

Retaining Early Childhood Teachers in Colorado: Factors that Predict Teacher Turnover, Retention, and Well-being

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September 2017

KEY FINDINGS

- ▷ Higher wages were associated with less teacher turnover in centers.
- ▷ Working on an academic calendar year was associated with greater retention of qualified teachers.
- ▷ Higher wages, more workplace benefits, and having stronger collaborative leadership in a center predicted teachers' intentions to stay in their jobs.
- ▷ Teachers with bachelor's degrees or higher were more likely to express intentions to leave their jobs than were teachers with a high school degree.
- ▷ Having a negative work environment in which teachers perceived there to be low teacher morale, too many children in the classroom, excessive paperwork, multiple program standards and operating rules and regulations, and a punitive work atmosphere predicted higher levels of occupational burnout among teachers.
- ▷ Directors who adopted a leadership style that emphasized a collaborative approach and fostered a shared sense of purpose and collegiality among teachers predicted less emotional exhaustion and a stronger sense of personal accomplishment in the work.

These findings are discussed in light of policy recommendations for recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers in ECE centers in Colorado.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher turnover in early care and education (ECE) programs is of major concern in Colorado. Prior briefs in this series have described that the average community-

based ECE center in the *Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017* sample lost approximately 18% of their lead teachers and 25% of their assistant teachers in the previous year, many of whom left the field altogetherⁱ. Moreover, a sizable portion of the centers in the sample lost at least a third of their teaching staff over the past 12 months. This level of turnover not only impacts Colorado's children, families, and the teachers who remain in their centers but also perpetuates a crisis in the lack of available high-quality ECE programs in the stateⁱⁱ.

National research also suggests that because of the low wages earned by many in the workforce, turnover rates among ECE teachers significantly surpasses the turnover of teachers in other educational settings and is more akin to turnover rates found among other low-wage jobs, such as fast-food workersⁱⁱⁱ. Yet unlike turnover in fast-food workers, turnover in ECE teachers can have a profound impact on the customers they serve. When teachers leave, important information about the care and learning needs of individual children leave with the teacher. As a result, high rates of turnover in ECE centers have been found to negatively impact the quality of care and instruction provided in a center and can adversely affect children's social-emotional development and language and literacy skills^{iv}.

Above and beyond teacher wages, the work environments of many ECE teachers can also influence a teacher's decisions to stay in or leave their jobs. Many ECE teachers, especially if they work outside of public school settings, work in environments that do not reflect the professional needs of educators or the types of practice environments that foster effective teaching. For example, many teachers work in settings that are often understaffed, where they have unreliable work schedules in which they are either sent home without pay if child attendance is low, or in which they move in and out of different classrooms throughout the day to meet state teacher-child ratio requirements^v. Many also have limited planning time or professional development days, limited access to work-sponsored benefits, and work in settings in which attaining more education and specialized training is not linked to substantial increases in wages.^{vi} These workplace conditions, combined with the long hours and physical and emotional nature of the work, may make ECE teachers particularly susceptible to occupational burnout and depression^{vii}.

In addition, these workplace factors can contribute to persistent difficulties in attracting and retaining effective teachers in the field^{viii}. Indeed, 70% of directors in the *Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017* sample reported that they struggled to find teachers to fill open positions, and they were often forced to hire teachers who were under-qualified for the job^{ix}. This is of particular concern given that the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment predicts that by 2025, the state will need to increase the number of ECE teachers by approximately 33% - 43%, depending on the position, if Colorado's economy continues to grow at its current rate^x. Thus, understanding the factors that predict turnover and teacher well-being in Colorado can help policymakers target efforts to retain its current ECE workforce and to build a pipeline of new professionals entering the field.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research brief will explore the following questions:

1. What strategies are being used in a sample of ECE centers in Colorado to retain teachers?
2. What personal, workplace, and policy factors are associated with teacher turnover and the retention of qualified teachers?
3. What personal, workplace, and policy factors are associated with teachers' intentions to stay in or leave their jobs over the next two to three years?
4. What personal, workplace, and policy factors are associated with teachers' occupational burnout and depression?

