

# LAFAYETTE READY START

## 2022 Early Childhood Workforce Study





Lafayette Ready Start (LRS) contracted with Advancing Communities for Equity (ACE) in March of 2022 to identify barriers in the early learning system that could threaten families' access to high quality early learning opportunities, particularly after Covid-19. In particular, LRS sought to understand the perspectives of early childhood directors and the teachers who work in their centers to determine the current state of the early childhood workforce in Lafayette, as well as possible supports that could help address pressing needs. ACE led community engagement activities to learn from the workforce. Specifically:

- **An online director survey** was issued to the 51 Type III early learning centers in Lafayette. The survey requested information regarding the challenges related to staff retention, as well as indicators associated with instructional and organizational leadership. Specific questions regarding administrative and instructional leadership utilized the research-validated Program Administration Scale indicators, to support the evaluation of responses along a set of standardized best practices. Directors were asked to identify their current business operations as *struggling*, *thriving*, or *maintaining*, for the purposes of identifying notable practices and trends by category.
- **Two virtual focus groups for directors** were conducted. Questions related to challenges, effective supports, and the future outlook of the business were discussed. In total, 16 directors participated in the two focus groups offered during lunchtime hours.
- **Two virtual focus groups for teachers** were conducted. Questions related to challenges, effective supports, and plans for continued work in the sector were discussed. In total, 12 early childhood teachers participated in the two focus groups offered during evening hours.



The online director survey was administered to 51 early learning centers. In all, there were 48 respondents to 19 questions. Of the respondents, 29 described their current state of operations as *maintaining* or “managing to maintain pre-COVID levels of children and staffing, but it is a struggle.” Seventeen described their businesses as *thriving* or “having a wait list, currently at capacity with full staff, and could grow more.” Only two respondents described the business as *struggling* where they are “unable to staff the center, and have closed classrooms.” **The Lafayette Ready Start: Early Childhood Workforce Study highlights findings and recommendations related to the surveys and focus groups, with particular interest in whether there were meaningful differences between *thriving*, *maintaining*, and *struggling* centers as it relates to size, pay, benefits, instructional leadership, and organizational culture.**





**Finding One: Scale of centers matters.** Staff size was the most notable difference between *thriving* and *maintaining* centers. Employing a larger staff may have supported early learning centers in having more flexibility during pandemic-related staffing challenges. With regards to staff size, on average, centers describing themselves as *thriving* had the largest staffs, followed by centers *maintaining* operations. Two centers describing operations as *struggling* had a smaller staff size of six. Thriving centers indicated fewer staffing impacts and challenges due to COVID-19, and did not necessarily employ broader marketing and hiring practices than *maintaining* centers.

**Recommendation: Provide targeted business guidance to smaller centers, and encourage appropriate scale to entrepreneurs developing new child care center businesses. See detailed discussion on p. 1.**

**Finding 2: Additional study of teacher pay and benefits is needed.** Bonuses provided by centers and the Louisiana Department of Education were frequently referenced in the survey and focus groups as supporting staff retention. However, pay and benefits alone did not determine if a center is *struggling* or not (See Table 1 p.X). In fact, the two *struggling* centers paid more to staff on average, and offered more benefits than *thriving* centers. Six *maintaining* centers had staffs smaller than six, but all paid staff below the average pay. It is possible that *struggling* centers are exceeding their operating budget with unsustainable high wages and expansive benefits to retain staff. However, *struggling* centers did not indicate a desire for support related to creating and *maintaining* a budget, and/or a staffing plan. Thriving centers paid more than *maintaining* centers, but *maintaining* centers offered more benefits on average. During one focus group, teachers expressed an interest in retirement benefits, but it was not clear from the discussion that pay and benefits were factors that shaped teachers' decision to stay in the field. Given the volatility of the labor market in general, more information is needed to determine how to best address workforce challenges.



**Recommendation: Survey teachers to learn more about wages, benefits, and satisfaction, and utilize the data to provide recommendations to early learning centers, and to inform systemic strategies. See detailed discussion on p. 2.**



*I think the main thing is salary. At one time it didn't matter. Now we are having to compete with so many other places and with unemployment. Assistance from the state or other entities would help teachers to stay longer than what they are doing now. Sometimes, we do not have any applicants. It took me six months to hire for one position.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Director*

*It would be nice to get paid a little more, or get benefits like teachers. I would just like some respect, that what we do is important.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Teacher*



**Finding 3: Concerns about attracting and retaining the workforce threaten the ability to offer early learning services to families.** Retaining existing teachers is the focus of the majority of centers, and the biggest challenge experienced by early learning centers during Covid-19. Of those surveyed, all centers cited losing staff during the pandemic. Moving forward, 26 centers (54%) are focused on retaining their existing staff (more than serving more children, or expanding to more locations). Directors requested guidance with staff scheduling (18), and improving communication with teachers (18).

Overwhelmingly, teacher participants in

focus groups stated that they felt supported by their employers during Covid-19. When asked what employers and the Lafayette community could do to make their work better, recognition and respect as educators were mentioned by several teachers in both focus groups. Many agreed with the perspective that families and the community still regard their work as babysitting, and that they did not feel valued as teachers. High ratios were also cited as a challenge for teachers in attempting to provide high quality teaching. Retirement plans, health insurance, mental health days, special events, and bonuses were also mentioned as desirable and needed.



