

Why Are Our Most Important Teachers Paid the Least?

Many preschool teachers live on the edge of financial ruin. Would improving their training — and their pay — improve outcomes for their students?

By JENEEN INTERLANDI JAN. 9, 2018

One snowy February morning at the Arbors Kids preschool branch in downtown Springfield, Mass., 38-year-old Kejo Kelly crouched low over a large, faded carpet and locked eyes with a blond-haired boy of 3. It was circle time, and Kelly was trying to get each of her 13 tiny students to articulate a feeling.

“Good morning, good morning, and how do you do?” she sang softly to the little boy. “Jamal’s silly! Amir’s happy! And how about you?” Kelly’s classroom was known for what one visiting specialist called its “singsonginess.” The good-morning bit was standard fare, but Kelly also sang her own impromptu ditties throughout the day. She’d found that a good melody could cajole even her most obstinate students into completing dreaded tasks: There was a song about washing hands, and one about cleaning up messes, and another about how shouting and running were for outside only.

Most children squealed with delight when their turn came to name a feeling: They offered up happys and sillys with abandon. Even the more bashful ones, who had to be prompted, were visibly thrilled by Kelly’s attention, which seemed to beat out a limited toy-dinosaur collection as the class’s chief attraction. But not the blond-haired boy. During the opening exercise, in which each child got a turn to dance in the center of the circle to a song of his choosing, he neither picked a song nor danced

to the one Kelly offered. Instead, he flung himself at her feet and writhed like a fish out of water, then went completely still in a belligerent game of possum.

Now, at least, Kelly had made eye contact.

“How are you today?” she asked, holding both of his hands in hers as she spoke. “Are you happy? Angry? Sad? Or silly?”

If any of her students — or “little friends,” as she called them — had sung her song back to her just then, Kelly would have answered that she was stressed. Three teachers had called out from work that morning, including the assistant teacher assigned to Kelly’s room. Massachusetts state law prohibits the child-to-teacher ratio in full-day preschool classrooms from exceeding 10 to 1, so normally, Kelly had 13 students and one co-teacher. But staff shortages were a common occurrence at Springfield Arbors, where teachers earned \$10 an hour on average and staff turnover was high. In practice, there was a lot of juggling: On any given day, students and teachers shuffled from one room to another, combining some classes and breaking others up in an effort to keep each room within the permissible ratio. That day, Kelly would absorb six additional students and one co-teacher from another classroom.

The extra little ones didn’t trouble her as much as the prospect of being stuck late again. She was supposed to be off by 4 p.m., but most of her kids didn’t leave until 5:30, and the teacher who was scheduled to stay late was among those who were out. Of the teachers who were present, all either had children of their own to fetch from day care or night classes to get to at the community college. Kelly had neither. Her own kids were 17 and 20, and she had long since forgone higher education in favor of working.

But none of that concerned the blond boy, who was blinking and smiling at her. Kelly kept her own eyes locked on his even as another student — a little girl with a devilish grin and a long dark ponytail — leapt onto Kelly’s back and began tugging at her hairnet. “How are you?” Kelly asked the boy again. “Can you tell me a feeling?”

The ponytailed girl was hardly the only one threatening to break the moment open. Someone was crying. Someone else was throwing toys not meant to be thrown and jumping on toys not meant to be jumped on. Someone smelled like poop and

needed to be taken into the bathroom and guided through the basics of toilet use. And several someones were demanding things of Kelly specifically — that she hug them, or carry them round the room on her shoulders, or play a special game with just them. The children were ravenous for their teacher. And for each moment that she focused exclusively on the little blond boy, she risked losing the rest of her class to an irrevocable anarchy.

To an outsider, it was tough to say which of the children's behaviors were normal for 3- and 4-year-olds and which were signs of bigger issues. Increasingly, classrooms like the one over which Kelly presides are being eyed by social scientists and policymakers as both the place where problems emerge and the safety net that stands the best chance of addressing them. Preschool is often thought of as mere babysitting. But a growing body of research suggests that when done right, it can be much more than that. An effective early-education program can level the playing field for low-income black and Hispanic students relative to their white or wealthier counterparts, so much so that gaps in language comprehension and numeracy can often disappear by the start of kindergarten. And according to at least two longitudinal studies, the very best programs can produce effects that reach far beyond those early years, increasing the rates of high-school completion and college attendance among participants and reducing the incidence of teenage parenthood, welfare dependence and arrests.

