Child Care Initiative
North Central Michigan College

Building a Sustainable Child Care System:

Implementing a Salary Scale for Early Childhood Professionals

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Executive Summary

With more working families needing childcare and an increasing number of providers closing their doors, the early childhood education system faces a critical imbalance between supply and demand. Access to high-quality childcare depends on availability and affordability, which in turn hinge on a sustainable early childhood workforce. However, systemic underfunding has left many programs unable to offer living wages, leading to high turnover and insufficient capacity to meet community needs.

The North Central Michigan College (NCMC) Child Care Initiative (CCI) seeks to address these challenges by implementing a True-Cost Fiscal Model (TCM). Central to this model is the development of a living wage salary scale for early childhood educators, a foundational step toward attracting and retaining skilled professionals. The salary scale provides a clear framework for fair compensation and career advancement, offering a roadmap for sustainable, long-term reform.

The CCI has identified the TCM as a critical innovation in its Phase II efforts. This white paper explores how the CCI is piloting the salary scale and other strategies to transform childcare in Emmet County, Michigan. If implemented broadly, these initiatives could serve as a model for nationwide reform.

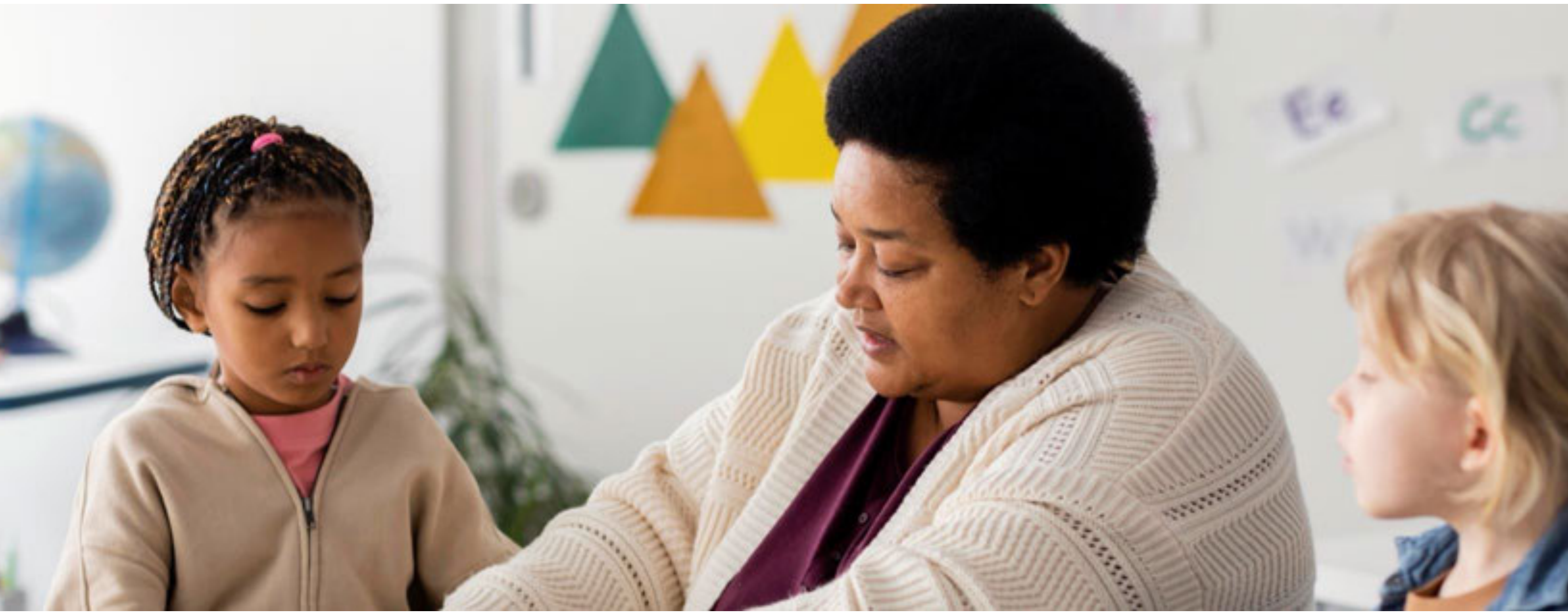
Introduction & Background

The Child Care Initiative

The early care and education system in the United States is at a tipping point, particularly in rural areas like Emmet County, Michigan. Providers are shutting their doors as more families search for care, exacerbating a critical gap between supply and demand. Quality, affordable childcare is essential for working families, local economies, and children's development; yet, the system remains underfunded and unsustainable.

