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Education Practice

K–12 teachers are quitting. What would make them stay?

New McKinsey research shows that nearly a third of US K–12 educators are thinking of leaving their jobs. But there are steps districts could take to attract and retain the teachers the nation needs.

by Jake Bryant, Samvitha Ram, Doug Scott, and Claire Williams

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K–12 schools in the United States are finding it increasingly difficult to retain teachers, with potentially far-reaching ramifications for society. Over the past decade, the annual teacher turnover rate has hovered around 8 percent nationally and is more than double that for schools designated for Title 1 funding. By comparison, the annual turnover rate in high-performing jurisdictions, such as Finland, Ontario, and Singapore, is approximately 3 to 4 percent.[1]

When school districts can't attract and retain enough teachers, students suffer. And the COVID-19 pandemic has only compounded the nation's education talent challenges. To improve our understanding of what makes K–12 teachers want to stay, leave, or return to their jobs, McKinsey surveyed more than 1,800 US educators, school leaders, and school mental health professionals at the end of the 2021–22 school year (see sidebar "About the research"). Approximately one-third of respondents said they planned to leave their role before the next school year began. That equates to roughly 900,000 teachers across the nation. Our research also revealed that this pending turnover could further exacerbate inequality, hampering efforts to create more resilient and equitable K–12 education systems.[2] While this stated intention to leave has historically not panned out, it suggests an unhealthiness to the profession that administrators should be mindful of.

There is no easy fix for lowering teacher turnover rates. Indeed, a deeper inspection of the data reveals significant nuances in what motivates educators to stay or leave. For example, our research found that more than half of teachers say that compensation is driving them out the door, while more than a third say it's why they are, instead, sticking with teaching. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of respondents who plan to leave cite an unmanageable workload, while nearly three-quarters of those who plan to stay say their workload is manageable.

To help school districts stem the wave of potential departures now and launch themselves on a more sustainable path for the future, this article examines the main talent challenges districts currently face and offers a strategic blueprint that leaders and school systems could consider for attracting and retaining more K–12 educators.

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[1] Desiree Carver-Thomas, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Leib Sutcher, *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S.*, Annenberg Institute at Brown University working paper, EdWorkingPaper series, number 19–184, December 2019; Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond, *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it*, Learning Policy Institute, August 2017.
[2] Jake Bryant, Emma Dorn, Stephen Hall, and Frédéric Panier, "Reimagining a more equitable and resilient K–12 education system," McKinsey, September 8, 2020.

About the research

To better understand what spurs voluntary attrition and other shifts in the K–12 workforce, we surveyed more than 1,800 educators between February 2022 and May 2022, including teachers, mental-health service providers, and school leaders. Our survey respondents came from elementary, middle, and high schools in urban, suburban, and rural locations and serve public, charter, and private (religious and nonreligious) schools. This research was done in conjunction with the broader Great Attrition, Great Attraction Survey of more than 13,000 employees across 16 industries.[1]

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[1] Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Bryan Hancock, and Bill Schaninger, "The Great Attrition is making hiring harder. Are you searching the right talent pools?," *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 13, 2022.

Despite rising demand and attrition, hiring lags

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant learning losses for students, fueling the need for more instructional support.[3] Between 2020 and 2022, nine-year-old students had the largest average score decline in reading since 1990 and the first ever score decline in math.[4] Federal stimulus funds are available to help address pandemic disruptions and spur hiring for new education roles, but this opportunity has come at a moment when many systems are struggling to find enough teachers to fill open positions.[5] Some school systems have responded by switching to four-day school weeks or allowing college students and veterans without a license or formal teacher training to instruct children.[6] Extreme measures such as these have continued into the 2022–23 school year.

Across the nation, the pandemic has exacerbated K–12 human-capital challenges in three significant ways.

