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Voices from the Classroom: Developing a Strategy for Teacher Retention and Recruitment

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Voices from the Classroom: Developing a Strategy for Teacher Retention and Recruitment

Key Findings from a survey of TK-12 teachers in California and in-depth interviews with aspiring and former teachers in California

September 15, 2022

This research was conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of the California Teachers Association and UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is an imperative in California to address the massive teacher shortage and to improve both teacher retention and recruitment. To inform potential policy changes that will help accomplish these goals, Hart Research completed a quantitative survey of current teachers and qualitative, in-depth interviews with former teachers and aspiring teachers who have taught or plan to teach in California.

Key Takeaways

- Teachers' primary motivations for entering the profession and staying in it are to help students and to make a positive difference in our world.
- While many current California teachers find their work rewarding and fulfilling, they most commonly and acutely feel exhausted and stressed. Majorities of current teachers also express low levels of satisfaction with key aspects of their job.
- Teacher retention will be a challenge in the near term. Four in ten current teachers have explored leaving the classroom either to continue within education or to switch occupations entirely. One in five current teachers say they will likely leave the profession in the next three years. Current teachers aged 55 and older are the most inclined to leave teaching within three years but more than one-third of younger teachers have a similar outlook.
- Burnout from stress is the top reason current teachers say they are considering leaving, with political attacks on teachers the next highest-ranking factor. Workload, low pay, student apathy and behavioral issues, and the lack of support from district administrators contribute to the stress felt by teachers. Former teachers underscore that teachers' compensation is too low to afford the high cost of living in California—a state with one of the highest levels of income inequality in the country.
- Many current teachers of color, especially Black teachers, say they have experienced discrimination and do not feel comfortable expressing themselves. LGBTQ+ teachers have also experienced discrimination at high rates. Aspiring and former teachers of color share that feeling comfortable and a part of their school community was directly tied to whether their students and their families, peers, and leadership had similar racial/ethnic backgrounds to their own.
- There are a variety of changes that current and former teachers believe would address burnout and improve teacher retention. Current and former teachers' top priority for state and local officials is better pay. Second-tier priorities are all things that could reduce the stress that current teachers are feeling in their jobs, including smaller class sizes, stronger discipline policies for students who behave disruptively, better staffing and a more manageable workload, and more support services for students.
- Classroom and relationship management are major concerns among aspiring, current, and former teachers. Former teachers feel there should be more

professional opportunities for teachers (especially those who are newer to the field) to learn relationship-based skillsets to manage interactions with students, other teachers, administrators, and parents.

- Finally, aspiring teachers provide several insights on teacher preparation programs. First, real-time teaching experiences are of central importance to prepare future teachers. Second, the workload is a major stressor, including the required state teacher assessments. Third, the financial costs influenced their decision to enter, and their ability to finish, the teacher preparation program.
    - Compensating student teachers was suggested by a significant number of the aspiring teachers and is viewed as a very important policy change that will help alleviate financial stress at an important time in the teacher preparation process.
    - Aspiring teachers of color report that they had become less motivated to teach as a result of their preparation program at higher rates than their white teacher counterparts, due to heightened financial stress, low or no pay for student teaching, and the required teacher candidate assessments, which some express are racially biased.

FULL REPORT

OVERVIEW

Hart Research Associates conducted research to understand the factors that positively and negatively impact teacher retention and recruitment in California. To examine this pressing issue, we completed in-depth quantitative research with current teachers and qualitative research with both former teachers who recently left the teaching profession and aspiring teachers who are enrolled in teacher preparation programs. This research identifies several important findings that can be integrated into policies to address the massive teacher shortage in California.

METHODOLOGY

Survey of current teachers. We completed online interviews in the summer of 2022, with a representative cross section of 4,632 CTA members who currently work as TK-12th grade teachers in California. We capped the age of survey respondents at 62 years to exclude teachers who are considering leaving their jobs to retire from the workforce.

We oversampled Black, Hispanic, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), and American Indian and Native Alaskan (AI/AN) teachers. This was done to achieve a sufficient sample size for each racial and ethnic group to allow us to meaningfully examine the experiences of teachers of color in California. See Appendix for detailed profile of survey respondents.

We weighted the survey data to reflect the full universe of CTA members who teach TK-12th grade and are under age 63. Specifically, the racial and ethnic oversamples were weighted to their proper proportions, and weights were applied to create a demographically representative sample by geographic region, gender, age, and political party identification. This online survey of 4,632 teachers has a credibility interval (which is similar to a margin of error) of +/-1.5%.

Interviews with former teachers. We conducted in-depth interviews with 26 former California teachers who left the classroom recently. In the interviews, the former teacher respondents shared the experiences and factors that led them to leave teaching, as well as the changes, improvements, and policies that might have kept them in the classroom longer. We recruited a diverse representation of former teachers, both by age and by race and ethnicity. See Appendix for detailed profile of former teacher respondents.

