

EXPLORING THE EVIDENCE BEHIND INCREASED COMPENSATION & TURNOVER IN THE CHILD CARE SECTOR

Applications to the King County Wage Boost Pilot

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May 2023

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I. Executive Summary

This research brief provides an overview of the existing research base assessing the causal relationship between increased compensation for child care providers and decreased turnover at child care sites. It also analyzes contextual factors specific to King County, WA and its wage boost pilot program that might affect this relationship. I argue that given strong and unanimous findings in the evidence base that wage boost programs were successful at reducing turnover, even at significantly smaller magnitudes of funding, King County can be reasonably confident that it will see reduced turnover as a result of the wage boost pilot. The research brief concludes with additional takeaways and recommendations for the pilot's evaluation.

II. Introduction

King County Child Care Wage Boost

In Washington State, the turnover rate for child care workers is currently 43%, and workers earn in the 3rd percentile of wages. 4 out of 5 child care providers report staffing shortages and cite low wages as the primary barrier to recruitment. Moreover, the child care workforce is disproportionately comprised of women of color; low wages in this sector are indicative of and perpetuate inequities along lines of race, class, and immigration status.¹

The King County Wage Boost Pilot is meant to address these challenges with a \$3/hour wage supplement provided to approximately 1,400 licensed child care workers, in center-based and home-based settings, over the next 6 years. The pilot is funded by the Best Starts for Kids levy, which was renewed in August 2021. The pilot will launch in summer 2023.

Figure 1 presents a graphic depiction of the pilot's theory of change. The pilot aims to impact workers, children, families, and society at large, in the following ways:

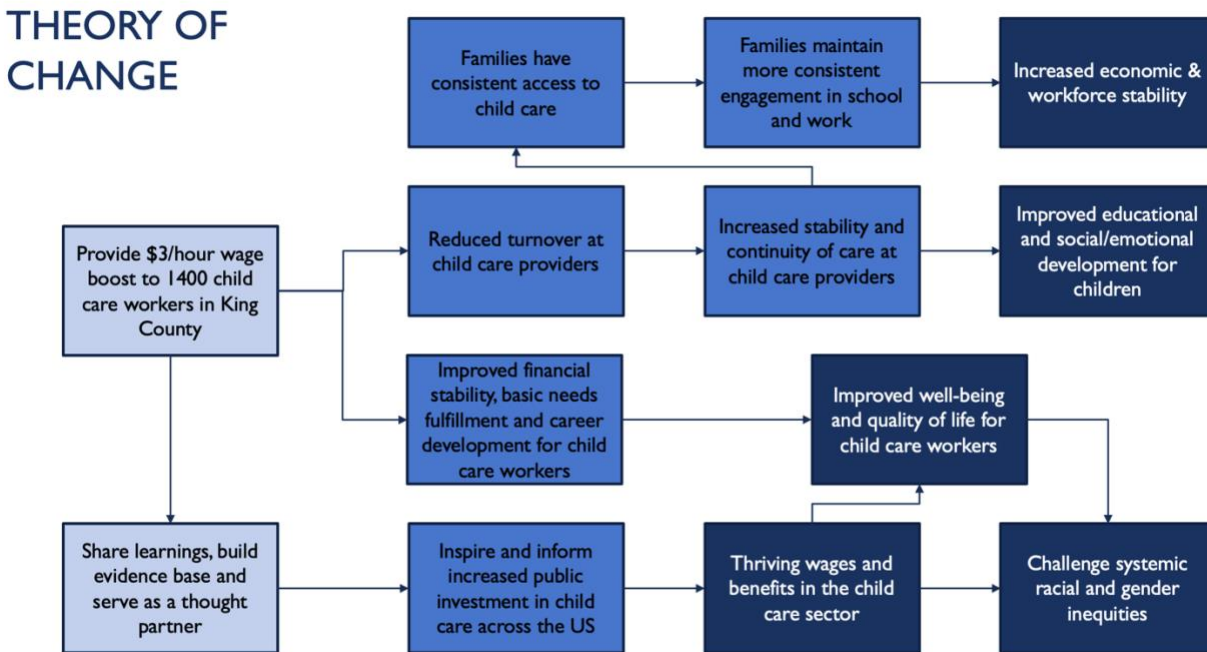
- By delivering the wage boost to workers, the pilot aims to reduce turnover at child care providers.
- Reduced turnover at child care providers will enable greater continuity of care for children, which will improve their educational, social and emotional development.
- Reduced turnover will also improve the stability and consistency of access to care that families receive, allowing parents to maintain more consistent engagement at work or in school. This will foster increased economic and workforce stability throughout the economy. Given that the responsibility of child care predominantly falls on women, greater consistency of access to care will also provide women with greater opportunities to invest in their career development, creating a more equitable workforce and challenging systemic gender inequities.
- For workers, the wage boost supplement will improve financial stability, the fulfillment of basic needs, and career development, which will improve well-being and overall quality of life. Given that the child care workforce is disproportionately comprised of BIPOC women, increased well-being and quality of life for this population will also challenge systemic racial and gender inequities.

