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# Early Childhood Teacher Turnover in Nebraska

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The purpose of this brief is to describe teacher turnover in early care and education settings in Nebraska. Data are drawn from the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey. View online at <https://bit.ly/2JSKcL0>.

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska promotes the development and learning of children from birth through age 8. Our vision is to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby. Visit [buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu](http://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu) for more information.

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Teacher turnover is a serious challenge across early childhood settings. Turnover can be expensive for early childhood programs, burdensome to staff, and harmful to children throughout the nation. Nebraska is no exception. This research brief describes teacher turnover in the state's early care and education settings, including licensed child care, state-funded PreK, and Kindergarten through Grade 3.



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## Background

Children thrive in environments where they can establish strong relationships with teachers and experience predictable classroom routines<sup>1</sup>. High-quality relationships and routines are even more important for children placed at risk as a consequence of poverty and family stress. Research tells us that the relationship between a child and teacher can serve as a protective factor for children exposed to trauma<sup>1</sup>. Teacher turnover, however, jeopardizes the stability of these important relationships<sup>2</sup>. When teachers leave their positions and are replaced by new teachers, children can be negatively affected<sup>3</sup>.

Turnover is expensive and burdensome to programs, administrators, and staff<sup>4</sup>. In Nebraska, teacher turnover in public schools cost the state between \$6 million and \$13 million in one year alone<sup>5</sup>.

Across studies nationally, annual turnover rates for child care workers range from 26% to 40%. Contributing factors include insufficient compensation and lack of personal and professional support<sup>4</sup>. Despite its importance and its negative impact, little is known about teacher turnover in early childhood settings across Nebraska.

## Research Questions

The following research questions were asked across early childhood programs (licensed child care, state-funded PreK, and K-3):

1. What was the average rate of annual teacher turnover?
2. According to administrators, what was the most common reason teachers left their employment?

3. Which hiring challenges did administrators experience in filling positions?
4. On average, how long did it take to fill vacant positions?

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☞ Turnover is expensive and burdensome to programs, administrators, and staff<sup>4</sup>. In Nebraska, teacher turnover in public schools cost the state between \$6 million and \$13 million in one year alone<sup>5</sup>.

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## Methods

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute surveyed a sample of administrators in early childhood programs in Nebraska in 2015-16 as part of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey. Responses from administrators in licensed child care centers (n = 166), state-funded PreKindergarten programs (n = 281), and elementary schools (n = 175) were considered for the current report. Licensed home-based providers were excluded from the current analysis because most do not employ other staff, rendering turnover less applicable. Child care administrators were asked about turnover in lead and assistant teachers. PreK and K-3 administrators reported turnover in PreK and K-3 teachers respectively. Specific survey items included:

- Think of the last time you advertised a position for your program. How long did it take to fill that position? (months or weeks)
- Have you had difficulty hiring staff because prospective candidates did not have appropriate training and/or certification? (yes/no)

- If you had trouble hiring staff, please briefly tell us why. (open-ended)
- In the past 12 months, how many teachers have left and had to be replaced? (number)
- When staff accept other positions, why do they typically leave? (multiple choice: higher salary; better hours; move to new community; occupational change—taking a different type of job other than child care)

Turnover rates were calculated by dividing the number of teachers who left and had to be replaced by the total number of teachers in the center/school. In child care settings, lead and assistant teachers were combined to calculate total teacher turnover. Turnover rates reported here represent the average annual teacher turnover in each respective setting.

Themes were identified from the open-ended survey item, “If you had trouble hiring staff, please briefly tell us why.” The most common themes are presented in this research brief.