1. Attrition is on the rise

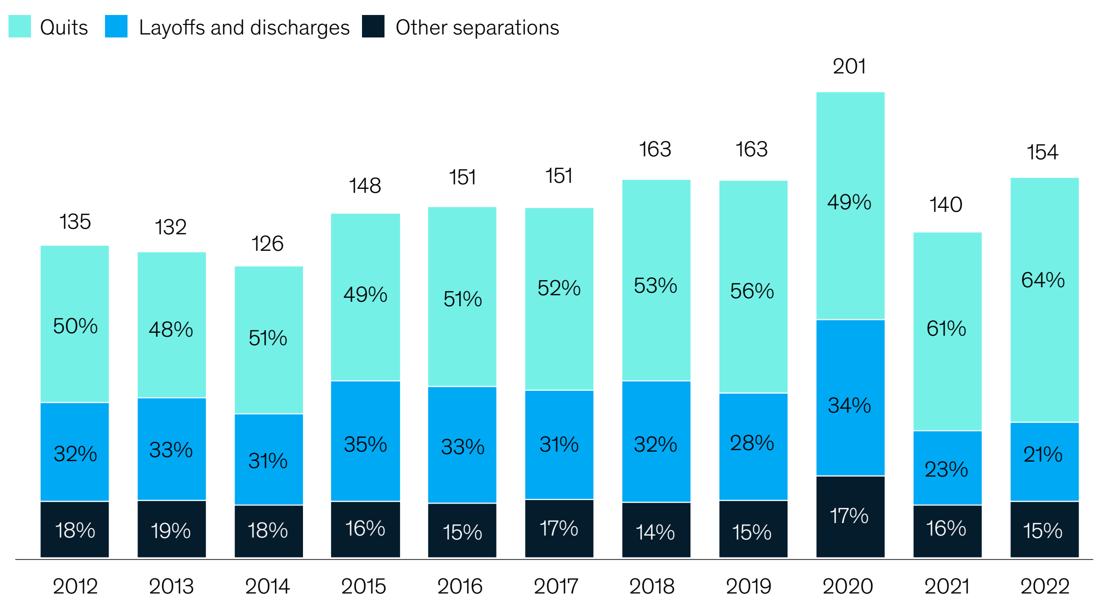
Over the past decade, 2020 saw the highest annual rate of teacher attrition, with separations of state and local education workers increasing 20 percent from 2019 to 2020. After experiencing a temporary dip between 2020 and 2021, attrition rose by 17 percent from 2021 to 2022 and is on track to outpace prepandemic monthly averages if current trends continue.[7] An increasing share of attrition can be attributed to quitting, which accounted for 64 percent of separations in 2022—up 8 percent since 2019 (Exhibit 1).

[3] Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning," McKinsey, July 27, 2021.
[4] "Reading and mathematics scores decline during COVID-19 pandemic," The Nation's Report Card, accessed January 3, 2023.
[5] "Halftime for the K–12 stimulus: How are districts faring?," McKinsey, November 2, 2022.
[6] Hannah Natanson, "'Never seen it this bad': America faces catastrophic teacher shortage," *Washington Post*, updated August 4, 2022.
[7] State and local education industry data for July 2022, US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS).

Exhibit 1

Separations in state and local education have returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, though quits have risen since 2019.

Average monthly total quits, layoffs and discharges, and separations in state and local government education, disaggregated, 2012–22,[1] thousands



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.
[1] 2022 annual average projected from available data (January 2022 through July 2022); all variables are seasonally adjusted.
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS)

It is important to note that our survey indicates that not all teachers who quit their current role will leave education entirely; nearly two-thirds report a preference to stay in education. This suggests that teachers may feel that the challenges they face in their current role and at their current school may be more effectively addressed by different districts, geographies, or roles.

2. Hiring has not kept pace

Hiring increased just 38 percent from 2020 to 2022, making it hard to replace education workers who left and to fill new positions (Exhibit 2). A recent McKinsey survey found that more than 61 percent of school administrators have had difficulties hiring personnel, including teachers, substitutes, counselors, administrators, and mental-health professionals.[8] This trend is set to worsen given recent declines (roughly one-third since 2008) in the number of college students entering and completing teacher education programs and traditional teacher preparation programs.[9]

3. Districts are creating new roles faster than they can fill them

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) allocates $190 billion in federal funding to K–12 systems across the United States.[10]

