

Work Environments and Well-being Among Early Childhood Teachers in Colorado

Diana D. Schaack & Vi-Nhuan Le

September 2017

KEY FINDINGS

- ▷ Teachers were generally satisfied with their collegial relationships at work and viewed their peers as collaborative and supportive.
- ▷ The most common reasons teachers stayed in their jobs were to help children and families, because it was their chosen profession, and because of their positive relationships with colleagues.
- ▷ Teachers felt less satisfied about staffing in their programs, including gaps in staffing as a result of teacher turnover, high teacher-child classroom ratios, and unstable staffing arrangements (e.g., teachers were sent home without pay if child attendance was low, or teachers needed to move in and out of different classrooms throughout the day to meet teacher-child ratio requirements).
- ▷ Teachers were frustrated with the increased amount of paperwork and reporting requirements in their jobs and with the duplication of assessments, standards, and reporting stemming from having multiple programs and funding sources in their classrooms.
- ▷ A significant portion of teachers cited children's challenging behaviors as a major job stressor.
- ▷ Teachers appeared to be somewhat emotionally and physically drained by their jobs, but at the same time, they felt a strong sense of accomplishment in their work with children and families. Approximately 11% of teachers reported experiencing depressive symptomologies.

These findings are discussed in light of policy recommendations for improving early childhood teachers' working conditions in center and public school-based programs.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood teachers play an important role in the lives of many young children and families across Colorado. Each day, they provide early care and education (ECE) services to nearly 100,000 children in center and school-based programs serving children birth to age five and enable their families to workⁱ. The Colorado Bureau of Labor also anticipates that the state will need to increase the ECE workforce by another approximately 33% - 43% by 2025 as Colorado's population continues to growⁱⁱ. Yet many communities are struggling to recruit new professionals into the workforce, and turnover among early childhood teachers is a persistent issue that plagues the field. While strong relationships certainly exist between low teacher wages and high turnover among ECE teachersⁱⁱⁱ, there are also other factors, above and beyond their pay, that can influence a teacher's decision to leave their job.

Indeed, teachers' working conditions not only impact their job satisfaction and desire to stay in or leave their jobs, but their working conditions can also support or constrain teachers' abilities to provide high-quality ECE services to children^{iv}. For example, many teachers work in classrooms with high teacher-child ratios that can make it difficult to attend to the needs of individual children which, in turn, can increase children's behavioral problems in the classroom, creating stress and burn-out among staff^v. Many early childhood teachers, especially if they work outside of public school-programs, also have unpredictable work schedules that depend on daily child attendance or have unstable classroom assignments in which they move in and out of different classrooms throughout the day to cover classrooms that are short staffed^{vi}.

The poor compensation and working conditions experienced by many early childhood teachers are also set against a backdrop of increased job expectations. As efforts to expand high-quality ECE services for vulnerable children in Colorado have grown, many early childhood teachers now work in programs in which they support the needs of children living in poverty, dual-language learners, children with special health and learning needs, and children who have experienced a variety of



adversities in their lives^{vii}. To serve these children, many ECE programs rely on multiple funding sources that require teachers to negotiate multiple reporting requirements, assessment systems, and operating standards that create increased job demands and responsibilities. Yet few teachers have paid planning time to complete these responsibilities and prepare their curriculum for children^{viii}.

As a result of these factors, job stress, burnout, and depression among early childhood teachers is of major concern. Burnout and depression not only can prompt teachers to leave the field altogether, but they can also affect the job performance of the teachers who remain, as higher rates of burnout and depression have been linked to more harsh and detached caregiving^{ix}. Early childhood teachers may also be especially vulnerable to burnout and depression because of the emotional and physical nature of their work, combined with long work hours and low pay. Consequently, understanding how teachers experience their work lives, including their job frustrations, what motivates them to stay in the field, as well as the resources available to them in their workplace, can offer insights into how to improve the working conditions and well-being of this vital workforce that supports the needs of Colorado's youngest children and their families.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research brief is to explore the job perceptions and occupational burnout among a sample of early childhood teachers in Colorado. Specifically, this brief addresses the following research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive their work environments?
2. What are teachers' job frustrations?
3. What motivates teachers to stay in their jobs?
4. What are teachers' levels of occupational burnout and depression?

