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## Teacher Retention Challenges: What we learned before and after COVID-19

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## Teacher Retention Challenges: What we learned before and after COVID-19

### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already elevated stress levels among teachers, leading to contemplation of leaving the profession. As educators were compelled to transition to online teacher, they suddenly found themselves immersed in the households of their students, an entirely novel experience. This newfound proximity granted teachers insight into various aspects of the students' lives, including family dynamics, home environments, levels of household stress, and the accessibility of essential resources. In addition to the teaching duties, educators were tasked with the development of online curricula, the acquisition of online learning resources, and providing support to parents and families during a particularly stressful period. The critical question arises: did these unique experiences influence teachers' decisions to remain in the profession? The research findings suggest a number of teachers considering leaving the profession.

### Keywords

Teacher Retention, COVID-19, Teacher Burnout

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## Teacher Retention Challenges: What we learned before and after COVID-19

Teacher retention has long been a persistent issue. Few issues in education have garnered as much attention as the challenge school districts face in retaining their staff since the 1980s. The teacher shortage problem began to raise concerns nearly four decades ago, with many experts believing that a widespread teacher shortage could impede the success of the education system at the elementary and secondary levels (Darling-Hammond, 1984).

Since the mid-1980s, research aimed at understanding why teachers leave the profession has been on the rise. Initial research primarily focused on individual characteristics as the root causes of teachers leaving their jobs (Mueller & Price, 1990). However, due to the complexities surrounding individual characteristics, research gradually shifted towards analyzing organizational structures and the broader issues contributing to teacher turnover. When excluding personal reasons such as pregnancy, relocation, retirement age, and school closures, there are identifiable factors that lead teachers to exit the profession. The primary driver of turnover tends to be job dissatisfaction and organizational dysfunction, although these reasons can vary widely (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Nonetheless, recent studies have identified common themes in teachers' experiences and their determination to explore alternative career paths.

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, shortages were prevalent across the nation (Sutcher et al., 2019). Numerous reports and studies on this shortage highlighted the attrition rate, defined as premature departure of a teacher from their job, whether voluntary or involuntary (Macdonald, 1999), with 40-50% of new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years (Alliance, 2014). In 2020, one in five teachers, regardless of years in the profession, reported their plan to stay in the classroom (Page, 2020). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) found that there were 270,000 fewer school workers between January 2020 to July 2022. State and federal governments discuss factors like early retirement as part of the problem, but the education profession is facing a global crisis with teachers leaving their positions at an alarming rate (Elizalde, 2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has only served to exacerbate concerns for school districts worldwide (Chavatzia & Watanabe, 2020). Teachers were tasked with delivering high-level instruction in the most complex situations during and after the pandemic. Darling-Hammonds and Hyler (2020) noted that the complexities of the learning environment, including in-person, distance learning, and hybrid models, would challenge even the most proficient and skilled educators. According to Chavatzia and Watanabe (2020), the pandemic had an overwhelming and unprecedented impact, intensifying worries for education systems globally.

A study conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in February 2022 revealed that 55% of educators were contemplating leaving the profession, a significant increase from the 37% reported in August 2021 (Walker, 2022). Among those considering leaving, 62% were Black educators, and 59% were Hispanic/Latino educators, both of which are groups already underrepresented in the field (Walker, 2022). Reasons cited in the NEA (2022) study for contemplating departure included exhaustion, frustration, increased responsibilities, loss of planning time or breaks to cover for colleagues affected by COVID-19, inability to give students adequate attention, feeling undervalued, and being underpaid. Last, teachers noted frustrations with student behavior, including a noticeable increase in disrespectful behavior, lack of accountability, and no consequences for student misbehavior. Teachers have reported significant upticks in inappropriate classroom behaviors at the start of the new academic year, with instances of students lying on the floor, hiding under desks, throwing objects, and displaying aggressive

behavior toward peers. The loss of social interaction, chronic stress, and cumulative trauma have severely disrupted classrooms in the fall of 2021.