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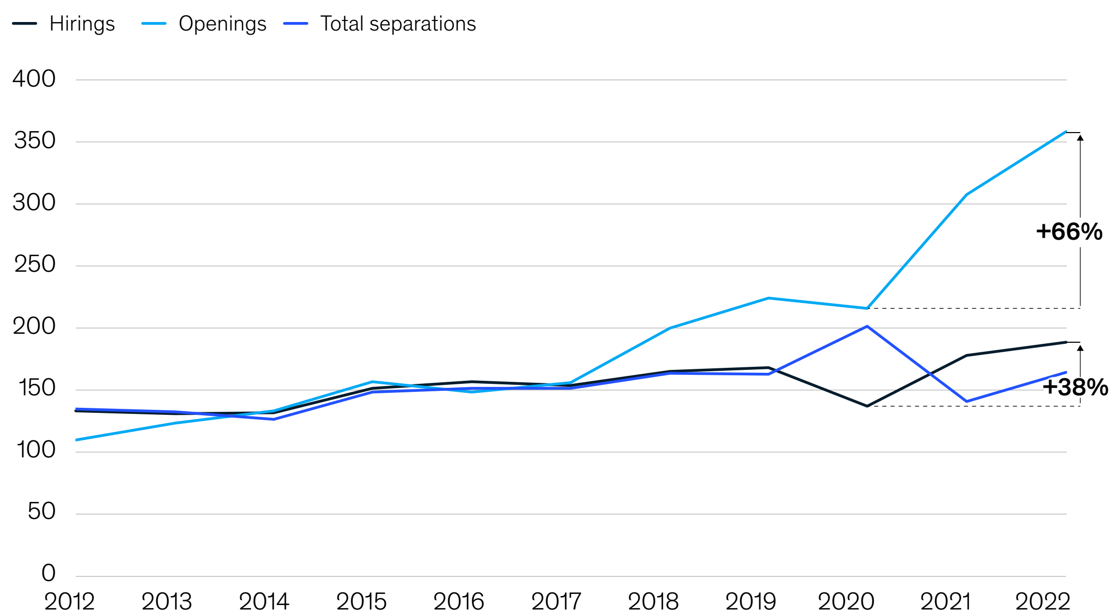
[8] "Halftime for the K–12 stimulus," November 2, 2022.
[9] Madeline Will, "Fewer people are getting teacher degrees. Prep programs sound the alarm," *Education Week*, March 22, 2022.
[10] "Halftime for the K–12 stimulus," November 2, 2022.

Exhibit 2

Hiring has not kept pace with job openings in state and local government education.

Average monthly hires, openings, and total separations in state and local government education, 2012–22,[1] thousands



[1] 2022 annual average projected from available data (January 2022 through July 2022); all variables are seasonally adjusted.
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS)

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The largest single federal investment ever in primary and secondary education, ESSER funding is creating new roles to support COVID-19 learning recovery, contributing to a 66 percent increase in job openings since 2020.[11]

Districts will likely use their remaining ESSER funds—which must be obligated by September 2024—to increase staff capacity to support student learning and mental-health needs. But without structural changes, it could be difficult to mount the sustainable funding needed to maintain staffing levels.

Teacher departures and equity impacts

Our survey suggests that, in addition to exacerbating talent recruitment and retention challenges, pending teacher departures would disproportionately affect low-income families and students of color. Four categories of teachers are more likely than others to consider leaving.

Younger teachers. Of the teachers ages 25 to 34 that we surveyed, 38 percent say they plan to leave, compared with about 30 percent of older educators. This imbalance in planned departures across age groups could create a bottleneck in the long term, narrowing the educator workforce in the future.

Teachers in low-income school districts. Almost 40 percent of teachers in districts where most students received free and reduced-price lunches (FRL) said they planned to leave, compared with just 25 percent of teachers in districts where fewer than one in four students received FRL.

Teachers in districts with more students of color. In schools where students of color make up more

[11] Data for the state and local education industry as reported in July 2022 by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS).

Teachers who are thinking of leaving cite compensation, unreasonable expectations, and an inability to protect their well-being as top motivators.

than three-quarters of the student body, about 38 percent of teachers are thinking of leaving, compared with 30 percent of educators in majority White schools.

Teachers working with younger and older students. Nearly 37 percent of educators working with pre-K or high school students plan to leave, compared with just 28 percent of those working in elementary and middle schools. This trend could have long-lasting consequences not only for educational attainment but also for the US economy and competitiveness at large, given the importance of pre-K for long-term cognitive development and achievement and of high school for higher education and workforce opportunities.[12]

Attrition and retention: Distinctions and overlap

There is no single factor that drives teachers to leave or stay, but our research revealed areas of distinction and overlap. Teachers who are thinking of leaving cite compensation, unreasonable expectations, and an inability to protect their well-being as their top motivators (Exhibit 3), while those who plan to stay cite meaningful work, quality colleagues, and compensation (see sidebar "The compensation conundrum").

