

Teacher Turnover in the United States

Who Moves, Who Leaves, and Why



Tiffany Tan, Wesley Wei, Desiree Carver-Thomas, and Emma García

Summary

Teacher turnover negatively impacts student achievement, contributes to shortages, strains schools, and undermines efforts to build a well-prepared, stable, and diverse teacher workforce. This brief examines patterns and drivers of teacher turnover in the United States. Findings show that about 1 in 7 public school teachers moved schools or left the profession between the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. Turnover rates were higher among early-career teachers; uncertified teachers; teachers teaching English as a Second Language, foreign languages, career and technical education, or special education; and teachers in city, charter, or high-poverty schools. After accounting for teacher and school characteristics, results show that teachers with higher salaries, more effective and supportive leadership, or higher job and workplace satisfaction are less likely to leave their schools. Policies to reduce turnover include improving compensation, working conditions, and access to strong preparation and supports for high-turnover groups of teachers. The report on which this brief is based can be found [here](#).

Introduction

Teacher turnover remains a persistent challenge in the United States, straining schools; disrupting student learning; and undermining efforts to build a strong, stable, and diverse teacher workforce. Every school year, about 1 in 7 public school teachers moves schools or leaves the profession—a higher turnover rate than in the 1990s and in leading international education systems.¹ When high turnover is paired with dwindling numbers of teachers entering the profession, schools face staffing challenges and unfilled teaching positions. Some schools then resort to hiring teachers who are not fully certified, increasing class sizes, or cutting course offerings.²

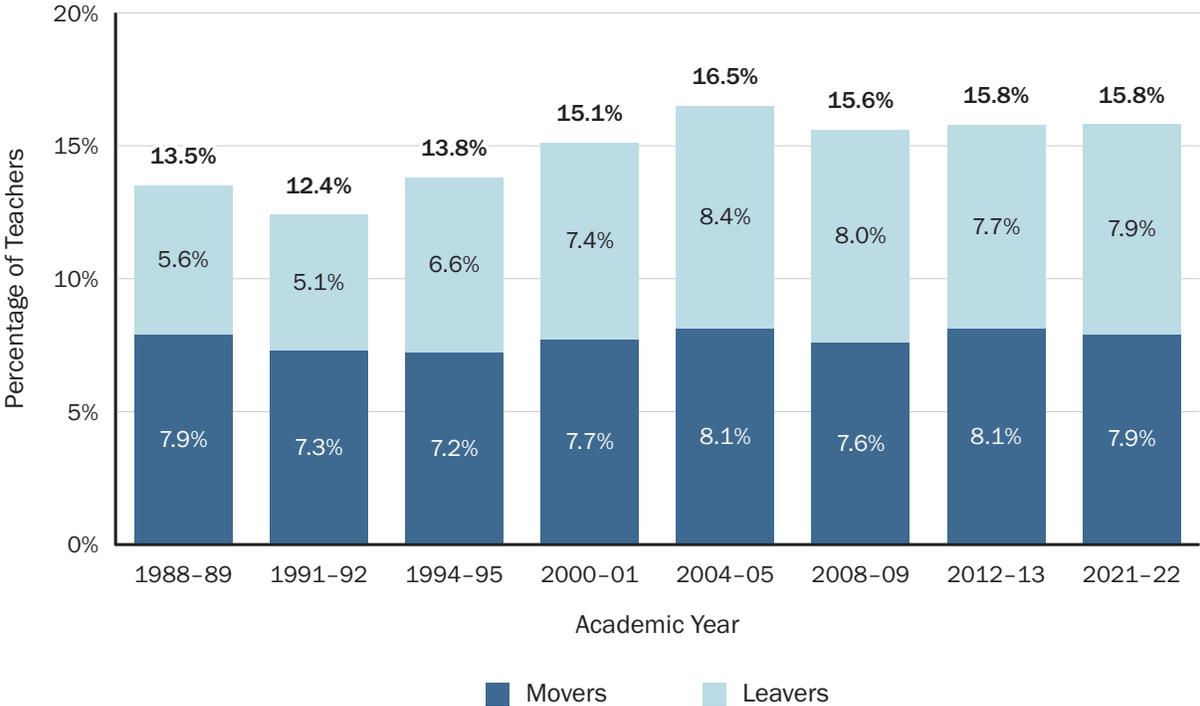
Research shows that these staffing challenges can leave remaining teachers overworked, with reduced time for planning, and they are a source of job-related stress.³ These staffing challenges, more frequent in schools with larger shares of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, diminish the overall quality of the education students receive and can also make it harder to retain teachers, fueling a cycle that is difficult to break.⁴ Overall, turnover impacts student achievement and the composition and qualifications of teachers in schools, and it further disrupts schools by undermining collegial relationships, collaboration, or the accumulation of institutional knowledge.⁵ Teacher turnover is also costly, as replacing a teacher can cost on average approximately \$25,000 in a large district and about \$12,000 in a small district (in 2024 dollars), diverting resources from investments that could support students and teachers.⁶

