



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

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

## Summary:

- This report highlights several key findings about staffing challenges during the pandemic from the perspective of 110 leaders of child care centers in Louisiana in Fall 2020.
- Almost all leaders (90%) found staffing their site difficult. Due to COVID, more than half of the child care sites in our sample lost valuable teachers.
- The teachers who remained experienced changes to their job duties, schedules, benefits, and pay. At sites that lost teachers, 86% of leaders reported that the remaining teachers were having to take on additional tasks due to COVID.
- Most site leaders reported they used or planned to use relief dollars to support teachers: 79% indicated they used or planned to use the money to cover staff wages, 53% to increase staff wages.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of leaders reported that they have struggled to find the teachers they need during the pandemic. Leaders who reported laying off teachers during the pandemic were more likely to also report struggling with recruiting teachers.

Early educators do complex, challenging work that is critical for young children's learning and development. In the United States, many who take on this strenuous work receive low compensation and limited professional supports.<sup>1</sup> In turn, recruiting and retaining teachers in early care and education (ECE) settings historically has been difficult. This is particularly true in child care settings, which receive limited public support and operate on very tight margins. In Louisiana almost half of lead teachers in child care settings leave their job each year.<sup>2</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID) exacerbated staffing challenges at child care centers. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that the early childhood workforce shrank substantially during the pandemic: In March 2021, there were almost 160,000 fewer people working in child care than in February 2020.<sup>3</sup>







One explanation for these drops is COVID’s damaging impact on child care sites’ enrollment and revenue. National data show that mandated site closures coupled with parents’ job losses and remote work led to serious financial challenges for sites.<sup>4</sup> Recent estimates suggest that as of June 2020, child care providers in Louisiana had collectively lost nearly 140 million dollars.<sup>5</sup> Child care sites also faced increased costs. They had to purchase health and safety supplies and personal protective equipment. They also had to comply with more stringent group size limits and child-to-teacher ratios. In response, many sites were forced to cut costs in ways that impacted early educators. In one national survey conducted in December 2020, 60% of child care workers reported that their site had reduced expenses by using layoffs, furloughs, and pay cuts.<sup>6</sup>

Another factor contributing to the contracting child care workforce was early educators leaving their positions for their own health, family, or other reasons.<sup>7</sup> Older early educators or teachers with COVID-related health concerns may have perceived the risk of working in person as too great. Other child care teachers may have left due to new caregiving responsibilities, including caring for their school-age children who were out of school during the pandemic.

The child care workforce has been incrementally growing since April of 2020 as child care sites re-opened, families re-enrolled, and relief dollars became more available.<sup>8</sup> However, the industry remains considerably smaller than it was before the pandemic and recent accounts<sup>9</sup> suggest sites are struggling to recruit and retain qualified candidates.<sup>10</sup>

This report takes a closer look at child care staffing issues in the wake of COVID using data from three large Louisiana parishes collected in the fall of 2020. In these communities, leaders of all child care sites that receive any public funding were invited to respond to the Study of Early Education in Louisiana<sup>11</sup> leader survey. At least one leader in 110 child care sites responded, representing over 60% of publicly funded child care sites.<sup>12</sup>

#### ABOUT THE SAMPLE

	<b>93%</b> Owner and/or director
	<b>5%</b> Assistant director
	<b>2%</b> Another leadership role
	<b>96%</b> Female
	<b>61%</b> Black, non-Hispanic
	<b>32%</b> White, non-Hispanic
	<b>5%</b> Hispanic, regardless of race
	<b>2%</b> American Indian/Native Alaskan
	<b>37%</b> High school diploma or less
	<b>11%</b> Associate degree
	<b>52%</b> Bachelor’s degree or higher
	<b>11 years</b> Average time leaders had worked at their site
	<b>93%</b> Were in their current position when the pandemic began

