

## Research Brief

# Spotlight on the Head Start Workforce: Program Strategies to Improve Well-Being and Increase Retention

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### Summary

This research brief draws on data from the 2021–2022 Study of Family and Staff Well-Being in Head Start FACES Programs (2021–2022 Study) to examine the strategies programs used to improve staff retention and well-being. Using data collected in spring 2022 after more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, this brief describes the types of strategies programs used to support and retain teaching and non-teaching staff, the staffing challenges centers experienced, and the associations between the two. The analysis presented in this brief is also informed by findings from OPRE’s Building and Sustaining the Early Care and Education Workforce (BASE) project about key levers of change to support the early care and education workforce (Administration for Children and Families n.d.). The findings can help develop insights into how programs could support the Head Start workforce in the wake of the pandemic and into the persisting staffing challenges.

The data in this brief provide a window into the experiences of a sample of Head Start program directors and center directors who were able to respond to the survey between April to July 2022. Readers should not assume the data are nationally representative of Head Start programs and centers. To learn more about the sample and weights used for the analyses please see the accompanying appendix.

### The four groups of staff examined in this brief

1. Teaching staff include teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors.
2. Family service workers include staff who provide in-home and other services to families. We examine family service workers together with child counselors and therapists.
3. Managers and coordinators include program leaders and administrative staff such as education, health, disability, and mental health managers or coordinators.
4. Other staff include facilities and support staff such as custodians, food service workers, office staff, and bus drivers.

Head Start is a national program that helps children from families with low incomes prepare for school success by working to promote children’s early learning and health and their families’ well-being (Administration for Children and Families 2019). For the program to meet its goals of supporting children and families, it is critical to support the Head Start workforce, including the teaching staff who work directly with children in classrooms and the non-teaching staff who support families and programs in many other roles.

Recruiting and retaining qualified staff is a persistent concern in Head Start, like in other early care and education (ECE) settings that provide services for children ages birth to 5. Rates of teacher turnover in Head Start have been high for decades (Barnett 2003; Bassok et al. 2013; Phillips et al. 2019;

## Key findings

### Strategies programs used to support and retain staff

- A majority of programs increased wages for both teaching and non-teaching staff between the spring of 2021 and the spring of 2022.
- Most programs used more than one strategy to support the economic well-being of staff and offered a variety of workplace supports. Programs offered these supports to both teaching and non-teaching staff.
- Most programs used a variety of strategies to support the psychological and physical well-being of teaching and non-teaching staff, such as mental health consultations and counseling resources or referrals to employee assistance programs. Many program directors reported that their programs added or increased these supports in the past year.
- Many strategies were used to support all groups of teaching and non-teaching staff, such as strategies to support their economic well-being. But for some strategies, programs tended to offer support to particular staff groups. Programs were more likely to offer supports for staff qualifications and competencies to teaching staff, family service workers and child counselors or therapists, compared to other staff groups. Programs were also more likely to offer flexible scheduling to managers and coordinators compared to other staff groups.

### Center challenges related to staff turnover and shortages

- More than half of centers faced challenges related to teacher turnover between spring of 2021 and spring of 2022, and most had difficulty finding classroom coverage. Less than half of center directors reported that turnover among non-teaching staff was a problem.
- More than half of centers struggled to find enough staff (including teaching and non-teaching staff) to operate at full capacity.

### Links between the strategies programs used to support and retain staff and the challenges their centers experienced because of staff turnover

- Generally, we found few associations between (1) the number and types of strategies programs used to support and retain staff, and (2) whether their centers experienced challenges because of staff turnover.
- Centers in programs that offered more types of supports for qualifications and competencies to “other” staff—such as facilities and support staff—tended to report greater challenges related to turnover among those staff. This association may be the result of staff in these roles going on to seek other roles after receiving the support.

## Head Start programs and centers

Head Start programs receive grants to provide direct services to children and families via child care centers. A program might operate more than one center. We talk about both programs and centers in this brief because program directors answered survey questions about the types of strategies used to support and retain staff, and center directors answered survey questions about challenges related to staff turnover and shortages. Throughout this brief, we highlight whether information came from program directors or center directors.

Whitebook et al. 2014). The staffing challenges experienced by Head Start and other ECE programs were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the demands placed on staff and impacted their personal well-being (Farewell et al. 2023; Kim et al. 2022; Powell et al. 2022). Recognizing these challenges, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Office of Head Start (OHS) have recently provided guidance on how programs can recruit and retain staff by using short-term incentives (Administration for Children and Families 2022a) and sustained increases in compensation and support (Administration for Children and Families 2022b).

Research conducted before the pandemic revealed some strategies that could help decrease turnover and increase retention in Head Start and other ECE settings. Generally, higher wages have been linked to better rates of teacher retention (Totenhagen et al. 2016; Schaack et al. 2020). However, there is mixed evidence regarding the links between other types of compensation and benefits (such as health and disability insurance) and teachers' intention to leave or stay (Holochwost et al. 2009; Torquati et al. 2007). Research has also found that positive work environments (Jeon et al. 2018; Hur et al. 2016; Rusby et al. 2013) and professional development emphasizing teachers' well-being and self-care (Tanaka et al. 2020) are positively linked to mental health and well-being. Because personal and professional well-being have been linked to higher rates of teacher retention (Grant et al. 2019; McMullen et al. 2020), these types of supports may also help retain staff.

In addition to their teaching staff, Head Start programs employ a variety of non-teaching staff, such as family service workers, child counselors and therapists, and facilities and support staff (Aikens et al. 2017; Harden 2010). Recruiting and retaining these staff is also critical to ensuring that children and families receive consistent and high-quality services (Aikens et al. 2017; Harden 2010). However, there is little evidence on the strategies that may support retention of non-teaching staff. Some research suggests certain groups of non-teaching support staff in Head Start programs, particularly administrators such as directors and coaches, have stronger intentions to stay than teaching staff do (McCormick et al. 2022). Yet existing research provides little guidance about what drives these differences.

