

Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017

Research to
Practice
Brief 4

Coming and Going: Turnover and Job Instability in Colorado's Early Care and Education Centers

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September 2017

KEY FINDINGS

- ▷ On average, directors reported a 17% annual turnover rate in program leadership positions, a 16% turnover rate in lead teacher positions, a 22% turnover rate in assistant teacher positions, and a 40% turnover rate among floater teachers. Community-based and Head Start centers tended to experience higher rates of turnover across job roles in comparison to public school-based ECE programs.
- ▷ Approximately 70% of directors sampled reported difficulty in filling vacant positions. Vacant positions took programs approximately two and a half months to fill, on average, and often directors had to fill vacant positions with unqualified staff.
- ▷ When teachers left their jobs, they most often left the field altogether, left to obtain a higher paying teaching job, or left to stay at home with their families.
- ▷ Approximately a quarter of teachers indicated that they plan on making a job change within the next two years.

These findings are discussed in light of policy recommendations to stabilize and retain the ECE teaching workforce in Colorado.

INTRODUCTION

Several decades of research have now firmly established the importance of high-quality early care and education (ECE) for children's short and long-term social-emotional and academic outcomes and point to the critical role that high-quality ECE can play in narrowing the achievement gap¹. Early childhood teachers are considered the linchpins to providing high-quality ECE experiences for young

children, as children thrive when they have consistent relationships with a teacher who can provide a foundation of basic trust and can respond to their individual learning and development needsⁱⁱ. Yet despite the importance of teacher consistency and continuity to young children's positive development and learning, high teacher turnover remains a persistent issue that plagues the field. Recent national estimates suggest that 15%-30% of ECE teachers leave their jobs each year, a rate four times higher than in elementary schools.ⁱⁱⁱ However, unlike elementary schools in which teacher turnover typically occurs between school years, teacher turnover in ECE occurs throughout the year, and many children experience a constant flow of new adults in their classrooms.

Teacher turnover can also undermine the quality of children's relationships with their teachers, preventing children from forming secure and trusting relationships with them^{iv}. This, in turn, can increase the likelihood of children exhibiting challenging behaviors, such as aggression and anxiety, which can deflect children's attention from learning,^v create conflictual relationships with teachers, and can negatively affect children's early friendships with peers^{vi}. When teachers leave, important information about the learning and development needs of individual children also leave with the teacher. As a result, children in classrooms with high teacher turnover have been found to have lower language and pre-mathematical problem solving skills than children in classrooms with low or no teacher turnover^{vii}. Teacher turnover can also have consequences beyond children, as relationships between families and teachers can also suffer,^{viii} and it can create additional job stresses for the teachers who remain.

Turnover among program leaders in ECE centers can also have a negative impact on children, families, and teachers. Center directors oversee the financial sustainability of their centers, set the overall tone of their program, provide instructional leadership to teachers, and ensure that families receive the supports that they need for their children to flourish. Therefore when directors leave, the overall quality of a program can suffer^{ix}. Their absence can also place additional burdens on teachers, prompting more teachers to leave their centers^x.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research brief is to understand staff turnover in a sample of center and public-school-based ECE programs in Colorado. This brief specifically addresses the following research questions:

1. What are annual staff turnover rates by job role, service sector, and profit status in a sample of ECE centers across Colorado?
2. When teachers leave, where do they go?
3. What percentage of teachers and center directors intend to leave their jobs?
4. What is the impact of teacher turnover, from the perspective of center directors?

SAMPLE

The sample used for this research brief included 711 ECE center and public school-based directors, 2,306 lead teachers, 1,026 assistant teachers, and 153 floater teachers across Colorado who provided early care and education (ECE) services to children birth through age five. Of the directors reporting on turnover in their programs, 72% worked in community-based ECE centers, 15% worked in Head Start centers, and 13% worked in public school-based ECE settings. For the purposes of this study, community-based ECE centers are defined as programs that are not housed in public schools and do not receive Head Start funding, Head Start centers are defined as centers receiving Head Start funding but not located in public schools, and public school-based ECE programs are defined as any classroom that is located in a public school and/or governed by a school or district. Of the community-based programs, 54% were considered non-profit organizations, and 46% were considered for-profit organizations.