Why some educators are planning to leave their roles

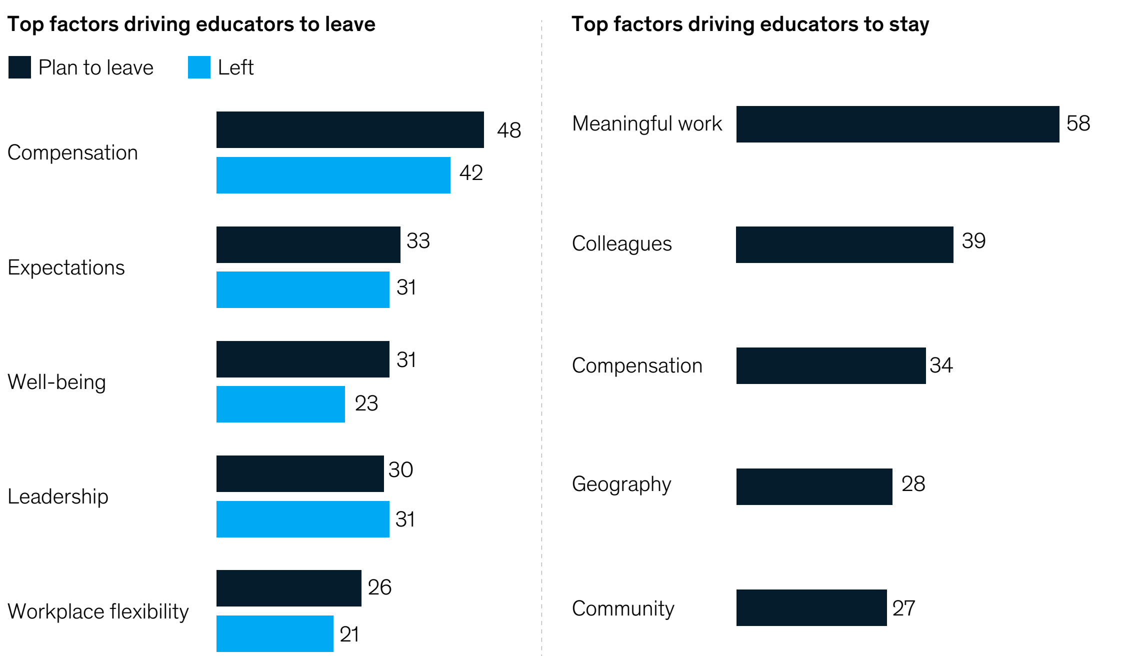
Compensation (including benefits) is consistently cited across all school types as the number-one

[12] Megan Feldman, "New Harvard study reveals lasting benefits of quality early childhood education," First Five Years Fund, March 23, 2018; Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney, "Education is the key to better jobs," Brookings, September 17, 2012.

Exhibit 3

Interpersonal factors drive educators to stay in their roles, while unmanageable work environments can drive them to leave.

Reasons that education sector employees plan to leave vs stay, % of respondents (n = 1,899)



Note: Sample sizes are as follows: plan to stay, 59% (n = 1,126); plan to leave, 27% (n = 518); left, 13% (n = 255).
Source: Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Bryan Hancock, and Bill Schaninger, "The Great Attrition is making hiring harder. Are you searching the right talent pools?," *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 13, 2022

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The compensation conundrum

Studies of human-capital systems in school districts have found that school districts do not compensate teachers to the same degree as college-educated professionals, nor do they provide teachers with the resources they need to do their jobs well. One 2019 analysis by the Economic Policy Institute found a 19 percent pay penalty when comparing teachers to similarly skilled and educated professionals in other industries.[1] Nearly two-thirds of districts are not able to offer pay incentives or differentiated pay, such as cash bonuses or salary increases, to teachers, and only about half of districts provide teachers with reimbursements for purchased classroom supplies.[2]

[1] Sylvia Allegretto and Lawrence Mishel, "Teacher pay penalty dips but persists in 2019," Economic Policy Institute, September 17, 2020.
[2] Meg Benner, Annette Konoske-Graf, and Lisette Partelow, *To attract great teachers, school districts must improve their human capital systems*, Center for American Progress, December 22, 2016.

reason why educators are considering leaving their jobs. Approximately 75 percent of educators in this category say they put more into their job than they receive in return, and 69 percent feel that their total compensation—including base salary and bonuses—does not reflect their qualifications and efforts. Moreover, 65 percent report not being able to live comfortably off earnings from their teaching positions.