¹ King County BSK Child Care Partnership One-Pager

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- The pilot will also share learnings, contribute to building an evidence base, and serve as a thought partner to similar initiatives across the state and the nation. This will inspire and inform increased public investment in child care, which will enable the achievement of thriving wages and benefits in the sector. Thriving wages and benefits will also contribute to improved well-being and quality of life for workers, and will challenge inequities for the same reasons outlined above.

Figure 1 – Wage Boost Pilot Theory of Change



Research Questions

This research brief focuses on the causal linkage between providing a wage boost and reducing turnover at child care providers. According to the pilot’s theory of change, reduced turnover has impacts on children, parents, and the greater economy. Therefore, the causal linkage between administration of the wage boost and reduced turnover at child care providers is a critical assumption underpinning the program, and is important to interrogate.

The two key research questions of this brief are as follows:

1. How strong is the causal relationship between increased wages for child care workers and reduced turnover at child care providers, based on existing research?
2. How well does the existing research base apply to this pilot in King County, given current labor market conditions and other relevant context?

Methods

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the pilot’s design, goals, history and context, I met with King County staff including Kalayaan Domingo, Carrie Cihak, Jessica Tollenaar Cafferty, and Lauren Dinsmore. I also reviewed internal materials including the Wage Boost Logic Model,

the Child Care Task Force Report, child care provider focus group insights, the Memo on Evaluation Activities, and an LOI for evaluation funding.

To address the first research question, I reviewed existing compilations of research, including Chapter 4 of the Economic Report to the President and its citations, as well as conducting searches using Google Scholar to identify relevant studies. I reviewed each study and summarized the key measures used, relevant context, findings and limitations.

To address the second research question, I analyzed census and living wage data, read external reports on the state of the child care sector, and conducted informational interviews with child care and workforce policy and research experts. A full list of interviews is below:

- Jessica Tollenaar Cafferty, King County
- Justin Doromal, Urban Institute
- Marisol Tapia Hopper, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County
- Natalie Renew and Alexandra Patterson, Home Grown Child Care
- Casey Osborn-Hinman, Central Consulting

III. Analysis of Research Base

This section primarily addresses research question 1: How strong is the causal relationship between increased wages for child care workers and reduced turnover at child care providers, based on existing research? It provides an overview of the research base, definition and discussion of key terms and metrics, an analysis of key findings, and two “spotlights” providing additional detail on particularly relevant studies.

The research base considered in this brief consists of the following sources:

- 2 retrospective regression analyses of national survey data (2021², 2022³)
- 6 evaluations of child care workforce salary supplement programs
 - 1 randomized control trial (2021⁴)
 - 1 quasi-experimental study (2007⁵)
 - 4 non-experimental evaluations using survey and administrative data (2011⁶, 2019⁷, 2022⁸, 2023⁹)

² Caven et al., Center- and Program-Level Factors Associated with Turnover in Early Childhood Education Workforce

³ Grunewald et al., Examining teacher turnover in center-based child care staff

⁴ Bassok et al., The Effects of Financial Incentives on Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood Settings: Experimental Evidence from Virginia

⁵ Gable et al., Cash incentives and turnover in center-based child care staff

⁶ Bridges et al., Strengthening the Early Childhood Workforce: How Wage Incentives May Boost Training and Job Stability

⁷ Shaw et al., Evaluation of R.E.E.T.A.I.N., Minnesota’s Child Care Workforce Retention Program

⁸ Child Care Services Association, Child Care WAGES Program Statewide Final Report

⁹ Bassok et al., The Importance of Financial Supports for Child Care Teachers: Findings from Year 3 of Virginia’s Recognition Program

Key Terms and Metrics

Studies that attempt to explore the relationship between a wage boost and turnover may operationalize these two constructs in different ways. This section describes how studies of similar programs defined and measured the constructs of a “wage boost” and “turnover,” with implications both for how generalizable the findings are to King County, and how King County might approach measuring them in its own evaluation.