*I have three early learning center locations. As a business, Covid-19 impacted our staffing the most. We had to reduce enrollment because we did not have teachers. Before the pandemic, we were full. In the last sixteen months, we have been unable to enroll new children.*

*- Lafayette Early Learning Center Director*



# **Recommendation: LRS should explore interest in systemic workforce supports for early learning staff as mentioned in this resource from the Administration of Children and Families:**

## **Immediate financial relief**

- Recruitment and retention bonuses
- Program improvement bonuses, which could include increased services to families
- Expense reimbursement

## **Systemic improvements**

- Contracted slots
- Wage ladders
- Family Child Care and Infant-Toddler Networks
- Shared services
- Apprenticeship programs
- Articulation
- Substitute pools
- Professional Development systems

## **Industry solutions**

- Comprehensive benefits
- Increase wages
- Salary scales

*See detailed discussion on p. 5.*



At the beginning of the pandemic, we had a strong support system with upper management. Staff was willing to work open to close. Over time, we became completely full, with 30 staff. Now, two years into this pandemic, we are starting to see burnout. Teachers don't want to work as much as they had. They could go down the road and make more at McDonalds.

They expect us to jump in. We want to do as much as possible for our work family, but it is tiring.

-Lafayette Early Learning Center  
Director

#### Finding 4: Many early learning centers want to serve more children.

Despite staffing challenges, 21 early learning centers (46%) are interested in serving more children in the current site (12 centers) or expanding their business (9 centers).

No directors indicated that they plan to transition away from the business. Twenty-one centers requested support with marketing to support their business goals.



**Recommendation: Support efforts to meet current and future demand. See detailed discussion on p. 8.**





The hardest thing during the pandemic was not being able to hug the kids, or see them smile. That's the whole reason I went into this profession.

-Lafayette Early Learning Center Teacher

**Finding 5: Directors at all levels would appreciate support in improving their leadership skills.** Directors were asked about the instructional leadership offered to teachers (like ongoing observations and feedback) as well as their ability to teach other leaders (about assigning teachers to the right classrooms, supporting staff, creating a warm environment for staff, etc.). Centers that were *maintaining* were most likely to provide more instructional leadership but were not as confident as *thriving* centers about their ability to teach others key leadership skills related to staffing. In general, more than eight other possible supports to help them in moving forward, 23 directors indicated a desire for leadership coaching and training to be a more effective director.

**Recommendation: Provide leadership coaching and related support to early learning center directors to enhance their ability to retain and attract staff, and expand their businesses. See detailed discussion on p. 11.**

**Finding 6: Directors and teachers articulated feeling isolated from other professionals and desired opportunities to connect.** Zoom meetings (like the focus groups themselves), where professionals could talk about challenges and approaches were mentioned in all

focus groups as ways to feel more connected as a community. City-wide events like picnics, bowling, and karaoke were mentioned as fun opportunities to connect with professionals from other early learning centers.

**Recommendation: Consider directly addressing burnout, and create opportunities to build peer support and professional relationships in the early learning field in Lafayette. See detailed discussion on p. 13.**



We need opportunities to share ideas with each other (multiple head nods). I have noticed that in this industry, people are too themselves, and they don't collaborate. We need opportunities to talk to each other.  
- Lafayette Early Learning Center Director







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## Lafayette Ready Start: Early Childhood Workforce Study

### Overview

Lafayette's early learning center directors actively participated in the Ready Start's efforts to gather perspectives on workforce challenges: 48 of 51 directors participated in online surveys. LRS identified sixteen directors for two focus groups, and these directors identified twelve teachers who would participate for the two evening focus groups that were offered to teachers. Questions utilized in the survey and focus groups are in the Appendix.

The resulting data informed the findings and recommendations in **the Lafayette Ready Start: Early Childhood Workforce Study, with particular interest in whether there were meaningful differences between *thriving*, *maintaining*, and *struggling* centers as it relates to size, pay, benefits, instructional leadership, and organizational culture.**

### Findings and Recommendations

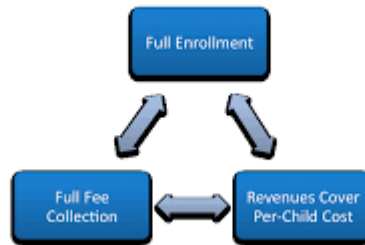
**Finding One: Scale of centers matters.** Staff size was the most notable difference between *thriving* and *maintaining* centers. Employing a larger staff may have supported early learning centers in having more flexibility during pandemic-related staffing challenges. With regards to staff size, on average, centers describing themselves as *thriving* had the largest staffs, followed by centers *maintaining* operations. Two centers describing operations as *struggling* had a smaller staff size of six. *Thriving* centers indicated fewer staffing impacts and challenges due to COVID-19, and did not necessarily employ broader marketing and hiring practices than *maintaining* centers.

It is possible that larger staffs are better able to absorb staffing disruptions, and these impacts do not fall on a small group of people, resulting in burnout and frustration. Notably, 66% of all centers surveyed do not currently have a substitute teacher available in an emergency situation, suggesting that the burden of staffing falls on existing teachers and administrators.