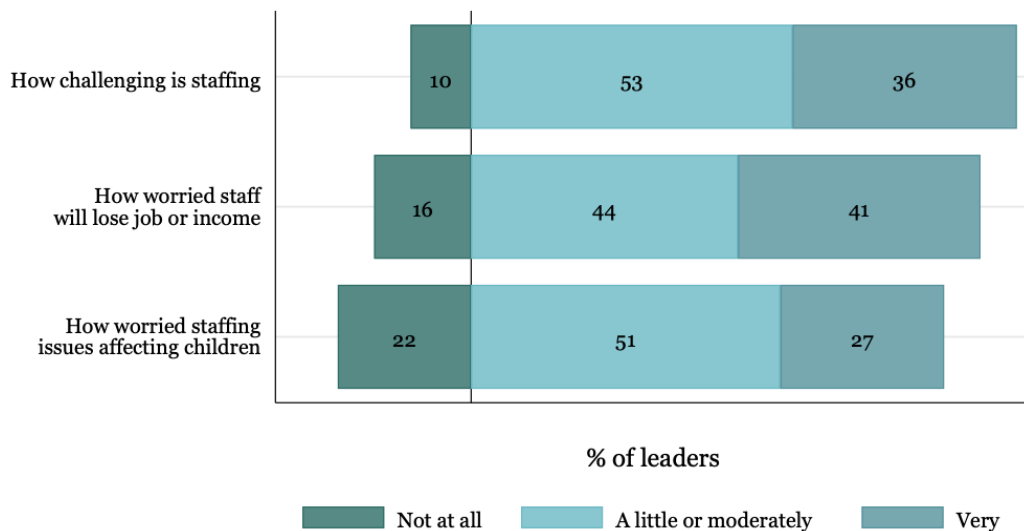
The survey’s well-defined sample, detailed questions about staffing, and high response rate provide a unique opportunity to understand the multiple challenges leaders faced staffing their sites during COVID.

## Staffing Child Care Sites during COVID

Like child care leaders nationwide, respondents in the three study communities reported challenges with recruiting and retaining teachers during COVID. On average, leaders reported that 4 teachers (including lead and assistant teachers) had left their site since the start of the pandemic. This rate of exits is high given that, on average, sites in our sample employed 10 teachers at the time of the survey. Most leaders (60%) reported at least one vacancy for a lead or assistant teacher: About half (51%) had at least one lead teacher vacancy, and 44% had at least one assistant teacher vacancy.

More than half (55%) indicated they lost valuable teachers at their site due to the pandemic. As shown in Figure 1, 90% of leaders reported that staffing (e.g., teachers leaving and vacancies) was at least a little challenging, with 36% reporting it was very challenging. Leaders were worried about the pandemic’s impact on their teachers: 85% were at least a little worried that the pandemic would result in their staff losing their jobs or income. Nearly 4 in 5 leaders (78%) were concerned that staffing difficulties at their site were having a negative impact on children.

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



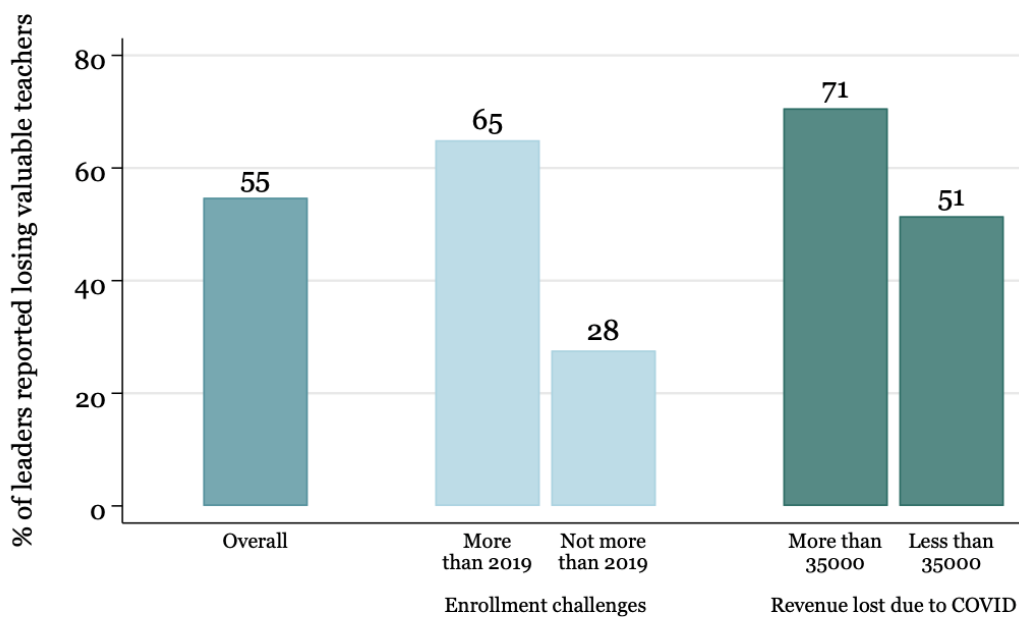
**Note:** Based on 107 - 108 responses.