Past studies have shown an ongoing attrition trend among public school educators, with increasing student populations nationwide and rising teacher retirement rates being two primary factors contributing to the potential teacher shortage, as highlighted by Ingersoll and Smith (2003). Furthermore, research from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization revealed a need for over 27 million new teacher hires by 2030, considering attrition projections between 2014 and 2030 (UNESCO, 2014). However, any predictions or analyses made before the 2020 school year would not accurately capture the impact of COVID-19. Accounting for the COVID impact Chavatzia and Watanabe (2020) projected that the number of teachers required to address the gaps had risen to 69 million worldwide. The global pandemic severely disrupted education, rendering projections unreliable moving forward (Reuge et al., 2021).

### **Dissatisfaction in the Profession**

Teaching in the United States is widely recognized as one of the most stress-inducing professions, as supported by various studies (Dworkin et al., 1990; Johnson et al., 2005). Coping with high-stress levels and the increasing burden of responsibilities is an inherent occupational challenge in public school education. The escalation of stress levels is a direct consequence of various adverse factors that significantly impact teachers' day-to-day experiences in the workplace. For instance, research conducted in 2014 identified several factors contributing to teacher stress and attrition, including inadequate administrative support, isolated working conditions, difficulties in managing student behavior, low salaries, and a lack of input in schoolwide decisions, all factors which led teachers to consider leaving the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). It is noteworthy that these issues reflect systemic challenges within the education system and addressing them is crucial for retaining teachers. Teacher stress has also been identified as a driver of staff absenteeism and turnover (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). There is a growing need to critically analyze the stress-related issues in the teacher profession, not only to retain experienced educators but create a healthier work environment.

The current challenges may ultimately drive teachers to leave the classroom for good, seeking opportunities in other professions. In the public education sector, teachers are falling behind their private-sector counterparts in compensation, particularly in compensation. The discrepancy in salaries compared to college graduates in other fields is commonly called the "teacher wage penalty" (Allegretto & Mischel, 2020). Allegretto and Mischel's (2020) study highlights variations among states in their efforts to address this growing wage gap. Teacher salaries have remained stagnant over the past decade and the incremental wage increases associated with experience levels are on the decline (Templeton et al., 2022).

### **Teacher Pay**

Conventional wisdom suggests that increasing teachers' salaries will lead to greater job satisfaction and, in turn, contribute positively to student achievement. However, some studies have shown mixed or even negative correlations between teacher pay and student performance (Hanushek, 2003; Hanushek et al., 2004). The challenge in establishing a direct link between teacher pay and student achievement lies in the complexity of the factors involved in such studies, as well as the crucial element of time. While it is challenging to establish a clear-cut

connection between teacher pay and student outcomes, research does indicate a relationship between teacher pay and teacher retention (Hendricks, 2014).

Hendricks (2014) found that increasing teacher pay has the most significant positive impact on novice teachers, with relatively consistent benefits across genders and subjects taught. In essence, the study suggests that raising teacher pay benefits educators at all experience levels up until around nineteen years or more of experience (Hendricks, 2014).

Given that teacher compensation can influence teachers' decisions to stay in the classroom, it's crucial to examine recent trends in teacher pay and how teacher salaries in the United States compare to those in other countries. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020), teacher compensation in the United States is relatively low compared to other nations. Additionally, research has indicated that per-pupil spending is a factor in student success, but the United States is struggling to keep up with inflation and falling behind in this regard. Teacher compensation also lags behind the salaries of college graduates in other fields, a phenomenon referred to as the "teacher wage penalty" (Allegretto & Mischel, 2020). Allegretto and Mischel's (2020) study also highlights disparities among states in allocating funds to address the growing teacher wage gap.

