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California's Teacher Shortages

Trends in Supply, Demand, and Turnover

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Summary

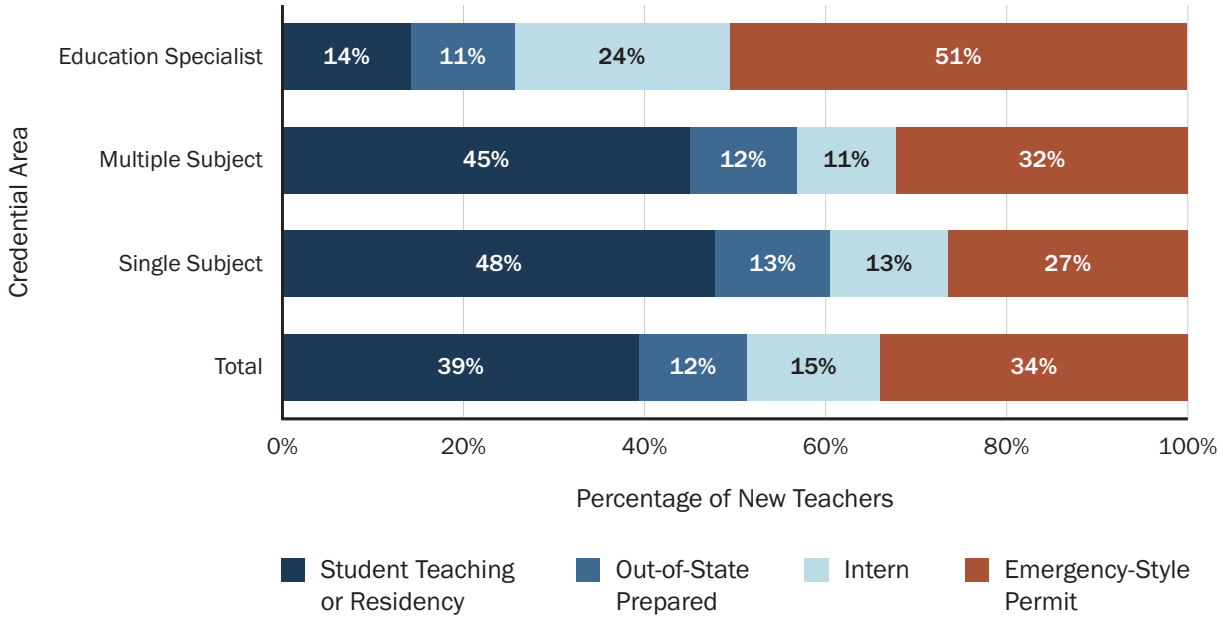
California faces long-standing shortages of fully prepared teachers. Using data from the California Department of Education and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), this brief analyzes supply- and demand-side factors shaping staffing challenges over time. Despite declining enrollment, teacher demand remains high, driven by persistent turnover, increasing student needs, and efforts to lower class sizes. Turnover is highest among beginning teachers, those on emergency-style permits, teachers of color, and special education teachers and is associated with lack of preparation, heavier workloads, principal turnover, and lower salaries and per-pupil spending. The number of teacher preparation program completers dropped 60% between 2003–04 and 2013–14, but recent state investments have begun to pay off, with new preliminary credentials up 40% from 2022–23 to 2024–25 and greater racial diversity among new teacher candidates. However, most programs have been funded on a one-time basis and will soon expire without continued funding.

The reports on which this brief is based can be found here and here.

Is There Still a Teacher Shortage in California?

After many years of budget and workforce cutbacks, the most recent round of teacher shortages emerged in California in 2015, when funding began to increase with California's new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), stimulating a demand for teachers while there was inadequate supply. The most telling indicator of teacher shortages in California is the prevalence of substandard credentials and permits—temporary authorizations that, by law, are supposed to be issued only when fully credentialed teachers cannot be found. The number of such credentials has more than tripled since 2012–13. The fastest-growing category is emergency-style permits (inclusive of Provisional Internship Permits, or PIPs, and Short-Term Staff Permits, or STSPs) issued to individuals with little or no pedagogical training or demonstrated subject matter expertise in the courses they teach. In 2024–25, close to 8,000 of these permits were granted. Among new teachers entering the California public education system that year, more than one third entered on an emergency-style permit: 32% of Multiple Subject teachers, 27% of Single Subject teachers, and 51% of Education Specialist teachers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of New Teachers by Entry Pathways and Credential Area, 2024–25



Source: Smith, T. M., & Li, Y. (2026). *Who stays, who leaves: Five-year retention patterns by teacher entry pathways*. Getting Down to Facts III.