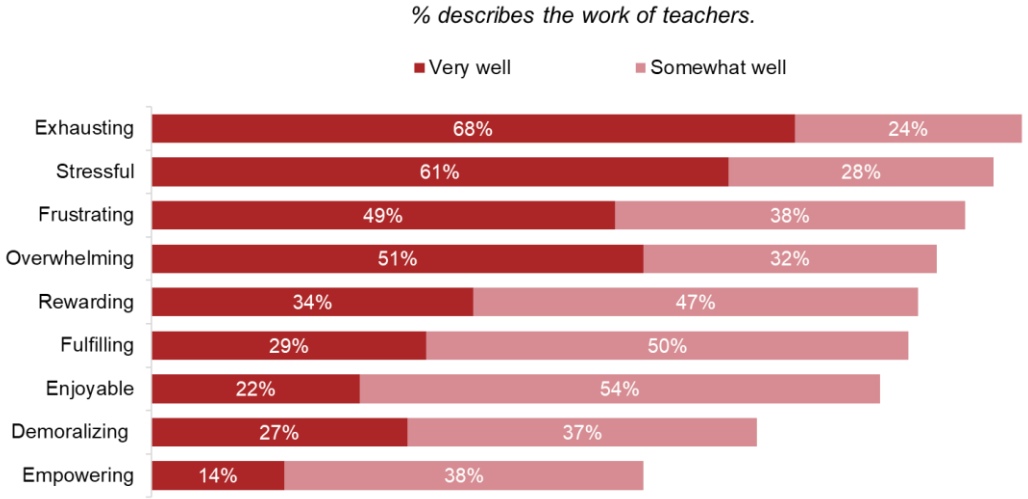
Interviews with aspiring teachers. We conducted in-depth interviews with 25 aspiring teachers enrolled in or recently graduated from California teacher preparation programs. The interviews' goal was to understand aspiring teachers' motivations to enter teaching and to identify the key influences (and influencers) in their lives that led them to consider teaching as a profession. We also heard from aspiring teacher respondents about the most important barriers they have faced in becoming teachers and the sources of any reluctance they might have to begin teaching as their vocation. We recruited a diverse representation of aspiring teachers by race and ethnicity, and by career point entry, including early- and mid-career respondents. See Appendix for detailed profile of aspiring teacher respondents.

JOB SATISFACTION AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Aspiring, current, and former teachers were all motivated to enter the profession for altruistic reasons. The primary motivations for current teachers for entering and staying in teaching are to help students and to make a positive difference in our world. Senior teachers who have been teaching for five years or more also identify job security (33%), a work schedule that includes summers off (32%), and health and retirement benefits (30%) as solid second-tier motivations.

The qualitative interviews with former teachers and aspiring teachers reinforced this finding. Former teachers express that a motivation to contribute to students' growth and transformation and to observe students' development in real time led them to enter and stay longer in the profession. Aspiring teachers were also driven by wide-ranging altruistic factors, including a love for children and teaching, a desire to participate in the growth and development of children, and a want to serve as an advocate for minority and special needs students.

Current California teachers are more likely to use negative than positive ways to describe the work of teachers. When provided with a variety of ways to describe their work, current teachers are most likely to say it is exhausting (68% describes *very well*) and stressful (61%). A smaller minority think that their position is rewarding (34% describes *very well*) and fulfilling (29%)—though large majorities do say that these positive adjectives describe their position at least somewhat well.

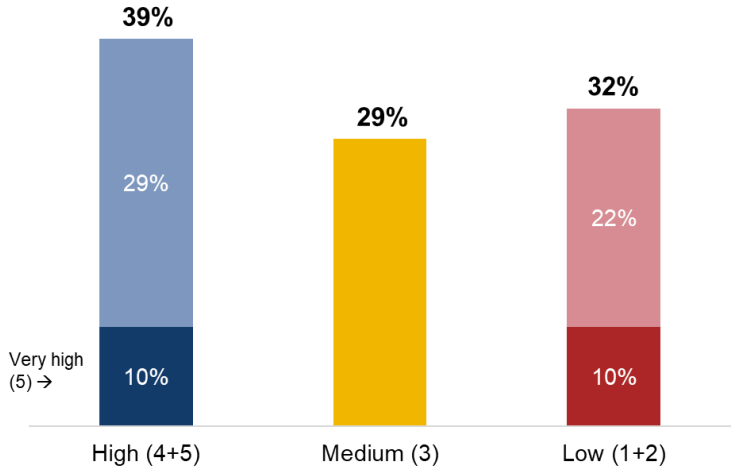


The outlook for the profession has also become more negative since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, similar levels of current teachers were likely to think conditions in the teaching field were either not changing much either way (40%) or changing for the worse (45%). However, post-pandemic, current teachers are significantly more negative in their outlook, with 77% saying things have changed for the worse, while 8% think things have changed for the better, and 15% think things have not changed much either way.

Further, current teachers in California also express low levels of satisfaction with key aspects of their job. Two in five teachers express a high level of satisfaction with their current position (rating of 4 or 5), while 29% are moderately satisfied (rating of 3), and 32% express a low level of satisfaction (rating of 1 or 2). Older (46%) and high

school (45%) teachers are more highly satisfied than are younger (34%) and elementary school (34%) teachers, respectively.

Satisfaction with teacher position % (on a 1-5 scale)