This brief describes the state of teacher turnover in the United States and examines individual- and school-level factors associated with turnover. It uses the most recent national-level data from the National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey (2020–21) and Teacher Follow-Up Survey (2021–22) to provide estimates of turnover across all teachers and by key teacher subgroups. Results are based on full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers in traditional public and charter schools in 2020–21 who were followed into the 2021–22 school year. The findings complement prior state-level research on COVID-19 pandemic-induced challenges, highlighting that the challenges teachers faced prior to the pandemic still mattered during this period. The brief concludes with policy considerations to reduce teacher turnover and suggestions for future research.

Key Findings

Teacher turnover remains high nationally. Between 2020–21 and 2021–22, 15.1% of U.S. teachers moved schools or left the profession: 8.0% moved schools, and 7.1% left teaching. Teacher turnover rates have been largely stable over the past 2 decades but are now about 27% higher than turnover rates in the early 1990s—an increase driven primarily because the rates of teachers leaving the profession increased by more than 50% (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Teacher Turnover Rates Among Public School Teachers Over Time



Note: These rates are based on all public school teachers; this sample is different from the sample in all other analyses, which only includes full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers.

Source: Taie, S., & Lewis, L. (2023). *Teacher attrition and mobility: Results from the 2021–22 Teacher Follow-Up Survey to the National Teacher and Principal Survey*. National Center for Education Statistics.

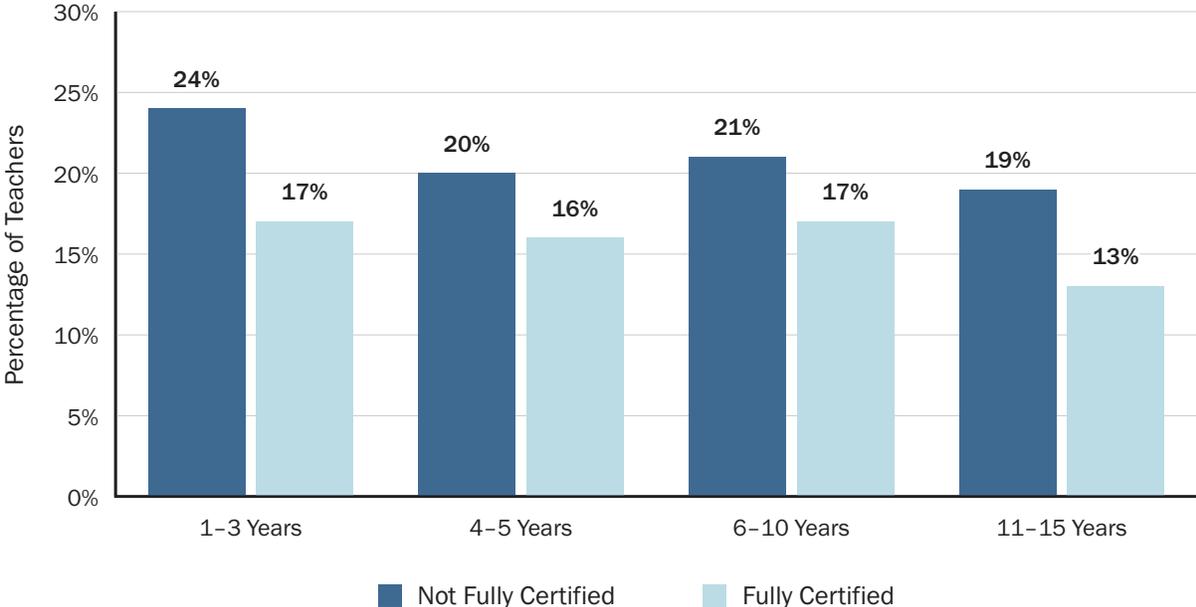
Most teacher turnover was voluntary and preretirement. Nearly 3 in 4 teachers (74%) who moved schools or left teaching did so voluntarily for reasons other than retirement. This proportion is larger than it was 10 years ago, when around two thirds of teachers left their schools voluntarily for reasons other than retirement (67%).⁷