## Enrollment Declines, Revenue Losses, and Staff Attrition

One major driver of child care staffing challenges was the drop in child enrollment and the financial struggles this created. Leaders reported lower enrollment in the fall of 2020 than at the same time in 2019. On average, site enrollment dropped from 62 children in 2019 to 46 in 2020, a 25% decline. Seventy-three percent of leaders reported they were facing greater enrollment challenges than the previous year, and the same percentage also reported that fluctuations in enrollment and attendance made staffing and budgeting difficult.

These enrollment challenges, as well as other operational difficulties caused by COVID, led to large losses in revenue. Among the 69 leaders who responded to a question about revenue lost, the median amount lost since the beginning of the pandemic was \$35,000.

**Figure 2. Relationship between enrollment, revenues, and loss of teachers**



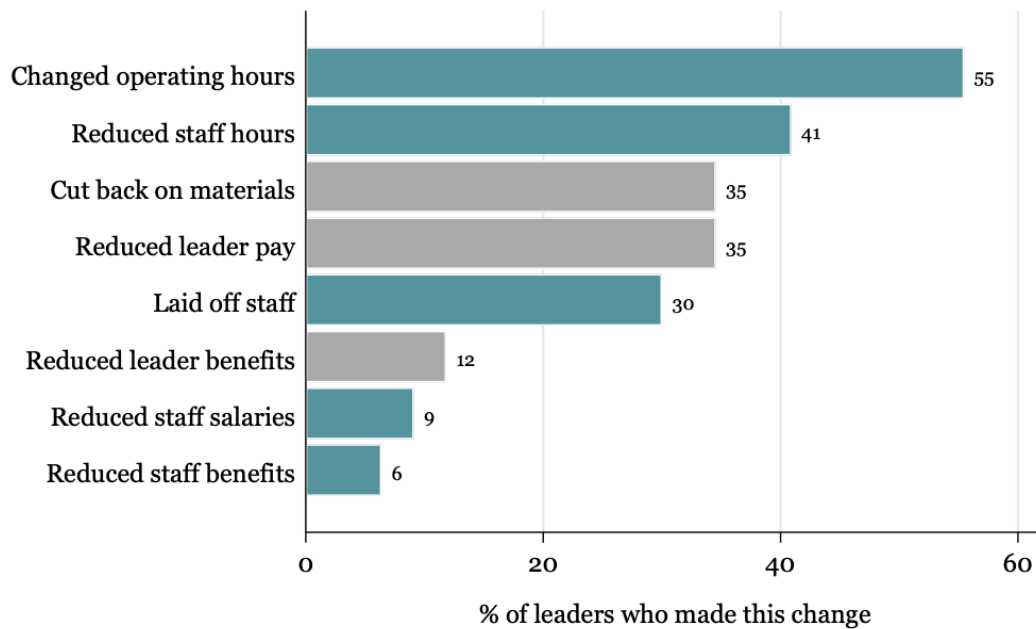
**Note:** Figure reports leaders who agreed or strongly agreed they lost valuable teachers for the full sample (N = 108); by perceived enrollment challenges (N = 106); and by lost revenue (N = 69). Respondents with increased enrollment challenges were defined as those agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were experiencing more challenges relative to 2019. Respondents with greater revenue losses were defined as those above the median reported revenue loss, or \$35,000.