Underprepared teachers are concentrated in schools serving higher proportions of low-income families, English learners, and foster youth (students in any of these groups count toward California's "unduplicated pupil count," or UPC) as well as Black students. The state's highest-need schools (those in the top decile by UPC percentage) were more than twice as likely to fill teaching positions with interns and teachers on emergency-style permits or waivers than the lowest-need schools (11% vs. 4%).

While schools rely on underprepared teachers across all subjects, teachers are least likely to be fully credentialed for the following subject areas: math (71%), science (70%), foreign languages (71%), art (68%), career technical education (66%), and computer education (57%). While similar data are not available for special education and bilingual education assignments, analyses of new teachers' credentials and placements reveal a severe level of shortage in special education. As shown in Figure 1, 51% of new Education Specialist teachers held emergency-style permits in 2024–25, and 24% were interns who were teaching full time while still in training. In other words, just a quarter of new Education Specialist teachers were fully qualified.

These shortages of fully credentialed teachers have real consequences for student learning. Prior research has found that teachers with little preservice preparation are less effective than fully prepared teachers and are far more likely to leave the profession. A large-scale study in California found that, holding school and community factors constant, districts with smaller shares of teachers with substandard credentials and permits were associated with significant increases in student achievement, especially for Black and Latine students. When there are not enough fully credentialed teachers to meet demand, districts may also rely on long-term substitute teachers and cancel or combine courses, further limiting students' learning opportunities.

Importantly, the factors that drive shortages can vary from district to district. Some districts facing declining enrollment and budget cuts may find themselves laying off teachers even while they struggle to fill vacancies in chronic shortage areas with qualified teachers.

What Is Causing California's Teacher Shortage?

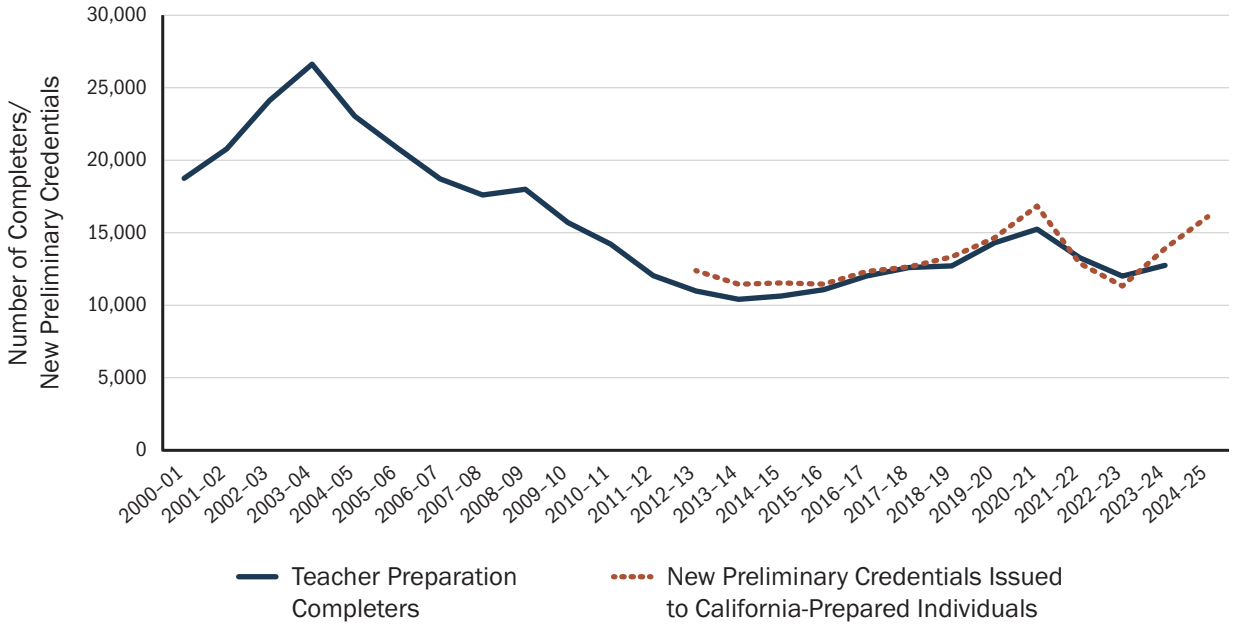
Teacher shortages arise when the supply of fully credentialed teachers fails to keep pace with demand. In California, both sides of this equation currently present challenges.