Wage Boost:

Each program evaluation used its own contextual definition of a wage boost, sometimes also referred to as a compensation increase, a salary or wage supplement, or a financial incentive.

The regression analyses of national survey data which will be discussed in the next section do not incorporate this construct, as they do not consider the effects of a change in compensation, but rather an analysis of the correlation between wage levels and turnover rates in the existing child care system.

All program evaluations considered in this brief are based on a bonus or stipend design, with infrequent or one-time payments. In contrast, King County’s pilot will administer payments biweekly to more closely resemble a true wage increase.

Stipend amounts were generally in the range of \$1,000-\$3,000. This is lower than the annual amount of King County’s wage boost, which will be roughly \$6,000/year for a full-time employee (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Wage Supplement Structure

Program	Wage supplement
2022 RB5 Program (VA)	\$2,000 bonus
2022 WAGES Program (NC)	Average \$1,600 over 6 months
2019 Teacher Recognition Program (VA)	\$1,500 bonus
2013-2018 R.E.E.T.A.I.N. Program (MN)	Average \$2,350 bonus
2002-2006 Workforce INcentive Project (WIN)	\$500-\$2,500 biannual bonus
2001-2004 California Childcare Retention Incentive (CRI)	Not disclosed
King County Wage Boost Pilot	\$3/hour increase (~\$6000/year for full-time staff)

Eligibility requirements varied by program, but many related to site tenure and/or educational attainment. King County’s program does not incorporate these requirements, as all employees at a site are eligible for the boost.

The implications of these differences in program design and in the construct of a wage boost will be explored further in section IV.

Turnover:

Turnover is typically measured annually, as the number of employees who left a site or company in a given year, divided by the total number of employees on average over the year, or at the start of the year.¹⁰

In the literature reviewed in this brief, turnover was measured over time periods ranging from 7 months to 2 years, depending on the length of the program and of the evaluation. We would expect turnover rates to be naturally higher over a longer period of time. If there was a comparison or control group in the study, then the length of time used to measure turnover is less relevant.

Most studies measured turnover at the site level, although one study also tracked the number of individuals who left the child care sector. Measuring turnover at the site level is typically easier to do, since evaluators can rely on site administrative data rather than attempting to follow up with individuals who leave their jobs. However, since King County is interested in both site-level turnover as well as the stability of the sector at large, the county may want to consider establishing an additional measure of turnover at the sector level.

For programs that did not have a strong comparison or control group with which to compare turnover rates, or that did not have access to site-level administrative data, surveys were used asking recipients to what extent the compensation boost impacted their decisions to stay at their employer. This is a useful approach to complement a traditional turnover rate measure and to incorporate workers' voices and decision-making criteria into the evaluation.

Summary of Findings

All studies found evidence of a correlation between increased pay for child care providers and decreased turnover at the site level, supporting the validity of the pilot's theory of change. A summary of outcomes for the 6 program evaluations is displayed in Figure 3.

There are some limitations to the strength of the research base. In most cases, causal relationships could not be proven due to non-experimental study designs, and all program evaluations were limited to a single-state context. Additionally, the programs for which full evaluations are available mostly contain pre-pandemic data, raising the question of their applicability in a post-Covid environment. There are many examples of similar programs current underway or in the design phase, for which data is not yet publicly available.

¹⁰ <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/how-to-guides/pages/how-to-determine-turnover-rate.aspx>

Figure 3 – Summary of Program Outcomes

Program	Observed turnover rate	Self-reported impact on decision to stay
2022 RB5 Program (VA)	-	40%
2022 WAGE\$ Program (NC)	6% lower than child care workforce average (14% vs. 21%)	96%
2019 Teacher Recognition Program (VA)	Program led to an 11% reduction in turnover (25% vs. 14%)	-
2013-2018 R.E.E.T.A.I.N. Program (MN)	-	55%
2002-2006 Workforce INcentive Project (WIN)	16% lower than comparison group after 20 months (30% vs 46%)	-
2001-2004 California Childcare Retention Incentive (CRI)	6% lower than 2000 state child care workforce average (24% vs. 30%)	-

Given the strong and unanimous findings in the research that wage boost programs were successful at reducing turnover, even at significantly smaller magnitudes of funding, King County can be reasonably confident that it will see reduced turnover as a result of the wage boost pilot.

However, although Covid-19 exacerbated existing challenges in the child care sector, it did not fundamentally shift the workforce dynamics of the sector. Given the strong and unanimous findings in the research that wage boost programs were successful at reducing turnover, even at significantly smaller magnitudes of funding, King County can be reasonably confident that it will see reduced turnover as a result of the wage boost pilot.

