



## Child Care Staffing Challenges during the Pandemic: Lessons from Child Care Leaders in Virginia

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## Summary:

- This report describes child care leaders' staffing challenges during the COVID pandemic using data from a Fall 2020 survey of 262 Virginia child care leaders.
- Almost all leaders (92%) found staffing their site difficult. More than half (58%) reported losing valuable teachers due to COVID.
- The teachers who remained experienced changes to their job duties, schedules, benefits, and pay. At sites that lost teachers, 88% of leaders reported that they had to ask remaining teachers to take on additional duties due to COVID.
- Most site leaders used or planned to use available relief dollars to support teachers: 79% of leaders reported putting some relief funds towards staff wages, and 22% used or intended to use them to increase staff wages.
- Two-thirds of leaders reported that they have struggled to find the teachers they need during the pandemic, and 60% of leaders found it challenging to support and train new teachers at their site.

Early educators do complex, challenging work that is instrumental to young children's development. Unfortunately, in child care settings teachers are often paid low wages, receive few professional supports, and they leave their jobs at high rates.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one recent study showed that nearly half of child care teachers in one state left their site from one year to the next.<sup>2</sup> A Virginia study showed that almost one-quarter (24%) of child care teachers left their job over an 8-month period between May and December 2019.<sup>3</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID) exacerbated longstanding staffing challenges at child care centers. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that, nationwide, the early childhood workforce shrank substantially at the onset of the pandemic. There were about 350,000 fewer people working in child care in April of 2020 than two months previously.

In large part, this workforce contraction was due to the damaging effects of COVID on enrollment and revenue for child care sites. Parents' job losses and remote work meant decreased tuition revenues.<sup>4</sup> Sites also had to increase their expenditures to purchase health and safety supplies and personal protective equipment. They had to adapt their operations in response to stricter group size requirements and smaller teacher-child ratios. To stay afloat, many sites were

forced to cut costs in a number of ways, many of which impacted early educators. In one national survey conducted in December 2020, 60% of child care workers reported that their site had reduced expenses by using layoffs, furloughs, and pay cuts.<sup>5</sup>

While cost-cutting measures were one major driver of teacher exits, early educators also left their positions for their own health, family, or other reasons.<sup>6</sup> Teachers may have felt the risk of working with children was too great, particularly older teachers or those with COVID-related health concerns. Additionally, like workers in every sector, teachers may have left due to new caregiving responsibilities, including caring for their own school-age children who were out of school during the pandemic.

As child care sites re-opened, families re-enrolled, and relief dollars became more available, the child care workforce numbers began to rise. However as of March 2021 there were still 160,000 fewer people working in the sector than in February 2020.<sup>7</sup> Sites are struggling to recruit and retain qualified candidates.<sup>8</sup>

This report takes a closer look at child care staffing issues during COVID using data from a large-scale survey fielded in fall 2020 as part of Virginia’s Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5).<sup>9</sup> Leaders at all child care sites participating in the PDG B-5 were invited to take a survey online or on paper. At least one leader from 262 child care sites responded, representing 85% of the child care sites surveyed.

The survey’s well-defined sample, detailed questions about staffing, and high response rate provide a unique opportunity to understand the multiple challenges leaders faced staffing their sites during COVID.

## ABOUT THE SAMPLE



80% Owner and/or director  
5% Assistant director  
15% Another leadership role



97% Female



61% White, non-Hispanic  
29% Black, non-Hispanic  
5% Hispanic, regardless of race  
4% Multiracial or another race



23% High school diploma or less  
24% Associate degree  
53% Bachelor’s degree or higher