Inadequate Supply of Fully Prepared Teachers

Historical trends in teacher supply show that the number of California teacher preparation program completers plummeted from a high of 26,624 in 2003–04 to a low of 10,409 in 2013–14—a 60% drop over the course of the decade. Since 2013–14, the number of completers has been gradually recovering, though it remains roughly 50% below the level of 2 decades ago.

Figure 2 shows both the long-run decline in teacher preparation completers and a more recent, encouraging trend: The number of new preliminary credentials issued to California-prepared individuals jumped by 40% from 2022–23 to 2024–25, rising from 11,325 to 16,104 credentials. This increase coincides with the peak investments from the state's Golden State Teacher Grant (GSTG) and teacher residency programs, discussed below.

Figure 2. Number of California Teacher Preparation Completers and Preliminary Credentials Issued to Individuals Prepared in the State, 2000–01 to 2024–25



Sources: California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (n.d.). *Teacher supply annual reports*; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2026). *Teacher supply in California, 2024–25: A report to the legislature*; Learning Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Department of Education Higher Education Act Title II State Report Card System data.

The composition of the preparation pipeline has shifted over time. Coinciding with state investments to support California's Teacher Residency Grant Program (TRGP), the share of new candidates enrolling in clinically intensive, yearlong teacher residency programs increased from 2% (421 candidates) in 2018–19 to 10% (2,026 candidates) in 2024–25. The share of candidates in undergraduate Integrated Teacher Education Program (ITEP) pathways, which allow candidates to earn both a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential in 4 years, grew from 6% to 9%, following recent state investments to expand ITEPs. Since 2021, teacher candidates—especially candidates of color and from low-income backgrounds—have also benefited from the GSTG, which provides up-front financial support during their preparation. These trends reflect the importance of state investments designed to make high-quality preparation more accessible. The teacher pipeline has also grown more diverse, driven by increases in Latine candidates; in 2024–25, teachers of color comprised 65% of new teachers.

At the same time, a potentially concerning trend has emerged: The share of candidates enrolled in online-only programs tripled from 10% in 2019–20 to 34% in 2024–25, with another 38% of candidates enrolled in hybrid programs that blend in-person and online coursework. While online programs can broaden access to teacher preparation—particularly in rural areas—research on their effectiveness is limited, and the rapid expansion warrants monitoring.

Teacher production has also shifted from public institutions of higher education (IHEs) to private and independent IHEs. Between 2004–05 and 2024–25, the share of new preliminary credentials issued to individuals prepared in private IHEs grew from 38% (9,338 credentials) to 45% (7,270 credentials) of a smaller base, while the share prepared in California State Universities (CSUs) fell from 55% (13,584 credentials) to 43% (6,975 credentials). This has equity implications, given CSUs' lower costs and greater financial aid access. Teacher production remains proportionally small in local education agencies (LEAs) and the University of California system (7% and 4% of credential recipients in 2024-25, respectively). This shift from CSUs to private IHEs is more pronounced among Education Specialist credentials, with LEAs also playing a larger role in preparing special education teachers. The share of Education Specialist credentials issued to individuals prepared in CSUs declined from 63% in 2004–05 to 28% in 2024–25, while private and independent IHEs increased from 36% to 52% and LEAs from 0.6% to 19%.

