



# Teacher Turnover in Child Care: Pre-Pandemic Evidence from Virginia

*Daphna Bassok, Todd Hall, Anna J. Markowitz & Justin B. Doromal*

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*EdPolicyWorks at the University of Virginia*

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## Summary:

- This report describes teacher turnover over an eight-month period in a sample of over 1,000 Virginia child care teachers.
- Nearly one in four teachers left their child care center during an eight-month period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- New teachers left their jobs at nearly twice the rate of teachers with at least three years of experience. New assistant teachers left their centers at particularly high rates.
- Turnover rates were highest among teachers who earned the lowest wages.

Many young children (ages 0-5) in the United States experience regular, non-relative care, and the adults who teach and care for them in early childhood education (ECE) programs can have lasting impacts on their development.<sup>1</sup>

Nationwide, however, teachers who work in child care centers turn over at high rates.<sup>2</sup> Recent findings from one statewide study show that nearly half of all child care teachers left their center from one year to the next.<sup>3</sup> In part, this is due to the low compensation that many early educators currently receive. Nationally, ECE teachers are nearly eight times as likely to live below the federal poverty line than their counterparts teaching children in kindergarten through eighth grade.<sup>4</sup> Compensation is particularly low among child care teachers, who often also lack access to benefits such as health care and paid sick leave. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half relied on at least one public income support such as Medicaid or SNAP.<sup>5</sup>

There is growing recognition that teacher turnover negatively impacts young children who benefit from stable relationships with teachers. Turnover also undermines efforts to improve early learning programs: Quality improvement investments are lost when teachers leave their jobs at high rates.<sup>6</sup> Addressing the low compensation and poor working conditions that are pervasive in child care settings is likely a critical first step.<sup>7</sup>

While increased investments are necessary for stabilizing the child care workforce, they are likely to be most effective with a clearer understanding of *which* child care teachers leave, how turnover relates to teachers' characteristics (e.g., their training and experiences), and whether child care teachers with higher compensation leave at lower rates.

Lack of data about the ECE workforce—and particularly child care teachers—has limited our understanding of turnover in child care settings. This report fills this gap. Using pre-pandemic data from over 1,000 Virginia child care teachers, it explores how teacher turnover is related to a key set of teacher and professional characteristics, including teacher compensation.

## 1. Data and Sample

This report uses unique data collected by the Virginia Department of Education, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, and the University of Virginia (UVA) through a federal Preschool Development Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grant. It combines administrative data tracking whether child care teachers left their center over an eight-month period with survey data from these same early educators.<sup>8</sup>

*Administrative Turnover Data:* In early 2020, child care directors participating in the PDG B-5 initiative reviewed a list of teachers who worked at their center in May 2019 and indicated whether each teacher remained in a teaching role through December 31, 2019. The list included lead and assistant teachers who worked with children ages 0 to 5 for at least 30 hours per week. This report presents turnover rates, or the percentage of teachers reported to have left their position on or before the December date.

*VA PDG B-5 Workforce Surveys:* Prior to the eight-month turnover tracking period, all teachers from the initial list were invited to take a teacher survey, and all child care directors were invited to take a leader survey. These surveys included detailed information about teachers' demographic characteristics, as well as their experience, education, and compensation.

Surveys were available in English and Spanish, online and on paper. Respondents received a \$20 gift card for their time. About 69% of child care teachers invited to take the survey did so.<sup>9</sup>

*Sample:* Our sample includes 1,002 early educators working in 157 child care centers for whom we have both administrative turnover data and survey data.

As shown in Table 1, about 60% of teachers in the sample worked as lead teachers, with the rest working as assistant teachers (e.g., aides, paraprofessionals, or floaters). Just under half (48%) worked with infants and toddlers (ages 0-2), and the rest worked with preschool-age children (ages 3-5).

As is true of the child care workforce nationally, our sample was racially and ethnically diverse. Just under half (47%) of respondents were women of color, about half of whom were Black.<sup>10</sup> On average, teachers had nearly 9 years of experience in the ECE field, but almost one in three teachers (31%) had fewer than three years of experience. Just over a quarter of teachers held a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, which is the most widely recognized ECE credential. Most teachers (62%) held a high school degree or lower as their highest degree.