The North Central Michigan College Child Care Initiative was launched in 2022, with support from the Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area Community Foundation, the Frey Foundation, and the NCMC Foundation, to create a sustainable, community-focused solution to these challenges. After completing Phase I (2022-2023), which involved gathering community input, the CCI prioritized two key innovations through research and stakeholder collaboration: the True-Cost Fiscal Model (TCM) and the Alignment of the Early Care and Education Ecosystem. The TCM aims to redefine sustainability in childcare by aligning program costs with living wages for educators, supported by employer engagement strategies to offset family expenses. Phase II (2023-2025) has focused on implementing these solutions.

This white paper examines the CCI's work in developing and piloting a living wage salary scale, as well as broader strategies to reform the childcare system. By laying a strong foundation for workforce sustainability, the CCI addresses the root causes of the childcare crisis while building a replicable model for long-term success.



Early Work of the Child Care Initiative

In tandem with Phase I of the Child Care Initiative, North Central Michigan College launched the *Access and Impact Analysis (AIA) for Child Care Businesses* project in 2021, in response to Emmet County's acute shortage of affordable, high-quality childcare. This 10-month initiative aimed to stabilize and strengthen five pilot childcare programs by helping them strategically leverage existing innovations, resources, and tools to optimize their business operations.

Through one-on-one technical assistance, resource mapping, and interviews, the AIA project uncovered three critical barriers to achieving sustainability in the childcare sector:

Time:

Providers are stretched thin, often balancing caregiving with business operations. This lack of time leaves little room for learning about or utilizing available supports, despite high motivation and interest.

Support:

Navigating fragmented childcare systems is challenging without centralized guidance. Personal relationships, peer collaboration, and access to trusted, knowledgeable advisors, such as Great Start to Quality coaches, proved to be essential.

Funding:

Providers often charge rates below the actual cost of care to remain accessible to families. This undercharging compromises wages, staffing, and ultimately, the quality and availability of care.

Some of the key recommendations that emerged from the analysis included: 1) Streamline access to resources and funding through simplified systems and personalized support. 2) Expand provider education on true-cost business models and link them to tools for long-term sustainability. 3) Increase public investment in both family subsidies and workforce compensation to close the affordability gap. 4) Encourage local employers to co-invest in childcare solutions for working families.

From this work with childcare businesses, the CCI focused on establishing a true-cost fiscal modeling. The Child Care Initiative then articulated three steps for piloting such a model including three steps: 1) the development of a salary scale, based on true-cost, 2) employer engagement strategies to help offset the cost of childcare for working families, and then 3) piloting these ideas in a proof of concept (NCMC Early Learning Center). Together, these steps aim to create a sustainable, community-centered childcare ecosystem in Emmet County.

The National Challenge: Underpayment and Its Effects

Underpaid Workforce

It is well documented that the early childhood workforce is underpaid (Alliance for Early Success, 2020; Build Initiative, 2022; McClean et al., 2021, 2024; Whitebook et al., 2016, 2018). This has been a longstanding issue in the national system and in Michigan. In 2020, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, produced the Early Childhood Workforce Index for Michigan. They reported that the state had 683,798 children from birth through five years old and 28,360 early childhood educators (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). According to the index, median hourly wages in 2020 were $11.13 for childcare workers, $14.89 for preschool teachers, and $21.70 for center directors. In comparison, median hourly wages for kindergarten and elementary teachers were $34.08 and $38.09, respectively.