7 years Average time leaders had worked at their site



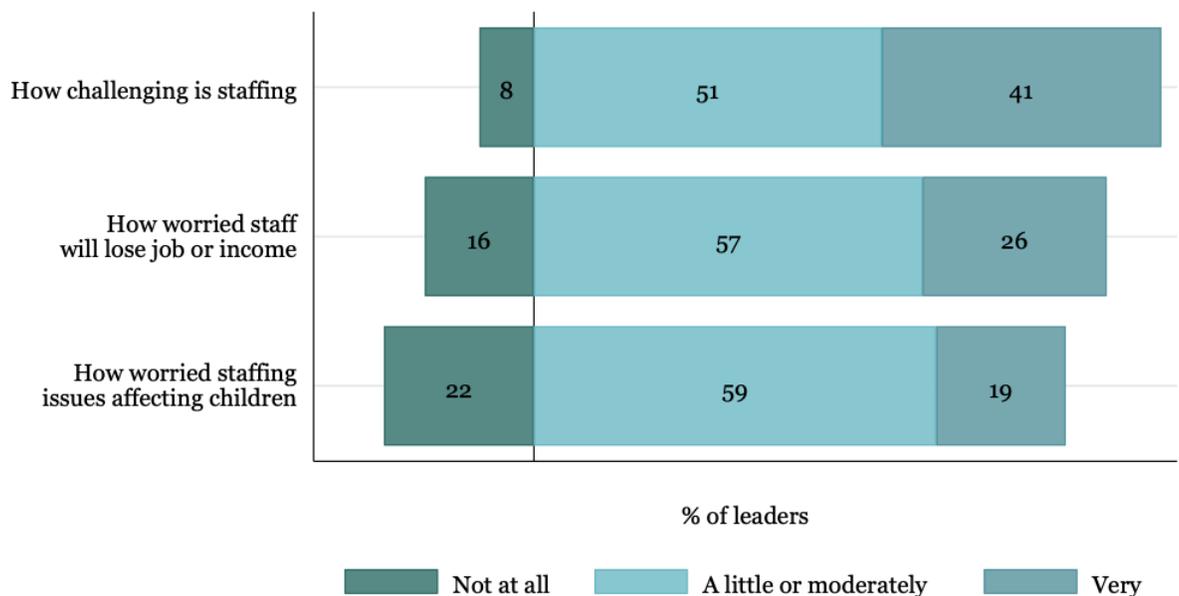
93% Were in their current position when the pandemic began

## Staffing Child Care Sites during COVID

Like child care leaders nationwide, respondents in our study communities struggled to staff their sites during COVID. On average, leaders reported that 5 teachers (including lead and assistant teachers) had left their site since the start of the pandemic. This number of exits is high given that, on average, sites in our sample employed 11 teachers at the time of the survey. Most leaders (72%) reported at least one vacancy for a lead or assistant teacher: About half (52%) had at least one lead teacher vacancy, and 65% had at least one assistant teacher vacancy.

Fifty-eight percent of leaders indicated they lost valuable teachers at their site due to the pandemic. As shown in Figure 1, 92% of leaders reported that staffing (e.g., teacher departures and vacancies) was at least a little challenging, with 41% finding it very challenging. Leaders were worried about the pandemic's impact on their teachers: 83% were at least a little worried that the pandemic would result in their staff losing their jobs or income. Nearly 4 in 5 leaders (78%) were concerned that staffing difficulties at their site were having a negative impact on children.

**Figure 1.** Leader perceptions of staffing challenges at their site



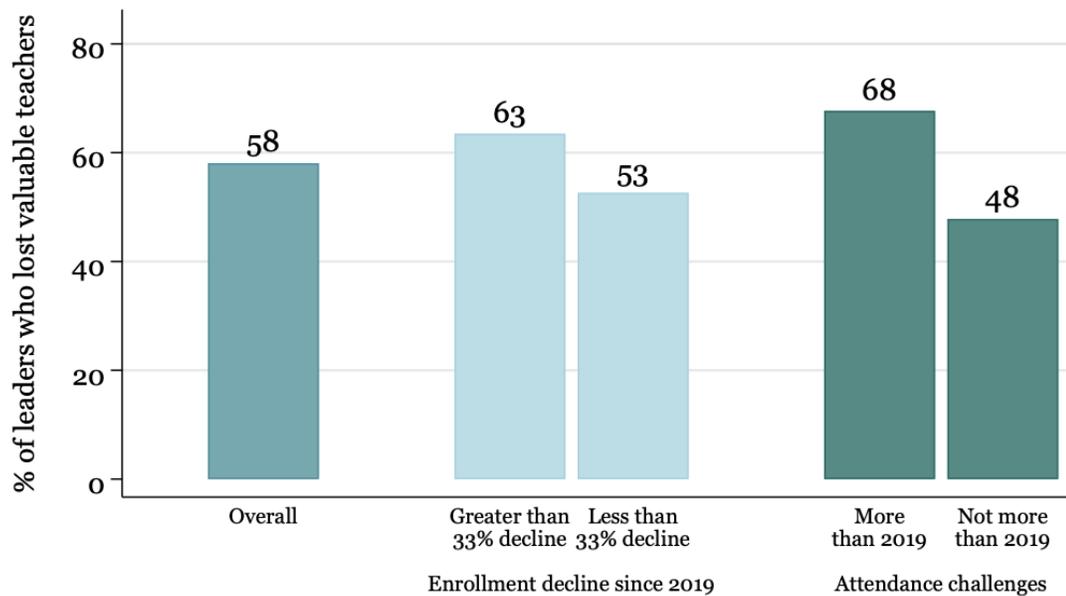
**Note:** Based on 252 - 254 responses.

