



## RESEARCH ROUNDUP TEACHER TURNOVER

Here are causes and consequences of teacher turnover in the United States – outlined by several nationally prominent scholars based in universities across the nation.

### **PAY MATTERS.**

Teachers are altruistic in many respects. However, they also respond to the same incentives as workers in other industries: *Pay matters*. Numerous [studies](#) find higher salaries relate to lower rates of turnover. Although high- and low-income schools face some turnover, [lower-income schools suffer higher rates of turnover](#). However, lower-income schools [can overcome turnover in part by paying teachers higher salaries](#).

Low pay can cause early retirement among experienced teachers, particularly if pensions and other retirement benefits are substantial. [Generally](#), if financial incentives to retire outpace incentives to continue to work, schools lose [high-quality, experienced teachers](#).

Compensation is not one size fits all. It matters in different ways for different teachers. Retention of early career teachers is driven by *expected salary growth rate*. However, for later career teachers, the salary level matters more. Either way, pay affects retention.

### **WORKING CONDITIONS MATTER, TOO.**

Pay matters, but is not the only factor. Like other workers, teachers not only want good pay, but a good work environment. Characteristics of schools and students also influence turnover.

**Student Population:** Turnover is higher in schools with challenging student populations, like more [low-achieving students](#), larger populations of [economically disadvantaged and minority students](#), and larger immigration populations. In particular, schools with large populations of low-achieving students see new teachers [leave the occupation entirely](#).

**Neighborhoods and Communities:** Teachers are more likely to [seek jobs with and remain at schools](#) in better-off communities with less crime. This trend reinforces other patterns; driving better teachers to schools with better-off student populations, independent of pay.

**Facilities and Working Conditions:** The [working conditions](#) at schools influence rates of turnover, including class sizes, the quality of facilities, the availability of textbooks, and more.

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**School Leadership:** Studies find that [principals providing effective leadership](#) can help mitigate turnover by successfully identifying and [retaining high-quality teachers](#). While also [selectively replacing ineffective teachers](#) with ones who are more qualified.

**Teacher Support and Autonomy:** Teachers with [a lack of administrative support are more likely to leave](#) their jobs or pursue other careers. Other studies find mentorship in the form of [on-the-job training and support](#) helps both teacher performance and retention rates.

**Teachers' Unions:** Teachers unions improve teacher retention in nuanced ways. Unions assist teachers in advocating for higher pay and more benefits, which helps schools retain teachers. However, unions also help schools retain high-quality teachers and replace lower-quality ones. Schools with strong unions know they will be paying tenured teachers a good amount, [and so are more likely to fire low-performing teachers, pre-tenure](#).

**Licensing Standards:** Different licensing standards across states impede teacher mobility. A study [in Washington and Oregon](#) found *in-state* mobility was much higher than *cross-state* mobility, due in part to [significant penalties for cross-state mobility](#) for teachers, like having to adapt to a new state's licensure requirements. This may help states keep teachers *within* their borders, but also impedes states' ability to lure high-quality teachers across state lines.

## **TURNOVER HAS CONSEQUENCES.**

Teacher turnover is not necessarily bad. Replacing [poor performing teachers with better ones](#) can be a net positive. The supply of high-quality teachers is rarely large enough to replace all lower-quality teachers, but where it is, turnover can [actually improve student achievement](#).

But mostly, turnover has adverse effects on students. High rates of turnover [negatively affect student achievement](#) and result in [higher dropout rates](#), in part, because [less experienced teachers tend to be less effective](#). Turnover also disrupts the performance of a school's retained teachers. In years of high turnover, schools see the [effectiveness of teachers who stay decline](#). Turnover disrupts staff cohesion and places additional burdens on teachers to mentor new colleagues. Turnover is also costly, with at least one projection finding each case of teacher attrition [costs a school system 30% of the departing teacher's salary](#) in related expenses.

Too much turnover can result in teacher shortages, which negatively affects student learning. This is truer for some subjects than others. For instance, in Washington State over a long stretch of time [the production of STEM teachers was too low, so the state had to import teachers](#), a difficult and costly solution.

## **A NUANCED PROBLEM REQUIRES NUANCED SOLUTIONS.**

Turnover has numerous causes and a variety of consequences. It is a nuanced issue. Simply increasing salaries across the board might encourage *poor* performing teachers to stay put. Increases in teacher compensation need to be strategically targeted and sized. Salaries need to be linked to adequate measures of teacher effectiveness and coupled with policy changes that improve working conditions in schools, including better school leadership, better facilities, and more teacher support. Retirement benefits also need to be balanced against salaries so as

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not to [inadvertently incentivize retirement](#). Compensation structures [designed to keep experienced teachers on the job](#) help mitigate turnover.

Teacher turnover is a nuanced problem that requires nuanced solutions. Without smart action, lawmakers can expect teacher turnover to negatively affect student achievement.

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