What Matters to Early Childhood Educators in the Workplace?

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A Research Brief by:
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KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this research brief we summarize findings from a survey of, and focus groups with, New Orleans early childhood educators. We asked educators about their workplace experiences, with a focus on employment benefits and factors influencing turnover and overall job satisfaction. The complete survey findings are provided in the accompanying report Early Childhood Educator Employment Benefits Survey Data Book. These findings shed light on a dedicated workforce navigating a difficult and essential job while often facing real financial hardship. Results point to the potential for targeted workplace policies to support both educator well-being and the stability that children and families depend on.

THE FINDINGS SUMMARIZED IN THIS BRIEF CONTRIBUTE TO A LARGER EFFORT TO EVALUATE EXISTING INITIATIVES AND UNDERSTAND EARLY EDUCATORS' PRIORITIES RELATED TO BENEFITS, COMPENSATION, AND JOB QUALITY.

Early childhood educators resoundingly shared that working with children is the best part of their jobs. But poor compensation, short-staffing, educator turnover, lack of support for managing challenging child behaviors, and a lack of appreciation and respect for the profession pose real challenges to their work.

AS EDUCATORS DISCUSSED THE TENSION BETWEEN LOVE OF THEIR WORK AND DIFFICULT WORKING CONDITIONS, FOUR THEMES EMERGED AS KEY CONTRIBUTORS TO THEIR WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE:

1. Limited paid time off and inflexible schedules affect educators' health, wellbeing, family life, and financial stability.
2. Educators feel undercompensated relative to their workplace responsibilities, adding to the financial stress they already face.
3. Center leadership plays an important role in creating a supportive workplace environment through their relationships with educators and the workplace policies they prioritize.
4. Educators want relevant professional development and coaching opportunities to build classroom management capacity and drive career growth.

We explore the ways these factors play into educators' workplace experience, and how they contribute to decisions to stay in or leave jobs in the New Orleans early childhood workforce.

WORKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The short- and long-term benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) on individual, community, and societal outcomes are widely recognized and documented. **Early childhood educators are key to the foundation of quality early learning, yet the ECE workforce faces serious and persistent challenges with wages, benefits, and job stability.**

Occupational employment and wage statistics published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report that, in May 2025, median hourly wages for childcare workers in the New Orleans metro were $13.28 per hour. Of the 546 occupations included, only 21 had lower median hourly wages than childcare workers. A recent study of Louisiana ECE providers found that more than 60% of all early educators leave their program within three years. High turnover disrupts relationships between children and their caregivers, which are crucial to healthy child development, increases stress for the educators who remain, and diminishes the quality of care.

$13.28 PER HOUR

MEDIAN WAGE FOR CHILDCARE WORKERS IN NEW ORLEANS IN 2025 ACCORDING TO THE U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

Orleans Parish has made significant investments in early childhood education, starting in 2018 with the first year of the locally funded City Seats program, providing free, high-quality care for children in Orleans Parish. Originally, the City Seats program served children from 6 weeks to age 2 but has since expanded to serve children up to age 3.

In 2022, Orleans Parish voters approved an early childhood education millage, committing over $21 million annually to expand access to high quality early learning opportunities. Millage funds are eligible for a 100% match from the state's Early Childhood Education Fund (ECEF). The New Orleans Early Education Network convened the Orleans Parish Workforce Taskforce in 2023 to identify and implement strategies to prepare, recruit, and retain a high-quality ECE workforce in Orleans Parish. A portion of millage and ECEF funding has been utilized for ECE workforce development and wage enhancements to support early childhood educators' wages.