Of the teaching staff who reported on their job intentions, approximately 45% worked in community-based programs, 30% worked in Head Start, and 25% worked in public school-based ECE classrooms. The majority of teachers, approximately 69%, worked in classrooms serving preschool-aged children, with the remainder, 31%, working in classrooms serving infants and toddlers. For more information about the sample and how it was collected, please see *Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017 Final Report*^{xi}.

RESULTS

RQ#1. What are the annual staff turnover rates by job role, service sector, and program auspice?

To address this research question, directors were asked to report on the total number of program leaders, including directors, assistant directors, curriculum coordinators, and any other types of similar positions that their center employed and the total number of program leaders who left their jobs over the last 12 months. Directors also reported on the total number of lead teachers, assistant teachers, and floater teachers their center employed and the number of staff in each of these roles who left their jobs over the last year. For this study, floater teachers are defined as teaching assistants who are not assigned to one particular classroom but instead provide support across different classrooms in a center throughout a day.



Because the nature and structure of their job roles are different from teachers assigned to one classroom, they are treated as a distinct type of teacher in the following analyses. In addition, directors were asked to report on the total number of teachers in their center who were assigned to classrooms serving infants and toddlers and to classrooms serving preschool-aged children and the number of infant/toddler and preschool teachers who left their jobs over the last 12 months. Turnover rates by job role and age groups served were then calculated.

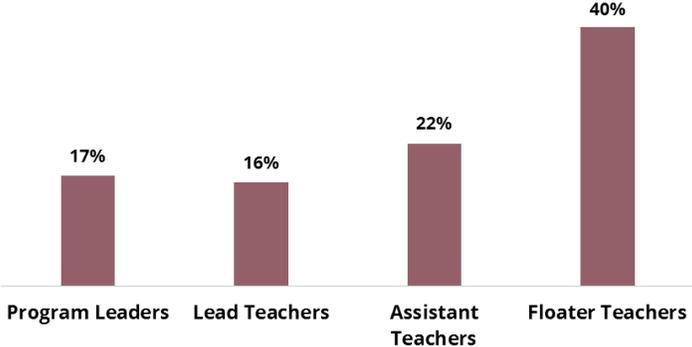
Job Roles

As can be seen in Figure 1, on average, directors reported a 17% turnover rate in program leadership positions. Average annual lead teacher turnover rates were calculated at approximately 16%, while average turnover rates for assistant teacher and floater teacher positions were calculated at approximately 22% and 40%, respectively. These estimates are comparable to a recent ECE workforce study conducted in Alameda County, California in which a turnover rate of 17% for lead teachers and 24% for assistant teachers was found^{xii}. Importantly, a number of centers in this study experienced significant turnover (greater than 33%) within teaching positions. For example, of the 711 centers and public school-based programs reporting on teacher turnover:

- 13% experienced a turnover rate of at least 33% in their lead teacher positions;
- 19% experienced a turnover rate of at least 33% in their assistant teacher positions; and
- 35% experienced a turnover rate of at least 33% in their floater teacher positions.

When comparing differences in turnover rates across roles, turnover rates among floater teachers and assistant teachers were higher than for program leaders and lead teachers¹. Annual turnover rates between preschool and infant/toddler lead and assistant teachers were also compared, but no significant differences were detected.

Figure 1. Annual Staff Turnover Rates by Job Role



¹ In instances throughout this brief where key differences among types of early educators are highlighted, the differences are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