Nearly half of the teachers who moved schools remained teaching in the same district, and almost 40% who left teaching continued to work in the education sector. A large majority of teachers who moved schools stayed within their district (45.1%) or within the state (36.5%), while 17.3% moved to teach in a different state. Among those who left teaching, 38.6% stayed in education in a nonteaching position, while another 31.2% retired. The remaining teachers who left teaching were working outside of education, caring for family, unemployed, or in college.

Teacher turnover rates vary across groups of teachers, confirming well-established evidence.

- **By certification:** Teacher turnover rates were higher among teachers with temporary, waiver, or emergency permits, or with no certification, as compared to teachers with regular or probationary teaching certificates (certificates granted to fully prepared beginning teachers). Overall, 20.1% of those not fully certified left their schools or the profession, compared to 14.7% of those who were fully certified. The difference in turnover based on certification was even larger among early-career teachers: The share of teachers with 1–3 years of experience who moved schools or left teaching was about 40% higher among teachers not fully certified than among fully certified teachers (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Teacher Turnover Rates by Years of Experience and Certification Status

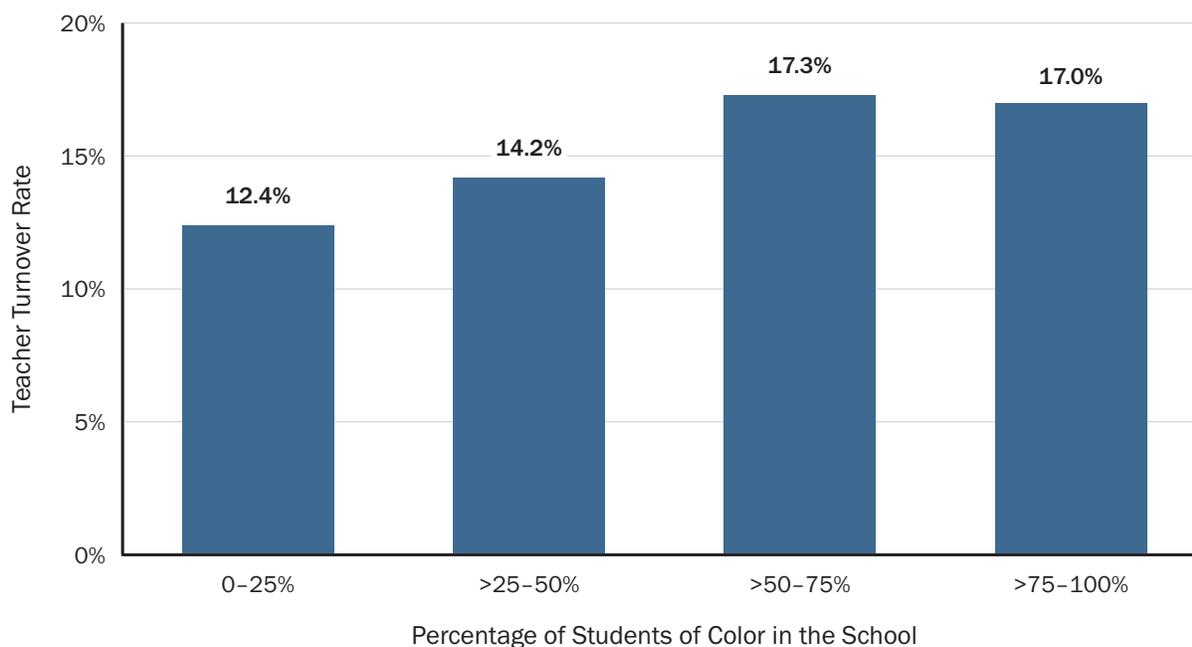


Notes: Results are based on full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers in public schools in the United States in 2020–21 who were followed into the 2021–22 school year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of the National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2020–21, and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2021–22. (2024).

- **By subject taught:** Teacher turnover rates were higher than average for teachers of English as a Second Language or bilingual education (19.0%), foreign languages (18.3%), career and technical education (17.5%), and special education (16.4%). These fields often require specialized expertise and, in many cases, additional certifications, targeted professional development, or other supports.
- **By type of school:** Turnover rates were higher in primary and middle schools (15.9% and 15.7%, respectively) than in high schools and schools that combine grade levels (14.1% and 12.6%, respectively). Teachers in city schools experienced higher turnover rates (17.7%) than teachers in rural (14.5%), suburban (13.9%), or town (13.7%) schools. Turnover rates were also higher in charter schools (17.8%) than in traditional public schools (14.9%).
- **By school student body composition:** Turnover rates were higher in schools serving larger concentrations of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Turnover rates were 35%–37% higher in schools with the largest concentrations of these students (low-income or students of color) than in schools with the smallest concentrations of these students (see [Figure 3](#)). These patterns are consistent with long-standing research on inequitable access to educational opportunities.⁸

Figure 3. Teacher Turnover Rates by Percentage of Students of Color in the School



Notes: Results are based on full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers in public schools in the United States in 2020–21 who were followed into the 2021–22 school year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of the National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2020–21, and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2021–22. (2024).

- **By race and ethnicity:** Teachers of color had higher turnover rates than White teachers (16.6% vs. 14.7%). Teacher turnover was especially high among Black teachers, whose turnover rate was more than 20% higher than that of White teachers (18.1% vs. 14.7%). Teachers of color are more likely to work in schools with higher proportions of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds—schools that are the most underresourced, where working conditions are more challenging, and where vacancies are harder to fill.