The community Kelly taught in was low-income by all the standard metrics. Many of her students came from single-parent households — some from teenage mothers, at least one from foster care — and nearly all of them qualified for state-funded child care vouchers. Programs like Springfield Arbors that accepted such vouchers received about \$35 a day for each child, enough to cover basics like food and art supplies but not enough to pay for on-site behavioral specialists or occupational therapists. The school did make referrals. By Massachusetts law, all 3- and 4-year-olds are eligible to receive special-needs services at the local public school; there is even a free shuttle to shepherd them back and forth. But the waiting list for those services can be long, and in the winter of 2016, few parents at the school bothered to put their children's names on it.

So Kelly kept her own fractured vigil — taking note of which students couldn't control their emotions, or sit still for the life of them, or engage with others in a meaningful way — and giving those students whatever extra attention could be spared. She sometimes imagined the classroom as a bubble, inside which her students were temporarily spared from the hazards of everyday life. Her job, as she saw it, was to hold that bubble open for the ones who couldn't always hold it open themselves.

“Come on, my friend,” she said now to the little blond boy. “Talk to me.”

The idea that we can deliberately influence the cognitive and social development of very young children is a fairly new one. In the early 20th century, some doctors considered intellectual stimulation so detrimental to infants that they routinely advised young mothers to avoid it. At the beginning of the 1960s, the prevailing wisdom was only slightly less dire. Trying to stimulate a very young mind wasn't considered dangerous so much as pointless, because 0-to-4-year-olds were “concrete thinkers,” incapable of theorizing or abstraction.

But such thinking began to shift with two seminal preschool experiments: the HighScope Perry Preschool Study, which began in 1962 in Ypsilanti, Mich., and the Carolina Abecedarian Project, which began in 1972 in and around Chapel Hill, N.C. Perry provided free half-day classes and weekly home visits to 58 black children living in a high-poverty district near Detroit. Abecedarian provided 57 children of a similar cohort with full weekday care for their first five years of life, including not only preschool but also health care and social services. Both programs employed highly trained teachers and kept student-to-teacher ratios low. The Perry study also used a curriculum rooted in “active participatory learning,” in which cognitive and social skills are developed through educational games that the children themselves initiate and direct.

The short-term results of these interventions were mixed. Some of the preschoolers, for example, were more aggressive at the end of the programs than they had been at the start, even if this difference disappeared by second grade. Decades later, however, when researchers went back, they found a surprise. At age 21, the Abecedarian children were half as likely to have been teenage parents and 2.5

times more likely to have enrolled in college than the control group, who did not attend preschool. At 40, the Perry children had higher median incomes than their control-group peers; they were less likely to be on welfare and less likely to have been arrested. Those results were not uniform. For example, while Perry seemed to reduce arrests and increase high-school graduation rates, Abecedarian had no impact on either. But the findings still caused a stir among social scientists and educators: Both programs appeared to have affected the children in ways that could still be seen in adulthood.

In the decades since those results were published, the biological and social sciences have radically altered our understanding of early-childhood development. We now know that infants and toddlers have the capacity for complex thought. According to a recent report from the Institute of Medicine, they can understand other people's intentions, reason about cause and effect and intuit the more basic aspects of addition and subtraction. We also know that the earliest years are a period of intense and rapid neural development — M.R.I. studies suggest that 80 percent of all neural connections form by age 3 — and that a child's ability to capitalize on these years is directly related to her environment. Social scientists have shown that, owing to a shortage of books and toddler-friendly conversation, children from families on welfare understand roughly one-third the number of words that their middle-class peers do by the start of kindergarten.

Scientists and educators have begun to build on this new understanding, creating pedagogy and designing curriculums around the needs of our earliest learners. But one crucial question remains unanswered: What actually works? What are the defining features of an excellent preschool education? “There is no empirically based definition of ‘high-quality preschool,’ ” says Mark Lipsey, a social scientist at Vanderbilt University. “We throw the phrase around a lot, but we don't actually know what it means.”

