



2023 Tennessee
**Teacher Retention
Listening Tour**

Findings Overview

Tennessee Department of Education | June 2023





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Executive Summary

Over the past several years, states across the nation have seen a decline in the number of classroom teachers remaining in the profession. In November 2022, the Tennessee Department of Education (department) launched work to begin a statewide Tennessee Teacher Retention Listening Tour to engage with Tennessee teachers across the state, hear their lived experiences in the classroom, and offer an opportunity for them to contribute input related to best practices or approaches to boost teacher retention across the state.

After announcing the listening tour and inviting all current classroom teachers to participate, over 1,000 Tennessee educators statewide expressed interest in interviews, providing input and feedback, through engaging in surveys and more. Using a random sampling method to pull a representative group of 100 teachers to participate in ten cohorts, the department had representation from each region, grade level, district and school type, years of experience, and more.

Over the past few months, the department strategically focused efforts on the Tennessee Teacher Retention Listening Tour, hosting insightful conversations with the ten different cohorts, totaling 3,590 minutes.

This report outlines an overview of the findings from the Teacher Retention Listening Tour and provides specific input that can help the state retain the best teachers in Tennessee.



After participating in the Teacher Retention Listening Tour, I feel confident that we are trending upward in supporting teachers' concerns and supporting new initiatives that support teachers state-wide.

That's why I love teaching, teamwork leads to student success every time.

- Teacher Retention Listening Tour Participant

Overview of the Listening Tour

1,000+ TEACHERS

Engaged in interviews and surveys, representing each CORE region, various grade levels, subjects and number of years in the profession



17 COHORT MEETINGS 90-MINUTES EACH



EACH COHORT MET
throughout February-April



3,590 MINUTES
spent in conversations



Key Findings

1



Personalized & Balanced Professional Development (PD)

Participating teachers discussed their desire for additional and more customized professional development opportunities across the state.

3



Mentorship & Collaboration

Participants shared that after the first few years of teaching, most teachers do not have many opportunities for mentorship, meaning they do not have access to mentorship groups or convenings with other seasoned educators. Teachers believe mentorship and continuous collaboration across the state will be beneficial to the profession in helping them grow and become better educators.

5



Teacher Wellness & Appreciation

Participating teachers want to be valued and appreciated by their district and school leadership and the state emphasizing the need to balance continuous improvements as well as recognition for great work. For example, a “Thank You” from their district and school leadership, students, parents or department staff would show teachers that what they do every day is valued and appreciated.

2



Pay & Benefits

Participating teachers shared their desire for better pay and benefits.

4



Leadership Support

Participating teachers emphasized that school and district leadership set the tone and morale in the overall school environment and culture, and that leadership’s actions directly impact them and their work. Teachers also voiced that spending time in classrooms is the best way leaders can understand and learn about the needs of a classroom.

6



Policymaking & Accountability

Teachers shared they enjoy opportunities to share their classroom experiences with state and elected officials, and would like to be included in more conversations with decision-makers at the department, State Board of Education, and Tennessee General Assembly.



A Deeper Dive into the Key Findings



KEY FINDING 1

Personalized & Balanced Professional Development

Professional development (PD) varies across schools and districts in Tennessee. For example, some schools and districts allow teachers to be more autonomous with their PD and provide them with a list of options to do asynchronously, while other schools require teachers to attend specific PD sessions aligned to specific topics. Additionally, some participants shared that they feel districts and schools require too much or repetitive PD, taking away from their time in the classroom and personal life. On the other hand, some participants feel they have access to great PD opportunities, with some districts and schools providing PD opportunities that teachers believe are helpful and aligned to student needs.

Overall, participants shared they desire to have more personalized PD experiences related to their specific areas of interest and growth, rather than topics that they are already specialized in or sessions they have previously attended in the past. For those teachers who have options to do PD asynchronously, they would like access to a comprehensive list of all available PD options.

“

I'm told I need to ***differentiate instruction to fit different students. Yet all PD is the same thing over and over.*** We partnered with a private company, and they did a great job with PD because they differentiated and had data on what each instructor needed.

- Teacher Retention
Listening Tour Participant



KEY FINDING 2

Pay & Benefits

Tennessee educators shared their desire for better pay and benefits. This topic was the most referenced throughout each conversation the department had during the listening tour. Teachers feel underpaid based on the amount of work that they do, along with the other work responsibilities they are taking on in addition to classroom teaching. Teachers fulfill many duties, including counseling, cleaning their classroom, buying classroom supplies, bus and lunch duty, after school programming, staffing events, etc., and participants shared that due to low pay, some must work other jobs outside of teaching or leave the profession completely to acquire a higher-paying job. Many teachers in districts and schools with lower salary schedules voiced they felt they have low retention rates as a result. They believe this is an area of growth and would like to increase the pay for all educators.

In May 2023, the Tennessee General Assembly passed and Governor Bill Lee signed landmark legislation that gives teachers the largest pay raise in state history, raising the minimum teacher salary to \$50,000 by 2026, a significant increase from \$35,000 in 2019. This will set

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Many teachers have to take on additional jobs, especially to find benefits like health insurance. ***Compared to other states, there is an issue with access to enough pay and benefits.***

In comparison, teaching does not offer the same benefits, memberships, and health insurance coverage. Most teachers I know are working two or three jobs. This is why many are quitting.

- Teacher Retention
Listening Tour Participant

Tennessee on a path to a \$50,000 minimum teacher salary in the next few years, which will also impact the average teacher salary across the state. Beginning with shifting Tennessee's salary schedule to \$42,000 this year, Tennessee will move ahead of Mississippi and South Carolina, and begin to catch up to comparative states such as Florida and Alabama.

