



Who Are the Teachers Leaving Child Care Centers? Evidence from Virginia

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Summary:

- High teacher turnover at child care centers was a problem even before the pandemic, but COVID intensified these challenges. The child care workforce shrunk, and many centers are turning families away because they cannot recruit and retain teachers.
- This brief provides new insights on teacher exits using data from a large survey of almost 3,000 child care teachers in Virginia, including nearly 500 teachers who left their child care sites between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022.
- Less experienced teachers – particularly those in their first year of teaching at their sites – were most likely to leave their sites, as were those in assistant teacher roles.
- Most teachers (73%) reported that compensation played a role in their decision to leave their sites.
- Just under half of teachers who left (47%) found new jobs working with children, though oftentimes this work was no longer in a child care setting. Most leavers reported greater satisfaction with their new roles, particularly with the pay.

Even prior to the pandemic, teacher turnover in child care centers was high.¹ In a study of early educators in Virginia, 24% of teachers at child care centers left their sites over an 8-month period.² COVID further exacerbated workforce challenges at child care centers. In the first few months of the pandemic, the number of child care teachers across the country shrunk by about 35%, and while other sectors have mostly rebounded, the child care workforce is still about 8% smaller than it was pre-pandemic.³

In Virginia, nearly all child care centers have been impacted by staffing challenges. In a recent statewide survey of Virginia child care providers, nearly all site leaders (89%) reported that staffing – including dealing with teachers leaving and filling vacant positions – was at least a little challenging, and many (43%) indicated staffing was *very* challenging.⁴ In turn, these staffing shortages

have had negative impacts on teachers, children, and families. Most leaders (72%) reported that staffing challenges led them to ask staff to take on additional responsibilities or more hours, and 51% reported turning families away, unable to serve as many children as usual.

Many recent accounts have attributed COVID-related staffing shortages to low wages and the influx of higher paying jobs available in retail and food service.⁵ To date, however, there has been little large-scale data about the child care teachers who leave. This brief fills this gap using data from the Virginia Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5)⁶ Spring 2022 Workforce Survey. It provides a unique look at the teachers who left their child care centers between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 by comparing the teachers who left to those who stayed, highlighting the conditions that may have contributed to teachers' decisions to leave, and describing the jobs they took after leaving their sites.

PDG B-5 Spring 2022 Workforce Survey

In 2019, with funds from Virginia's Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) began a set of initiatives to improve the quality of early childhood education (ECE). The state introduced the Virginia Quality Birth to Five System (VQB5), a unified measurement and improvement system that focuses on the quality of all publicly funded classrooms that serve children ages 0-5 throughout the state. Virginia also started RecognizeB5 (formerly known as the Teacher Recognition Program), which aims to reduce teacher turnover by providing incentive payments to teachers who work with children ages 0-5 at publicly funded sites.⁷ Since the start of PDG B-5, the Study of Early Education through Partnerships team at the University of Virginia has repeatedly surveyed teachers in an effort to better understand the experiences of early educators in Virginia, both in response to these reforms and more broadly.

In May 2022, all teachers and site leaders working with children ages 0-5 at publicly funded sites participating in Virginia's PDG B-5 in Fall 2021 were invited to take a survey.⁸ This group included nearly 6,000 teachers working at child care centers and leaders at nearly 700 sites. Over half of invited teachers (54%) and leaders at 60% of sites completed the survey.⁹ Of the 2,926 teachers who took the survey, just under 500 – or 16% of all teacher respondents – indicated that they no longer worked at the child care center where they had been employed 9 months prior, in Fall 2021. It is likely that many teachers who left their sites during this period also did not complete the survey, so the 16% of teacher respondents who were no longer working at their sites likely understates actual teacher turnover during this period.¹⁰ However, survey responses from

this large sample of teacher leavers, combined with additional context from their former employers, does provide a unique opportunity to better understand who is leaving child care positions and why.

Who are the leavers?

Are the characteristics of teachers who left their sites different from those who stayed?