Part of the problem is that the benefits of a preschool education tend to manifest unevenly. Developmental gains made by the start of kindergarten can be enough to close racial achievement gaps, but those gains often evaporate by third or fourth grade, a phenomenon that education researchers call the fade-out effect. And so far, the longer-term rebounds found in Perry and Abecedarian — in which children who

attend good preschools fare better in adulthood than their peers who attend no such program — have been difficult to parse or replicate. In 2017, a group of prominent early-education researchers published a consensus statement declaring that preschool classrooms were a “black box” and that much more research was needed before anyone could say with certainty which ingredients were essential to improving long-term developmental trajectories.

Amid that uncertainty, though, at least two things seem clear: Children in low-income and minority neighborhoods stand to gain (or lose) the most from whatever preschool system we ultimately establish. And the one-on-one exchanges between students and teachers — what developmental psychologists call “process quality” — may well be the key to success or failure. In other words, if preschool classrooms really are crackling with the kind of raw power that can change the course of a life, that power most likely resides in the ability of teachers like Kelly to connect with students like the little blond boy.

But if teachers are crucial to high-quality preschool, they are also its most neglected component. Even as investment in early-childhood education soars, teachers like Kelly continue to earn as little as \$28,500 a year on average, a valuation that puts them on par with file clerks and switchboard operators, but well below K-12 teachers, who, according to the most recent national survey, earn roughly \$53,100 a year. According to a recent briefing from the Economic Policy Institute, a majority of preschool teachers are low-income women of color with no more than a high-school diploma. Only 15 percent of them receive employer-sponsored health insurance, and depending on which state they are in, nearly half belong to families that rely on public assistance. “Teaching preschoolers is every bit as complicated and important as teaching any of the K-12 grades, if not more so,” says Marcy Whitebook, a director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. “But we still treat preschool teachers like babysitters. We want them to ameliorate poverty even as they live in it themselves.”

The solution to this paradox seems obvious: Hold preschool teachers to the same standards as their K-12 counterparts, and pay them a salary commensurate with that training. But that proposition is rife with intractable questions. Who will pay the higher salaries? How will current teachers rise to meet the new credential

requirements? And if they can't or won't, who will take their place? At the heart of those questions is this one: What, exactly, makes a good preschool teacher?

Springfield Arbors preschool consists of one long hallway on the ground floor of an assisted-living facility, with several classrooms strung along either side. The surrounding neighborhood, known as Six Corners, is home to a high school (the same one that Kelly attended), a community college and a steady beat of drug- and gang-related violence. Six Corners children live on the down side of what's known in education circles as the achievement gap. According to analysis done by the Massachusetts-based nonprofit Strategies for Children, between 12 and 14 percent of third graders in some Six Corners schools read at or above grade level, compared with between 37 and 43 percent in nearby Forest Park, a neighborhood known for its well-preserved Victorian homes, and as the birthplace of Dr. Seuss, the city's most famous native son.

Kelly came to preschool teaching about a decade ago, when the local caterer she was working for abruptly shut down. For a single mother with a high-school diploma, the options in Springfield were limited: Home health aides, retail salespeople and food-service workers all made about the same salary. Receptionists and secretaries made more, but those jobs required office experience, and the work itself sounded dull. Kelly wanted a job helping people. She had only ever worked in food service, but when she found a local preschool with an opening in the kitchen, she saw a chance to pivot.

She started by making herself known in the classroom, lingering to help out when she delivered lunches, introducing herself to parents in the hallway, befriending the teachers and asking them about their work. When an assistant-teacher spot opened up, she jumped on it. She considered it a promotion, even though the teacher's salary (\$9 an hour) was actually \$1 an hour less than what she made as a school cook. For the first year, she split her time between the kitchen and the classroom while she earned her Child Development Associate certification, or C.D.A., which required her to complete a nine-month course that met for four hours every Saturday at the local Y.M.C.A.

At first she thought that credential would help her carve a path to some greater edification: a higher degree, maybe, and a higher wage along with it. But those dreams were quickly jettisoned. In 2011, just as she was completing her first class at the community college, an electrical fire tore through the three-family home that Kelly and her two children shared with her grandmother, mother, aunt and cousin. Her relatives' apartments weren't damaged much, but Kelly and her children lost nearly all their possessions. Worse, the fire seemed to usher in a newly dark chapter in her life. In 2012, her younger brother died in a horrific car accident; a year later, her cousin was shot and killed, and her aunt died. Her daughter's boyfriend — the father of her newborn grandson — was also killed, in another shooting. Somewhere in the middle of those heartaches, the preschool she worked at closed, and Kelly moved on to Springfield Arbors.