A matrix of key information from each study can be found in the Literature Review Tracker_Increased Compensation and Turnover_IEDL_King County.xlsx document, which has also been provided to King County. The following sections of this brief provide a more detailed description of two sources: a regression analysis of national survey data, and the first experimental study of compensation and turnover in the child care sector from Virginia’s Teacher Recognition Program.

Spotlight: National Survey Data Analysis

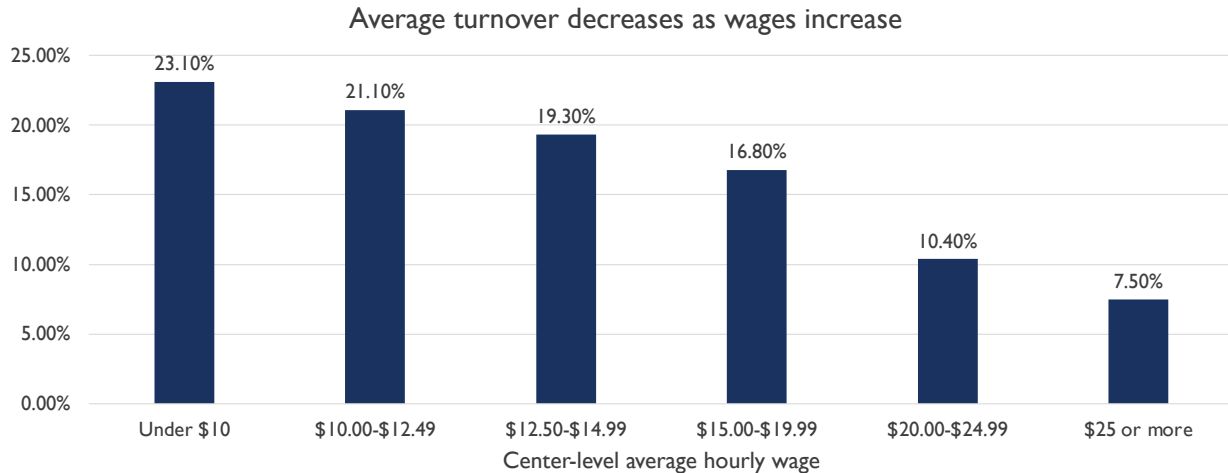
The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) is a nationally representative study intended to document the “use and availability of child care and early education (CCEE) across the US.”¹¹ The survey has been administered twice, first in 2012 and again in 2019. The survey includes detailed questions about wages and turnover rates at child care sites, and is therefore a valuable source of data to understand the correlation between compensation and turnover in the

¹¹ <https://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/national-survey-of-early-care-and-education.aspx>

child care sector. One limitation of the data is that it does not include home-based child care providers.

In both sets of survey data, wages were the strongest predictor of turnover rates across child care centers, with higher wages associated with lower turnover rates across the board.¹² Moreover, as shown in Figure 4, the relationship appears to be at least somewhat linear: each ~\$5/hour increase in wages is associated with a 3-5% reduction in turnover.

Figure 4 – NSECE Data on Average Turnover & Wages, 2019¹³



Many other characteristics of child care sites, including nonwage benefits and PTO for professional development, were not significantly associated with turnover rates.¹⁴ Although a causal relationship cannot be inferred from this study alone, the data suggests that increasing wages is likely the most effective way to reduce turnover at child care sites.

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Additional insights from the studies highlighted inequities within the sector. The racial wealth and income gap was observable in the data: Black workers were significantly more likely than workers of other races/ethnicities to work in low-wage centers.¹⁵ The highest turnover rates and the lowest average wages were found in non-school sponsored centers serving the youngest age group of children (0-5).¹⁶ Lastly, centers serving children whose families receive child care subsidies had higher turnover and lower average wages than other centers,¹⁷ suggesting that the brunt of the negative impacts of high turnover in this sector are borne by families and children with lower socioeconomic status.

¹² Grunewald et al., Caven et al.

¹³ Grunewald et al.

¹⁴ Caven et al.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Caven et al., Grunewald et al.

¹⁷ Ibid

Spotlight: First Experimental Evidence from Virginia

The first experimental evidence documenting the effects of increased compensation on turnover in the early child care sector comes from an evaluation of the Teacher Recognition Program in Virginia, with data gathered in 2019.¹⁸ This program continues today and has since been renamed RecognizeB5. The program was funded by a federal Preschool Development Birth through Five Initial Grant (PDG), and was implemented in 26 cities and counties in Virginia. Limited funding in Fairfax County, VA (the state’s largest county) enabled randomization via a lottery system, which allowed researchers to implement an experimental design (randomized control trial).

