



Who Teaches Virginia's Youngest Children? Sector Differences in the Racial/Ethnic Composition of Early Educators

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Summary:

- This report describes the racial/ethnic composition of teachers in child care centers and school-based early childhood education (ECE) programs participating in Virginia’s Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five initiative.
- Lead teachers in school-based ECE programs are 30 percentage points more likely to be White than lead teachers in child care centers.
- In school-based ECE programs, Black and Hispanic women are much more likely to serve as assistant rather than lead teachers, and are particularly under-represented in leadership roles.
- Black children are about three times more likely to have a Black teacher in a child care center as they are in a school-based ECE program.

The educators who teach and care for young children in early childhood education (ECE) settings play a central role in children’s development.

In the United States, publicly funded center-based ECE is provided primarily through three program types: subsidized child care, federally funded Head Start, and state-funded pre-kindergarten.¹ While these programs all care for and educate young children, they differ significantly in their historic goals, their funding levels, and the stringency of their quality regulations.

In turn, there are striking differences in the characteristics of teachers across settings. State-funded pre-kindergarten programs, particularly those based in public school settings, oftentimes require that teachers hold a bachelor’s degree and provide teachers with the same pay, benefits, and supports available to other public school teachers. Child care settings, in contrast, tend to face fewer regulations and receive fewer supports. On average, child care center staff in the United States are paid about a third as much as kindergarten teachers, and over half use food stamps, Medicaid, or other publicly funded social supports.²

Early educators are often described as a particularly racially and ethnically

diverse workforce. Recent estimates suggest that about 40 percent of teachers and staff working in ECE settings are women of color.³ In comparison, only about 20 percent of elementary and secondary school teachers are not White.⁴

This diversity may have important, positive implications for the young children and families ECE programs serve. In elementary and secondary schools, teacher-child racial/ethnic match is linked to increased academic achievement, higher attendance rates, lower exclusionary discipline rates, and increased assignment to gifted services—particularly for students of color.⁵ More recently, researchers have found similar patterns for children in kindergarten and in ECE settings.⁶ One study showed that parents were more involved in their children’s ECE programs—and their children attended more regularly—when the teacher and child shared the same race/ethnicity.⁷

It is concerning, however, that the diversity of the ECE workforce is driven in part by the overrepresentation of people of color in jobs with very low levels of pay, few benefits, and few supports: Black and Hispanic are much more likely to teach in child care than in school-based programs, and are also more likely to be in roles with lower credential requirements and lower pay (e.g. assistant rather than lead teachers).⁸

Using new data on center- and school-based ECE teachers in Virginia, this report highlights large differences in the racial/ethnic composition of early educators across both sectors and roles (see box above). It also explores the degree to which early educators reflect, or fail to reflect, the diverse population of children for whom they care and educate.

Sectors & Roles in Early Childhood Education

In this report we describe the racial/ethnic composition of early educators by sectors and roles, which are defined as follows:

Sectors:

School-based programs are ECE programs physically located within a public school building. They are typically sponsored and/or operated by a local school division.

Child care centers include all other center-based ECE programs, located outside of public school buildings (e.g., in a community-based center).

Roles:

Leaders include child care center directors and school principals and are responsible for the managerial and/or administrative leadership of ECE programs.

Lead teachers lead (or co-lead) the instruction of children in their ECE classrooms.

Assistant teachers work directly with young children and support lead teachers; they also include instructional aides or floaters.

Context & Sample

This report uses survey data collected in the first year of Virginia's federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) initiative. In 2019, the Virginia Department of Education, in partnership with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the University of Virginia (UVA), began a set of efforts to improve early childhood education opportunities in Virginia.

In the first year of Virginia's PDG B-5, 26 cities and counties—covering about a third of Virginia's total population— participated. These communities are geographically diverse and include urban, suburban, and rural settings. Their racial/ethnic composition mirrors the rest of the state, and their median household income is slightly lower than the state average.⁹

All publicly funded ECE programs in those communities, including school-based, center-based, and home-based programs, were invited to participate in PDG B-5. Due to the small size of the home-based program sample, this report focuses on the teachers in center- and school-based settings. In total, 415 center- and school-based ECE programs participated, representing about 90 percent of school-based programs and just over 40 percent of publicly funded child care centers in these communities. Head Start programs are included in both sectors, depending on their physical location (i.e., they are classified as a child care center if located in a community-based organization, and a school-based program if located in a public school).

