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DATA SNAPSHOT February 2026

Child Care Centers Compete With California's $20 Fast Food Wage

by Anna Powell, Wanzi Muruvi, and Abby Copeman Petig

Poor compensation is built into the fabric of early care and education in the United States. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) tracks wages in California through our ongoing Workforce Study. In comparing our data from 2020 and 2025, we find wages have risen since 2020, but not evenly across job roles and program types. While inflation increased by 20 percent, the minimum wage increased much faster at 37.5 percent. Moreover, California now has a $20 minimum wage for fast food that exceeds pay for most assistant teachers.

Key Findings

1. The typical starting wage for child care centers was approximately $18 per hour for assistant teachers and $21 per hour for lead teachers in 2025. However, one in five centers used the $16.50 minimum wage to set starting pay.
2. California's minimum wage rose by approximately 37.5 percent from 2020 to 2025. While lead teacher starting pay rose at a similar pace (40 percent), assistant teacher starting pay struggled to keep up (28.6 percent).
3. The upper end of the pay scale typically falls at $21 per hour for assistants, just above the state's new fast food minimum wage of $20 per hour. Lead teacher pay tops off at $26.60 on average (up to $32 in Head Start).
4. Programs without any public funding had the lowest starting pay for assistants in 2020, but they raised wages faster than other centers by 2025. They now offer better starting pay than voucher-funded centers.
5. California's proposed 2026-2027 budget does not increase funding for vouchers, meaning centers in the subsidy system may continue to lag behind.

Poor compensation is built into the fabric of early care and education in the United States.

What is an early educator's passion worth? To the professionals working in early care and education (ECE), their jobs are a source of joy and pride. Unfortunately, the wages they receive are another story.

> "Watching children grow, learn new skills, and build confidence day by day is incredibly fulfilling... Knowing that I'm contributing to a strong foundation for their future success gives me a deep sense of purpose and joy."
>
> — San Diego County Assistant Teacher earning $16.50 per hour

> "The rewarding part [of my job] is knowing that my students are ready for kindergarten when they leave my class. When I talk to the kindergarten teacher, she says they are engaged and understanding concepts because of the lessons and techniques I used. I am happy I was able to give them those tools and help them grow."
>
> — Riverside County Lead Teacher earning $16.50 per hour

CSCCE tracks wages in California through our ongoing Workforce Study. In comparing our data from 2020 and 2025, we find wages have risen since 2020, but not evenly across job roles and program types. California's minimum wage rose to $16.50 per hour in 2025, one of the highest in the country but well below a living wage of $28.72 for a single adult (let alone the $50.83 needed for a single parent with one child). Moreover, California has a minimum wage of $20 for fast food workers. By contrast, **we estimate that child care center starting pay was only $18 for assistants and $21 for lead teachers in 2025.**

These economic conditions make it very challenging for employers in ECE to be competitive. Typically, a child care center can only raise wages by charging higher fees to parents, but program directors are acutely aware that a single parent already pays about half of her salary to enroll an infant. Meanwhile, publicly funded programs like Head Start and State Preschool budget for wages out of a fixed grant, so they can typically only improve wages when legislators allocate more funding (or if they can draw on other sources). In 2024, Head Start programs also received a new mandate to offer a wage floor that is "generally sufficient to cover basic needs" by 2031, but there are no new resources to support the change. Instead, Trump administration policies have routinely threatened to cut or withhold funding for child care.

Inadequate public funding keeps our ECE system fragmented and, more to the point, keeps wages structurally low. In this snapshot, we examine hourly wage trends in center-based care in California from 2020 to 2025.

Among child care centers, pay scales are highest in Head Start and State Preschool programs.