## Enrollment Declines, Attendance Challenges, and Staff Attrition

Drops and fluctuations in children’s enrollment and attendance contributed to the staffing challenges. Leaders reported considerably lower enrollment levels in the fall of 2020 than at the same time in 2019. On average, site enrollment dropped from 84 children in 2019 to 59 in 2020, a 30% decline.<sup>10</sup> Seventy-eight percent of leaders reported they were facing greater enrollment challenges than the previous year, 53% reported greater attendance challenges than the previous year, and 75% indicated that fluctuations in enrollment and attendance made staffing and budgeting difficult.

Sites experiencing larger declines in enrollment were more likely to report losing valued teachers. In Figure 2, we compare the half of sites that saw their enrollment drop by a third or more between 2019 and 2020 to sites with less enrollment instability. Among sites with greater enrollment declines, 63% of leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they had lost valued teachers due to COVID, compared to 53% of leaders at sites with lesser enrollment decreases.

**Figure 2.** Enrollment challenges, attendance challenges, and loss of teachers



**Note:** Figure reports leaders who agreed or strongly agreed they lost valuable teachers for the full sample (N = 247); by enrollment declines (N = 229); and by perceived attendance challenges (N = 245).

Respondents with greater enrollment declines were defined as those that had a drop greater than the median, 33%. Respondents with increased attendance challenges were defined as those agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were experiencing more challenges relative to 2019.

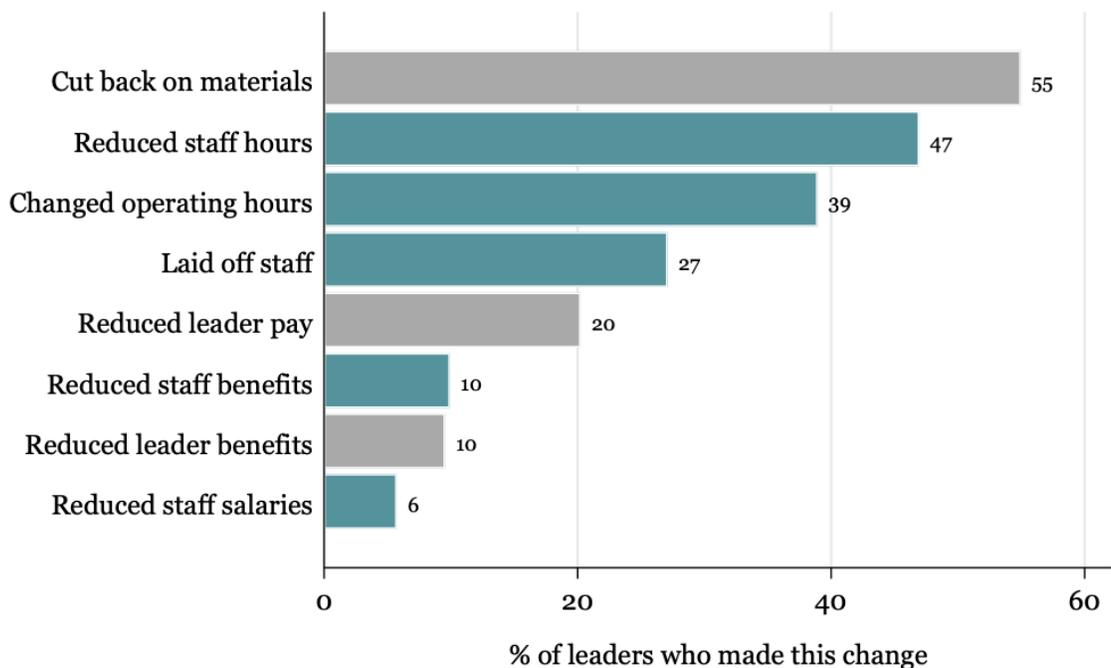
**“Fluctuating attendance of children caused fluctuating need for caregivers, which made for extra stress and lower morale.”**