Persistently High Teacher Demand

Despite declining student enrollment statewide—which fell by about 7% from 2014–15 to 2024–25—teacher demand has remained high for several reasons:

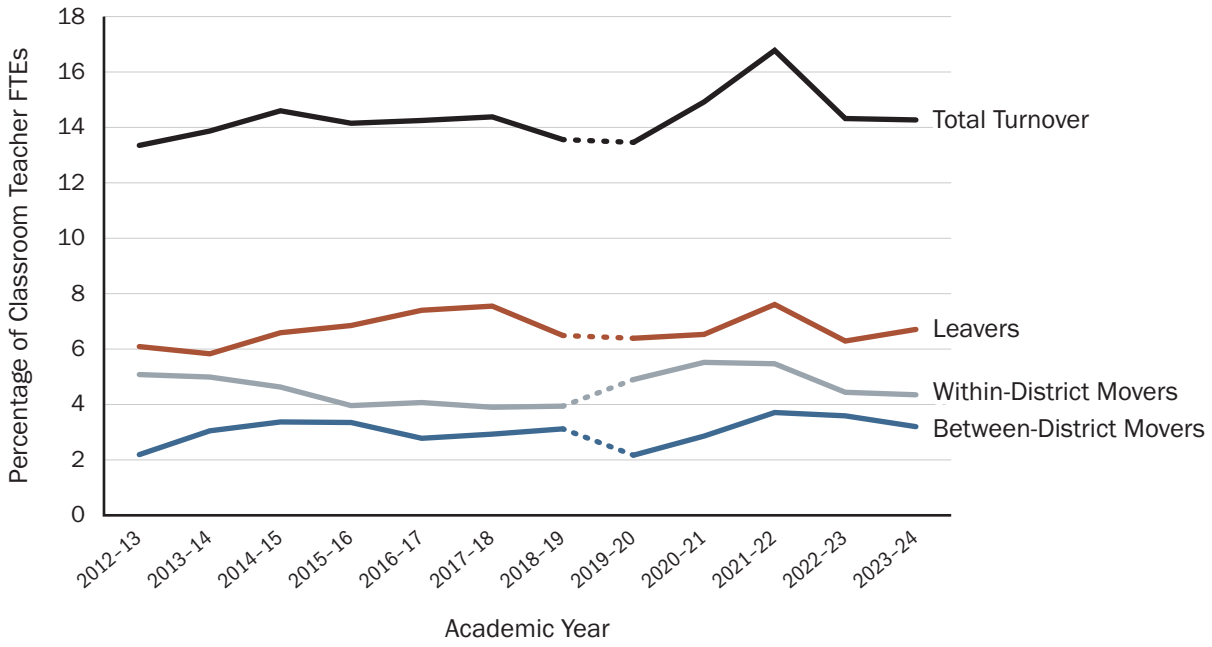
- **High Turnover.** In 2023–24, teacher attrition from the prior year accounted for 86% of new teacher hires, underscoring the central importance of retention as a strategy for easing shortages.
- **Growing Student Needs.** Among California's students, 64% are economically disadvantaged, 14% have a disability, and 4% are homeless. The share of students in each of these categories has grown over the past decade, and more intensive and specialized staff are needed to meet the greater educational and support needs of students. Federal COVID-relief funds supported districts to hire large numbers of additional staff—such as tutors, counselors, and health personnel—to address students' academic, mental, and physical health needs during the pandemic. While these funds have expired, ongoing investments in high-need schools continue to drive demand for additional staffing.

- **Policy Expansions.** Universal transitional kindergarten (TK), which expanded to all 4-year-olds as of 2025–26 with a 10:1 student-to-adult ratio, has effectively added an entire grade to the public education system, greatly increasing demand for qualified early educators. Proposition 28, which funds arts and music education, and new career technical education (CTE) programs have increased demand for arts and CTE teachers.
- **Efforts to Reduce Class Sizes.** Before the pandemic, California's pupil–teacher ratio was 24 students per teacher, the highest in the nation. While it fell to 21.7 students per teacher in 2024–25, it is still the third highest in the nation; the national average is 15.4. Further class size reductions could require more teachers, even as enrollment falls.

Who Leaves and Why: Patterns of Teacher Turnover

High turnover is a key driver of teacher demand and, therefore, of teacher shortages. Between 2023–24 and 2024–25, California's turnover was 14%, or about 39,000 teacher full-time equivalents, nearly equally split between those who left teaching in California public schools ("leavers") and those who switched schools ("movers") (see Figure 3). California does not collect data on why teachers leave or move, but national data suggest that about three quarters of teacher turnover is voluntary and for reasons other than retirement, pointing to the important role retention plays in tackling teacher staffing challenges. Although turnover rates statewide have been fairly stable over time (except for increases immediately following the pandemic), they vary widely across teachers and schools, with some schools experiencing rates of 30% or more.