As shown in Figure 2, sites that struggled more with enrollment and financial challenges were also more likely to report staffing challenges. Among the nearly three quarters of leaders who reported enrollment was more challenging than in 2019, 65% indicated that they had lost valuable teachers due to the pandemic. In contrast, among leaders who did not indicate enrollment challenges increased, only 28% said they had lost valued teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, among the half of leaders who reported their site lost more than \$35,000 due to COVID, 71% indicated they had lost valuable teachers. Among those who lost less than \$35,000, just over half (51%) reported losing valued teachers.

To counteract the enrollment drops and revenue lost, many sites had to cut costs. Figure 3 highlights the many ways sites approached cost cutting. Almost one-third of leaders (30%) reported that their site laid off staff. In addition to layoffs, many site leaders made operational changes with direct implications for their teachers: Fifty-five percent of sites changed their operating hours, which may have disrupted teachers’ normal work schedules; 41% reduced staff hours; 9% reduced staff salaries; and 6% reduced staff benefits. Many leaders (35%) also reported that they reduced their own pay as a cost-cutting measure.

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



**Note:** Based on 110 responses.  
Blue bars indicate cuts that most directly impacted teachers.

## Changes to Early Childhood Work during the Pandemic

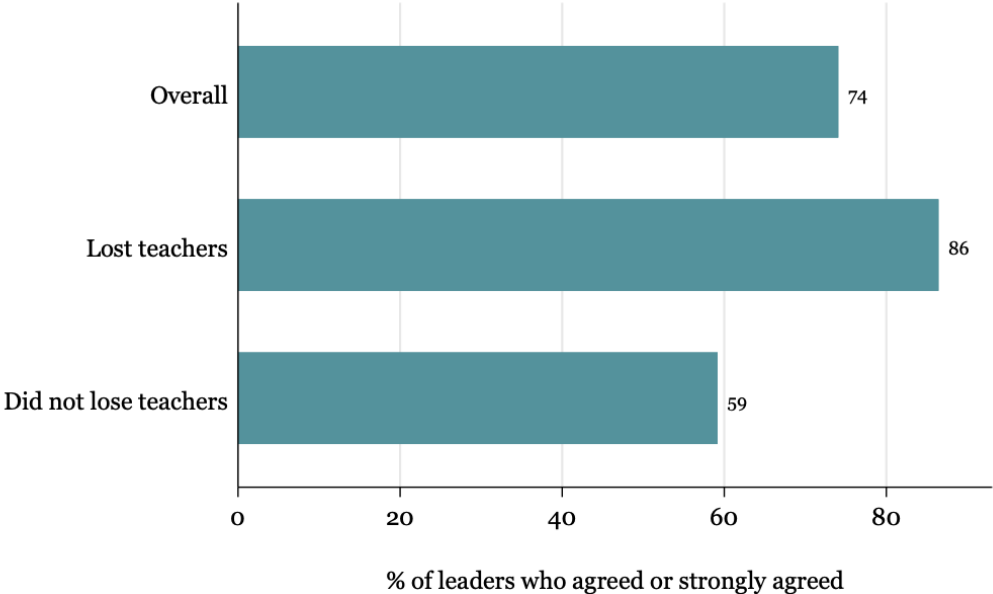
For many of the teachers who stayed at their sites, the pandemic changed the nature of their job over and above the changes in schedules, compensation, and benefits reported above. Teachers reported taking on additional job duties; changing practices to comply with heightened health and safety requirements; adjusting to new ways of interacting with young children; and experiencing more stress.<sup>14</sup>

**“Teachers are experiencing high levels of anxiety. Teachers and their assistants are required to work longer days due to static grouping mandates.”**

Almost three-quarters (74%) of leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they were asking teachers to take on additional duties due to the coronavirus pandemic. As Figure 4 illustrates, this was especially

true at sites that lost teachers due to COVID, where remaining teachers may have had to take on more job responsibilities to compensate for a smaller staff. Leaders who reported losing teachers were much more likely to report asking their teachers to take on more duties due to COVID than leaders who did not (86% vs. 59%).

