

UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATOR LABOR MARKET: A LOOK AT TENNESSEE'S DATA

Introduction

Access to highly effective teachers is essential for student achievement, but growing evidence suggests students have unreliable and inequitable access to effective educators, with many school districts reporting high levels of teacher vacancies.¹ SCORE partnered with 15 school districts and the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) to understand the broader trends behind educator labor market challenges so that school, district, and policy leaders can better focus on short- and long-term actions to take. This report is the first in a series aimed at exploring those challenges and offering actionable solutions.

The data suggest this is more than a challenge with the teacher pipeline and requires a holistic look at all aspects of the Tennessee educator labor market to ensure students have a reliable, effective, and diverse educator workforce. Addressing these challenges with student-centered solutions that make the most of finite education resources will require looking at the following key areas that guided this research project:



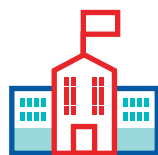
**Attracting
new talent**



**Leading for
retention**



**Maximizing
current talent**



**Education industry
in context**

Tennessee's Educator Labor Market Challenges Likely Worsened In Recent Years But Are Not Unique To Tennessee

Tennessee has a decades-long history of addressing educator talent issues grounded in the evidence that teacher effectiveness is central to student achievement. In recent years, the state has invested in or committed to:

1. **Educator effectiveness:** For more than a decade, Tennessee students have benefited from a multiple-measure evaluation system that has contributed to improved teaching and learning by providing annual feedback to educators.² In addition, the state has a robust infrastructure of policies to implement differentiated compensation so that districts can expand the impact of our most effective educators and pay them for that additional responsibility.
2. **High-quality instructional materials to ground academic strategy:** There is widespread support and adoption of high-quality instructional materials in the state's school districts to ensure students have access to great learning materials and district academic strategies have a strong foundation to build from.³
3. **Flexible student-based funding formula with more funding:** In addition to investing \$1 billion more in the public education system, the new funding formula centers on student needs and preserves longstanding spending flexibilities for districts to meet those needs. In parallel, the state aims to raise the starting teacher salary to \$50,000 by 2026.

- 4. Innovative pipeline models:** Drawing from models within Tennessee, the state invested in registered apprenticeships and Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives to advance innovation within the teacher pipeline. This is in addition to more than a decade of support for alternative certification programs and recent support for educators pursuing additional endorsements in high-needs areas.

While these are important contextual factors that advance great teaching and learning, **there is growing evidence that students have unreliable access to an effective educator workforce.**

- **Teacher vacancies suggest staffing challenges in many — but not all — school districts:** Many school districts are reporting staffing challenges. Based on data from the Tennessee Department of Education from fall 2022, there were over 1,000 vacant positions across the state (defined as unfilled teaching positions that result in the lack of course availability) in an educator workforce of around 60,000 teachers. Vacancies were concentrated in middle grades, English as a second language (ESL), world languages, and special education. Alarming, one-third of these vacancies were in the K-5 grade band, and elementary area endorsements were a major driver of permit increases in 2022-23 — an area that traditionally has a greater supply of licensed teachers. These trends were also reported by many Tennessee public charter schools. However, these vacancy data also revealed that nearly one-third of Tennessee school districts had zero vacancies in 2022-23 at the time data was collected.⁴ Additionally, research focused on Tennessee’s educator labor market before the pandemic noted that teacher shortages and surpluses coexisted as recently as Fall 2019.⁵
- **Permits help fill vacancy gaps, but impact on the overall pipeline is unclear:** Permits are emergency credentials used when districts cannot find a licensed educator to fill a position. Recent policy changes have allowed districts more flexibility in awarding permits while attempting to hold firm on foundational

quality expectations. These flexibilities have contributed to the number of initial permits issued more than tripling between the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.⁶ While permit holders have expressed an interest in teaching, barriers to permit holders obtaining full licensure — such as sufficient on-the-job support — remain. Less than half of permits awarded during the 2018-19 school year were converted to licensure within the three-year time frame that permits are active, and less than one-fifth of permits issued in the 2021-22 school year were converted to full licensure after one year.⁷

- **District leaders elevate the impact of staffing challenges on day-to-day school operations, district budgets:** In SCORE’s conversations with district leaders throughout 2023, district leaders often cited staffing challenges as a key barrier to providing effective daily instruction and learning acceleration through initiatives like high-dosage tutoring. When asked what their top budget priorities were for the 2023-24 budget year, an overwhelming majority elevated investments in educator salary to address these challenges, ranging from salary increases of 3 percent to more than 9 percent for the current school year. While increasing educator pay remains a statewide priority, district leaders will need to draw on a more diverse set of recruitment and retention strategies to remain competitive in the tight educator labor market.