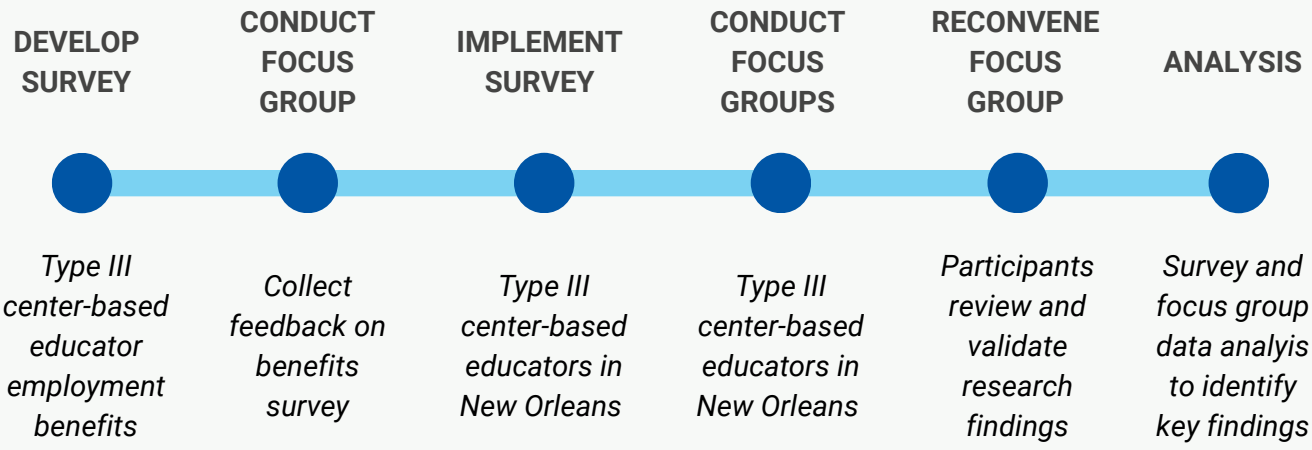
METHODOLOGY

This brief draws on two complementary sources of data collected in 2025.

In summer 2025, we surveyed early childhood educators working at licensed Type III early learning centers in Orleans Parish. Of 1,037 surveyed educators, 384 responded. With a 37% response rate, we feel confident that these findings reflect the diverse experiences of educators working in New Orleans childcares. For more details on survey administration, see the corresponding Early Childhood Educator Employment Benefits Survey Data Book.

TYPE III EARLY LEARNING CENTERS

Type III early learning centers are facilities licensed by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) that provide care for 7 or more children, meet regulatory requirements set by the LDOE, and are eligible to receive government funding.



In November 2025, we held five focus groups with 32 educators recruited from the same pool of educators working at Type III early learning centers, deliberately including centers with both high and low staff retention rates to capture a range of workplace experiences. Sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes and were facilitated by a trained researcher. A smaller group of participants reconvened in January 2026 to confirm that the themes we identified felt true to their experiences.

Together, the numbers tell us about the employer-provided benefits educators have access to, and their voices reveal why those benefits matter and elevate other workplace factors that shape their experiences as educators in New Orleans.

PARTICIPATING EDUCATORS

The survey and focus group cohorts were similar in profile, suggesting that focus group participants were generally reflective of the larger group of survey respondents. The age distribution was similar across both groups with most participants between 25 and 54 years old. Approximately three in four survey respondents and focus group participants (76% and 77% respectively) were not married, and a majority (63% and 74%) care for at least one dependent at home.

The cohort in both samples was experienced in the field of early childhood education. Half of survey respondents had ten or more years of early childhood education experience; focus group participants showed a similar pattern, though with higher representation of educators who were newer to the field. Across both groups, most participants were lead teachers - 65% of survey respondents and 58% of focus group participants - followed by co-teachers and assistant teachers. We refer to the group of survey and focus group participants, collectively, as educators throughout the report.

ABOUT HALF OF EDUCATORS REPORTED RECEIVING AT LEAST ONE PUBLIC BENEFIT

WORK EXPERIENCE RANGED FROM NEW TEACHERS TO THOSE WITH OVER 15 YEARS EXPERIENCE

A MAJORITY OF EDUCATORS WERE CARING FOR AT LEAST ONE DEPENDENT AT HOME

A notable share of the cohort of educators experiences financial hardship alongside their work. **About half of survey respondents and focus group participants reported receiving at least one public benefit, including SNAP, Medicaid, or housing assistance.**

Educators were asked for this information to develop a comprehensive understanding of the educator workforce in New Orleans, and the ways in which their experiences – both in and outside of work – shape the way they determine what is most important to them in the workplace.