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



**Note:** Based on 108 responses.

In addition to taking on new responsibilities, the pandemic meant that teachers faced heightened risks to their personal health in the workplace. Almost half (48%) of leaders reported at least one positive case of COVID in a staff member or child at their site. Most leaders (92%) worried that staff, families, or children would be exposed to COVID at their site, and many (68%) were concerned they would not have enough health and safety supplies to keep people safe.

It is not clear to what extent these stressors contributed to teachers' decisions to leave their positions, but in write-in comments, many leaders highlighted the impact of COVID on teachers' stress and wellbeing. One leader reported, "It has been an emotional and psychological strain on staff. Many have health concerns of their own and worry about the possibility of getting sick."<sup>15</sup> Another commented, "Teachers are experiencing high levels of anxiety. Teachers and their assistants are required to work longer days due to static grouping mandates." A third leader explicitly linked these new challenges to teacher exits: "People have quit with no notice due to the increased workload."

**"People have quit with no notice due to the increased workload."**

## Hiring New Teachers during COVID

While much of the public conversation about the impact of COVID on child care staffing has focused on job losses, many leaders needed to hire new teachers during the pandemic. Indeed, 83% of leaders had hired at least one lead or assistant teacher since the pandemic began, and, as noted above, 60% reported they currently had a teacher vacancy.

There were several reasons sites needed new hires during the pandemic. Some leaders reported needing additional personnel to implement changes related to health and safety; for example, needing extra staff to take on cleaning duties, allow for smaller group sizes, or better manage the pick-up and drop-off process. One leader wrote: "Since we can't allow parents in the center it requires more staff at drop off and pickup times. We don't combine classrooms for fear of COVID outbreak, so we need teachers in each class from open to close, which makes for really long days and struggles to find coverage."

Others sites may have needed teachers to fill vacancies created when teachers left. And, while most site leaders reported drops in enrollment, about 1 in 5 (18%) had *increased* enrollment between fall 2019 and fall 2020, which likely required more teachers for those sites.

**"Nobody wants to take on the stress and responsibility of taking care of young children for minimum wage."**

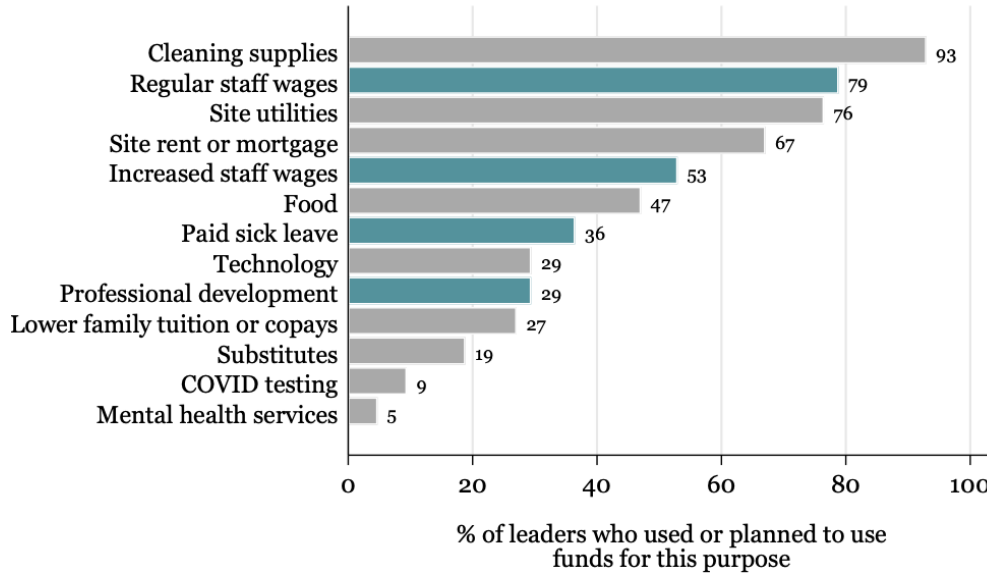
After the initial pandemic closures, access to financial supports as well as gradual increases in enrollment may have led sites to try to re-fill

positions that had been eliminated in the early stages of the pandemic. Every leader in our sample reported receiving at least one form of COVID-related relief funds (e.g., loans or grants through the Paycheck Protection Program, LaCAP,



Front Line Workers' Rebates, or others), and many reported they used or planned to use that money for personnel-related expenses. Seventy-nine percent of leaders used or planned to use the COVID assistance funds for regular staff wages, 53% for increase staff wages, and 36% to offer paid sick leave (Figure 5).