The C.D.A. taught her the basics of lesson planning, class structure and family engagement, but her real training came through trial and error. Kelly's classroom was often chaotic, but parents quickly learned that they could come to her with concerns, even after their children had aged out of her classroom. One mother asked her to step in as foster parent during a particularly tough time. Others hired her to babysit when they picked up night shifts at one job or another, so that Kelly might welcome a given child at 8 in the morning and not return him to his mother until well after 10 or 11 at night. The work was exhausting, but she found she had a knack for it — an instinct for what her students needed, an ability to relate to them and, when all else failed, a willingness to keep trying.

One early-spring afternoon, when a rainstorm kept the children indoors during what would normally be playtime, Kelly tried arranging a field trip to the basement hallway — the only substitute playground at Springfield Arbors. But when too many of them fell into tantrum mode at the same time, she changed tack and set up the portable chalkboard at the front of the room. It did not take long for one, then three, then a dozen of the children to notice her chalking letters and gather around. The letter of the week was “D,” and she had been teaching the students what words it was used in and showing them how to write and pronounce it. “Down, over, over,” she said in a long, slow drawl, as she drew first the spine and then the hump of the letter. She was speaking to one little boy specifically, and when she was done, she handed

the chalk to him and held his hand as he repeated her movements. Then she removed her hand and nodded at him to try on his own.

At first, the class was enthralled by this demonstration. But then one little boy started screaming. Grandma, an elderly volunteer who sometimes came for an hour or two and mostly sat in back of the room on a small couch, grabbed the boy's arm and yanked him to her side. "Cut it out," she said. "Come sit!" The boy yanked his arm back, flopped onto the floor and wailed. Kelly kept her focus on the students at the blackboard. Eventually the screamer ran back over to the circle and forced another little boy off his seat, which made the other boy cry, which distracted the rest of the class and set half of them wandering off, before anyone had made a full D.

When nap time came it seemed impossible that any one of the tiny, furious bodies twirling through the room could be stilled long enough to let sleep come, let alone all of them at once. But the sleeping mats were soon laid out across the room, and the children took their cue, except for the little blond boy, who wouldn't lie still. One of Kelly's colleagues sat on the floor near him, urging him to calm himself. "Relax your body," she said over and over, patting his back. But it was no use, so she traded spots with Kelly. Kelly leaned over the little blond boy and made eye contact with him and allowed him to grab at her hands with his. This seemed to do the trick. When he settled in just enough to release his grip, she took her cellphone out and played soft music, just for him, which clinched the deal.

By the time all the children fell asleep, Kelly was sitting cross-legged on the floor with four little ones unfurled like flower petals around her. She was rubbing each of their backs in turn with one hand — rub, rub, pat, next; rub, rub, pat, next — while rocking a fifth in her other arm. Her classroom had a total of 19 students just then, and in order for her to grab lunch, the school's cook had to be summoned to sit with the sleeping children. She pulled a pack of noodles from her coat pocket and tiptoed toward the door. "It's a ramen week," she whispered. "I just spent a fortune on household stuff yesterday, and my son has two basketball games this week." The high school charged \$5 admission to each game, and Kelly rarely missed one, even when it meant skimping on meals.

She returned a few minutes later with a bowl of steaming noodles and two co-teachers. As the children snoozed, the three women slipped into a whispered chat. One student's voucher was about to expire, and the student's mother had yet to contact the voucher office to renew it. They debated who was to blame for this looming catastrophe; but how the voucher office worked was a mystery, even to these women who were both mothers and teachers.

"You can't call them," one teacher said. "They never answer. You have to go down there."

"She must have missed her appointment," another added.

"They don't always give appointments," Kelly said. "They never gave my daughter one for my grandson."

One teacher, Miss RJ, was summoned to the office: The nurse at her own children's school was calling to say that both of them were sick. But Springfield Arbors was still short-staffed. So Miss RJ was stuck there, and her own children were stuck with someone else.

In the United States, the care of children who have not yet aged into public school has long run on two tracks, separated mostly by household income. The upper-and-middle-income track was designed specifically to engage and nourish young minds at their ripest juncture. The low-income track originated in the social-welfare system; its programs were created not just for children but also for their mothers, who needed to work. As such, they tend to be larger and staffed by teachers with high-school diplomas. They also tend to be chronically underfunded.

