

WORK & FAMILY

By SUE SHELLNBARGER

10/21/98 Wall Street Journal

Tight Labor Market Is Putting Squeeze On Quality Day Care

TO SEE THE human toll of the labor shortage, one need look no farther than The Best Lil' Day Care N' Texas.

After seven years of trying to provide high-quality care at her Austin, Texas, child-care center, tight labor markets finally did Clara Spriggs-Adams in. Ms. Spriggs-Adams gave her teachers above-average pay and training and an annual appreciation dinner. Still, she went through 100 hires just keeping three full-time staff slots full.

In her final month, Ms. Spriggs-Adams hired and fired five people after concluding they weren't fit to care for children. One let a child wander unattended out of a playground gate. She fired another upon learning she was just biding her time before starting a government job; "I didn't want the children to become attached, then lose her."

At a meeting with children and parents, Ms. Spriggs-Adams explained she didn't want to entrust their care to the people she had been able to hire. Crying, many children begged her to stay, asking, "Where are we going to go? You're like our mother!" Ms. Spriggs-Adams, who now runs an employee-training firm says: "It was so awful."

Turnover in child-care centers, long a problem, has worsened in the past 18 months. Beyond the general labor-market crunch, demand for child-care workers is rising. Education-reform programs in many states are luring child-care workers into better-paid public-school jobs. For the first time in memory, even the best centers, including many in prosperous suburbs, can't keep good teachers, sounding alarms in the industry.

WHILE TURNOVER hurts any employer, nowhere are the costs higher than in child care. Small children form attachments to child-care workers that underpin their ability to learn, trust and sustain relationships. When those attachments are repeatedly severed, a child's development is threatened. About one-third of U.S. prekindergartners are in child-care centers and preschools; this increasingly includes children of working and at-home parents alike, as more families choose preschool for educational reasons.

Some small-town child-care centers in the Midwest have shut down and dozens in the Minneapolis area have closed rooms for lack of staff, says David Allen of KidsPlan, a St. Paul, Minn., consulting firm. Donna Krause of Creative Learning and Child Care, Dundalk, Md., lost five of her nine teachers in one day in August to public-school jobs. Center directors say the caliber of applicants is declining. All Ms. Krause's departing teachers had four-year degrees; none of their replacements do.

Losing a teacher can be calamitous for a child. Marilyn Procaccini of Maryland says that after her three-year-old daughter had six different teachers in one year at the accredited, high-quality child-care center she attends, she became irritable, "whiny, clingy and very unhappy. She didn't trust" adults. Ms. Procaccini's younger daughter, age two, also got caught in a revolving door with four teachers who came and left, and "we started to see more tantrums, biting, hitting and aggressive behavior."

In contrast, children thrive in stable child-care settings. After Ms. Procaccini arranged to move both her children into rooms with steady



Carol Lay

teachers, they fared better. Her older daughter grew happy and calm again and "blossomed into a charming young girl," she says.

THE BEST national statistics, from the Center for the Child Care Workforce, Washington, D.C., show child-care workers pay stagnating at \$10,000 to \$19,000 a year; turnover rose to 31% in 1997 from 26% in 1992. Many of the poorer-quality centers that had the most turnover in the sample have closed since 1992. With turnover hitting 50% at many centers, several parents have told me they discourage their kids from becoming too attached to their teachers.

Some politicians have proposed welfare-to-work hiring as a solution. Though about one-third of centers in the work-force center's study had hired welfare recipients, many paid them rock-bottom wages, worsening turnover rather than easing it, child-care advocates say.

Roger Neugebauer, publisher of Child Care Information Exchange, an industry bimonthly, says the number of skilled, qualified welfare-to-work hires is too small to "make a dent in" the labor shortage.

Solutions to the problem are increasingly well-documented. Among 10 superb child-care programs with low turnover identified by High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Mich., in a nationwide study due out next month, most gave higher salaries and benefits to staffers.

The centers were helped by funding from government, employers, charities or even wealthy individuals. Beyond that, parents who can afford it likely will be asked to pay more. At the Old Firehouse School, Lafayette, Calif., parents give \$1,000 a year to a Staff Stability Trust Fund to pay teachers periodic bonuses of up to \$31,000 for sticking around. Director Dorothy Stewart won support partly by showing parents a video highlighting the powerful bonds between teachers and their children.

I don't report this news lightly, having burst into tears myself several years ago after opening a letter announcing a hefty tuition increase at my toddler's child-care center. However, trends suggest that parents may have to begin thinking of early-childhood care in the same way as college—as a critical link in a child's development that may require even more scrimping and sacrifice.