SAMPLE

The sample used for this research brief included 366 center and public school-based programs that provided ECE services to children birth through five across Colorado. Of these programs, 46% were community-based ECE centers, 29% were Head Start programs, and 25% were public school-based ECE programs. The sample included survey responses from 366 center and public school-based directors, and 1,066 teachers, including lead and assistant teachers, who worked in these programs. 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 district. For more information about the sample, how it was collected, and study methods, please see *Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017 Final Report*^{xi}.

RESULTS

RQ#1. What strategies are ECE centers¹ in Colorado using to retain teachers?

To address this research question, directors were asked to report on the types of strategies that their program has implemented to retain teachers. Their responses are displayed in Figure 1. In general, strategies fell into six categories: improving wages, improving benefits, improving hiring, financing teacher development, improving working conditions, and improving instructional leadership.

Improving wages. Over half of the centers in the sample have improved the wages paid to teachers. Many of the centers made adjustments to increase teachers'

¹ For the purposes of this brief, center-based programs refer to ECE programs operating as community-based programs, as Head Start programs, and as programs housed in public schools.

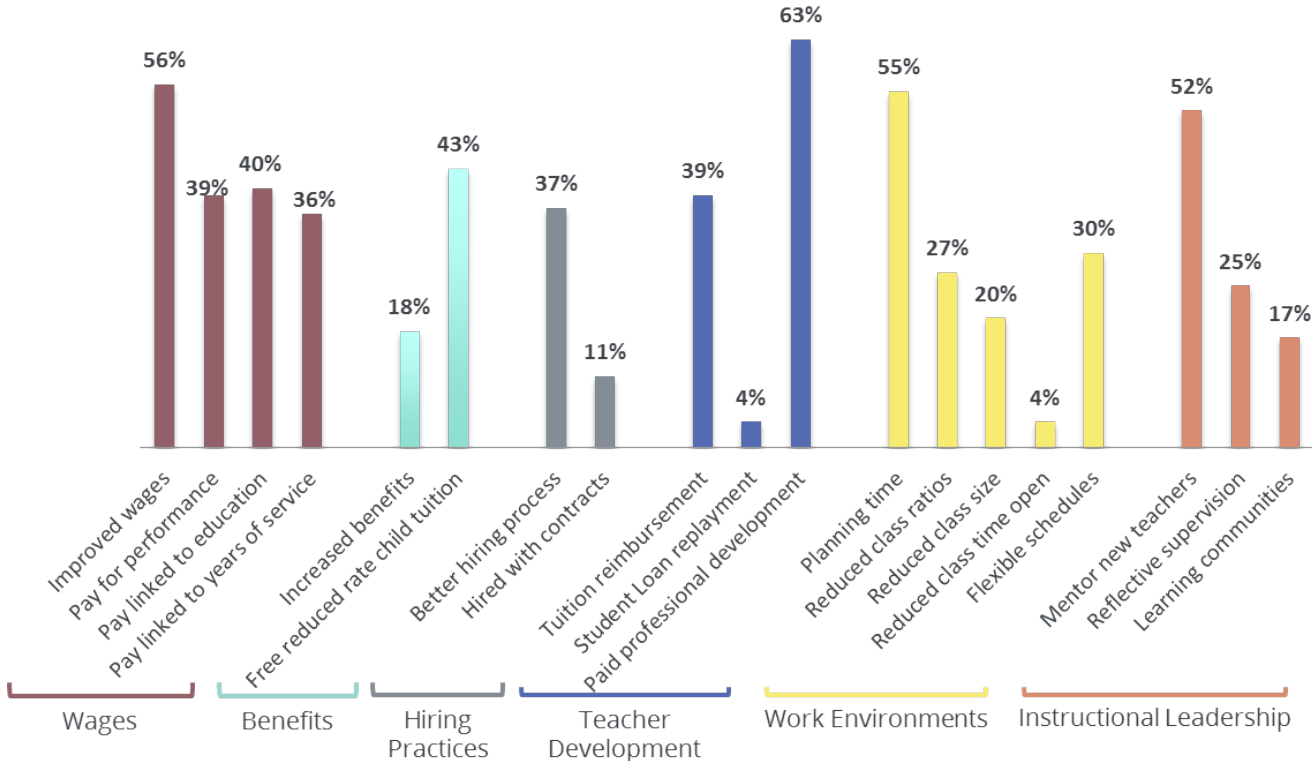
salaries or began hiring at higher rates of pay. More often than not, centers also tied these wage increases to teacher quality indicators. For example, 39% linked wage increases to performance, 40% linked wage increases to educational attainment, 36% linked wage increases to years of teaching experience, and a number of programs used a combination of these factors to determine salary adjustments.

