

Cost of Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood Education



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July 2, 2026

Executive Summary

Teacher turnover is one of the most pressing challenges in early childhood education — and its true cost is not well understood. When a teacher leaves, a center doesn't just lose a staff member. It absorbs the cascading costs of classroom coverage and recruiting and training new staff. This paper explores the fiscal and social costs of teacher loss in early childhood education. Drawing on national data and an ECE-specific cost framework, we break down where those costs come from and what program and system leaders can do about it.

Teacher turnover is a persistent challenge in early childhood education (ECE), affecting not only programming, but also the quality and stability of care.¹ In ECE settings, turnover can be especially disruptive because consistent relationships between teachers and children are a central part of healthy early development and learning. When teachers leave, children may experience interruptions in the continuity of care and instruction that supports language, literacy, math, and social skills.² These disruptions can extend beyond the classroom as well. Families depend on stable child care arrangements, so staff turnover can create stress, reduce reliability, and in some cases limit access to care altogether.³ Finally, remaining teachers and staff may experience additional stress and frustration. Losing a colleague often means juggling coverage for classrooms and devoting time to training replacements.⁴ Teacher turnover in ECE is therefore not just a staffing issue; it is also a problem tied to program quality, family stability, and child outcomes.



Despite the importance of this issue, most of the turnover cost estimates cited in policy discussions come from research based on K-12 education or from general workforce studies rather than ECE settings. ECE programs operate under different staffing ratios,

funding structures, licensing requirements, enrollment patterns, and wage conditions than K-12 schools.⁵ In an early childhood center, the loss of even one teacher can have immediate operational consequences: increased staff overtime, use of substitute teachers, combined classrooms, reduced productivity during onboarding, or temporary classroom closure.¹ Turnover may also contribute to revenue losses if classrooms cannot remain open or if funding dependent on quality assessments is affected.² Turnover data drawn from outside the ECE field does not capture these impacts sufficiently.

This paper will use an ECE-specific framework for estimating the costs of losing one teacher in a typical early childhood setting. Drawing on U.S.-based research and national data sources, the paper separates turnover into the direct industry components of staffing and human resources costs, operational disruption, and revenue loss from classroom closure. Using this framework, this analysis estimates the tangible cost of turnover per lost teacher. However, not all consequences can be understood using direct financial cost estimates; there are social and long-term impacts of turnover, including potential effects on children's learning and school readiness, increased instability for families, and weakening of the early childhood workforce over time. Together, these direct and indirect consequences suggest that teacher turnover in ECE generates a higher cost than is often recognized and deserves greater attention from both program leaders and policymakers.

Conceptual Framework for ECE Turnover

The conceptual framework for this paper treats teacher turnover in ECE as a complex event with both industry and social costs. On the direct industry side, the model separates turnover into three major categories: staffing and human resources costs, operational disruption costs, and revenue losses. The model keeps these categories separate, as they occur through different mechanisms and are estimated with different data sources. We then combine these costs to estimate the total direct industry costs resulting from a single ECE teacher's departure.

Direct Industry Costs

Our model organizes the direct industry costs of ECE turnover into three categories: staffing and human resources costs, operational disruption costs, and revenue losses (see **Figure 1**). This structure separates the immediate administrative costs of replacing a teacher from the wider costs created by the vacancy itself. In combination, these categories provide a more complete estimate of turnover costs for ECE settings than models focused only on replacement expenses.

*“Teacher turnover in ECE is not just a staffing issue; it is also a problem tied to program **quality, family stability, and child outcomes.**”*

The staffing and HR portion of the model is based on the methodology proposed by the Center for American Progress (CAP),⁶ which synthesized 31 case studies drawn from 11 research papers and found that the typical median cost of replacing an employee was about 21 percent of annual salaries. The CAP brief groups direct replacement costs into these categories: separation costs, recruitment costs, and training or onboarding costs. Applying that methodology to the median annual wage of a preschool teacher (based on 2025 BLS reporting⁷), \$37,120, yields an estimated staffing and HR turnover cost of **\$7,424 per lost teacher** and provides a starting point for estimating the direct industry costs of turnover in a field where ECE-specific replacement cost studies remain limited.