The program offered a \$1,500 stipend to 338 child care workers in Fairfax County, with a total study sample of 568. To be eligible for the full stipend, staff had to work directly with children ages 0-5 at least 30 hours/week, and had to remain at same site for 8 months.

85% of the providers in the sample were center-based, and the remaining 15% were school-based. Although home-based providers were included in the Teacher Recognition Program, they were not included in the evaluation due to expected differences in the measurement and conception of turnover rates for this group of providers.

The workforce in the sample was racially diverse: 19% of workers were Black, 24% were Hispanic or Latino, 26% were White, and 31% were other/two or more races.

The study found that childcare workers who received the stipend were 11% more likely to still be employed at the same site after 8 months than those in the control group. These effects were most pronounced for workers at center-based providers (vs. school-based) and for assistant teachers (vs. lead teachers), as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5 – Treatment and Control Group Turnover Rates

	Stipend	No stipend
All childcare workers	14%	25%
Center-based workers	15%	30%
Assistant teachers	16%	40%

The study found that childcare workers who received the stipend were 11% more likely to still be employed at the same site after 8 months than those in the control group.

In addition, the study incorporated survey data from child care workers who received the stipend to better understand the impact of the stipends, and which factors might have driven the significant observed reduction in turnover. The results are striking: 98% of participants reported that the program made them feel like their hard work was valued; 95% reported that the program made them more excited for the work they do; 97% reported that the program helped them meet their financial needs at least a little; and 89% reported that the payments helped with personal or family needs (e.g. housing, food, bills, household supplies) at least a little (57% said they helped “very much”).

¹⁸ Bassok et al. (2021)

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These results are extremely promising, especially considering that the impacts were observed in a short time frame and with a relatively small increase in compensation.

Given that the two counties are on opposite coasts, it is reasonable to question how similar the labor market and workforce dynamics are in Fairfax County, VA and King County, WA, and therefore how applicable these experimental findings would be to the King County context. As displayed in Figure 6, the two counties have strikingly similar racial demographics, almost down to the exact percentages. The estimated living wage, which incorporates the costs of housing, food, child care, medical care, transportation, and taxes, is also remarkably similar in both counties. This suggests that a wage boost of similar nominal value will also have the same real effect on purchasing power and the fulfillment of basic needs in the two locations. Although it was difficult to obtain high-fidelity data on average wages in the child care sector in Fairfax County, the available data does suggest that wages fall in a similar range to King County.

Figure 6 – Comparing Fairfax County, VA and King County, WA

	Fairfax County, VA	King County, WA
Median household income ¹⁹	\$133,974	\$106,326
Average child care sector wage	~\$37,500 ²⁰	~\$35,000 ²¹
Minimum wage	\$12	\$15.74
Living wage (no children) ²²	\$22.42	\$22.77
Racial demographics²³		
White (not Hispanic/Latino)	49.1%	56.1%
Black/African-American	10.8%	7.2%
Asian	20.7%	20.9%
Hispanic/Latino	16.6%	10.3%

Although there are no doubt differences in geographic context between Fairfax County and King County, the parity of these key factors presents a strong case for the applicability of these experimental research findings to King County’s pilot.

¹⁹ US Census Bureau

²⁰ Salary.com

²¹ Workman & Capito, Understanding the true cost of child care in the City of Seattle and King County (2023)

²² MIT Living Wage Calculator

²³ US Census Bureau

IV. King County Context

This section addresses research question 2: How well does the existing research base apply to this pilot in King County, given current labor market conditions and other relevant context?

Informational interviews indicated three major contextual factors to consider: (1) high cost of living in the region, (2) the inclusion of home-based providers in the program design, and (3) the no-strings-attached nature of the pay increase, without direct links to professional development. Each of these factors differentiates King County or its pilot from some others in the research base and could have an impact on observed turnover rates.

Regional Context²⁴

The high and rising cost of living in the region poses a potential threat to the validity of the wage boost pilot's theory of change, and whether or not \$3/hour will be sufficient to make a real difference for workers. Rising rental costs and the termination of pandemic renter protections also creates housing and displacement risk for providers who rent their spaces. Gentrification in the region, especially in and around Seattle, is displacing workers who can no longer afford to live where they work, and the lack of public transportation inhibits workers' ability to commute.