SAMPLE

The sample used for this research brief included 3,485 teachers who provided early care and education (ECE) services to children birth through age five across Colorado. Of these teachers, 66% identified as lead teachers, and 34% identified as assistant teachers. Approximately 45% of the sample worked in community-based ECE programs, 30% worked in Head Start, and 25% worked in public school-based ECE classrooms. 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. For more information about the sample and how it was collected, please see *Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017 Final Report*^x.

RESULTS

RQ.#1. How do teachers perceive their work environments?

To address this research question, teachers¹ were asked to rate 30 items concerning aspects of their work environment on a 7-point scale. A principal component analysis conducted on teachers' responses indicated five overarching dimensions of the quality of their work environment.

- **Shared Vision** concerned teachers' understanding of the vision of their program and a shared belief in the center's philosophy, mission, and policies.
- **Collaborative Leadership** focused on teachers' perceptions of the extent to which program leaders effectively communicate with teachers in a program, ensure that teachers understand and have input in program changes, and foster collaboration and planning among teachers.
- **Distractions from Teaching** included aspects of their job that make it difficult to attend to children, such as excessive paperwork, insufficient staff in the classroom, multiple program requirements, and a punitive work atmosphere.
- **Individualized Leadership Support** addressed the extent to which a teacher's direct supervisor is fair and helps to foster her teaching effectiveness.
- **Collegial Support** focused on the extent to which teachers perceived their relationships with other colleagues in their program as helpful and collaborative.

For these five scales, a higher rating indicates stronger *Shared Vision*, greater *Collaborative Leadership*, more *Distractions from Teaching*, and higher levels of *Individualized Leadership Support* and *Collegial Support*.

Table 1. Perceptions of Working Environment

Dimension	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Shared Program Vision	5.82	1.30	1.00	7.00
Collaborative Leadership	5.17	1.44	1.00	7.00
Distractions from Teaching	3.19	1.22	1.00	7.00
Individualized Leadership Support	5.44	1.58	1.00	7.00
Collegial Support	5.76	1.22	1.25	7.00

¹ Lead and assistant teachers were included in this analysis. Due to similarities in responses between the two groups, responses were aggregated.

Table 1 shows that, on average, teachers perceived there to be strong alignment between their own values and beliefs about how children should be cared for and instructed and their program's mission, values, and policies. In general, teachers also reported that working relationships within their programs were positive and supportive, both with respect to their relationships with their direct supervisor and with respect to their relationships with other teachers in their program. For example, on average, teachers reported that program leaders in their centers were largely collaborative, demonstrated effective communication, and ensured that teachers had input in programming.

However, the mean score of 3.19 on the *Distractions from Teaching* subscale also suggests that to a moderate extent, teachers felt that their working environments often did not have enough teaching staff, had paperwork burdens, and some low staff morale and conflict that distracted them from their work with children.

RQ#2. What are teachers' job frustrations?

To learn more about the aspects of teachers' jobs that frustrated them the most, teachers were asked to report on their three most significant job frustrations. The results are displayed in Figure 1. Pay and compensation was the most frequently cited factor as teachers' greatest source of job dissatisfaction. However, they also reported other job frustrations, which fell into four additional categories: staffing, children, conflict, and job demands.

Staffing. Approximately 33% of teachers cited staff turnover as being a source of frustration, and 15% cited instability of their classroom assignment stemming from gaps in staffing that necessitated they move in and out of different classrooms throughout the day to meet child-staff ratio requirements. Other frustrations included high child-teacher ratios in classrooms (23%) that they perceived made it difficult to provide individualized attention to children and being sent home without pay when child attendance was low (17%).