Supporting the Head Start workforce has grown increasingly critical since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs must choose which strategies—or combination of strategies—to use to support and retain staff in an environment of limited funding. Moreover, given the widespread impacts of the pandemic on the well-being of the ECE workforce, Head Start programs may need to use new strategies to support their staff in the current context.

This brief provides information about the types of strategies Head Start programs use to support and retain staff, and the staffing challenges Head Start centers are experiencing more than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Using data collected in spring 2022, we describe what Head Start programs chose to implement to address the workforce shortage. We also examine the links between supports and turnover-related challenges.

### **Strategies programs used to support and retain teaching staff, and challenges centers experienced related to teaching staff turnover and shortages**

#### **What types of strategies did Head Start programs in the 2021–2022 Study use to support and retain teaching staff? Did programs increase their use of these strategies in the past year?**

In the spring of the 2021–2022 program year, program directors reported that their programs used a variety of strategies to support and retain teaching staff. Beyond increasing wages for teaching staff (Exhibit 1), programs offered a variety of supports for staff economic well-being, such as health benefits and paid sick days (Exhibit 2). Programs also offered staff a variety of supports to enhance their qualifications and competencies (Exhibit 3), psychological and physical well-being (Exhibit 4), and workplace supports (Exhibit 5). Many programs increased their use of strategies to recruit and retain staff in the past year, particularly strategies to support teaching staff's psychological and physical well-being (Exhibit 4) and workplace supports (Exhibit 5).

**Increased staff wages.** In light of the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, ACF and OHS encouraged Head Start grant recipients to permanently increase staff compensation—

## Research questions

In this brief, we examine the strategies programs used to support and retain staff and the challenges centers experienced because of staff turnover and shortages after more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. We use data from program director (Questions 1 and 3) and center director (Questions 2 and 3) surveys collected from April 2022 to July 2022 to address the following three research questions, examined separately for teaching staff and non-teaching staff:

1. What types of strategies did Head Start programs in the 2021–2022 Study use to support and retain staff? Did programs increase their use of these strategies in the past year?
2. To what extent did Head Start centers in the 2021–2022 Study experience challenges due to staff turnover and shortages?
3. What are the associations between the strategies programs used to support and retain staff and the challenges their centers experienced because of staff turnover?

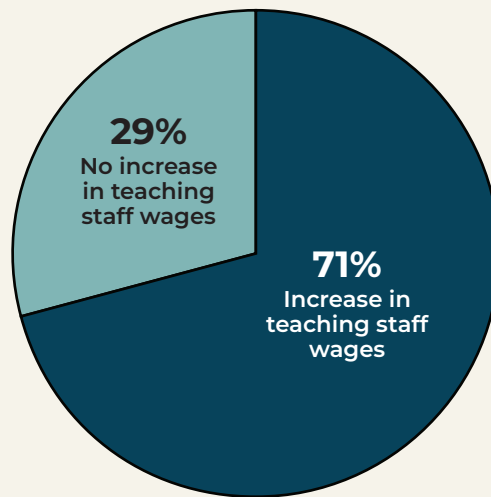
In the first part of this brief, we present findings on strategies and challenges for teaching staff. In the second part of this brief, we present findings on strategies and challenges for non-teaching staff.

## Program strategies to support and retain staff

This brief focuses on five strategies Head Start programs could use to support and retain staff:

1. **Increased staff wages** refers to wage increases for all staff working in specific positions, not including increases for particular individuals (for example, due to promotions) or standard adjustments that programs would typically make (for example, cost-of-living increases).
2. **Supports for economic well-being** refers to strategies that support staff's economic well-being, including health benefits, paid sick days, paid holidays, retirement benefits, and monetary or financial incentives.
3. **Supports for staff qualifications and competencies** refers to strategies to help staff enhance their qualifications and competencies. These include assistance to complete postsecondary coursework, career development programs, support for increased credentials, and reduced tuition rates for continuing education.
4. **Supports for psychological and physical well-being** refers to strategies including offering professional mental health consultations, counseling resources or referrals to employee assistance programs, training or resources on secondary traumatic stress, resources or programs to support self-care, virtual or in-person social events, employee assistance services, and resources to support staff physical health, such as exercise and nutrition resources or a yoga room.
5. **Workplace supports** refers to the types of strategies programs use to address job- and workplace-related factors, reduce job stress, and help staff accomplish work-related goals. These include providing a physically and mentally safe work environment, encouraging personal health and safety, offering regular check-ins, providing staff chances to take breaks during the day, and providing flexible scheduling.

**Exhibit 1. More than two-thirds of programs increased wages for teaching staff**



**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Program directors were asked if their program increased staff wages for teaching staff in the past year, and were asked to select one of the following response options: increased staff wages, did not increase staff wages, program has contracted staff only, and program did not have any staff in the position. Figure reports the percentage of programs that reported increasing staff wages, and the percentage of programs that selected one of the other three response options. Some program directors may have interpreted “No staff in this position” as meaning they did not increase wages for any staff in the position.

Data are drawn from Table A.1 in the accompanying appendix.

including wages—to recruit and retain qualified staff (Administration for Children and Families 2022b). A majority of program directors (71 percent) reported that their program increased wages for teaching staff in the past year (Exhibit 1).