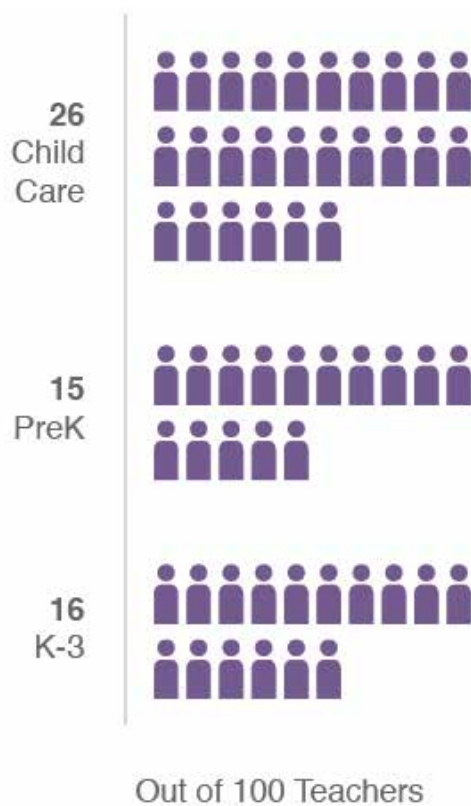
## Findings

Survey data related to teacher turnover are grouped into four categories: turnover rate, reasons for leaving, hiring challenges, and hiring or filling vacant positions.

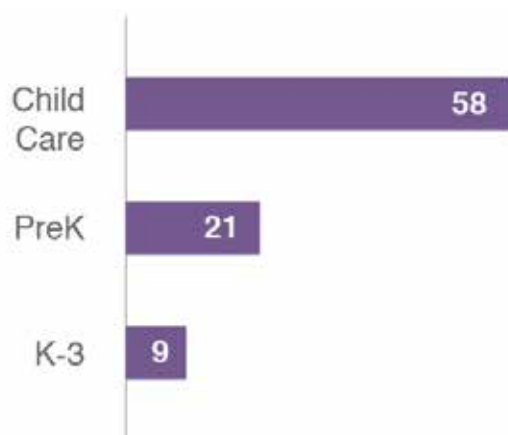
### TURNOVER RATE

The average annual turnover rate was 26% in child care settings, 15% in PreK settings, and 16% in K-3 settings (Figure 1). Within child care, annual turnover was 36% for assistant teachers and 17% for lead teachers.

**FIGURE 1 | AVERAGE ANNUAL TEACHER TURNOVER IN NEBRASKA (PERCENTAGE)**



**FIGURE 2 | PERCENTAGE OF ADMINISTRATORS WHO IDENTIFY SALARY AS THE REASON TEACHERS TYPICALLY LEAVE**



### REASONS FOR LEAVING

According to child care administrators, the most common reason teachers left was to earn higher salaries. Fifty-eight percent (84 of 144) of administrators identified “higher salary” as the reason teachers typically left their jobs. In contrast, only 21% of PreK administrators and 9% of K-3 administrators identified higher salaries as the reason teachers typically left their jobs (Figure 2).

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- Given that the annual earnings of child care teachers are less than \$19,000 a year<sup>7</sup>, well below the federal poverty level for a family of three<sup>8</sup>, it is not surprising that over half of child care administrators reported that teachers most commonly leave to obtain higher salaries.
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According to PreK and K-3 administrators, the most common reason teachers left was to move to a new community, including a new school or town. Sixty-nine percent (130 of 188) of PreK administrators and 72% (107 of 149) of K-3 administrators identified a move to a new community as the reason teachers typically left their jobs. Only 17% of child care administrators identified a move to a new community as the reason teachers typically left their jobs.

### HIRING CHALLENGES

Two survey items were used to identify hiring challenges administrators experienced. First, the close-ended item, “Have you had difficulty hiring staff because prospective candidates did not have appropriate training and/or certification?” revealed that 62% (95 of 153) of child care administrators, 27% (73 of 267) of PreK administrators, and 15% (25 of 167) of K-3 administrators had difficulty

hiring staff because candidates did not have appropriate training or certification (Figure 3).

When asked as an open-ended question, “If you had trouble hiring staff, please briefly tell us why,” 65% (108 of 166) of child care administrators responded. Twenty-six percent (73 of 281) of PreK administrators responded, and 15% (26 of 175) of K-3 administrators responded.

The most common hiring challenge administrators identified in child care settings, other than lack of qualifications, was the inability to pay high enough salaries and/or provide benefits.