This estimate should be treated as a conservative baseline rather than a complete measure of teacher turnover costs in ECE. The studies included in the CAP synthesis were drawn from a wide range of occupations, including grocery, hospitality, health care, direct service, and call centers. They did include one study related to replacing a teacher, however it was based on data from K-12 teaching and only used costs stemming from recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers.

The CAP review notes that many of the studies included captured direct costs more than indirect ones, and only a small share explicitly included indirect effects such as coping with vacancies, reduced productivity, and lost revenue or institutional knowledge. In ECE, these omitted costs are especially important because vacancies are not merely administrative events; they can disrupt ratio compliance, require classrooms to combine or close, require the use of substitutes, increase workload for remaining staff, and reduce the quality and continuity of care. The staffing and HR estimate in our model is supplemented by additional categories for operational disruption and revenue losses, which are necessary to reflect the distinct realities of teacher turnover in early childhood settings.

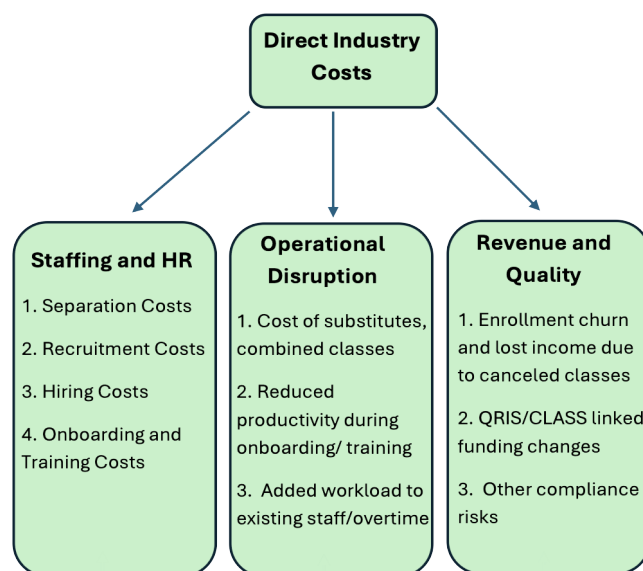


Figure 1

The remaining types of direct industry costs in our model – operational disruption and revenue loss – are discussed in tandem. We define vacancy time as the average period between a teacher’s departure and the placement of a permanent replacement. This period is significant because it is during the vacancy that centers incur many of the additional costs associated with turnover, such as substitute coverage, staff overtime, classroom consolidation, and possible enrollment disruptions. Given the limited availability of ECE-specific evidence, we use an applied estimate of an average vacancy duration based on two recently published sources related to ECE. First, a 2018 Illinois report⁸ found that filling a lead preschool teacher vacancy takes roughly 11 weeks, while

a 2018 Nebraska brief⁹ reported an average replacement time of about 1.4 months for a general preschool teacher. Averaging these estimates yields an 8-week vacancy period, which we use as an approximation for modeling vacancy time across different ECE teachers. To represent how centers manage this vacancy period, our model assumes a simplified balance of coverage consisting of 2 weeks of classroom closure, 3 weeks of staff overtime, and 3 weeks of substitute teaching. Because empirical evidence on the relative use of these strategies is limited, this division can be understood as a starting baseline that can be adjusted for different program contexts.



Operational Disruption Costs

Operational disruption costs refer to the short-term expenses that centers incur to maintain classroom operations while a teaching position remains vacant. In our model, these costs are estimated as the combined value of staff overtime and substitute teacher coverage used during the vacancy period, excluding any losses already attributed to classroom closure to avoid double counting. Based on the vacancy coverage assumptions above, we assume 3 weeks of coverage is handled using staff overtime and another 3 weeks of vacancy is covered with substitute teaching.

To estimate overtime costs, we use the average hourly wage for preschool teachers in child care services¹⁰

along with the Fair Labor Standards Act overtime standard of 1.5 times the regular wage, which leads to an estimated overtime rate of \$27.87 per hour. Assuming that only half of the weekly vacancy hours are covered through paid overtime, or 20 hours per week, this yields an estimated overtime cost of \$1,672 across the 3 weeks. Substitute coverage is then estimated using the average hourly wage for substitute teachers in child care services,⁹ or \$14.81 per hour, multiplied by 40 hours of coverage per week across 3 weeks, yielding an estimated substitute teacher cost of \$1,777.