Attendance was related to staffing loss as well: 68% of leaders who were experiencing more attendance challenges than in 2019 lost teachers. This was only true for 48% of leaders who did not report greater attendance challenges than the prior year. One

leader wrote, “Fluctuating attendance of children caused fluctuating need for caregivers, which made for extra stress and lower morale.”<sup>11</sup>

COVID caused significant financial challenges for child care sites. For the leaders in our sample, the median amount of site revenue lost since the beginning of the pandemic was \$65,000. Figure 3 highlights the many ways sites approached cost cutting in response to COVID’s financial strain. Approximately one-quarter (27%) of leaders reported that their site laid off staff in order to cut costs. In addition to layoffs, many sites made operational changes with direct implications for their teachers: Thirty-nine percent of sites changed their operating hours, which may have disrupted teachers’ normal work schedules; 47% reduced staff hours; 10% reduced staff benefits; and 6% reduced staff salaries. Some leaders (20%) also reported that they reduced their own pay as a cost-cutting measure.

**Figure 3.** Cost-cutting measures taken by site leaders during the pandemic



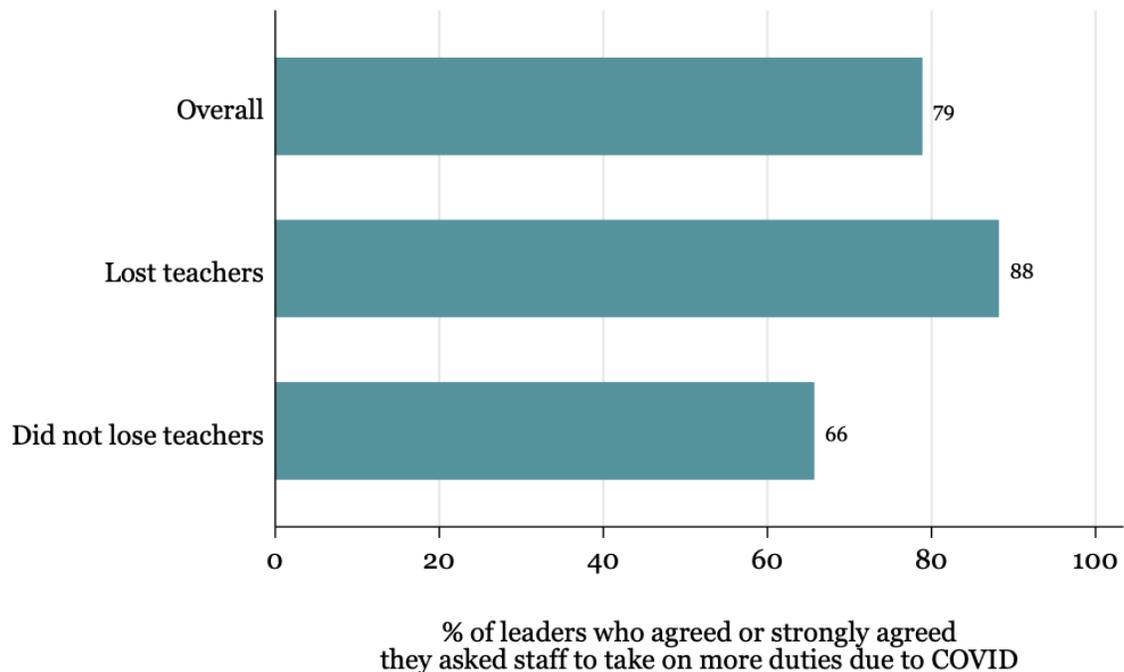
**Note:** Based on 262 responses.  
Blue bars indicate cuts that most directly impacted teachers.