KEY FINDING #1. LIMITED PAID TIME OFF AND INFLEXIBLE SCHEDULES AFFECT EDUCATORS' HEALTH, WELLBEING, FAMILY LIFE, AND FINANCIAL STABILITY.

Access to paid time off (PTO) for sick days, vacation, and holidays was a frequent concern among survey respondents and focus group participants alike. **Nearly all survey respondents (90%) reported that PTO was very or extremely important to them, making PTO the highest ranked benefit in terms of perceived importance to educators.** The value placed on PTO stood in contrast to the reported availability of PTO. Three quarters of survey respondents reported receiving some amount of PTO. However, educators expressed frustration at the limited PTO available to them and the subsequent impact on their health, wellbeing, and finances. "I have bills to pay. Am I sick enough to not get paid today or to use one of my very few paid days to stay home?"

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The need for more flexible and accommodating schedules was also discussed by educators in the focus groups. Educators wanted the ability to take breaks throughout the day, and work schedules that accommodated their lives outside of work. Nearly three out of four survey respondents (74%) said their current workplace has designated regular breaks, but many reported challenges to using these breaks due to short staffing. One example of this is the "tap out" system mentioned by educators throughout the focus groups. The goal of these "tap out" systems is to provide classroom support so that an educator can step away from the classroom for brief breaks throughout the day. "At my job... we was supposed to have a tap out room where you can take 15 minutes and somebody will come in, but nobody has been able to tap out 'cause we don't have enough people to tap," explained one educator whose center had made efforts to implement a "tap out" system for their staff.

And just half (53%) of educators surveyed said their workplace provided flexible scheduling – limiting them from being able to pick up sick children or schedule doctors' appointments. Some survey respondents and focus group participants also signaled that even with PTO offered, staffing issues posed a barrier to being able to use PTO as flexibly as they'd like: "You can only take, like, two days off at a time, even with your vacation, because they don't have enough coverage." As a result, educators often reported feeling burnt out, having to go to work sick, or feeling the financial impacts of having to take time due to illness, school closures, or personal needs: "I have to use my PTO, or I can take unpaid time off, but then I don't get paid. So if I have to go to the doctor, I'm actively losing money by being sick."

"You can only take, like, two days off at a time, even with your vacation, because they don't have enough coverage."

When asked about the things that drove educators' decisions to stay or leave a workplace, a combination of PTO and flexible scheduling policies came up often. "The center that I started workin' at now… they offered, you know, sick, holiday, personal. So that was part of the reason why I switched centers," explained one focus group participant. Another educator became emotional describing her experience in the wake of her mothers' passing in a workplace that provided PTO and additional flexibility: "My mother just passed... and I did my bereavement, but I took extra time. But I also had sick time. So I could add it in… and it helped me out a lot. A whole lot. I still can't talk about it."

WHEN AVAILABLE, ACCESS TO PTO AND THE FLEXIBILITY THAT CAME WITH IT CLEARLY HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES IN THE WORKPLACE, AND THEIR LIVES OUTSIDE OF IT.

KEY FINDING #2. EDUCATORS FEEL UNDERCOMPENSATED RELATIVE TO THEIR WORKPLACE RESPONSIBILITIES, ADDING TO THE FINANCIAL STRESS THEY ALREADY FACE.

Focus group participants viewed their role as being a consistent presence in children's lives, encouraging and promoting their cognitive and social growth and development. However, some shared feeling like parents, families, and even the broader field of ECE did not share this perception of their role as an educator. It's "treated like babysittin', instead of early education," said one educator. "We have to be therapists. We have to be parents. We have to be a educator. We have to sometimes be the director when the director is unavailable. We have to make sure the children are eating. We have to be nutritionists. We have to be occupational therapists. Occupational therapists make $60,000 a year— minimal... We're not making half that."

Educators reported feeling undercompensated given their day-to-day responsibilities in the workplace, often receiving low pay, and limited benefits like PTO, healthcare, and retirement supports. "Educators have so many standards that we're held to and so many requirements, but the pay does not, and the benefits don't, meet what they're expecting us to do," one educator explained.

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The impact of low wages was evident throughout the focus groups. One educator explained that "the only reason [being paid lower wages] works for me is 'cause I'm not independent right now" to which another educator responded, "Right. So you can live with your parents and make it, but with me bein' 37, I have to have another source of income."