The average annual wage for early educators in our sample was just under \$25,000, slightly lower than the national average for center-based preschool teachers. Wages varied among teachers in our sample. The lowest-paid quarter had a median annual wage of \$18,000 per year while the highest-paid quarter had a median annual wage of \$34,000 per year. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (63%) worked at centers that offered health insurance and more than half (55%) worked at centers that offered retirement benefits.

Table 1 also presents information about lead teachers and assistant teachers separately. Lead teachers take the primary responsibility for classroom instruction while assistant teachers typically support the lead teacher in the classroom. Accordingly, lead teachers may differ from assistant teachers with respect to their training, compensation, and, in turn, turnover. In our sample, lead teachers had more experience working in ECE, with 9% being in their first year compared to 22% of assistant teachers. Lead teachers also had higher levels of education: 41% of lead teachers had at least an associate's degree, compared to 33% of assistant teachers. On average, lead teachers received about \$2,000 more in annual wages.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample**

Variable	All Teachers (n=1002)	Lead Teachers (n=598)	Assistant Teachers (n=404)
<b>Role</b>			
Lead teacher	60%	---	---
Infant / toddler teacher	48%	48%	50%
<b>Demographics</b>			
Age (years)	37.5	38.8	35.7
Female	98%	99%	97%
White	53%	55%	50%
Black	26%	27%	24%
Hispanic	13%	11%	15%
Other race	8%	6%	11%
<b>Experience</b>			
Years of experience in ECE	8.7	8.6	7.9
One year or less	14%	9%	22%
Between one and three years	17%	15%	22%
Three or more years	68%	76%	56%
<b>Education</b>			
Child Development Associate	28%	28%	26%
High school degree or less	62%	58%	67%
Associate's degree	14%	17%	10%
Bachelor's degree or higher	24%	24%	23%
<b>Wages</b>			
Annual wages (\$)	24,742	25,501	23,615
<b>Benefits<sup>1</sup></b>			
Center offers vacation benefits	90%	88%	92%
Center offers sick leave	72%	67%	79%
Center offers family leave	42%	39%	46%
Center offers overtime	83%	82%	85%
Center offers bonuses	54%	52%	58%
Center offers health insurance	63%	57%	73%
Center offers retirement	55%	47%	68%

Note: This table presents means unless otherwise noted.

<sup>1</sup> The benefits *offered* at each center were reported by center directors generally, not separately for lead and assistant teachers. Assistant teachers were more likely to work at centers where directors indicated they offered each benefit in general. Note, this does not imply that assistant teachers were more likely to receive each benefit. Comparing teachers who work within the same centers, lead teachers were more likely than assistant teachers to report that they *received* each benefit.

## 2. Which teachers leave child care centers?

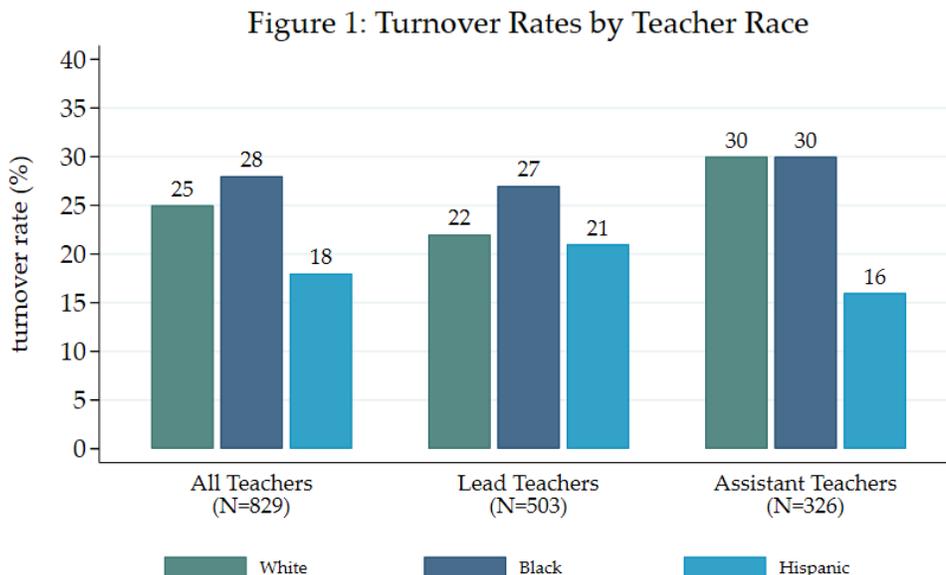
Overall, about 1 in 4 (24%) child care teachers in our sample left their center over an eight-month period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Turnover rates were slightly lower among lead teachers (22%) compared to assistant teachers (26%). Teachers working with infants and toddlers left their centers at about the same rate as those working with preschool-age children.