## Changes to Early Childhood Work during the Pandemic

For many of the teachers who stayed at their sites, the pandemic changed the nature of their job beyond the changes in schedules, compensation, and benefits reported above. Teachers in Virginia reported taking on additional job duties; changing practices to comply with heightened health and safety requirements; adjusting to new ways of interacting with young children; and experiencing more stress.<sup>12</sup>

More than three-quarters of leaders (79%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were asking teachers to take on additional duties due to the coronavirus pandemic. As Figure 4 illustrates, this was especially true at sites that lost teachers due to COVID: Leaders who reported losing teachers were much more likely to report that they asked teachers to take on more duties (88%) than leaders who did not lose teachers (66%). One leader noted: “When staff were furloughed, some chose not to come back or took extended leave, which put stress on the staff that continued to work.”

**Figure 4.** Leaders who indicated asking teachers to take on more duties than before the pandemic



**Note:** Based on 246 responses.

In addition to taking on new responsibilities, the pandemic meant that teachers faced heightened risks to their personal health in the workplace. Almost half (46%) of leaders reported at least one positive case of COVID in a staff member or child at their site. Most leaders (90%) worried that staff, families, or children would be exposed to COVID at their site, and many (64%) were concerned they would not have enough health and safety supplies to keep people safe.

It is not clear to what extent these stressors contributed to teachers leaving their positions, but in write-in comments, many leaders highlighted the toll of COVID on teachers' stress and wellbeing. One

leader wrote, "Every staff member is required to do more work in sanitizing and temperature taking than before COVID. Staff are stressed trying to maintain all the social distancing guidelines while keeping masks on and teaching." Multiple leaders tied teacher exits directly to health concerns. One wrote, "Teachers are leaving because they are afraid of getting COVID." Another confirmed, "The turnover rate has been significantly high due to teachers feeling like their health is in jeopardy."

**"Staff are stressed trying to maintain all the social distancing guidelines while keeping masks on and teaching."**

## Hiring New Teachers during COVID

While much of the public conversation about the impact of COVID on child care staffing has focused on job losses, many leaders needed to hire new teachers during the pandemic. Indeed, *every* leader in our sample had hired at least one lead or assistant teacher since the pandemic began, and, as noted above, 72% reported they currently had at least one vacancy.

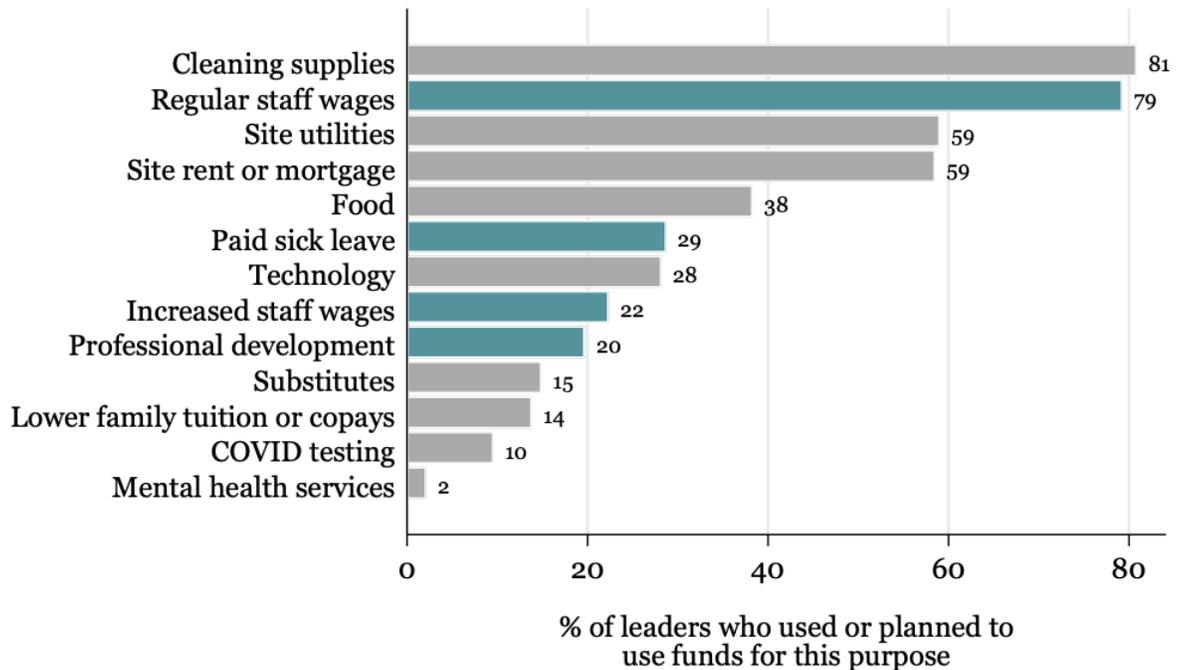
There were several reasons sites needed new hires during the pandemic. Some leaders reported needing additional personnel to implement changes related to health and safety; for example, needing extra staff to take on cleaning duties, allow for smaller group sizes, or better manage pick-up and drop-off process. One leader wrote that they "increased the number of staff members needed to operate the center in order to maintain a 'pod' structure." Another confirmed, "We have to staff extra since we cannot combine classrooms."