Teachers who left their child care centers between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 were similar to teachers who stayed at their sites on many dimensions. As shown in Table 1, nearly all survey respondents were female. Among both leavers and stayers, about one-third were Black, around 10% were Hispanic, and about one-half were White. There were also no notable differences with respect to teachers' educational attainment: In both groups, just over 60% of teachers did not have a post-secondary degree.

There were, however, considerable differences with respect to teachers' roles and their levels of experience. Lead teachers were less likely to leave their jobs than assistant teachers. Among teachers who left, one-third (32%) were assistant teachers, a higher percentage than observed among the stayers (22%).

There was also a much higher percentage of novice teachers among the leavers. In fact, 68% of leavers had spent just one year or less at their sites prior to leaving. In comparison, of the teachers who continued working at their sites, just 31% were in their first year of working there. Indeed, among all surveyed teachers who reported they had only been working at their sites for one year or less, nearly one-third (31%) left. Among the teachers who had been at their sites for more than five years, just 5% left.

Overall, teachers who left had fewer years of experience working at their sites than those who stayed (2 years versus 5). They also had less years of ECE experience altogether. On average, teachers who left had 5 fewer years of experience working in ECE than those who stayed (6 years versus 11).¹¹

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Teachers Who Left and Teachers Who Stayed at their Sites between September 2021 and May 2022

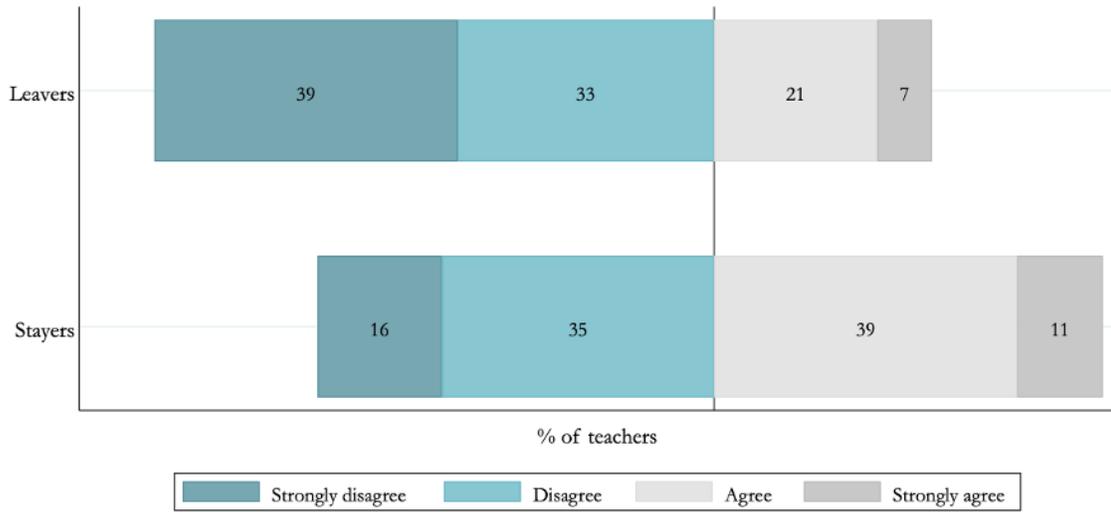
Characteristic	Leavers (n = 481)	Stayers (n = 2,445)
Female	97%	98%
Age (years)	33	39
Race / Ethnicity		
Black, non-Hispanic	32%	29%
Hispanic	7%	10%
White, non-Hispanic	51%	51%
Other, non-Hispanic	10%	9%
Education		
No post-secondary degree	61%	62%
Associate’s degree	15%	15%
Bachelor’s degree or higher	24%	23%
Role		
Lead teachers	65%	77%
Assistant teachers	32%	22%
Time spent at site		
1 year or less	68%	31%
2-5 years	24%	39%
More than 5 years	8%	30%
Average time spent at site (years)	2	5

Note: Teachers self-reported these characteristics in the Virginia PDG B-5 Spring 2022 Workforce Survey.

Do teachers who left their sites report different working conditions than those who stayed?

