

Changes in Early Educator Wellbeing and Job Commitment in the Wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic: Lessons from Large-Scale Surveys in Jefferson and Rapides Parishes

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SUMMARY

- When teachers struggle emotionally and financially, they are less able to interact with young children in a way that promotes development, and they are more likely to leave their sites
- Prior to COVID, early educators already reported high levels of depression, financial stress, and food insecurity as well as low job commitment
- Child care teachers had substantially lower levels of wellbeing and commitment than their school-based peers
- After COVID, teachers reported significantly lower wellbeing and up to a 10% reduction in job commitment
- Post-COVID policy initiatives should focus on retaining and supporting the early childhood workforce, especially in child care, to best serve children

Early educators are the key ingredient in high-quality early care and education (ECE) experiences for young children, whether they work in child care settings or in school-based pre-kindergarten.¹ Unfortunately, early educators in the U.S. are, on average, paid substantially less than educators working with older children, and in turn have lower levels of financial and emotional wellbeing, and higher levels of turnover.

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID) likely exacerbated these conditions, as teachers had to adapt their classroom practices, implement new health and safety routines, and manage the COVID-related stress of the children, their families, and co-workers alongside their own.

Surveys of child care leadersⁱ and teachersⁱⁱ conducted during the pandemic provide compelling evidence that emotional and financial wellbeing are indeed low. They have raised significant concerns about the quality of

¹ Although Head Start sites are also a critical part of the ECE landscape in Louisiana, they were not able to participate in the study.

care children are receiving and the long-run stability of the child care sector in particular. However, because these surveys only use data from one time point, it is impossible to distinguish how much teachers' responses reflect *changes* due to COVID from their existing struggles pre-COVID.

Additionally, many existing COVID surveys cover just a single ECE sector (e.g., only child care or only school-based settings). Although COVID was challenging for teachers in both child care and school-based settings, the difficulties child care settings faced as they offered in-person care for essential workers without a consistent source of public funding likely impacted teachers' pandemic experiences.

This brief uses two years of data from Louisiana to answer two questions:

1. What were early educators' levels of emotional wellbeing, financial wellbeing, and job commitment in fall 2019 (pre-pandemic), and did they vary by sector?
2. How did wellbeing and commitment change from fall 2019 to fall 2020, and did changes vary by sector?

Understanding wellbeing prior to the pandemic and how COVID impacted early educators in both child care and school-based settings allows policymakers to better target recovery dollars and to build better, more stable care for the future.

DATA

We compared teacher emotional wellbeing, financial wellbeing and job commitment before and during COVID both overall and separately for child care and school-based pre-k sites using data from the fall 2019 and 2020 waves of the Study of Early Education in Louisiana Workforce Survey.ⁱⁱⁱ In both years, surveys were sent to all teachers working with children ages 0-5, not yet in kindergarten working in publicly-funded child care and school-based state pre-k sites. In 2020, surveys were sent to sites that were open and providing care, either remotely or in-person. Response rates were 71% in 2019 (October through December 2019, N~870) and 68% in 2020 (October through December 2020, N~870). We restricted our sample to lead teachers; in 2019 this included 327 teachers in 69 child care centers and 219 teachers in 78 schools, and in 2020 this included 288 teachers in 68 child care centers and 197 teachers in 76 schools. Table 1 presents teacher and job characteristics.

Child care teachers have, on average, lower levels of education. While about 55% of child care teachers are Black or Brown women, only about 25% of school-based teachers are. Notably, across both years teachers in child care make about half of those in schools. The average salary for child care teachers in our sample in 2019 was \$21,000: an amount less than the 2019 federal poverty line for a family of three.