Improving benefits. Only 18% of the centers in the sample improved their centers' benefits packages (e.g., providing health insurance or increasing center contributions) as a retention strategy. Approximately 43% of centers now offer free or reduced rate tuition for a teacher's child to attend the center.

Improving hiring. Approximately 37% of centers indicated that they improved their hiring processes to better ensure that new hires were a good fit for the program. Eleven percent of centers have also tried hiring teachers on a one-year contract and bringing new teachers in on an annual basis at the start of an academic school year. These strategies are similar to the hiring practices in K-12 settings.

Financing teacher development. The majority of centers in the sample provided financial support for teachers to increase their knowledge and skills during their service as teachers as an incentive to remain in their jobs. For example, 39% of centers provided tuition reimbursement for teachers, while 63% paid for teacher's in-service professional development. Only 4% of centers used student loan forgiveness as an incentive to recruit and retain teachers who were well qualified prior to being hired.

Figure 1. Percentage of Centers Using Retention Strategies



Improving work environments. Many centers in this sample improved teachers' practice environments in ways that may also better support effective care and instruction. For example, 55% implemented paid curricular planning time for teachers, while 27% reduced class teacher-to-child ratios, and 20% reduced class sizes. Approximately 30% of centers also instituted more flexible work schedules for teachers.

Instructional leadership. A number of programs improved the instructional leadership in their programs to better support teachers in their practice. For example, 52% provided mentorship to new teachers, 25% implemented ongoing reflective supervision with teaching staff, and 17% facilitated professional learning communities among teachers to support ongoing teacher learning.

RQ#2. What personal, workplace, and policy factors are associated with teacher turnover and the retention of qualified teachers in their jobs?

To address this research question, directors were asked about the turnover across all teaching roles. Directors were also asked to report on the total number of teachers employed in the program and the number of teachers with at least an associate's (A.A.) degree in ECE who have been employed as a teacher in their center for at least five years. These figures were then used to calculate a retention rate of "highly-qualified" teachers. Directors also reported on: (1) their highest level of educational attainment; (2) the types of child tuition funding sources in the program; (3) the total number of children in their program; (4) the proportion of children receiving Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) subsidies; (5) the proportion of children exhibiting challenging behaviors; (5) the retention strategies the center employed (see RQ#1); and (6) whether the center participated in Colorado Shines – Colorado's quality rating and improvement system.

Teachers were asked to report on (1) their highest level of educational attainment; (2) their hourly wages; (3) the types of workplace benefits received; (4) whether they worked part or full-time; (5) whether they worked on an academic or calendar year; (6) the age group of children with which they worked; and (7) their job role. Teachers were also asked to rate the quality of their work environment along five dimensions: *Shared Vision*, *Collaborative Leadership*, *Negative Work Environment/Distractions from Teaching* (e.g., excessive paperwork, insufficient staff, punitive work environment, etc.), *Individualized Leadership Support*, and *Collegial Support*. For these five scales, a rating of 7 indicates stronger *Shared Vision*, greater *Collaborative Leadership*, more *Negative Work Environment/Distractions from Teaching*, and higher levels of *Individualized Leadership Support* and *Collegial Support*.

Teacher surveys and director surveys were then matched by street address. Ordinary least-squared regressions that accounted for the clustering of responses within a center were then conducted to understand factors that predict teacher turnover rates in a program and the retention of qualified teachers. Descriptive statistics can be found in the Appendix.

Results indicate that:

- The only factor that predicted teacher turnover were wages, such that higher wages were associated with less teacher turnover in a program.
- The only factor that predicted the retention of qualified teachers (e.g., those with at least an A.A. degree in ECE or higher) was working on an academic calendar year.