Figure 3. Teacher Turnover, 2012–13 to 2023–24



Notes: FTE = Full-Time Equivalent. Data collection procedures changed between 2018–19 and 2019–20 school years, as signified by the dashed line between those years.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of California Department of Education 2012–13 to 2024–25 public and restricted staff assignment data (2026).

The Inequitable Distribution of Turnover

Teacher turnover carries adverse organizational, fiscal, and educational consequences. Districts must devote time and resources to recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers, which can cost larger districts an estimated $25,000 per departed teacher. Higher turnover also disrupts school functioning and harms student learning. These learning losses can compound over time, since high turnover leads to an increased reliance on underprepared teachers, who themselves leave at higher rates. Turnover is concentrated among specific teacher groups and schools, with significant equity implications:

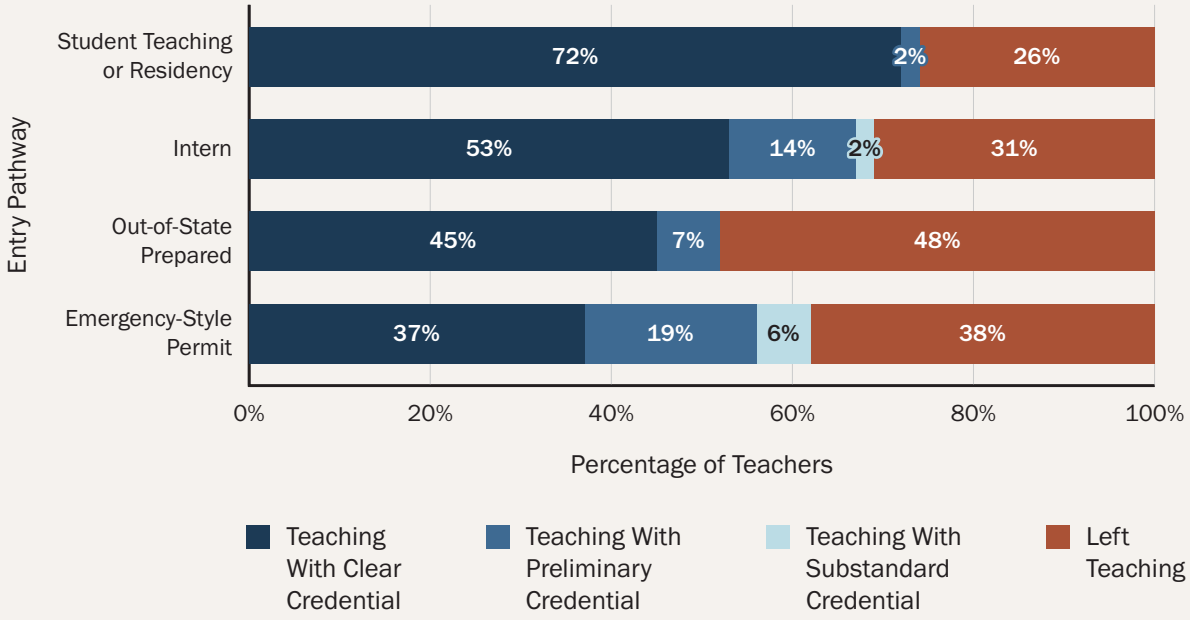
- **Credentials.** Teachers on emergency-style permits had a turnover rate of nearly 40% in 2023–24—almost triple the rate of fully credentialed teachers (13%). (For details on teacher retention by pathway into the profession, see Teacher Preparation—A Key Driver of Turnover.)
- **Race and Ethnicity.** Black teachers had a turnover rate of 19% in 2023–24, with 1 in 10 leaving the profession entirely. Black teachers have had less access to full preparation (5% teaching on emergency-style permits, compared to 2% statewide) and are more likely to teach in high-need schools with more challenging working conditions, factors that likely contribute to the high turnover rate. Multiracial and American Indian/Alaska Native teachers also had above-average turnover rates.
- **Special Education Teachers.** In 2023–24, 1 in 5 special education teachers (20%) left their positions—a rate 30% higher than other classroom teachers. This is particularly concerning given that special education is already among the most acute shortage areas.
- **Beginning Teachers.** More than 1 in 4 teachers (26%) in their first or second year of teaching left or switched schools in 2023–24. Turnover also remained well above average for teachers with 3–5 years of experience (20%).
- **Schools Serving Historically Marginalized Students.** Teachers in the highest-need schools (those in the top UPC decile) had a turnover rate of 16%, compared to 11% in the lowest-decile schools.
- **Charter Schools.** Teachers in charter schools had turnover rates of 17%, compared to 14% in non-charter schools.
- **Location.** Rural teachers were more likely to move between districts (5%) or leave the profession entirely (8%), compounded by the lack of nearby teacher preparation programs and difficulties attracting teachers to rural areas.

