

**U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
Committee Hearing: Supporting Children, Workers, and Families by  
Strengthening America's Child Care Sector**

April 27, 2021

**Written Testimony of Khadija Lewis Khan**

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Right from the Start Steering Committee Member



National Association for the  
Education of Young Children



Rhode Island Association for the  
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Full Committee Hearing

SUPPORTING CHILDREN, WORKERS, AND FAMILIES BY STRENGTHENING  
AMERICA'S CHILD CARE SECTOR

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Thank you Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of Congress for the opportunity to speak before you about this topic that is close to my heart: the importance of strengthening America's child care sector so we can support America's children, workers, and families.

For the last 21 years I have been the executive director of Beautiful Beginnings Child Care Center in Providence, RI. Our mission is to ensure that each child who attends our program receives a strong educational and social-emotional foundation in their early years to prepare them for success in school and in life. We are a four-star quality rated program through Bright Stars, our state's quality rating and improvement system, which means we have committed to offering a safe environment that provides a high level of quality, with educated and qualified staff. I am happy to share that as a result of this work, we have become a trusted part of our community since we first opened our doors in 1999. Because of this work, I also have the pleasure of serving on the steering committee of Right from the Start and as Board President for Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children.

At our main site, Beautiful Beginnings offers infant, toddler, preschool and state Pre-K classrooms and is licensed for 140 children. We also operate one stand-alone Pre-K class at our local community college. Beautiful Beginnings is an Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership site and historically, 70% of the children in our program receive some form of payment assistance for their care, either through subsidies via our Department of Human Services or through Rhode Island State Pre-K.

Prior to the pandemic, I had a staff of 39 women—primarily women from communities of color who reflect the diversity of our child population. Our 12 classrooms were at capacity, and we always had a long waiting list, which spoke to the need of families in our community for access to high-quality child care. Yet even with a program that was constantly in-demand, I struggled, like so many of my fellow child care programs, with

the challenges of a system in which neither parent fees nor subsidies covered the cost of the care in a way that allowed me to provide wages and benefits that reflected my staff's incredible, skillful work. In Rhode Island, as in states across the nation, the regular rates for the Child Care Assistance Program are too low to enable low-income families to have equal access to the market that middle income families have access to, and too low to do anything but keep teacher wages suppressed.

Many of my staff members rely on programs such as SNAP benefits, rental and heating assistance programs to make ends meet. To be honest, it was not out of the ordinary for me to hear from one of my longtime staff members that their child, who recently graduated from high school, was making as much as they were at an entry-level job in any other industry.

Even prior to the pandemic, we were feeling the weight of decades of operating on shoestring budgets as part of an underfunded and under resourced system. For example, back during the great recession in 2008, Rhode Island cut eligibility for child care and we have still not restored this access even though we know that almost every family in the state needs help paying for child care. Using the federal affordability guideline of 7% of family income, a Rhode Island family would have to earn \$150,000/year to be able to affordably pay for one three-year-old in a typical child care center—even one that only pays their teachers \$12/hour (and our minimum wage is \$11.50/hour).

So it was already a difficult situation; and then, COVID hit. You all know the crisis we have faced as a result and NAEYC's surveys of the field have demonstrated this: decreased revenue and increased costs for cleaning supplies, PPE and staffing. At Beautiful Beginnings, in compliance with our Governor's public health emergency directive, we closed from March through June of 2020. Thanks to CARES funding, Rhode Island Department of Human Services was able to pay for enrollment rather than attendance for those months. We would never have survived the closure period without it. We eventually reopened with 4 of our 12 classrooms, and have slowly returned to having 11 open classrooms. With the assistance of relief funding, we were able to provide enhanced pandemic wages for three months to support staff members who were uneasy about returning with all of the unknowns of the pandemic. It also allowed us to dedicate a staff member exclusively to cleaning. An example of our additional cleaning is that now our playground spaces have to be sanitized 22 times daily between each group of children since our safety precautions mean separating small groups of children and keeping them in pods.

Being an early childhood educator had its challenges before the pandemic, but COVID has layered additional challenges onto teachers and staff, who are overburdened, underpaid, mentally and physically drained, and challenged daily by doing a job where they are considered essential, yet so often treated as disposable. As a sector, child care is facing the most significant staffing challenge we've ever had, as educators leave the field to get higher paying jobs not just in the public schools, but in retail, warehouse distribution centers, and fast food. Child care teachers are among the lowest paid workers in the nation. In Rhode Island the average wage for a child care teacher is \$12.01/hour and the minimum wage is \$11.50/hour. Because our country hasn't sufficiently funded necessary supports and fair compensation, our programs, families, and children feel the impact of current and future educators who have to make decisions to leave the field—or not to enter it at all. Directors are sharing stories of staffing nightmares every day, and I can tell you that our last classroom has not yet opened because I have been unable to hire a qualified early childhood educator to lead the classroom. This job is so much more than babysitting, so much more than simply keeping children safe. It requires supporting the children and families in our program, through trauma, learning loss, and more. Child care educators are responsible for day-to-day interactions that influence the developing brain architecture of children. Disparities in development begin to emerge in infancy and widen over time without consistent, nurturing care and high-quality learning opportunities that can be provided by effective, competent, prepared, and compensated educators.

Child care relief funding is keeping many programs from going over the cliff, but we are still teetering on the edge. We don't want to go back to the crises and challenges of the past—we want to be part of the effort to build a child care system that will work for our children, our families, our staff, and the businesses in our community that rely on us. It makes no short or long term sense for our nation and our states to put so little money into child care that educators are paid such low wages and offered minimal benefits. Here are four things that I think would make all the difference in the world:

- 1) We need funding that covers the cost of care, which includes fair compensation for the skilled, valuable, and essential work of our early childhood educators. Effective and qualified educators, including those who work with babies, deserve pay parity with elementary school teachers,
- 2) It is important for more families to be able to choose and get help paying for high quality child care options that provide stability for them, for their children, and for us,
- 3) We must recognize that child care and early learning cannot be separated. I see every day how child care programs in centers and homes - just like schools -

provide support for working families AND provide support for children's positive growth and development.

- 4) Finally, I am so pleased to be here today, and I hope you will continue to ask early childhood educators and program directors to be part of the solution so that we can work with you, to create investments in ways that will work for those of us on the ground.

Child care is a lifeline to our families and early childhood educators are essential. I urge you to support us by building on relief that has allowed us to keep going, and providing substantial and sustained investments to rebuild and strengthen child care programs like mine. On behalf of all of us, I thank you for listening to my story, and look forward to your questions.