

## Michigan



Stephen Smith

# Michigan looks to create a better career path for early childhood educators

JOANNE BAILEY-BOORSMA | WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2023

Would you like to have an opportunity to provide insight, feedback, and recommendations to inform Michigan's efforts to expand GSRP (PreK for All)? Share your thoughts on the online MI PreK for All feedback form.



*This article is part of Early Education Matters, a series about how Michigan parents, childcare providers, and early childhood educators are working together to implement Pre-K for All. It is made possible with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.*



Two preschool teachers work across the hall from each other. Both teach four-year-olds, have the same education level and ability, and work to meet the curriculum standards set by the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). One teacher's classroom is part of GSRP and the other is tuition-based, which creates a number of differences from student ratio to pay.

Those differences are something Rhonda Meyers, CEO and owner of Heartfelt Impressions Learning Centers, is very familiar with. In fact, she shared the above story at a PreK for All Listening Session in Ypsilanti. The Listening Sessions are being held in-person and virtually throughout the state to gather feedback from parents, early childhood educators, and others involved in caring for and teaching Michigan's youngest residents.

Having been involved in early education for more than 30 years, Meyer's facilities have both GSRP and tuition-based preschool programs. Student ratios are different with GSRP operating with one teacher for every eight 4-year-old students while tuition-based programs may have one teacher for every 10 or 12 students to keep tuition affordable while breaking even. GSRP teachers know they will work from about 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Tuition-based teachers could start as early as 6:30 a.m. and go as late as 5:30 p.m. with the possibility of students coming and going throughout the day. Also, teachers in tuition-based programs may not receive as much planning time as those in GSRP.

But the biggest difference is pay, which can be up to \$7 an hour more for a GSRP teacher despite everything else being equal.



**A number of financial incentives for post-secondary education help those interested in an early education career.**

## Key to expanding pre-K to all: finding teachers

As Michigan works towards a PreK for All program, which will expand voluntary preschool options so that every four-year-old in Michigan can access a free preschool education by 2027, one concern that Meyers and other preschool educators raise is workforce development for preschool teachers.

“As we’re expanding preschool to more families, that’s going to involve a lot more preschool teachers,” says Maddie Elliott, policy and program associate for Michigan’s Children. She shares that having qualified and experienced preschool teachers is key to building a high-quality preschool program. Elliott says there are about 17 states that have plans to recruit and retain teachers.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s proposal includes an up-to-\$3,000 tax credit for those working in a licensed childcare facility including childcare, preschool, and after-school programming. This is something that Michigan’s Children has advocated for because pay for early education instructors traditionally has been so low.

The Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP) notes that the younger the classroom, the lower the wage in its 2022 report on the childcare workforce. In 2019, the median wage for a preschool teacher was about \$14.89 per hour. A kindergarten teacher’s 2019 median wage was \$34.08 per hour while an elementary teacher was \$38.09 per hour.

“As we’re expanding these programs, we’re not going to be able to make it successful unless we actually have the teachers to teach the kids and fill the classrooms,” Elliott says. “We have to make sure that a central part of this public pre-k expansion is increasing wages for all early childhood professionals. We can’t be doing this by just increasing wages for GSRP teachers because that’ll just drive a lot of childcare teachers from their childcare businesses into GSRP and leave a void in infant care.”



**Having qualified and experienced preschool teachers is a key to building a high quality preschool program.**

## **Being valued and being heard**

In a 2022 report, the Center for American Progress stated that the pandemic exacerbated the lack of good jobs in childcare. Since the pandemic, the profession has struggled to recover and fill openings as childcare teachers sought better-quality jobs in other fields.

“I have had experience with college students or graduates with an early childhood degree getting a preschool teaching job with a school district only as a placeholder until they get into a kindergarten, first-, or second- [grade class],” says Jennifer Haeussler, assistant dean of academics and education and early childhood education chair for Sierra Heights University. “So yes, pay is a huge deal. I just had one student come through the program and she had been a preschool teacher for seven or eight years. The government-funded preschool

program she was in didn't offer her health benefits, so she got a job working with the district as a district teacher so she could have health insurance.”

While pay is an issue, Meyers says the bigger issue for early education instructor is good working conditions.