Typically, school districts use a salary structure organized into "steps" that take into account factors like academic degrees and years of teaching experience (Hendricks, 2014). However, as noted by Hendricks (2014), these salary schedules often remain static over time. This lack of change can be particularly disadvantageous for novice teachers with one to five years of experience, as there are typically no retention bonuses or incremental pay increases until after five years. Consequently, novice teachers may find it challenging to stay motivated to remain in their current district or even in the teaching profession (Hendricks, 2014). Research has shown that teacher experience significantly influences student success, with teachers becoming more effective and productive as they gain more experience in the classroom (Ladd & Sorenson, 2014). Therefore, it is increasingly crucial to view the teaching profession, especially in underserved communities, as a long-term investment rather than a mere expense.

When accounting for inflation, the average base pay for teachers in the 2020-2021 school year was similar to that of teachers in the 2015-2016 school year. According to Templeton et al. (2022), it's important to highlight that the average pay for teachers has not seen an increase over the past decade. Furthermore, as teachers accumulate more experience, the additional pay premium for each year of experience diminishes (Templeton et al., 2022). Understanding these wage premiums is critical as they directly impact student success. When school districts can adequately support their teachers, it has a positive effect on school quality and student outcomes (Baker, 2017).

However, several other issues continue to contribute to the departure of teachers from the profession. Over the years, scholars have emphasized the link between teacher turnover and impoverished areas and communities with a higher percentage of minority students (Borman & Dowling, 2008). The research underscores a higher attrition rate in specific subject areas, with special education being particularly affected (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Reasons for this include increased accountability for student success on standardized exams in content areas, and an increase in paperwork and documentation for students enrolled in special education services.

The challenges associated with high-need subject areas like special education often coincide with concerns about student behavior, a lack of support from administrators, and an increasing burden of paperwork and responsibilities (Kersaint et al., 2007). Much of teachers'

dissatisfaction stems from working conditions, including the school culture, climate, and leadership provided by administrators at both the campus and district levels (Johnson et al., 2012; Kraft et al., 2016).

Taken together, factors including inadequate pay adjustments in the face of inflation, growing responsibilities, challenging student behavior, and poor working conditions constitute a national crisis. This crisis is projected to result in nearly 300,000 teachers leaving the field each year through 2026 (Torpey, 2018). Addressing these issues is crucial not only to retain experienced educators but also to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the education system.

### **Stress and Burnout**

Emotions related to the factors contributing to teacher attrition often worsen mental health issues, including feelings of defeat and burnout (Anhorn, 2008). Researchers can categorize teachers' emotional responses during the most stressful aspects of their jobs through qualitative methods, which help explain the factors contributing to burnout. Before the COVID19 pandemic, teachers experienced a range of emotions, including feeling overwhelmed, isolated, fearful, disoriented, unsupported, embarrassed, and overloaded (Anhorn, 2008). Many teachers, especially newcomers to the profession, felt there was no outlet for support when these emotions reached their peak. Isolation often became the primary emotion leading many teachers to leave the profession within the first three years (Shillingford-Butler, et al., 2012). Over time, these emotional responses could culminate in the psychological phenomenon known as burnout.

Burnout is not merely a stress-related response that causes individuals to leave a career or profession. Maslach, an American social psychologist, is renowned for their research on occupational burnout, collaborated with Jackson to develop the Maslach Burnout Inventory, an assessment tool used to measure burnout (Maslach, et al., 1997). According to Maslach (1997), burnout is defined as a psychological response characterized by three key factors related to interpersonal and stress-related aspects of the workplace. These factors include feeling overwhelmed by exhaustive job tasks, experiencing a sense of cynicism or complete disengagement from the work, and struggling to perceive a sense of accomplishment or effectiveness within the profession (Maslach, 1993).