Tennessee’s teacher staffing challenges are not an outlier: Using the best methods available, researchers seeking to quantify the teacher shortage estimate the nation’s teacher shortage at about 55,000.⁸ Tennessee’s shortage is about average compared to the rest of the country, which suggests our state’s challenges are not unique even if they are acutely impacting some of the state’s communities more than others. A slate of recent research on leading indicators of interest in the teaching profession suggests that even within high-quality and effective teacher pipeline initiatives, there is more work to do to attract individuals to the profession. Evidence from across the country suggests⁹:

- **Fewer licenses issued:** Between 2006 and 2020, the number of teacher licenses issued in the US dropped by roughly one-third.
- **Education degrees on the decline:** While roughly one-quarter of college graduates completed an education degree in the 1970s, this rate halved by 1987 with only 8 percent of BA and MA completers being education majors in 2019. Relatedly, in Tennessee the number of candidates completing educator preparation programs has fallen nearly 40 percent over the last decade.¹⁰
- **Public perceptions on the decline:** Over the last 13 years, surveys have revealed the number of parents wanting their child to become a teacher has fallen by 50 percent.

Tennessee has made significant investments in teacher pipeline initiatives in recent years. Relative to many other states, Tennessee has a robust ecosystem of:

- Alternative certification pathways, such as registered apprenticeships, district-based educator preparation programs, and Grow Your Own programs, as well as early pipeline initiatives such as the Teaching as a Profession program for high school students
- Scholarship programs, such as the Future Teacher Scholarship, an occupational teacher scholarship, and the Minority Teaching Fellows Program
- Licensure flexibilities and endorsement opportunities, such as temporary permits for academic, occupational teachers and teacher candidates, endorsement exemptions, a limited license pathway, and free opportunities to get additional endorsements in special education and English as a second language

While work remains to assess the quality and output of each of these pipelines, it is clear from these investments that Tennessee has placed a priority on strengthening the teacher pipeline, and there are numerous opportunities to benefit from extensive

policy flexibilities, financial support, and innovative models of preparation for both prospective educators and the districts that seek to hire them.

Educator Labor Market Data Insights From 15 Tennessee Districts

With growing concerns about the educator pipeline and its impact on student learning, Tennessee has an urgent need to better understand how the state is attracting, developing, retaining, and maximizing its educator workforce. To ground this conversation in strategic data insights, SCORE partnered with 15 school districts — representing just under 40 percent of all Tennessee students and staff with variation in student population size, demographics, and geographical types — and the Tennessee Education Research Alliance to understand the broader trends behind these challenges. The analysis was conducted with four focus areas aligned to potential actions district leaders could take:

- **Attracting new talent:** At the beginning of the teacher pipeline, districts need to attract new talent who earn teaching licenses through traditional and alternative certification programs and have endorsements in the subject areas that districts need. The availability of this talent pool is impacted both by the ease of entry into the profession and the desire of individuals to pursue teaching as part of their career.
- **Leading for retention:** Although some attrition is part of any profession, healthy teacher pipelines retain talent year to year. Improving retention is an important part of any strategy to strengthen teacher pipelines, particularly given the costs of replacing lost teachers and training new teachers in a given district.
- **Maximizing current talent:** With retention of effective teachers more important than ever, there are opportunities to leverage strategic approaches and models to extend the impact of our most effective teachers while providing more instructional and leadership capacity to our schools.

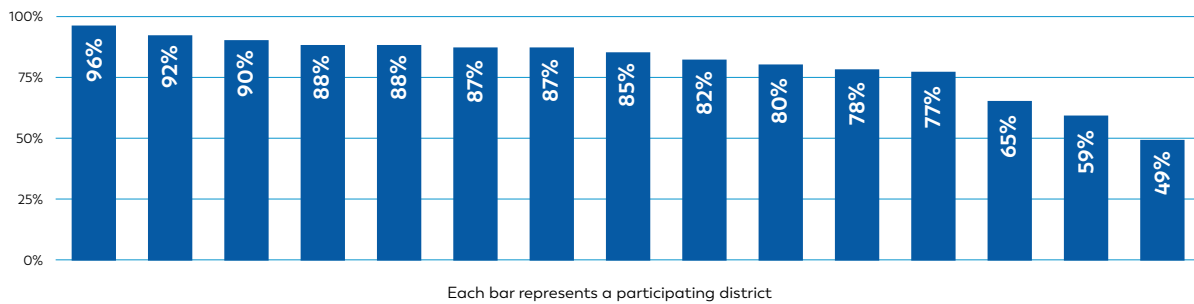
- Education industry in context:** Prior research has demonstrated that educator labor market issues are intricately tied to broader workforce, economic, and demographic trends at both the state and local levels.¹¹ By placing educator labor market data in context, we can better understand the magnitude and relative severity of issues like educator diversity and compensation.