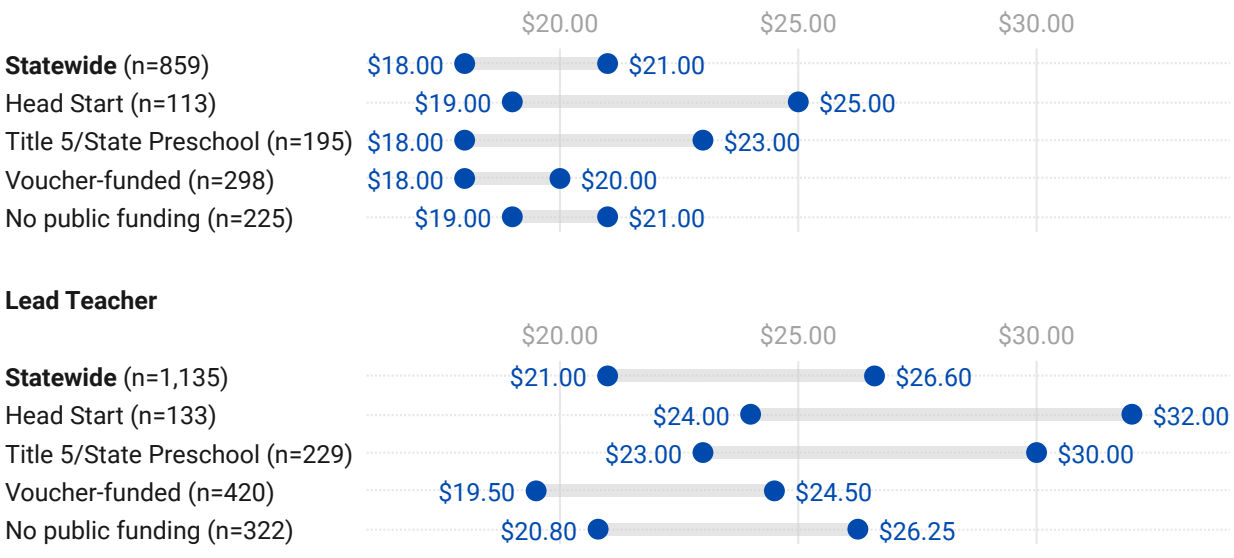
In the latest *State of the Early Care and Education Workforce*, we reported that median center-based pay was $23.56 per hour for lead teachers and $20.00 per hour for assistants. These are self-reported wages, and they are not the only way we measure pay: we also ask directors to report their site's lowest and highest pay by job role. We focus on these director-reported pay scales with particular attention to the low end of the pay scale, which we analyze as the "starting" or "entry-level" wage for the role.

To describe a typical pay scale, we use the **median, or 50th percentile**: in other words, the 50th percentile for the starting wage and for the top wage reported by directors. Some centers hire staff at minimum wage. For instance, nearly one in five centers reported their starting wage for assistants to be the $16.50 minimum wage.

Assistant teacher pay falls on a narrow scale from $18.00 to $21.00. Head Start offers the highest upper bound ($25.00), followed by Title 5/State Preschool ($23.00). Lead teacher pay sits just above that of assistants, with a scale from $21.00 to $26.60. Once again, Head Start's scale sits highest, topping off at $32.00. Title 5/State Preschool pay is slightly lower, with an upper bound of $30.00.

Typical Pay Range for Center Teaching Staff, 2025

California ECE Workforce Study



Notes: Range reflects the median (50th percentile) starting wage and median top wage reported by directors. Voucher funding includes CalWORKS and Alternative Payment.
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

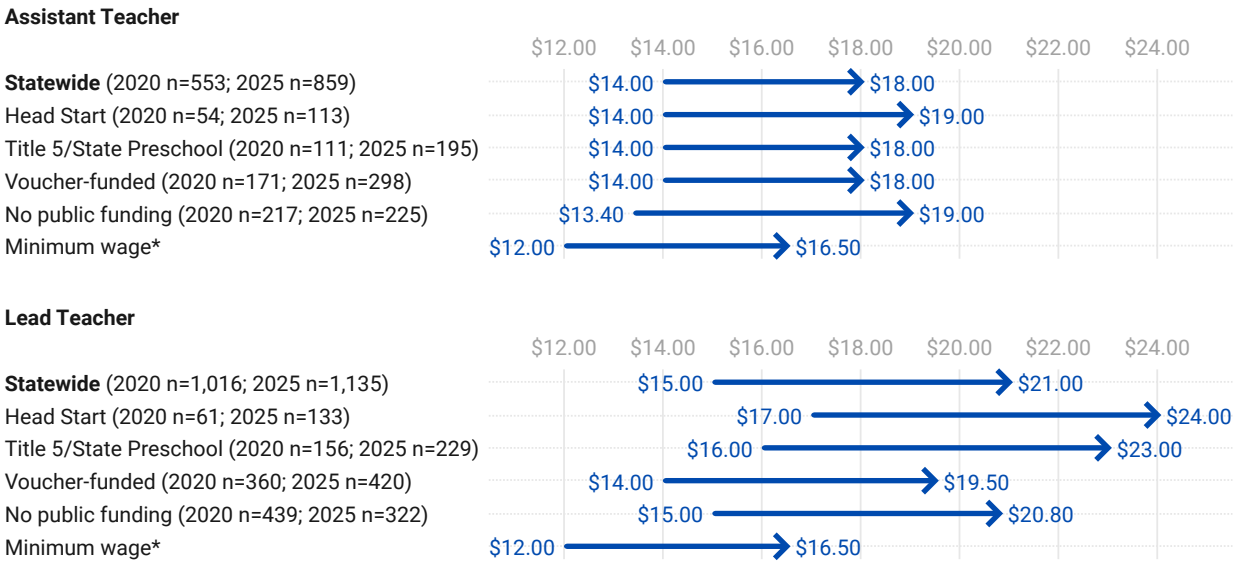
Across the board, pay scales in centers have increased since 2020.