Just over one-half of all teachers who completed the survey (54%) indicated there were not enough teachers and staff at their sites. As shown in Figure 1, however, leavers reported more pronounced concerns. Almost three-quarters of leavers (72%) reported that there were not enough teachers and staff working at their sites. In comparison, one-half of teachers who continued working at their sites (51%) reported this concern. In a write-in comment one leaver shared, “Staff was overworked and extremely underpaid; most teachers were burnt out.”

Figure 1. Leavers' & Stayers' Reports of if There Were Enough Teachers & Staff at Site

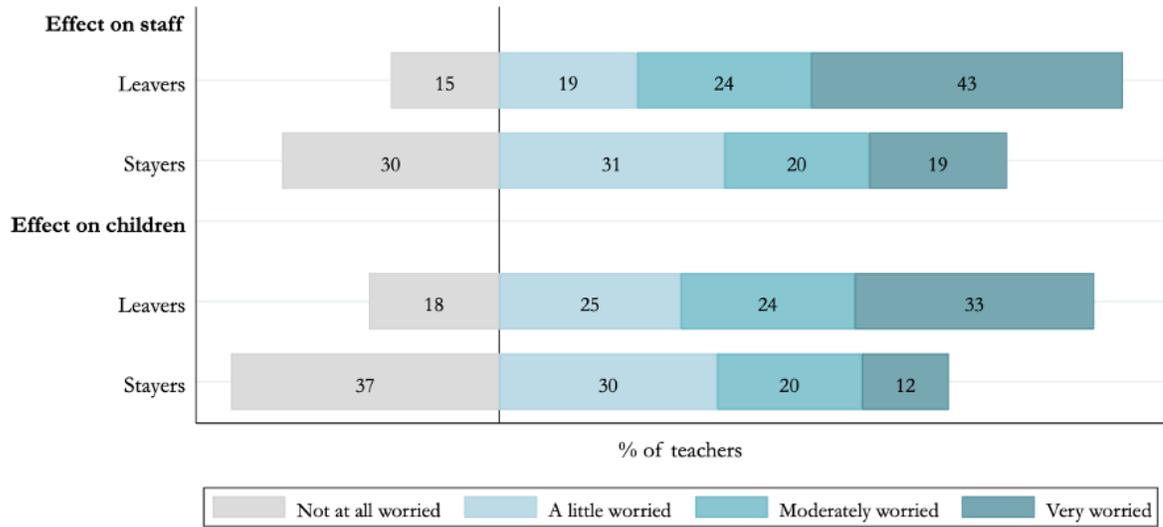


Note: Based on responses from 482 leavers and 2,406 teachers who remained at their sites.

Leavers were also more likely to report concerns about the negative impact of staffing shortages, both on teachers and staff at the site and on children. As shown in Figure 2, 43% of leavers reported that they were *very* worried that staffing shortages were having a negative effect on teachers and staff. In comparison, 19% of teachers who continued working at their sites reported this concern.

Similarly, 33% of leavers reported that they were *very* worried about the impact of staffing shortages on the children at their former sites. In comparison, only 12% of teachers who did not leave their sites reported that they were concerned about the negative impact of staffing shortages on the children they were teaching and caring for.

Figure 2. Leavers' & Stayers' Reported Concerns About the Effect of Staffing Challenges



Note: Based on responses from 479 leavers and 2,406 teachers who remained at their sites.

Why do teachers leave?

One common reason teachers report leaving their sites is low compensation. According to responses to the leader survey, lead teachers earned around \$14 per hour on average, and assistant teachers earned less than \$13 per hour. Most site leaders reported concerns that these wages were insufficient: 83% indicated they were worried that teachers might leave due to low levels of compensation.

Indeed, nearly three-quarters (73%) of teachers who left their sites said compensation played a role in their decisions to leave, and one-third (34%) reported that it was a major factor.

Teacher leavers were also asked an open-ended question about why they left, and most (68%) responded. Among those who did, compensation was a common theme: About 16% of comments specifically mentioned the role of compensation in their decision. One former teacher shared, “The ultimate deciding factor to leave teaching in general was the pay. If I could make enough money to live on my own teaching, I ultimately may have stuck with it for my entire life.” Another wrote, “It’s a sad state of affairs when those entrusted with teaching our children cannot support themselves on the wages offered. I suppose we’ll just keep

“If I could make enough money to live on my own teaching, I ultimately may have stuck with it for my entire life.”

hoping that high quality professionals will continue to accept that poverty is the cost of caring.”