Teacher Preparation—A Key Driver of Turnover

A teacher's pathway into the profession and the credentials they hold are strong predictors of teacher turnover. Higher turnover rates for teachers of color, special education teachers, new teachers, and teachers in charter schools and high-need schools are associated with their lack of preparation, as these groups disproportionately teach on emergency-style permits and waivers. The extent of preparation teachers can acquire depends on their financial circumstances and the support available to them, since most preparation in California is at the graduate level, making the credentialing process more time-consuming and expensive overall.

Analyses tracking new teachers over time found that entry pathways are highly associated with early-career retention. California-prepared teachers who entered after full preparation with a preliminary credential have the lowest leaving rates, with 74% still teaching in California after 5 years, as compared to only 52% who entered from out of state and 62% of those who entered on an emergency-style permit (see figure below). Out-of-state-prepared teachers, who make up about 12% of new teachers, may experience challenges with licensure reciprocity and greater mobility in their life circumstances. Teachers entering on emergency-style permits typically have not demonstrated subject matter expertise and may have received little or no pedagogical training, leaving them less prepared for the demands of teaching. However, over half of teachers entering on an emergency-style permit were able to progress to a clear or preliminary credential after 5 years, highlighting the potential for some of these teachers to become fully prepared with adequate support. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of supporting teacher preparation as both a recruitment and retention strategy.

Distribution of Teaching Status at Year 5, by Entry Pathway



Note: Percentages shown are based on the average across teacher cohorts who began teaching from 2019–20 to 2020–21.

Source: Smith, T. M., & Li, Y. (2026). *Who stays, who leaves: Five-year retention patterns by teacher entry pathways*. Getting Down to Facts III.

What Conditions Predict Turnover?

Consistent with prior research, our analysis of California teacher turnover between 2021–22 and 2023–24 found that, controlling for student and teacher characteristics, higher turnover is associated with lower district salaries, greater reliance on underprepared teachers, principal turnover, heavier workloads, and lower per-pupil spending. For example:

- **Salary.** Every $10,000 increase in entry-level salary was associated with a 9% reduction in leavers and a 25% decrease in between-district movers.
- **Principal Turnover and Experience.** Principal turnover in the same year was associated with a 24% increase in total teacher turnover. Teachers working under more experienced principals also had lower turnover rates.
- **Per-Pupil Spending.** Teachers in the lowest-spending quintile of schools were 21% more likely to switch districts than those in the highest-spending quintile. Higher per-pupil spending typically enables lower pupil–teacher ratios and improved working conditions, which can help support teacher retention.

These patterns suggest that teaching conditions—including compensation, staffing stability, workloads, and school resources—play an important role in teacher retention.

Structural Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

California faces a unique set of challenges that contribute to persisting teacher shortages, constraining both the supply of new teachers and the retention of those already in the workforce. These include:

- **High Costs of Living and Stagnant Salaries.** Teachers struggle to cover living expenses with their earned salaries, which are roughly equivalent to what they were in 2004–05, after adjusting for inflation. Research finds that California teachers in 2024 earned about 80% of what other college-educated workers in the state earn. A third of California teachers carry student loan debt, further reducing their actual take-home dollars. The LCFF does not adjust for differences in cost of living across the state, and wide salary disparities exist within regional labor markets.
- **Limited Undergraduate Teaching Pathways.** California's history of requiring teacher preparation at the graduate level means that teacher credentialing can be particularly costly in the state. The ITEP allows candidates to earn a bachelor's degree and teaching credential in 4 years, yet only 9% of new teacher candidates were undergraduates in 2024–25. One reason is Pell Grant restrictions limiting aid in institutions offering both undergraduate and postbaccalaureate teacher preparation, creating disincentives for universities to offer undergraduate programs. Additionally, CTC subject matter requirements for undergraduate programs have proved difficult for many universities to implement. (These are currently being reevaluated and redefined.)