Beyond compensation, these educators also feel overworked and undervalued. Nearly 75 percent of respondents who cite expectations as a top reason they plan to leave say they have too much work to do each day and that there aren't enough teachers to carry the workload. Those who cite well-being as a reason to leave say they are expected to give too much time and energy to their jobs at the expense of things outside of work that are meaningful to them. These stressors may be even more pronounced in rural or resource-challenged districts, where responsibilities that may eventually be taken up by new hires are currently divvied up and delegated to existing staff.[13]

Why some educators are planning to stay in their roles

Meaningful work is by far the top reason that motivates teachers to stay. In fact, educators are nearly 20 percent more likely than private-sector employees to identify meaningful work as a top reason to stay in their jobs. Of those who cite this as a reason they want to stick with their current position, 93 percent say they believe their work helps others, while 89 percent say the mission and purpose of their organization aligns with what matters to them (see sidebar "The impacts of free and reduced-price lunch districts on employee experience").

Community and colleagues also play a key role in teacher retention. Among those citing these two factors as reasons for staying, 87 percent say their coworkers show genuine concern for one another, 83 percent say their coworkers help one another to achieve their work goals, 85 percent say they fit in with the culture of the organization, and 84 percent say they can be themselves at work.

Interestingly, factors that drive many educators to leave, such as compensation, being overworked, a lack of resources, and work-life balance, are also reasons for some educators to stay in their roles. Notably, 88 percent of teachers who cite well-being as a reason they want to stay say they have enough time outside of work to spend on things that are meaningful to them; 74 percent say they're not expected to give too much time, energy, and attention to their work; 73 percent of those who cite expectation as a reason to stay say they do not have too much work to do each day; and 62 percent of those who cite compensation as a reason to stay say they can live comfortably off what they earn.

[13] Eliza Fawcett and Jacey Fortin, "How bad is the teacher shortage? Depends where you live," *New York Times*, updated September 2, 2022.

The impacts of free and reduced-price lunch districts on employee experience

Employees who work in areas where high rates of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches are most motivated by meaningful work, with 76 percent of educators in these districts citing this factor as their reason to stay. This may be because they can see the profound effect a good education can have in communities facing higher rates of poverty. But working in these districts can be a double-edged sword: teachers in these districts who report planning to leave cite unsustainable work (33 percent) and lack of well-being (30 percent) as driving factors, likely due to resource constraints and the associated challenges of working in high-poverty districts.

Our survey results suggest that school type, geography, and teacher age, among other factors, may drive these differences in experience. For example, public noncharter teachers are far more likely to report compensation as a reason to stay than teachers in public charter or private nonreligious schools. This may reflect the effect that unions—which are far more present in public noncharter schools—have on teacher salary and other dimensions of compensation. Alternatively, teachers in public charter and private nonreligious schools are more likely to report colleagues, leadership, and career development as reasons to stay.

Geographically, teachers in urban areas are more likely to be driven to stay by reasonable expectations and workplace flexibility than teachers in rural or suburban geographies. Furthermore, teachers who are 45 and older are more likely than younger teachers to report compensation as a reason to stay, which may be due to better tenure-based packages or because older teachers have less educational debt.

The differing experiences of school leaders and classroom teachers

While much of the public narrative has focused on the departure of classroom teachers, school leaders report plans to leave at nearly the same rate, with 31 percent of our school leader respondents planning to leave their roles. Stability in school leadership is an important ingredient in long-term school success and appears to contribute to improved teacher retention.[14]

While the rate of planned departure is nearly the same, the reasons cited by school leaders for staying and leaving differ markedly from those cited by classroom teachers. As described above, teachers stay because of meaning and purpose, connections with colleagues, and compensation. By contrast, school leaders cite well-being, career development, and workplace flexibility as reasons to stay (Exhibit 4).