The next sections describe how turnover rates varied depending on teachers' race, experience, and education. Understanding which teachers leave can help better target solutions.<sup>11</sup>

### *Turnover Rates by Teacher Race*

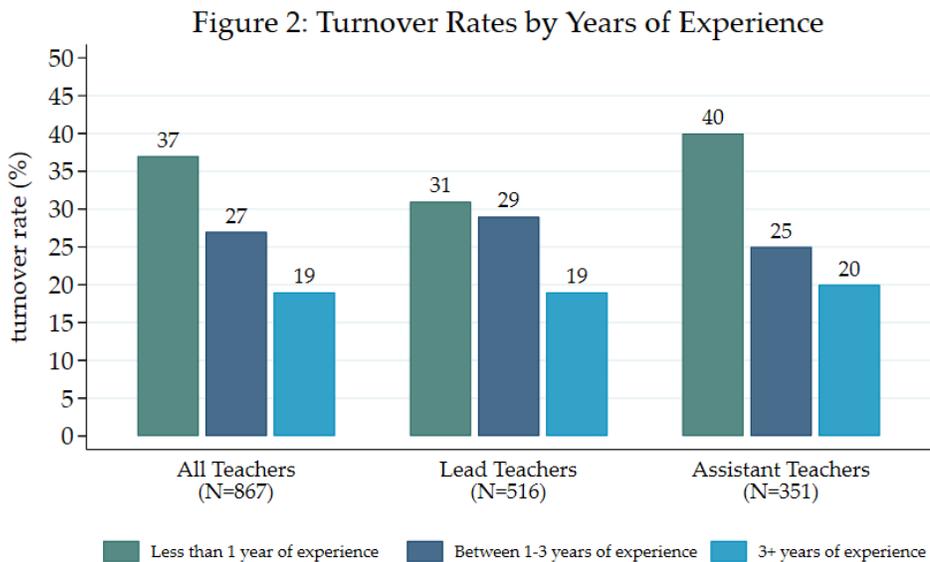
Prior research indicates that Black and Hispanic early educators face more difficult working conditions than White teachers.<sup>12</sup> Given this finding, as well as research showing the benefits that young Black and Hispanic children benefit from having teachers who mirror their race and ethnicity, we examined whether Black and Hispanic teachers leave their centers at higher rates than White teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1 compares turnover rates for White, Black, and Hispanic teachers—the three largest racial/ethnic groups in our sample. Overall, Black teachers turned over at the highest rates (28%), but rates among White teachers were similar (25%). Overall, Hispanic teachers turned over at lower rates (18%). This pattern was particularly pronounced among assistant teachers: whereas 30% of White and Black assistant teachers left over the eight-month period, just 16% of Hispanic assistant teachers did so.



### Turnover Rates by Teacher Experience

Working with young children may be especially hard for new teachers. To date, however, there has been little evidence on whether teachers earlier into their ECE careers are more likely to leave. Figure 2 below shows that teachers with less experience were far more likely to leave their positions than teachers with more experience. For example, first-year teachers were about twice as likely to leave their position over an eight-month period than were teachers with three or more years of experience (37% compared to 19%). Assistant teachers in their first year were 15 percentage points more likely to leave their center than even those with 1-3 years of experience (40% vs. 25%).