The last half-century is littered with attempts to merge these two tracks — that is, to make the day cares of the poor more like the preschools of the middle class and wealthy. But those efforts have long been plagued by a deep cultural ambivalence toward both charity and working mothers. When Head Start, the nation's first public preschool, began in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, its goals were twofold: to provide underprivileged preschoolers the tools they needed to keep up with their better-off peers; and to offer an economic boost for their mothers, some of whom were recruited and trained to work at the centers as educators. The program was

part of what would come to be known as the country's biggest peacetime mobilization of human resources, but enthusiasm for it was short-lived. Amid concerns about "family weakening" in the 1970s and "welfare queens" in the 1980s, funding for early education stalled. Today Head Start serves less than one-third of the nation's eligible students. As part of a wave of reforms about a decade ago, Head Start began requiring half of its lead teachers to hold bachelor's degrees. It's too soon to tell what impact this has had on teaching and learning, but one unintended consequence is that it's harder for teachers like Kelly to find work at the centers.

Head Start is not the only program to raise credentialing requirements for preschool teachers. In 1998, as a result of a lawsuit filed by the Education Law Center, an advocacy group for New Jersey public-school children, the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered 31 low-income school districts to provide high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Among other things, the court's definition of "high quality" included full-day programs staffed by college-educated teachers who earned salaries equal to those of their K-12 counterparts. The resulting program — known as the Abbott preschool program, after the lawsuit that led to the mandate — represents one of the first efforts among education reformers to replicate the models of Perry and Abecedarian and bring them to scale.

One recent morning in a brightly colored classroom at Egenolf, an Abbott preschool in Elizabeth, N.J. A 3-year-old girl with soft brown pigtails and a white shirt examined a row of water bottles, each of which had a pine cone submerged in a different liquid, and dictated observations to her teacher, Yamila Lopez Hevia. The cone in the "cold water" bottle was closing up. The one in warm water was closing, too — but more slowly. "And what do we think is going on?" Lopez asked. "Why might that happen?" After a brief pause, the girl pulled up two big words, each of which she had heard from Lopez.

The pine cones, she explained, were *a-dap-ting* to their *en-viron-ment*.

It was the crowning moment to a much larger project that began when the children noticed that it was getting colder out and that the leaves were changing color. Lopez led them through a dialogue about how trees and other plants get ready for winter. From there, they turned their attention to what animals do. Lopez took

the class to a local park, where they noticed squirrels collecting nuts and looked for birds who might be getting ready to migrate. In the end, they circled back to themselves, discussing sweaters and warm coats and winter boots. “We introduced some big concepts,” Lopez told me when I visited her class recently. “And it all started with that one simple question: ‘What do you see happening around you?’” The technique was called scaffolding, and it was a key tenet of current preschool pedagogy, which Lopez learned as a student teacher.

According to that pedagogy, preschoolers discover the world around them through trial, error and experimentation. They learn by doing things more than by thinking about them. The techniques that educators and developmental psychologists have devised for cultivating this natural tendency are decidedly Socratic. Rather than standing at a blackboard chalking letters or leading a large group in song, they assert, teachers like Kelly and Lopez should pay close attention to what the children themselves are interested in, or puzzled by, and respond to that. Any given moment is ripe with the opportunity to teach in this way, but doing it well requires a suite of disparate skills. A squirrel collecting nuts for the winter might hold a biology lesson; but to offer that lesson, a teacher needs to recognize the moment as it occurs. She also needs a grounding in that discipline and a clear sense of where the student in question sits on the developmental spectrum.

“The bottom line is really individualized intentional teaching,” says Steven Barnett, co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. “And there’s specialized knowledge that preschool teachers need that’s different even from what kindergarten and first-grade teachers need.” For example, he says, preschoolers are apt to reverse letters. “It really helps to understand why they do that, if you want to help them get it right,” he says. “It’s not an isolated thing. Like, let’s take my sippy cup. My whole life up to now, my sippy cup is a sippy cup no matter what way I hold it — upside down, sideways, whatever. But now you give me this thing called a *d*. And I put it down one way and it’s a *b*. And another way and you tell me it’s a *p*. What’s with that?”