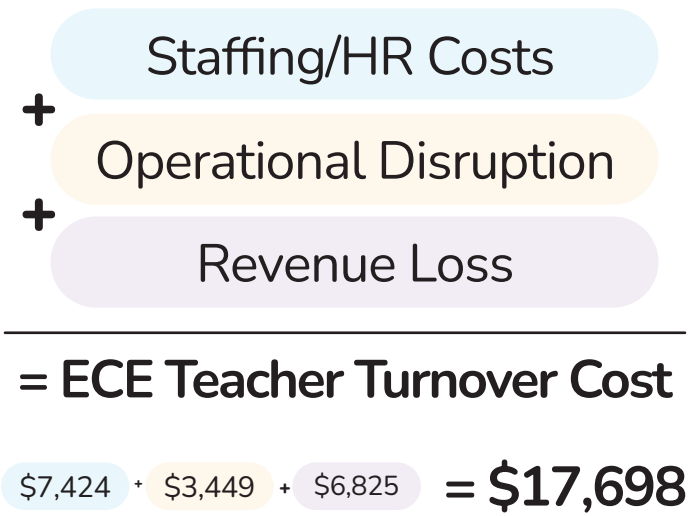
Taken together, these two components produce a total **operational disruption estimate of \$3,449 per teacher vacancy**, representing an average direct cost of keeping classrooms staffed and functioning while a permanent replacement is found.

Revenue Loss

Revenue loss in our model refers to the income a center forgoes when a classroom cannot remain open during a teacher vacancy. Unlike operational disruption costs, which reflect the expenses of covering a vacancy while continuing services, revenue loss captures the financial consequences of being unable to provide care at all. To estimate this, our model assumes 2 weeks of the 8-week vacancy period is handled through classroom closure, or approximately 10 weekdays of lost classroom time. We then calculate the revenue loss as the product of the number of closure days, along with the average number of children in a classroom and the daily tuition value per child. Using a national average annual child care price estimate of \$13,128 (based on reporting from Child Care Aware of America¹¹), we calculate a daily rate of \$52.50 across a 250-day operating year. For classroom size, we use results from a recent center-based care survey¹² which found average enrollment of 9.5 children for classrooms serving children under age 3, 16.6 children for ages 3-5, and 15.1 children for mixed ages. Combining these figures, along with national prevalence of these child ages in centers, we use 13 children as an overall U.S. average estimate for enrollment. **Therefore, we calculate an estimated revenue loss associated with classroom closure of \$6,825 per teacher vacancy.**

Summary Cost Estimate

Together, these three components provide an overall estimate of the direct industry costs of teacher turnover in ECE. In this model, the average cost per lost teacher is calculated as the sum of staffing and HR costs, operational disruption costs, and revenue loss from classroom closure. Using these estimates, the combined cost is \$17,698 per teacher loss:



This combined figure is intended to represent a national average estimate of the financial burden centers may face when a teacher leaves, while also illustrating that the costs of turnover extend well beyond recruitment and hiring alone.

Social Factors and Moderating Factors

Our model assumes that not all costs of turnover can be combined into a single dollar estimate. The social cost framework (see Figure 2) includes three major domains: child learning outcomes, family stability, and workforce loss. These are included because they are real consequences of teacher turnover and are central to understanding why turnover matters in ECE, not merely to center operations but also to children and families. While important, these effects are excluded from the cost estimate because the available research does not yet support a consistent method for assigning

a dollar value to these impacts — particularly when some effects may emerge indirectly or accumulate over time. For this reason, our analysis should be interpreted as a conservative estimate of costs that can be more readily quantified, rather than as a full accounting of the total consequences of ECE turnover.