- **Barriers to Licensure.** Testing requirements prevent many teacher candidates who have invested in preparation from earning their credentials. Recent policy changes enable candidates to demonstrate basic skills and subject matter knowledge through coursework evaluated by transcript review, when universities are willing to do so. Pass rates on the California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET) are notably low in many areas, including in chronic shortage areas (for example, 77% for chemistry, 69% for mathematics, 64% for physics, and 58% for foundational science). While the number of candidates using exams to demonstrate subject matter competence declined by 24% between 2021–22 and 2023–24 due to the recent policy changes, thousands of candidates are still failing the CSET each year.

California's Teacher Workforce Investments

California has made large-scale investments in the teacher workforce since 2016, totaling more than $2.3 billion in targeted programs to support teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention, with the most significant investments beginning in 2021. Major initiatives include:

Teacher Residency Grant Program ($742 million total). TRGP funds partnerships between school districts and teacher preparation programs to provide yearlong, clinically intensive residency experiences. Residents receive a stipend of at least $20,000 in exchange for a commitment to teach for 4 years. The share of candidates in residency programs grew from 2% in 2018–19 to 10% in 2024–25. Over 70% of residents are people of color. Research has found that residents are viewed by supervisors as very well prepared, pass the Teacher Performance Assessment at higher rates and without racial/ethnic disparities, and enter and stay in the workforce at higher rates than other candidates, with 93% of the first cohort of TRGP residents still teaching after 3 years.

Golden State Teacher Grant Program ($572.5 million total). The GSTG service scholarship, initially offering up to $20,000 per candidate, currently provides up to $10,000 to teacher candidates who commit to teach in a priority school (a school with 55% or more UPC) for 2 years. Nearly half (45%) of new teacher candidates received a grant in 2023–24. A 2025 study found that the program has encouraged thousands of teacher candidates to pursue teaching and to teach in high-need schools and fields.

National Board Certification Incentive Program ($280 million total). The program provides financial awards to National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) who teach in priority schools and subsidizes certification costs for teachers currently in those schools. The number of candidates pursuing National Board Certification more than tripled after the incentive became available in 2022. Data find that the incentive also drew NBCTs into priority schools, expanding access for low-income students, English learners, and foster youth to more experienced and accomplished teachers. By 2025, over 400 of the new NBCTs that year were teaching in priority schools, compared to just 81 in 2021 before the incentive launched.

Together, these investments have contributed to meaningful progress. The number of new preliminary credentials issued to California-prepared individuals increased by 40% from 2022–23 to 2024–25, California's teacher workforce has grown and become more racially diverse, and pupil–teacher ratios have returned to near prerecession levels. However, all of these programs have been funded with one-time rather than ongoing appropriations. As the state faces reduced federal education funding and ongoing fiscal pressures, these promising programs will need to be renewed if their full impact is to be realized.

Key Findings

Key findings from the analysis of state teacher workforce data include the following:

- **The number of teacher preparation program completers dropped by 60% between 2003–04 and 2013–14 but is beginning to rebound and diversify alongside state investments in recruitment and preparation.** Recent data show a 40% jump in the number of new preliminary teacher credentials issued to California-prepared individuals (from 11,325 credentials in 2022–23 to 16,104 credentials in 2024–25), when state initiatives underwriting the costs of preparation have been at their peak.
- **Teacher demand is driven primarily by high turnover.** In 2023–24, teachers who left the California teacher workforce in the prior year accounted for 86% of vacancies that needed to be filled by new teacher hires. The total turnover rate in 2023–24 was 14%, including 7% of teachers who moved to a different school and 7% who left the California teaching profession altogether. Turnover was highest among beginning teachers; teachers on emergency-style permits; Black, multiracial, and American Indian/Alaska Native teachers; and special education teachers.
- **Salaries and working conditions predict teacher turnover.** After accounting for school and teacher characteristics, higher turnover is associated with lower district salaries, greater reliance on underprepared teachers, principal turnover, heavier workloads, and lower per-pupil spending.
- **Teacher shortages are inequitably distributed.** California's highest-need schools—those serving the most students from low-income families, English learners, and foster youth—rely disproportionately on underprepared teachers who leave at far higher rates than lowest-need schools. As a result, high-need schools and districts disproportionately shoulder the organizational, fiscal, and educational consequences of teacher turnover.
- **Shortages are exacerbated by structural factors in the state.** California's high cost of living, stagnant inflation-adjusted teacher salaries, limited undergraduate preparation pathways, and barriers to licensure continue to constrain the supply of qualified teachers in California.
- **State investments are beginning to make a difference, but sustained funding is important to achieve long-term impact.** Programs such as the Teacher Residency Grant Program, the Golden State Teacher Grant Program, and the National Board Certification Incentive Program have recently supported a more diverse and better-prepared pipeline of teachers committed to teaching in high-need schools. However, all of these have been one-time rather than ongoing investments. Long-term impact will depend on continued funding.