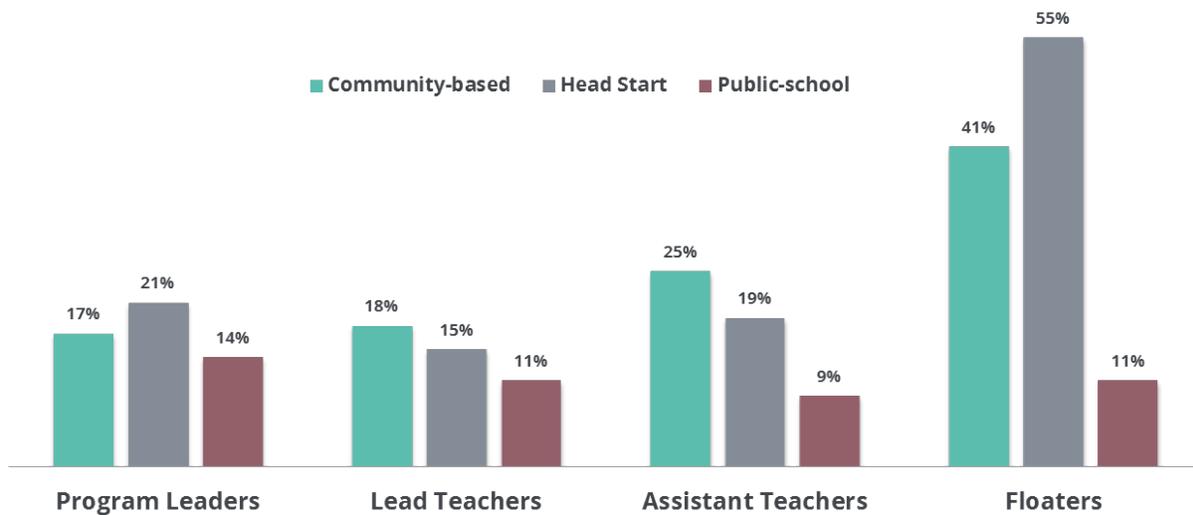
Service Sector

Because different ECE service sectors have different resources that can affect a center's abilities to support and retain teachers, average turnover rates by job role for each ECE service sector were also calculated and are shown in Figure 2.

Comparisons in turnover rates among service sectors found that:

- Head Start centers experienced higher turnover in program leaders compared to public-school based programs;
- Community-based programs experienced higher turnover in lead teachers compared to public school-based programs;
- Community-based and Head Start centers experienced higher turnover in assistant teachers compared to public school-based programs;
- Head Start centers experienced higher turnover in floater teachers compared to community-based programs and public school-based programs;
- Community-based programs experienced higher turnover in floater teachers compared to public school-based programs.