The index also indicated that early educators earned over 20 percent less than educators working in K-8, which contributed to a significantly higher poverty rate among early educators compared to K-8 teachers or the broader Michigan workforce (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). Additional data from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education showed that wages for early educators remained low regardless of whether they held a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree. While higher degrees often lead to increased pay in many fields, this was not necessarily the case in early childhood education (National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2019).

Recent research by the Early Childhood Investment Corporation and Talent First found that 67% of the early care and education workforce in Region 2, which includes Emmet County, earns less than $15 per hour (Andrews, 2023). Andrews (2023) also reported that over the past 20 years, 1,200 early educators have left the region, representing a 35.8% decline in the early childhood workforce from 2001 to 2022, and suggests that low wages may be a key factor behind this workforce shortage.

Impact on Retention

Low wages and limited opportunities for advancement through ongoing education and professional development create significant instability in the early childhood education system. The field faces high turnover and a staffing shortage, leading to a greater need for quality care for families. According to Poyatzis (2022), nearly one-third of the workforce is relatively new to the field (having worked for five years or less), and one-quarter of workers have searched for a new job in the past three months, either seeking higher pay or a second job to make ends meet.

Workforce retention in early childhood education is a nationwide challenge (Hong & Teng, 2022), which many states are addressing with various compensation strategies. In the same study, Hong and Teng (2022) cite results from a survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, showing that two-thirds of respondents "reported experiencing a staffing shortage that impacted their ability to serve families, resulting in fewer children served and longer waits for families to access childcare" (Hong & Teng, 2022, p.1).

The decline in Michigan's ECE workforce is documented in the recent report "Balancing the Scales," produced by Talent First and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation. It found that nearly 36%, or over 1200 ECE professionals, have left the field in the past twenty years. The same 2023 report by Andrews highlights that 67% of the early childhood workforce in our region (NW lower MI) earn less than $15 per hour, underscoring a clear link between low pay and low retention rates.

Impact on Attraction

Recruiting new professionals is equally challenging, resulting in many unfilled positions. The 2022 NCMC study, titled the Access and Impact Analysis (AIA), uncovered widespread staffing shortages primarily caused by compensation issues (Harris, Wixson, Kling & Lopez, 2023). Without competitive pay, individuals with relevant degrees often avoid entering or remaining in the field. The problem is complex; most pilot participants in the study set their rates or fees based on what they believed parents could afford or what matched other local rates. The decision to undercharge parents was made thoughtfully and out of concern for working families; however, this decision results in staff being underpaid.

This undercharging creates two problems for childcare business owners: a shortage of well-trained, high-quality early educators ready to lead classrooms, and fewer classrooms overall. One childcare business owner reported having space to add another classroom, but no qualified applicants to staff it. Another owner shared that quality care isn't cheap, noting that you can’t have quality care at low rates (Harris, Wixson, Kling & Lopez, 2023).

A Local Solution: A Salary Scale

What is a Salary Scale?

A salary scale offers a clear and organized method to determine pay based on qualifications, roles, and responsibilities. For the Early Learning Center, the salary scale seeks to close the gap between Michigan's median early childhood wage, about $15 per hour, and Emmet County's living wage of $20.71 per hour in a household with 1 adult with 0 children (MIT, 2025). This tool not only ensures fair and competitive pay for educators but also aids in financial planning, professional development, and advocacy for funding models that reflect the true cost of quality care.

Salary Scale Development

Early Research

We started developing our salary scale by examining other industries that use salary scales, particularly nursing, since it has a similar entry point and progression. We also researched the salary scales for K-12 educators in Emmet County. Then, we looked into other states that employ salary scales for Early Childhood professionals, such as Oregon, Washington, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, Rhode Island, among others. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, the Alliance for Early Success, and the Build Initiative are all monitoring wages for early educators and the use of salary scales to boost compensation for these professionals.

Design Framework

We identified a template for the living wage salary scale, generated in 2021 by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (Casale & Noel, 2021), while focusing on developing a salary scale for early childhood education (ECE) professionals in the state. The template uses the NAEYC Power to the Profession: One Profession, Three Designations Framework (NAEYC, 2019). To that, we added a beginning or entry-level position for staff coming into the field directly from High School.

