

Leaving the Classroom: Addressing the Crisis of NC's Early Childhood Educator Turnover

INTRODUCTION

hild Care Services Association (CCSA) is in the process of completing the 2019 North Carolina Early Childhood Workforce Study, with an anticipated release date of August, 2020. This study gathers and analyzes data about child care teachers/assistants, directors, and family child care providers working in licensed programs across the state. Topics include wages, benefits, education, training and experience, job satisfaction, and staff turnover. In addition, for the first time in more than 15 years, this Early Childhood Workforce Study will include county-level data for each of NC's 100 counties.

In the spring of 2019, as part of the Workforce Study data gathering, CCSA had the opportunity to solicit information from a group of former early childhood educators about their reasons for leaving their birth to five classrooms. This became possible when CCSA emailed a five-question survey to more than 35,000 individuals who had expressed interest in working in an early childhood classroom and had email addresses on file at the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE). In addition, DCDEE had another list of approximately 35,000 people without email addresses, so CCSA made an attempt to reach them by telephone to ask the five-question survey. A total of 10,484 individuals responded to the survey with 3,013 (29%) no longer working in a birth to five classroom.

As a result of this non-randomized survey, CCSA was able to glean information about former early childhood educators, identify some direction for future study, and provide recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Early childhood education (ECE) programs across the country struggle to retain their teachers. In 2014, the national turnover rate¹ for ECE classroom staff was 13% overall, and increased to 25% for centers with any turnover (Whitebook et. al, 2014, p. 29). The 2015 NC Early Care and Education Workforce study found that, in North Carolina specifically, 18% of full time teachers and assistant teachers had left their classrooms in the year preceding the survey, and 17% of preschool teachers planned to leave the field within the next three years (Child Care Services Association 2015, p. 22). Experts in child development and health know that frequent turnover harms teachers, children, and their programs. Children, especially in their earliest years, require consistent and uninterrupted relationships with the adults in their lives in order to build the cognitive, emotional, and social skills necessary for them to thrive (Lieberman, 2017).

Early childhood education advocates and researchers often cite obstacles such as low wages, insufficient benefits, and low payoff for degree attainment as reasons for teacher departure (Whitebook et. al, 2014). For example, according to data from the 2015 Workforce Study, early

childhood education teachers in North Carolina earned a median wage of \$10 per hour (Child Care Services Association 2015, p. 5). According to MIT's living wage calculator (MIT Living Wage, 2018), this falls significantly lower than North Carolina's 2015 living wage even for one adult with zero children (\$10.96² per hour).

For the 74% of early educators with children, the gap between earned and a living wages was even more stark, with a living wage of \$12.16 for a two parent family with one child, \$14.19 with two children, and \$16.33 with three children. Finally, at the \$10 per hour median, the 14% of early childhood teachers who are single parents with children (Child Care Services Association, 2015, p. 10), would have either earned or come close to earning poverty wages (\$7.35 for one child, \$9.28 for two children, and \$11.22 for three children). This is compared to living wages of \$22.20, \$25.89, and \$31.91 per hour for a single parents with one child, two children, and three children, respectively (MIT Living Wage, 2018).

Sometimes, employer paid benefits can help early childhood teachers make ends meet despite low average salaries. However, benefits in ECE programs are frequently lacking. As of 2015, about half of early childhood centers paid for partial or full health insurance coverage, and less than 40% paid retirement benefits. Only 13% of centers provided free child care, and 56% provided parental leave. Despite both the increased occupational health risk involved with caring for young children who are sick, and the dangers of exposing young children to illnesses, 28% of centers did not provide paid sick leave (Child Care Services Association, 2015, p. 9). As such, teachers often come to work when they are sick because they cannot afford to miss a day's (or worse, a week's) pay. Paid time off for illness benefits all children and staff as it reduces the risk of illnesses spreading.

Adding to North Carolina's elevated rate of teacher turnover, early childhood college degree programs battle to prepare a steady stream of new teachers. In a special data report prepared for the NC Early Education Coalition in 2017, North Carolina's community colleges reported a 22% decline in their early education programs between 2008 and 2017 (NC Community Colleges, 2017). Early childhood advocates have pointed

¹ Turnover rate = percentage of classroom staff who left their center in the 12 months preceding the study.

² Living wage estimates originally from MIT Living Wage Calculator 2018 but adjusted for 2014 CPI to compare with salary rates from 2015 Early Childhood Workforce Study. Adjusted using inflation calculator from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The survey was completed by 10,484 people.