Before the pandemic, teachers faced anxiety and stress due to various internal and external factors during a typical school year (Shillingford-Butler, et al., 2012). Shillingford-Butler's (2012) study found these factors included the dynamics of the parent-teacher relationship, the inherent pressures of the teaching profession, and a lack of support from both the community within and outside the school environment. This lack of support was a contributing factor to teachers leaving the profession or experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety. In a career known for its high burnout rates, teachers continued to face emotional triggers that were not addressed (Shillingford-Butler, et al., 2012). One proven factor for maintaining longevity in a stressful job is the presence of support and meaningful relationships (Chang, 2009). As the COVID-19 pandemic persists and continues to impact education, teachers' concerns about unrealistic job expectations and escalating disciplinary issues have only added to the stress levels they experience (Charles Butt Foundation, 2020).

In a 2014 study that examined the risk of burnout among first-year teachers, researchers emphasized the role of personality and motivation in teachers' decisions to either continue in the profession or leave. The study highlighted the importance of establishing positive habits early on and identifying potential risk factors for this particular group. Additionally, it noted that educators lacked sufficient coping resources to effectively manage stress and burnout (Reichl et

al., 2014). Similarly, in a 2018 study conducted by researchers from the University of Cairo Health Department, classroom teachers faced a similar challenge. The study revealed that teachers struggled to cope with the increasing stress in the classroom. Instead of adopting healthy problem-solving coping strategies, they tended to rely on emotionally driven responses, which further contributed to the overall toxic work environment (Hassan et al., 2018).

Burnout and stress are pivotal factors that affect individuals' capacity to handle demanding situations or professions (Johnson et al., 2005). Teaching, as indicated by numerous studies, ranks among the most stressful professions in the United States (Dworkin et al., 1990; Johnson et al., 2005). Managing high stress levels and the increasing responsibilities associated with the teaching profession pose significant challenges in public school education. Elevated stress directly impairs teachers' daily performance in the workplace, resulting in adverse consequences (Morton & Berardi, 2018). Teacher stress has been correlated with apathy, absenteeism, and attrition from the profession (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). These challenges are not unique to the current environment; however, they have been exacerbated by the influence of COVID-19 and its prolonged effects. During the initial nationwide shutdown, both teachers and students faced rapid and sometimes unpredictable shifts in the educational landscape (Pressley et al., 2021). Pressley team (2021) observed that a lack of communication among many teachers contributed to heightened stress levels. Interestingly, for some teachers, the absence of communication actually reduced their stress levels upon returning to campus from online learning. One study indicated that 40% of participants reported improved stress levels, while the remainder did not experience the same improvement (Pressley et al., 2021).

The escalation of stress and work responsibilities directly contributes to the psychological phenomenon known as occupational burnout. When teachers grapple with burnout and lack effective coping strategies to address their negative sentiments about their careers, it significantly raises the likelihood of educators leaving the profession (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). The initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to yield enduring consequences, even three years after the global shutdown.

### **School Culture and Morale**

An individual's perception of their value within an organization can significantly influence their motivation and mental well-being (Rogers & Ashforth, 2017). The morale of educators on a school campus or within a school district can play a pivotal role in their lives and have far-reaching consequences on long-term decisions, such as whether to continue in a specific position or in the teaching profession as a whole (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002).

Various factors, including school leadership, organizational culture, and teacher autonomy, all impact an educator's commitment to the profession and their desire to remain in the classroom (Weiss, 1999). Weiss suggests that teachers are more likely to consider leaving when they are dissatisfied with workplace conditions, school leadership, student behavior, and the level of autonomy they have. This becomes even more concerning when considering lower income schools, where these factors are more likely to contribute to teacher morale issues (Weiss, 1999).

Studies focusing on teacher morale have reported similar findings globally. Results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005) indicate that teachers in numerous countries worldwide faced increased pressure and a higher likelihood of leaving their jobs due to factors such as poor working conditions or unrealistic work expectations. Recent

studies echo these results, pointing to reasons like inadequate administrative support, isolated working conditions, difficulties in managing student behavior, low salaries, and a lack of collective teacher influence over schoolwide decisions as factors contributing to teachers leaving the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014).