Table 1: Teacher characteristics

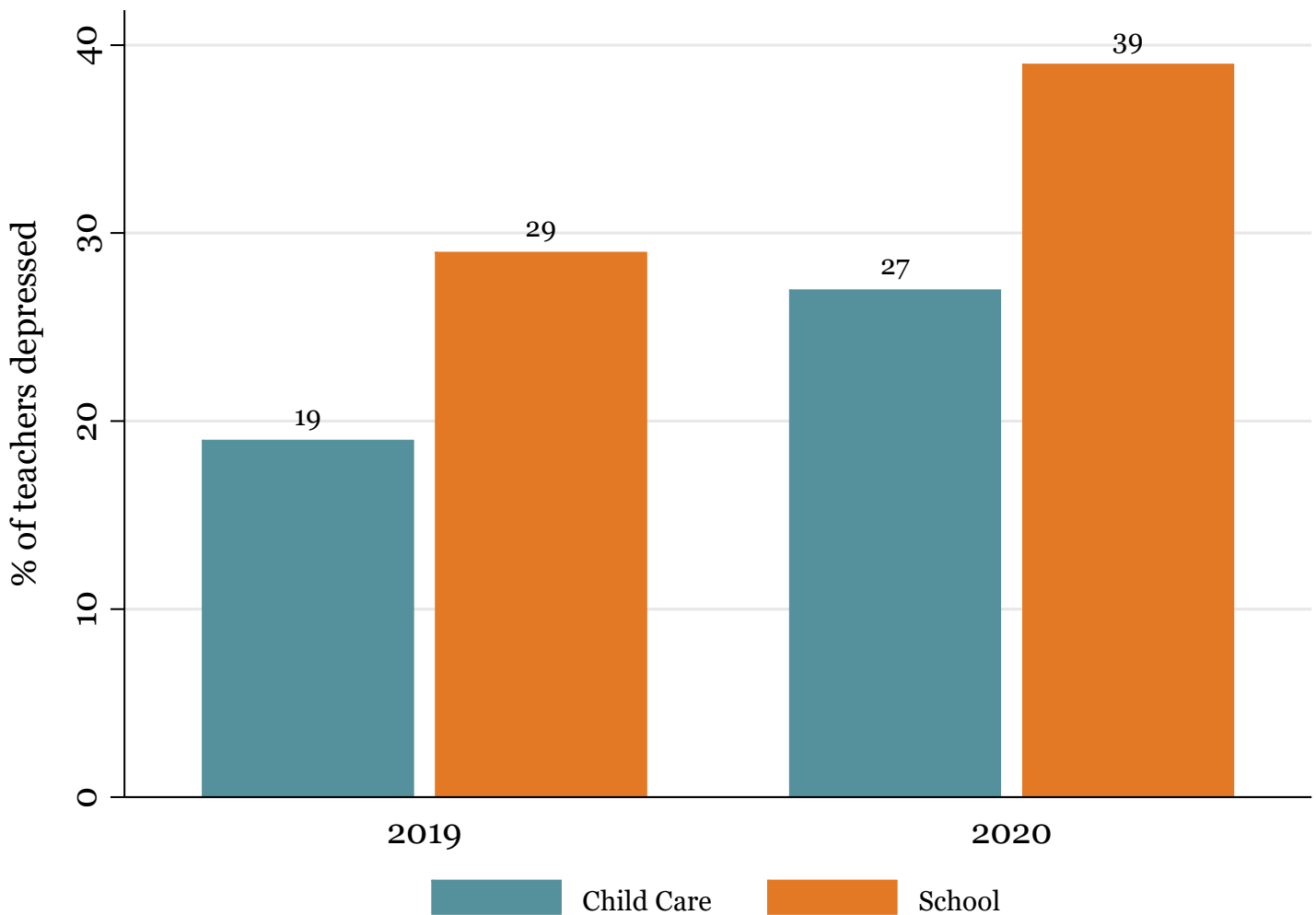
		<u>Child Care</u>		<u>School-Based Pre-K</u>	
	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>	
<i>Age Group Served</i>					
3 to 5	32%	27%	89%	78%	
0 to 2	63%	64%	0%	0%	
Multiple age groups	4%	9%	11%	21%	
<i>Education</i>					
High school/GED or less	42%	45%	0%	1%	
Some college	45%	41%	3%	2%	
Bachelors degree or more	13%	14%	97%	98%	
<i>Teacher Race</i>					
White	45%	44%	78%	74%	
Black	45%	47%	17%	17%	
Hispanic	7%	5%	3%	5%	
Other Race	3%	4%	2%	4%	
<i>Average Salary</i>					
	\$20,900	\$22,850	\$45,450	\$45,300	
<i>Parish</i>					
Jefferson	68%	71%	63%	64%	
Rapides	32%	29%	37%	36%	
<i>Sample Size</i>					
	328	304	219	198	