Overall, most comments (62%) called out poor working conditions, including compensation, but also other factors. Nearly 2 in 5 leavers (39%) specifically described problems with site leaders or concerns about the way that their centers were run. Other comments described the toll the job had taken on their mental health (18%) and staffing issues (17%), with leavers sharing comments about stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout. One wrote, “I enjoyed working with the

“My mental health was being drained from the high-stress position, and I couldn’t even enjoy life outside of work because I was living paycheck to paycheck...”

kids and some of the staff but sadly became burnt out, didn’t feel very appreciated or well compensated, came to disagree with overall care, found higher ratios to bring more stress, and came to find it hard to handle due to understaffing.”

Another added, “My mental health was being drained from the high-

stress position, and I couldn't even enjoy life outside of work because I was living paycheck to paycheck, constantly dipping into the ‘red’ because I was not paid a livable salary.”

Where do teachers go after they leave?

As shown in Figure 3, at the time of the survey, only one-quarter of leavers (26%) reported that they were now working at a different child care center. Two-fifths (21%) shared that their new job, while not in a child care setting, still involved working with children through, for example, home-based care, school-based pre-k programs, or working with older children in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Many recent media and anecdotal accounts have suggested that child care teachers are leaving their sites for higher paying jobs in other sectors. In our sample, just over one-quarter (29%) of leavers reported they were in a new job outside of

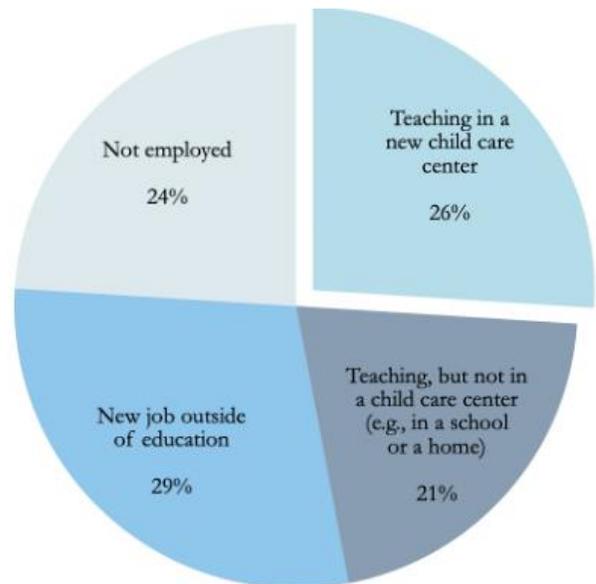


Figure 3. Leavers’ Reported New Jobs

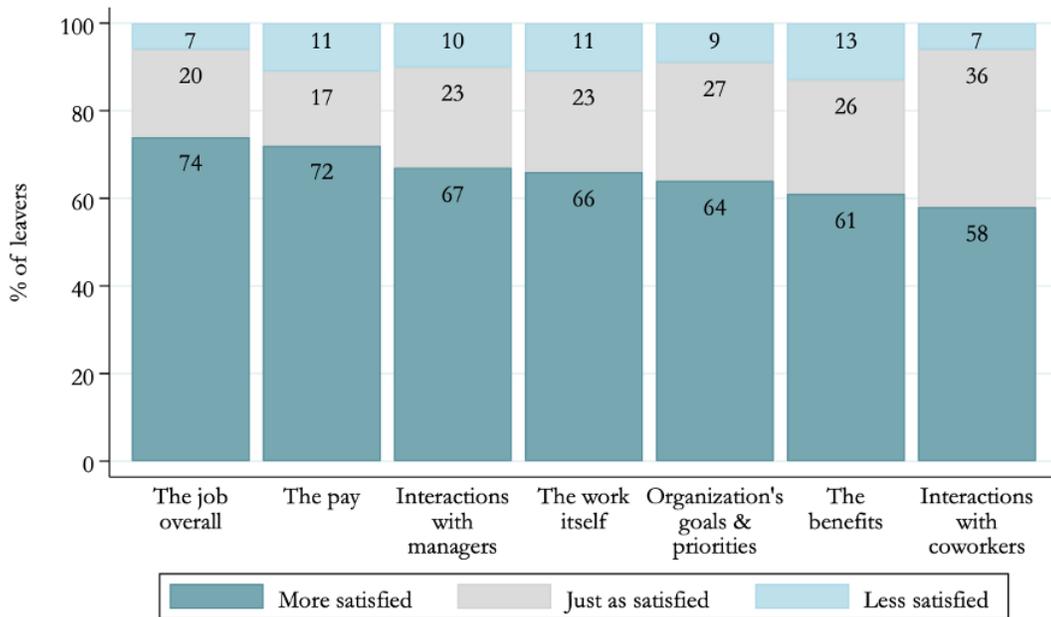
Note: Based on responses from 481 leavers.