Assistant teacher starting pay grew from $14.00 to $18.00 from 2020 to 2025, and lead teacher starting pay grew from $15.00 to $21.00. Both job roles saw increases that outpaced the 20 percent inflation rate (using the California Consumer Price Index, or CPI-U, from October 2020 to December 2024). However, with an increase of just $4.00 per hour, assistant teacher wage growth did not keep pace with the minimum wage bump of $4.50 for small employers. Lead teachers experienced a somewhat larger pay increase of $6.00 per hour. This finding corresponds to a decompression of wages between the two jobs: where hourly starting pay for lead teachers was only $1 higher than assistants in 2020, this gap had tripled by 2025.

Many centers increased pay more slowly than California increased its minimum wage. Crucially, the 2025 minimum wage is higher than nearly all 2020 entry-level ECE wages, so nearly every ECE pay scale had to rise to stay compliant (let alone competitive).

Typical Starting Wage in Child Care Centers, 2020 to 2025

California ECE Workforce Study



*Minimum wage in 2020 depended on the size of the employer: an agency with more than 25 staff members was required to pay $13 per hour instead of $12. In 2025, employers of all sizes were subject to a state minimum wage of $16.50.

Notes: Each year of data reflects a cross section, so centers surveyed differ between years. 2020 wages are not adjusted for inflation. Starting wage reflects the median (50th percentile) low-end wage reported by directors in their pay scale. Voucher funding includes CalWORKS and Alternative Payment.

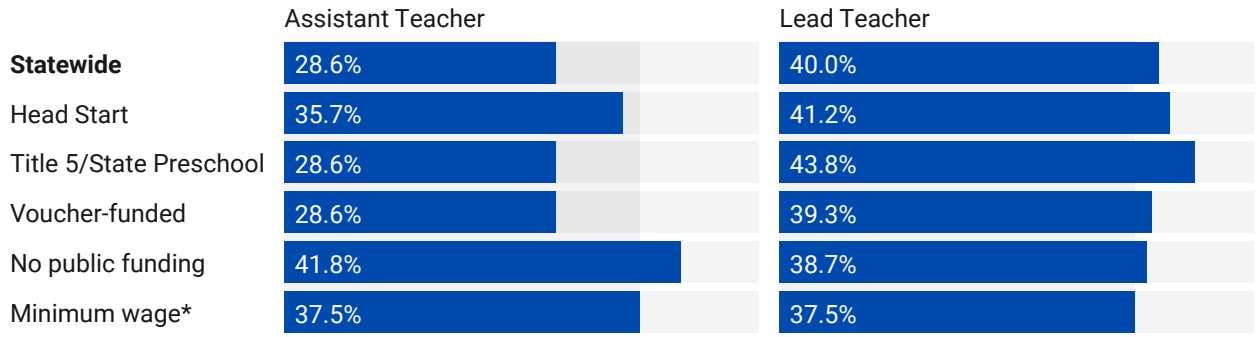
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

California's minimum wage increased 37.5 percent from 2020 to 2025, and assistant teacher wages largely didn't keep pace.