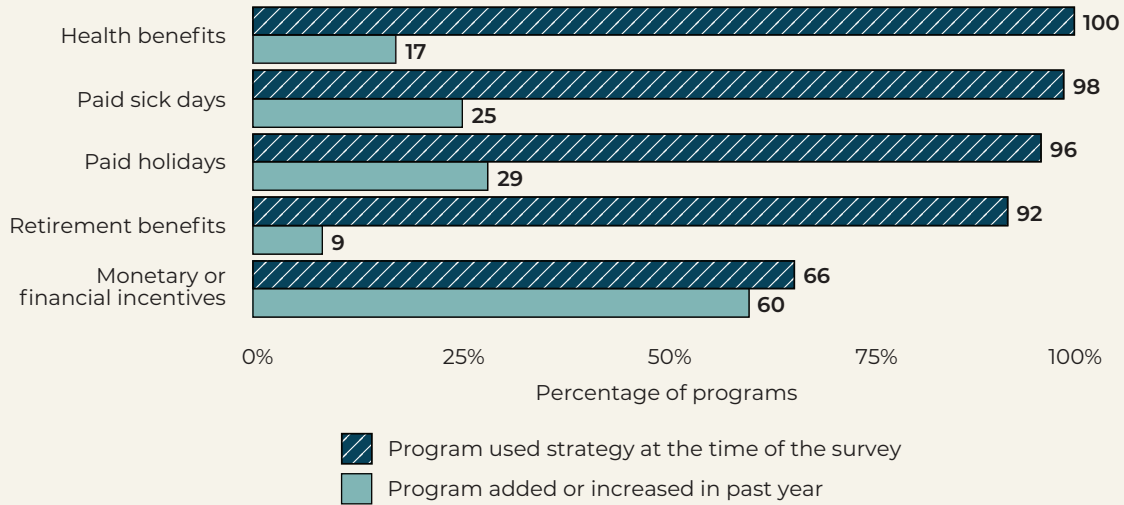
**Supports for economic well-being.** Most programs offered health benefits, paid sick days, paid holidays, and retirement benefits to teaching staff (Exhibit 2). About 30 percent of program directors reported their programs had increased the number of paid holidays in the year before the survey, and one-quarter reported their programs had increased the number of paid sick days.

Although only two-thirds of programs provided monetary or financial incentives to teaching staff at the time of the survey, 60 percent had added

or increased the amount of monetary or financial incentives offered to teaching staff in the past year. This change may be in response to guidance from ACF and OHS that encouraged grantees to offer bonuses, short-term pay increases, and other financial incentives (Administration for Children and Families 2022b).

**Supports for staff qualifications and competencies.** About two-thirds of programs offered assistance to complete postsecondary coursework and career development programs (Exhibit 3). More than half provided support for pursuing new credentials (such as credentials for providing bilingual education or services to children with disabilities) and reduced rates for continuing education. However, less than 10 percent added or increased any supports to improve qualifications and competencies in the past year.

### Exhibit 2. Most programs used more than one strategy to support the economic well-being of teaching staff

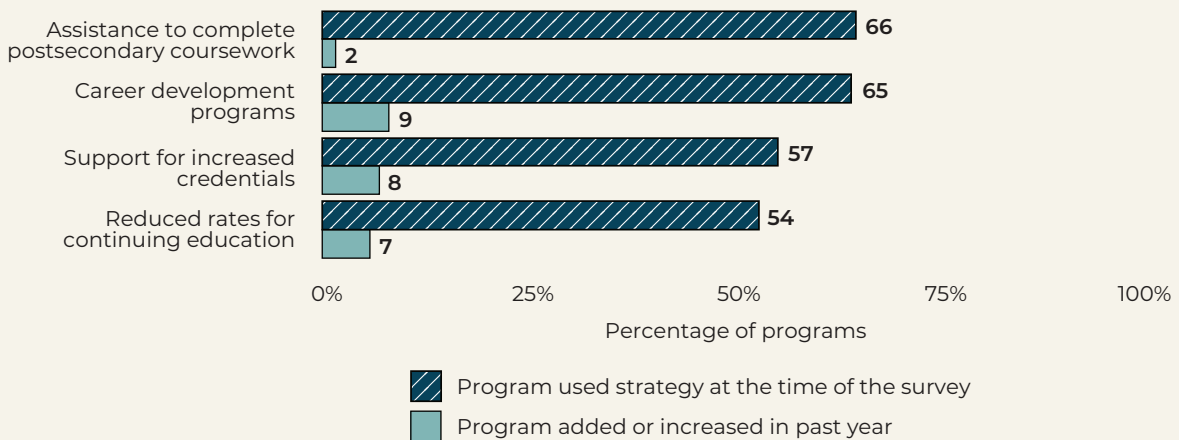


**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Data are drawn from Tables A.2 and A.3 in the accompanying appendix.

### Exhibit 3. A majority of programs used strategies to support teaching staff qualifications and competencies



**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Data are drawn from Tables A.4 and A.5 in the accompanying appendix.