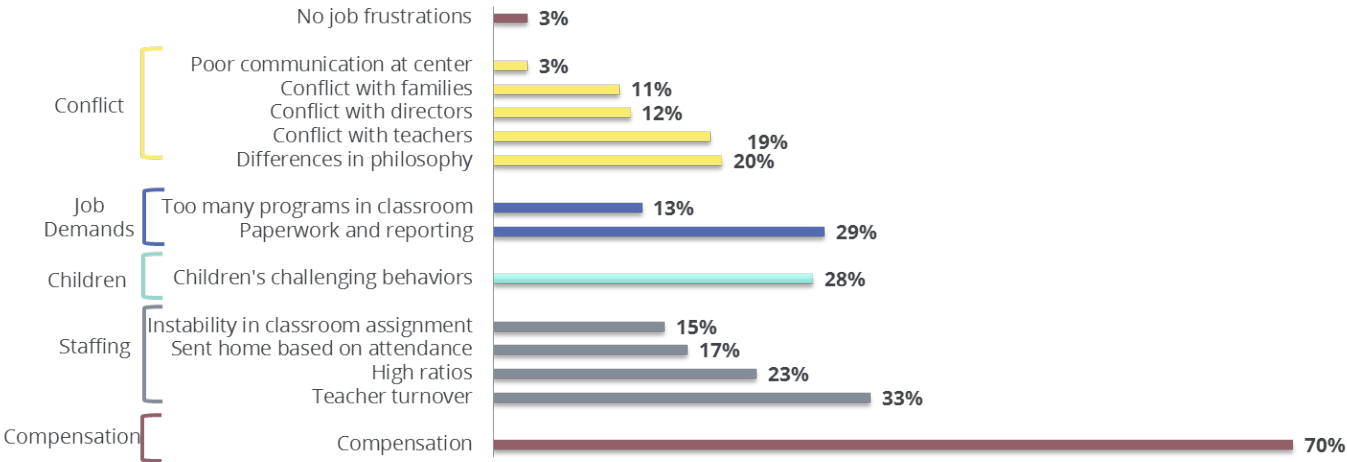
Children. Approximately 28% of teachers also reported that children's challenging behaviors in the classroom was a significant source of frustration and job dissatisfaction.

Job Demands. A sizable percentage of teachers, 29%, also reported that paperwork and reporting requirements created job dissatisfaction while 13% mentioned frustration over having multiple reporting requirements and operating standards stemming from different program funding sources in their classrooms.

Conflict. For approximately 20% of the teachers, differences in their caregiving and educational philosophies and their center's values emerged as a significant source of job frustration. A smaller portion of teachers also reported on other sources of

conflict in their work lives that created job dissatisfaction. For instance, 19% of the teachers expressed frustration over conflicts with other teachers, 12% were frustrated over conflict with directors, and 11% were frustrated over conflict with families.