Each district received their individualized district data as well as comparison group information to provide them with actionable and localized insights to inform their planning and strategies. The [full TERA analysis](#) is now available, and key findings from the data are shared here.

Finding #1: Educator labor markets are highly local

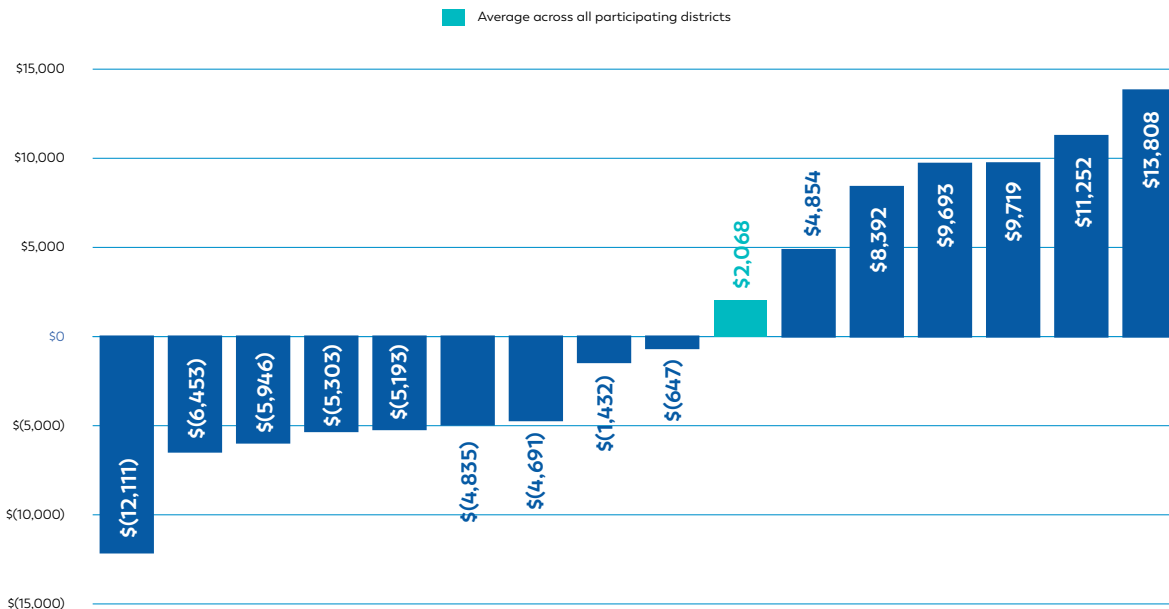
Most districts hire more than 75 percent of their teachers from three or fewer educator preparation programs.

Share of all recent EPP graduates in each district from three or fewer EPPs



Average staff salaries vary in competitiveness across different communities.

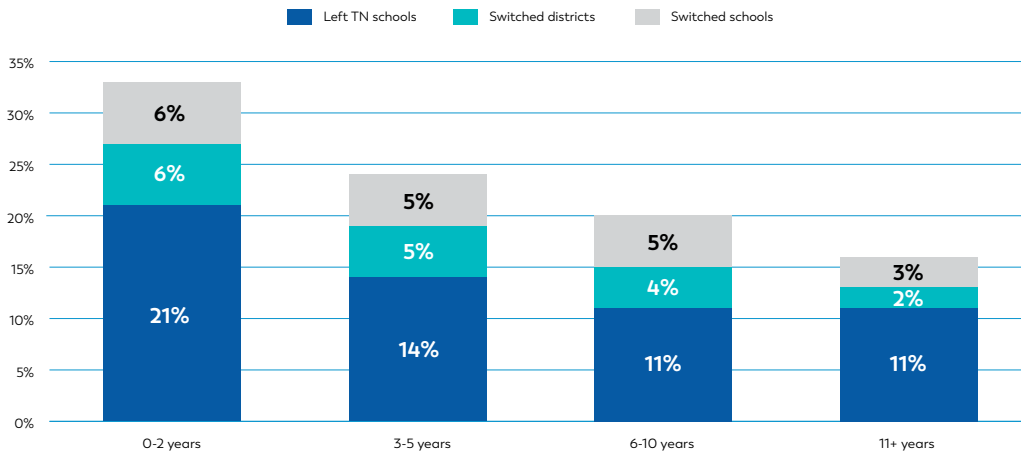
Difference between average staff salary in each district and family median income in each county, 2022



Finding #2: Participating districts continue to lose one in five early-career teachers, with many citing need for additional support