Figure 2. Annual Staff Turnover Rates by ECE Service Sector

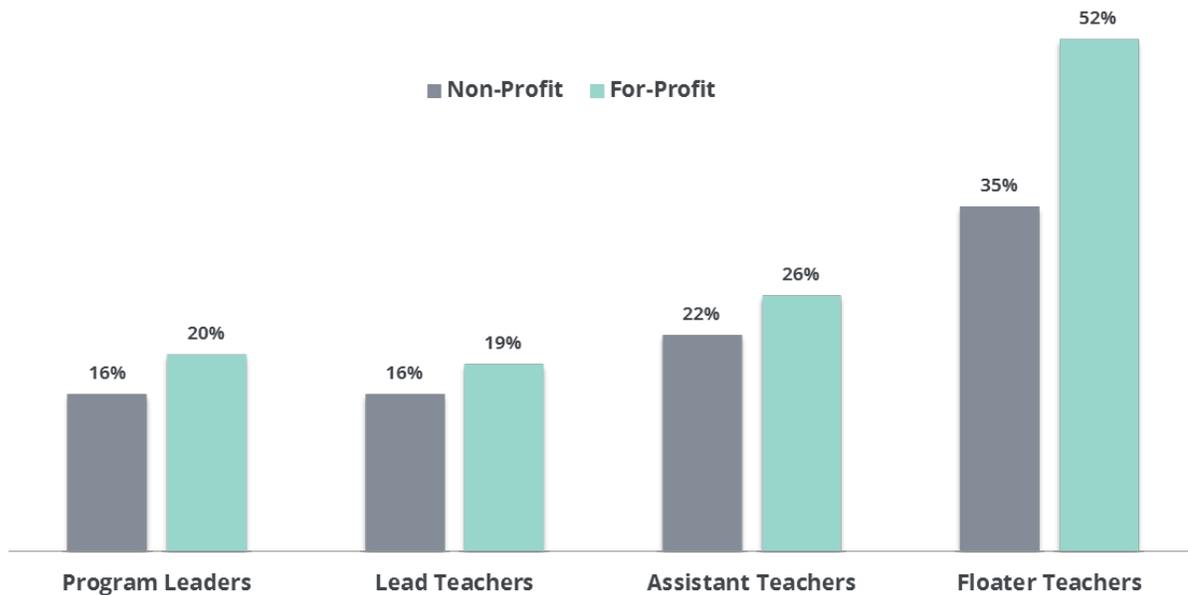


Profit Status

Turnover rates were also examined based on the profit status of a center. Figure 3 shows that for-profit centers had approximately 3%-4% higher rates of turnover in program leader, lead teacher, and assistant teacher positions compared to non-profit centers, but these differences were not significant. However, two significant differences in turnover rates were found between non-profit and for-profit

centers. Infant/toddler teacher turnover rates were higher among for-profit centers (21%) compared to non-profit centers (16%). For profit centers also experienced higher turnover rates in floater teacher positions compared to non-profit centers.

Figure 3. Annual Staff Turnover Rates by Profit Status



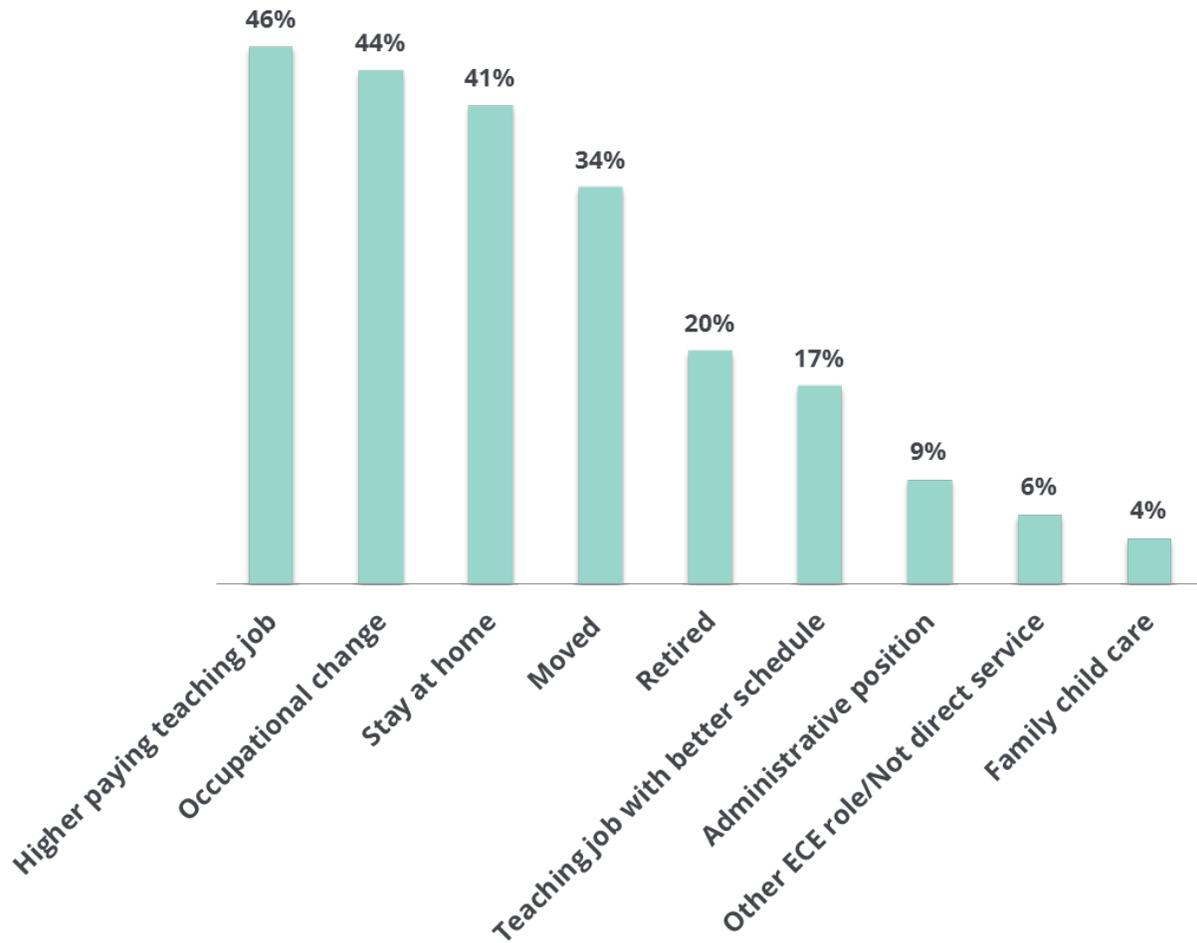
RQ#2. Where do teachers go when they leave?