Educators uniformly expressed gratitude for the quarterly wage enhancement payments provided through a city-wide millage – one component of the city's broader initiative to expand access to high quality early learning through ECE workforce development – because they helped educators pay bills and combat high cost of living.

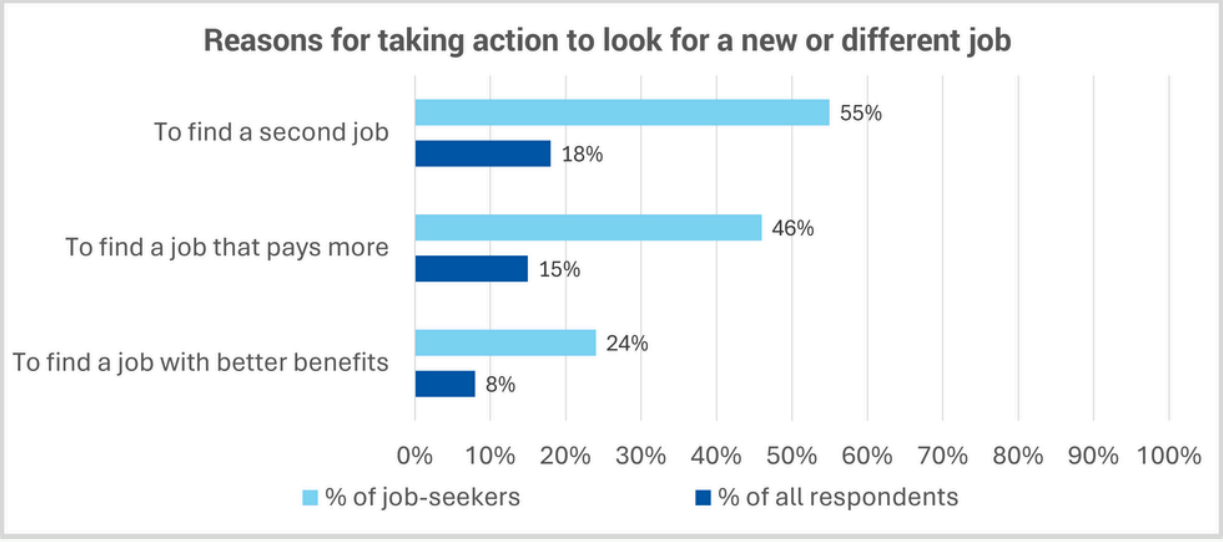
"The wage enhancement program has helped me tremendously. I have to babysit every week to help my bills. I sometimes go negative in my bank account or have to live off of credit cards because I don't make enough money to cover my living expenses," wrote one survey participant.

ORLEANS PARISH WAGE ENCHANCEMENT PROGRAM

The Orleans Parish Wage Enhancement Program is an initiative administered by Agenda for Children utilizing funding from the Orleans Parish Early Childhood Millage and state matching funds. To improve early childhood educator recruitment and retention across Orleans Parish, Agenda for Children launched a pilot program in 2023 to boost educator pay.

In the 2023-24 through 2025-26 program years, eligible educators in Type III Early Learning Centers in Orleans Parish received these quarterly wage enhancement payments, distributed by Agenda for Children.

Nearly one in three (32%) survey respondents reported taking action to look for a new or different job in the past three months, and indicated that wages and benefits were key reasons for seeking new or additional employment.



Notably, nearly 1 in 5 educators reported looking for a second job to supplement their income. Overall low compensation in the field was a clear driver of turnover for many New Orleans educators.

KEY FINDING #3. CENTER LEADERSHIP PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN CREATING A SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATORS AND THE WORKPLACE POLICIES THEY PRIORITIZE.

Workplace environment was a key contributor to educators' feelings about their workplace. They sought a supportive workplace, which educators defined as feeling respected as professionals, having positive working relationships with leadership and other coworkers, having accommodating schedules, and receiving classroom training and support – things that, when present, often offset other workplace frustrations and drove retention decisions. "My mental health wasn't all that great when I was there," explained one educator referring to a previous employer where pay had been higher, "So I'd rather stay where I'm at – maybe miss out on a little bit more money, but have peace when I go home. If I'm not respected as – let alone a professional, but as a person, I'd rather stay where I'm at."