Barnett and others say that the ability to guide preschoolers through this stage of development takes a college degree. Teachers who don’t have rich vocabularies or groundings in math and science can’t impart those things to their students, he says.

In a 2015 report, the Institute of Medicine agreed. The report argued that holding preschool teachers to lower standards than public-school teachers has fed the perception that the work itself is low-skill and in turn has helped justify policies that keep preschool teachers' wages down and prevent them from growing professionally.

But teachers themselves have been divided over the prospect of new job requirements. Many of them migrated to the field precisely because it did not require a higher degree. College — navigating financial aid, carving out the hours for class and homework — takes time and money and know-how. And for those who have been doing the job for years or even decades, the suggestion that they need additional training can feel like an insult.

Abbott addressed these issues head-on. It provided intensive college-admissions counseling, including help with financial-aid forms and scheduling. It also covered tuition for teachers in the program and nudged the college programs to bring their classes to the preschools. “We had the college professors go into the Newark schools and hold their classes there so that the teachers didn’t have to travel,” Barnett says. “We also paid for substitutes when the teachers needed to go to classes during the day, because we knew that not everybody could do this at night school.” The process was neither cheap nor easy nor fast, he adds. Many teachers struggled through remedial courses and community college before making their way into bachelor’s degree programs. All told, it costs \$14,000 per child per year, more than twice the national average.

Those figures have made Abbott a lightning rod in the debate over public preschool in general and teacher credentials in particular. Critics say that the program is far too expensive given how little it may affect student outcomes in the long term (Abbott studies show fade-out effects, albeit less significant ones than in many other preschool studies). But proponents argue that it’s unfair to judge the success or value of such programs by performance in the middle-school or high-school years — in part because there may be rebound effects later on. And in any case, the program works demonstrably well in achieving its primary objective: preparing children for elementary school. It has also helped stabilize the preschool work force. Because Abbott teachers earn solid middle-class salaries — between \$55,000 and \$57,000

per year on average — staff turnover is less of a problem, which in turn means that classrooms are less chaotic.

This latter benefit underscores all the others: A successful preschool teacher needs to make her students feel safe and help them understand their emotions and regulate their own behavior. Children can't concentrate long enough to absorb new ideas or develop new skills if every slight sets them off crying or swinging at other children, or if they feel constantly threatened or mistrustful of their surroundings. And teachers who earn poverty-level wages can't be expected to create consistent and reassuring classrooms. "Security is an essential foundation for early learning," says Whitebook of U.C. Berkeley. "An older kid might be able to learn about math or history from a teacher they don't like. But a young child, a preschool-aged child, is going to have a very hard time learning anything from an adult that they feel averse to. For very young children especially, you have to meet them where they are, both literally and figuratively, and you have to make them feel safe in that space."

Little of what experts like Barnett and Whitebook espouse would surprise Kelly, who in the time I spent in her classroom seemed always to be on bended knee, talking one child or another through their tears, gently but firmly explaining the reality of other people's feelings or helping them understand the relationships between their physical behavior and its consequences. One day, I watched her spend a full 15 minutes on a small boy in bright orange shorts who had gotten in the habit of tearing through the room at full speed. In the course of a morning, he had knocked two little girls to the ground and destroyed a block city that two other children were building. The assistant teacher had threatened him with suspension from class, to no avail. Kelly, applying the same squat-down-direct-eye-contact treatment that she used on the blond-haired boy, led him through a string of questions:

"What happens when we run?"

"We go fast!"

"What else happens?"

"We ... hit things?"

“Why do we hit things when we run fast, but not when we walk?”

“Because ... it takes longer to stop!”

From there they discussed how barreling into a person might make that person feel. Eventually the boy concluded that it was best to save fast running for outside, where there was more space. It was as good a lesson in physics and feelings as any 4-year-old was likely to get, in any school.

But later that day, the same little boy found himself puzzling over another riddle of movement and speed. It was recess, and the class was scattered across the narrow strip of wood chips and strewn toys that constituted the Springfield Arbors playground. The boy in orange shorts huddled with three other boys in a cubbyhole at the base of a plastic fort. The group whispered and drew in the dirt with twigs for several minutes before abruptly bursting out across the yard. They took possession of a large rubber ball from some uninterested girls and set about throwing it as high as they could. The boy in the orange shorts took several consecutive turns, throwing the ball higher each time. When it landed atop a tarp that was fastened to the side of the building, the boys exchanged giddy confused looks: Why had the ball landed there instead of on the ground? What should they do next? The boy looked across the playground toward Kelly, but she was busy brokering a time-share deal between two archrivals over the class’s only Malibu Barbie.