More than 3,000 were no longer in the classroom.

out that teachers frequently do not see a return on their investment in higher education in the form of proportionally higher wages. While the average increase in salary obtained from either an associate or bachelor's degree is enough to raise a single parent family with three children above the federal poverty level (Child Care Services Association, 2015, p. 17; Rau, 2014), wages remain far below the median salary for all full time workers with college degrees (Torpkey, 2018)³. In fact, according to Marcy Whitebook of the Center for Child Care Employment, once Early Childhood Educators have received their degrees, they have the "lowest projected earnings of all college graduates" (NPR, 2016).

Early childhood advocates have pointed to this "wage penalty" as a driver of teacher turnover. Teachers of the youngest children suffer the wage penalty most profoundly as the disparity persists both between K-12 education and birth to five education, and within birth to five education, with infant and toddler teachers being paid the least in the ECE field. Nationally, the most recent data showed that even birth to five teachers with bachelor's degrees in the highest paying auspice (a school-sponsored preschool) were paid, on average, about \$13,300 less than kindergarten teachers (Whitebook et. al, 2014, p. 21). The disparity is most stark for teachers of children ages birth to three in private settings. These teachers earned \$25,800 less than the mean salary for public kindergarten teachers (Whitebook et. al, 2014, p. 21).

These statistics paint a sobering picture of North Carolina's early childhood field. Early childhood education is imperative work, without which North Carolina's communities could not function. The devaluation of early childhood education is situated within a historical context of systemic injustice that continues to deeply impact the field of 99% women and 47% people of color (Child Care Services Association, 2015, p. 10). North Carolina's policymakers and governmental institutions have a responsibility and an opportunity to repair legacies of racism and sexism that have helped produce the current turnover crisis. A first step involves understanding the problem and the potential solutions by speaking directly to those most impacted.

Though early childhood advocates identify many compelling reasons for early childhood teacher turnover, researchers rarely have the opportunity to conduct large scale surveys of former teachers. Child Care Services Association (CCSA) has recently had the opportunity to learn directly from over 3,000 early childhood educators about their reasons for leaving birth to five classrooms.

SURVEY METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Beginning in April 2019, Child Care Services Association sent a brief survey to over 35,000 individuals who had email addresses listed with the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) because they had been identified as being interested in working in an early childhood classroom. An additional approximately 35,000 did not have an email address listed but an attempt was made to contact them by phone.

The brief survey allowed CCSA to narrow down those respondents who were still working as a teacher or assistant teacher in a birth to five classroom in North Carolina as candidates to receive CCSA's 2019

Statewide Workforce Study. In addition, this method provided a rare opportunity to identify and ask further questions to those who answered that they were no longer employed in a birth to five classroom.

The survey was returned by 10,484 people. Of these, 7,471 (71%) were still working as a teacher or assistant teacher in a birth to five classroom in North Carolina, and 3,013 (29%) were no longer working in a birth to five classroom. These 3,013 were then asked to complete the four follow up questions. Their responses are detailed below in the Summary of Results and Discussion.

Considering that the respondents were selected non-randomly through a convenience sample, the ability to generalize the results of this survey is limited. Therefore, the survey's results should be considered preliminary research. However, this report summarizes the answers to this survey to identify directions for further study, and recommends possible actions to support ECE teachers and their longevity in the profession, based on corroborating evidence in the early childhood literature.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identifying Current and Former Teachers

Q1: Do you work as a birth to five year old classroom teacher or assistant teacher in a licensed child care program (including private, public, church based programs and Head Start, NC Pre-K, and licensed preschool programs) in North Carolina?

Question 1 asked respondents if they were still a teacher or assistant teacher in a birth to five classroom in a licensed program in North Carolina, and 10,484 answered. If they answered "Yes," the current teachers were advised to be on the lookout for the 2019 Statewide Workforce Survey coming soon. Those who answered "No" were given the opportunity to answer four follow up questions regarding where they were currently working, why they stopped teaching in a birth to five classroom, and whether or not they planned to return to the field in the future. Approximately 29% (3,013) of the respondents to Question one answered "No" and proceeded to the rest of the survey.

Current Employment

Q2: Which best describes your current work situation?

Respondents who answered "No" to Question 1 were asked to describe their current employment and 2,808 individuals did so. The majority (57%) answered that they left a birth to five classroom to work in another field entirely. In Table 1 (p. 4), these respondents are categorized as working in a "non-early childhood education field." Another 28% of respondents reported that they left their former position for another job in the early childhood field. Among those still working in the early childhood field, a different position in child care, such as a director or assistant director, was the most frequent answer (12% of respondents). Others (7% of respondents) worked in the field in a different capacity,

³ In 2015, a North Carolina early childhood teacher with no college degree earned an average annual salary of approximately \$18,500 per year, while a teacher with an associate degree in ECE earned approximately \$22,200, and a teacher with a bachelor's degree in ECE earned about \$29,600 per year, according to the 2015 Workforce Study.