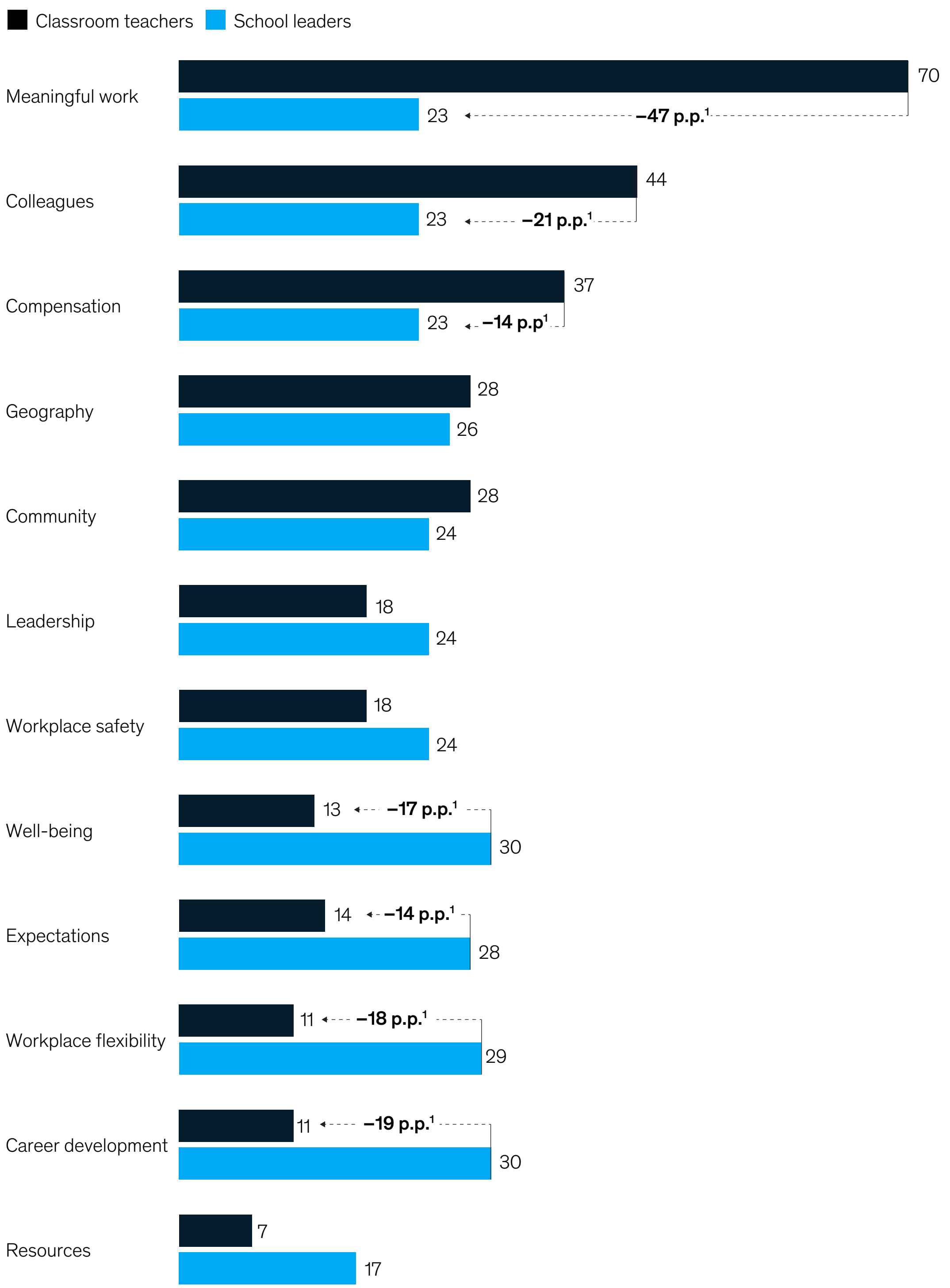
School leaders also differ from teachers in their reasons for leaving: leaders are less likely to cite

[14] Lauren P. Bailes and Sarah Guthery, "Building experience and retention: The influence of principal tenure on teacher retention rates," *Journal of Educational Administration*, June 2022, Volume 60, Number 4.

Exhibit 4

Classroom teachers and school leaders differ significantly in some of their top reasons to stay in their roles.

Reasons that teachers vs school leaders plan to stay by role type, % of respondents (n = 1,644)