RQ#3. What personal, workplace, and policy factors are associated with teachers' intentions to stay in or leave their jobs?

To address this research question, teachers were asked to report on whether they intended to stay in or leave their jobs over the next two years. Within this sample, 78% of teachers reported they intended to stay in their jobs for the near future, while 22% anticipated making a job change. The same factors as described in research question 1, with the addition of teacher turnover rate in the center, were then used in an ordinary least-squared regression to predict teachers' job intentions.

Results indicate that:

- Higher wages, a greater number of workplace benefits, and having stronger collaborative leadership in a center predicted teachers' intentions to stay in their jobs.
- Teachers holding at least a Bachelor's (B.A.) degree were more likely to express intentions to leave their job within the next two years than teachers with a high school degree.

It is beyond the scope of the data to draw definitive conclusions as to why teachers with more education intend to leave their position. It is possible that more highly educated teachers in community-based or Head Start programs, for example, may be seeking jobs in public school-based ECE settings that often offer higher pay, better benefits, and an academic teaching calendar. It is also possible that more highly educated teachers are seeking employment outside of ECE, as they may be able to command higher salaries in other industries^{xii}. However, these explanations are speculative and more research is needed to better understand the career trajectories of highly educated teachers in different early learning sectors.

RQ#4. What personal, workplace, and policy factors are associated with teachers' occupational burnout and depression.

To address this research question, teachers were administered a shortened 9-item version of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*^{xiii}, which is organized into three subscales: *Emotional Exhaustion*, *Depersonalization* (e.g., psychological withdrawal from children), and *Sense of Personal Accomplishment in the Work*. The possible range of each scale is 7 to 21, with high scores on each subscale representing more feelings of

Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Sense of Personal Accomplishment (e.g., less burnout). Teachers were also administered a shortened 10-item version of the *Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale*^{xiv}. 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. Descriptive statistics for dimensions of occupational burnout and the depression inventory can be found in the Appendix².

The same factors as described in research question 1, with the addition of a center's teacher turnover rate, were then used in a series of ordinary least-squared regressions accounting for the clustering of teachers in centers to predict dimensions of occupational burnout and depression.

Results indicate that:

Emotional Exhaustion

- More hours worked per week, having a negative work environment that distracted teachers from teaching, having a B.A. degree or higher, and participation in Colorado Shines predicted greater feelings of emotional exhaustion in teachers.
- When examining specific aspects of a negative work environment that predicted more emotional exhaustion, low morale among teachers, excessive paperwork, having multiple rules, standards, and reporting requirements stemming from multiple child tuition funding sources and quality improvement initiatives in a center, and caring for too many children in the classroom predicted greater emotional exhaustion.
- On the other hand, working in a center with leadership that promoted a stronger shared vision among staff, that employed more collaborative leadership, and fostered greater collegiality among teachers predicted less emotional exhaustion in teachers.

Depersonalization

- Having a negative work environment that distracted teachers from teaching and having a Bachelor's degree or higher predicted greater depersonalization of children and families (e.g., psychological withdrawal).
- When examining particular aspects of a negative work environment that predicted greater depersonalization, excessive paperwork, having multiple rules, standards, and reporting requirements stemming from multiple child tuition funding sources and quality improvement initiatives in a center, caring too many children in the classroom, conflicts among staff, and a punitive work climate predicted greater depersonalization.
- Having higher wages predicted less depersonalization.

² For more information on these measures and how they were collected, please see Schaack, D. & Le, V. (2017). *Work environments and occupational burnout among early childhood teachers in Colorado*. Denver, CO: University of Colorado Denver.

Sense of Accomplishment and Feeling Effective in the Job

- Having a negative work environment that felt punitive to teachers predicted less feelings of personal accomplishment in the work.
- The number of workplace benefits offered in a center, working in a center with leadership that promoted a stronger shared vision among staff and that fostered greater collegiality among teachers, holding a B.A. degree or higher, and number of child tuition funding streams in the classroom predicted greater feelings of personal accomplishment in the work.