- Beginning Level
- ECE I
- ECE II
- ECE III

Additionally, the framework considers the type of role and the required education for that level, utilizing the Michigan Child Care Licensing Standards.

- High School Diploma
- CDA or ECE/CD Associate
- CDA or ECE/CD Associate - ECE/CD/ED Bachelor or Master
- ECE/CD/ED Bachelor or Master

Next, we outlined the four roles within the Early Learning Center, along with their corresponding job descriptions.

- Assistant Teacher
- Associate Teacher
- Lead Teacher
- Administrator

We also added the four indicators (Beginning to Extending) that can be used to determine compensation based on the core knowledge and core competencies the early childhood professional exhibits.

- The Beginning Level indicates a need for Information/Education.
- The Developing Level incorporates Knowledge and Comprehension.
- The Achieving Level incorporates Application and some Analysis.
- The Extending Level incorporates Analysis and Synthesis.

The salary scale and accompanying evaluation tools are based on the Michigan Professional

Michigan Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators

Nine Competencies

1. **Child Development and Learning in Context**
2. **Family-Teacher Partnerships and Community Connections**
3. **Child Observation, Documentation, and Assessment**
4. **Developmentally, Culturally, and Linguistically Appropriate Teaching Practices**
5. **Knowledge, Application, and Integration of Academic Content in the Early Childhood Curriculum**
6. **Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator**
7. **Promoting Children's Health and Wellness**
8. **Leading High Quality Early Childhood Programs**
9. **Promoting the Well-Being of Early Childhood Professional**

Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (formerly the Core Knowledge and Core Competencies for the Early Care and Education Workforce) (MDE, 2014, 2025) and the NAEYC Professional Standards (NAEYC, 2019). These combined frameworks outline the nine essential knowledge and competencies for professional growth and development.

The living wage for an individual living in Emmet County, MI, can be calculated using the MIT Living Wage Calculator (MIT, 2025). The calculator utilizes federal census data to determine the cost-of-living expenses in each area. The estimated living expenses include food, childcare, medical expenses, housing, transportation, civic fees, internet/mobile services, other miscellaneous expenses, and taxes. Those expenses are then presented in tables for various household compositions: Single Adult, Two Adults (one working), Two Adults (both working), and then from no children to three children. For a single adult with no children living in Emmet County, the estimated living wage is $20.71 per hour. For a two-adult household (both working) with two children, living in Emmet County, each adult needs to earn an average of $24.10 per hour to meet their family's basic needs.

Using MIT's tool and the supporting data from Housing North and the Michigan League for Public Policy, the CCI confirmed that MIT's estimates reflect minimum costs and found that actual expenses for rent, childcare, and food may be even higher.

Understanding that the Beginning Level would be exclusively used for new hires coming directly out of high school, or possibly still in high school (therefore sharing some of those living expenses with their families), the CCI placed the $20.71 at the ECE I Level.

Piloting the Salary Scale

The CCI team is demonstrating a proof of concept by testing the salary scale at our new child care program, the Early Learning Center, on the NCMC campus. Piloting this salary scale provides an opportunity to develop a sustainable operating budget based on the actual cost of care. The goal of paying early childhood professionals in this program a living wage across all roles is likely to attract attention from early childhood professionals, highlighting the importance of full transparency with the community. Childcare rates at the ELC reflect a commitment to paying staff a living wage and offering a comprehensive benefits package, while also helping families afford care. This is where employer engagement can be especially influential.

NCMC is working to engage employers in piloting programs like Tri-Share and Duo-Share, both innovative funding programs unique to Michigan, designed to reduce the cost of childcare for working families. With Tri-Share, the cost of childcare is shared between a participating employer, an eligible employee, and the State of Michigan. With Duo-Share, the cost of childcare is shared between a participating employer and an eligible employee.