This brief examines three measures of teachers' wellbeing: teacher depression, food insecurity and financial stress; and three measures of job commitment: belief that you will still teach at your site in 6 months and 3 years, and belief that ECE is your long-term career.^{iv} All differences noted are statistically significant in models that account for the differences in teacher and job characteristics in child care and school-based settings described above.

FINDINGS

ECE teachers' emotional wellbeing was low in 2019. As seen in Figure 1, in 2019 19% of child care teachers and 29% of school-based teachers had levels of depressive symptoms consistent with mild to moderate depression. Both groups experienced a substantial increase in depression after COVID; about 40% for child care and 30% for school-based teachers.

Figure 1. Teacher depression



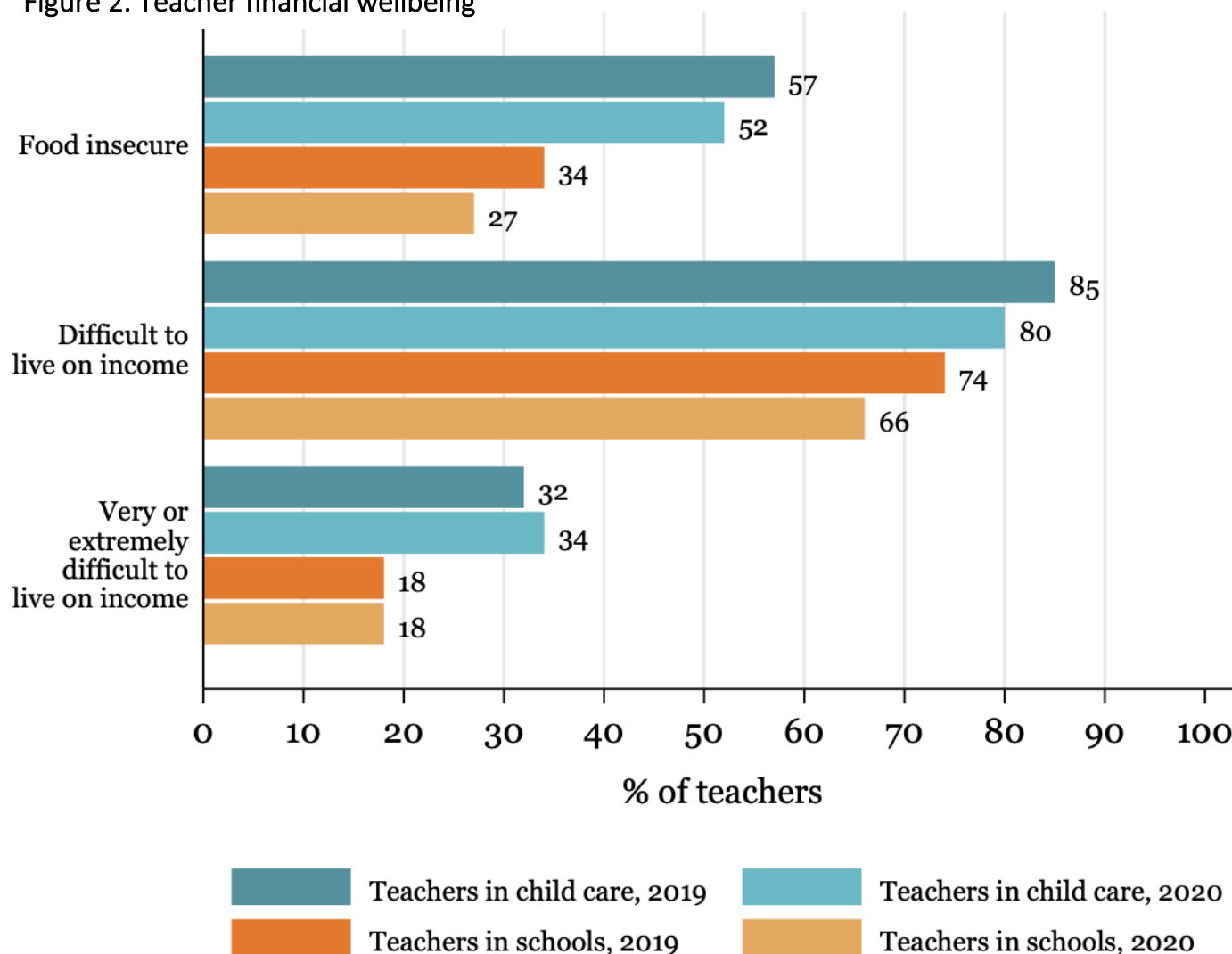
Consistent with the wage differential between child care and school-based teachers, child care teachers reported much higher levels of financial insecurity in both 2019 and 2020 (Figure 2).