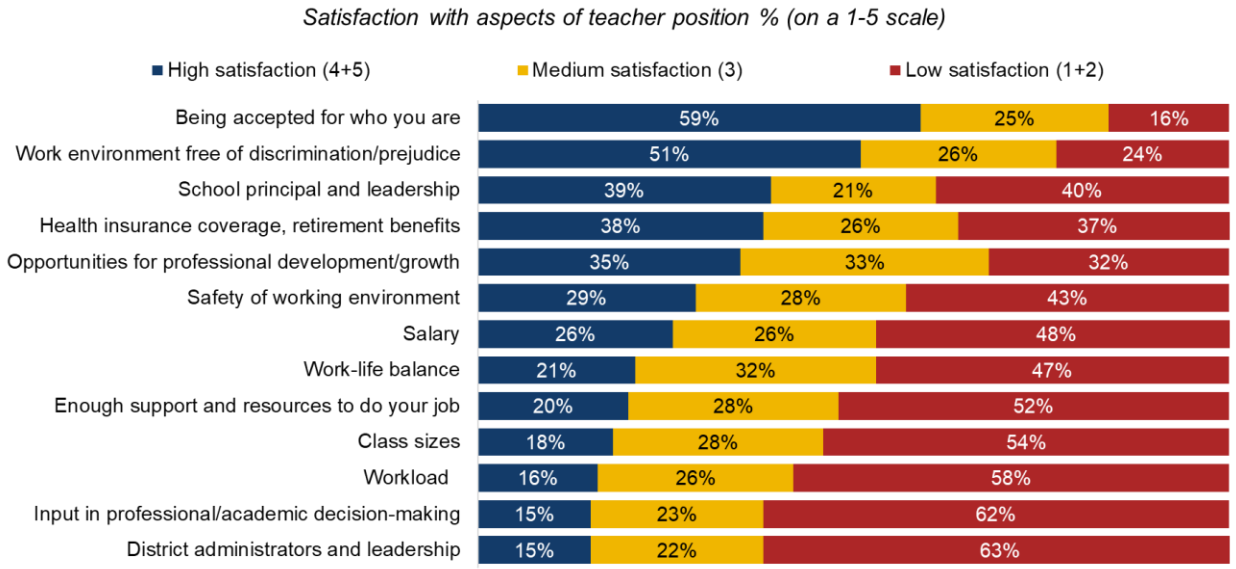


Students are central to the level of job satisfaction—both positive and negative—that current teachers experience in their position. In an open-ended question asking them what they like most about their current position, current teachers indicate that the highlight of their job is connecting with their students (42%) and helping their students grow and develop (43%). In interviews, former teachers underscored that the greatest satisfaction for practicing teachers was in developing meaningful connections with their students. As one former teacher expressed:

> *"I found connecting with students on a personal level and helping them realize their goals very fulfilling. Many students feel unseen or uncared for, so I tried to make my teaching based on caring for each one (as time allowed), with the philosophy that students will care and invest more in their education if their teachers cared and invested in them."* – ***Male, 30, Race Unknown, TK-8th***

Another aspect of teaching that practicing teachers like the most about their current position is having supportive colleagues (21%). The importance of peer networks was echoed again by former teachers who relied on their colleagues to learn teaching tips, as confidants and to share their struggles, and to debrief when issues arose with someone who was not in an evaluative position. This resource is especially important because most current teachers do not frequently receive meaningful recognition for doing good work, but close to 80% are able to reach out to colleagues for support all or most of the time.

The areas of their jobs in which current teachers express the highest levels of satisfaction are in being accepted for who they are (59% *very/extremely satisfied*) and having a work environment free of discrimination (51%); but that leaves solid proportions who are less satisfied in each of these areas, and there are other indicators in the survey and interviews of barriers to teachers feeling a sense of belonging.



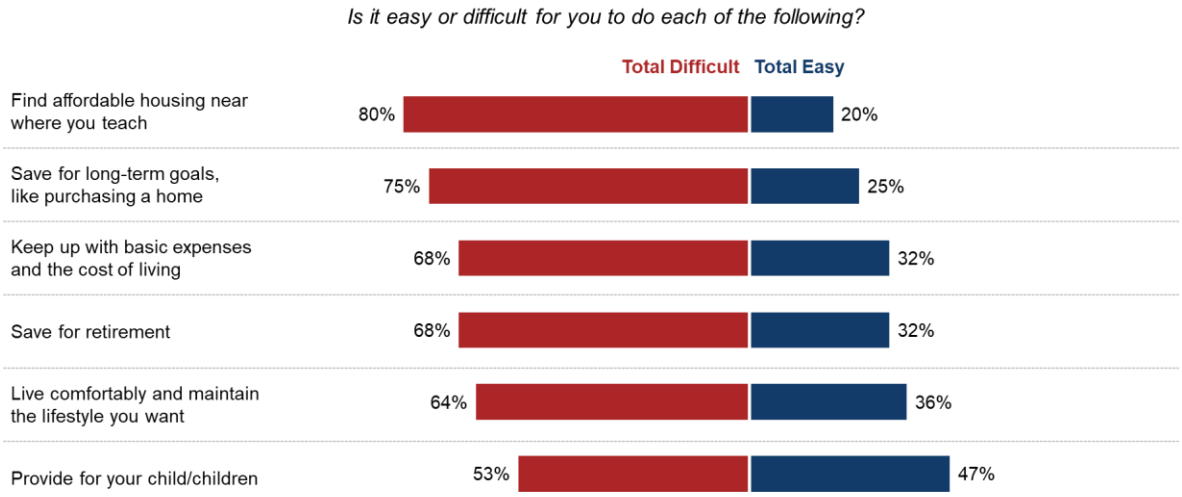
On the other side of the coin, when asked in an open-ended question what they like least about their position, current teachers most often mention aspects related to student apathy, discipline, and behavioral problems (32%). The qualitative interviews further highlighted how problematic student behavioral issues are for teachers; and it is a heightened by inadequate training in classroom management and inadequate support from administrators and parents. Both aspiring and former teachers discussed in detail how real a challenge it is for teachers in California. An aspiring teacher described how good classroom management is necessary to teach effectively:

> *"The most challenging aspects of being a teacher right now I'm seeing is a lot of teachers struggle with the behavior management portion of the classroom. Because you can't teach if you don't have control of your classroom and your kids aren't engaged, and I think the pandemic has had a lot to do with that."*
>
> – ***Female, 26, White, TK-8th***

In addition, practicing teachers express low levels of satisfaction with the district administrators and leadership, the amount of input they have in professional and academic decision-making, their workload, class sizes, and having enough support and resources to do their job (in each of these areas, 20% or less are *highly satisfied*). Fewer than one in four teachers express high levels of satisfaction in each of these areas.

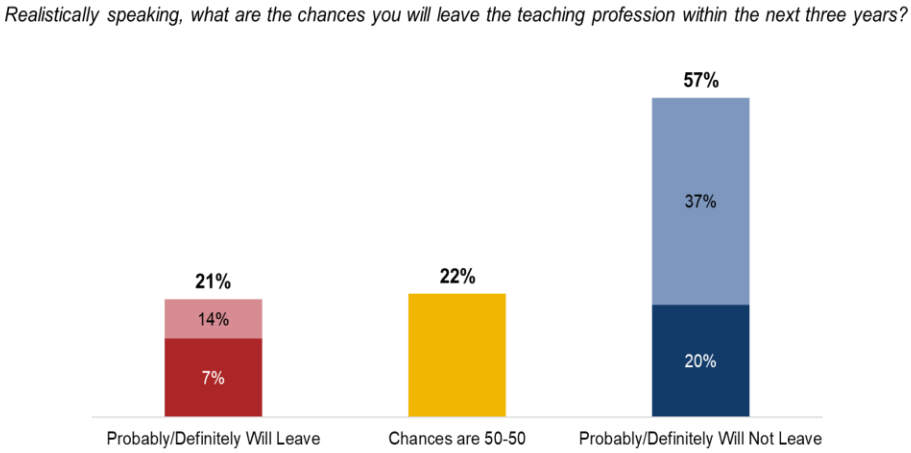
California teachers are also experiencing financial stress. Large majorities say it is difficult to find affordable housing near where they teach (80% difficult), to save for long-term goals (75%), to keep up with basic expenses (68%), to save for retirement (68%), and to live comfortably and maintain the lifestyle they want (64%). The interviews with former teachers revealed that all of the areas of dissatisfaction identified by current teachers cumulatively contributed to their eventual departure. However, higher pay could have changed their tolerance for dealing with them, as one former teacher shared:

> *"[To improve teacher retention, we need] a significant raise of at least 25%. The work is hell, but there is a financial tipping point that helps deal with the organizational trauma."* – ***Female, 49, Hispanic, TK-5th***



Teacher Retention

The survey of current California teachers shines a bright light on the teacher retention crisis in California. Half of practicing teachers have considered leaving the classroom, and one in five say they will likely leave the profession in the next three years, including 14% who say they will definitely leave. Another 22% say there is a 50-50 chance they will leave. Teachers aged 55 and over are the most inclined to leave teaching within three years (43% *definitely or probably will leave*), but three in ten younger teachers (34% *definitely or probably will leave*) have a similar outlook. Black teachers (25%) and AI/AN teachers (24%) are slightly more likely than white teachers (19%) and Hispanic teachers (21%) to indicate they will leave the profession.

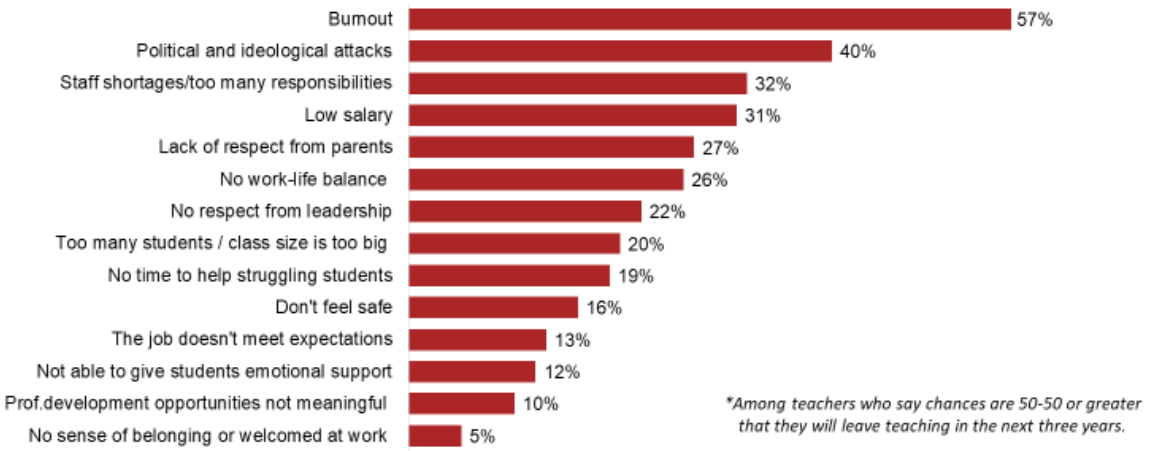


Burnout from stress (57%) is the top reason current teachers say they are considering leaving, with political attacks on teachers (40%) the next highest-ranking factor. Workload, staff shortages, low salary, lack of respect from parents, and no work-life balance further contribute to the reasons that current teachers are considering leaving the profession (over 25% list one of these reasons). From the in-

depth interviews with former teachers, we learned that these contributing stressors were interrelated and compounded to push teachers out of the profession. One younger former teacher said:

> *"I would say it was a gradual process—it was not just one moment. Over time, I just started to think about not continuing on with teaching. It was not one moment that did it but several moments over the course of years."*
>
> – ***Female, 37, Black, TK-8th***

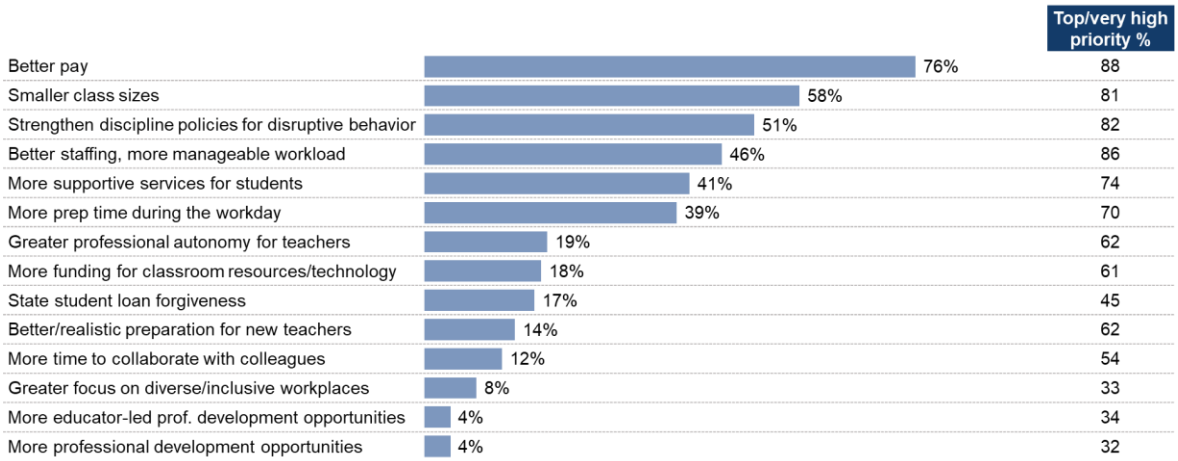
*Top three reasons why teachers are considering leaving the profession.**



PRACTICES AND POLICIES TO IMPROVE TEACHER RETENTION

There are a variety of changes that current and former teachers believe would address burnout and improve teacher retention. Current teachers' top priority for state and local officials is better pay (76%)—and it is the top priority regardless of how likely teachers are to say they will leave the profession. Second-tier priorities are all things that could reduce the stress that current teachers are feeling in their jobs, including smaller class sizes (58%), stronger discipline policies for students who behave disruptively (51%), better staffing and a more manageable workload (46%), and more support services for students (41%).