**Recommendation One: Provide targeted business guidance to smaller centers, and encourage appropriate scale to entrepreneurs developing new child care center businesses.** In particular:

- Build professional development opportunities that teach centers about the [Iron Triangle](#) of early childhood finance, where there is a focus on setting an appropriate tuition, collecting fees that are owed, and fully enrolling the program.
- Encourage participating centers to participate in the Louisiana Department of Education [Child Care Management Software Initiative \(CCMSi\)](#) to support full collection of tuition and fees that are owed.
- Study [current research](#) and [best practices](#) in early learning center budgeting, keeping in mind competitive compensation rates for teachers (further described in Finding Two).

Figure 1: Iron Triangle of Early Childhood Finance

Retrieved from: <https://cfrmorris.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Iron-Triangle-Webinar-FINAL-6.13.14.pdf>

**Finding Two: Additional study of teacher pay and benefits is needed.** Bonuses provided by centers and the Louisiana Department of Education were frequently referenced in the survey and focus groups as supporting staff retention. However, pay and benefits alone did not determine if a center is *struggling* or not (See Table 1 below). In fact, the two *struggling* centers paid more to staff on average, and offered more benefits than *thriving* centers. Six *maintaining* centers had staffs smaller than six, but all paid staff below the average pay. It is possible that *struggling* centers are exceeding their operating budget with unsustainable high wages and expansive benefits to retain staff. However, *struggling* centers did not indicate a desire for support related to creating and maintaining a budget, and/or a staffing plan. *Thriving* centers paid more than *maintaining* centers, but *maintaining* centers offered more benefits on average. During one focus group, teachers expressed an interest in retirement benefits, but it was not clear from the discussion that pay and benefits were factors that shaped teachers' decision to stay in the field. Given the volatility of the labor market in general, more information is needed to determine how to best address workforce challenges.

Table 1: Average staff size, pay, and benefits by current state of early learning center					
Average staff size by category				Average pay & benefits	
Current state of centers (self-identified)	# of full-time staff	# of part-time staff	Total # of teachers	Hourly pay	Number of benefits
Struggling (2)	4	2	6	\$12.50 - \$15.50	3.5
Maintaining (29)	8.53	2	10.53	\$9.29 - \$10.51	3.83
Thriving (17)	10.29	2.41	12.70	\$10.76 - \$12.00	3.18
Average of all centers	7.60	2.14	9.74	\$10.85 - \$12.67	3.5



Directors were surveyed about which benefits were offered to staff, from a list of 8 options including health, vision/dental, vacation days, sick days, professional development funds, and retirement (with or without matching funds). *Maintaining* centers offered the most (see Table 1), followed by *struggling* centers, and *thriving* ones. The most frequently offered benefits were vacation time, and retirement-related benefits were offered the least (see Table 2). There was disparity between the two struggling centers, with one struggling center providing one benefit, and the other providing 6 benefits (many of which were listed in the “Other” category).

Table 2: Number and type of benefits by center category				
Benefit options	Total (48)	Struggling (2)	Maintaining (29)	Thriving (17)
Health benefits	16 (33%)	0	12 (41%)	4 (24%)
Facilitating enrollment in the healthcare marketplace	10 (21%)	0	7 (24%)	3 (18%)
Dental/vision benefits	17 (35%)	0	12 (41%)	5 (29%)
Retirement benefits (enrollment only)	1 (2%)	0	1 (3%)	0
Retirement matching funds (employer pays 3-6% of employee salary annually)	10 (21%)	0	6 (21%)	4 (24%)
Sick leave annually, and in the first year	18 (38%)	1 (50%)	8 (28%)	9 (53%)
Vacation time annually, and in the first year	25 (53%)	2 (100%)	19 (66%)	14 (82%)
Professional development funds	19 (40%)	1 (50%)	8 (28%)	10 (59%)
Other benefits: Bonuses (7), Holiday pay/paid days off (6), Leave after 1 year (3), paid holidays after 6 months (2), Lunch (1) travel stipend (1) raises (1) random incentives (1) mental health services (1) Life insurance (1)				

Teachers in the focus group did acknowledge feeling supported by the administration at the early learning centers where they work. Bonuses and paid holidays were mentioned as supports that enhanced teachers’ quality of life, particularly during the pandemic.

The Program Administration Scale standards outline indicators in the Benefits subscale as captured in Table 3:

<b>Table 3: Program Administration Scale Indicators - Benefits</b>			
Inadequate	Minimal	Good	Excellent
All full-time employees do (not) have the option to purchase health insurance with the employer paying a portion of the cost.	All full-time employees have the option to purchase health insurance with the employer paying a portion of the cost.	All full-time employees have the option to purchase health insurance with the employer paying 50% or more of the cost of employee's coverage.	All full-time employees have the option to purchase health insurance with the employer paying 66% or more of the cost of employee's coverage.
All employees do (not) receive at least 6 paid sick/personal days during the first year of employment.	All employees receive 6 or more paid sick/personal days during the first year of employment.	All employees receive 9 paid sick/personal days during the first year of employment.	All employees receive 12 or more paid sick/personal days during the first year of employment.
All employees do (not) receive at least 5 paid vacation days during the first year of employment.	All employees receive 5 or more paid vacation days during the first year of employment.	All employees receive 10 or more paid vacation days during the first year of employment.	All employees receive 15 or more paid vacation days during the first year of employment.
All full-time employees do (not) have the option of contributing to a retirement plan.	All full-time employees have the option of contributing to a retirement plan.	The employer matches 3% or more of the employee's salary contributed to a retirement plan.	The employer matches 5% or more of the employee's salary contributed to a retirement plan.
The employer does (not) make any provision to pay for or reimburse professional development expenses.	The employer makes some provision to pay for or reimburse professional development expenses.	The employer provides \$100 or more per year to all employees to pay for or reimburse professional development expenses.	The employer provides \$200 or more per year to all employees to pay for or reimburse professional development expenses.