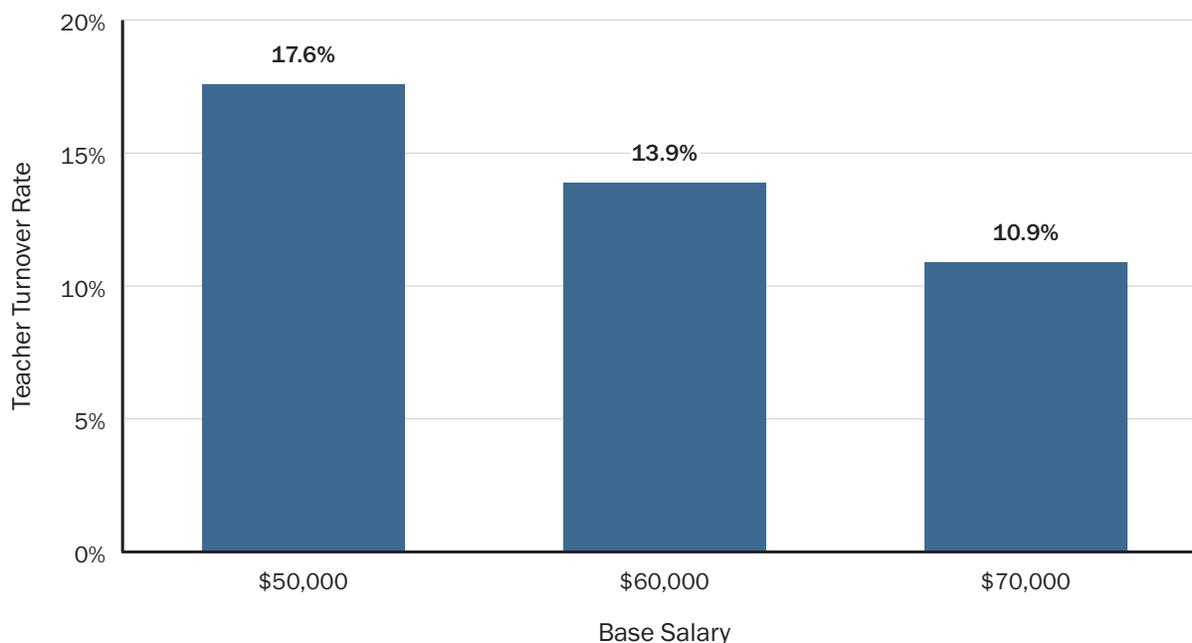
The most important reasons why teachers moved schools or left the profession reflected some form of dissatisfaction with their previous position.

- Nearly 1 in 4 teachers who moved schools (22.5%) cited dissatisfaction with administration, salary, or job assignments as their most important reason. Nearly 1 in 6 leavers (16.3%) noted their dissatisfaction with their salaries and with teaching as a career as their most important reason.
- Other reasons for moving schools or leaving teaching included a preference for their new assignment. For example, among teachers who moved schools, 11.2% selected “the opportunity to teach at their current [new] school” as their most important reason.
- Among those who left teaching, 13.1% chose to pursue a “position outside the K–12 teaching sector” as their most important reason. Another 16.2% noted that retirement was the most important reason for doing so.

Teacher compensation, school leadership, and job and workplace satisfaction are associated with teacher turnover. After accounting for teacher and school characteristics, teacher turnover was significantly associated with salaries, the degree to which teachers experienced effective and supportive school leadership, and teachers’ job and workplace satisfaction.

- **Teachers with higher salaries were less likely to move schools or leave the profession.** For every \$1,000 increase in salaries (adjusted for cost of living), the probability of turnover decreased by about 0.34 percentage points, on average. For example, the probability of turnover decreased by nearly 40% when salaries increased from \$50,000 to around \$70,000 (see [Figure 4](#)). Furthermore, teachers working multiple jobs and holding student loans had higher turnover rates than others. These financial stress indicators were key drivers of preretirement teacher turnover.