Salary Scale Placement

Piloting the salary scale at the ELC required a simple, transparent process for deciding where each educator should start. This led to the creation of an interview protocol and rubric to guide initial placement. Also aligned with the Michigan Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, the interview protocol and accompanying rubric help assess a candidate's qualifications for the position. The rubric enables the interviewer to thoroughly evaluate each of the nine competencies and provides specific indicators for scoring candidates. It helps differentiate between the levels of Beginning, ECE I, ECE II, and ECE III, as the indicators show increasing competence. The protocol and rubric are adaptable for all roles.

Table 1. *The ELC Salary Scale*

Living Wage Salary Scale for Early Childhood Professionals

NCMC Early Learning Center	Competency Level and Educational Attainment			
		ECE I	ECE II	ECE III
	Beginning Indicates a Need for Information/Education Specific to the Role	**Developing** Incorporates Knowledge and Comprehension	**Achieving** Incorporates Application and Some Analysis	**Extending** Incorporates Analysis and Synthesis
	High School Diploma	CDA or ECE/CD Associate	CDA or ECE/CD Associate	ECE/CD/ED Bachelor or Master
Professional Level & Role				
Assistant Teacher	$18-$20/hour	$20-$22/hour		
Associate Teacher		$45,760-$54,080	$52,000-$58,240	
Lead Teacher		$49,920-$58,240	$56,160-$62,400	$62,400-$70,720
Administration			$60,320-$66,560	$66,560-$74,880

Evaluation & Self-Evaluation Tools

Placement on the salary scale is only the starting point. Ongoing evaluation and self-assessment ensure that educators can advance through the scale based on demonstrated competencies and continued professional growth. The evaluation and self-evaluation tools are to be used in tandem with the salary scale. With it, early childhood educators and program administrators can assess a staff member's knowledge and competencies and then plan appropriate professional development opportunities.
Similar to the salary scale, the evaluation tools are based on the Michigan Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (MDE, 2014, 2025) and NAEYC's Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (NAEYC, 2019).

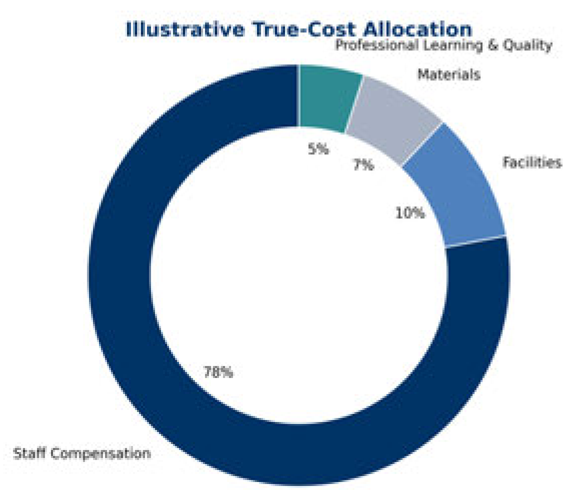
Both the evaluation tool and the self-evaluation tool are designed to assess the nine comprehensive standards and competencies of early childhood professionals. Each standard or competency is bolded and numbered (1-9) at the top of the table, followed by a brief description. Below each standard or competency, there are several indicators. After reviewing the standard and each indicator, an early educator (using the self-evaluation tool) or a program administrator (using the evaluation tool) selects the level that best describes the professional's proficiency. The user can then utilize the notes section at the end of each standard or competency to record goals or opportunities for professional development. Ultimately, staff members can use the evaluation results to identify opportunities for advancement on the salary scale, linking performance to pay growth in a clear and organized manner.

Looking Ahead: The Early Childhood Leadership Toolkit

The salary scale and its related placement and evaluation tools are part of a larger resource currently being developed, the *Early Childhood Leadership Toolkit: Comprehensive Support for Hiring, Onboarding, Compensating, and Evaluating*. This toolkit will give early childhood program leaders practical, ready-to-use tools to improve workforce recruitment, retention, and professional development. In addition to an editable salary scale, it includes an interview protocol and rubric, an onboarding framework, and an evaluation tool. The complete toolkit will be available to the public in Fall 2025, offering a full set of strategies to build strong, sustainable early learning teams.