Lastly, there is an anecdotal sense that wages have increased in alternative industries such as fast food and retail in the past few years, while the child care sector has not kept pace. Although many child care providers are extremely dedicated to the sector and the work they do, rising wages in other sectors may increase the likelihood that workers will exit the field for better-paying opportunities, and could lessen the impact of the wage boost.

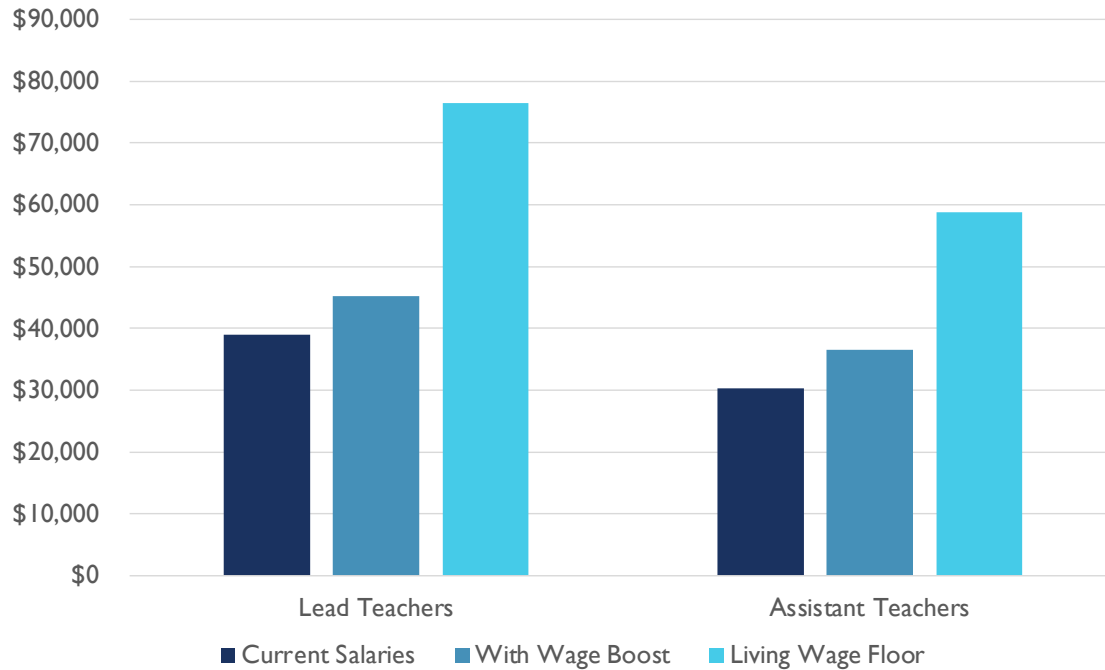
Figure 7 compares current wage levels, wage levels with the boost, and the living wage floor for child care workers, broken down by Assistant and Lead Teachers. Current wage levels and the living wage floor for each group of workers were sourced from Workman & Capito's cost of care model for King County.

Although these statistics illustrate that the wage boost alone will not be enough to bring workers to a living wage level, this does not mean that the wage boost will not make a difference. As demonstrated in section III, wage boost programs of much smaller magnitudes (\$1,000-\$3,000) still had significant effects on turnover at child care providers (and, although it is not the focus of this research brief, on measures of worker satisfaction and financial stability). However, it does mean that the wage boost will need to consider itself just one part of a larger movement to achieve living or thriving wages for the child care workforce.

Although these statistics illustrate that the wage boost alone will not be enough to bring workers to a living wage level, this does not mean that the wage boost will not make a difference.

²⁴ King County internal interviews

Figure 7 – Child Care Sector Wages in King County ²⁵



	Current Salaries	With Wage Boost	Living Wage Floor
Lead Teachers	\$38,992	\$45,232	\$76,443
Assistant Teachers	\$30,289	\$36,525	\$58,802

Including Home-Based Providers

There is a paucity of information in the research base on how wage boost initiatives may impact home-based child care workers differently than center-based workers. My informational interview with Home Grown Child Care shed light on several contextual factors of the home-based child care sector which are relevant to the King County pilot and for understanding turnover in this segment of the workforce.

Key themes emerged in the interview around belonging and value. Home-based providers have the lowest earnings in the sector, and were often ineligible for or did not receive federal pandemic relief funding. Home-based providers are asked to participate in a system which is biased toward institutional and center-based care, and the strengths of home-based care are not recognized by the system at large. Certification and administrative requirements have increased over the last several years, placing a huge burden on these providers, who often work alone. There has also been an increase in homeownership requirements for home-based providers, which creates inequity in the field given the inaccessibility of homeownership for a large segment of the population. Immigration status also intersects with providers’ willingness to engage in public or formal systems.