Depression³

- Working more hours per week, having a negative work environment that distracted teachers from teaching, and working on a 12-month calendar year predicted greater feelings of depression among teachers.
- When examining specific aspects of a negative work environment that predicted more depressive symptomologies, excessive paperwork, having multiple rules, standards, and reporting requirements stemming from multiple child tuition funding sources and quality improvement initiatives in a center, and caring for too many children in the classroom predicted stronger feelings of depression.
- However, strong teacher collegiality, having a highly educated director (B.A. or higher) and working on an academic year (9-months) predicted less depression among teachers.

One surprising result of this study is that teachers with more education reported greater feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. However, this finding is similar to research on teachers and principals in K-12 settings in which educators with more education were found to strive to be more effective in their jobs and had higher expectations for themselves, thereby creating more job stress^{xv}. It may be that teachers with more education have a deeper grasp of what high-quality service provision entails and have higher expectations for their own performance and thus may work harder, creating more emotional exhaustion, leading to depersonalizing the work. Teachers with more education may also be in instructional positions with greater job demands. However, these are speculations and more research is needed to explore the relationships among teacher education, working conditions, quality service provision, and feelings of occupational burnout.

Another interesting result is that teachers who worked in classrooms with more child tuition funding sources predicted greater feelings of personal accomplishment. Many of these child-funding sources are targeted toward children who are living in poverty or who have special health, learning, and behavioral needs.

³ It is important to note that there may be other factors, above and beyond the workplace that were not collected for this study that may better predict greater depression among teachers. Consequently, these results should be interpreted with caution.

It may be that teachers feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in supporting the health, learning, and well-being of children who are considered at-risk for later difficulties. In other words, they feel accomplished in the work itself. At the same time, having multiple funding sources also may mean multiple program standards and reporting requirements that appear to challenge teachers' well-being and foster more job stress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

The results of this research brief suggest several important areas in which Colorado might consider investing in strategies to address ECE workforce compensation, development, and systems-building efforts and in additional research.

Improving Teacher Compensation

One of the key findings in this study is that of the multitude of factors explored, only higher teacher wages were predictive of less teacher turnover within ECE centers. In addition, the provision of more workplace sponsored benefits and higher wages predicted teachers' intentions to stay in their jobs. Major public investments are needed to raise the compensation levels of ECE teachers, which are currently described as near poverty levels^{xvi}, to reward them appropriately for the jobs that they do and at levels that reflect their professional role. However, until these investments are secured, incremental steps may be taken that can help to stabilize the workforce that can meet the dual goal of raising the knowledge and skills of the workforce.

Bonuses linked to educational attainment. Colorado might consider awarding annual bonuses to early educators tied to their professional credential level and awarding supplemental bonuses as they advance credential levels as a way to put more money into the pockets of teachers and simultaneously incentivize teachers to advance their knowledge and skills. Results of prior research briefs in this series found very little variance among the wages teachers earned as a function of their educational attainment. Teachers with a B.A. degree earned, on average, only approximately \$3.07 an hour more than teachers with a high school degree^{xvii}. This small marginal difference offers little incentive for attaining higher credentials and seeking higher levels of education.

Raising Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) Reimbursement Rates. Another important strategy that Colorado may consider pursuing is raising CCCAP reimbursement rates so that programs serving lower-income children can afford to raise compensation for all staff. Currently Colorado links these rates to a program's Colorado Shines quality rating. Colorado might consider requiring that any differential reimbursement above the base rate that programs receive for children receiving CCCAP subsidies be

directed toward staff compensation. Colorado might also consider adding a supplemental reimbursement for programs that employ highly qualified staff that could be earmarked for compensation to help ensure that programs serving the most vulnerable children can employ the most highly qualified staff.

Creating Tax Credits. Another strategy currently being used in other states to bolster compensation is refundable tax credits for ECE teachers. These credits are a dollar-for-dollar reduction in an individual's income tax liability, with the amount varying based on their credential or degree level. The amount of the credit can be submitted as a claim for a refund if an individual earns too little to incur any income tax liability (see Louisiana's ECE refundable tax credit as one viable model). In addition, Colorado currently has a tax credit for philanthropic donors. However, changes to this tax credit could also be made to tier the credit based on the quality level of the ECE program to which philanthropists donate, which could encourage donor dollars to flow to ECE at a much higher level than they are currently. The state could then require that ECE programs that receive these donations that claim the tax credit use donor dollars to support increased compensation.