**Recommendation Two: Survey teachers to learn more about wages, benefits, and satisfaction, and utilize the data to provide recommendations to early learning centers, and to inform systemic strategies.** More information could be collected to get more granular about the levels of benefits that centers provide. The Administration for Children and Families provides guidance on conducting a [wage comparability study](#) that could be adapted for use with early learning centers.

**Finding Three: Concerns about attracting and retaining the workforce threaten the ability to offer early learning services to families.** Retaining existing teachers is the focus of the majority of centers, and the biggest challenge experienced by early learning centers during Covid-19. Of those surveyed, 66% of centers cited losing staff during the pandemic, with 73% hiring new teachers with little to no experience (See Table 4). Experienced teachers are playing an even more urgent role with this influx of teachers: 42% of centers surveyed are having experienced teachers mentor new teachers. Moving forward, 26 centers (54%) are focused on retaining their existing staff (more than serving more children, or expanding to more locations).

*I think the main thing is salary. At one time it didn't matter. Now we are having to compete with so many other places and with unemployment. Assistance from the state or other entities would help teachers to stay longer than what they are doing now. Sometimes, we do not have any applicants. It took me 6 months to hire for one position.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Director*

*It would be nice to get paid a little more, or get benefits like teachers. I would just like some respect, that what we do is important.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Teacher*

From [the Institute for Child Success](#): “Increasing compensation across these fields would serve to fairly compensate professionals based on the true value of their labor, particularly given the societal importance of health child development; it would also likely reduce turnover, and the subsequent costs of turnover to employers; decreasing the utilization of public benefits among certain professionals; and improve quality of the services families received based on reduced stress and burnouts levels of professionals. Compensation cannot be increased on the backs of clients. Parents already pay, on average, about 10 percent of their annual income for child care, significantly higher than the federal definition of affordability. Families with insurance already spend \$22,000 per year in premiums, to say nothing of out-of-pocket costs. Long-term structural changes to the compensation structures in these fields is required, like ensuring that funding streams for early childhood ensure salary parity across all settings.”

<b>Table 4: Impacts of the pandemic on staffing by center category</b>				
Negative impacts	Total (48)	Struggling (2)	Maintaining (29)	Thriving (17)
I always struggled to retain teachers and COVID-19 has just made it harder.	16 (33%)	1 (50%)	9 (31%)	6 (35%)
I have lost many of my long-term teachers.	32 (66%)	12 (41%)	12 (41%)	8 (48%)
The teachers I hire now have little/no experience.	35 (73%)	2 (100%)	19 (48%)	14 (82%)
I do not believe I am orienting new teachers well due to time constraints.	11 (23%)	2 (100%)	6 (21%)	3 (18%)
I am unsure if I can keep my teachers.	4 (8%)	0 (0%)	3 (10%)	1 (6%)
Positive practices	Total (48)	Struggling (2)	Maintaining (29)	Thriving (17)
I have a well-developed orientation process for new teachers.	15 (32%)	1 (50%)	8 (28%)	6 (35%)
I have kept most of my teachers.	13 (27%)	0 (0%)	8 (28%)	5 (29%)
My experienced teachers are mentoring new teachers.	20 (42%)	2 (100%)	11 (38%)	7 (41%)
LDOE-provided bonuses have helped me to retain teachers.	30 (63%)	2 (100%)	18 (62%)	10 (59%)

Teachers participating in the focus groups indicated high levels of enjoyment in describing their daily work. They articulated a deep sense of purpose, and appreciation for their daily work with children. While directors indicated that staffing was challenging during the pandemic due to health and safety concerns (65%), high unemployment benefits (60%), and the job becoming more stressful (54%),



*I have three early learning center locations. As a business, Covid-19 impacted our staffing the most. We had to reduce enrollment because we did not have teachers. Before the pandemic, we were full. In the last sixteen months, we have been unable to enroll new children.*

*–Lafayette Early Learning Center Director*

Overwhelmingly, teacher participants in focus groups stated that they felt supported by their employers during Covid-19, and did not feel pressure to perform in their jobs. When asked what employers and the Lafayette community could do to make their work better, recognition and respect as educators were mentioned by several teachers in both focus groups. Many agreed with the perspective that families and the community still regard their work as babysitting, and that they did not feel valued as teachers. High ratios were also cited as a challenge for teachers in attempting to provide high quality teaching. Retirement plans, health insurance, mental health days, special events, and bonuses were also mentioned as desirable and needed.