²⁵ Workman & Capito

Given these realities, it will be important for King County to lean on existing trusted networks and individuals to engage with the home-based child care workforce. It is also crucial that the pilot keeps the administrative burden on these workers as low as possible, both for receiving the wage boost and participating in an evaluation. At a minimum, the county should strive to do no harm, ensuring that providers receive the full value of the dollars, while taking into account administrative burdens and time taxes as additional costs.

Turnover looks different for home-based providers than for centers. It often means that a business is shut down, although an Erikson Institute study found that 67% of former home-based providers stayed in the ECE field after closing their businesses.²⁶ There are higher barriers to both entry and exit for home-based providers; exit for home-based workers may look more similar to center directors than to other workers at centers. Prior evaluations have omitted home-based providers from their measurement of turnover, presumably due to these challenges.

However, turnover and exit from the field are significant problems in home-based care. NSECE data showed a 25% decrease in licensed home-based providers from 2012 to 2019. A 2021 Erikson Institute study²⁷ analyzed the factors contributing to this decline using data from surveys, focus groups and interviews. The study identified three primary, intersecting reasons for the exit of home-based providers:

1. Challenges with early care and education (ECE) systems, including inequitable subsidy payment policies, costly and time-consuming licensing requirements, and center-centric regulations (80% of providers reported as a challenge).
2. Unsustainable business economics, including lack of benefits and unstable enrollment (63% of providers reported as a challenge).
3. Difficult working conditions, including working long hours alone and managing a business in one's home (53% of providers reported as a challenge).

While low wages are likely the primary driver of turnover for the center-based workforce, additional systemic challenges for home-based providers may lessen the observed impact of the wage boost on retaining these workers in the field.

Although a majority of respondents did indicate the unsustainable economics of their business as a key reason for their exit, an even greater percentage cited systemic and regulatory challenges. While low wages are likely the primary driver of turnover for the center-based workforce, additional systemic challenges for home-based providers may lessen the observed impact of the wage boost on retaining these workers in the field.

No-Strings-Attached Pay Increase

King County is at the vanguard of a growing movement toward no-strings-attached pay initiatives, decoupled from professional development or quality indicators. This approach recognizes that professionalization of the child care sector has often pushed out BIPOC providers and “whitewashed” the field. Historically, workers’ investments in education and certifications

²⁶ Bromer et al.

²⁷ Bromer et al.

have not resulted in pay increases large enough to justify their cost. A historical focus on improving the quality of early care and education through onerous certification requirements has created inequities in the field and obscured the reality that providers are not paid adequately for the high-quality work they already do.²⁸

However, professional development is still an important factor in attraction and retention of staff in the child care workforce. Career pathways and professional development opportunities are of particular interest to younger workers, and influence their decisions of whether to stay in the field.²⁹ There are also significant barriers to entering the field, and limited seats at community colleges artificially limits the supply of workers.³⁰

King County should explore these themes in conversation with community partners to better understand their salience to workers, and to what extent a lack of professional development opportunities is driving turnover in this region, in addition to low wages. On the flip side, it is important to recognize the need to attract new staff, rather than narrowly focusing on staff who leave the field. The wage boost may compel new workers to join the sector, but if the lack of career advancement pathways remains unaddressed, this could mitigate the pilot's impact on attraction.

The goals of the pilot's theory of change include both improved worker well-being and financial stability, and greater stability in the child care sector as a whole. In reality, those goals may come into conflict with each other. The pilot will need to find a balance between stabilizing the sector and supporting the economic mobility of individual workers, which may mean they choose to leave the field.

V. Takeaways

In brief, the main takeaways of sections I-IV are as follows:

1. Despite the insufficiency of the wage boost to bring childcare provider compensation up to a living wage, there is strong evidence that even smaller compensation boosts had a significant impact on worker retention.
2. Demographic, economic and cost of living similarities between Fairfax County, VA and King County indicate the applicability of experimental research findings to King County's wage boost.
3. The relatively small size of the research base and lack of causal evidence offers an opportunity for evaluation of the King County pilot to be additive to the field at large.
4. While wages are likely the most important factor influencing turnover, other factors including professional development opportunities and burdensome regulatory requirements will also impact retention.