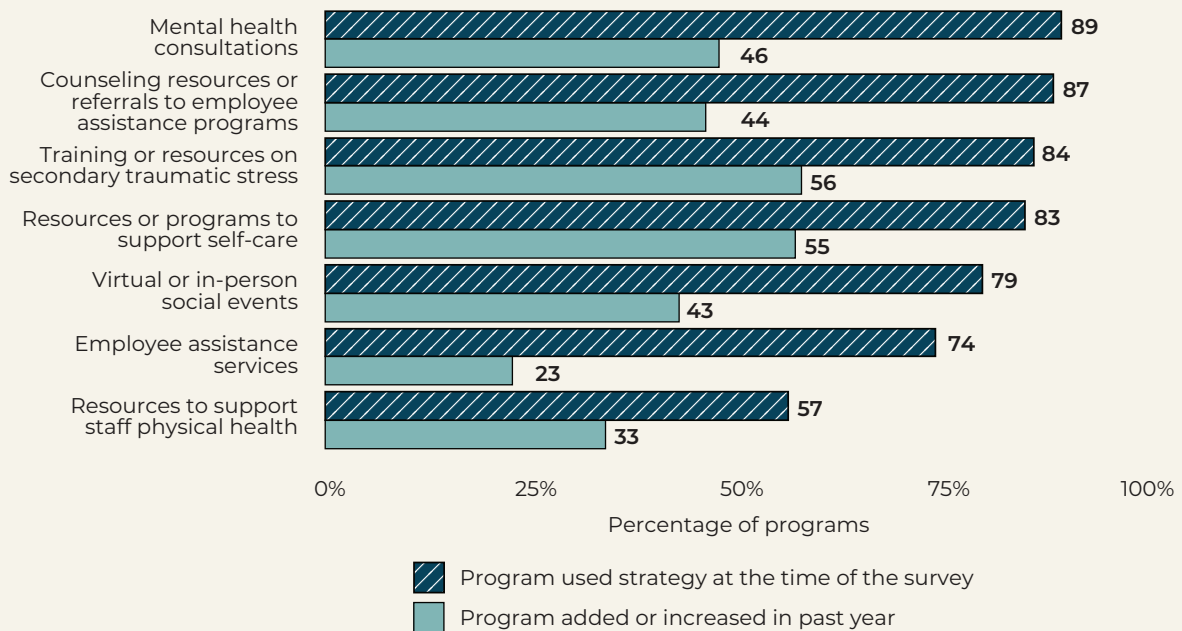
**Supports for staff psychological and physical well-being.** More than 80 percent of programs offered mental health consultations, counseling resources or referrals to employee assistance programs, training or resources on secondary traumatic stress, and resources or programs to support self-care (Exhibit 4). A majority of programs offered other types of supports for their staff psychological and physical well-being, including virtual or in-person social events, employee assistance services, and resources to support their physical health.

Many programs added or increased these supports in the past year. More than half provided additional training or resources on secondary traumatic stress and more resources or programs to support self-care. More than forty

percent added or increased use of mental health consultations, counseling resources or referrals to employee assistance programs, and virtual or in-person social events. Fewer programs—still more than one-fifth—added or increased employee assistance services and resources to support staff physical health.

**Workplace supports.** Most programs provided teaching staff a physically and mentally safe work environment, encouraged personal health and safety, offered regular check-ins, and provided opportunities for staff to take breaks during the day (Exhibit 5). More than half of programs added or increased each of these supports in the year before the survey. In contrast, only one-third offered flexible scheduling to teaching staff, and roughly one-fifth added or increased this support.

**Exhibit 4. Most programs offered teaching staff supports for psychological and physical well-being, and more than 40 percent of programs added or increased most supports in the past year**

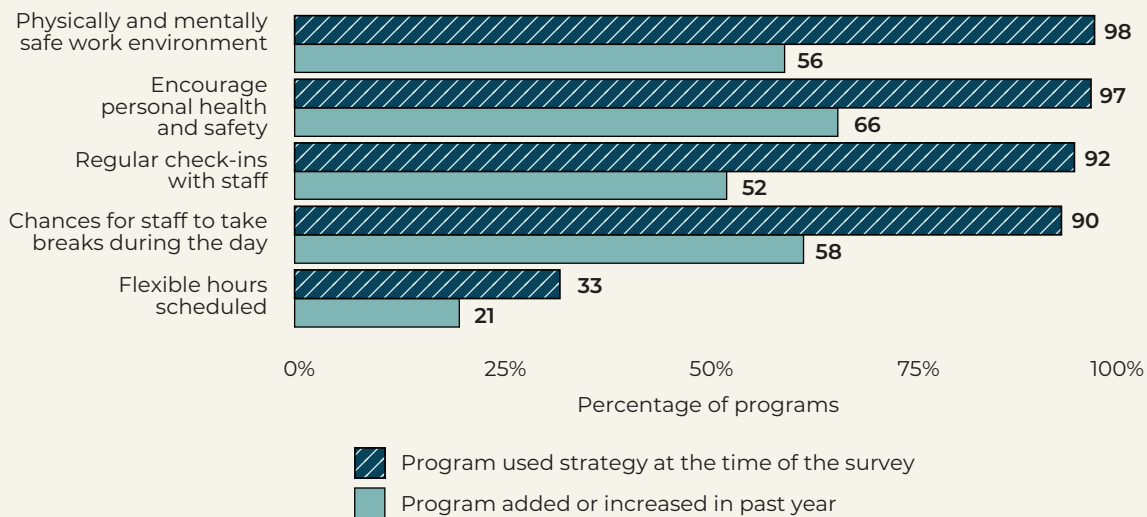


**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Data are drawn from Tables A.6 and A.7 in the accompanying appendix.

### Exhibit 5. Most programs offered more than one workplace support to teaching staff, and more than half of programs added or increased most supports



**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Data are drawn from Tables A.8 and A.9 in the accompanying appendix.

#### To what extent did Head Start centers in the 2021–2022 Study experience challenges related to teaching staff turnover and shortages?

High rates of teacher turnover are a persistent and well-documented concern for Head Start programs and centers. More than half of center directors reported their center experienced challenges related to teaching staff turnover in the past year, and it was often difficult to ensure classroom coverage (Exhibit 6).

About one-quarter of center directors reported that turnover was a substantial problem, and about one-third reported it was somewhat of a problem (Exhibit 6). Finding classroom coverage for teaching staff was a substantial problem in a majority of centers, and somewhat of a problem in an additional 26 percent.

#### What are the associations between the strategies programs used to support and retain teaching staff and the challenges their centers experienced because of teaching staff turnover?

Overall, the number of strategies programs used to support and retain teaching staff was not associated with whether their centers experienced challenges related to teaching staff turnover.

Programs' increase of wages for teaching staff in the past year did not predict whether their centers experienced challenges related to teaching staff turnover (Appendix Table A.11). In addition, programs' use of strategies to support teaching staff—including a greater number of strategies to support economic well-being, staff qualifications and competencies, staff psychological and physical health, and to provide supports in the workplace—did not predict whether their centers experienced challenges related to teaching staff turnover (Appendix Tables A.16).