**Recommendation Three: LRS should explore interest in systemic workforce supports for early learning staff and services as mentioned in this [resource from the Administration of Children and Families](#):**

**Immediate financial relief**

In response to pressing workforce emergencies, LRS can support:

- Recruitment and retention bonuses to support attracting new teachers and recognizing the role of experienced ones. 50% of surveyed directors reported that bonuses helped them to retain staff during the pandemic.
- Program improvement bonuses, which could include increased services to families.
- Expense reimbursement in targeted areas that are related to increased pandemic-related expenses, such as cleaning supplies and Personal Protective Equipment.

**Systemic improvements**

Lafayette’s comprehensive structure - with a school system, early childhood network, and Resource and Referral Agency under one roof creates a potential opportunity for strategic alignment.

- Contracted slots that reduce the volatility of child enrollment, so that high quality early learning centers have an operating budget to hire staff.
- [Wage ladders](#) that provide guidance and/or support for increasing wages by specific benchmarks (like educational attainment) could be established for the LRS, with support and guidance to help centers implement standards.
- [Family Child Care and Infant-Toddler Networks](#) to ensure that families have options that meet their needs and budgets.
- [Shared services](#) to provide back office and staffing support to alleviate the challenges of program administration.

- Apprenticeship programs that help address the workforce pipeline challenges. This could include partnerships with high school certificate programs and higher education. [Federal Workforce Innovation and opportunity Act](#) dollars can help to reduce the on-the-job training costs of youth employment.
- Substitute pools or centralized substitute teaching staff could help reduce the churn of staffing challenges, and potential child safety issues related to compliance with ratio standards.
- Professional Development systems to address the influx of new teachers in the field. An [expansive library](#) of online early childhood training is available on the Administration for Children and Families website. A concerted effort to provide live training and coaching should be developed to support new educators.

### Industry solutions

Early childhood providers can advocate for changes that address key levers to teacher retention. Specifically:

- Comprehensive benefits
- Increase wages
- Salary scales

**Finding Four: Many early learning centers want to serve more children.** Despite staffing challenges, 21 early learning centers (46%) are interested in serving more children in the current site (12 centers) or expanding their business (9 centers). No directors indicated that they plan to transition away from the business. Twenty-one centers requested support with marketing to support their business goals.

Efforts to retain teachers are critical, and at the same time, not sufficient, as shared in this brief from the [Institute for Child Success](#):

“The projected growth of many early childhood professions between 2020 and 2030 exceeds the average projected growth of American jobs overall.<sup>1</sup> This means the number of positions available to be filled by professionals within a specific industry will expand and more people will be needed, which creates pressure to ensure people hold the necessary credentials. While the average projected growth across all industries is 8 percent, jobs predominantly focused on child well-being exceed that: social workers are projected to experience industry growth at 12 percent, and early child care educators at 18 percent.”

Lafayette Ready Start needs to actively and urgently sustain and increase the number of teachers in the early childhood field to meet both its current and future demand.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook. (September 2021). Employment Projections 2020 – 2030. BLS. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ecopro.pdf>



Additionally, early learning center directors may need support in improving center-based recruitment efforts. In listing job opportunities, most early learning centers use an average of 2 or more strategies, including online and word-of-mouth approaches. However, only 31% felt confident in rating their job listings as standing out in a good way. Another 31% expressed uncertainty at the quality of their job postings. The remaining 38% named that the job postings utilized to recruit teachers could be stronger.

Additionally, more expansive hiring practices could be employed to increase the likelihood that the teacher-recruit is well-suited for the position, reducing disruptions in care for children, and ensuring the efficiency of the director's time. When asked about recruiting activities (See Table 5), in-person interviews are only conducted 85% of the time, with most centers employing only two of three basic hiring practices (phone screen, interview, and reference check). While reduced in-person interviews during the pandemic may have become standard practice, a secondary step of visiting the center could be extended to strong applicants, as an additional measure of suitability.

The scarcity of teacher applicants coupled with the increase of new teachers in the field could pose safety issues for children. Thorough recruiting practices could help to minimize this risk.

**Table 5: Recruiting activities by category**

Onboarding activities	Total (48)	Struggling (2)	Maintaining (29)	Thriving (17)
Phone screen	19 (40%)	0 (0%)	11 (38%)	8 (47%)
In-person interview	41 (85%)	2 (100%)	26 (90%)	13 (76%)
In-classroom field visit	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	1 (6%)
Reference check	27 (68%)	2 (100%)	10 (21%)	15 (88%)
Other: Virtual interview (3), Responding to written questions (3), Social media check (1), Screening for Child Development Associates qualifications (1)				

**Recommendation Four: Support efforts to meet current and future demand:**

- Launch a community-wide marketing push to both recognize existing teachers, and attract new ones to the field.
- Provide continuous professional development that addresses the specific needs of new early childhood educators, as well as the directors supervising them.
- Coach directors in enhanced recruiting techniques.

*The hardest thing during the pandemic was not being able to hug the kids, or see them smile. That's the whole reason I went into this profession.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Teacher*

**Finding Five: Directors at all levels would appreciate support in improving their leadership skills.**

Directors were surveyed about the instructional leadership offered to teachers (like ongoing observations and feedback). Centers that were *maintaining* were most likely to provide more instructional leadership (See Table 6). Observing new teachers (88%) and an expansive orientation were the two most common instructional leadership activities across all categories. Daily check-ins during the first week of employment were only employed 67% of the time.