Top four changes that state and local officials should prioritize in order to improve teacher retention.



The top two priorities for current teachers who indicate they will definitely leave the profession within three years are better pay (73%) and strengthening discipline for students with disruptive behaviors (66%). While teachers who are less likely to leave equally prioritize better pay, they are 16 to 19 percentage points less likely to list strengthening discipline for students with disruptive behaviors as a top priority in order to improve teacher retention.

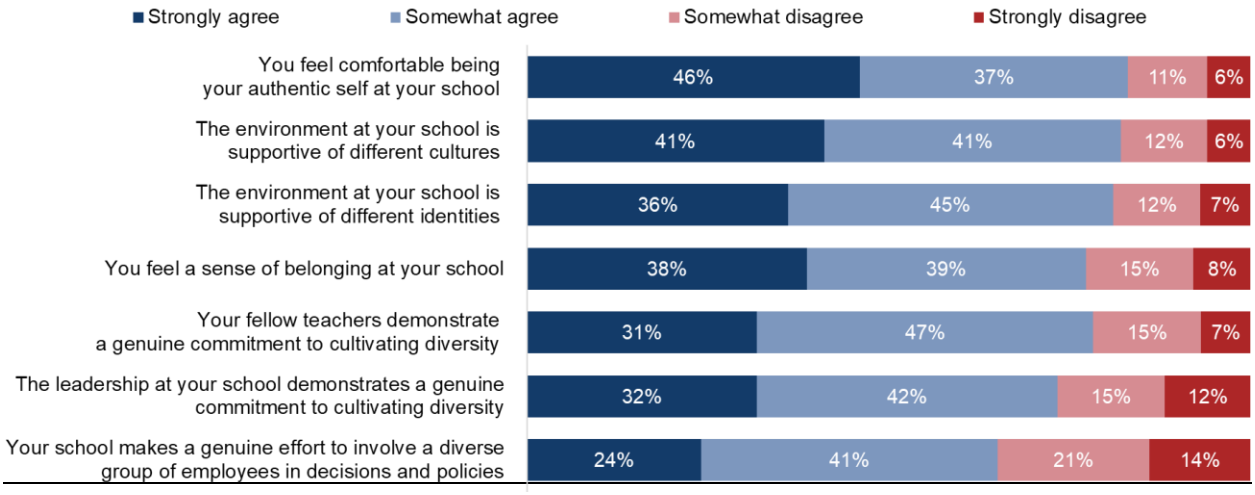
Former teachers in interviews echoed the top two priorities of current teachers who will definitely leave within three years. Compensation was an underlying and constant frustration for former teachers and a key factor in their decision to leave the classroom. They feel strongly that salaries are not commensurate with the amount of work, time, effort, and commitment required for the job. Student behavior issues were also a constant issue that former teachers dealt with during their teaching tenure; and school-mandated solutions were typically ineffective and support from administrators and leadership was minimal. To partially address this issue, former teachers suggest there should be more professional opportunities for teachers (especially those who are newer to the field) to learn relationship-based skillsets to manage interactions with students, other teachers, administrators, and parents. One former teacher outlines a model of success to reduce some of the stresses pushing California teachers to leave the profession:

> *"The school I taught at actually had pretty great retention, so I also have some changes/suggestions based on my good experiences at the school.*
>
> *Firstly, the school was very teacher-led. Almost all of the administrators were either former teachers or were still concurrently teaching. This led to a feeling of synergy between the administration and the teaching staff that made misunderstandings minimal and kept pedagogical power in the hands of the teachers that knew their classrooms best. The administrators were also entirely internal hires (as far as I know), pulled and promoted from the teaching pool, further creating a sense of unity within the school.*
>
> *Secondly, the teachers were highly encouraged to participate in activities with each other and the students in order to create a friendly and supportive culture. Teachers would learn dances from the cheerleaders to perform at pep rallies and events, clubs were highly encouraged, as well as creating your own events (another teacher and I directed a* Hamilton *showcase in our spare time), and teachers would participate in the school programs and plays, all of which made the school feel more like a welcoming community.*
>
> *Finally, the school had a management philosophy of letting the effective teachers (those with solid grades and few to no complaints) teach with a lot of freedom; the administration focused mostly on fixing problem areas, rather than trying to micromanage working classrooms.*
>
> *I feel that all of these things helped the teachers feel welcome and gave them a desire to stay on." –* ***Male, 30, Race Unknown, TK-8th***

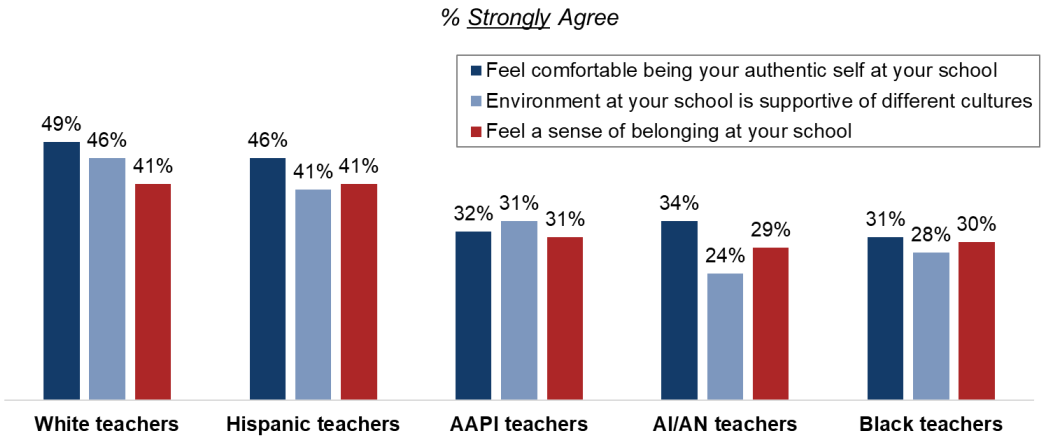
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION WITHIN THE SCHOOL WORK ENVIRONMENT