Statewide, assistant teacher wage growth was slower than minimum wage growth. Only centers without public funding raised wages faster than the minimum wage for assistants (though they started with the lowest wage in 2020). Meanwhile, all types of centers, except for voucher-funded centers, increased lead teacher entry-level pay faster than the minimum wage. Among lead teachers, Title 5/State Preschool centers provided the largest increase in base wages at 43.8 percent. This finding reflects a shrinking gap in lead teacher pay between State Preschool and Head Start programs. In practice, we estimate about half of Head Start programs also have state funding, so pay scales may in fact be the same at many agencies.

Changes to Typical Starting Pay in Child Care Centers, 2020 to 2025

California ECE Workforce Study



*Minimum wage in 2020 depended on the size of the employer: an agency with more than 25 staff members was required to pay $13 per hour instead of $12. In 2025, employers of all sizes were subject to a state minimum wage of $16.50.

Notes: Each year of data reflects a cross-section, so centers surveyed differ between years. 2020 wages are not adjusted for inflation. Starting wage reflects the median (50th percentile) low-end wage reported by directors in their pay scale. Voucher funding includes CalWORKS and Alternative Payment.

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

The proposed 2026-2027 state budget does not include a funding increase for ECE.

The Governor's Office released the first draft of the 2026-2027 budget in early January. The Health and Human Services overview lists three adjustments for ECE: first, "$89.1 million ongoing General Fund for a cost-of-living adjustment" for voucher-funded programs; second, "$11.5 million one-time Proposition 64 funding for child care infrastructure, specifically targeted toward communities impacted by recent fires;" and third, a 2.41 percent cost-of-living adjustment for State Preschool. This last adjustment falls short of inflation, which was approximately 3.3 percent between August 2024 and 2025, based on the California Consumer Price Index (CPI-U).

California faces a challenging fiscal outlook for social services programs: the Trump administration issued a series of cuts and eligibility changes designed to squeeze families who use the safety net. In January, bluster about alleged fraudulent payments to child care providers in Minnesota ballooned into a funding freeze for five blue states—including California, which rapidly used legal action to stop implementation of the freeze.

Despite these headwinds, state action on child care funding is long overdue. California has taken steps to overhaul the subsidy system by adopting an alternative methodology to setting rates. However, higher rates (and wages) can only be delivered through a budget increase.

In particular, the state needs to invest in both contracted programs like State Preschool and voucher-funded programs like Alternative Payment. California's ECE funding shrank during the Great Recession and spent the better part of a decade recovering. In particular, legislators have made few increases to subsidy reimbursement rates in recent years, instead providing a "cost of care" supplement. It's important to note that the supplement was driven by union action among home-based providers. Center-based educators do not systematically have union coverage (except where employed by school districts).

We can see the consequence of stagnant state funding for the subsidy system: voucher-funded centers are paying some of the lowest wages, especially when looking at both the lower and upper end of the pay scales. The top of the pay scale for lead teachers in voucher-funded programs barely exceeds the floor available in Head Start and State Preschool. To make matters worse, with the state's $20 fast food minimum wage, centers are struggling to attract assistants with a $18 to $21 pay range (for voucher-funded programs, only $18 to $20), and the turnover rate for assistants was 29 percent.

California's early educators deserve a wage that honors their passion and dedication. Only with bold budgetary action can California retain and grow the ECE workforce.

About the Data

The data in these profiles were collected as part of the California Early Care and Education Workforce Study, conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley.

We focus on center-based educators in this snapshot because they are typically hourly workers with pay scales subject to (and sensitive to) the minimum wage. We provide data on 2025 wages for other early educators like family child care providers and Transitional Kindergarten teachers in the *State of the Early Care and Education Workforce – California*. We plan to gather more data on family child care earnings after we are able to survey small license holders in greater numbers.

The 2020 survey took place in October through December, while the 2025 survey took place primarily in March through May. Some counties conducting an oversample had a longer survey window. In both cycles, CSCCE invited all available licensed early care and education (ECE) programs serving children from birth to five in California. Our sample size was designed to produce a sample representative of sites within a 6 percent margin of error at the regional level. Except for small family child care educators, we met or exceeded these targets for all regions except the northern region, where our center director sample fell short by 12 percent (20 sites). Data are weighted using a post-stratification method by program type and region.

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Editor: Deborah Meacham

About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), founded in 1999, is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.