According to a study conducted by Kraft, Marinell, and Yee (2016), maintaining positive morale and fostering a supportive culture are particularly critical for first-year and novice teachers. Regardless of the certification pathway that led them into the teaching profession, novice teachers require additional support. The initial years in the classroom involve extensive on-the-job training, and a positive atmosphere at the campus or district level plays a vital role in sustaining teachers and shaping their future perspectives. The study by Kraft, Marinell, and Yee (2016) highlighted teacher dissatisfaction with campus-level administration and a lack of communication or disconnect with district-level administration. When teachers perceive that their leaders are not providing support or recognizing their contributions to the campus, it becomes challenging to establish long-term stability (Kraft et al., 2016). Novice teachers are particularly affected, and high turnover rates in classrooms significantly impact student success.

Teacher morale and school climate are pivotal for teachers to maintain a positive outlook and overcome the challenges they face in education (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Grayson and Alvarez's (2008) study demonstrates that the support system within the school community, involving professional staff and faculty, fosters a sense of community and belonging that positively affects students as well. Morale serves as the foundation for the entire organization. While it is important for individuals to feel optimistic about their profession to stay motivated, the benefits extend to the organization as employees are more likely to achieve goals and fulfill organizational tasks (Govindarajan, 2012). Accountability pressures such as standardized exams are often identified as a negative factor affecting teacher morale and contributing to teacher turnover. Erichsen and Reynolds (2020) assert that the accountability pressures placed on teachers by administrators and state policymakers increase job-related stress, leading to higher turnover rates. Added pressure not only harms school culture but also creates a less professional work environment as teachers struggle to adapt to constant changes in faculty and staff (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020).

Deal and Peterson (2016) emphasize the significance of effective school culture and draw parallels with studies in the business world, highlighting the importance of culture and its overall impact on success. Similarly, research in education confirms this crucial relationship (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Just as successful businesses prioritize strategies to cultivate a healthy, productive, and practical culture, the public education system must prioritize culture as a top concern. Focusing solely on increasing test scores will not guarantee the success of public schools. When culture takes center stage, positive outcomes usually follow (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Failure to prioritize morale and culture by campus, district, and state leaders within the public-school system leads to overwhelming negative impacts on teachers, ultimately hindering student success.

## **Post Pandemic**

At the outset of the 2020 calendar year, schools worldwide faced the sudden closure of in-person learning as COVID-19 rapidly spread. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic triggered a series of events that affected every aspect of the educational process (Chavatzia et al., 2020). The full extent of its direct impact on the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, as



well as its indirect consequences on the 2021-2022 school year and beyond, may not become fully clear for years to come (Chavatzia et al., 2020).

Early projections by Chavatzia and Watanabe (2020) concerning the educational consequences paint a sobering picture, with a staggering 1.57 billion students worldwide—representing 90% of the learner population—having been adversely affected by COVID-19 since the beginning of 2020. While policymakers in the United States prioritize addressing learning loss and its impact on student education, the effects of COVID-19 on teachers and their mental health receive less frequent attention (Baker et al., 2021). Preliminary research indicates that a minimum of 63 million teachers globally, working with students at the primary and secondary levels, have experienced negative effects due to the pandemic (Chavatzia & Watanabe, 2020). This underscores the urgent need to recognize and address the challenges faced by educators in the wake of this unprecedented crisis.

Despite previous studies' projections and the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the education system, various factors continue to contribute to teachers leaving the profession (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Research, such as the one conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in 2002, reveals that the underlying complexities driving educators away from teaching often stem from unmet needs at the most fundamental level, both by employers and the school community. The NEA's 2002 report recommended adopting a holistic perspective on the issue of teacher attrition, calling on federal and state policymakers, as well as local stakeholders, to consider the broader context of the education system and teacher retention (National Education Association, 2002).