Directors were also asked to report on the three most common places teachers go once they left their employment. Figure 4 displays these results. The graph shows that when teachers left, they most typically:

- Obtained a higher paying teaching job in ECE in another center or school-based program;
- Obtained a job outside of ECE; or
- Stayed at home to care for their family.

Only a small percentage of directors reported that teachers typically left their employment to start a family child care business, move into leadership roles, or move into other non-direct service positions in ECE, such as coaches, trainers, or other infrastructure roles. However, 17% of directors suggested that a common work situation that teachers pursued after leaving their centers were teaching jobs in ECE that offered work on an academic calendar year or offered more flexible schedules. In addition, 34% of directors indicated that teachers left their centers to move to another community, indicating a degree of transience in the workforce.

Figure 4. Where Teachers Go Upon Leaving Their Job



RQ#3. What percentage of teachers and directors intend to leave their jobs over the next two years?

To understand the job intentions of the sample and to help forecast future turnover, teachers and directors were asked to report on whether they anticipated leaving or staying in their jobs over the next two years. Table 1 displays the percentage of staff who planned on leaving their jobs by job role, age group served, and by ECE service sector. The table shows that across service sectors, approximately 10% of directors, 26% of lead teachers, 24% of assistant teachers, and 30% of floater teachers intend to leave their jobs. Directors in this sample were significantly less inclined to leave their jobs than were lead, assistant, and floater teachers. Infant/toddler teachers also reported being more inclined to leave their jobs than preschool teachers. When examining differences among service sectors, the table shows that approximately 27% of Head Start and community-based teachers and 20% of public school-based teachers plan on making a job change. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 1. Staff Intentions to Leave their Job within Two Years

	Percent Who Intend to Leave
Job Role	
Directors	10%
Lead teacher	26%
Assistant teacher	24%
Floater teacher	30%
Type of Teacher	
Infant/Toddler	30%
Preschool	23%
Service Sector	
Community-based	27%
Head Start	27%
Public school-based	20%

RQ#4. What are the effects of turnover, from the perspective of center directors?