57% left to work in another field.

with positions in child care resource and referral, Smart Start, community colleges, or other non-classroom based settings. A total of 9% were still teaching children ages birth to five either in another state, an unlicensed program, or as a family child care provider.

The remaining 15% of respondents answered "other," and were given the option to explain. A large number indicated that they were working as a teacher, assistant teacher, or substitute teacher in a K-12 school setting (mostly public, but some private). Others said they were caring for school age children. Therefore, in the chart below, K-12 education and school age care are reported in a separate category called "education field," rather than as a part of the "other" respondents⁴. Those who answered "other" but noted that they were working as a nanny were classified in a new category titled "care work." Thus, the 6% remaining in the "other" category are those former teachers who answered that they were retired, unemployed, disabled, in school, or other miscellaneous responses.

A limitation of this study is that the "current work situation" question did not provide an option for "education field," but instead respondents chose between the "other" and "no longer in early childhood education" answers if they worked in K-12 education or caring for school age children. Therefore, it is likely that some respondents who answered "non-early childhood education field" were in fact working in K-12 education but did not consider this relevant to report under "other." A list of all original answer choices for this question can be found in the Appendix.

Reasons for Leaving the Classroom

Q3: Why did you decide to stop being a classroom teacher/assistant teacher?

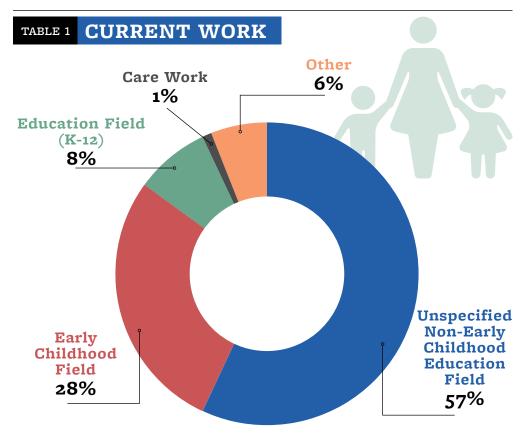
Survey recipients were also asked to select one or more reasons why they decided to stop being a classroom teacher/assistant teacher, and 2,305 responded. Of those, 41% stated that they left because they wanted to earn more money, 32% wanted more opportunities for professional growth, 25% wanted better benefits, 20% wanted better working conditions, and 16% wanted more respect (see Table 2, p. 5).

Though this study was not conducted via random sample and the results cannot be considered generalizable, the desire for better wages, benefits, and working conditions confirms concerns already identified in the literature and aligns with other studies of early childhood educator turnover (Buffett Institute, 2019; Whitebook et. al, 2014). Also of note, only 5% of respondents indicated "Teaching is not for me," revealing that most who answered the survey did not consider their reason for leaving to be a lack of a desire to teach.

Interestingly, the desire for "more opportunities for professional growth" was the second most frequently chosen answer for leaving the classroom, 7 percentage points above "wanted better benefits," and 12 percentage points above "wanted better working conditions." Considering that 11% of respondents left their classroom because

they received a promotion and, as mentioned previously, 36% of respondents answered that they were still a part of the education field at large, movement into not only higher paying positions in a different auspice, but into higher ranking positions overall is a trend to consider when studying turnover. While moving into another early childhood position is often a loss for the children, it is often a plus for a program to have an experienced professional in a higher position.

Another area of note is the high rate of former teachers who indicated a lack of support for children with challenging behaviors as a reason for leaving the classroom (12%). An additional 7% answered that they left the classroom because of difficulty supporting children with special needs, and 5% answered that they wished for a smaller classroom size (see Appendix for these statistics). Considering all of these responses together, 24% of respondents left the classroom due to a lack of support around classroom management or a lack of capacity to meet individual children's needs.



If adding K-12 teachers, assistant teachers, and substitutes as well those who care for school age children to those who chose "another field," the percentage of those in another field increases to 65%.

Only 45% said they might return to teaching.

Future Plans to Return or Remain Out of the Classroom

Q4: Do you plan on being a birth to five year old teacher/assistant teacher in the future?