Teaching is a profession that demands more than just delivering an effective curriculum (Valli & Buese, 2007). Nationwide studies have consistently identified similar reasons behind teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). These factors apply to both first-year teachers and veterans, encompassing challenging work assignments, inadequate communication about assignments, insufficient resources to provide students with a quality educational experience, and a sense of isolation stemming from poor relationships between administration and peer teachers (Anhorn, 2008).

Throughout the pandemic, the quality of education has suffered across all academic areas (Locke, 2021). Concerns have also arisen regarding the mental health and overall well-being of students beyond their academic performance (Dorn et al., 2020). Similarly, teachers have faced mental health challenges due to internal and external factors related to the pandemic (Baker et al., 2021). However, despite the significant challenges educators confront, many professionals choose to persevere in their roles during these difficult times (Varela & Fedynich, 2021). It is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to teacher attrition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential mitigating factors influencing individual teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Lopez, 2022).

## **The Study**

The present study aims to investigate the pressing issue of teacher retention within the context of Oregon's K-12 education system. Specifically, it seeks to (1) understand the intentions of K-12 teachers in Oregon regarding the decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession, and (2) explore the underlying reasons that contribute to the consideration of leaving the profession. Addressing these objectives is crucial in formulating effective strategies to mitigate teacher attrition and ensure the sustainability of quality education.

## Methodology

The purpose of this research was to (1) learn the intentions of Oregon K-12 teachers to either stay in the teaching profession or exit the profession; (2) learn reasons for considering leaving the profession. The following research question guided this study: What influences teacher's decision to stay or leave the teaching profession?

### Participants

Participants for the study were all alumni from the College of Education at a university in the Pacific Northwest. The alums included undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students from 2010 - to 2019. Each alum received an email describing the study and asking for participation. This yielded 386 alums who agreed to participate in the pre-pandemic study. A follow-up study was conducted post-pandemic, with the same 386 participants. In the follow-up study, 154 of the original 386 participated. It is interesting to note that 24 emails were returned as "undeliverable," indicating that since the first study, the email they provided the university, overwhelmingly a K12 school email, was no longer valid.

### Instruments

A Google form was created that included the following open-ended questions: How many years have you worked in education, primary role in education, have you ever considered leaving the profession, and what causes you to consider leaving the profession? The questions were first piloted with a small group of educators, edited based on results of the pilot, and then sent using the Google form.

### Procedures

Once Institutional Review Board approval was received, an email was sent to the College of Education alumni informing them of the research project and asking for their participation to complete the open-ended question survey. This was completed in the fall, 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic shut-down Oregon schools approximately six months after the data was collected and analyzed. We then made the decision to send out the exact same questions to the same participant pool to explore what, if any, impact the pandemic had on teachers choosing to stay or leave the teaching profession. Responses from both 2019 and 2020 were analyzed.

### Data Analysis

Request to participate in the study went out to 386 alumni. The email included a link to the survey. Of those 386, 17 responses were duplicates (same email address listed twice in the responses), and 14 surveys were incomplete. This yielded N=358. Content analysis was used to code the narrative responses. Content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). Of the four questions, one included an open response, where the participants could respond with as little or as much narrative as they chose. Responses to this

question were read to explore participant experiences and to identify recurring patterns and/or common themes. Data was then organized by theme. The post-COVID 19, 2020 follow up study followed the same protocol. Emails were sent to the 358 who had completed the surveys. Of those 358, 145 agreed to participate in the follow-up; N=145. The follow-up survey, also using Google form, included questions related to teaching during the pandemic and thoughts about leaving or staying in the profession. It was also analyzed using content analysis, following the same steps as the first survey.

## Findings

The pre-pandemic 2019 survey yielded 386 participants and the follow-up survey conducted in 2020, from the same pool of 386, yielded 154 responses. The participants were administrators, teachers, or “other educational professionals”. In 2019, of the 358 participants, 286 were teachers, 26 were administrators, and 46 “other”. See Table 1 Findings for the details.