Figure 1. Job Aspects that Teachers Perceive to be Frustrating



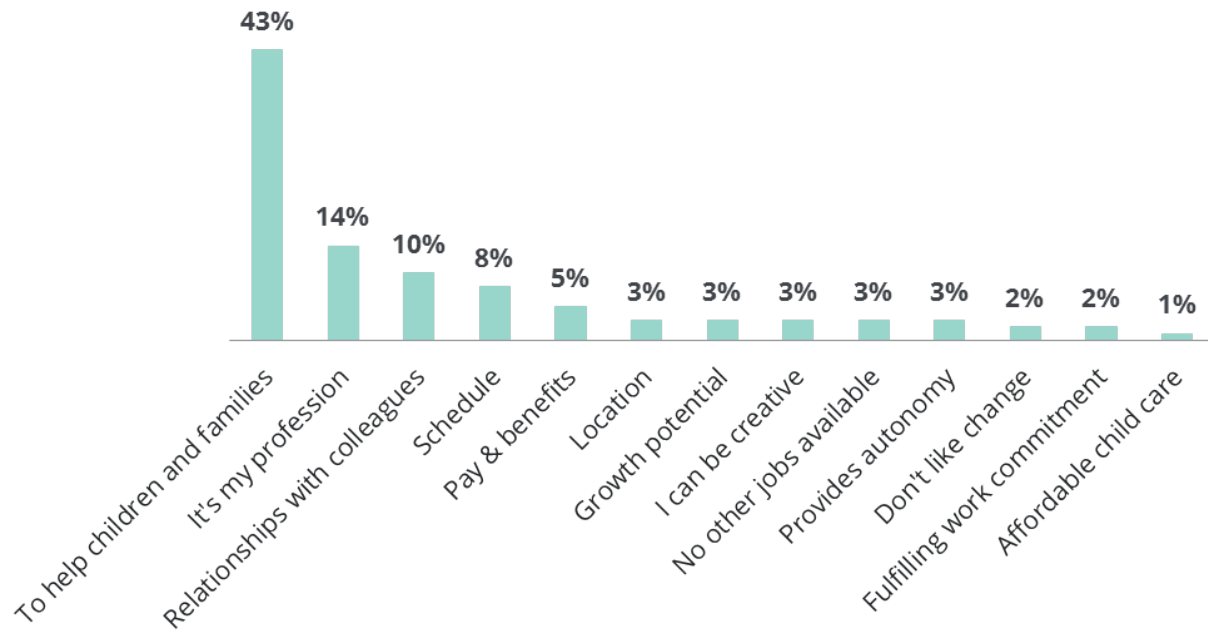
RQ#3. What motivates teachers to stay in their jobs?

Teachers were also asked to consider the main reason that they stayed in their current job². Figure 2 displays their responses. In general, teachers were typically motivated to stay in their jobs because they believed that working with young children was their calling. For instance, 43% reported that they remained in their jobs to help children and families and because they believed in the mission of their organization. Similarly, 14% indicated that teaching was their profession and that they felt effective in their jobs. To a slightly lesser extent, teachers reported being motivated to stay in their jobs because of the relationships that they have formed with the other professionals in their centers.

Teachers did not tend to mention structural features of their work environments as the primary reason they remained in their jobs. For example, only 8% of teachers indicated that work-life balance and hours that aligned with their children’s school schedules prompted them to want to stay in their jobs. Only 5% reported that pay and benefits kept them in their jobs, and 3% indicated that their organizations provided them with growth potential that motivated them to stay. However, it is unclear whether these structural features of their work environments are not an important factor in motivating teachers to stay in their jobs, or if they do not work in environments that provide these types of working conditions, and thus they are not a significant source of motivation for teachers to stay.

²For this analysis, lead and assistant teacher responses were aggregated. In only one instance were responses between lead and assistant teachers different. Assistant teachers were more likely to indicate that work-life balance and having a work schedule aligned with their children’s school schedule was a motivator to stay in their jobs than were lead teachers.

Figure 2. Teachers' Motivations for Staying in their Jobs



RQ#4. What are teachers' levels of occupational burnout and depression?

To address this research question, teachers were first administered a shortened 9-item version of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*^{xi}, which is organized into three subscales, that included:

- **Emotional Exhaustion** measured teachers' feelings of being worn out or depleted by their jobs.
- **Depersonalization** assessed the extent to which teachers psychologically withdraw from children and families as a result of work stress.
- **Personal Accomplishment** measured the extent to which teachers felt effective in their work.

Each of the three items within each subscale were measured on a 7-point scale, and item scores were summed to yield a subscale score with a maximum of 21. High scores on each subscale represent more feelings of *Emotional Exhaustion*, *Depersonalization*, and *Sense of Personal Accomplishment* (e.g., less burnout). The results of teachers' responses are displayed in Table 2.