Thirty-one percent (33 of 108) of child care administrators identified this issue. Comparatively, pay and benefits were identified by seven (6%) PreK administrators and one (1%) K-3 teacher.

### HIRING OR FILLING VACANT POSITIONS

Child care administrators reported spending between 0-24 months filling vacant positions, with an average of 2 months (SD = 2.8). PreK administrators reported spending between 0-48 months filling vacant positions, with an average of 1.4 months (SD = 3.6). K-3 administrators reported spending between 0-6 months filling vacant positions, with an average of 1 month (SD = .86) (Figure 4).

## Conclusion

Turnover is a serious challenge across early childhood settings in Nebraska and throughout the nation. Publicly funded programs (PreK and K-3) face turnover challenges as teachers leave for reasons commensurate with other occupations, such as moving to a different school or community. Consistent with national trends, these data suggest that turnover is most prevalent in child care centers<sup>6</sup>. Approximately 3

out of 10 child care staff will leave each year.

Given that the annual earnings of child care teachers are less than \$19,000 a year<sup>7</sup>, well below the federal poverty level for a family of three<sup>8</sup>, it is not surprising that over half of child care administrators reported that teachers most commonly leave to obtain higher salaries.

An important consideration is that turnover is expensive for programs, further depleting their already limited resources.

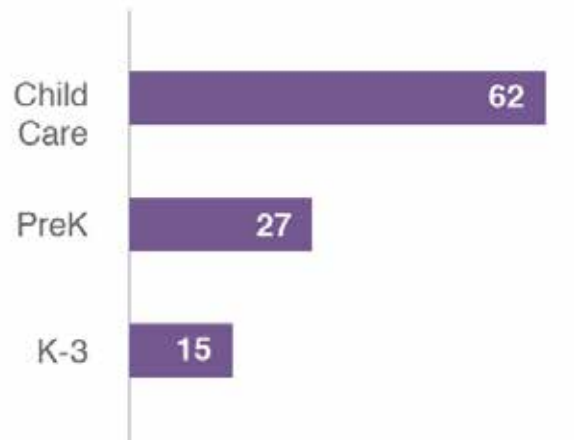
On the hiring side, 62% of center administrators report difficulty hiring staff because prospective candidates lack appropriate training and certification. They require two months, on average, to fill vacancies. Many administrators (20%) also attribute hiring challenges to the inability to provide adequate pay and benefits, suggesting that the problem of turnover is cyclical: staff leave due to low pay, low pay impacts the qualifications of staff and subsequently fuels administrators' inability to hire qualified staff.

The problem of teacher turnover is often referred to as a "leaky bucket." Just as water placed in a leaky bucket will continue to drip out until the holes are filled, teachers will continue to leave a broken system until the system is repaired.

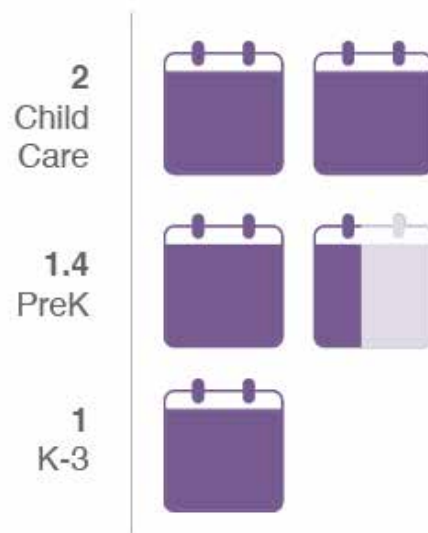
The compensation and supports provided to early child educators must be improved, particularly in child care settings, to promote a stable workforce that can support children and families in Nebraska.

*More information about the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey can be found at <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/workforce-survey>.*

**FIGURE 3 | PERCENTAGE OF ADMINISTRATORS WHO HAD DIFFICULTY HIRING STAFF BECAUSE CANDIDATES DID NOT HAVE APPROPRIATE TRAINING AND/OR CERTIFICATION**



**FIGURE 4 | AVERAGE MONTHS TO FILL VACANT POSITIONS**



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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