### Turnover Rates by Teacher Qualifications

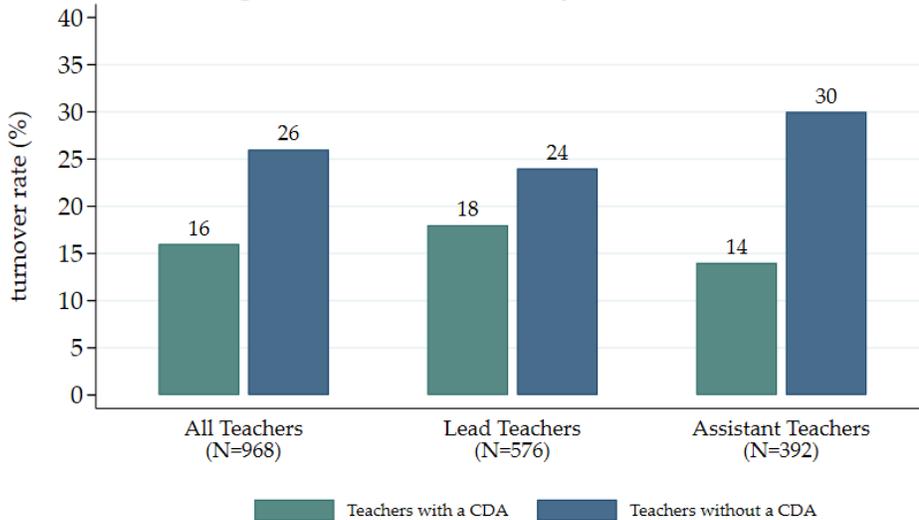
Low levels of education and training have been cited as potential drivers of child care teacher turnover; however, evidence about the relationship between teacher training and turnover is limited and mixed.<sup>14</sup>

We first examined whether turnover rates differ for teachers who do and do not hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Figure 3 shows that teachers with a CDA left their center at a rate ten percentage points lower than those without the credential (16% vs. 26%). Among assistants, teachers with a CDA were half as likely to leave as those without (14% vs. 30%).

While teachers with CDAs had considerably lower turnover rates, this does not imply that earning a CDA causes drops in turnover. Rather, teachers with a CDA may differ in important ways from those without. For instance, in our sample, teachers with more experience were much more likely to hold a CDA, and these

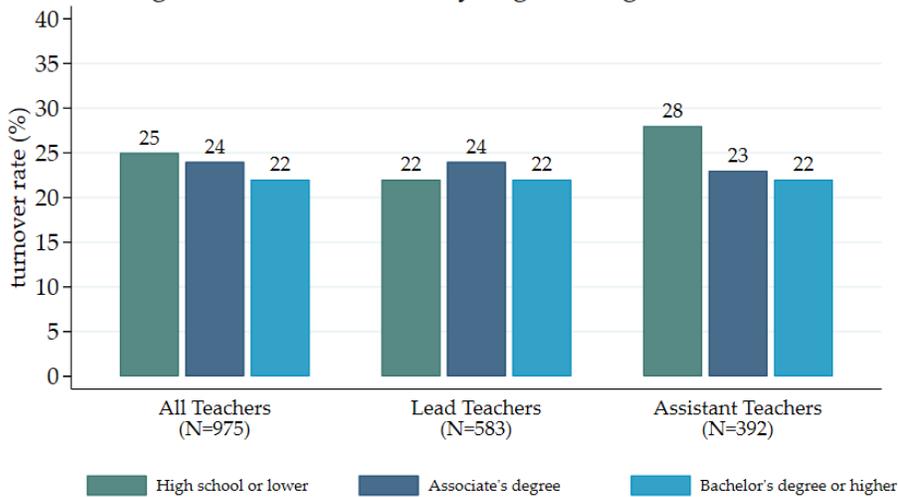
more experienced teachers were less likely to leave their center. Our findings, here and throughout the report, are descriptive and do not tell us what factors ultimately cause turnover.

Figure 3: Turnover Rates by CDA Credentials



Turnover rates did not vary much based on teachers’ highest degree attainment (see Figure 4). Among lead teachers, turnover rates were almost the same across education levels. Assistant teachers without a college degree turned over at a slightly higher rate than those with an associate’s degree or bachelor’s (28 percent vs. 23% and 22% respectively).