Table 1. *Findings*

Data Set	Participants	Teachers	Administrators	Other	Considered leaving	% of all considering leaving
Pre-COVID-19	N=358	286	26	46	235	65.6%
Post-COVID-19	N=154	109	25	20	111	76.5%

## Themes

Four themes were identified from both pre and post-COVID-19 data as reasons why the participants considered leaving education. The themes include teacher stress and burnout, student behavior issues attributed to trauma, lack of administrative support, and politics.

### Teacher Stress and Burnout

Participants shared the stress they were under and feelings of exhaustion and burnout. One participant wrote, “It gets exhausting in my role (advocate/support/instructor for at-risk kids and teen parents) to hear the heartbreaking stories day after day and then have to battle teachers to support or have grace for my students over trivial things.” Another noted the inability to meet the growing needs of their students was causing them to “question my purpose.” One participant shared, “The stress of managing student behavior, exhaustion of working with high needs students, disengaged families, is causing a feeling of hopelessness about my ability to have any positive influence.” Several participants noted the mental exhaustion they felt due to the expanding role of the teacher to be “counselor, mentor, support system” in addition to teaching. They also noted feeling defeated from repeated disrespectful encounters with family and students.

Many others noted the significant increase in hours they were working and still unable to get everything done. One shared, “Working many, many, many hours (far beyond 40 hrs/week) and still having the feeling it’s not enough. This feeling comes from the fact that there is always something new being asked of teachers and not enough thank you’d- as parents only email when they’re not getting something and kiddos are just too young to give the needed appreciation in

the way that's sometimes needed." Another shared their frustration "at the tasks we are being asked to do while not equipped (with training, funds, etc.) to do them well. Basically, the job has changed and we need different training."

Stress and burnout was also attributed to school-wide initiatives that changed from year to year, new programs, and teacher accountability evaluated through professional goals / tasks they were to accomplish during the year. One teacher in particular explained the struggle:

Too many bureaucratic directives and meetings that seemed like a waste of time drove me to want to quit classroom teaching. A pattern developed—Well-meaning but faddish programs are rolled out, emphasized for a short time and then fade away. New year, repeated. In the meantime, all these fad-focus projects detract from attention to preparing instruction and providing meaningful feedback to students in a timely way. The administration seemed dead to the concerns of teachers. For example—at one point in addition to teaching a full load of classes with 5 preps for 7 class periods, I had 7 specific different professional goals/tasks to accomplish and/or work into my curriculum content and implement in my teaching methodology and document. These were for a variety of district wide goals, school wide goals, and multiple colleague teams. I prepared a chart showing time taken to do all these on top of regular work and presented it to my supervisor and asked for prioritization directives. I explained that although these were good things, it was too many to do a good job at all of them and still get instructional planning, preparation along with grading and providing meaningful student feedback done. The answer from two different supervisors was dismissive. You just do them all. No acknowledgement that all these different, non-teaching task detracted from the quality of instruction I could provide was frustrating. The perpetual sense of failure to accomplish all of them wore down my respect for administrators, made me angry at bureaucratic directives, and most significantly undermined my sense of the importance of my job and ability to do it.

### **Student Behavior Issues attributed to trauma**

The majority of participants noted the significant needs of their students and families and how those needs were impacting the classroom and their role. Some of these comments were brief, stating simply, "overwhelming amount of trauma" and "the toll of mental health issues in students" were causing burnout. One said, "constant, daily exhaustion of working with countless students in each classroom who are severely trauma-impacted." They also noted a lack of social-emotional resources to meet student and community needs. Other participants connected the student trauma to behavioral issues manifesting in the classroom. One noted, "the needs are so great, and we can't meet them. Students are frustrated, and it is spilling over into the classroom." This experience was also noted by another teacher who said, "Another said, "student behaviors have escalated to the point of being dangerous." One teacher said, "I had a really tough class last year with many behavioral problems. I had wonderful support from my administration but each day was really tough to get through. It has definitely made me consider ways I can use my education degree outside of teaching in a classroom." One shared, "some days feel like 90% of my classroom time is spent restorative problem solving because students are fighting so much." Last, a teacher summed it up by saying, "I'm exhausted and frustrated."