If there was a shortcoming to Kelly’s work, it was that her skills were almost always deployed to resolve a crisis or defuse tension, and rarely to nurture some budding curiosity. Kelly didn’t doubt the vastness of her students’ inner mental worlds; nor did she discount the importance of meeting them where they were or of treating them with frankness and intelligence. In fact, she seemed to grasp those principles intuitively. What she lacked was the support she needed to build on her natural talents or cultivate her own ambitions.

One such ambition was taking more of a leadership role at the center. In April 2016, she was unofficially promoted from lead teacher to assistant director — an office job that came with a small raise. But then in June, two teachers quit and another was fired, and she was sent back to the classroom. “I feel like I can’t move

forward,” she told me at the time. “I keep picking up slack for all these other people moving forward with their careers, and their lives. And I’m stuck.”

That feeling had become more pronounced lately, owing to a string of incidents outside the classroom. First was the robbery: When she and her daughter stopped at the bank one evening after work, they were held at gunpoint by a man in a ski mask demanding all the money behind the counter. The entire episode passed in 15 minutes. But while Kelly’s daughter compartmentalized it quickly, Kelly replayed it in her head for weeks, enumerating to herself all the ways that trouble had nearly missed them: She did not normally stop at that branch, but had taken a different route home to run an errand. They had been about to leave; Kelly’s hands were on the door when the gunman came through it from the other side, thrusting his weapon in her face. He was never caught, but the Springfield Police Department sent the Kelly household a pamphlet on how to deal with the aftermath of a robbery.

Then, as summer approached, Kelly received a summons asking her to testify in a murder trial. The actual killing took place in 2013, on her brother’s birthday. It was the first of his birthdays since his death, and Kelly and her sister were sitting up in her sister’s kitchen, weathering the internal storm that such anniversaries tend to bring, when they heard shots. Kelly looked down from the second-story window to find a gaggle of teenagers, including her nephew, scrambling for cover. She grabbed every glass object she could get her hands on — plates, vases, dishes — and hurled them out the window at the gunman, ducking in between throws to protect herself. When the shooting stopped, she and her sister ran out to the street, where they found one boy down. Kelly gave him CPR, and even got him back to breathing for a few minutes, but he died before the ambulance arrived. In addition to reminding her of that day, the court summons had the effect of putting her children on edge; there had already been more than one shooting in their neighborhood that summer, and it was never good to be the only person standing between an accused killer and a possible life sentence.

Kelly prided herself on setting those worries aside when she was at work. But with each fresh calamity, she felt the walls of her own bubble closing in.

One late afternoon, as fall tipped into winter, a squirrel perched itself on the ledge just outside Kelly's classroom window and caught the attention of a small boy with milk-chocolate skin and big, round eyes. He pointed at the animal, silently but with gusto. When Kelly walked by, he tugged at the leg of her pants. She scooped him up, rested him on her hip and, for a brief moment, watched with him as the creature scurried up and down a tree at the playground's edge. "Yes," she said. "That's a squirrel." The boy continued to point, but it was late in the day, and Kelly was tired and distracted, so the conversation ended there.

In the fall of 2017, Kelly and her colleagues received word that Springfield Arbors preschool would change owners this January, and become Bright Futures. No one could say for sure what that meant for the teachers or their students. The anxiety surrounding this change reflected an uncertainty that reached far beyond Kelly's classroom. In the last decade or so, the percentage of children served by state programs has doubled; 43 states and the District of Columbia now have public preschool programs of one kind or another. But that recent progress is now being tempered by federal indifference: The Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has yet to appoint a director of the Office of Early Learning, established under the Obama administration to help facilitate the integration of preschool into the public-education system; and President Trump has eliminated preschool funding increases from his proposed budget. What's more, experts are still divided over what credentials early childhood educators should have.