Other sites may have needed new teachers to fill vacancies created following teacher departures. While most site leaders reported drops in enrollment, some (10%) did have *increased* enrollment between fall 2019 and fall 2020, which likely required more teachers as well.

After the initial shock of the pandemic, access to financial supports as well as gradual increases in enrollment may have led sites to try to re-fill positions that had been eliminated during the early stages of the pandemic. Ninety-one percent of leaders in our sample reported receiving at least one form of COVID-related relief funds (e.g., loans or grants through the Paycheck Protection Program, Front Line Workers’ Rebates, or others), and many allocated (or planned to allocate) that money towards personnel-related expenses. Of those sites that received relief funds, 79% of leaders used or planned to use COVID assistance funds for regular staff wages, 22% for increased staff wages, and 29% for paid sick leave (Figure 5).

Even with these resources, leaders faced substantial challenges filling needed positions: Overall, 66% of leaders agreed or strongly agreed that, due to COVID, they were struggling to recruit the teachers that they needed, and 60% agreed or strongly agreed that since COVID began, it has been challenging to train and support new teachers.

**Figure 5.** Leaders’ use or planned use of COVID-related relief funding



**Note:** Based on 188 responses from leaders who received at least one form of COVID relief funds. Blue bars indicate expenditures that most directly impacted teachers.

Leaders emphasized this struggle in their written comments. One wrote: “It is hard to find new staff willing to work with the added stress and responsibilities during this pandemic.” Another reported, “I believe the fear of contracting COVID inhibits potential employees from applying.”

**“It is hard to find new staff willing to work with the added stress and responsibilities during this pandemic.”**

## **Implications**

Early childhood educators do strenuous work that often comes with little pay and few supports. Staffing child care sites has long been a concern for leaders in the field. These problems were further exacerbated by the pandemic. The child care leaders in our sample struggled to retain and pay teachers, and faced difficulties recruiting new teachers when needed.

More than half of leaders reported that they had lost teachers who were valuable to their site due to COVID. Low and unpredictable enrollment and attendance created scheduling hardships for both leaders and teachers. Financial strain forced leaders to make tough decisions around budget cuts: More than one-quarter of leaders had laid off staff to cut costs at their site.

In addition, COVID made the already-difficult job of being a child care teacher even harder. Leaders reported changing teachers’ work schedules, reducing their pay and benefits, and asking teachers to take on additional duties in order to keep their sites operational and safe. Educators were also exposed to greater health risks in the workplace. These worsening job conditions may have both driven teachers to leave their jobs and simultaneously made it harder to recruit new employees.

COVID recovery funding – from the CARES Act and others – may give sites the financial resources needed to recruit and retain teachers. Of leaders who had received any COVID relief funding, 79% used or planned to use these funds for regular staff wages, 29% for paid sick leave, and 22% for increased staff wages.

At the same time, leaders can only use relief funds to hire new teachers if they can find qualified teachers willing to take these positions. Two-thirds of leaders in our sample indicated they were struggling to recruit necessary teachers. Recent media accounts<sup>13</sup> have highlighted the impacts of these struggles: Some child care sites with waitlists and the capacity to care for more children are turning families away – and even closing<sup>14</sup> – due to their inability to hire teachers.