Figure 4. Teacher Turnover Rate by Base Salary

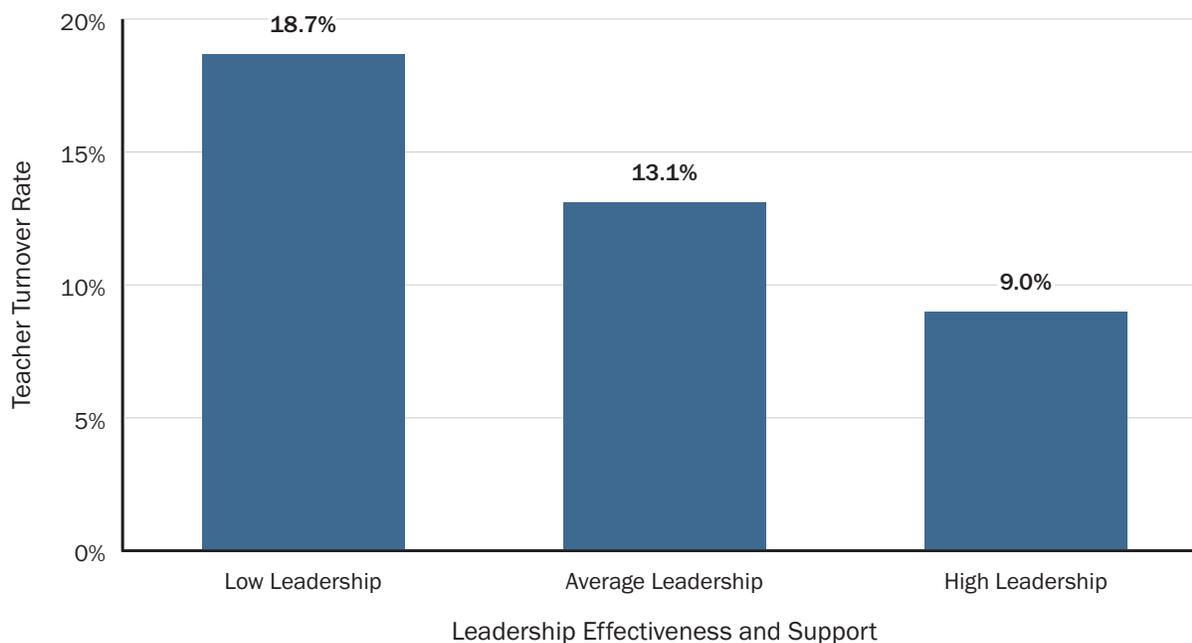


Notes: Results are based on full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers in public schools in the United States in 2020–21 who were followed into the 2021–22 school year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of the National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2020–21, and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2021–22. (2024).

- **Teachers who have more effective school leaders are less likely to move schools or leave the profession.** The probability of turnover was reduced by half—from 18.7% to 9.0%—when comparing teachers who reported low versus high levels of leadership effectiveness and supports in their schools (see [Figure 5](#)). Effective leaders are supportive of teachers, communicate a clear vision, and are effective at encouraging collaboration and promoting professional development. On average, teachers who had higher levels of leadership effectiveness and supports indicated they had greater influence over school policy, fewer barriers to teaching and learning, higher levels of satisfaction, or greater access to the materials they needed.

Figure 5. Teacher Turnover Rate by Perceived Leadership Effectiveness and Supports