Last year, for instance, the District of Columbia school district took a step toward professionalizing its preschool work force when it declared that all preschool teachers would be required to obtain an associate degree by 2020. The measure met with controversy even among some preschool proponents. One argument holds that preschool teachers with college educations have not been shown to improve students' educational outcomes compared with those who do not have degrees but have been trained in child development. "The evidence for a B.A. is pretty weak," says Bruce Fuller, an education researcher at U.C. Berkeley. "It probably screens for people who engage in richer language, but the actual training in college — I'm not sure it has any effect."

The other argument is that increasing credential requirements without first raising wages places too much of a burden on already-overtaxed teachers. Mary Alice McCarthy, director of the Center on Education and Skills at the New America foundation, has proffered a different approach: apprenticeships. Like many human-service jobs, she says, teaching is best taught through “iterative interactions,” where a person with experience helps a newcomer identify and respond to challenges. And the structure of an apprenticeship may be better suited to teachers who need to work full time while they learn. “You can’t say the goal is to level the playing field for low-income kids,” McCarthy says, “and then cut low-income teachers who have been doing this work forever out of the equation.”

Amy O’Leary, a former preschool teacher and current campaign director for Strategies for Children, agrees: “The existing preschool work force is much more diverse than the elementary work force, and we want to preserve that,” she says. “If you hire only those teachers who have the means to do it on their own, you displace the existing ones, who often come from the communities they teach in and have their own specialized knowledge of what it is to live in neighborhoods like Six Corners.”

A Philadelphia-area community college, a union and a number of local preschools joined forces to make the first attempts at training preschool teachers in this way. The program pairs apprentice teachers with mentors as they progress through a structured curriculum while working in the classroom full time. They get four wage increases over a two-year period, so that by the time they complete the program, which grants them both an associate degree and a journeyman card, they are already earning \$2 to \$3 more an hour. “That’s a life-changing increase,” McCarthy says.

It’s also classroom-changing. The program is still in its infancy, but I spoke with apprentices, teachers and center directors who say that improvements in classroom dynamics and staff turnover, not to mention actual teaching, are already apparent. “I feel like I’ve learned more about how their little brains work, and also about the best ways to reach them,” says Briana Gonsiewski, an apprentice at Spin preschool in Philadelphia, who taught for 10 years before joining the program in 2017. “Before, I did not see playing on the ground as something structural. Now I get how they are really learning all the time, and I can start to see how to tap into that.”

It will take a few years more to say how the apprentice program stacks up against programs like Abbott, or even like Springfield Arbors, and if the teacher training affects student outcomes in any measurable way. And then individual communities will have to decide if the gains are worth the price.

“We have to come to terms with the fact that this is going to cost a lot more money,” O’Leary says. “And to accept that, I think we still have to shed a lot of prejudices about working mothers and the working poor, and what it means to help them.” In the meantime, with limited funds, policymakers and educators are caught between competing imperatives: Use the money they have to expand access so that as many students as possible receive some form of early education, or use it to improve quality in specific places like Six Corners, where both the need and potential payoff are greatest.

Investing in teacher education, as Abbott or the apprenticeship programs do, means choosing the latter, and that’s a tough sell to taxpayers who need child care themselves. “Politicians are understandably reluctant to tell parents who need to work and who are on the waiting list for subsidies, ‘Well, we’re not going to expand access this year, because we are putting that money into quality,’” Barnett says. “It’s true that the lowest-income areas stand to benefit the most from good preschools. But it’s not just the very poor that are struggling. The story of inequality is increasingly that the very rich are leaving everyone else behind.”

For now, Kelly and hers were making do. Her son was accepted at six of the 10 colleges he applied to. He had qualified for some scholarship money, which would help bring his tuition down, but Kelly was scrambling to come up with the rest. She had found a second job working nights and weekends at Kohl’s, and was cutting corners where she could. One such economy was her car: a 2001 Buick Park Avenue, bought from a friend for \$700. The engine was solid, but the gas meter was busted, so that you had to pay very close attention to the amount of driving you did relative to the amount of money you had put in the tank, or you’d end up stranded.

Kelly learned this the hard way one evening. After a day filled with staff shortages and screaming children, she was heading through Six Corners toward home when the car sputtered to a stop. Both snow and darkness were falling fast, but

there was a gas station just two miles up the road. Kelly called her daughter to say she'd be home late. Then she fished a plastic container from the trunk, hunched her back against the cold and set out for the long walk by herself.

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