True-Cost Model: Aligning Revenue and Expenses for Sustainability

The salary scale is part of a larger vision: a true-cost fiscal model supported by employer partnerships. The True-Cost model used by the Early Learning Center (ELC) at NCMC aims to make high-quality care sustainable by providing educators with a living wage and benefits. Instead of presenting a fixed budget in this paper, which can quickly become outdated and vary for each program, the True-Cost approach is best understood through the general distribution of expenses and the mix of funding that supports them.



In a typical high-quality, living-wage childcare program:

- Staff compensation (wages and benefits) makes up the largest share of expenses, generally 70–85% of the total budget. Within this, benefits such as health insurance, retirement contributions, and paid leave usually account for 18–30% on top of wages. This level of investment is essential to recruit and retain skilled educators, reduce turnover, and support long-term workforce stability.
- Facilities costs, which include rent, utilities, and maintenance, generally make up 8–15% of total expenses. These costs can vary widely depending on whether programs receive space in-kind or pay market rates for facilities.
- Program materials and consumables, such as classroom supplies, learning materials, and snacks, typically account for 4–8% of the budget.
- Professional learning, coaching, and family engagement investments typically represent 2–5% of costs, reflecting a commitment to continuous quality improvement.

What Drives Budget Variation

While the True-Cost Model outlines common patterns in how expenses are distributed, no two childcare programs have identical budgets. Several key factors, or budget levers, can shift the way resources are allocated while still aiming for the same principle: aligning revenue with the actual cost of living-wage compensation without placing the entire burden on families. Employer cost-sharing and public subsidies are critical for achieving this balance.

Other levers that impact revenue and expenses include:

- Ages served and ratios
- Staffing models and benefits
- Program calendar
- Facilities arrangements
- Enrollment and attendance patterns

The *ages of children served and required adult-to-child ratios* have a significant impact on costs. Infant and toddler classrooms require more staff per child than preschool classrooms, increasing personnel expenses and shaping the overall budget.

Similarly, the *staffing model and benefits* offered can shift expenses considerably. A team of full-time educators with comprehensive benefits will have higher upfront costs than a mix of part-time roles with limited benefits, though the latter may increase turnover and reduce long-term stability.

The *program calendar* also influences expenses and revenue. A year-round model generates more tuition income but carries higher staffing and operating costs, while school-year programs may have gaps in funding and fewer paid weeks for staff.

Facilities arrangements create another layer of variation. Programs with donated or subsidized space can dedicate more funding to compensation, whereas those paying market rates for rent or utilities face tighter margins.

Finally, *enrollment and attendance patterns* affect revenue stability. Consistent, full enrollment supports predictable budgets, while fluctuating attendance or part-time schedules can create shortfalls unless supplemented by subsidies or cost-sharing agreements.

These levers explain why True-Cost budgets vary across different settings, and why there isn't a single “right” budget template. Instead, programs can customize their approach while adhering to a central benchmark: allocating at least 70–85% of expenses to well-compensated educators, supported by shared investments from families, public funding, and employers whenever possible.

Programs that allocate less than 70% of their budget to compensation often cannot provide competitive wages, leading to ongoing staffing shortages and high turnover. Conversely, when compensation costs go over 85%, programs may become vulnerable to shocks, meaning they have limited flexibility to handle unexpected expenses, enrollment changes, or funding delays. Diversifying revenue sources and building reserves can help shield programs from these financial risks.

Revenue Sources that Support True-Cost Care

While tuition is the largest and most consistent revenue source, it rarely covers the full cost of living-wage compensation without making care unaffordable for families. A sustainable True-Cost model typically blends:

- Family tuition and copayments, ideally subsidized for low- and middle-income households.
- Public funding, which includes state or federal childcare subsidies/scholarships, grants, or quality incentives.
- Employer contributions can be made through cost-sharing models like Tri-Share or Duo-Share, tax credits, or direct stipends for employees.
- Philanthropy or institutional support, particularly for start-up costs, facility investments, or quality enhancement initiatives.