## **Lack of Administrative Support**

Participants shared both positive and negative experiences working with the administration, trying to provide support. Many respondents noted a lack of resources that if they were available would have provided the strong support that was needed. One mentioned "lack of programming available to support our student's social/emotional well-being." Another pointed to "lack of support from administration by not holding students accountable for poor behavior." Others noted a "lack of funding to support students in crisis" and a "lack of behavioral interventions they could use."

An administrator shared their frustration with what they felt was a "lack of professional respect" directed at them by their teachers and staff. They went on to comment about the "low executive functioning" abilities of staff and teachers that more than likely stemmed from previous trauma. These things contributed to "high needs staff and coworkers" within the building, which took up significant amounts of time to address.

Teachers weren't the only ones who talked about the lack of support they received. An administrator shared the struggle of supporting decisions from the district office and asking to much of teachers. They shared, "Being asked to do more with less has been really tough on morale. The big hearts and compassion that make teachers good at their job, I feel is often preyed upon by those that continue to implement mandates without access to resources. This banks on the fact that teachers will step up and go above and beyond for students perpetuating overworking and the snapshot that programs, curriculum, and school infrastructure are thriving more than it truly is. It is this coupled with unstable school administration that erodes my tenacity to continue at times."

## **Politics**

This theme was found throughout the data. One participant noted, "political influence has impacted the required curriculum." Another said, "At times it feels that education is not run efficiently and is way too political." An administrator noted "education is becoming more about testing and not exploring real world applications." This same administrator also commented on the exhaustion felt from being in education during a time in our history when things felt "politically charged". A teacher also pointed to the political pressure her administrator was under to show how student test scores had improved. While she acknowledged this pressure from the district office, she also felt like this led to her administrator taking credit for the positive academic and behavioral growth of students, when she believed the credit was due to the hard work of teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Teacher shortages have existed for decades, but the exodus from classrooms since the COVID-19 pandemic is cause for serious alarm. In 2020, 65.6% of teachers reported they were considering leaving the profession or had considered leaving the profession. That number took a sizeable jump in 2021 to 76.5% of teachers reporting leaving or considering leaving. The 76.5% finding is also significantly higher than the 55% (Walker, 2022).

The four themes found from the surveys revealed student behavioral issues, lack of support from their administration, and politics were all contributing to teacher exhaustion and burnout. The findings of this study highlight the complex challenges that educators face and the need for targeted interventions to improve teacher retention rates. The increase in teacher attrition during the post-pandemic period underline the exacerbated pressures faced by educators in the current climate, echoing the NEA (2002) report which provided a comprehensive look at the underlying issues contributing to educator resignations and calls for a new model of educator support that focuses on the whole educator.

The information gained from these participants reveals the complex and expanding role of the teacher in the post-pandemic classroom and the toll it is taking on their mental health. Recommendations for policymakers and educational leaders include providing mental health support for teachers and administrators who are stretched too thin. Mental health support can be provided through resource allocation which includes funding and resources that center on trauma-informed practices that will also benefit students.

This research illuminates the need for social-emotional programs and practices in schools that support students and school personnel, as well as focused attention on the factors contributing to burnout in teachers. As teacher educators, this information is critical to informing institutional programs. Teachers require administrative support that values and respects educators and policy advocacy that prioritizes the well-being of all stakeholders. We must prepare teachers with the tools necessary to be effective, successful teachers, in-tune with and equipped to address their mental health care.

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