Figure 4: Turnover Rates by Highest Degree Attainment



### 3. Is turnover related to compensation?

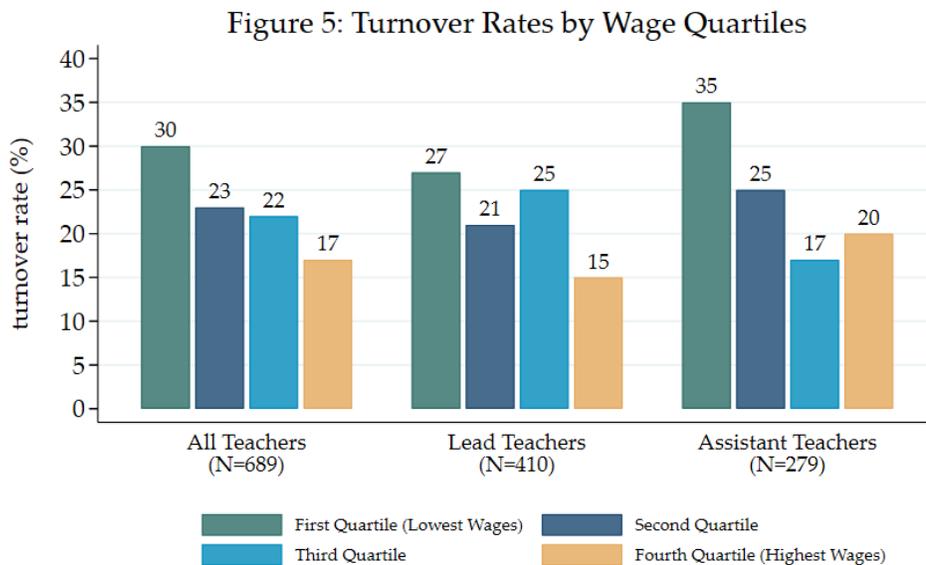
Low teacher compensation, both wages and benefits, is often hypothesized to be a key driver of turnover among early educators. Wages at child care centers are, on average, much lower than in other teaching jobs, leaving many child care teachers in poverty. There is little evidence, however, about whether compensation is related to turnover among a large sample of child care teachers.

#### *Turnover Rates by Teacher Wages*

We examined whether child care teachers turned over at different rates depending on their wages, split into four quartiles.

As shown in Figure 5, early educators with the lowest wages turned over at much higher rates than those with higher wages. In the overall sample, 30% of teachers in the lowest wage quartile left their center within eight months; this was almost double the rate of teachers in the highest wage quartile (17%). The same pattern also held for lead and assistant teachers.

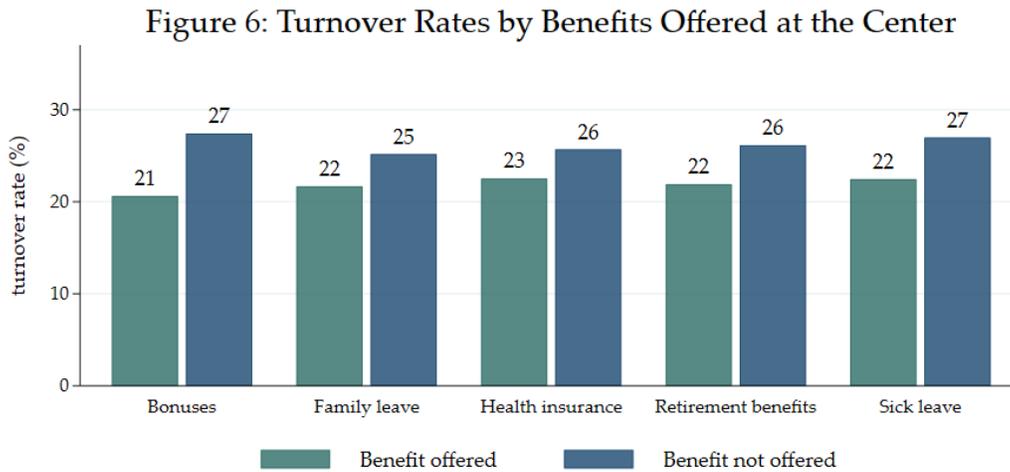
The results in the figure include teachers across the state of Virginia, and therefore may be driven by regional variation in both compensation and turnover rates. However, we observed similar patterns (albeit less pronounced) even *within* the same geographic region: Even comparing teachers working in the same community, turnover was still much higher for teachers in the bottom wage quartile for their region compared to the top wage quartile.



*Note: The bottom wage quartile included teachers paid between \$13,650 to \$20,000 per year; the second quartile ranged from \$20,200 to \$23,000; the third quartile ranged from \$23,100 to \$28,000; and the top wage quartile ranged from \$28,500 to \$72,000.*

### Turnover Rates by Benefits Offered

As shown in Figure 6, turnover rates were slightly lower among teachers whose center director indicated they offered benefits than among teachers whose center directors did not.<sup>15</sup> For instance, at centers that offered bonuses, 21% of teachers turned over compared to 27% of teachers working in centers that did not.