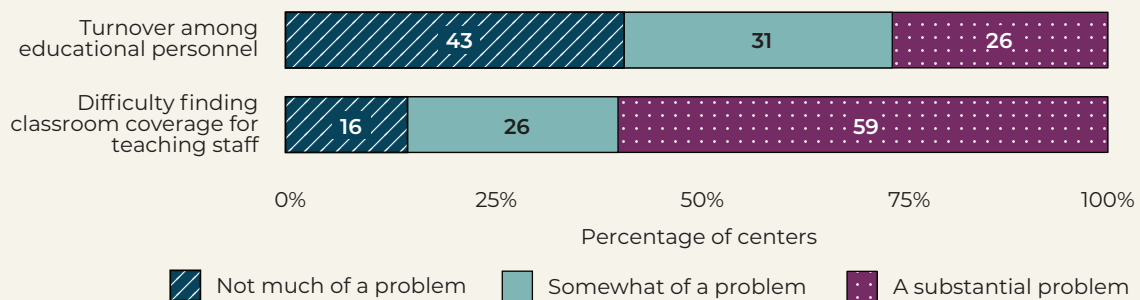
We also looked at whether the likelihood of a center’s experiencing challenges related to teaching staff turnover varied based on whether their program used each type of strategy.<sup>1</sup> Overall, we did not find any statistically significant associations (Appendix Tables A.12, A.13, A.14, and A.15). These results were unexpected because we hypothesized that centers whose programs used more strategies to support teaching staff (or used specific strategies) would be less likely to experience challenges due to teaching staff turnover. These unexpected results may be due to limitations of our data, which are correlational rather than time ordered, and include information on whether programs offered supports to teaching staff but not whether teaching staff used them. There was also limited variation in the number and types of strategies programs used to support teaching staff, which may have reduced our ability to detect associations with centers’ challenges due to teaching staff turnover. We discuss potential explanations for the lack of associations at the end of this brief.

### Strategies programs used to support and retain non-teaching staff and challenges centers experienced because of staff turnover and shortages among non-teaching staff

#### What types of strategies did Head Start programs in the 2021–2022 Study use to support and retain non-teaching staff? Did programs increase their use of these strategies in the past year?

Program directors reported that their programs used the same kinds of strategies to support and retain non-teaching staff that they used for teaching staff. As they did for teaching staff, programs increased wages for all four groups of non-teaching staff (Exhibit 7) and offered a variety of supports for their economic well-being. Most programs offered supports for psychological and physical health to non-teaching staff, and many added or increased these supports in the past year. However, programs provided these staff with supports for qualifications and competencies less often than they did for teaching staff

**Exhibit 6. More than half of centers faced challenges related to teaching staff turnover in the past year, and most had difficulty finding classroom coverage for teachers**

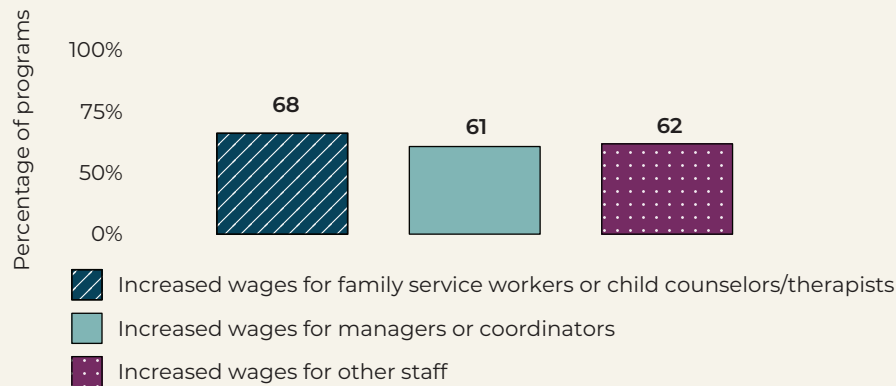


**Source:** Spring 2022 Center Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate, (2) center directors who did not consent to participate in the study, and (3) nonresponse to the center director survey (among center directors who consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Data are drawn from Table A.10 in the accompanying appendix.

### Exhibit 7. A majority of programs increased wages for non-teaching staff in the past year



**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

Program directors were asked if their program increased staff wages for each position in the past year and selected one of the following response options: increased staff wages, did not increase staff wages, program has contracted staff only, and program did not have any staff in the position. Figure reports the percentages of programs that reported increasing staff wages in each position. Some program directors may have interpreted “No staff in this position” as meaning they did not increase wages for any staff in the position.

“Other staff” include facilities and support staff such as custodians, food service workers, office staff, and bus drivers. Data are drawn from Table A.1 in the accompanying appendix.

(Exhibit 8), whereas they provided flexible scheduling to non-teaching staff more often than to teaching staff.

**Increased staff wages.** Nearly 70 percent of programs increased wages for family service workers and child counselors or therapists (Exhibit 7). This finding is comparable to the percentage of programs that increased wages for teaching staff (Exhibit 1). Fewer programs (just over 60 percent) increased wages for managers and coordinators or for other staff.