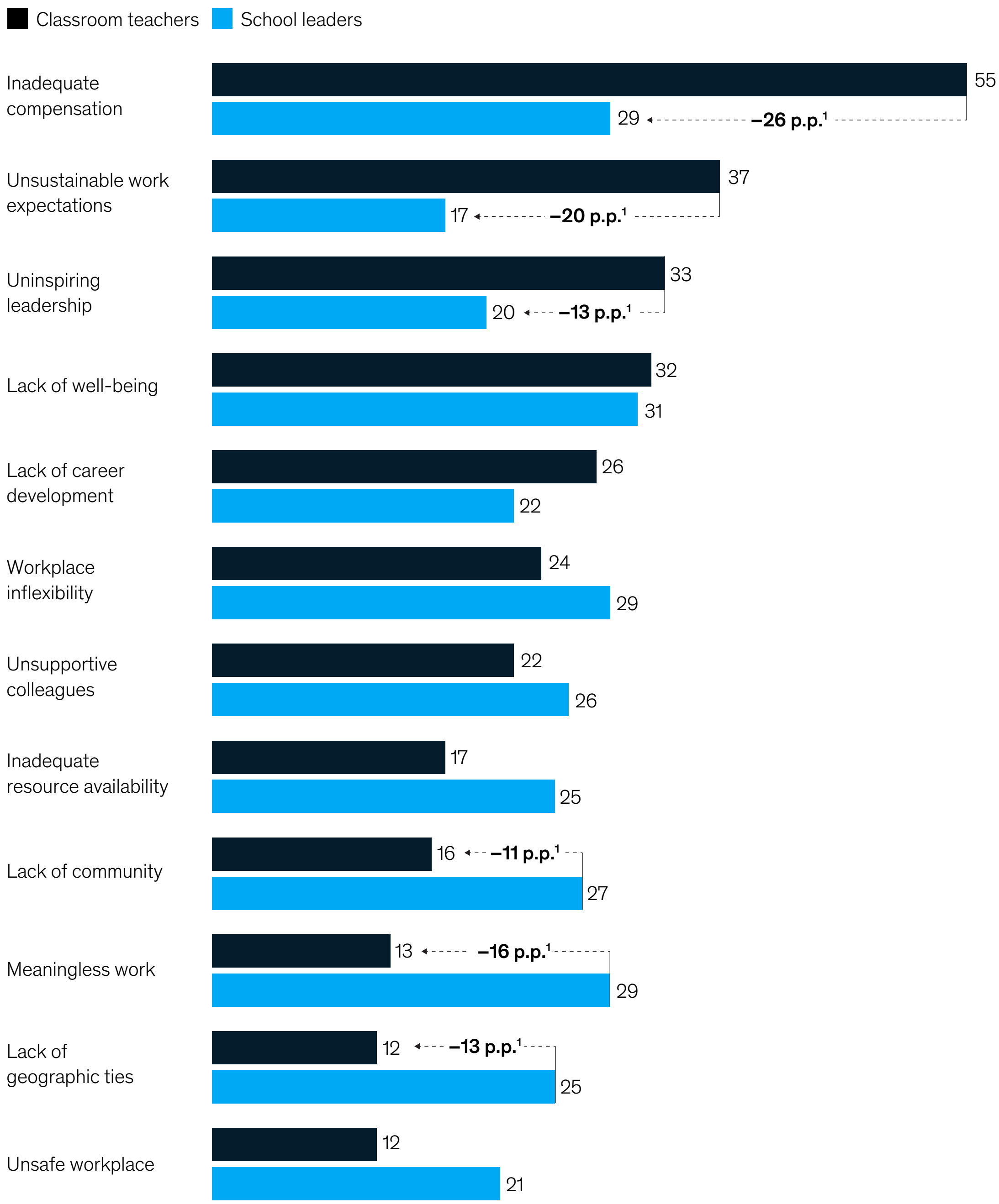


[1]Percentage points.
Source: Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Bryan Hancock, and Bill Schaninger, "The Great Attrition is making hiring harder. Are you searching the right talent pools?," *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 13, 2022

Exhibit 5

Classroom teachers rank compensation and work expectations among their top reasons for planning to leave their roles.

Reasons that education sector employees plan to leave by role type, % of respondents (n = 1,644)



[1]Percentage points.
Source: Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Bryan Hancock, and Bill Schaninger, "The Great Attrition is making hiring harder. Are you searching the right talent pools?," *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 13, 2022

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Multiclassroom methods

One multiclassroom model—piloted by Opportunity Culture[1]—ensures that workloads and staff capacity are appropriately distributed across team members, easing conditions that affect workplace expectations and well-being. At Ranson Middle School in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, for example, leaders are assigned a cohort of classes—such as sixth grade language arts—and divide their weekly time across activities such as teacher coaching, codelivery of lessons, planning time, and data analysis. This approach provides valuable leadership training to cohort teachers while improving student outcomes. As one of the first Opportunity Culture schools in the nation, its results have proved promising, with the middle school ranking in the top 1 percent for overall student growth despite its Title 1 status.[2] This approach could be especially valuable for lower-tenure teachers, who are at greater risk of attrition in their early years.

[1] For more, see the Opportunity Culture website.
[2] "Days in the life: The work of a successful multi-classroom leader," Opportunity Culture, 2018.

compensation and workloads and are more likely to cite resources, a lack of meaning, community, and flexibility, highlighting the unique challenges associated with supporting education outside the classroom (Exhibit 5).