In May 2019, UVA researchers fielded surveys to all program leaders and all teachers who worked directly with children ages 0-5 for 30 or more hours per week at programs participating in PDG B-5. The surveys asked early educators about themselves, their training and education, and other aspects of their work.

This report describes findings from 1,909 ECE teachers and 297 leaders in child care centers and school-based programs, representing a response rate of 76 percent for teachers and 71 percent for leaders. These response rates are high; survey response rates among early educators are oftentimes under 40 percent.¹⁰

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of early educators by setting and role

	Child Care Centers			School-Based Programs		
	Assistant Teachers	Lead Teachers	Leaders	Assistant Teachers	Lead Teachers	Leaders
<i>Demographics</i>						
Female (%)	97%	98%	97%	99%	100%	74%
Age	37.4	38.7	46.1	46.3	43.3	48.2
<i>Highest Education Degree (%)</i>						
No post-secondary degree	71%	52%	16%	43%	1%	0%
Bachelor's or higher	18%	31%	65%	31%	98%	100%
<i>Household income (%)</i>						
Under \$25,000/year	53%	39%	4%	29%	1%	1%
Under \$45,000/year	78%	70%	26%	55%	11%	1%
More than \$100,000/year	3%	5%	25%	11%	30%	74%
Number of respondents	391	832	190	290	396	107

Table 1 (above) describes the early educators in our sample and highlights large differences across sectors in Virginia's PDG B-5 communities. As is true in the rest of the nation, early educators working in child care have substantially lower levels of education and income compared to early educators working in school-based settings. For instance, only 31 percent of lead teachers in child care centers hold college degrees. Nearly all lead teachers in school-based programs reported having college degrees. Just under forty percent of lead teachers working in child care centers have household incomes under \$25,000, versus next to none of lead teachers in school-based settings. Turning to program leaders, a quarter of child care leaders reported household incomes more than \$100,000, compared to just under three quarters of school leaders.

Table 1 also shows differences across roles. For instance, there are large differences between assistant and lead teachers in school settings. Over forty percent of assistant teachers in school-based programs lack a post-secondary degree compared to one percent of lead teachers. Many assistant teachers in school-based programs (55 percent) reported annual household incomes less than \$45,000. This figure is 11 percent among lead teachers. In child care, differences between lead and assistant teachers are much less pronounced.

Does the racial/ethnic composition of Virginia's early educators vary across sectors and roles?

The racial/ethnic composition of early educators varies substantially both when comparing early educators in child care centers and in school-based programs, and when comparing assistant teachers, lead teachers, and program leaders within the same sector. We consider four race/ethnicity groups: White, non-Hispanic (or "White"); Black, non-Hispanic (or "Black"); Hispanic or Latino (or "Hispanic"); and other non-Hispanic race(s), including multi-race (or "Other").

Figure 1 (next page) shows the racial/ethnic composition of assistant teachers, lead teachers, and program leaders in child care and school settings, respectively. Looking first between sectors, child care centers have a more racially and ethnically diverse teacher makeup than school-based programs. For example, 54 percent of lead teachers in child care centers are White, compared to 84 percent of lead teachers in school-based programs. Just under a quarter of child care lead teachers are Black compared to only eight percent of lead teachers in school-based settings, and 11 percent of lead teachers are Hispanic, compared to only three percent in school-based programs. These patterns are the same for assistant teachers and leaders across sectors.

Figure 1 also highlights substantial variation in racial/ethnic composition by role. Black and Hispanic teachers are most likely to work as assistant teachers and least likely to occupy the roles that usually come with greater opportunities for leadership and higher earnings. In child care centers, 44 percent of assistant teachers are White, 54 percent of lead teachers are White, and 69 percent of leaders are White.

Within school-based programs this general pattern holds as well, though early educators in all roles are predominantly White: 75 percent of assistant teachers, 84 percent of lead teachers, and 90 percent of leaders identify as White.