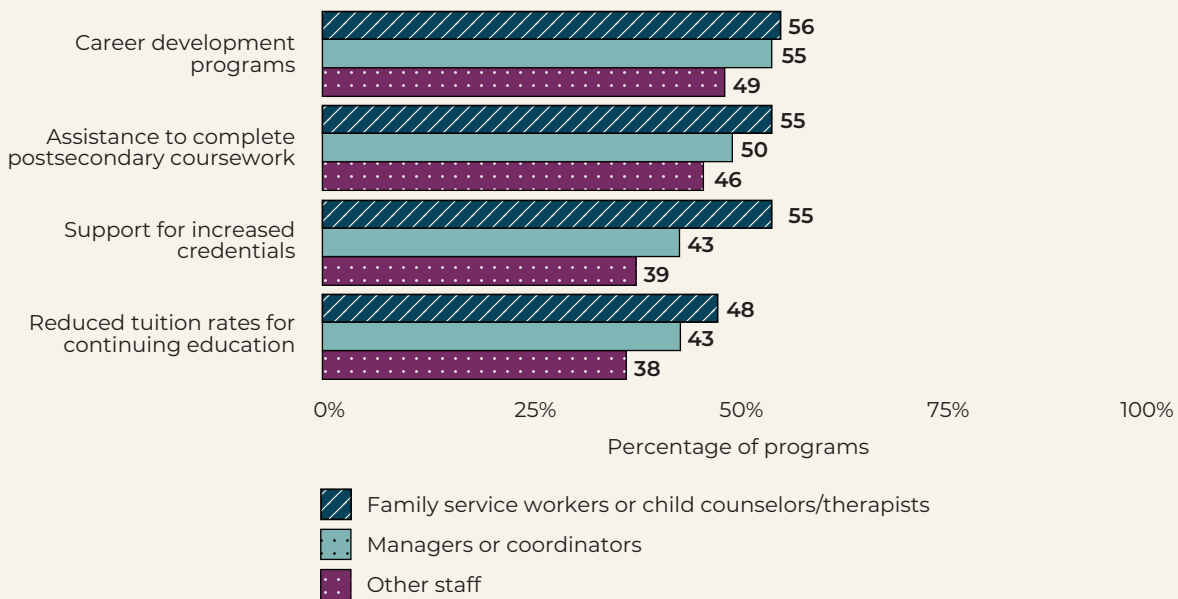
**Supports for economic well-being.** As they did with teaching staff, programs used a variety of strategies to support the economic well-being of non-teaching staff. More than 90 percent of programs offered health benefits, paid sick days and paid holidays to each group of non-teaching staff (Appendix Table A.2). More than 80 percent also offered retirement benefits. Although about two-thirds of programs provided monetary or financial incentives to each group of non-teaching staff at the time of the survey, more than half had

added or increased the amount of monetary or financial incentives offered to each group of staff in the past year (Appendix Table A.3). Fewer programs added or increased other types of supports for the economic well-being of non-teaching staff. These findings are comparable to those about additional or increased supports for the economic well-being of teaching staff (Exhibit 2).

**Supports for staff qualifications and competencies.** Compared to other types of strategies to support and retain staff, fewer programs offered supports for qualifications and competencies to non-teaching staff. Roughly half offered career development programs, assistance with completing postsecondary coursework, support for increased credentials, and reduced tuition rates for continuing education to at least one group of non-teaching staff.

Programs were more likely to offer these supports to some groups of non-teaching staff than others. Just over half offered support to family service workers or child counselors and therapists who

**Exhibit 8. The provision of some types of supports for staff qualifications and competencies varied across non-teaching staff roles**



**Source:** Spring 2022 Program Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate and (2) nonresponse to the program director survey (among programs that consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

“Other staff” include facilities and support staff such as custodians, food service workers, office staff, and bus drivers. Data are drawn from Table A.4 in the accompanying appendix.

were seeking to increase their credentials, whereas approximately 40 percent offered this type of compensation to managers or coordinators and other staff (Exhibit 8). Similarly, about half of the programs offered reduced tuition rates for continuing education to family service workers or child counselors and therapists, compared with roughly 40 percent that offered this support to other staff. Differences in whether programs offered other types of supports for staff qualifications and competencies between non-teaching staff roles were smaller (less than 10 percent), but suggest that programs were most likely to offer them to family service workers and child counselors or therapists and least likely to offer them to other staff. Few programs (less than 10 percent) added or increased supports for staff qualifications and competencies for non-teaching staff (Appendix Table A.5).

Generally, programs were less likely to offer supports for staff qualifications and competencies to non-teaching staff compared with teaching staff. For example, roughly half of programs offered career development programs to non-teaching staff, and two-thirds offered this support to teaching staff (Exhibit 3).

**Supports for psychological and physical well-being.** Most programs offered supports for psychological and physical well-being to each group of non-teaching staff. More than 80 percent of programs offered non-teaching staff mental health consultations, counseling resources or referrals to employee assistance programs, training or resources on secondary traumatic stress, and resources or programs to support self-care (Appendix Table A.6). More than 50 percent offered virtual or in-person social events,

employee assistance services, and resources to support staff physical health. Programs offered similar supports to each of the three groups of non-teaching staff, and offered similar supports to teaching and non-teaching staff (Exhibit 4).

At least 40 percent of programs increased most supports for the psychological and physical well-being of non-teaching staff in the past year. As they did in discussing their practices for teaching staff (Exhibit 4), more than half of program directors reported that their programs provided additional resources or programs to support self-care and additional training or resources on secondary traumatic stress to each group of non-teaching staff in the year before the survey (Appendix Table A.7). At least 40 percent provided additional mental health consultations, counseling resources or referrals to employee assistance programs, and virtual or in-person social events. About one-third provided additional resources to support staff physical health, and about one-fifth added or increased employee assistance services. Programs offered each of these added or increased supports to all three groups of non-teaching staff.

**Workplace supports.** Most programs provided a physically and mentally safe work environment, encouraged personal health and safety, offered regular check-ins, and offered chances for staff to take breaks during the day to each group of non-teaching staff (Appendix Table A.8). At least half of programs added or increased each of these supports in the year before the survey. These findings are similar to those for teaching staff (Exhibit 5).

Compared to other workplace supports, relatively few programs offered flexible scheduling, and those that did tended to offer it to certain staff groups. Nearly half of programs offered flexible scheduling to managers or coordinators compared with the roughly 40 percent of programs that offered flexible scheduling to family service workers or child counselors and therapists or other staff. By comparison, one-third of programs offered flexible scheduling to teaching staff (Exhibit 5).