For example, about 60% of child care teachers were food insecure in 2019 as compared to 34% of school-based teachers. Nearly twice as many (32%) child care teachers reported that it was very or extremely difficult to live on their income as school-based teachers (18%).

These data confirm the remarkable disparity between the working conditions faced by ECE teachers in child care centers as compared to school-based sites.

Encouragingly, we did not find evidence that teachers' food insecurity or financial stress increased in 2020. Notably, however, our sample includes only lead teachers employed at sites. COVID led to drops in teacher hours, layoffs, and teacher exits, so it may be that

Figure 2. Teacher financial wellbeing

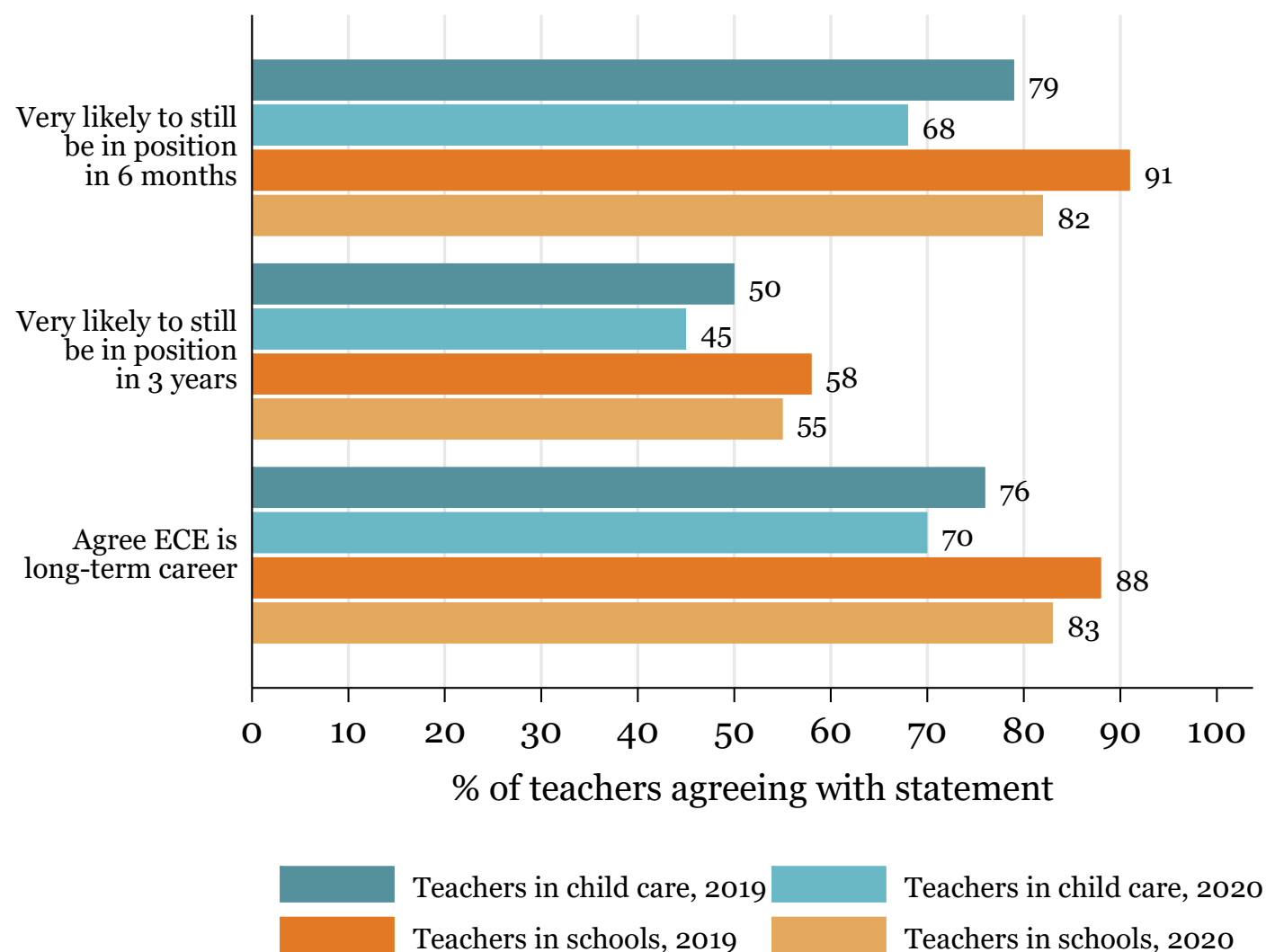


teachers who experienced greatest financial hardships due to COVID are not in the sample.

In 2019, child care teachers reported lower levels of job commitment than school-based teachers (Figure 3). Across all three job commitment items—whether teachers were very likely to remain in their job for six months, whether they were very likely to remain for

three years, and whether teachers agreed that ECE was their long-term career—child care teachers were about 10 percentage points less likely to indicate agreement than their school-based peers. Between 2019 and 2020 there was a decrease in job commitment for both child care and school-based teachers. Decreases in job commitment were about 5 to 10 percentage points across all outcomes.

Figure 3. Teacher job commitment



IMPLICATIONS

Declines in teacher wellbeing are important for both educators and the children they care for and teach. Previous research has linked early educators' wellbeing to their ability to create high-quality environments,^v and data suggest that children's development is negatively impacted in classrooms where educators are