the field of education entirely. Another quarter (24%) reported that they were currently unemployed.

How satisfied are leavers with their new jobs?

Most teachers who left their jobs for new employment reported higher levels of satisfaction with their new jobs. As shown in Figure 4, nearly three-quarters reported greater satisfaction with their new job both overall (74%) and with respect to compensation (72%). About two-thirds were also more satisfied with their new manager (67%) and with the work itself (66%). These patterns were true for both leavers who continued working with children elsewhere and those who left the profession entirely.

Figure 4. Leavers’ Reported Satisfaction with New Job, in Comparison to Old Job



Note: Based 323-358 responses from leavers who reported having a new job.

Policy Implications

Teaching and caring for young children is a labor-intensive and often low-paying job. The pandemic exacerbated already challenging working conditions at child care centers. This brief uses data from a survey of nearly 3,000 child care teachers, providing new insights into the experiences of teachers who left their sites, and in many cases the profession, between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022.

We found that teachers who left their sites were quite similar to those who stayed with respect to their racial composition and education levels. Where they differed considerably was their level of experience. New teachers – particularly

those in their first years of teaching – were far more likely to leave than more experienced teachers. In fact, nearly one in three teachers (31%) who were in their first year of working at their site left over the 9 months considered. Among the teachers who had been at their sites for more than five years, just 5% left.

These findings highlight the need to better support new teachers. Recent data from Virginia indicates that many directors at publicly funded child care centers (61%) are hiring teachers they view as inexperienced or underqualified due to their struggles with filling teaching roles.¹² These novice teachers may find their work particularly challenging, and providing them with greater support and mentorship may increase retention.¹³

Indeed, many states have implemented induction programs for K-12 educators that are designed to provide new teachers with mentoring and extra support to meet the demands of the job. Similar programs may benefit early educators. Teachers often cite a lack of support and isolation as their reasons for leaving the profession, and these programs can promote a more collaborative environment that may improve teacher effectiveness and decrease teacher turnover.¹⁴

Beyond the need for greater supports for new teachers, these results highlight the need for higher compensation, as a strategy both to recruit and to retain teachers. While teachers left their positions for a variety of reasons, most (73%) indicated that low pay and compensation was a factor in their decision, and about three-quarters (74%) did not go on to work at another child care center. Among teacher leavers who were working in a new job, the majority (72%) indicated they were more satisfied with compensation at their new jobs. Experimental evidence from Virginia, as well as a large body of research nationwide, shows that increasing teacher pay – even just a little bit – can reduce turnover.¹⁵ Unfortunately, most child care settings lack the resources to adequately compensate their teacher workforce.¹⁶ Unlike K-12 education, which is mostly publicly funded, the majority of revenue for privately-owned child care centers comes from tuition payments, and increasing teacher compensation would likely necessitate increasing the already high costs parents must pay for care.