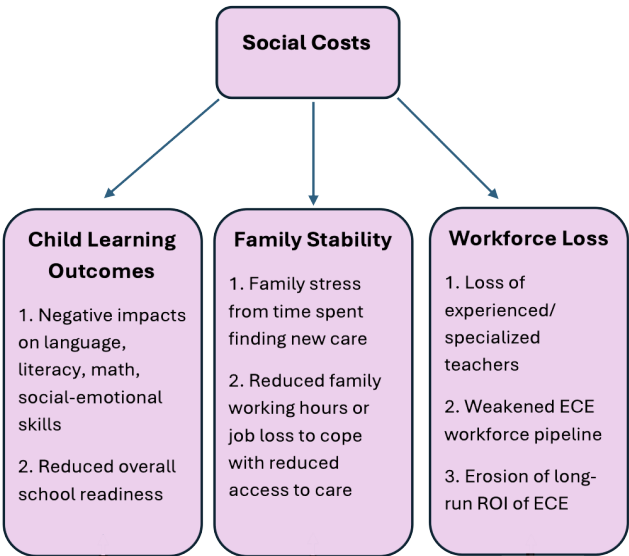


Figure 2

Our framework also acknowledges that the scale of turnover costs can be shaped by several factors that may further influence how costly and disruptive a given vacancy will be. Center size matters because smaller programs have less staffing flexibility, so the loss of even one teacher may force classroom closure or major schedule changes. Funding sources also matter, since programs supported primarily by private pay tuition or family child care revenue may have less financial cushion than centers with more stable public funding streams such as Head Start.⁴ Child age and ratio constraints can further moderate impact because vacancies among infant and toddler teachers are often more disruptive under stricter ratio requirements⁴. Teacher experience, credentials, and role are also important, as the loss of lead teachers or highly qualified staff can create larger replacement costs and greater damage to quality and organizational knowledge.⁴ Finally, seasonality and the timing of vacancies can affect how quickly programs refill positions and how much revenue is lost, since hiring conditions vary across the calendar year.⁴ Together, these moderating factors explain why turnover does not result in a uniform burden across ECE settings.

Conclusions

Overall, this model estimates the direct industry costs of ECE teacher turnover as the combined total of staffing and HR costs, operational disruption costs, and revenue loss associated with classroom closure, yielding an average estimate of \$17,698 per lost teacher. This figure is intended to capture the direct center-level financial burden of turnover, but it does not include the broader social costs that may also result when educators leave the classroom. Those excluded costs may include (but are not limited to): disruptions to children's learning and school readiness, instability for families who depend on reliable care to work, and long-term losses to the strength and experience of the ECE workforce. Several elements of the model rely on limited or indirect evidence, including the use of a general employee turnover methodology for staffing and HR costs, assumptions about average vacancy duration and coverage, and national averages for wages, tuition, and classroom size that may differ substantially across centers and states. In addition, some potentially important consequences of turnover, such as quality-related funding, compliance risks, or enrollment changes, are difficult to estimate consistently and are not fully captured here. Nevertheless, these results should be understood

as a practical, research-informed baseline estimate. This estimate likely understates the full cost of turnover in many ECE settings while still offering a more complete approximation than replacement cost methods alone.

The cost estimate in this paper is offered by LENA to help ECE program leaders, funders, and policymakers weighing investments in teacher retention. At nearly \$18,000 per lost teacher, the fiscal burden of turnover is substantial enough that even modest retention strategies — including professional development or structured mentorship programs — may offer a meaningful return on investment. Program administrators can also use this framework as a practical tool for communicating the true cost of instability to boards, funders, and community partners.

