



Opportunities to Support the Preschool Workforce and Prevent Burnout

The preschool workforce is critical to developing and maintaining high-quality preschools. To support children, the preschool workforce must feel supported themselves.¹ Unfortunately, turnover is especially high in the early care and education field.² Although turnover happens for a variety of reasons, educators describe burnout and emotional exhaustion from the work as common causes. This brief summarizes turnover and burnout among educators in the Denver Preschool Program (DPP) and highlights opportunities to promote educator retention and well-being.³

What does turnover look like in DPP preschools?

Turnover was reported in two ways: annual turnover reported by program leadership and intent to leave reported by the workforce. Turnover can be costly and disruptive to children, families, leadership, and staff who stay.⁴ Directors in community-based preschool programs reported that median annual turnover was 36–38%. This means that a preschool with 10 teachers may lose approximately four teachers each year—nearly half of its workforce.

Additionally, 27% of educators reported that they may leave their current positions within two years, with most planning to leave the early care and education field entirely (37%). When asked why they intend to leave, low pay and burnout were their primary reasons. Educators who experienced higher levels of burnout were 50% more likely to report an intent to leave their jobs, suggesting that stress may contribute to turnover.

¹ Phillips, D., Austin, L. J. E., & Whitebook, M. (2016). The early care and education workforce. *The Future of Children*, 26(2).

² Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2012). *The early childhood care and education workforce: Challenges and opportunities: A workshop report*. The National Academies Press.

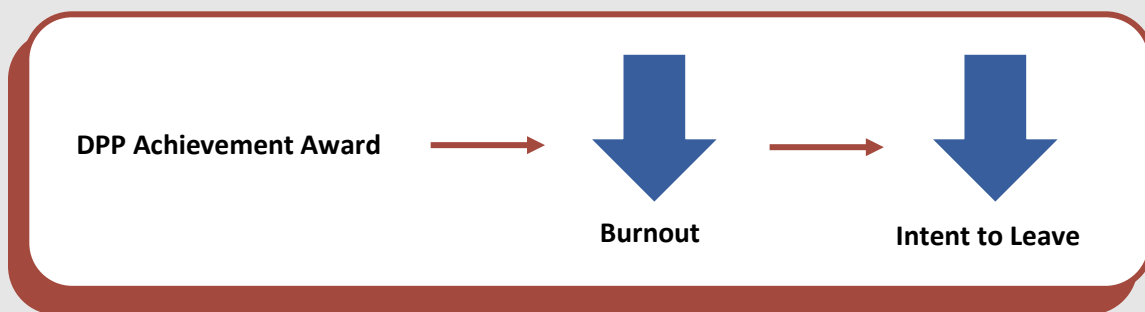
³ Data were collected by the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver in 2021-2022 for the DPP Operations Evaluation. Data sources include surveys of preschool educators and follow-up interviews.

⁴ Kwon, K. A., Malek, A., Horm, D., & Castle, S. (2020). Turnover and retention of infant-toddler teachers: Reasons, consequences, and implications for practice and policy. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 115, 105061.

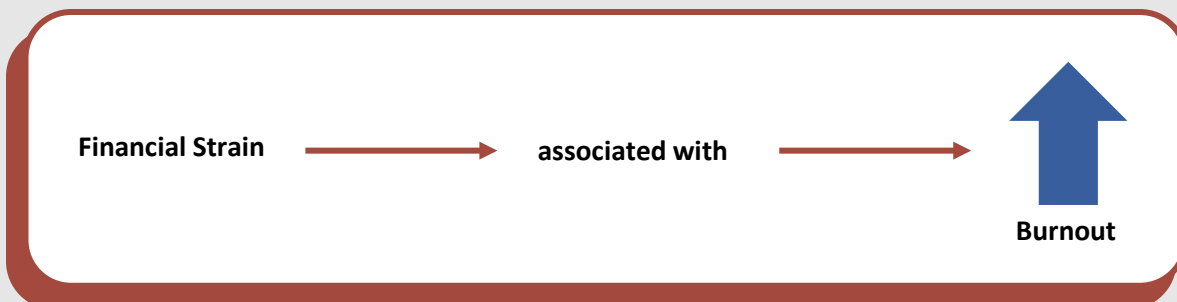
What factors are associated with burnout?

Understanding why burnout happens can lead to ideas to enhance educator support and prevent burnout.⁵ Among this group of educators, financial strain significantly predicted burnout. Additionally, receiving a DPP achievement award and self-care practices protected against burnout.⁶

DPP Achievement Awards are financial awards granted to programs, directors, and/or educators for participating in professional development activities, such as coaching or training. Award amounts ranged from \$100 to \$300 per accomplishment.⁷ Receiving a DPP Achievement Award in 2021–22 was associated with *less burnout*, which in turn decreased intent to leave.