<b>Table 6: Ongoing instructional leadership practices by category</b>				
Instructional Leadership practices	Total (48)	Struggling (2)	Maintaining (29)	Thriving (17)
Daily check-ins for the first week	32 (67%)	2 (100%)	19 (40%)	11 (65%)
Observing the new teacher and providing them with feedback	42 (88%)	2 (100%)	25 (66%)	15 (88%)
Assigning the new teacher to a mentor teacher	33 (69%)	1 (50%)	18 (62%)	14 (82%)
Weekly check-ins with the new teacher for the first 45 days	26 (54%)	1 (50%)	16 (55%)	9 (53%)
An orientation that includes more than the state minimum requirements	36 (75%)	1 (50%)	22 (76%)	13 (76%)
Classroom observations and feedback at least three times a year	26 (54%)	1 (50%)	16 (55%)	9 (53%)
Annual evaluations	25 (52%)	1 (50%)	15 (52%)	9 (53%)
Annual surveys to understand teachers' perspectives	10 (21%)	1 (50%)	7 (24%)	2 (12%)
Increased pay with a CDA or other credentials	23 (48%)	0 (0%)	14 (48%)	9 (53%)
An exit interview for teachers who are leaving	6 (13%)	0 (0%)	4 (14%)	2 (12%)

Notably, activities that provide directors with feedback loops about their own performance (like annual surveys to understand teachers' perspectives and exit interviews) were not as common. Regular touchpoints with staff provide opportunities for continuous improvement, and enhance staff relationships and communication.



Table 7 reflects business guidance that directors stated would be helpful. Directors requested guidance on improving communications with teachers (38%), and staff surveys could be a practice that invites constructive criticism.

When asked about other guidance that would be helpful, directors indicated a need for additional leadership coaching (50%), as well as [guidance with staffing plans](#) and scheduling (38%) in addition to marketing support previously discussed in Finding Four.

Table 7: Desired business guidance by category				
Suggested business supports	Total (48)	Struggling (2)	Maintaining (29)	Thriving (17)
Creating and maintaining a budget	7 (15%)	0 (0%)	6 (21%)	1 (6%)
Guidance with the staffing plan/scheduling	18 (38%)	0 (0%)	15 (52%)	3 (18%)
Orientation guidance	16 (33%)	0 (0%)	11 (38%)	5 (29%)
An overhaul of the staff pay and benefits structure at my center	12 (25%)	0 (0%)	9 (31%)	3 (18%)
Leadership coaching/training so that I can be a more effective director	24 (50%)	0 (0%)	16 (55%)	8 (47%)
Improving communication with my teachers	18 (38%)	1 (50%)	11 (38%)	6 (35%)
Marketing support to recruit more teachers and families	22 (46%)	1 (50%)	14 (48%)	7 (41%)
Time management training	15 (31%)	0 (0%)	14 (48%)	1 (6%)
Guidance on expanding my booming business	11 (23%)	0 (0%)	5 (17%)	6 (35%)
I do not need additional guidance	3 (6%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (12%)

In general, *struggling* directors were least likely to seek support (with an average of 1 support selected), while *thriving* directors selecting an average of 2.6 supports, and *maintaining* directors selecting 3.5 areas for future guidance.

Directors were asked what strengths they could teach to others along five particular areas of organizational culture in an early learning center:

- I have assigned teachers with the right age group.
- I have created a culture where my teachers know they can come to me with a problem or question.
- I have created a culture where my teachers know they can come to me with a problem or question.
- I am available to support my teachers when appropriate
- I create an environment where my teachers are most content with their employment at my center.

*Maintaining* centers selected an average of 3.5 strengths, with *struggling* centers selecting three strengths (one center chose one strength, and the other chose five). *Thriving* directors were most likely to state that they could teach others in general areas of leadership, with an average response of 4.2 strengths, suggesting an efficacy and experience in their roles, and a strong organizational culture.

**Recommendation: Provide leadership coaching and related support to early learning center directors to enhance their ability to retain and attract staff, and expand their businesses.**

**Finding Six: Directors and teachers articulated feeling isolated from other professionals and desired opportunities to connect.** The global pandemic challenged the workforce in new ways, and reduced social and professional engagements. In the brief, [Supporting the Professionals that Support our Families](#), recommendations for the early childhood workforce are made from learnings in the medical field: “In thinking about organizational and structural reforms, there are seven ‘dimensions’ linked to burnout and engagement in the workforce which provide insight into both prevention and mitigation, again derived from the medical world:

- workload,
- efficiency,
- flexibility and/or control,
- culture and values,
- work-life integration,
- community at work, and
- meaning in work”

Zoom meetings (like the focus groups themselves), where professionals could talk about challenges and approaches were mentioned in all focus groups as ways to feel more connected as a community. City-wide events like picnics, bowling, and karaoke were mentioned as fun opportunities to connect with professionals from other early learning centers. These activities could promote peer connection, professional development, and build a sense of community. Creating conditions to avoid burnout can happen at both the early learning center and system level.

**Recommendation:** Consider directly addressing burnout, and create opportunities to build peer support and professional relationships in the early learning field in Lafayette.