struggling with stress and depression,^{vi} which has become more common in the past year.

These changes are also relevant for the long-term viability of the ECE sector. Levels of financial insecurity were already high in 2019, and the reduction in job commitment among teachers in both sectors raises concerns about increased instability over and above the already high rates of teacher turnover.

This study suggests that efforts to return ECE to its pre-pandemic stasis will neither sufficiently support early educators nor generate a stable, ECE system, particularly in the child care sector. Dollars invested in professional development, credentialing, or recruitment incentives may be wasted without a more explicit focus on educator wellbeing and retention. Rapid implementation of strategies designed to assuage the financial and emotional turmoil teachers are experiencing during COVID is crucial.

Furthermore, calls to invest in ECE in the wake of COVID should focus on the child care sector. Promising strategies for supporting this workforce include providing hazard pay for working during the pandemic; expanding access

to public benefits (e.g., health care, access to mental health services); increasing compensation through linking subsidy repayment rates to the cost of living wages; and expanding the use of refundable tax credits to incentivize retention.^{vii} Such efforts should also be designed with equity in mind; Black early educators currently make 78 cents for every dollar their White peers earn.^{viii}

A bailout to pre-pandemic conditions will not create the kind of stable, high-quality care that children and families need; instead, policymakers should consider bold investments that create sustainable supports for living wages, adequate benefits, and professional experiences for the early educators who keep the system afloat.

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