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



**Note:** Based on 85 responses  
Blue bars indicate expenditures that most directly impact teachers.

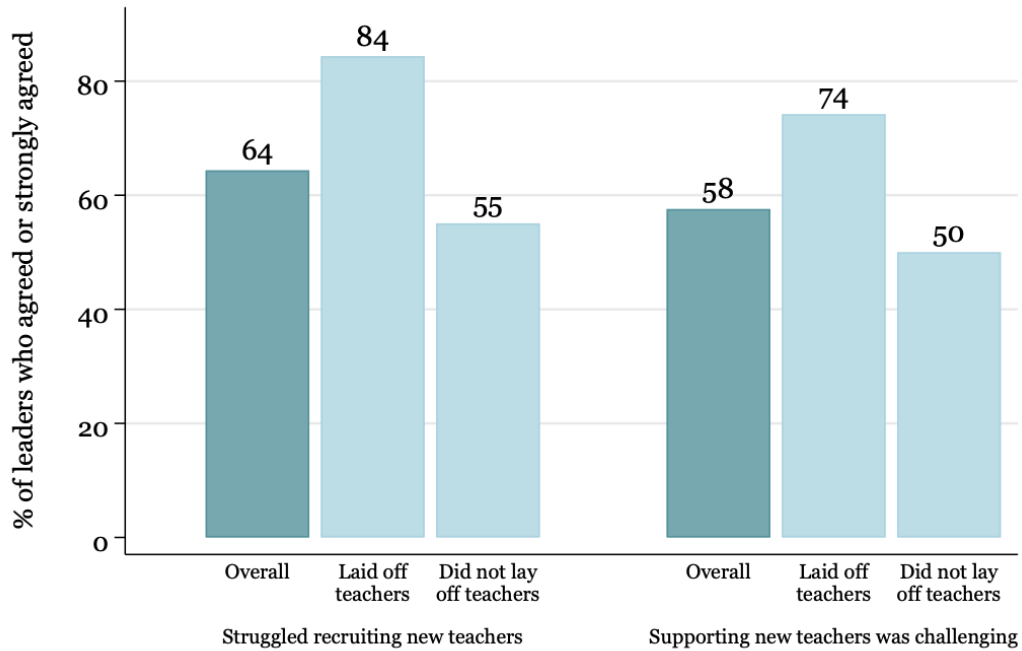
Still, leaders faced substantial challenges filling needed positions: Overall, 64% of leaders agreed or strongly agreed that, due to COVID, they were struggling to recruit the teachers that they needed, and 58% agreed or strongly agreed that since COVID began, it has been challenging to train and support new teachers (Figure 6).

**“We do *not* have the applicants coming in to fill our vacancies. We have college students filling in as leads in 2 rooms where we have no qualified applicants to even interview.”**

These challenges were more pronounced for leaders who also reported that they had laid off teachers during the pandemic. While 84% of the leaders in that group reported struggling to recruit the teachers that they needed, this was only true for 55% of leaders who had not laid off teachers. Similarly, 74% of leaders who had laid off teachers found it challenging to support and train new teachers, compared to 50% of leaders who had not. This discrepancy is not explained by differences across groups in the likelihood of *hiring* teachers. Both sites that laid off staff and sites that did not had hired, on average, 3 teachers since COVID began.

Many leaders were concerned about their inability to fill needed positions. One site leader explained, “Nobody wants to take on the stress and responsibility of taking care of young children for minimum wage.” Another reported, “We do *not* have the applicants coming in to fill our vacancies. We have college students filling in as leads in 2 rooms where we have no qualified applicants to even interview.”