In terms of benefits not directly related to salary, teachers highlighted three additional areas: **1)** teachers feel as though they could benefit from lower costs for healthcare for themselves and their dependents, **2)** participants also voiced that although teachers do get time off throughout the year, they feel additional days off to use for illness or restoring their mental health during the school year would be beneficial, and **3)** participating teachers also shared additional planning time would be helpful because their typical planning time is often used to fill other duties as assigned, such as lunch duty.

Teachers believe that these improvements would go a long way in retaining teachers across the state by lessening their workload and providing more time to teach and take care of themselves.



KEY FINDING 3

Mentorship & Collaboration

Participants shared that after the first few years of teaching, most teachers do not have many opportunities for mentorship, meaning they do not have access to mentorship groups or convenings with other seasoned educators. Teachers believe mentorship and continuous collaboration across the state will be beneficial to the profession in helping them grow and become better educators.

They expressed that their current mentorship is focused on teachers that have been in the field for one to three years. Although many veteran teachers are mentors, they would enjoy a chance to have more teacher collaboration settings to grow and learn from other teachers in schools in their district as well as other schools across the state.

Experienced teachers also mentioned they feel hesitant to speak up when they need help or have a question, out of concern that they will be looked down upon by their district or school leadership. After being in the profession for many years and with it ever-changing and growing, teachers want to feel supported in seeking or providing mentorship no matter how many years they have been in the profession.

Additionally, teachers voiced formal mentorship programs, informally mentoring their colleagues and continuous collaboration could be beneficial to the profession in helping teachers strengthen their skills and create a strong support system across the profession.

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We need more time for collaboration as teachers. Usually, we do it after school on our own time. We need more time built in for that, not just in your subject area but also within your grade level. I wish there were a way to build that in more to have more collaboration time.

- Teacher Retention Listening Tour Participant



KEY FINDING 4

Leadership Support

Participating teachers emphasized that school and district leadership set the tone and morale in the overall school environment and culture, and that leadership's actions directly impact them and their work. With that in mind, teachers shared they appreciate reassurance from leaders that we are all in this together - and they will provide educators the support they need to support students.



(continued)



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I would like for us to be supported and feel like someone has our back. When a directive comes from the district or state, a leader says they are doing their job. I want someone to have my back in my district. This would help with a lot of issues.

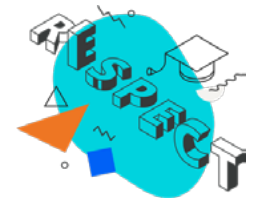
- Teacher Retention Listening Tour Participant

Teachers also voiced that spending time in classrooms is the best way leaders can understand and learn about the needs of a classroom. Teachers who believed their leaders spend adequate time in classrooms voiced that this made them feel respected and more connected to leadership, and that leaders are intentionally working to support them.



KEY FINDING 5

Teacher Wellness & Appreciation



Many teachers throughout the listening tour voiced that showing appreciation and prioritizing the well-being of teachers should be top of mind when considering teacher retention.

Teacher identified challenges, including a lack of sufficient support staff and an unreasonable workload, that often leave little to no time for personal lives during the school year. The participants suggested to include more mental health programs and remove some of their workload by hiring additional support staff and considering the high expectations many teachers are encountering.

Teachers play an extremely impactful role in the future of our states and nation, and they desire respect and appreciation for their dedication to students. Some teachers shared that they feel as though many individuals outside of the profession do not respect them and voiced that a simple improvement would be to see more personalized appreciation. For example, a “Thank You” from their district and school leadership, students, parents or department staff would show teachers that what they do every day is valued and appreciated. Participants voiced that continuously showing gratitude to teachers for their steadfast work in and outside of the classroom on behalf of their students can boost morale in the profession. The participants feel that creating systems to value teacher time, mental health, and workload would be beneficial to promoting teacher retention in the state.

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The value of education has decreased over the years. It isn't as important to people. Teachers feel they need to be backed by the administration.

Teachers aren't supported or respected. It's embarrassing to tell people I am a teacher because it's looked down upon, which makes me sad.

- Teacher Retention Listening Tour Participant



KEY FINDING 6

Policymaking & Accountability

Teachers expressed a desire to raise awareness among state and local elected officials on Tennessee teachers' experiences in their classrooms and schools and that they would like to see staff at the state-level who have previously been a classroom teacher.

Teachers shared they enjoy opportunities to share their classroom experiences with state and elected officials, and would like to be included in more conversations with decision-makers at the department, State Board of Education, and Tennessee General Assembly. Teachers voiced that they would like a seat at the table and be provided with opportunities to be part of the legislative process.





Conclusion

Through the Tennessee Teacher Retention Listening Tour, hundreds of Tennessee teachers provided insightful and valuable feedback on their lived experiences in the classroom. The educators within our state have a responsibility to support all our students— and importantly, the passion and dedication to help them succeed.

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By voicing my opinion in the listening tour, ***I rediscovered my love for the ‘Ah-Ha’ moments and the joy that I feel when students reach the point of understanding.*** I made extra efforts after the listening tour to make more of those moments happen and I plan to continue this going forward.

The department would like to thank each educator for their time and willingness to participate in the listening tour, and prepared this report to share Tennessee teacher input on how to improve their classroom experience. Tennessee is dedicated to retaining and attracting high-quality educators to provide the best for all students.

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