Steps for attracting—and retaining—educators

Addressing critical and growing talent shortages now while laying a more sustainable foundation for the future will likely rely on a mix of targeted interventions to address the root causes of attrition and cater to the unique challenges of teachers whose impending departures could worsen equity gaps.

Though our research shows that compensation is a top driver of both attrition and retention, school districts typically do not have much leeway to alter salary ranges. States and districts are exploring different models of addressing compensation concerns, especially in large urban districts where workforce shortages are felt more acutely. For example, Clark County, Nevada—home to Las Vegas—announced its first pay raise for teachers since 2015[15]; Nashville is raising pay in response to inflation[16]; and San Diego has started offering bigger bonuses.[17] The Noble Network of Charter Schools in Chicago's Distinguished Teacher Program offers an additional $10,000 annual salary increase for teachers who have exemplified success in five key areas: student growth, classroom culture, instructional rigor, inclusion and relevance, and extended impact.[18]

Districts and state education systems could also consider tailoring bonuses to teacher segments that are particularly prone to attrition, such as those working in higher-poverty districts or with younger grade levels and high schoolers. Innovative staffing models that harness the expertise of senior teachers by allowing them to lead lessons across several classrooms have also proven to be a cost-effective intervention that may allow districts to increase compensation by up to $10,000 in select cases (see sidebar "Multiclassroom methods").

Of course, we know that considering only compensation is likely to be insufficient. A survey conducted in late 2020 found that teachers value a school that provides a full-time nurse, counselor, education paraprofessional, and special education coteacher more than they value a 10 percent salary increase.[19] As such, investments in support staff may prove to be both more economical for schools and more valuable for their teachers and school leaders—particularly for teachers in low-income districts, where students may face additional challenges that could be addressed by support staff.

[15] "CCSD raises starting teacher pay, current teachers respond," News 3, May 31, 2022.
[16] Ambriehl Crutchfield, "Nashville teachers and school support staff get a pay bump in Metro budget as inflation rises," WPLN, June 23, 2022.
[17] Will Huntsberry, "Pandemic money will go to 4.5 percent teacher bonuses," Voice of San Diego, June 16, 2022.
[18] "Noble schools names four new distinguished teachers," Noble Schools, June 13, 2022.
[19] Jessica Poiner, "Investing in the teacher workforce," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 5, 2022.

To address overwork concerns, districts could consider a cross-coverage model. At Treadwell Elementary in Memphis, for example, school administrators and other staff provide backup support to cover classes so that teachers don't have to take on extra work without adequate breaks or planning. Coupled with other efforts such as professional development and staff get-togethers, this backup support has contributed to a record 90 percent retention rate at the school even amid the pandemic.[20]

To increase teachers' sense of purpose and meaning in their job, leaders could employ nonfinancial incentives that are common in other workplaces, such as public recognition. Our broader research on the Great Attrition shows that workload-related stress and toxic managers caused many people to leave their jobs during and after the pandemic. Across industries, 70 percent of people noted that they define their purpose through their work, which is also true for educators. Therefore, education systems could focus on helping educators at all levels find purpose in their work. Integrating more nonfinancial incentives and public recognition into educators' jobs may be particularly useful for educators working in high-poverty districts who turn over at a higher rate but who also find their jobs meaningful. The return to in-person learning may also help ease challenges associated with a lack of meaning; almost one-third of teachers who planned to leave in our survey cite the switch to remote learning as a primary reason for departure.

To enhance the satisfaction and sense of purpose of school leaders specifically, actors can consider taking steps to increase the time available for leaders to connect with students and provide greater support to teachers—both in and outside of the classroom—through coaching, feedback, and mentorship. In addition, providing support for completing administrative tasks, for example, could help free up leaders' time so they could focus on developing relationships with stakeholders in the district and help alleviate challenges associated with well-being and burnout.

K–12 schools in the United States are facing talent challenges that have been building for years and that were exacerbated by the pandemic. The longer they go unaddressed, however, the more potential damage they could cause to students and the future of the nation. Understanding the unique factors that are motivating K–12 educators to stay or leave can help inform solutions for addressing critical talent gaps today and for laying a stronger foundation for tomorrow. By tailoring solutions that address the root causes of attrition, leaders could potentially build more fulfilling and equitable environments that better serve not only educators but also students and society at large.

[20] Neven Holland, "The power moves to retain teachers amid the pandemic," Homeroom, May 5, 2022.

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