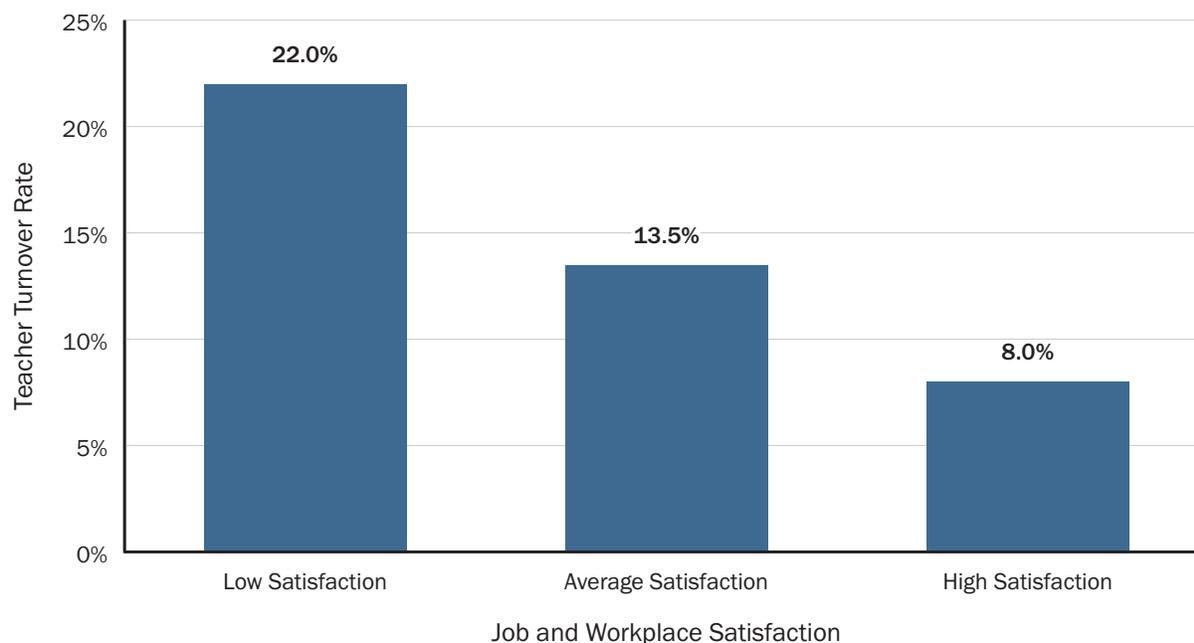


Notes: Results are based on full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers in public schools in the United States in 2020–21 who were followed into the 2021–22 school year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of the National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2020–21, and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2021–22. (2024).

- **Teachers with greater job and workplace satisfaction are less likely to leave their schools.** The turnover rate for teachers with high job and workplace satisfaction was less than half the rate for teachers with low job and workplace satisfaction (8.0% vs. 22.0%). (See [Figure 6](#)). High job and workplace satisfaction was measured based on teachers’ reported experiences of positive school environments and enthusiasm, lack of stress and burnout, and willingness to stay in teaching. On average, teachers who had higher levels of job and workplace satisfaction indicated they had greater support from their students’ parents, greater classroom autonomy, and more effective and supportive school leadership. Conversely, teachers who reported lower levels of satisfaction had higher amounts of paperwork and administrative duties, worked more hours, taught in a larger class, or experienced test-related job insecurity.

Figure 6. Teacher Turnover Rate by Reported Job and Workplace Satisfaction



Notes: Results are based on full-time, part-time, and itinerant teachers in public schools in the United States in 2020–21 who were followed into the 2021–22 school year.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of the National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2020–21, and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2021–22. (2024).

Policy Considerations

Turnover is a complex issue with no single cause. A multifaceted and mutually reinforcing policy approach—at the federal, state, and local levels—is necessary to create the conditions that encourage teachers to stay in the workforce. There are multiple avenues policymakers can pursue to reduce teacher turnover, including those that improve compensation, school leadership, and job satisfaction as well as those that can particularly benefit high-turnover groups of teachers.

Salaries and Compensation