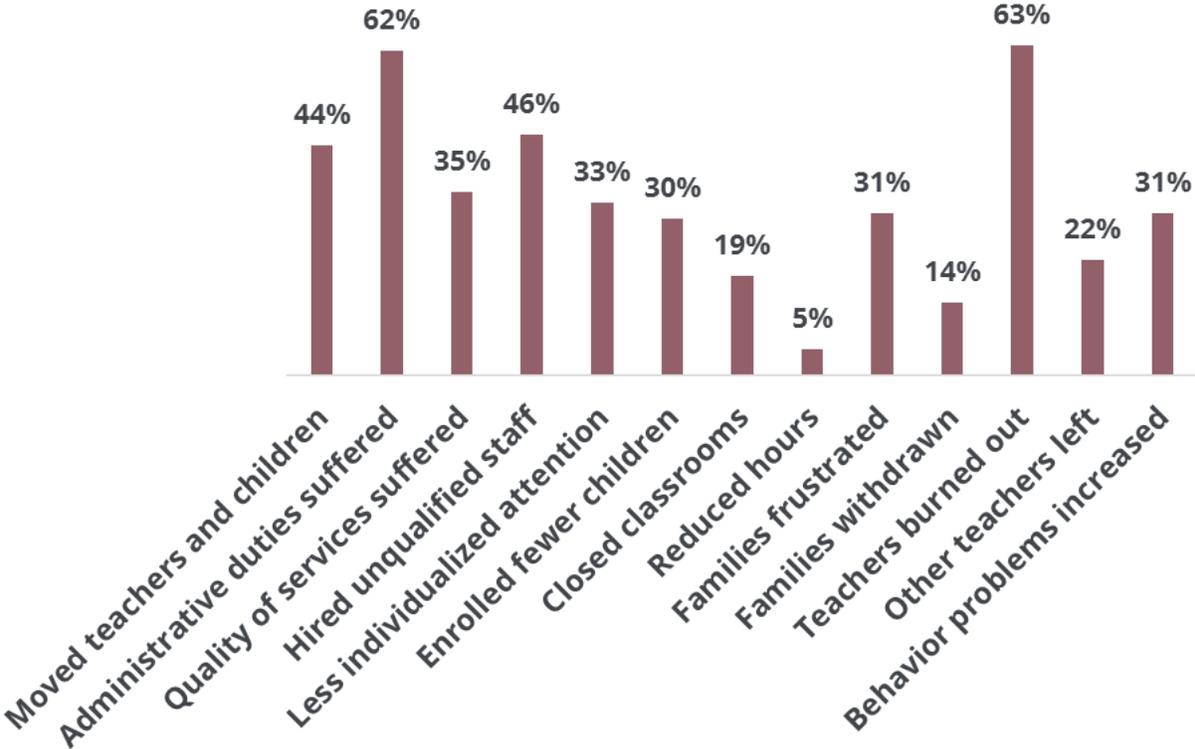
Effects of Turnover

Center directors were also asked about the impact of turnover on their program. Their responses are displayed in Figure 5. Directors reported that as a result of teacher turnover, they often had to enact staffing patterns that resulted in even greater discontinuity in children's ECE experiences that often jeopardized the quality of services they provided to children and families. For example, 44% percent reported that the gaps in their teaching staff necessitated using accordion grouping, in which they moved teachers and children in and out of different classrooms throughout the day to meet state teacher-child ratio requirements. Sixty-two percent of directors indicated that because of frequent teacher turnover they have had to substitute in classrooms, which resulted in their administrative duties suffering; while 35% indicated that the overall quality of their educational programming has suffered. Specifically, 46% reported that they have been forced to "emergency hire" and fill vacant positions with unqualified teachers, while a third noted that their teachers were constrained in their abilities to offer individualized care and instruction to children due to gaps in staffing.

Some directors also reported that they have had to make structural adjustments to their centers as a result of challenges with filling positions that may serve to limit the availability of ECE in their communities. For example, 30% enrolled fewer children, 19% have closed classrooms, and 5% have reduced their hours of operation.

Approximately 31% of directors also reported that families have expressed frustration about teacher turnover, while approximately 14% mentioned that teacher turnover has prompted families to withdraw children from their center.

Figure 5. Directors’ Perceptions of Impact of Turnover on Program Operations



Difficulty Filling Vacant Positions

Approximately 70% of directors sampled reported difficulty in filling vacant positions and that position vacancies took, on average, approximately 2.5 months (S.D. 2.52) to fill. Directors also reported that lead teacher positions, likely due to the increased educational qualifications necessary, were harder to fill than assistant teaching positions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

The results of this study indicate that for many ECE centers in Colorado, and in particular community-based and Head Start programs, staff turnover is of major concern. Within the average program, 17% of program leaders, 16% of lead teachers, 22% of assistant teachers, and 40% of floaters teachers left their jobs last year. Moreover, approximately a quarter of the lead and assistant teachers sampled for this study plan on leaving their jobs soon.

Career Pathways

While all types of job roles in ECE centers in this sample are experiencing substantial turnover, the results of this study point to particularly high turnover rates in paraprofessional job roles, including assistant and floater teachers. Because many centers are open for 12 hours a day, and young children need multiple adults in group-care settings, assistant teachers play a vital role as they are often in charge of classrooms for several hours during the day and frequently assume a co-teaching role. Consequently, assistant teachers can play an important role in influencing child development^{xiii}, and their departure can dramatically interrupt the functioning of a classroom. Building a transparent career lattice for these entry level positions within organizations and supporting their ongoing educational attainment to guide them into lead teaching positions may be an important strategy for retaining this critical sector of the ECE workforce and building a pipeline of lead teachers.