Importantly, center leadership's role in creating a supportive workplace environment was central to focus group discussions and was also reflected in a number of open-ended survey responses.

There were two main ways that educators perceived leaders' roles in creating a supportive environment that addresses educators' needs in the workplace:

- **Emotional support**
- **Organizational support through workplace policies**

"So I'd rather stay where I'm at – maybe miss out on a little bit more money, but have peace when I go home. If I'm not respected as – let alone a professional, but as a person, I'd rather stay where I'm at."

Educators described emotional support as leadership showing appreciation and compassion to their staff, respecting them as professionals, and providing spaces for them to check-in or provide feedback. Lack of compassion was a key driver of frustration for educators in the focus groups. "And one of the things that I learned is you can't depend on them to support you — or have sympathy for you. All they need to do is make sure they got their educators in the classroom meetin' they ratios," explained one educator about the leadership in their center. In contrast, educators who did feel emotionally supported by their leadership expressed gratitude: "[My boss], you know, has the open-door policy, and she can understand our concerns, so we're grateful for her." One survey respondent equated this support as a direct benefit, writing, "Our director…really cares about her team, and the support, encouragement, setting the bar high and personal touch that she provides to each team member is one of the best benefits anyone can ask for."

Educators also felt supported when leadership prioritized policies that addressed their underlying concerns – including tap out policies and systems that allowed for scheduling flexibility. Focus group participants shared examples of how their centers provided flexibility around scheduling including having aftercare staff, having a rotating 'late' schedule where educators only stay after 3:30 PM a handful of days per month, or providing PTO pools of time for any staff to access.

"They were able to adjust my schedule for me to be sure that I could get my own kid," said one educator explaining the importance of a flexible schedule in their life, while another educator in the same focus group shared a different experience, saying "I have to put my son in after-school care 'cause I have to work late. So, for me, that's another fee." The positive impact of organizational support also extended to employee benefits. One survey respondent shared, "I feel my employer tries their best to give us affordable and useable benefits. They also do monthly Zoom meetings to help employees understand and access they benefits that they have and need to use."

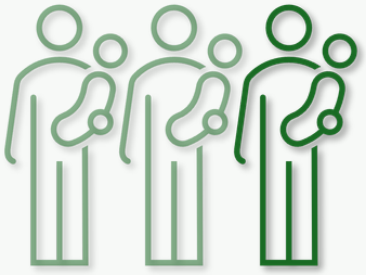
"The center where I'm at now, my boss, she's a beautiful person. She's fair. She... shows her appreciation for her children and her staff... she can't give you the pay that you deserve, but if she could, she would. So she's the type of person that will make me stay there on the strength of: I know her heart toward her workers and her children."

There were many examples of how supportive leaders and their impact on the workplace environment affected educators' desire to remain at their center more than pay or benefits. "Well, the center where I'm at now, my boss, she's a beautiful person. She's fair. She... she shows her appreciation for her children and her staff... she can't give you the pay that you deserve, but if she could, she would. So she's the type of person that will make me stay there on the strength of: I know her heart toward her workers and her children. 'Cause I had came from many daycares where those owners were horrible toward their workers and their children."

CENTER LEADERSHIP PRACTICES HAVE A CLEAR EFFECT ON WHETHER EDUCATORS FEEL SUPPORTED IN THEIR JOBS, THE WAY THEY PERCEIVE ACCESS TO EMPLOYEE BENEFITS, AND THEIR OVERALL JOB SATISFACTION.

KEY FINDING #4. EDUCATORS WANT RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COACHING OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT CAPACITY AND SUPPORT CAREER GROWTH.

Survey findings highlight a clear desire for high-quality professional development (PD) opportunities in the workplace. Among respondents who were not offered PD, four out of five (83%) considered this benefit very or extremely important.



ONE IN THREE SURVEY RESPONDENTS (35%) WHO REPORTED TAKING ACTION TO LEAVE THEIR CURRENT ECE POSITION CITED THEIR REASON FOR DOING SO "TO FIND A JOB FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND/OR ADVANCEMENT WITHIN THE FIELD OF CHILDCARE."