Teachers were administered a shorted 10-item version of the *Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale*^{xii}. Teachers responded to each item of the scale by rating the frequency with which they felt a mood or symptom "during the past week" on a four-point scale, with scores ranging from 0-3, where three indicates a higher

frequency of the mood or symptom. Thus, the possible range of the 10-item scale is 0 to 30, and a score of ten or higher indicates the presence of significant depressive symptoms.

Table 2 shows that, in general:

- **Emotional Exhaustion:** Teachers felt moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, suggesting that to some extent their work is draining to them.
- **Depersonalization:** On the other hand, low scores on the Depersonalization subscale suggest that teachers are psychologically engaged in their work with children and families.
- **Personal Accomplishment:** Their work also appears to provide teachers with a strong sense of personal accomplishment and fulfillment, as the average teacher felt very effective in their work with children and families.
- **Depression:** The average score of 4.95 on the depression inventory also indicates that, in general, the sample did not show symptoms of depression. However, 10.73% of the sample scored a 10 or above on the scale, indicating significant depressive symptomologies, which is approximately 4% more than would be expected in the general population.^{xiii}

Table 2. Teachers’ Levels of Occupational Burnout				
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Emotional Exhaustion (0-21 Scale)	10.01	3.42	3.00	21.00
Depersonalization (0-21 Scale)	5.21	2.97	3.00	21.00
Sense of Personal Accomplishment (0-21 Scale)	17.50	3.42	3.00	21.00
Depression (0-30 Scale)	4.95	4.27	0.00	30.00

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

The results of this research brief suggest several important areas in which Colorado might consider investing in workforce development and systems-building efforts as well as in additional research.

Conducting a Systems Scan

Colorado should consider conducting a scan of their programs and initiatives and their standards and reporting requirements to identify areas in which alignment and efficiencies can be developed to relieve the paperwork burden and duplication of efforts that are felt at the classroom level.

A key finding in this study is that a sizable portion of teachers in this sample were frustrated by increased amounts of paperwork and by the multiple operating

standards and requirements that stem from having children's tuition subsidized or paid for by multiple funding streams in their classrooms. Many ECE programs in Colorado, especially if they serve vulnerable populations, can receive funding from Title 1, Head Start, Colorado Preschool Program, and the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program, and most ECE programs receiving these funds are also required to be licensed by the state. Each of these funding sources is guided by different governance, standards, and accountability systems.

In addition, many ECE programs are also participating in Colorado Shines, the state's quality rating and improvement system, and other quality improvement initiatives that may be tied to funding that come with their own reporting requirements. While blending funding and participating in these initiatives helps to ensure high-quality ECE programming and access to ECE for many children, the multiple program requirements may inadvertently have negative consequences on teachers.

Investing in Evidence-Based Programs to Reduce Challenging Behaviors

Findings from this study also indicate that almost a third of teachers are frustrated by children's challenging behaviors in classrooms. Colorado might consider investing more heavily in evidence-based models such as The Teaching Pyramid or in infant mental health consultation that work with ECE programs to improve teacher skills and classroom practices around addressing challenging behaviors and provide intensive intervention for children exhibiting more extreme behaviors. Opportunities may also exist to include courses focused on children with more intensive behavioral support and learning needs in required coursework leading to teacher qualifications.

Understanding Staffing Patterns

As Colorado embarks on efforts to improve the working conditions and compensation of the ECE workforce, they might consider experiments with different class sizes and compensation adjustments to understand the cost-benefit of each approach. An important finding in this study is that a sizable portion of teachers in this sample are frustrated by high teacher-child ratios in the classroom, which makes it difficult to attend to the needs of children and may also contribute to more children exhibiting challenging behaviors. Several studies have found that teacher wages and classroom ratios are the two strongest predictors of instructional quality in early childhood classrooms and both contribute importantly to teacher turnover^{xiv}. Yet reducing classroom ratios or group sizes comes with a cost, making it difficult to improve teacher compensation.