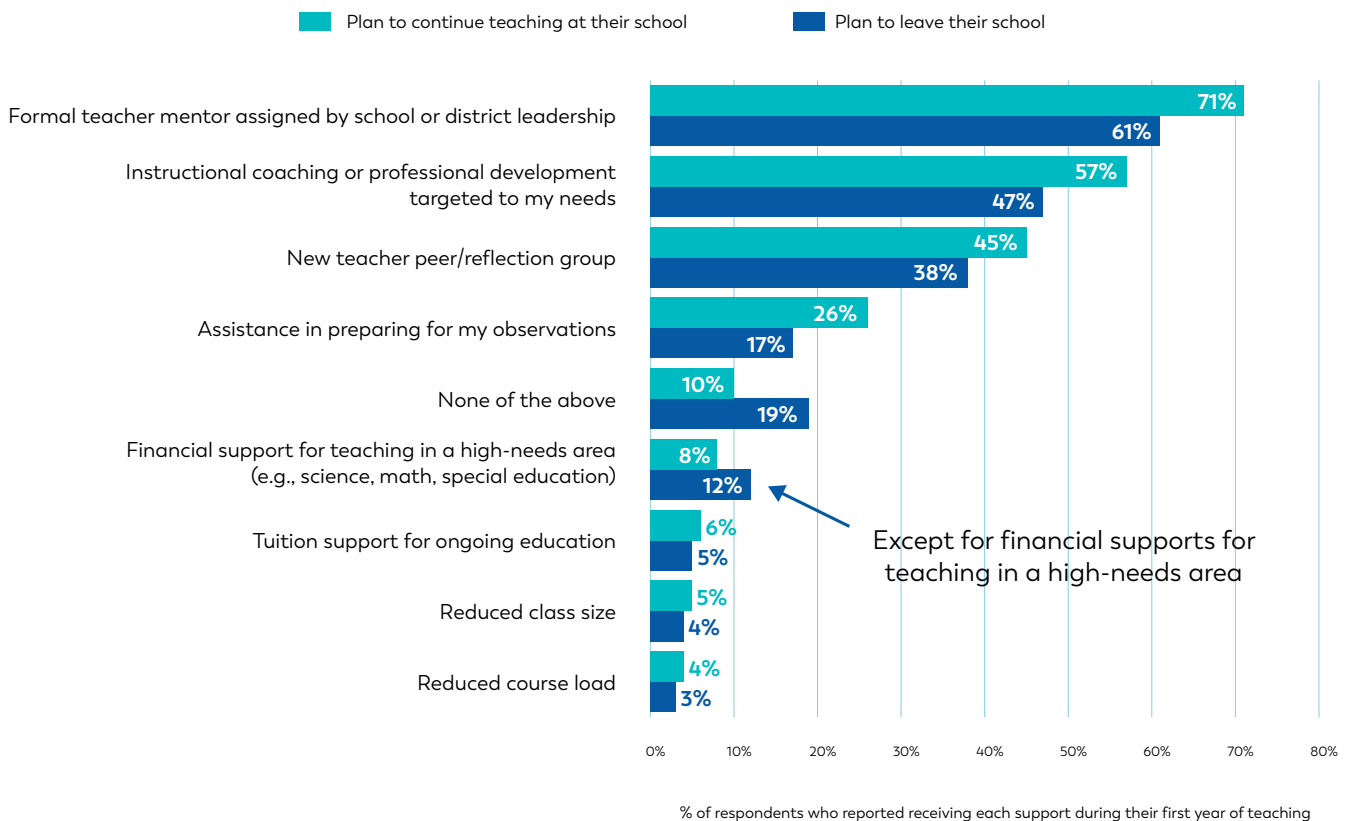
Teacher turnover is highest among novice teachers.

Teacher turnover by experience level, 2016-17 to 2022-23



First-year teachers who planned to stay at their schools received more support.

