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(Photo by Chris Kain)

OPINION

Jamal Berry: Shortsighted budget cuts jeopardize progress of early childhood's workforce

By **Commentary**

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The District of Columbia has been on a roll over the last decade to make early childhood education more affordable and equitable. From universal pre-K to the Birth-to-Three law, the District is a national leader viewed by other states as a model for creating a robust early

childhood education system. Let's celebrate this progress, continue it, and defend it – which means the DC Council needs to reverse Mayor Muriel Bowser's proposed fiscal year 2024 budget cuts.

In a newsletter to constituents earlier this year, Bowser herself touted the importance of the issue: "We know that high-quality child care is critical for a child's long-term development, it helps us keep and attract families in DC, and it creates more opportunity for parents."

What we also know is that high-quality early childhood education requires quality educators who are appropriately compensated. Recognizing that, in 2022, the District launched the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund, which is finally paying early educators the higher wages they deserve for their critically important work. When fully implemented later this year, the Pay Equity Fund will raise early childhood teacher salaries to be on par with K-12 public school teacher salaries and help child care providers attract and retain highly qualified staff.



Jamal Berry is president and chief executive officer at Educare DC.

The early childhood workforce is in crisis, the impact of which I have experienced firsthand as CEO of Educare DC, a high-quality early childhood education organization. The Pay Equity Fund is one-of-a-kind in the United States and is a game changer in a field struggling with a teacher shortage. Even before the pandemic devastated the sector, teachers were leaving the field for better pay, and fewer teachers were entering it at the start of their careers. The pandemic worsened that trend, and we need thoughtful and sustained support from the government at every level for the sector's stability.

It's commonly said that "early childhood educators are the workforce behind the workforce." Parents want access to high-quality, safe and reliable care so that they can work. Its absence affects the workforce in all other sectors, as well as our economy and community at large. A report from ReadyNation calculates that the DC economy loses \$769 million annually because of the child care crisis. With early childhood education being so critical to children, families and the community, we need *more* investment, not less.

Unfortunately, Mayor Bowser's proposed FY 2024 budget cuts \$4.4 million from the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund, threatening to halt the District's momentum. So far, the DC Council has not voted to reverse this decision. They have that opportunity *today* as they prepare to take a final vote on the FY 2024 budget.

Cutting funding now would undermine the Pay Equity Fund at its inception. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) is still in the process of implementing the program's permanent compensation structure. Slashing funding before the long-term program is fully launched in October will limit OSSE's ability to successfully implement the program if and when all teachers are eligible.

DC officials have suggested there is additional money in the fund because not all teachers are currently eligible to receive the full amount budgeted for them. Such reasoning is shortsighted. We don't know where we will stand in October and beyond, when child development facilities start receiving their money and have to adhere to a salary band. We also want to recruit highly qualified teachers to the District to teach here, and cuts now will harm our ability to do so.

While it may be too early to say how much of a long-term impact the Pay Equity Fund will have on teacher recruitment and retention, we have fewer vacant teaching positions today at Educare DC than we had before the launch of the Pay Equity Fund. In May 2022, more than a third of our teaching positions were vacant and being covered by temporary staff; now we are at half of that, with teaching vacancies at 15%.

But I think the program's impact is best captured in the stories from teachers about the difference the pay supplements have made in their lives. One teacher shared that she used the money on a down payment for a home. Another said she used it to help pay for college tuition for her child. Others used theirs to help a parent with medical bills, for funeral expenses, and to build savings. These are meaningful and consequential expenses that many of us can afford because we are paid a fair wage.

For too long, early childhood teachers haven't been paid a living wage. We need to continue investing in our teachers and reassuring them that their career of caring for children will also pay them enough to care for themselves and their families.

I understand that budgetary choices must be made, but we should not balance the budget on the backs of teachers. Cutting funds from the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund would be a step backward when what we need as a city is to keep the momentum going toward making the District's early childhood system more affordable and equitable for all.

***Jamal Berry** is president and chief executive officer at Educare DC.*

About commentaries

The DC Line welcomes commentaries representing various viewpoints on local issues of concern, but the opinions expressed do not represent those of The DC Line. Submissions of up to 850 words may be sent to editor Chris Kain at chriskain@thedcline.org.

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