- **Ensure that teachers’ salaries and total compensation are competitive with other professions requiring similar levels of education.** Teacher salaries are largely determined at the local and state levels. Many states—including Iowa, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Texas—have recently passed legislation to raise and equalize teacher pay. Federal policy can complement and incentivize these efforts by offering nonsalary benefits, such as refundable tax credits or housing subsidies, for educators.

- **Expand access to loan forgiveness and service scholarship programs.** Expanding and improving federal and state loan forgiveness and service scholarship programs can lessen the amount of student loans teacher candidates take on, increasing the likelihood of individuals choosing to enter and stay in the profession by reducing their financial burden.
- **Provide compensation increases for teachers in high-need fields and locations, as well as for teacher expertise and leadership.** Policies can provide additional financial incentives and opportunities that complement teachers' salaries, such as when teachers earn advanced credentials (e.g., National Board certification), teach in high-need subjects or schools (e.g., special education, rural schools, high-poverty schools), work as mentors, or take on other roles within the school system. These policies also align with prior literature showing that career growth and advancement can enhance teacher satisfaction and may reduce turnover.

School Leadership

- **Ensure that school leaders are well prepared to support teachers and have access to high-quality professional learning.** Policies can support access to principal preparation programs that develop strong instructional leadership skills from the outset. States can leverage licensure requirements and program approval standards to ensure that preparation programs incorporate research-based practices for effective leader development.⁹ Leadership practices that support teachers' opportunities to collaborate and involvement in decision-making are associated with higher teacher retention. Once school leaders are in their roles, federal, state, and district policies can provide them with access to high-quality coaching and mentoring that reinforce the foundations built during preparation. This enhances strong leadership that creates an environment of trust and collaboration among staff and supports teachers in their professional development.