Similarly, Colorado might also consider funding staffing structure pilots. The results of this study indicate that many teachers are frustrated with inconsistent classroom assignments in which they move in and out of different classrooms throughout the day, which can have consequences on the quality of care and education children receive and on children's school readiness skills^{xv}. Findings discussed in another

research brief from this study also suggest that some teachers leave their jobs for more flexible schedules that are more compatible with their own children's school schedules^{xvi}. However, currently little is known about staffing structures and program schedules that foster teacher retention and quality programming.

Colorado might also consider investing in pilot studies to better understand the cost-benefits of different staffing options and the impact on teacher retention and job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood education can indeed be a rewarding career. Teachers in this study reported that, in spite of the low pay and often poor working conditions, they were motivated to stay in their jobs to help the children and families in their programs and received a great deal of personal fulfillment from their work. However, as evidenced by the high rates of turnover in the field and the approximately one-quarter of teachers indicating that they plan to leave their jobs in the next two years^{xvii}, passion for the work and personal fulfillment may not be enough to enable teachers to continue to pursue a career in the field. Consequently, understanding how the workplace climate, pay and compensation, structural aspects of programs such as their schedule, and career advancement opportunities, influences turnover and retention will be the subject of a forthcoming brief in this series and may help to shed some light on important areas in which to invest in workforce retention efforts.

REFERENCES

- ⁱFranko, M. & Brodsky, A. (2017). *Bearing the cost of early care and education in Colorado: An economic analysis*. Denver, CO: University of Denver, Butler Institute for Families.
- ⁱⁱIbid.
- ⁱⁱⁱWhitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy Work, Still Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*, Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- ^{iv}Torquati, J., Raikes, H., & Huddleston-Casas, C. (2007). Teacher education, motivation, compensation, workplace support, and links to quality of center-based child care and teachers' intention to stay in the early childhood profession. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 22(2), 261-275.
- ^vGilliam, W. & Shahar, G. (2006). Preschool expulsion and suspension: Rates and predictors in one state. *Infants and Young Children*, 19(3), 228-245.
- ^{vi}Whitebook et al., 2014.

- ^{vii}Sakai, L., Kipnis, F., Whitebook, M., & Schaack, D. (2013). Yes we can: Supporting degree attainment for early childhood practitioners. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 16(2).
- ^{viii}Whitebook et al., 2014.
- ^{ix}Hamre, B. & Pianta, R. (2004). Self-reported depression in non-familial caregivers: Prevalence and associations with caregiver behavior in child-care settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19 (2), 297-318.; Rentzou, K. (2012). Examination of work environment factors relating to burnout syndrome of early childhood educators in Greece. *Child Care in Practice*, 18(2), 163– 181.; Torquati et al., 2007.
- ^xSchaack, D. & Le, V. (2017). *Colorado's Early Childhood Workforce Survey, 2017*. Denver, CO: University of Colorado Denver.
- ^{xi}Maslach, C., Jackson, S., & Lietner, M. (1997). The Maslach Burnout Inventory Fourth Edition. Menlo Park, CA: Mind Garden, Inc.
- ^{xii}Radloff, L. (1977). The CES-D Scale: A Self Report Depression Scale for Research in the General. *Applied psychological measurement*, 1(3), 385–401.
- ^{xiii}Kessler R., Chiu W., Demler, O. Walters, E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(6), 617-27.
- ^{xiv}Phillips, D., Mekos, D., Scarr, S., McCartney, K., & Abbott Shim, M. (2000). Within and beyond the classroom door: Assessing quality in child care centers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(4), 475-496.
- ^{xv}Setodji, C.M., Le, V., & Schaack, D. (2012). Accounting for movement between child care classrooms: Does it change teacher effects interpretations? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 33(1), 1-12.
- ^{xvi}Schaack, D. & Le, V. (2017). *Coming and going: Turnover and job instability in Colorado's early childhood centers*. Denver, CO: University of Colorado Denver.
- ^{xvii}*Ibid.*

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.