“You have to make a wage that is livable, but if you look at all of the research about why people leave jobs, it's not the money,” Meyers says. “It's about being seen and heard and valued. That takes human capital. And so it's not one silver bullet that fixes this.”



**Exposing middle- and high-school students to the early education as a career path could help increase the pre-K workforce.**

## **Raising the bar in training**

Early education requirements vary, says Julie Ricks-Doneen, Oakland University

associate professor of human development and human studies. Programs like Head Start and GSRP require a teaching certificate or a bachelor's degree with a birth-to-kindergarten (B-K) certificate. An assistant teacher has to have a child development associate degree (CDC).

The B-K certification is fairly new, Ricks-Doneen says, adding it is part of a movement to help unify the system. However, the industry has yet to catch up to the new certifications, Haeussler adds, noting that most licensed facilities, outside of state and federally funded programs, do not have requirements for early education.

A number of financial incentives for post-secondary education help those interested in an early education career. Ricks-Doneen and her colleague Tomoko Wakabayashi, Oakland University associate professor of human development and child studies, both note they almost need a diagram to navigate through all the options. But it still goes back to the pay issue, Wakabayashi says, pointing out that people seek a higher degree because it usually will help boost their income. An early education program may not be able to pay more for a person with a higher degree because less funding supports those programs than K-12 programs.



**Early education careers can be very rewarding.**

## Connecting with future teachers

According to Meyers, reaching the state's goal of PreK for All by 2027 comes down to a math problem. With approximately 110,000 four-year-olds in Michigan and applying the GSRP standard of 16 per class, Michigan will need around 6,875 lead preschool teachers in the next two years.

"We can open up all the classrooms everywhere across the state for 6,875 classrooms, all needing a lead teacher," Meyers says. "But if we only have 4,000 qualified lead teachers, how will we cover the gap?"

Many in post-secondary institutions believe connecting with middle and high school students, before they make a career decision could help — as well as raising awareness of the many incentives Michigan offers to help cover the costs of post-secondary education. Current incentive programs include Grow Your Own, Sixty by 30, and the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Michigan Scholarship Program.

"We need to focus on the students and say we have pathways to help you get from high school to community college to college, if that's what they want to do," Ricks-Doneen says. "They could end up out of high school with a CDA [Child Development Associate], which then transfers into community college credits, which then transfers into four-year college credits. If they want to do the B-K program, that's where they would end up if they want to focus on early childhood."

Getting high school and college students out into preschool classrooms where they can interact with preschool students and families is another strategy.

"I've had many students who go in knowing that the pay is lower, but they really enjoy working with families of children with special needs," Tomoko says. "The only way to know that is to do it, to have a mentor who can show you how to do that."





"... the kisses, the crayons, it's worth it."

## Setting positive examples

Lastly, Haeussler says that people have to stop bashing the profession.

"My daughter, who's 30-years-old now, is just brilliant. She graduated from high school when she was 16, and she said she wanted to be a teacher," Haeussler says. "Not just any teacher but an early childhood teacher. I went, 'No, no, no, no, no. You're way too smart for that.'"

"I have been in education my entire career. I've been a teacher, and I was a preschool teacher before I became a university faculty member, and I owned my own childcare center. Is that not the pot calling the kettle black? That I am in this profession, and I didn't want my daughter to join it. To say, 'You're too smart to be a teacher,' that's crazy. We want the smartest people to be the teachers."

Haeussler says her daughter did become an early education teacher. Now Haeussler uses herself as an example of why a potential student should go into teaching.

“I’m a middle-aged woman. I have been an early childhood professional my entire career,” Haeussler says. “I am not starving to death. I do have a car I pay for. I have a house I pay for. I have lights. So it can work. No, I’m not going to be rich, and I do frequent resale shops sometimes. But, the kisses, the crayons — it’s worth it.”

**Joanne Bailey-Boorsma has 30-plus years of writing experience having served as a reporter and editor for several West Michigan publications, covering a variety of topics from local news to arts and entertainment.**

**Photos by Stephen Smith.**

*Early Education Matters is a series of stories about the implementation of Pre-K for All throughout the State of Michigan. It is made possible with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.*

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