ enthusiast (see her photo with graduating scholars above), sat down with ITEACH to discuss a topic on every T.E.A.C.H. scholar's mind: COMPENSATION.

T.E.A.C.H. DC: What are your hopes for the Early Childhood Field?

Shannon Rudisill: I believe infant and toddler teachers are doing the hardest work. My hopes for our teachers are that they feel qualified and confident to do their jobs. Also, that they are well paid with benefits, and they don't worry when an unexpected expense arises. Ultimately, my hope is that all early childhood educators are respected and valued as professionals.

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T.E.A.C.H. DC: Talk to us about the importance of teacher compensation as it pertains to providing high-quality child care.

Shannon Rudisill: It's hard to understate the importance of teacher compensation. Brain development research has proven what many of us have always known from experience: a child's first experiences are the most important experiences. The first experiences lay the foundation for a child's success in life. After parents, primary caregivers and family members, early learning educators have the greatest impact on child development. We have a compensation crisis in our future. Our crisis is determined by our public commitment to put resources towards early childhood education, as we have with K-12 public education. I believe that we can, but it will be a different model because early education is delivered in multiple settings, especially in the District of Columbia. The model that we work towards needs to be created, but I think that it can be done.

“Parents are paying all they can afford to pay. That's why we need to look at where parents and the public can invest more ...”

T.E.A.C.H. DC: Why do you think it's difficult to increase compensation in the ECE workforce?

Shannon Rudisill: I believe that it's difficult to increase compensation because we haven't found a way to finance early education appropriately. At the federal level, we understand that teachers are the largest part of a budget in any early learning organization.

In programs that are attached to public education (K-12th grade), we see in national survey data that they are better compensated than other early educators. Teachers in Head Start are not adequately compensated, but they are better compensated than educators in child care. We believe that there is a direct relationship between the amount of public investment and revenue in a particular child care setting and how much teachers are making. In child care in particular, and all birth to three services, we are relying on what parents can afford to pay. We need to determine where parents and the public can invest more.

I am really proud of the work we did in the Obama administration. We put new investments in Head Start. In addition, we proposed a universal pre-k investment and a child care investment so that every child under the age of 4, under 200% of poverty, would be able to access child care. Although those proposals were not adopted and taken up by congress, I am proud of the progress that we did make. We put a billion dollars in the race to the top early learning challenge and we put billions in Head Start.

Now that the Obama administration has come to an end, there is a lot of work for the next administration to do. I feel that our work sets a precedent for the kind of investments we would need to pay our teachers what they deserve.

T.E.A.C.H. DC: In your current role or in previous positions, when have you had the opportunity to advocate for higher compensation for the ECE workforce?

Shannon Rudisill: Advocating for higher compensation is on my mind all of the time. Every year, the president submits a budget to congress outlining his annual spending priorities. When I served President Obama in the Administration for Children and Families, we crafted a child care proposal that would have ensured adequate payment per child - nearly doubling the national average from about \$5500 per child to \$10,000 per child for full day, year-round care.

Also, we funded the National Academies of Science to look at the early learning work force. This proposal demonstrated the commitment that the Obama administration had to pay teachers adequately. Over a couple decades, our whole field will be required to have a bachelor's degree. T.E.A.C.H. will be critical in reaching this goal. People often think if you get the degree, the money will follow. That won't happen. There has to be an intentional effort to increase compensation.

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T.E.A.C.H. DC: What advice would you give to early childhood educators who are advocating to increase compensation?

Shannon Rudisill: Don't underestimate the power of your voice. You may feel that state, congress, and other political leaders know what you know, but we don't know everything that you know. You know so much about your family and the families you serve. Early childhood teachers rarely come to visit me. We want you to come! We want to talk to you! If you can find time, make an appointment. I always meet with the same people from big organizations. I will prioritize meetings with families and teachers over anything else because I know how hard it is for them to schedule time on their calendars. Your voice is what I need to hear.



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