The ELC’s True-Cost Model reveals what it genuinely takes to provide high-quality early learning while ensuring educators earn a living wage. At this early phase of a new childcare program, most costs are still covered by families, highlighting the gap between market rates and the true expense of quality care. By making these costs transparent, the model creates a foundation for broader solutions, such as increased subsidies, scholarships, and employer cost-sharing, which can ultimately reduce the burden on families and support a sustainable, well-paid early childhood workforce.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Low wages are driving early childhood educators out of the profession. High childcare costs are forcing families out of the workforce. These dual pressures have created a fragile system that can no longer meet the needs of children, families, or communities. Solving this crisis requires bold, systemic change beginning with how we value and compensate the early care and education workforce.

The North Central Michigan College Child Care Initiative offers a promising, data-informed model for reform: a living wage salary scale grounded in true-cost fiscal modeling. By aligning compensation with core competencies, professional qualifications, and the real cost of living in Emmet County, this model lays a sustainable foundation for recruiting and retaining high-quality educators.

However, implementing the salary scale alone is not enough. True sustainability requires public investment and cross-sector collaboration to ensure that rising compensation does not simply shift the burden onto families. Instead, cost-sharing solutions like Tri-Share and Duo-Share offer an innovative way forward, acknowledging that quality care benefits not only children and parents but also employers, communities, and the broader economy.

Recommendations for Scaling the Model

To expand the impact of this salary scale framework across Michigan and beyond, the following policy and funding strategies are recommended:

- **Support Regional Salary Scales Tied to Local Living Costs:** State and federal agencies should promote regional wage scales that reflect geographic cost-of-living differences and align with early childhood professional standards.
- **Increase Public Subsidies and Reimbursement Rates:** Expand eligibility and raise subsidy rates to cover the true cost of care, enabling providers to adopt living wage models without displacing families.
- **Create Employer Incentives to Offset Family Costs**: Encourage employers to participate in shared-cost programs (e.g., Tri-Share, Duo-Share) and offer tax credits, direct subsidies, or stipends to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for working parents.

- **Invest in Professional Development Connected to Compensation:** Provide funding for credentialing, mentorship, and ongoing education that is explicitly linked to career advancement and salary increases.
- **Integrate Salary Scales into Child Care Licensing, Quality Rating, and Workforce Systems:** Include compensation benchmarks in state quality improvement systems (QRIS), licensing requirements, or workforce registries to promote adoption and ensure accountability.

By investing in a compensation model that reflects the value of early childhood educators, we are not only strengthening workforce stability but also promoting equity, increasing access to quality care, and building stronger communities. The CCI Salary Scale model is both actionable and adaptable. With the proper support, it can serve as a replicable blueprint for transforming childcare in Michigan and beyond.

Learn More

More information on the Child Care Initiative at North Central Michigan College can be found on the CCI webpage: https://www.ncmich.edu/community-events/child-care-initiative.html, or reach out to the CCI team at ECE@ncmich.edu.

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

Salary Scale
A structured compensation framework that outlines pay levels based on job roles, qualifications, experience, and competencies. Salary scales promote transparency, equity, and workforce development.

True-Cost Fiscal Model
A budgeting approach that calculates the actual cost of delivering high-quality care, including living wages and benefits for child care staff members, and sets tuition rates accordingly. This model often requires shared investment from families, employers, and public programs.

Living Wage
The hourly rate an individual must earn to cover basic expenses such as housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. Calculated using tools like the MIT Living Wage Calculator, it varies by region and household size.

Tri-Share
A Michigan-based child care cost-sharing program where the cost of care is split equally between the employee, their employer, and the State of Michigan (⅓ each).

Duo-Share
A Michigan pilot program in which child care costs are split between the employer and employee. It is designed to support working families who may not qualify for Tri-Share.

ECE I, II, III (Early Childhood Educator Designations)
Professional levels are based on a combination of education, experience, and demonstrated competencies. These levels are used within the salary scale to guide compensation and career progression, aligning with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Unifying Framework.

Michigan Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators
A state-adopted framework outlining the essential knowledge and skills early childhood professionals need to provide high-quality care and education.

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