Figure 1. Racial/ethnic composition of early educators by role and by sector



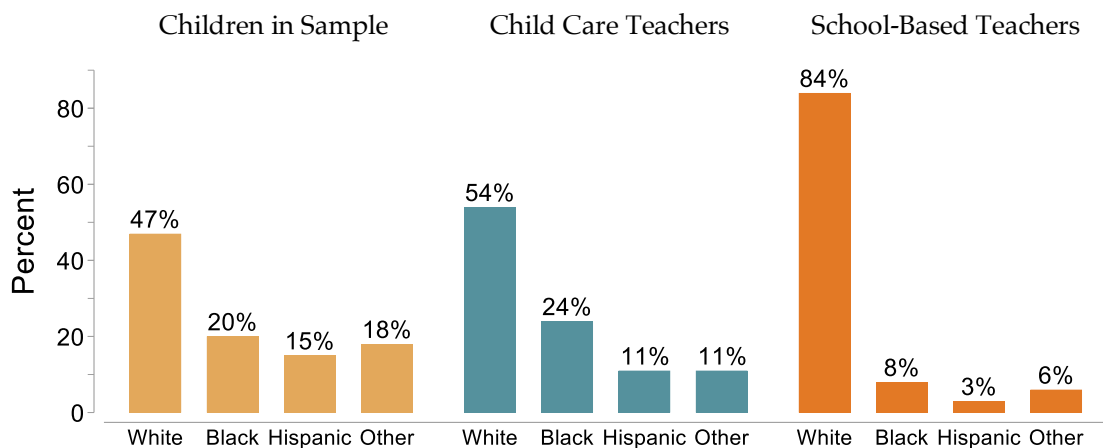
Note: Based on responses from 681 assistant teachers, 1,228 lead teachers, and 297 leaders.

Does the racial/ethnic composition of Virginia’s early educators match the children they serve?

The survey asked lead teachers to report the number of children in their classrooms by race/ethnicity.¹¹ In all, lead teachers reported serving over 17,000 children. Figure 2 (below) shows that just under half of these children (47 percent) are White, 20 percent are Black, 15 percent are Hispanic or Latino, and the remainder are another race/ethnicity. The racial/ethnic composition of children in our sample closely mirrors that of young children in Virginia overall,¹² and it does not vary substantially by sector.

Figure 2 also shows that the racial/ethnic composition of lead teachers at child care centers is fairly similar to the overall composition of children served. This is not the case in school-based ECE programs. While just under half of the children served in the school-based programs are White (44 percent; not pictured), the vast majority of lead teachers are White (84 percent).

Figure 2. Racial composition of children and lead teachers in survey sample

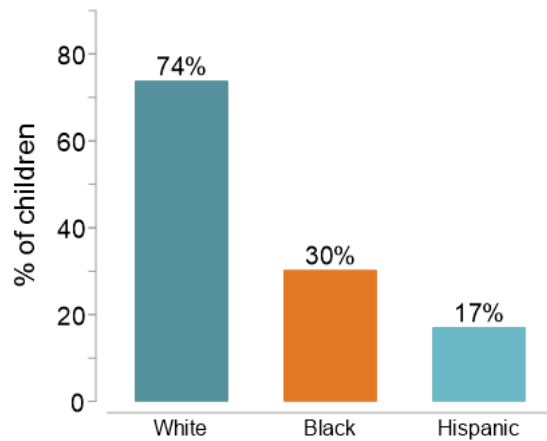


Note: Based on responses from 1,228 lead teachers serving 17,105 children.

Figure 3 (at right) shows the extent to which children have the same race/ethnicity as the lead teachers of their classrooms. We focus on the racial/ethnic match for White, Black, and Hispanic children. Overall, 53 percent of these children share the same race/ethnicity as their lead teachers.

Most White children (74 percent) are taught by White teachers. In contrast, just under a third of Black children have Black teachers, and far fewer Hispanic children have Hispanic teachers (17 percent).

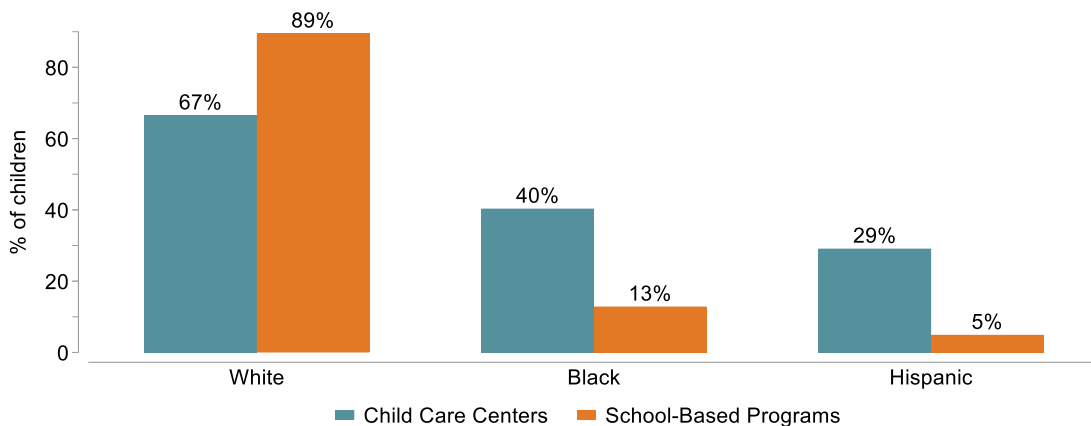
Figure 3. Percentage of children with a lead teacher of the same race/ethnicity



Note: Based on responses from 1,228 lead teachers serving 14,021 children.