²⁸ King County internal interviews

²⁹ Central Consulting Interview

³⁰ Workforce Development Council Interview

Recommendations for Evaluation

Multiple interviewees expressed excitement about the opportunity for the King County pilot to provide proof of concept and insights for other related initiatives, including to the state legislature. An evaluation of the wage boost pilot can be used to advocate for sustainable funding sources for similar programs, as pandemic-era federal relief funding subsidies. There is also an opportunity to educate the public on low wages in this sector and the system-wide benefits of the wage boost.

An evaluation will be particularly additive to the research base by assessing the impact of a regular wage boost compared to a one-time stipend. It is an open question how these impacts will differ: biweekly payments will allow workers greater flexibility and consistency, likely increasing the utility of the dollars, but may have less salience than a large one-time bonus.³¹

Expanding on the four key takeaways above, I propose the following recommendations for King County's evaluation of the wage boost pilot:

1. **Incorporate interviews with workers on their use of funds and decisions to stay at or leave employers.** This will help ensure that the evaluation centers the worker voice and experience, and that it addresses the question of causation if a randomized study design is not feasible.
2. **Evaluate the impacts of key differentiators of King County's program,** including:
 - If / how biweekly payments impact workers differently than one-time stipends
 - Impact on center workers who do not work directly with children
 - If / how program impacts home-based child care workforce differently than center-based
3. **Incorporate qualitative case studies with perspectives from a variety of stakeholders beyond workers.** For example, understanding the benefits to families of increased continuity of care and stability at child care providers will help illuminate the systems-level impacts of increased wages.
4. **Keep the administrative burden on providers as low as possible,** both in program implementation and evaluation.
5. **Consider partnerships with the WDC and community colleges to provide resources and pathways for professional advancement in the sector.** While perhaps secondary to low wages, career advancement opportunities in the sector are an important factor influencing turnover, particularly for younger workers.
6. **Embrace a mindset of collective action.** Given that the wage boost on its own does not achieve living wage levels, prioritize partnerships with policy advocacy organizations and others to advance broader systems change.
7. **Create content explaining the wage boost's theory of change to the greater public.** The high cost of child care can obscure the reality of low wages from families' perspectives, and the wage boost offers an opportunity for education.

³¹ Urban Institute Interview

Directions for Further Research

This research brief focused primarily on one causal linkage in the pilot's theory of change: the relationship between increased wages and turnover. However, there are many other linkages that could be explored in a similar way to assess (a) the strength of the research base supporting the causal assumption and (b) the influence of contextual factors. This section details some of those potential research questions.

1. What is the impact of continuity of care on children's educational, social and emotional development?

In researching this project, I came across many sources backing up this causal relationship. I have included some of these sources in a SharePoint folder which has been shared with King County staff. There seems to be a strong evidence base already underpinning this assumption, so I would not recommend it as a priority for King County to devote resources.

2. What is the impact of stability at child care providers on parents' consistent engagement in school and work?

I have not encountered any specific sources on this topic in my research. However, King County staff have raised this as an important angle to demonstrate the wider economic impacts of increased stability in the child care sector.

3. What is the impact of increased wages on workers' financial stability, basic needs fulfillment and career development?

There is a growing research base on the impacts of guaranteed income programs, but more research is needed, particularly in the context of child care workers. I think this will be an important area for King County to devote resources to evaluating.

4. What level of public investment would be sufficient to achieve thriving wages and benefits in the sector?

Workman and Capito's cost of care model will be extremely useful in answering this question quantitatively. Given that thriving wages and benefits is a goal in the pilot's theory of change, but one that it cannot achieve on its own, it will be important to understand and continue to explore the pilot's role within the broader landscape of advocacy and action.

5. How are similar initiatives currently underway evaluating themselves?

A limitation of this research brief is that published evaluations lag a few years behind current programs. King County is in the vanguard of new approaches and initiatives to increase pay in this sector, and many such initiatives are underway across the country. King County will want to understand the approaches others are taking to evaluation both so that it can follow the same conventions and approaches as others in the field, and so it can contribute research that is unique and additive, serving as an example for others.

6. How can King County best share learnings, build an evidence base and serve as a thought partner to inspire and inform other investments in childcare across the state and nation?

King County is pioneering a progressive, large-scale and innovative approach to increasing wages for child care providers. While this pilot is at the forefront of change, there is increasing interest and momentum in similar initiatives building across the country. As such, King County has the opportunity to serve as a valuable thought partner and provide a blueprint for how a wage boost can be operationalized in practice. Given the systemic changes that need to occur for the pilot's theory of change to be realized, it is important for the county to commit to this role and disseminate information, evidence, and best practices.

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