The next question asked respondents if they planned to return to the early childhood field in the future. A total of 2,483 answered, and the majority (55%) indicated that they had no plans to return to the classroom. Only 10% indicated that they had plans to return, but an additional 35% responded that they may come back to the classroom. Therefore, less than half, or 45%, of those former classroom teachers surveyed indicated any potential that they would return.

Future Plans to Return if Reasons for Leaving Were to Change

Q5: If any of the items that you listed in Question 3 were to change, would you consider becoming a classroom teacher/assistant teacher?

A total of 2,226 people answered the final question. In contrast to the

prior question, the share of potential returners increased to 64% when respondents stated they would plan to resume teaching if the factors they had listed as reasons for leaving were to change or improve. In this question, only 35% of respondents indicated that they would definitely not return to the field, while 37% answered "yes," and 27% answered "maybe."

DISCUSSION

The distribution of respondents' replies about current employment raises interesting questions about the nature of turnover in North Carolina's early childhood field. Including those still in the early childhood field, a total of 37% of respondents answered that they were still educating or caring for children in some capacity⁵. This is in alignment with a trend early childhood workforce advocates have identified, which is a high rate of site-specific turnover, but a significant number of those teachers staying in the early childhood field in general (Russell, 2016). Movement into other positions in the field shows that former teachers may not be disillusioned with teaching in general, but are unsatisfied with current working conditions in the birth to five classroom. This reason is reflected in the answers

REASONS FOR LEAVING THE CLASSROOM TABLE 2 Make More Money 41% **Professional Growth** 32% **Better Benefits Better Working Conditions More Respect** 20% 16% 12% 12% 11% 11% Support for Challenging Behaviors More Paid Time Off Received A Promotion Stay Home with Family to the survey—only 5% responded "teaching is not for me" when asked why they left the classroom. Though the trend of movement into other positions in the early childhood field has already been identified as a promising sign that teachers might stay in the classroom if conditions were improved, considering matriculation into other positions in the education field broadens even further the possible population of teachers who are still interested in teaching, and therefore might consider returning.

Zooming out more broadly to include those who have stayed in the education field reveals the possible impact of factors such as the wage penalty: the phenomenon that teachers of young children are paid less as they work with younger age groups. Other possible "penalties" for teaching birth to five as opposed to holding another position in the education field include lack of opportunities for professional growth (32%), lack of benefits (25%), and lack of respect (16%).

⁵ It is also possible that some of the 57% who chose "another field" considered K-12 education to be a separate field, meaning the "education field" category may be underreported.

With changes 64% said they might return to teaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Key Takeaways

- Of those surveyed, 36% had remained in the education field in some capacity, even if they left ECE, and only 5% said "teaching is not for me." This suggests that a large portion of teachers who leave the classroom are still interested in teaching.
- The number of respondents who would consider returning to the classroom even with no improvements started at a high 45%, and jumped all the way to 64% with the possibility of improvements. This shows the necessity for intervention and supports to improve working conditions and retain North Carolina's early childhood educators.
- The most frequent reasons for leaving the classroom were wanting to be paid more, wanting opportunities for professional growth, and wanting better benefits. These are key areas to concentrate research, funding, and programmatic supports.

The 2019 Workforce Study

Child Care Services Association periodically studies North Carolina's early childhood workforce. CCSA is in the process of conducting the 2019 study with results due late summer 2020. This teacher turnover survey was conducted as part of the 2019 North Carolina Early Childhood Workforce Study, and the 2015 workforce study results were cited in this report. Child Care Services Association's ECE workforce studies assess the ECE workforce in a particular geographic area. A workforce study usually includes questions about wages, benefits, experience, education and training, job satisfaction and turnover of teachers, directors, and family child care providers. The turnover rates collected will be broken down by auspice and type of teacher.

The 2019 Workforce Study will provide robust quantitative data to help complete the picture that the teacher turnover survey has begun to paint. As well as substantiating the results of the teacher turnover survey, the results of the workforce study will offer opportunities for future research by those interested in the well-being of the early childhood education workforce. Some recommendations for research are listed here, grouped by theme.

Research Recommendations

1. General

- Use weighted sampling to ensure all relevant groups are captured. The sample should include representative numbers of assistant teachers vs. teachers, as well as teachers and assistant teachers with associate degrees, bachelor's, and master's, etc.
- In future surveys, allow former teachers to expand their answers about what would have prevented them from leaving the field and what would make them consider returning.
- Diversample those who stayed in the field but left the

- classroom, or conduct interviews/focus groups to gain more information. Gaining an understanding of the former teachers who moved to another position in the field may reveal a promising opportunity to keep early childhood professionals in the classroom if conditions are improved.
- Provide an option for respondents to choose "Other Position in the Education Field" for those employed in a public school, or a school age care program.