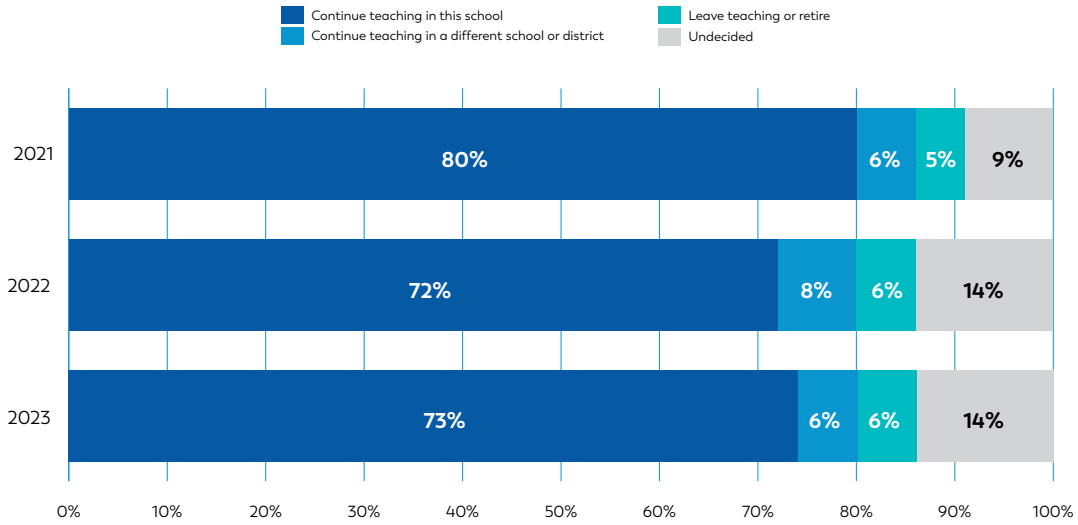
Supports received by first-year teachers who...



Finding #3: Educators continue to express indecision about the profession, even as turnover rates recover slightly from pandemic

Teachers are increasingly undecided about their plans for next year.

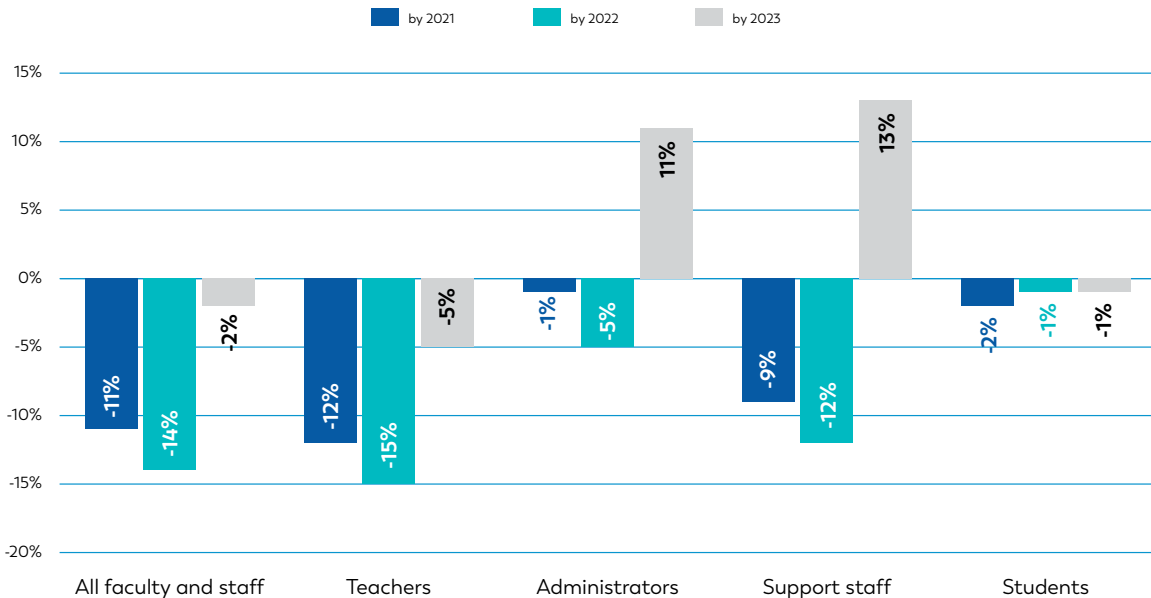
Teachers' plans for the next school year over time



Finding #4: Growth in administrators, support staff positions likely fueled by ESSER funding to recover student learning

Administrator and support staff categories have grown fastest in recent years. With ESSER's conclusion, districts will need to sustainably reorganize educator staffing.