**Figure 6. Challenges recruiting and supporting new teachers during the pandemic**



**Note:** Based on 99 - 101 responses.

## Implications

Early educators do challenging work, often for little pay, so staffing issues have long been a concern for child care leaders. The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated staffing challenges. Child care leaders struggled to pay and retain teachers, and they also struggled to recruit new teachers.

More than half of the leaders in our sample reported losing teachers who were valuable to their site due to COVID. Low and unpredictable enrollment and attendance, combined with revenue losses, forced leaders to make budget cuts that affected teachers. Almost a third laid off staff to cut costs.

COVID also made the already-difficult job of being a child care teacher even harder. Leaders reported changing teachers’ work schedules and reducing their

pay and benefits in order to cut costs. These changes, coupled with being asked to take on additional duties and expose themselves to greater health risks, may have driven some teachers to quit their jobs. These worsening job conditions may also have made it harder than usual to recruit new staff.

COVID recovery funding – from the CARES Act and others – may give sites the financial resources needed to rebuild their child care staff. Seventy-nine percent of leaders used or planned to use the COVID assistance funds for regular staff wages, 53% for increased staff wages, and 36% to offer paid sick leave.

At the same time, leaders can only use relief funds to hire new teachers if they can find qualified teachers to fill those vacancies. Nearly two-thirds of leaders in our sample indicated they were struggling to recruit necessary teachers. This is consistent with recent media accounts<sup>16</sup> showing that some child care sites with waitlists and the capacity to care for more children are turning families away - and even closing<sup>17</sup> - due to their inability to find new teachers.

In the short-term, states and communities can explore creative solutions to help sites attract and retain qualified teachers. They can earmark portions of their relief funds specifically for teacher compensation. In Louisiana, for example, policymakers are using COVID relief funds to offer centers Teacher Support Grants, which are funds that must be used specifically for compensating child care teachers. States and communities can also make infrastructure investments like establishing substitute teacher pools sites can use to find reliable back-ups when regular staff are unable to work or need to be out of the classroom for professional development.

Ultimately, short-term solutions designed to return sites to pre-pandemic operations will not be enough to address the staffing challenges that have long affected child care. In Louisiana, even prior to the pandemic, nearly half of child care lead teachers left their sites from one year to the next. Bold, long-term financial investments are needed to meaningfully impact child care staffing beyond the pandemic, such as ensuring living wages for all early educators and providing enhanced employee benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave.

Recovery funds are temporary and typically come to sites in the form of short-term grants. Though critical, these funds make it difficult to implement changes with ongoing costs, such as changes to compensation packages. Funding reforms that allow for long-term staffing supports will be essential to ensure that sites are able to meet families' needs for care and to provide warm, developmentally rich environments for young children.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>8</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.).
- <sup>9</sup> Albertson-Grove, J. (2021, April 24). High demand, staff shortages create a child care quandary in NH. *New Hampshire Union Leader*. [https://www.unionleader.com/news/education/high-demand-staff-shortages-create-a-child-care-quandary-in-nh/article\\_b95426ae-5217-57a3-a5bc-2695462b0255.html](https://www.unionleader.com/news/education/high-demand-staff-shortages-create-a-child-care-quandary-in-nh/article_b95426ae-5217-57a3-a5bc-2695462b0255.html)
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- <sup>10</sup> NAEYC (2020, December).
- <sup>11</sup> More information on the Study of Early Education in Louisiana can be found on our website: <see-partnerships.com>

- <sup>12</sup> Our sample includes 43 leaders from Jefferson parish, 18 from Rapides parish, and 49 from Orleans parish, representing response rates of 68%, 67%, and 60%, respectively. These response rates are high relative to both pre-pandemic surveys of child care leaders, and other COVID child care surveys that report response rates.
- <sup>13</sup> Similarly, 63% of leaders reported that *attendance* challenges were higher in fall of 2020 relative to the same time in 2019. Sixty-two percent of these leaders reported losing valuable teachers compared to 35% of those leaders who did not experience increased attendance problems.
- <sup>14</sup> Bassok, D., Weisner, K., Markowitz, A.J., & Hall, T. (2021). *Teaching Young Children during COVID-19: Lessons from Early Educators in Louisiana*.  
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