Focus group participants valued professional development (PD) opportunities as well. Educators expressed a desire for relevant and applicable training and coaching opportunities, and were especially interested in PD opportunities that would build classroom management capacity, specifically their ability to support children who may have special needs. Participants also discussed a desire for furthering education opportunities – including CDA certification, classroom observer trainings, and tuition assistance for education programs – that promote career growth and upward mobility.

Educators were also clear that not all professional development in the workplace is created equal. Educators discussed the need for relevant, individualized coaching that is responsive to their needs and the needs of their students.

"We're seeing so many children that are having these behavioral issues because they have these needs that aren't being met. Because developmentally, there's something that they need a little bit of help with. And I just don't know how to give it to them."

The need for more training in behavior management, in particular, came up across focus groups. Some participants described this as a growing need attributed to an increasing number of students with challenging behaviors, and the absence of other specialists, such as speech or occupational therapists, on-site. As one educator explained, "We're seeing so many children that are having these behavioral issues because they have these needs that aren't being met. Because developmentally, there's something that they need a little bit of help with. And I just don't know how to give it to them."

Opportunities for relevant professional development in the workplace often went hand-in-hand with supportive leadership that provided opportunities for professional growth and the scheduling flexibility to attend classes or training. When asked what things keep them in their jobs, one educator responded, “I have a awesome director, I will not lie. She is very supportive. And as far if you wanna further your education, she's findin' all kinda programs, helpin' me, approachin' me. She sends us all the time all kinds of stuff."

Educators who weren’t experiencing that in their workplace expressed frustration with its absence. “So it’s… frustrating ’cause don’t tell me you want me to go to the next level and go do something different when clearly you’re not giving me the opportunity,” explained one educator discussing a desire to pursue further education, but unable to get financial assistance from their center director.

IMPLICATIONS

Survey respondents and focus group participants described the joys and challenges of working in the field of early childhood education. Educators voiced their love for the children and the pride they take in the role they play in each child’s growth and development: “I love these kids and know that these relationships are the bedrock of their development.” But they also expressed feelings of frustration driven in large part by short staffing, a lack of support for managing challenging child behaviors in the classroom, and feeling undervalued as professionals. These workplace challenges were often made worse by experiences of financial hardship. Survey and focus group data point to adequate compensation, access to paid time off and flexible scheduling, career growth opportunities, and supportive leadership as possible ways to address those challenges.

Findings from this work suggest that there are immediate — and potentially low-cost — ways to support educators in the field at the local level. Educators point to the need for policies that facilitate accommodating work schedules, thoughtful staffing management, and professional development opportunities that address educators' current needs and career goals. Center policies paired with a workplace environment that prioritizes clear communication and mutual respect can have significant impacts on educators’ lived experiences in the workplace day-to-day. Findings suggest that these efforts may impact educators’ decision-making about staying in or leaving their jobs. Local solutions could include leadership trainings and peer learning groups for center directors (i.e., communities of practice) and sustainable wage incentives programs like the investment Orleans Parish made towards a wage enhancement program starting in the 2023-24 school year to increase educator pay.

However, large-scale, systemic changes are necessary to build a stable, supported, well-trained ECE workforce. Local efforts like those described above can make a meaningful difference in educators' lives but are not likely to drastically reduce turnover. Working in childcare is low-wage and high stress, and that combination leaves educators burned out and looking for better options. Secure attachments to caring adults are critical for young children's learning and development, and children should not have to wait until age five to enter a stable learning environment. Though the K-12 workforce has its own challenges, educators are much better paid, and the sector has much lower turnover compared to childcare. In order to match that level of stability, we will need significant investment at the state and federal level to raise salaries, provide benefits at a system-wide level, and fund substantial supports for children with special needs.

"I didn't care about the pay or the benefits, I just like doin' it... I love to see 'em [go from not knowing] how to write to writing, recognizing words around the class... But as I hear everybody speak... I'm emotional about hearing' about what we not getting. I never really thought about it until now, you know. I'm just thinking like dang... we do deserve that."

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