While teachers are more likely to agree than disagree that their school environment is supportive of diversity, fewer than half of teachers are firm in their belief that their schools fully embody these values, signaling a serious need to address these concerns. Less than half of teachers strongly agree that:

- The environment at their school is supportive of different cultures (41% *strongly agree*) and different identities (36%).
- Their fellow teachers demonstrate a genuine commitment to cultivating diversity (31%).
- The leadership at their school demonstrates a genuine commitment to cultivating diversity (32%).
- Their school makes a genuine effort to involve a diverse group of employees in decisions and policies (24%).

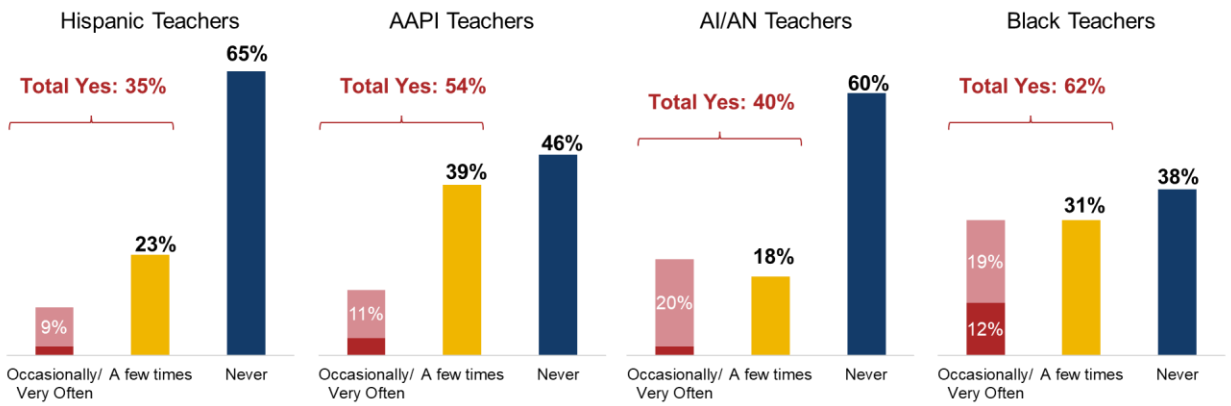


There is significant variation in the degree to which White teachers and teachers of color feel comfortable being their authentic selves and feel a sense of belonging at their school. Less than a third of Black teachers strongly agree that they feel comfortable being their authentic self at their school (31%); their school is supportive of different cultures (28%); and feel a sense of belonging at their school (30%). White teachers are more likely to strongly agree by greater than 10 percentage points in all three of these measures of their school's diversity and inclusion efforts. This trend is mirrored with AAPI and AI/AN teachers. Furthermore, a majority of Black teachers (60%) and significant minorities of AAPI (38%), AI/AN (41%) and Hispanic (18%) teachers sometimes feel uncomfortable expressing themselves due to their racial identities.



And satisfaction with having a work environment free from discrimination varies widely across different racial and ethnic groups. While more than 50% of white teachers express high satisfaction that their work environment is free of discrimination and prejudice, the percentage is **below 50%** for Hispanic (46%), AAPI (46%), Black (36%), and AI/AN (25%) teachers. Many current teachers of color, especially Black teachers, say they have experienced discrimination. Significant proportions of Black (62%), AAPI, (54%), AI/AN (40%), and Hispanic teachers (35%) indicate they have experienced racial discrimination in their current position. Additionally, fully two in five LGBTQ+ teachers say they have experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation, including 16% who experience it occasionally or very often, indicating room for greater inclusivity.

Do you ever experience racial discrimination at your current teaching position?



Former teachers of color in the interviews indicated that in their most recent teaching positions, they generally felt accepted and comfortable expressing themselves for who they are, in terms of race and ethnicity. Part of feeling fully accepted and comfortable expressing themselves as teachers of color was working at a school where some or all of the population was from a similar background as theirs. Two illustrative quotes include:

> *"I've never felt excluded, or unwanted, or 'other.' First and foremost, it's easier to fit in when you look and speak like the people around you. And just the familiarity of knowing generations of families."* – ***Male, 40, Hispanic, 9-12th***
>
> *"I absolutely felt accepted. Something that was helpful to me is that it was a very welcoming kind of a community and there were people that look like me, there were people of different cultures that were representing the school and made decisions."* – ***Female, 37, Black, TK-8th***

Another key element to former teachers of color feeling accepted was working in a school that explicitly fostered an environment welcoming of diversity. Even though most former teachers of color did not explicitly identify challenges with racial discrimination, they did experience other forms of discrimination (e.g., homophobia, ignorance of the importance of an *English as Second Language* program, and political and religious insensitivity).

When asked broadly, most aspiring teachers of color did not identify specific challenges they face within their program due to their race and/or ethnicity. Aspiring

teachers who did not experience challenges often qualified that the school district or program they were in was very diverse. In addition, none of the aspiring teachers could explicitly identify resources available to them in the teacher preparation program to address challenges they may face as a person of color. However, a small number of aspiring teachers did experience challenges. Challenges included: lack of diversity in the program, faculty micro-aggressions, degree of engagement with cultural and ethnic content in the curriculum, biased standardized tests, and tensions among other students of color.