2. Wages and Benefits

- The 2019 ECE Workforce study will provide insight about the current working conditions of the ECE workforce by county for the first time in over 15 years. Since the most frequent reason respondents gave for leaving the field was "wanting to make more money," research focusing on wages is a priority. Using the results of the workforce study, identify and contrast geographic areas with the lowest wages relative to cost of living and highest wages relative to cost of living as places to concentrate the study of teacher turnover.
- Prioritize/oversample infant toddler teachers, for whom the "wage penalty" is highest.

3. Professional Growth

- Use surveys, interviews, or focus groups to understand how teachers define "professional growth" and what kinds of professional mobility would inspire them to continue working in the birth to five classroom.
- Explore the relationship between higher education and the desire for professional growth. In a future survey, ask former teachers whether they have received an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree in early childhood, and whether they received and were satisfied with an increase in pay or a promotion to a new role such as "lead teacher."

4. Classroom Management

Use surveys, interviews, or focus groups to understand in more detail how teachers who left the field experienced challenging behaviors and what kinds of classroom management support would inspire them to continue working in the birth to five classroom.

More robust research is needed to understand the mechanisms of teacher turnover in North Carolina and possible opportunities for keeping teachers in their birth to five classrooms. Despite its limitations, the teacher turnover survey has revealed promising directions for further study, in alignment with corroborating evidence from the existing early childhood literature. Addressing the crisis of teacher turnover will require innovative approaches to research, as well as hearing from those who are most impacted, in order to create sustainable solutions.

Teachers said the biggest reason they left was to earn more money.

APPENDIX

Q1: Currently Teaching in a Birth to Five Classroom	Number	Percentage
Yes	7471	71%
No	3013	29%

Q2: Current Work Situation	Number	Percentage
I no longer work in the early childhood education field	1611	57%
Other	427	15%
I am working in a different position in child care (director, assistant director, etc.)	333	12%
I am working in the Early Childhood field but in a different capacity (CCR&R, Smart Start, community college, etc.)	185	7%
I am teaching birth to five in another state	136	5%
I am a Family Child Care Provider	61	2%
I am teaching in an unlicensed program	55	2%

Breakdown of "Other" Respondents	Number	Percentage
K-12 Teacher	150	35%
K-12 Teacher Assistant	43	10%
Caring for own children/grandchildren	27	6%
Retired	27	6%
School Age Care	27	6%
Nanny	25	6%
Disabled	18	4%
Unemployed	13	3%
In School	9	2%
Substitute Teacher	6	1%
Deceased	2	0%
Miscellaneous	80	19%

Q3: Reasons for Leaving the Classroom	Number	Percentage
Wanted to make more money	956	41%
Wanted more opportunities for professional growth	741	32%
Wanted better benefits	578	25%
Wanted better working conditions	466	20%
Wanted more respect	380	16%
More support for children with challenging behaviors	270	12%
Wanted more paid time off	269	12%
Other	258	11%
Received a promotion	244	11%
Stay home with family	243	11%
Went back to school	212	9%
Retired	199	9%
More support for children with special needs	172	7%
Wanted more planning time	130	6%
Teaching is not for me	126	5%
Wanted a smaller class size	121	5%
Wanted different hours	114	5%
Wanted more hours	68	3%
Wanted fewer hours	66	3%
Health difficulties*	63	3%
Moved and couldn't find job in child care program	62	3%

Q4: Future Plans to be a Birth to Five Teacher/Assistant Teacher	Number	Percentage
Yes	249	10%
Maybe	869	35%
No	1375	55%

Q5: Future Plans to be a Birth to Five Teacher/Assistant Teacher if Factors Listed in Question 3 Were to Change	Number	Percentage
Yes	609	27%
Maybe	835	37%
No	788	35%

^{*}Health was not a listed option to choose from but was included so much under "other" that it needed to be pulled out on its own. Responses ranged from people who were disabled and no longer able to work at all to those who could work in other capacities but not meet the physical demands of working in a classroom.

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For more information about the Teacher Turnover Policy Brief, please contact the Research Department at Child Care Services Association at (919) 967-3272.

This report was co-authored by CCSA staff Allory Bors and Joy Turner, and managed by Marsha Basloe, Mary Martin, and Cass Wolfe.



CHILD CARE **SERVICES ASSOCIATION**

PO Box 901 Chapel Hill, NC 27514





www.childcareservices.org