Policy Considerations

California's teacher shortages are severe, but they are not inevitable. Building on prior research, evidence from this brief points to several implications for California policy to build a strong, stable, and diverse teacher workforce.

Stabilize and Sustain the Teacher Pipeline

- **Continue to broaden access to high-quality teacher preparation through stable ongoing investments in effective programs**, such as the Teacher Residency Grant Program and Golden State Teacher Grant Program. For example, the new Paid Student Teaching Program was funded in the 2025 budget at $300 million, with implementation underway to provide student teachers with a $10,000 stipend beginning in July 2026.
- **Incentivize teacher education, including undergraduate preparation, at California public universities.** Only 9% of California teacher candidates entered through undergraduate ITEP pathways in 2024–25, and teacher preparation within the public system has declined substantially over the past 2 decades. Additional financial incentives to public IHEs, as well as financial supports for teacher candidates, will be important to support the supply of new teachers.
- **Support implementation of teacher testing reforms.** With thousands of candidates still failing the CSET each year, additional strategies are needed to fully implement and make coursework alternatives for meeting licensure requirements more widely known.
- **Modernize California's teacher credentialing system.** With California's expansion of college and career pathways, arts education, and TK, teacher shortages have grown in subjects such as new CTE fields, computer science, early childhood education, and the arts in elementary school. California's credentialing system must adapt to these new demands, including reviewing and amending CTE credentialing requirements and exploring microcredentials, as over 30 other states have already done.

Support Teacher Retention

- **Enable competitive salaries.** Policymakers should treat salary competitiveness as a recruitment and retention strategy, including continuing investments in more adequate and stable funding that is equitably distributed through the LCFF and considering strategies to account for regional cost-of-living differences.
- **Address the special education teacher crisis.** Three quarters of new Education Specialist teachers in 2024–25 entered without full preparation, and turnover rates of special education teachers are 30% higher than other teachers. Strategies to strengthen the special education teacher workforce include supporting dual credentialing; partnering with labor organizations to inform bargaining approaches (e.g., stipends and bonuses, caseload caps, administrative supports); and strengthening state, county, and Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) technical assistance in areas such as supporting principals to better support special educators, facilitating collaboration between special education and general education teachers, and alleviating compliance and paperwork workload.

- **Support principal preparation and stability.** Principals shape teaching conditions and play a critical role in attracting and retaining teachers. California has worked to strengthen its principal workforce, launching the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy in 2019 to provide principal professional learning supports and the Diverse Education Leaders Pipeline Initiative in 2023 to strengthen preparation and retention. Policymakers should provide stable funding for these efforts, continuing to augment federal funds designated through the Title II 3% school leadership set-aside.

Strengthen Data to Inform Policy

- **Implement regular statewide surveys of teacher and school leader working conditions.** California lacks data on working conditions that research identifies as predictors of educator retention. Several states have implemented statewide surveys that have enabled more targeted and effective policy responses. Such surveys are especially important for understanding and improving working conditions in high-turnover schools.
- **Study the rapid growth of online teacher preparation.** Over a third of California teacher candidates are now enrolled in online-only programs, triple the share from just 6 years ago. California should study the impact of these programs across key measures, including program completion, credentialing, hiring, retention, and effectiveness.
- **Strengthen data systems.** California should develop a systematic approach to collecting, linking, and analyzing data across state agencies to enable more effective long-term tracking of state investments and overall teacher workforce trends.

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