Aspiring teachers of color were more likely to feel less motivated to teach than their white counterparts, and through those discussions, a clear disparity emerged. The reasons they feel **less** motivated include heightened financial stress, low or no pay for time spent student-teaching, discouraging feedback, and the required teacher candidate assessments, which some express are racially biased. The testing and evaluation process required to enter the profession was cited as a significant reason for why future teachers of colors became less motivated. In their own words:

> *"I became less motivated because I realized very quickly that teachers have to take on a lot of work for unsatisfactory and unlivable wages. Many student teachers do not receive any scholarship stipend, so we are doing it without pay and it is hard to provide for yourself while having a full-time job without pay. This aspect was very hard for me and caused hardship, because I was commuting an hour, and with inflation and rising gas prices, it became very costly."* – ***Female, 24, Black, 6-12th***

> *"The part of the process that held me back, and I know it holds back a lot of students, is the testing process. Especially with the CSET…the standardized tests we have to take and pass. I had to retake the math portion of the CSET, I think, three times, and my wallet took a big hit because those tests are not cheap, and I don't feel that they're useful."* – ***Female, 26, Hispanic, TK-5th***

OPINIONS ABOUT TEACHER PREPARATION

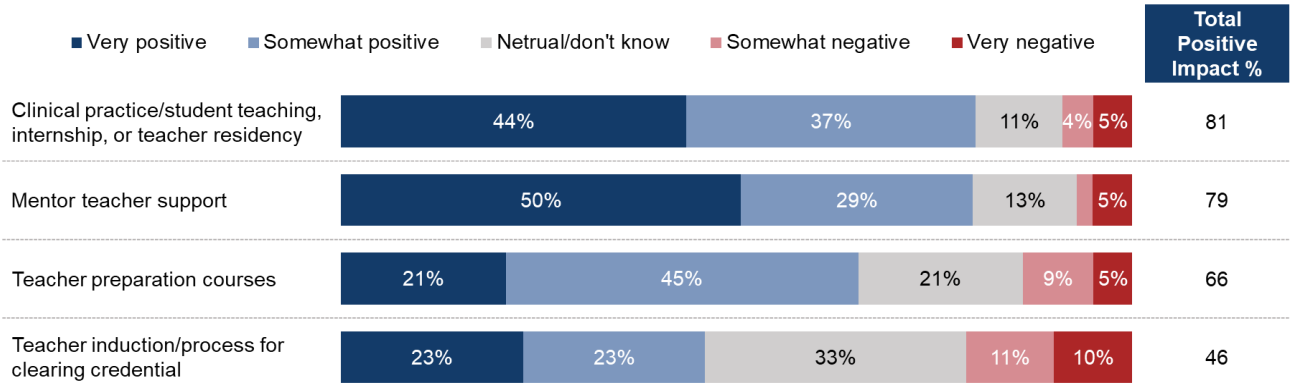
Less tenured teachers practicing in California recognize the positive impact that clinical practice and mentor teacher support had on their preparation to teach, but few see little benefit to teacher candidate assessments. Most new teachers who entered the profession in the past five years feel that (1) clinical practice and student teaching, internships, and residency (81% *positive*) and (2) mentor teacher support (79% *positive*) had the most positive impact on their preparation for the demands of their position. A two-thirds majority feel that teacher preparation courses have had a positive impact (66% *positive*).

They are less convinced of the benefit of teacher induction and the process for clearing credential (46% *positive*, 21% *negative*). Few new California teachers think that teacher candidate assessments have had a positive impact on their preparation. In fact, one in three (39%) think that Teacher Performance Assessments (i.e., CalTPA, EdTPA, or FAST) have had a negative effect, and one in four (28%) think that the CSET has had a negative effect.

Aspiring teachers are somewhat split on the degree to which their teacher preparation program has made them more motivated to become a teacher. Reasons that increased motivation to teach for aspiring teachers include relationship with program cohort, strength of program curriculum, and mentorship and relationship with

professors. In contrast, reasons that decreased motivation to teach encompassed observing examples of inequality and discrimination, teacher placement-related issues, methods and quality of feedback, and insufficient in-person teaching experience.

Positive/negative impacts of components of teacher preparation programs among those who have been a teacher for 5 years or less.



The cost of tuition and assessments is a major financial burden and source of stress for these aspiring teachers in California. Many report that they specifically chose the institution they attended based on tuition costs and the availability of scholarships, grants, and financial aid. Several indicated that, had they not had financial support from a spouse or partner or received some form of financial assistance or a scholarship, they likely would not have pursued a career in teaching. As one example, an aspiring teacher lamented:

> *"I was and am willing to do whatever it takes to be a teacher. However, the cost of tuition, compared to how much teachers make, is very sad. This was a con for me when considering being a teacher. The cost of student-teaching was 10 grand and has been a huge challenge for me."*
>
> – ***Female, 23, White, 6-12th***

Compensating student teachers was suggested by a significant number of the aspiring teachers and is viewed as a very important policy change that will help alleviate financial stress at an important time in the teacher preparation process. Aspiring teachers also discuss the workload as a major stressor, including the number and length of assignments, required state student assessments (and the teacher preparation time needed), and in-person student teaching and observation hours.

Aspiring teachers express more negative than positive feelings about teacher candidate assessments. There were two key aspects that aspiring teachers did find valuable in preparing and completing the teacher candidate assessments: (1) assessments like the CSET, CBEST, and RICA helped aspiring teachers learn material they will need and build the confidence to teach the material in the classroom; and (2) these assessments can test aspiring teachers' knowledge and provide a barometer for what they need to learn or relearn. Criticisms of teacher candidate assessment centered around the time, cost, and stress associated with the process;

and, paralleling the survey results, the EdTPA was the most mentioned as an overwhelmingly negative experience.