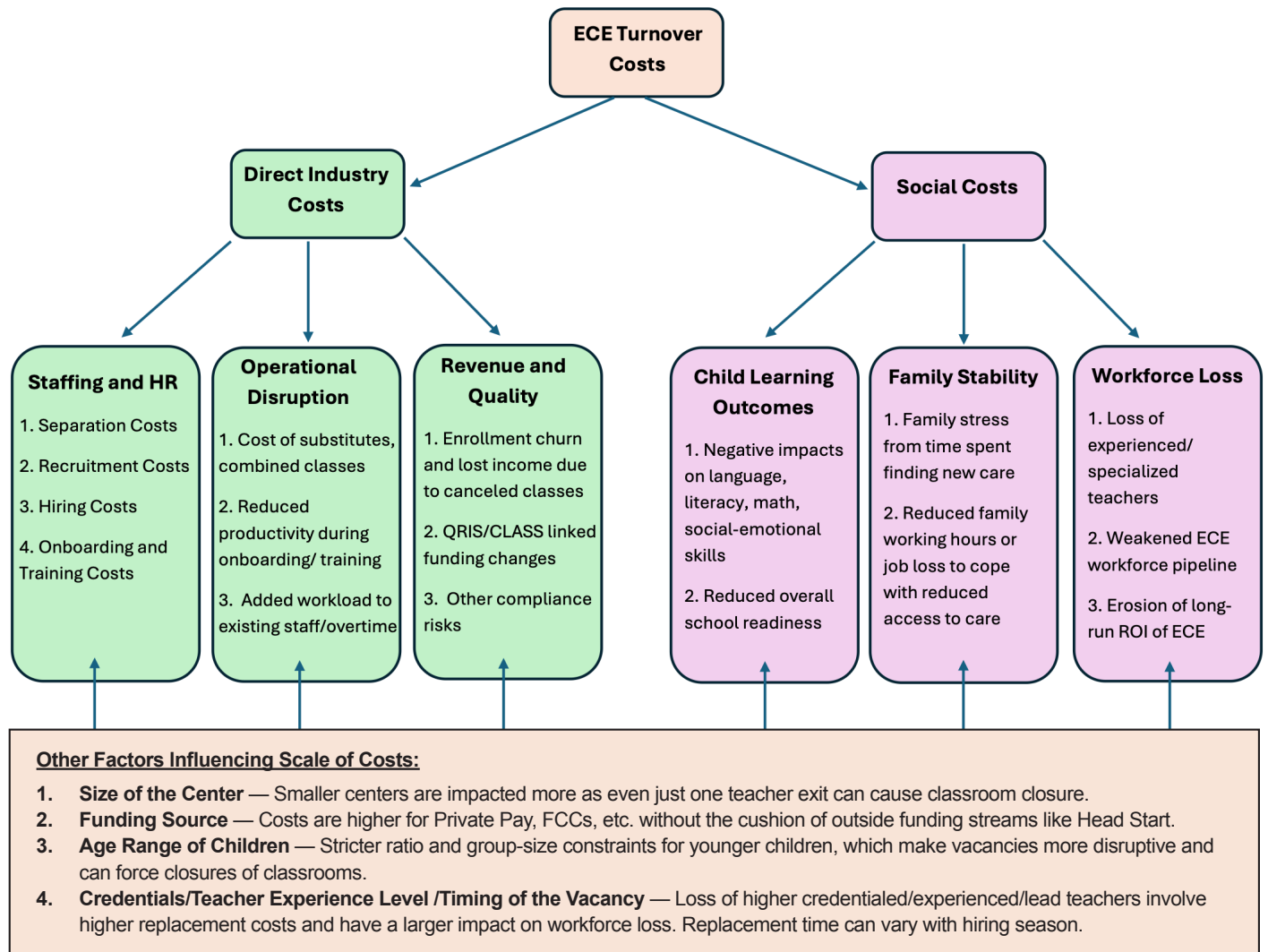
*"At nearly **\$18,000 per lost teacher**, the fiscal burden of turnover is substantial enough that even modest retention strategies — including **professional development or structured mentorship programs** — may offer a meaningful return on investment."*



For policymakers, these findings reinforce the value of funding streams that support workforce stability. Initiatives worth considering include:

- **Compensation efforts** to reduce financial pressure on ECE workers and reward longevity
- **Professional development pathways** that build teacher skills, confidence, and long-term commitment to the field
- **Research investments** to refine vacancy duration estimates and better capture quality-related funding impacts across different program types

Each of these strategies has the potential to generate center-level savings that extend well beyond their direct cost.

Figure 3

Citations

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- ⁶ Boushey, Heather & Glynn, Sarah Jane. (2012). There are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/there-are-significant-business-costs-to-replacing-employees/>
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- ⁸ Main, Catherine & Yarbrough, Karen W. Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce: A Call to Action for the State of Illinois. A joint project of the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education. October 2018.
- ⁹ Roberts, A. M., Gallagher, K. C., Sarver, S., & Daro, A. (2018). Early childhood teacher turnover in Nebraska. Buffet Early Childhood Institute.
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- ¹¹ Child Care Aware of America. (2025, May). Child Care in America: 2024 Price & Supply. <https://www.childcareaware.org/price-landscape24>.
- ¹² Atwell, M. S., Hains, D., Hogan, L., Lazarte, N., Alnajjar, A., & Walters, T. (February 2025). An Unsustainable Status Quo. NAEYC.