### **To what extent did center directors report that Head Start centers in the 2021–2022 Study experienced challenges related to non-teaching staff turnover and shortages?**

Center directors reported that turnover was less of a problem among non-teaching staff than it was for teaching staff (Exhibit 9). However, a majority of center directors reported they were having trouble finding and retaining enough staff (including teaching staff and non-teaching staff) to operate at full capacity, suggesting that centers were struggling to recruit and retain enough staff in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

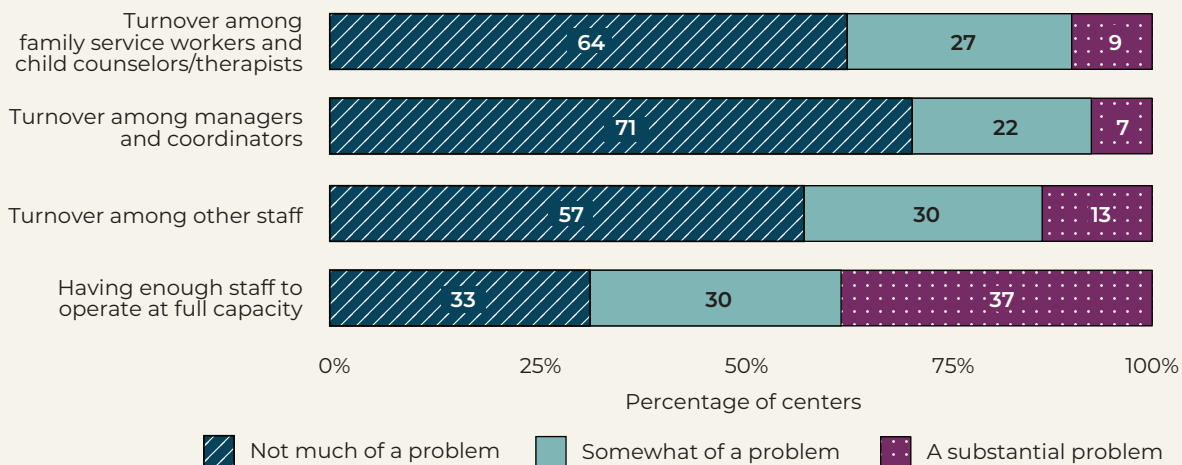
More than half of center directors reported that turnover among family service workers and child counselors or therapists, managers and coordinators, and other staff was not much of a problem (Exhibit 9). In contrast, roughly 60 percent of center directors reported that turnover among teaching staff was somewhat of a problem or a substantial problem (Exhibit 6). At the same time, two-thirds of center directors reported that having enough staff (including both teaching staff and non-teaching staff) to operate at full capacity was somewhat of a problem or a substantial problem.

### **What are the associations between the strategies programs used to support and retain non-teaching staff and the challenges their centers experienced because of turnover in non-teaching staff?**

Overall, the strategies programs used to support and retain non-teaching staff were not associated with their centers' experiencing challenges related to turnover among these groups of staff.

Programs' increase or non-increase in wages for non-teaching staff did not predict whether their centers experienced challenges related to turnover in these staff groups (Appendix Table A.11). For family service workers, child counselors or therapists, and managers and coordinators, the number of strategies programs used to support staff also did not predict whether their centers experienced challenges related to turnover (Appendix Tables A.17 and A.18). There were also no associations between the specific types of strategies programs used to support these groups of staff and whether centers experienced challenges related to staff turnover (Appendix Tables A.12, A.13, A.14, and A.15).

### Exhibit 9. A majority of center directors reported turnover of non-teaching staff was not a challenge



**Source:** Spring 2022 Center Director Survey.

**Note:** The data are weighted to adjust for the probability of selection. They are also weighted, to the extent possible, to account for (1) programs that chose not to participate, (2) center directors who did not consent to participate in the study, and (3) nonresponse to the center director survey (among center directors who consented to participate in the study). However, given lower than expected response rates, we recommend readers do not assume the data are nationally representative.

“Other staff” include facilities and support staff such as custodians, food service workers, office staff, and bus drivers. Data are drawn from Table A.10 in the accompanying appendix.

For three of four groups of strategies, the number of strategies programs used to support and retain other non-teaching staff (such as facilities and support staff) did not predict whether their centers experienced challenges related to turnover among this staff group. Unexpectedly, however, centers in programs that provided a larger number of supports for staff qualifications and competencies to other staff were more likely to report that turnover among this group of staff was a problem (Appendix Table A.19). Looking at the specific types of supports provided to other staff, such as facilities and support staff, centers in programs that provided postsecondary coursework support were more likely to experience challenges related to turnover for this staff group (Appendix Table A.13). This result is unexpected, and may be because centers and programs that experienced difficulty retaining staff may have invested in additional strategies to help retain them. Additionally, we note that we found only one statistically significant result out of several associations examined, and so this result could be due to chance. We discuss potential

explanations for this result at the end of this brief and note that this finding should not discourage the use of these supports.

### Conclusions and implications

Findings from this brief provide encouraging evidence on the steps Head Start programs are taking to support their staff. The analysis revealed that programs seem to be responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic by using a wide range of strategies to support both teaching and non-teaching staff. A majority of program directors reported that their programs increased staff wages between the spring of 2021 and the spring of 2022, and many have increased the other types of supports they provide to staff—particularly supports for staff psychological and physical well-being and workplace supports. This effort to recognize and retain staff is notable in light of evidence that points to the importance of adequately compensating ECE staff and supporting their well-being.

At the same time, centers continue to face challenges related to staff turnover and shortages—particularly among teaching staff—and have difficulty recruiting and retaining enough staff to operate at full capacity. Consistent with research conducted since the onset of the pandemic, we found that turnover among teaching staff is a particular concern. Programs should seek to understand and meet the needs of their teaching staff. A smaller but substantial percentage of centers had directors who reported that turnover among non-teaching staff—such as family service workers, child counselors and therapists, managers and coordinators, and other staff—was a concern. Given the lack of existing evidence on turnover and retention for these staff, our findings point to the importance of ensuring that efforts to support the Head Start workforce reach these groups.