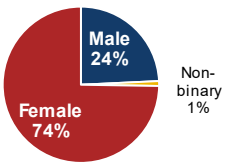
While not a top priority, three in five current teachers (62%) think that better and more realistic teacher preparation should be a very high or top priority for improving teacher retention. Indeed, both aspiring and former teachers express that teacher preparation programs should incorporate more real-time teaching experiences and professionalize the training process. Aspiring teachers also found that the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the usefulness of the "teaching experience," as much of it occurred virtually. Further, student teaching overlapped with the EdTPA assessment, which heightened stress for aspiring teachers. Finally, there was also a sense among aspiring teachers that the effectiveness of the classroom training is too variable, depending on the classroom, teacher, and/or school assignment. Former teachers suggest professional development opportunities for practicing teachers should be offered to supplant insufficient classroom management preparation in teacher preparation programs.

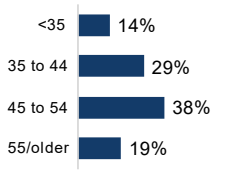
APPENDIX

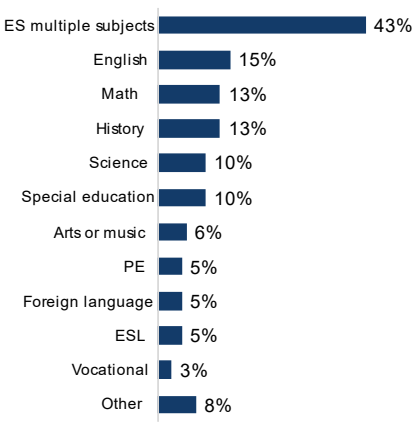
Methodology and Profile of Survey Respondents

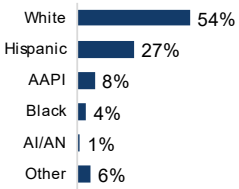
Online survey **of 4,632 teachers** who are members of the California Teachers Association

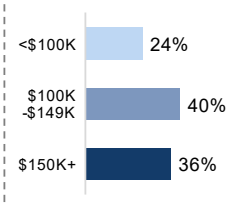
Conducted May 24 to June 6, 2022

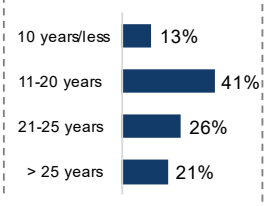




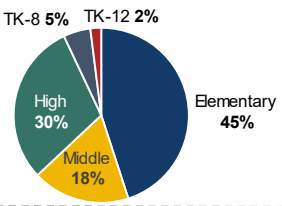


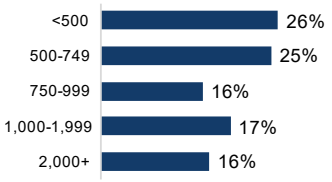


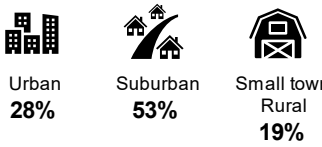


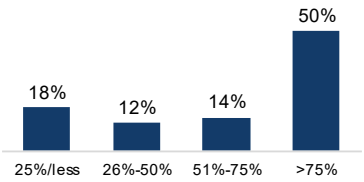


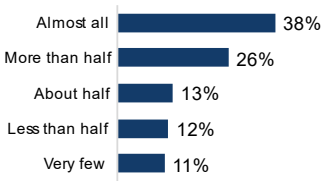
Profile of Respondents – School Characteristics

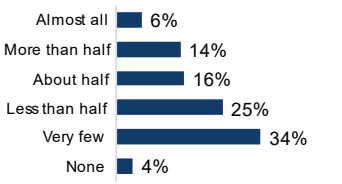










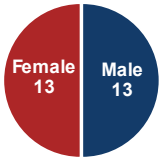


Methodology & Profile of IDI Participants: Former Teachers

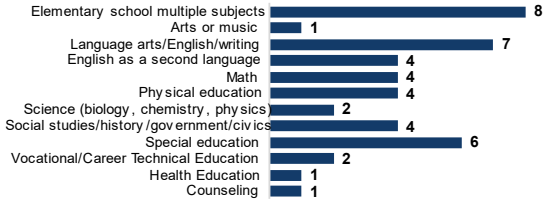
In-depth interviews with **26 former California teachers** who left the classroom within the past five years.

Conducted June 22 to July 16, 2022.

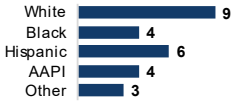
Gender



Subjects taught
Multiple selected (each out of 26)



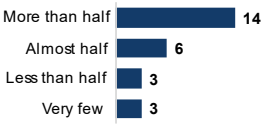
Race



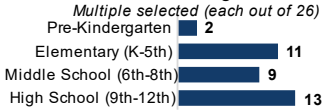
% Free/reduced lunch at last school

0% - 25%: **4**
26% - 50%: **4**
51% - 75%: **6**
More than 75%: **10**
Not sure: **2**

Students of color at last school



Grades taught
Multiple selected (each out of 26)

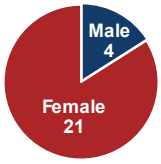


Methodology & Profile of IDI Participants: Aspiring Teachers

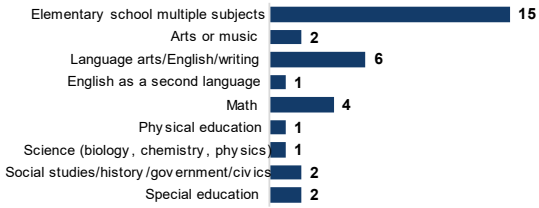
In-depth interviews with **25 aspiring teachers** enrolled in or recently graduated from California teacher preparation programs.

Conducted June 22 to July 16, 2022.

Gender



Subjects to teach
Multiple selected (each out of 25)



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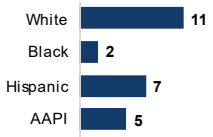
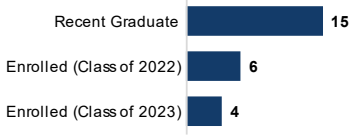
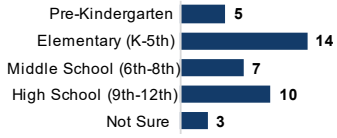


Secured Teaching Position

Yes: **8**
No: **17**

Enrollment Status



Grades to teach
Multiple selected (each out of 25)