Investing in Developing Program Leaders

Colorado might consider additional higher education opportunities for directors and leadership apprenticeships to build a pipeline of effective leaders. Another key finding from this study is that the leadership in ECE centers appears to play an important role in setting the climate of a program and fostering teacher well-being, and plays significantly into teachers' decisions to stay in or leave their jobs. For example, teachers who worked in centers whose leaders employed a collaborative approach were more likely to anticipate staying in their jobs. Similarly, when teachers worked in centers where their leaders were able to promote a stronger shared vision and greater collegiality among staff, teachers demonstrated less occupation burnout. These results suggest that investing in leadership development may be an important strategy for retaining teachers and ensuring their well-being. 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. These courses are typically taken when as students are preparing to become teachers. However, at this particular juncture in their career, the courses may not be entirely relevant.

Understanding Staffing

Colorado might consider investing in pilot studies to better understand the cost-benefits of different staffing options and the impact on teacher retention, job satisfaction, and instructional effectiveness. Another important finding in this research brief is that working on an academic calendar year was related to higher rates of retention among qualified teachers. 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^{xviii}. Yet currently little is known about optimal staffing structures and program schedules that foster teacher retention and quality programming.

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. This study found that teachers who perceived that their classroom group sizes and teacher-to-child ratios were too high demonstrated greater levels of occupation burnout. 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^{xix}. Yet reducing classroom ratios or group sizes comes with a cost, making it difficult to improve teacher compensation.

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. This study also found that teachers who worked in classrooms that have multiple rules, regulations, and standards operating within it driven by multiple child tuition funding sources and their centers' participation in quality improvement initiatives predicted greater levels of occupational burnout among teachers. 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 appear to have negative unintended consequences on teachers.

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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.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Variable	Percent	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
<i>Type of Program</i>				
Community Based	46%			
Head Start	29%			
Public School	25%			
<i>Director Education: Highest Level</i>				
High School	17%			
A.A.	19%			
B.A.	45%			
M.A.	19%			
<i>Teacher Education: Highest Level</i>				
High School	36%			
A.A.	18%			
B.A.	33%			
M.A.	13%			
<i>Work Characteristics</i>				
12-Month Work Year	61%			
9-Month Work Year	39%			
Work in Full Day Class	56%			
Work in Part-Day Class	44%			
Participate in Colorado Shines	92%			
<i>Turnover & Retention</i>				
Intentions to Stay	78%			
Overall Teacher Turnover Rate		19.81%	22.63	0.00 - 223%
Retention Rate of Qualified Teachers		6.90%	9.31	0.00 - 100%
<i>Teacher Well-Being</i>				
Emotional Exhaustion		10.29	4.73	3.00 - 21.00
Depersonalization		5.22	3.04	3.00 - 21.00
Personal Sense of Accomplishment		17.67	3.26	3.00 - 21.00
Depression		4.93	4.49	0.00 - 30.00
<i>Child Characteristics</i>				
Number of Child Funding Sources		1.98	1.20	1.00 - 7.00
Percent CCCAP		26.30	28.47	0.00 - 100
Percent Challenging Behaviors		9.11	11.29	0.00 - 100
<i>Working Conditions</i>				
Hourly Wage		\$14.60	\$4.23	\$8.31 - \$38.19
Number of Benefits Provided by Workplace		3.67	2.48	0.00 - 12.00
Hours Work Per Week		32.54	7.92	5.50 - 41.00
Shared Vision		5.96	0.94	1.00 - 7.00
Collaborative Leadership		5.25	1.20	1.00 - 7.00
Distractions from Teaching/Negative Work Environment		3.28	1.11	1.00 - 7.00
Individual Leadership Support		5.58	1.33	1.00 - 7.00
Collegial Support		5.89	0.90	1.00 - 7.00