*At the beginning of the pandemic, we had a strong support system with upper management. Staff was willing to work open to close. Over time, we became completely full, with 30 staff. Now, two years into this pandemic, we are starting to see burnout. Teachers don't want to work as much as they had. They could go down the road and make more at McDonalds. They expect us to jump in. We want to do as much as possible for our work family, but it is tiring.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Director*

*We need opportunities to share ideas with each other (multiple head nods). I have noticed that in this industry, people are too themselves, and they don't collaborate. We need opportunities to talk to each other.*

*- Lafayette Early Learning Center Director*

*This is the best work there is. I can honestly say that a child will make me laugh about something at least one time a day.*

*-Lafayette Early Learning Center Teacher*

## **Conclusion**

Lafayette Ready Start has a committed early childhood workforce, interested in serving more children. Its unique structure provides it an opportunity to provide systemic solutions to pervasive problems that would enable retention of the workforce. Further study is needed to determine which options are feasible and most attractive to teachers and directors.



## Appendix

### Director Survey Questions

#### (Sent via Google Form)

Early Learning Center

Director Survey

Lafayette Ready Start is seeking insight to learn about the challenges and successes directors have had with staff retention. Your personal information will not be shared with anyone beyond the LRS team and the consultant. This information will help LRS to provide targeted support to directors.

Name of person completing this survey

Name of early learning center(s)

How would you describe the current state of your early learning center business?

- a. Thriving - have a wait list, currently at capacity with children and with a full staff, and could grow more.
- b. Maintaining - managing to maintain pre-COVID levels of children and staffing, but it's a struggle.
- c. Struggling - unable to staff center, and have closed classrooms.

How many full time teachers do you employ?

How many part time teachers do you employ?

Do you currently have substitute teachers available in an emergency situation?

- a. Yes
- b. No

What is your current rate of pay for lead teachers?

- a. \$8-9/hour
- b. \$9-10/hour
- c. \$10-11/hour
- d. \$11-12/hour
- e. \$12-13/hour
- f. \$13-14/hour
- g. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What benefits do you provide staff? Check all that apply.

- Health benefits

- Facilitating enrollment in the health care marketplace
- Dental/vision benefits
- Retirement benefits (enrollment only)
- Retirement matching funds (employer pays 3-6% of employee benefit annually)
- Sick leave annually, and in the first year
- Vacation time annually, and in the first year
- Professional development funds
- Other benefits:

How would you describe the impact of the pandemic on your ability to staff the center? Check all that apply.

- I always struggled to retain teachers and COVID-19 has just made it harder.
- I have lost many of my long-term teachers.
- The teachers I hire now have little/no experience.
- I do not believe I am orienting new teachers well due to time constraints.
- I am unsure if I can keep my teachers.
- I have a well-developed orientation process for new teachers.
- I have kept most of my teachers.
- My experienced teachers are mentoring new teachers.
- LDOE-provided bonuses have helped me to retain teachers.
- Other:

How do you currently advertise for open teaching positions in your center?

- Newspaper advertisements
- Facebook
- Websites, like Indeed.com
- On Track by Five bulletin board
- Community bulletin boards
- Outreach to community supporters, church, and other organizations
- Current staff and families
- Other:

How would you rate your job postings?

- a. My job postings stand out among others, in a good way.
- b. I don't know if my job postings are good or not.
- c. My job postings could be stronger in helping me recruit teachers.

During COVID, which of the following steps do you take before hiring a new teacher?

- Phone screen
- In-person interview

- In-classroom field visit
- Reference check
- Other:

Which of the following steps do you take after hiring a teacher?

- Daily check-ins for the first week
- Observing the new teacher and providing them with feedback
- Assigning the new teacher to a mentor teacher
- Weekly check-ins with the new teacher for the first 45 days
- An orientation that includes more than the state minimum requirements
- Classroom observations and feedback at least three times a year
- Annual evaluations
- Annual surveys to understand teachers' perspectives
- Increased pay with ECAC or other credentials
- An exit interview for teachers who are leaving
- Other:

What challenges have made it harder for you to keep your teachers during the pandemic? Check all that apply.

- Their own children have not been in school due to COVID, quarantines, etc.
- Changes in their spouse's employment.
- Unemployment benefits are too attractive, and there is a lack of motivation to work.
- Concerns about health and safety during COVID.
- Pay and benefits are not sufficient.
- Center operations (closures, pay) have been unstable.
- The job has become more stressful and less enjoyable.
- Families are more stressed out and frustrated.
- Other:

Are there any business practices and policies that have helped you keep your teachers during the pandemic? Check all that apply.

- Pandemic pay
- Bonuses
- Flexible schedules
- Offering child care for children of staff, as needed
- Being kind and flexible with teachers
- Paid time off/sick leave
- High health and safety standards
- Providing PPE for staff
- Other:



Which of these would you describe as strengths of yours, that you could teach others? Check all that apply.

- I have assigned my teachers with the right age group.
- I have created a culture where my teachers know they can come to me with a problem or question.
- I am available to support my teachers when appropriate.
- I invest in my teachers' growth and learning as their leader.
- I create an environment where my teachers are mostly content with their employment at my center.
- I do not feel like any of these statements represent my strengths.
- Other:

What would you like to be true for your business in the future?

