

## Employee Retention in the Day Care Industry

*By A Thread: How Child Care Centers Hold On to Teachers, How Teachers Build Lasting Careers.* By Marcy Whitebook and Laura Sakai, Kalamazoo, MI, W.E. Upjohn Institute, 2004, 145 pp., \$16.00/paperback.

How do child care centers retain the staff necessary to provide quality care in light of the low pay and status of workers in the child care sector? That is the question that the authors address in this book. The demand for child care for preschool children has grown rapidly over the past 35 years as the labor force participation of women with young children has increased. This increased demand comes at a time when it is recognized that the quality of child care provided before age five is vital to the educational and social development of children. Finding and retaining workers to provide this care has become a critical issue. This book focuses on two other crucial retention questions as well: “Why do individuals choose to work in child care?” and “Why do they choose to stay or leave the field?”

The data for the book comes from an in-depth study of day care centers in the San Francisco Bay area conducted by the authors. The study was done in three phases in 1994, 1996, and 2000, with each phase including interviews with staff members. The sample included 92 child care centers, 75 of which participated in all three phases. About sixty-five percent of the centers were located in middle income areas, but the ethnicity of the child population of the centers was diverse: roughly 40

percent were children of color, and around half of the classrooms had children whose native language was not English.

The authors found that teachers were attracted to child care by the challenge of working with children and the importance they place on their own role in the social and cognitive development of the children. Teachers also placed importance on their working relationship with other staff members and the opportunities for professional development.

Low wages and the accompanying low status were important reasons why workers left child care jobs. Wages varied among the centers in the study, but the mean hourly wage was \$13.52 an hour for day care teachers, (\$24,606 annually), well below the \$46,236 average annual public school salary in California; the average hourly wage for assistant teachers at the child care centers was just \$9.35 an hour. Workers who left their jobs were earning less on average than those who stayed, and this relationship held across all educational levels and job titles. Financial and emotional stresses created problems for child care workers. Those who had other sources of income, such as a spouse with a good paying job, were more likely to remain in child care; those who were dependent solely on their child care income were less likely to stay. The authors found that family support was important for those workers to remain in child care, and that those who did not have small children of their own for whom they had to arrange day care were more likely to stay. Many child care workers reported that they felt overextended by their job responsibilities and by the cultural and linguistic diversity

they encountered. Many also felt that their work was not fully appreciated, and that their job skills were invisible to family, friends, associates, and even the parents in the program.

Only 42 percent of those who left child care jobs in the centers participating in the survey took a teaching job at a different child care center. Fifteen percent became “stay-at-home moms” and another 13 percent were still working in other jobs associated with children e.g., elementary school teacher, family child care provider, day care director at a different facility, or nanny. Of the remainder, 21 percent found employment outside the field—the rest found work in other types of child services (such as resource and referral) or became full-time students or retired. While money was the reason most often cited for leaving child care work, other reasons included greater autonomy and shorter hours.

The authors identified staff turnover as a serious problem in providing quality care; between 1999 and 2000, the average turnover rate was 30 percent for teaching staff. High turnover creates staff training burdens, disrupts staff cohesion, and limits the ability of the staff to build emotional bonds with the children. When staff turnover is high it typically exacerbates existing tensions, causing even more people to leave and creating further turnover problems. A lack of collegiality, in fact, was often cited as a reason for leaving. Turnover appeared to be at least somewhat a function of wages; centers with no turnover had an average teaching staff wage of \$17.28 per hour while those that had turnover in excess of twenty percent had an average teaching staff wage of

\$11.65 hourly.

The authors conclude with three recommendations:

1. Expand the focus of K-12 educational reforms, including those focused on teacher retention, to include the pre-school years, and finance them adequately.
2. Sponsor National legislation that encourages and augments

state and local investments to improve compensation, linked to educational attainment, for those who work with young children.

3. Encourage those working with young children to organize and strengthen their voice for increased pay, improved benefits, and greater access to education and training.

This volume is a valuable addition to the literature on child care workers. The authors offer useful information on why people choose work in child care, why they stay, why they leave and what happens to them after they leave. □

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