The likelihood that children have a lead teacher with the same race/ethnicity differs substantially across sectors (see Figure 4, below). Black children in child care centers are 27 percentage points more likely to have a Black teacher than Black children in school-based ECE programs. Similarly, Hispanic children in child care are 24 percentage points more likely than those in school-based settings to have a Hispanic teacher.

Figure 4. Percentage of children with a teacher of the same race/ethnicity by sector



Note: Based on responses from 1,228 lead teachers serving 14,021 children.

Conclusion

This report shows that early educators participating in Virginia's PDG B-5 initiative are a racially and ethnically diverse group. However, as is also true nationwide,¹³ the extent of this diversity differs by sectors and by roles: Black and Hispanic teachers are much more likely to work in child care centers than in school-based ECE programs. In turn, Black children are just over three times more likely to have a Black lead teacher in child care settings than they are in school-based settings.

The diversity of the child care sector is a celebrated asset and helps programs meet the needs of Virginia's diverse families. Emerging research shows children and families benefit from having their race/ethnicity represented among teachers at their programs. At the same time, the Black and Hispanic teachers who work in child care receive considerably lower pay, lower benefits, and lower professional status than do teachers in school settings.

These patterns have real consequences for young children. Early educators play a critical role in fostering children's learning. Young children in child care settings are often taught by women whose compensation leaves them struggling with poverty and related challenges. At school-based settings, most Black and Hispanic children have teachers who do not share their race/ethnicity. Both issues need to be addressed, and policymakers are increasingly seeking out strategies to eliminate the large racial and professional disparities across sectors and roles.

Many of these efforts are part of broader policy initiatives aimed at building a well-trained ECE workforce. For example, one oft-proposed strategy for professionalizing the field is raising training and higher education requirements for ECE teachers.¹⁴ Increased educational requirements, such as Bachelor's degree mandates, aim to acknowledge the professional training needed to support young children's learning.

These types of mandates can have unintended, negative implications for teacher diversity in ECE,¹⁵ such as the overwhelmingly White ECE workforce currently found in school-based settings. Strategies that focus explicitly on recruiting, retaining, and supporting women of color through the educational pipeline are critical for at least partially addressing the systemic inequities in degree attainment and barriers to entry for certain educator roles.¹⁶

At the same time, educational requirements are costly, and the benefits of degree programs vary. Ensuring children receive high-quality, culturally responsive experiences across ECE settings will require new and varied strategies to support early educators, especially women of color, in the profession. There is an urgent need to ensure all early educators, irrespective of sector, have the skills required to teach young children, get the supports they need to improve over time, and receive adequate compensation. Meeting this goal will inherently require new approaches and large increases in the public funding allocated to ECE.

Endnotes

- ¹ Home-based programs also serve young children and may also receive public funds, such as reimbursements through child care subsidies. In this report, we focus on early educators in center- and school-based ECE settings; we describe early educators at home-based programs in a separate report.
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- ⁷ Markowitz, A. J., Bassok, D., & Grissom, J. A. (2020). Teacher-child racial/ethnic match and parental engagement with Head Start. *American Educational Research Journal*, 1-44. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219899356>
- ⁸ Bassok, D., Markowitz, A. J., Smith, A., & Oleson, L. (2019). *The Early Childhood Education Workforce in Louisiana: Findings from the 2018 Early Childhood Workforce Survey in Jefferson and Rapides Parishes* (Report No. 2). Retrieved from <https://curry.virginia.edu/study-early-education—louisiana>

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- ¹¹ Due to data limitations, we cannot compute racial match between assistant teachers and the children they serve.
- ¹² According to Kids Count Data center, the racial/ethnic composition of children ages 0-4 is 52 percent non-Hispanic White, 20 percent non-Hispanic Black, 13 percent other non-Hispanic, and 16 percent Hispanic.
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- ¹⁵ For example, Bassok (2013) finds that the rise in teacher education requirements in Head Start settings between 1999 and 2011 was associated with drops in the racial/ethnic match between children and staff members.
- ¹⁶ New America. (2019).