Generally, we found only a few associations between the number and types of strategies programs used to support staff and the challenges their centers experienced related to staff turnover. The few associations we did observe were in the opposite direction from what we would have predicted—most notably, centers whose programs provided more supports for staff qualifications and competencies to other non-teaching staff (such as facilities and support staff) were more likely to experience challenges related to turnover in this group. This association may be the result of staff in these roles going on to seek other roles after receiving the support. For example, staff who obtain a postsecondary degree may seek higher-paid opportunities for which they are newly qualified. Although there is little evidence on the predictors of turnover among this group of non-teaching staff, research focused on ECE teachers provides some support for this explanation. For example, one study found that ECE teachers with a postsecondary degree had stronger intentions to leave compared to other teachers, possibly because teachers with a degree may have higher-paid job opportunities either in other ECE programs or in other industries (Schaak et al. 2020). It is also important to note that these data are correlational and not time-ordered—that is, data about programs' use of strategies to support staff and the staffing challenges centers experienced focus on the same time frame between the spring of 2021 and the spring of 2022. Centers and programs that experienced

difficulty retaining staff (for example, related to local labor market conditions) may have invested in additional strategies to help retain them.

Findings from this brief fill a key gap in our understanding about what Head Start programs were doing to support their staff in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results help to understand the supports programs provide to teaching staff and, importantly, provide new insight about how programs are supporting non-teaching staff. Findings also provide new understanding about whether the strategies programs use are linked to whether they experience staffing challenges. Nevertheless, this analysis has limitations that point to the need for additional research; readers should use caution in interpreting the findings about the links between strategies and staffing challenges. First, most programs offered many of the forms of staff compensation and support that we asked about. As a result, there was limited variation in the sample in the number and types of compensation and supports provided to staff, which may have reduced our ability to detect associations with centers' staffing challenges. In addition, program directors reported whether these supports were offered to staff, but not whether staff used them. If staff were unable to take advantage of these types of compensation or supports (for example, if they were not offered at a convenient time or location) or if the supports did not meet their needs, staffing challenges could persist. Future research that examines whether staff can fully use the supports programs provide, and whether supports meet staff needs, is needed to provide a more complete picture of how programs can best support the Head Start workforce.

These findings describe the different strategies Head Start programs have used to recruit and retain their workforce, and highlight the staffing challenges their centers continue to face. The results also point to the continued need to better understand the most effective strategies or combinations of strategies to support and retain the Head Start workforce.



## Head Start FACES

This research brief draws on spring 2022 data from the 2021–2022 Study of Family and Staff Well-Being in Head Start FACES Programs (2021–2022 Study). The 2021–2022 Study builds on the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), which has been a source of national information about Head Start programs and participants since 1997.

Head Start is a national program that helps young children from families with low incomes get ready to succeed in school. It does this by working to promote early learning, health, and family well-being. Head Start connects families with medical, dental, and mental health services to ensure their children are receiving the services they need to develop well. Head Start not only involves parents in their children’s learning and development—it also supports parents’ own goals, such as stable housing, continuing education, and financial security (Administration for Children and Families 2019). Head Start operates by providing grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies that deliver comprehensive child development services to children and their families who are economically disadvantaged.

## Methods

For the 2021–2022 Study, we selected a nationally representative sample of Head Start programs. However, given lower than expected program participation and response rates, we do not recommend assuming national representativeness. In spring 2022, 176 programs and 340 centers participated in the study, with 132 program directors and 237 center directors completing surveys. More information on the study methodology and measurement in the 2021–2022 Study is available in the “Staff Experiences in Head Start FACES Programs, Centers, and Classrooms in Spring 2022: The 2021–2022 Study” report (Reid et al. 2024).

This brief examines the strategies Head Start programs used to support and retain staff (Research Question 1), the extent to which their centers experienced challenges because of staff turnover and shortages (Research Question 2), and the associations between the strategies they used and the challenges they experienced (Research Question 3). The brief includes two sections focused on teaching staff and non-teaching staff, respectively.

This brief uses data from the program director and center director surveys. We report percentages and averages (means) to answer Research Question 1, with a sample of 132 programs that had a complete program director survey. We report percentages and averages (means) to answer Research Question 2, with a sample of 237 centers that had a complete center director survey.

To answer the research questions about the associations between the strategies programs used to support and retain staff and whether centers in those programs experienced challenges related to staff turnover (Research Question 3), we conducted a series of logistic regressions that used the number of strategies programs used to support and retain staff to predict whether centers experienced challenges related to staff turnover. We also conducted logistic regressions to examine whether programs’ use of specific strategies to recruit and retain staff predicted whether centers experienced challenges due to staff turnover. For all comparisons in the brief, all cited differences and associations are statistically significant at the 0.05 level or lower. The sample for these analyses includes 179 centers with complete center director and program director surveys.



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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Some strategies were excluded from the analysis of the links between programs' use of specific strategies and their centers' staffing challenges because there was not enough variation to support multivariate analyses. We excluded three supports for staff economic well-being (paid sick days, paid holidays, and health benefits) and two workplace supports (physically and mentally safe work environment and encouraging personal health and safety) because at least 90 percent of programs offered them to all four staff groups. Multivariate analyses looking at the links between the number of strategies programs used to support staff and their centers' staffing challenges included these strategies.

#### Submitted to:

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Administration for Children and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

#### Contract Number:

HHSP2332015000351/HHSP23337024T

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#### Suggested Citation:

Gonzalez, Katie, Ellen Litkowski, Louisa Tarullo, Jeani Choe, and Sara Bernstein (2024). Spotlight on the Head Start Workforce: Program Strategies to Improve Well-Being and Increase Retention, OPRE Report #2024-094, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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