This study also found that directors intend to leave their jobs to a significantly lesser extent than do staff in teaching roles. This is perhaps because many directors are compensated at higher levels than are teachers, and it is more feasible for them to stay in their jobs. Given the intensity of the job and the low compensation, it may not be reasonable to expect teachers to remain in the classroom throughout their career. Thus, it may be important for Colorado to consider building a more intentional career pathway for lead teachers to transition into program leadership positions. This may include providing access to higher education focused on leading programs at key points along career trajectories. Currently, two entry-level community-college classes on program administration are required to become a director, which are often taken as students are preparing to become teachers; although at this particular juncture in their career, the courses may not be entirely relevant. Colorado might consider additional higher education opportunities for directors and leadership apprenticeships to build a pipeline of effective leaders and as a mechanism for retaining well-educated professionals in the field throughout their careers.

Compensation Initiatives

A key finding in this study is that when teachers left their jobs, they typically left for higher paying teaching positions or left the field altogether, likely due to the low pay. Over the next 10 years, concerted policy efforts are needed in Colorado to secure more substantial public investments to raise the compensation of ECE teachers to be rewarded appropriately for the jobs that they do, and at levels comparable to elementary school teachers to be able to retain and attract qualified teachers. In the meantime, Colorado might consider several incremental steps to stabilize the workforce. For example, Colorado might consider raising Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) payment rates so that programs serving lower-income children can afford to raise compensation for all staff. Currently Colorado links these rates to an ECE program's Colorado Shines quality rating. Colorado might also consider requiring that any differential reimbursement above the

base rate that programs receive for children receiving CCCAP subsidies be directed toward staff compensation.

Other strategies Colorado might pursue are refundable tax credits for ECE teachers and for parents to enable them to afford more expensive tuition that may stem from raising teacher compensation. Opportunities also exist to provide annual tiered bonuses linked to a teacher's Colorado Early Childhood Professional Credential and to provide supplemental bonuses as teachers improve their credential level to facilitate the dual goals of improving wages and the qualifications of the workforce.

Family-Friendly Workplaces

The results of this research brief also suggest that when teachers left their jobs, many left to stay at home with their own children or to move to ECE programs that have more flexible schedules or operate on an academic calendar year, that are presumably more convenient for teachers with children. These findings suggest that offering benefits such as free or significantly reduced rate child care may be an important benefit to enable some teachers to remain in their jobs. Colorado might also consider funding staffing structure pilots to learn more about how adjustments to staff schedules and programming may facilitate teacher retention.

CONCLUSION

Every industry experiences occupational turnover in their workforce, especially in industries that pay wages as low as ECE. However, the level of turnover reflected in this sample is costly to centers in terms of shouldering an ongoing need to recruit and train new staff, and as noted by the directors in this study. Additionally, it comes at a cost to teachers' and children's well-being. Such high rates of staff turnover also contribute to aggravating an ongoing ECE teacher shortage in Colorado, and in turn, perpetuating the crisis of lack of available quality ECE centers in the state. Better understanding the antecedents to turnover and how teachers experience their work lives offer important insights into how Colorado can elevate the field and retain qualified staff, which will be the focus of the next research brief in this series.

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This brief was developed as part of the Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Colorado project, an innovative public-private partnership to advance the early childhood workforce in Colorado.

Steering partners for the project include Early Milestones Colorado, the Colorado Department of Education, and the Colorado Department of Human Services. Research partners for the Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey include NORC, at the University of Chicago and University of Colorado Denver. Philanthropic partners include the Piton Foundation at Gary Community Investments and the Buell Foundation.

Thank you to the following organizations for donating photography used in this brief series: Early Connections Learning Centers, Family Development Center of Steamboat Springs and Mile High Early Learning.

The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the University of Colorado Denver and NORC, and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Human Services, Gary Community Investments, or the Buell Foundation.