Job and Workplace Satisfaction

- **Provide access to ongoing professional learning and supports for teachers.** Our study found that job and workplace satisfaction increased when other working conditions, such as school leadership or classroom autonomy, improved. Conversely, job and workplace satisfaction decreased when teachers had additional jobs outside of the school system. School leaders and district policies can ensure that teachers are well supported and more satisfied by creating opportunities to continuously grow their professional capacities in the school.
- **Redesign schools to support collaboration and shared decision-making.** Policies can provide dedicated time during the school day for teachers to collaborate, such as conducting reciprocal peer observations, implementing lesson studies, and engaging in teacher action research. Simultaneously, policies to increase teachers' influence in the classroom and in decision-making can increase their job satisfaction and improve retention.

Additional Policies to Address Turnover Among High-Turnover Groups

- **Strengthen preparation and early-career supports for new teachers.** Investments that make strong preservice preparation more accessible and affordable for a wider range of teacher candidates are key to minimizing early-career turnover. Access to high-quality preservice preparation, such as teacher residencies,¹⁰ better equips teachers to meet classroom challenges and realities. In addition, broadly available, high-quality mentoring and induction opportunities can help mitigate early-career turnover.
- **Incentivize and underwrite the costs of earning high-need, advanced credentials.** Underwriting the costs of earning credentials in high-need subjects, for which shortages are the most acute, such as special education, improves access to these credentials.
- **Ensure equitable and adequate school funding and resources.** There is a need to address higher turnover rates in schools that are the most underresourced and that serve students who are furthest from opportunity. This requires revising state funding formulas to provide added resources for students with greater needs. Some of these resources can support targeted workforce preparation, recruitment, and retention investments to help create more equitable staffing conditions across schools.

Research Considerations

Future studies can build on these research findings to further answer relevant policy questions and inform policies that help build a strong, stable, and diverse teacher workforce. Recommendations include the following research efforts:

- **Examine the specific drivers of turnover among groups of teachers with high turnover rates.** Investigating how specific policies influence turnover decisions using subgroup analyses and consistent and comparable data can offer new evidence to better tailor policy solutions for specific teacher labor markets. Examples include how early-career teachers may respond to some supports and how to retain teachers in high-need subjects or schools.
- **Assess how recent policy changes affecting salaries, leadership, and satisfaction have influenced teacher turnover.** Examining the impact of recent policy changes, such as those affecting teacher salaries, could yield important lessons about the effectiveness and efficiency of various policies and investments. A deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of working conditions is important as well, as it opens the door to addressing multiple drivers of turnover through coordinated policy levers.
- **Further investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the teacher workforce.** An important caveat of our study is that the teacher workforce examined is an unusual cohort due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Future studies, especially those relying on longitudinal evidence, could estimate the pandemic's impact on the workforce, as well as how the workforce has evolved since the pandemic.

- **Expand theoretical frameworks of teacher turnover.** Emerging research suggests the need to account for a broader and evolving set of factors, such as school design and teachers’ roles within school contexts—both as drivers of turnover and as conditions affecting teacher effectiveness. Adapting turnover frameworks to better reflect the current sociopolitical and technological context of teaching, such as changes in technology or the greater needs for teachers to respond to mental health challenges, could strengthen our understanding of how to better support and retain teachers.
- **Ensure continued investments in national datasets.** While some state-level data can provide timely examinations of local teacher labor markets, the availability of national-level data like the National Teacher and Principal Survey and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey is essential to examine the profession across states and to explain differences in turnover patterns and working conditions nationwide. To ensure that this work continues, it is critical that federal policymakers sustain and strengthen funding for the collection and improvement of these national datasets.

Endnotes

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