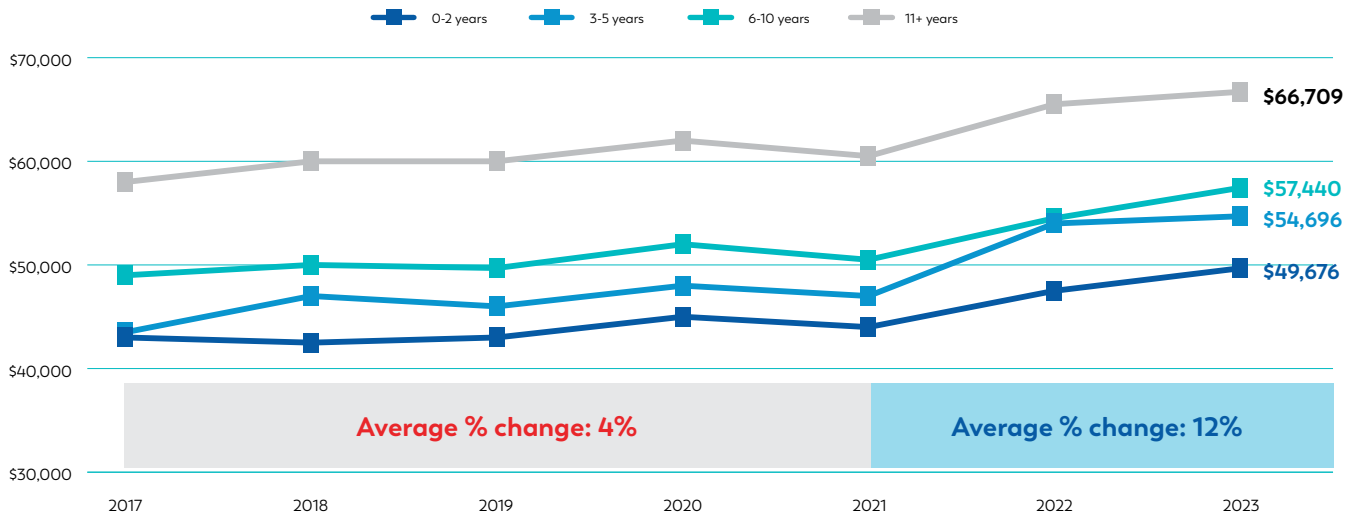
Percent change in staff and students since 2020



Finding #5: Even as the state and districts invest in educator compensation, salary is not the primary reason teachers leave

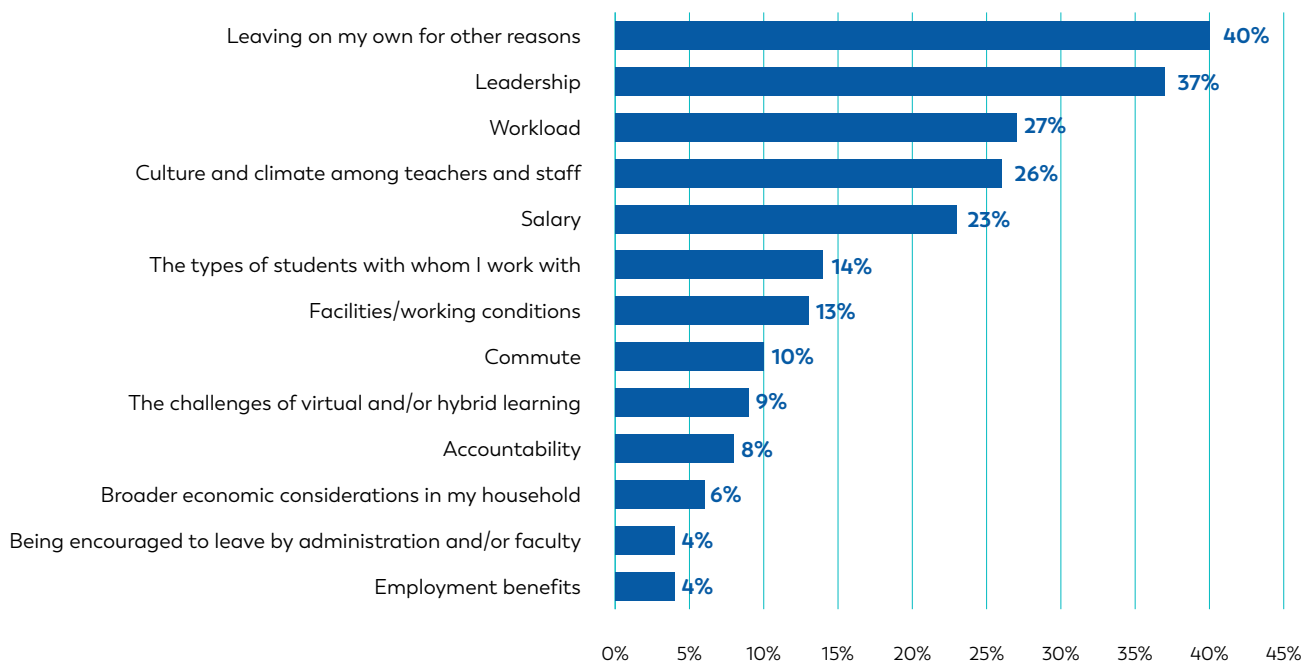
Salaries increased three times more quickly from 2021-2023 than from 2017-2020.

Average teacher salary by experience level over time



Salary is not the most influential factor in why teachers do not return, with leadership, working conditions, and culture among the top reasons.