Note: Sample size ranges from 278 to 708 depending on how many teachers had each benefit offered at their center. For example, 278 teachers were at centers that did not offer sick leave. Given the smaller sample sizes for these survey items, which depended on the teacher's leader having also taken our survey, we only report turnover rates for the overall sample, and not separately by role.

## 4. Implications

This report combined unique data on teacher turnover with survey data from a sample of over 1,000 Virginia child care teachers to explore how teacher and professional characteristics relate to teacher turnover.

It highlights very high rates of turnover: Nearly one in four child care teachers left their center between May 2019 and the end of the calendar year, an eight-month period from before the COVID-19 pandemic. This turnover rate is high. For comparison, less than 5% of K-12 teachers leave during the school year, and about 16% leave within a 12-month period.<sup>16</sup>

The much higher rates of turnover in child care relative to both K-12 teachers and even other early educators (including pre-k and Head Start teachers) are likely driven by the large differences in compensation between teachers in child care and those in other settings. Recent calls for increased compensation for child care teachers and pay parity among ECE sectors aim to tackle these differences,<sup>17</sup> and new federal funds offer an unprecedented opportunity to pursue these strategies.<sup>18</sup>

A clear understanding of *which* child care teachers are most likely to leave can inform efforts to target new investments. However, lack of data tracking teacher exits in child care settings has made it difficult to know how teacher and job characteristics relate to turnover. This report aimed to fill this gap, providing suggestive evidence about where targeted supports may be useful.

It shows that teachers new to the ECE profession—especially assistant teachers just starting out—were considerably more likely to exit their jobs than those with more experience. While the analysis did not examine *why* this is the case, one possibility is that teachers begin teaching at centers with little preparation. They are often met with few supports to help them thrive in their jobs. In-service professional development specially targeted towards new teachers may help some beginning teachers through those initial challenges.

Similarly, our finding that child care teachers who received lower wages were more likely to leave is consistent with a broad literature asserting that compensation is a key reason teachers leave early education.<sup>19</sup> In Virginia, the Teacher Recognition Program—which gives financial incentives to child care teachers who remain in their positions—reduced turnover considerably and provides compelling evidence that financial incentives paid directly to child care teachers may be an important part of efforts to stabilize the workforce.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that this analysis focused *just* on child care teachers, and that the patterns that emerged likely differ significantly from those we would observe among a broader sample of ECE teachers, including teachers in state pre-k and Head Start. Child care teachers turn over at much higher rates than teachers in these other ECE sectors and are also more likely to be women of color, to have lower levels of education, and to work at jobs with lower wages and fewer benefits offered.<sup>21</sup> If we considered the entire ECE workforce, we would likely observe far larger gaps with respect to race, education, wages, and benefits than we observed in the current analysis.

It is also worth reiterating that the patterns documented here reflect pre-pandemic trends in teacher turnover. COVID-19 substantially exacerbated staffing challenges in child care settings.<sup>22</sup> Many Virginia child care leaders struggled to retain existing teachers and recruit new teachers during the pandemic, a problem that has continued into the recovery period.<sup>23</sup> The infusion of recovery funding provides an opportunity not just to address pandemic-related challenges, but to address the high levels of turnover observed in child care settings prior to the pandemic. Bold investments, targeted towards the teachers and centers that need them most, will be essential to stabilize child care in the short-term, sustain the sector into the future, and support children and families.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>9</sup> Among teachers who took the teacher survey, 77% had a director at their center take our leader survey. This leader survey information was used to determine which benefits were offered by each center.
- <sup>10</sup> We categorize teachers as “Hispanic” if they selected Hispanic ethnicity, regardless of race; “Black” if they selected only Black as their race, “White” if they selected only White, and “Other” if they selected any other race in the survey or two or more races. About seven percent of the teachers in our data identified as Asian. About one percent identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and less than one percent identified as Northern Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Due to small sample sizes, we group these respondents as “Other” rather than disaggregate the results for each group.
- <sup>11</sup> The relationships we document in the report should not be interpreted as causally linked. For instance, if we observe that teachers with a CDA are less likely to leave their center, this does not imply that attaining a CDA causes teachers to stay at their center. It may be that teachers with a CDA simply differ from teachers without one in ways that also relate to turnover (e.g., they have more experience).
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