- a. I would like to serve more children than I do now, in my current center.
- b. I would like to expand or open another center.
- c. I would like to focus on keeping my staff.
- d. I would like to transition out of this business.
- e. Other:

What business guidance would be helpful to you moving forward? Check all that apply.

- Creating and maintaining a budget
- Guidance with the staffing plan/scheduling
- Orientation guidance
- An overhaul of the staff pay and benefits structure at my center
- Leadership coaching/training so that I can be a more effective director
- Improving communication with my teachers
- Marketing support to recruit more teachers and families
- Time management training
- Guidance on expanding my booming business!
- I do not need additional guidance.
- Other:

What else do you want us to know?

**Virtual Focus Group Protocol and Script:**

- **For Directors:** Thank you for giving us your time and insights today. We are going to ask you some questions about your business operations during COVID-19. We will not connect your names to any information you share. You have my contact information and you can contact me with additional thoughts that you wanted to share, if relevant.
- **For Teachers:** Thank you for giving us your time and insights today. We are going to ask you some questions about working in an early learning center during COVID-19. We will not connect your names to any information you share. You have my contact information and you can contact me with additional thoughts that you wanted to share, if relevant. There is no need to tell us where you work.
- The Lafayette Ready Start Network is working to better understand challenges being experienced by the early learning workforce. Specifically, they want to understand how to support businesses to retain teachers so that families have access to high quality early learning opportunities. We want to hear from you - about practices that have worked well, and those that haven't so that we can design supports with that learning in mind.
- **For Directors:** We want to remind you that LRS is a partner with you, and we want you to reach out to communicate about the challenges you may be experiencing before you make critical decisions about your services. They are not on this call today, and will not know which of you raises particular concerns. I encourage you to reach out to Emmy (not me) if you are considering big shifts in your business so that they can thought partner and support you as much as possible.
- The purpose of this focus group is to get your honest opinion, so there are no right or wrong answers. Our questions will be focused on your own experiences, impressions, and knowledge. We would like your consent to record the conversations we are having so that we can review them later and with our team. Please give me a "thumbs up" if this is alright with you.
- We'll summarize this conversation to help the Network strengthen how it supports centers and teachers in Lafayette, but your answers will not be attributed to you individually.

*(Pause and ask for any clarifying questions/comments)*

I want to go over a few guidelines before I start:

- As I mentioned, there are no right or wrong answers, just different perspectives.
- Lafayette is a small community. We ask that you hold each others' answers in confidence.
- (Teachers:) There is no need to tell us where you work, to respect the confidentiality of the discussion.
- You can disagree, but please do so respectfully.
- Only one person should speak at a time. This can awkward on Zoom. I will help to moderate.
- We ask you to be present, as much as possible. Use the video function so we can see your face, if possible. It helps to make the conversation more engaging.
- My role as moderator will be to ask questions and guide the discussion, but I encourage you to talk to each other. Let's get started!

**Focus Group Questions for Directors:**

*Facilitated round-robin style. Prioritized questions are in bold.*

- 1. Tell me your name and how Covid has impacted your center operations in two to three sentences.**
- 2. (If thriving): What has staff retention been like for you during COVID?**
  - a. Probing: What ways of supporting teachers has helped you weather COVID?
- 3. (If struggling): What has proven most challenging about retaining staff during COVID?**
  - a. Probing: Is there anything you think would be helpful in retaining staff?
- 4. If you reduced the number of children you serve during COVID (like making classrooms smaller, or closing entire rooms), what factors shaped those decisions?**
  - a. Probing: What is keeping you from reopening classrooms?
  - b. Probing: What would be most helpful to you in reopening classrooms?
- 5. What do you think the next 6-12 months will look like for your business?**
  - a. Probing: If you are considering closing, selling, or further reducing the children you serve, please feel free to reach out to me afterwards. I'll drop my email in the chat.
- 6. (If struggling): What support would be most helpful to you to keep your doors open?** For example: Professional development, coaching, business guidance, substitute pool.
- 7. (If thriving): What support would be necessary to help you maintain capacity or serve more children?** For example: Professional development, coaching, business guidance, start-up support.
  - a. Probing: What is preventing you from your desire to expand?
    - i. Facility -
    - ii. Staffing
    - iii. Funding
    - iv. Time



### Focus Group Questions for Teachers

*Facilitated round-robin style. Prioritized questions are in bold.*

1. **Tell me your name, how long you've worked in ECE, and why you work in the early childhood education field in two to three sentences. As a reminder, it is not necessary to tell us where you work.**
2. **What has been the hardest for you about working during COVID?**
  - a. Probing: Have you felt supported or not by your employer during COVID? How?
  - b. Probing: Have you changed jobs during COVID? From center to center, or are you new to the early learning field?
3. **How long do you see yourself working in the early childhood field and why?**
  - a. Probing: Do you feel pressure to perform at a certain level at your job?
  - b. Probing: Do you feel like you have the opportunity to grow in your career at your current work setting?
  - c. Probing: What would attract you to stay in the field?
4. **What could early childhood employers or the Lafayette community do to show you how valued your work is?**
  - a. Probing: What would make your job better?
5. **What else would you like us to know?**