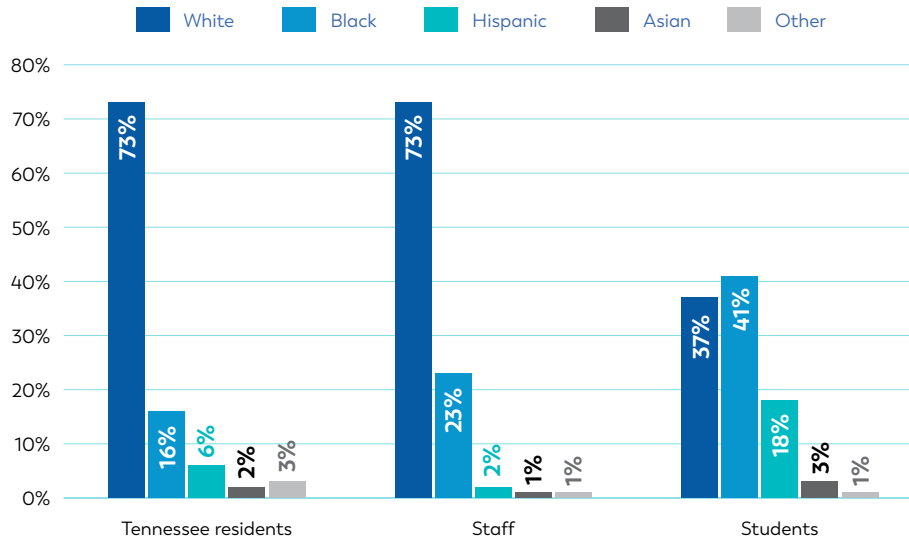
Which of the following most influenced your plans to not teach in your school next year?



Finding #6: There remains substantial work to ensure our educator population better matches our student population

Educator staff demographics mirror Tennessee's population, but not the student population.

Residential, staff and student racial/ethnic demographics, 2022



What Can Be Done To Address These Challenges

As district leaders continue to address the day-to-day impacts of educator staffing challenges, these data demonstrate a greater need than ever to assess strategic challenges and solutions to ensure that students have reliable access to an effective educator workforce. Building upon recent data around teacher vacancies that paint a nuanced picture of the teacher shortage context, district leaders will need solutions that are more local, data driven, and precise — work that will take great effort to redesign existing practice and is a long-term strategy for improvement.

Appendix A outlines some immediate and longer-term strategies district leaders can pursue to address educator labor market challenges and were provided to participating districts in the educator labor market project with TERA.

As a state, there is a broader body of work that must be accomplished so that students have a reliable, effective, and diverse educator workforce. In the immediate term:

- 1. We need better data:** Educator labor markets are highly localized, making it critical for districts to have the data they need to make strategic human capital decisions. All Tennessee school districts should have access to educator labor market reports focused on pipeline, retention, effectiveness, compensation, and other relevant measures — preferably with district comparison group data — to allow strategic decision making. The state has a critical role to play in providing this support so that there is a common language and data-driven understanding of both the state and localized educator labor market challenges. This is especially true for the state's smaller and predominantly rural districts that may not have the central office capacity to produce these analyses.
- 2. We need to focus on supporting novice teachers:** Given the prevailing headwinds on interest and quantity of entrants into the teaching profession, addressing vacancies will require a focus on retention and reducing

teacher turnover, particularly for novice teachers. While Tennessee has a robust suite of policy flexibilities and program investments that can make it easier for prospective educators to enter the profession, it is ultimately up to school districts to design systems to support early-career teachers' success and to ensure our most effective educators are retained. Districts may consider creating robust advanced teacher roles that expand the impact of their most effective teachers and stand up systems of robust support for novice teachers — a core design behind models like Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools' Grow Your Own initiative that look beyond the licensure and certification work.¹²

- 3. We should revisit compensation and staffing approaches:** Tennessee has made needed progress on improving teacher salaries in recent years. However, districts must go beyond across-the-board salary increases to address educator labor market challenges and create lasting change for students. District leaders have invested significantly in across-the-board educator salary raises, in part to try and keep educator pay competitive and also in response to legislative requirements to raise beginning teacher salaries to \$50,000 by 2026. These are worthy efforts drawing on substantial financial resources that became available in recent years. However, across-the-board raises alone will not address the fundamental challenges to the teaching profession or make a substantial improvement in student achievement. There is a considerable body of research outlining how differentiated compensation can increase student achievement and teacher retention.¹³ This is an area where school districts have many flexibilities to innovate, but few districts invest substantial resources in differentiated compensation that could change the value proposition — the combination of responsibilities, professional growth, compensation and rewards, and mission — of serving as an effective educator or go beyond sporadic recognition of a range of

extra duties. With a more normal resource environment expected in future years, salary investments will need to be stretched and more targeted to make a real difference for students and teachers.