Financial Strain is the extent to which educators experienced difficulty paying their bills. Among this sample of educators, 64% reported at least some financial strain in making ends meet. Greater levels of financial strain were associated with *more burnout*.



⁵ These results are correlational and do not suggest cause and effect relationships.

⁶ The model controlled for educators' education, years in the job, and job role.

⁷ https://dpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/DPP-Achievement-Award-Framework_2020-2021_Final.pdf

Financial strain resulting from low pay was a common reason educators intended to leave the job. For example, one educator shared, *“I am unable to make rent and am ‘continuously in the negatives’ with the pay I get.”*



Pay varies drastically by job role and setting. Within our sample:

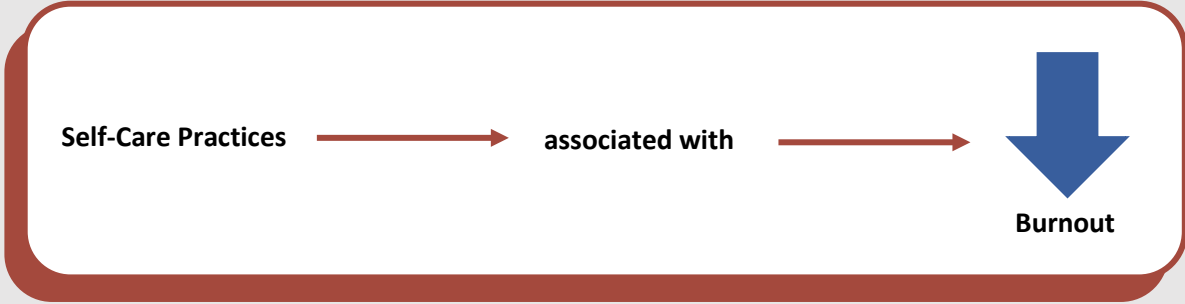
- Public school paraprofessionals made on average less than \$25,000 per year
- Public school lead teachers averaged \$64,000 per year
- Educators working in community preschools averaged less than \$31,000 up to \$50,000 per year, depending on job role

To address educators’ financial strain, DPP and the Office of Children’s Affairs collaborated in fall 2021 to offer unconditional monetary stipends to all staff in DPP community sites. Most educators reported that being offered the stipend made them feel valued, which positively impacted their intent to stay in the field. However, most educators felt the stipend did not have a significant effect on their financial well-being, indicating more systemic change is needed to address financial strain on educators.

I’ve always felt that if we pay staff well enough...you’ll see an increase in the quality of their work. You’ll see an increase in their morale. I mean they say money doesn’t buy happiness, but I don’t think that’s true. Money buys security, you know? ... If they don’t have to worry about buying groceries or keeping the lights on or putting gas in the car, that frees up their mental space to make sure that they’re providing the best care and education for the families that we serve. Pay them well enough that they’re not spending their breaks looking for jobs.”

-Preschool Director

Self-Care reflects how often educators can and do take care of themselves throughout the workday. Greater use of self-care practices at work predicted **less burnout**.



Self-care strategies educators used most often at work included:

- Problem solving when presented with challenges
- Seeking out supportive colleagues
- Reserving work tasks for designated work hours

These strategies could be built upon to promote educator self-care at work. However, educators were not as likely to address feeling overwhelmed at work or take breaks throughout the day. These areas need to be addressed so educators can take care of themselves during the workday. Finding ways to promote educator self-care is critical, as engaging in self-care strategies was related to positive teaching practices.⁸

Summary and Recommendations

Turnover is common in DPP preschools and is often caused by low pay and burnout. Our analyses identified multiple factors associated with burnout. Focusing on these factors can increase support for educators and ultimately prevent burnout.

Recommendations for supporting the workforce include:

Continue offering a variety of Quality Improvement (QI) supports, including DPP Achievement Awards.

- Promote educator awareness of QI resources through communication and orientation efforts
- Ensure QI resources are available in multiple formats, times, and languages to meet the needs of a diverse workforce

Improve compensation to promote workforce well-being and retention.

- Advocate for better educator pay and improved access to benefits
- Create or expand financial assistance or loan forgiveness for educators who pursue continuing education
- Offer more financial resources through workforce stipends, either with more frequency or in higher amounts

Improve working conditions to allow the workforce to take care of themselves.

- Give educators the opportunity to take breaks during the workday by planning adequate staffing and break times and providing supportive leadership
- Promote leave policies and benefits that support mental health and well-being
- Provide professional development on organizational change and leadership
- Support directors with hiring efforts and creating or enhancing substitute pools
- Advocate for increased funding for preschools

⁸ In multivariate analyses, self-care practices significantly predicted educators' use of developmentally appropriate practices and their use of family engagement practices, respectively.

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