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Many states – including Virginia – have invested pandemic recovery dollars into bonuses and other financial supports for early educators. While beneficial, these

are temporary solutions that are insufficient for fully addressing underlying staffing challenges and inadequate funding. Some states, including Virginia, are also using pandemic relief dollars to increase reimbursement rates for child care subsidies to better account for the true cost of providing care – including the costs of adequate compensation.¹⁷ While promising, these strategies depend on short-term funding sources and will need sustainable, long-term funding solutions.

High teacher turnover and other staffing challenges undermine center quality.¹⁸ They hinder centers' ability to adequately serve the needs of working families and compromise the development of strong relationships between teachers and children, in turn negatively impacting child development. As child care centers continue to face challenges filling vacancies and competing with other sectors that are able to offer higher wages, sustained investments and increased support are vital for ensuring that they are able to both recruit and retain qualified teachers.

Endnotes

¹ Whitebook, M., Philipps, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/publications/ReportFINAL.pdf>

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⁴ Doromal, J.B., Weisner, K., & Bassok, D. (2022, May). *Staffing challenges at Virginia child care centers: Differences by centers' subsidy participation status*. SEE-Partnerships Report. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/see_partnerships_staffing_va_CCSP

⁵ For example: Long, H. (2021, September). 'The pay is absolute crap': Child-care workers are quitting rapidly, a red flag for the economy. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/09/19/childcare-workers-quit/>

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Coffey & Khattar (2022).

⁶ In 2019, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) began the Virginia Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) initiative in partnership with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) and the University of Virginia (UVA) with the goal of building a more cohesive early childhood education (ECE) system. As part of this initiative, the Study of Early Education through Partnerships team at UVA has been administering a series of workforce surveys that aim to better understand the experiences of early educators in Virginia in center-, school-, and home-based programs. VDOE has been incrementally expanding the work of the PDG B-5 to communities across the state. This brief uses data collected during the third and final year of the PDG B-5 initiative, which includes publicly funded ECE programs throughout the entire state. Moving forward, all publicly funded ECE programs will be required to participate in the improvement efforts that the PDG B-5 initiative has laid the groundwork for.

⁷ Bassok, D., Doromal, J.B., Michie, M., & Wong, V. (2021, December). *The effects of financial incentives on teacher turnover in early childhood settings: Experimental evidence from Virginia*. Virginia PDG B-5 Evaluation SEE-Partnerships Report. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/see_partnerships_incentives_turnover

⁸ The PDG B-5 Spring 2022 Workforce Survey was distributed in May and June 2022, was available in both English and Spanish, could be taken online or on paper, and took about 30 minutes to complete. All respondents received a \$20 gift card.

⁹ This response rate is high, as surveys of early educators typically do not exceed 40%.

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¹⁰ The fact that 16% of survey respondents indicated they left their site does not imply that the turnover rate between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 for the full sample is 16%. We do not have data on the employment status of invited teachers who did not complete the survey, and it is likely that "leavers" are over-represented among the 46% of invited teachers who did not complete the survey. Using separate data tracking turnover among teachers at Virginia child care centers over the same period, we observed that 21.5% left their sites.

¹¹ Among the leavers, 29% had spent 1 year or less working in the ECE field, 36% had spent between 2 and 5 years working in ECE, and 35% had spent more than 5 years working in ECE. Among teachers who did not leave their sites, just 11% were in their first year of working in ECE, 30% had been working in ECE between 2 and 5 years, and 59% had been working in ECE for over 5 years.

¹² Doromal, et al. (2022).

¹³ Ingersoll, R.M. & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: A critical review of the research. *Review of Educational Research* 81(2), 201-233. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311403323>

¹⁴ Ronfeldt, M. & McQueen, K. (2017). Does new teacher induction really improve retention? *Journal of Teacher Education* 68(4), 394-410. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117702583>

¹⁵ Bassok, Doromal, et al. (2021).

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Treasury. (2021, September). *The economics of child care supply in the United States*. Retrieved from <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf>

¹⁷ For more information, visit <https://doe.virginia.gov/cc/community/index.html?pageID=15>

¹⁸ Tran, H. & Winsler, A. (2011). Teacher and center stability and school readiness among low-income, ethnically diverse children in subsidized, center-based child care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(11), 2241-2252. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.07.008>