The child care sector in the United States is characterized by very high rates of teacher turnover. This was true prior to the pandemic, but COVID-19 has made things considerably worse. Recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the child care workforce is now 10 percent smaller than in pre-pandemic times (BLS, 2021). Many media accounts describe staffing shortages so pronounced that sites are turning families away or shutting down.

Our research program, the Study of Early Education in Louisiana, has a long-standing partnership with the early childhood team at the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). During COVID-19, our partners have heard many concerns about the stability of the child care workforce and the challenges that directors face in filling teaching positions. Indeed, when LDOE surveyed early-childhood stakeholders about the best use for American Rescue Plan funds, 93 percent ranked “supplementing child care teacher wages, for workforce recruitment and retention” as a high priority. With this in mind, LDOE allocated $27 million in relief dollars to Teacher Support Grants—specifically for stipends, bonuses, and wage supplements, with the explicit aim of workforce stabilization.

While our partners knew that many centers needed help, they felt that clear data on the severity and spread of staffing challenges was needed to inform policy investments. They also wanted to track whether new funding improved stability. Like many states, however, Louisiana cannot yet collect systemwide data (such as wages and turnover rates) about the child care workforce. Our research team proposed using the application process for the support grants as an opportunity to collect systemwide data. Asking child care leaders a short set of questions as part of the application process proved to be a feasible, low-cost way to gather essential data, allowing our team to provide much-needed analytical capacity.

We now have the first round of application data from the 690 sites applying for funds (79 percent of all publicly funded child care sites statewide). These data quantify the staggering extent of staffing challenges. More than 70 percent of sites reported at least one teacher vacancy, and 35 percent reported that more than a quarter of their positions were unstaffed (Figure 1). Nearly 50 percent of leaders reported that losing teachers has been “very challenging” for their site; 70 percent reported that it was “very challenging” to find and hire replacement teachers. About 85 percent said they had to ask remaining staff to work more hours or take on additional roles; three-quarters worried that staffing would negatively affect children; and nearly half were serving fewer children or turning families away (Figure 2).

These statewide data—which wouldn’t have existed without the partnership—give LDOE a clearer understanding of the current landscape. LDOE intends to disburse additional funds, and we will use information from future grant applications to track
changes over time, both in compensation and stability. We'll also be able to tackle policy-relevant questions of broad interest, such as, How are wages and turnover rates linked? Are some approaches to allocating bonuses particularly effective? As the United States considers unprecedented investments in the child care sector, partnerships can help policy makers develop low-cost ways to track returns on investments using large-scale data, and ensure that early educators are better supported.

**Figure 1:** Child Care Leaders' Report of Current Teacher Vacancies

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents reporting different levels of vacancies.](chart1.png)

**Note:** Based on 673 responses. A site's vacancy rate was calculated as the number of teacher vacancies at the site divided by the sum of vacancies and current teachers at the site.

**Figure 2:** Child Care Leaders' Views on the Impacts of Staffing Challenges for Staff, Children, and Families

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents reporting different impacts of staffing challenges.](chart2.png)

**Note:** Based on 673 responses.