Tennessee Districts' Moment To Lead On Educator Labor Market Solutions In Practice

District leaders and policymakers are urgently seeking solutions to Tennessee's educator staffing challenges. However, more fundamental changes to how we staff schools and design the teaching role are key to Tennessee's next generation of educator workforce innovation. Future papers in this series will look to elevate innovative practice opportunities and to analyze the state's current educator labor market challenges. Topics will include:

1. Diving deeper into rural perspectives on the educator labor market challenges.
2. Outlining how innovative staffing models can be a strategic lever for addressing a wide range of pressing education challenges — including growing and sustaining pre- and early-career teacher pipelines, increasing educator retention, expanding the impact of our most effective educators, and responding dynamically to changing funding environments and emerging innovations in the field (like high-dosage tutoring or new high school models).
3. Exploring strategic staffing structures from within Tennessee and across the country that can support a reliable, effective, and diverse educator workforce for students.

Tennessee has been a pioneer in educator labor market innovation for decades. With the ongoing and longstanding staffing challenges, it is time for Tennessee leaders to boldly design and implement the holistic staffing solutions that best serve students for years to come.

APPENDIX A

District Leader Actions To Address Educator Labor Market Challenges

ATTRACT NEW TALENT

There are programs and policies designed to address challenges school districts face in attracting new talent. Some of these levers to address the teacher pipeline include:

- **The Tennessee Future Teacher Scholarship** is a last-dollar scholarship for future educators enrolled in a Tennessee educator preparation provider (EPP) who commit to teaching for four years in a subject area with a critical shortage or in a Tennessee public school that is in an at-risk or distressed county.
- **District-led EPPs**, such as Rutherford Teach Now, allow districts to recruit new teachers while providing them with mentorship, coaching, and a pathway to a teaching certification.
- **Grow Your Own (GYO) and teacher residencies** are additional pathways that recruit new teachers to the profession while supporting them to and through the requisite steps of licensure. Multiple GYO and residency programs exist across the state.
- **Occupational teaching licenses** are available to industry professionals seeking to enter the classroom. Requirements include having current industry-recognized credentials, at least three years of work experience in the endorsement area, and enrollment in an EPP that is recognized by the State Board of Education.

For district leaders seeking immediate action steps, consider:

- **Developing an employee value proposition that articulates what makes your district unique as an employer.** Use focus groups to understand teachers' lived experiences,

document the value proposition, then revise based on feedback from a range of teachers and staff and include the information in job descriptions or on the district website.

- **Creating an onboarding plan for new hires.** Ensure expectations and support structures are clearly communicated, build in check points to connect with new hires, and include support structures for new hires (welcome packet, welcome event, and mentors for new staff).
- **Implementing a staff referral system.** Offer incentives for staff members who refer candidates to the school district.

LEAD FOR RETENTION

There are programs and policies designed to address challenges school districts face in leading for retention. Some of these levers to address the teacher pipeline include:

- **Targeted mentorship and coaching** from principals and teacher leaders to teachers at every level of effectiveness (LOE) can improve retention and instructional practices.
- **Assigning smaller class rosters to novice teachers** can create more manageable workloads and allow more space for targeted coaching.
- **Regularly soliciting teachers' perspectives and opinions** allows school leaders to understand the most pressing needs and desires of their staff. With this information, school leaders can create environments that support and value educators, leading to increased retention.

For district leaders seeking immediate action steps, consider:

- **Developing systems to collect and track key data.** Conduct exit surveys. Track key data around hiring, promotion, turnover, and

teacher leadership, and ensure data can be analyzed by gender, age, race, and years of experience.

- **Implementing consistent structures to elicit staff feedback.** Conduct formal and informal surveys, one-on-one check-ins, and focus groups.
- **Planning and executing “stay” conversations.** Ensure that leaders have early and direct conversations with staff that they hope to keep next year with a goal of sharing those intentions. These conversations occur prior to winter break.

MAXIMIZE CURRENT TALENT

There are programs and policies designed to address challenges school districts face in maximizing staffing. Some levers to address the teacher pipeline include:

- **Strategic staffing models**, such as Opportunity Culture, expand the reach of the strongest educators and create opportunities for increased responsibilities and compensation. This is achieved by elevating the most effective teachers to a coaching and mentorship role — a multiclassroom leader (MCL) — that allows strong teachers to continue to teach. On average, MCLs are paid a stipend of 21 percent of their regular pay on top of their regular salaries. Innovative staffing models create a career ladder for teachers to progress to higher levels of responsibility and pay without leaving the classroom.
- **Teacher residencies** are programs that support teacher candidates at the beginning of their career by providing mentorship and support through teaching certification. Residencies often hire newly certified teachers in their residency schools, creating a smoother on-ramp for new teachers.

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