Recovery funds can be leveraged creatively to tackle these challenges and help sites both retain existing teachers *and* attract qualified workers. In 2019, Virginia started its early childhood Teacher Recognition Program, which gives child care teachers up to \$1,500 a year in bonuses when they remain at their site. Evidence from a recent randomized controlled trial shows that these payments led to large drops in teacher turnover.<sup>15</sup> Such findings highlight the potential of recovery dollars to stabilize the workforce, whether through targeted bonuses to promote retention, through increased direct compensation for teachers, or through supporting teachers' access to critical benefits. In fact, Virginia is now expanding the Recognition Program – to more teachers and with more dollars per teacher – as one way to stabilize the workforce.

Still, recovery funds are temporary. Short-term solutions aimed at restoring sites to pre-pandemic operations will not be enough to address the staffing challenges that have long affected child care. In Virginia, prior to the pandemic, nearly one-quarter of child care teachers left their job over the span of 8 months. Bold, long-term financial investments are needed to meaningfully impact child care staffing in the long-run, such as ensuring living wages, health insurance, and paid sick leave for all early educators. Funding reforms that allow for long-term staffing supports will be essential to ensure that sites can meet families' needs for care and provide the types of engaging learning environments young children need.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Hall, T., Doromal, J., & Bassok, D.. (2021, March). *Predictors of Within-Year Teacher Turnover in Child Care Settings: New Evidence from Virginia*. Presentation at the Association for Education Finance and Policy 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, virtual.
- <sup>4</sup> NAEYC. (2020, April 17). *From the Front Lines: The Ongoing Effect of the Pandemic on Child Care*. [https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/topics/naeyc\\_coronavirus\\_ongoingeffectsonchildcare.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/topics/naeyc_coronavirus_ongoingeffectsonchildcare.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> NAEYC (2020, December). *Am I Next? Sacrificing to Stay Open, Child Care Providers Face a Bleak Future Without Relief*. <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally->

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<sup>6</sup> The Hunt Institute. (2021, March 30). Ensuring equitable access to child care amidst COVID-19. *The Hunt Institute COVID-19 Policy Considerations*. <https://hunt-institute.org/resources/2021/03/ensuring-equitable-access-to-child-care-amidst-covid-19/>

<sup>7</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *BLS Data Viewer*. <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/CES6562440010>

<sup>8</sup> Albertson-Grove, J. (2021, April 24). High demand, staff shortages create a child care quandary in NH. *New Hampshire Union Leader*. [https://www.unionleader.com/news/education/high-demand-staff-shortages-create-a-child-care-quandary-in-nh/article\\_b95426ae-5217-57a3-a5bc-2695462b0255.html](https://www.unionleader.com/news/education/high-demand-staff-shortages-create-a-child-care-quandary-in-nh/article_b95426ae-5217-57a3-a5bc-2695462b0255.html)

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NAEYC (2020, December).

<sup>9</sup> The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) began the PDG B-5 initiative in 2019, in partnership with the University of Virginia and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. Towards the goal of strengthening its ECE system, VDOE has been incrementally expanding the work of PDG B-5 to communities across the state. This report looks at data collected in the initiative's second year, which included publicly funded ECE programs across a total of 70 cities and counties across the state. These communities account for about two-thirds of Virginia's population.

<sup>10</sup> The median enrollment decline experienced by sites was a 33% decrease in enrollment.

<sup>11</sup> Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity.

<sup>12</sup> Bassok, D., Weisner, K., Markowitz, A.J., & Hall, T. (2021). *Teaching Young Children during COVID-19: Lessons from Early Educators in Virginia*. [http://bit.ly/see\\_partnerships\\_teaching\\_covid](http://bit.ly/see_partnerships_teaching_covid)

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<sup>13</sup> Albertson-Grove, J. (2021, April 24).

<sup>14</sup> Stone, J. (2021, May 22). Labor shortage forces closure of Klondike. *Texarkana Gazette*. <http://texarkanagazette.com/news/texarkana-region/story/2021/may/23/labor-shortage-forces-closure-klondike/872215/>

<sup>15</sup> Bassok, D., Doromal, J.B., Michie, M., & Wong, V.C. (2020). *Reducing Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood Settings: Findings from Virginia's PDG B-5 Recognition Program*.  
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