

Educator Retention Strategies for District Leaders

Practical Starting Points to Keep Great Educators in Tennessee Classrooms

What is Educator Retention?

Educator retention refers to the ability of a school or district to keep qualified teachers and staff employed over time. It reflects how often educators remain in their roles year-to-year and is influenced by factors such as job satisfaction, support systems, working conditions, and opportunities for professional growth.

Educator retention impacts school systems in a number of ways, including:

- Retaining teachers is cost-effective and saves schools and districts time and money. Replacing teachers involves significant expenses for recruiting, hiring, and training new staff, which can be a substantial burden on school budgets.¹
- High teacher retention rates lead to improved student outcomes, especially in high-need schools. Research suggests a correlation between high teacher turnover and lower student test scores, particularly in high-poverty schools.²
- When teachers leave, schools may need to rely more on substitute teachers or educators who are newer to the profession, which can make it challenging to maintain consistency and continuity of instruction.
- Teacher turnover can also disrupt or limit the types of academic courses that can be offered to students within a school or district, especially in hard-to-staff subject areas at the secondary grade level, such as mathematics or world languages.
- Low rates of educator retention can place a resulting burden on remaining

¹ Learning Policy Institute. (2024, September 17). *2024 update: What's the cost of teacher turnover?* Learning Policy Institute. [2024 Update: What's the Cost of Teacher Turnover?](#)

² Jabbar, H., & Holme, J. J. (2025). *Teacher turnover and social capital: Understanding the mechanisms*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Advance online publication. [Teacher Turnover, Social Capital, and Improvement: How Instability Disrupts School](#)

teachers, who must help cover classes, onboard new colleagues, or teach larger classes that have been combined due to teacher vacancies, potentially contributing to greater burnout among those remaining teachers.

- Frequent teacher turnover can disrupt a school's positive culture, affecting relationships among teachers, students, and the wider community.
- Lower teacher retention rates can translate into district leaders spending more of their time and capacity on human capital initiatives, such as recruitment, staffing, and new teacher training, impacting time that could be otherwise spent on key priorities such as instructional leadership.

Key State Requirements and Sponsored Initiatives to Increase Teacher Retention

Tennessee has implemented a range of policies and initiatives aimed at strengthening teacher retention and supporting a stable educator workforce. Legislative action has prioritized compensation, positioning Tennessee as more competitive in attracting and keeping quality educators. Additionally, the Tennessee Department of Education has acknowledged the need to highlight the importance of educator pay, benefits, mentorship, leadership support, and recognition. Together, these efforts reflect the state's commitment to addressing the root causes of turnover and to ensuring that more educators choose to remain in Tennessee classrooms.

- [Educator Preparation Report Card \(T.C.A. § 49-5-108\)](#)²

[Annual Educator Preparation Report Card press release](#), showed a year-to-year increase in three-year retention for new teachers from 78.8% to 82.6%.³

- [Minimum Teacher Salary Increase to \\$50K by 2026 \(T.C.A. § 49-3-306\)](#)
Legislation signed by Governor Bill Lee in 2023 raises the minimum base salary for Tennessee teachers from \$35,000 in 2019 to \$50,000 by the 2026–2027 school year and is designed to improve teacher recruitment and retention.
- [Teacher Retention “Listening Tour” and Report](#)
In 2023, the Tennessee Department of Education conducted a Teacher Retention

³ [Annual Educator Preparation Report Card Press Release](#)

Listening Tour and gathered insights from over 1,000 educators. The findings emphasized the need for better pay and benefits, personalized professional development, mentorship, leadership support, and recognition efforts. This initiative informed the state's retention policy direction, and the resulting report outlining key takeaways is available in the [2023 Tennessee Teacher Retention Listening Tour Findings Overview](#).

2025 TN Educator Survey Highlights on Educator Retention

A few points of interest in the [2025 Tennessee Educator Survey Results](#) focus on educator retention efforts and workplace conditions that are important to Tennessee teachers. These findings indicate that low teacher compensation is a concern for 1 in 3 current Tennessee teachers who responded. However, results also show that other factors beyond teacher pay more heavily influence educator retention.

- Approximately 70% of teacher respondents who said they planned to continue teaching in their schools next year identified culture and climate among teachers and staff as an important factor in their decision.
- Top reasons respondents decided not to continue teaching were school leadership (35%) and culture and climate among teachers and staff, highlighting the strong influence leadership and school culture have on teacher retention.
- 54% of teacher respondents who indicated they do not intend to continue teaching said they will earn the same or less money when they leave the profession.
- 47% of teacher respondents said their school leadership influenced their decision to continue teaching in that school the following year.
- 33% of respondents reported that encouragement from school administration played a role in their decision to continue teaching at that school.

Educator Retention Strategies: Key Concepts and Best Practices

While educator retention strategies can and *should* look different based on each district's unique circumstances, the key concepts and best practices below serve as guiding principles for district leaders to align their educator retention strategies:

- **Strategic Staffing and Early Hiring:** Encourage signing upcoming school-year contracts and completion of internal transfers no later than the prior spring, if not earlier. Use data to prioritize early hiring in historically hard-to-staff roles and schools, and consider implementing a strategic staffing model to create clearly mapped opportunities for teacher career growth.
- **Differential Retention:** The practice of differential retention means focusing retention efforts on the educators a district wants to keep most, including highly effective teachers, those in hard-to-fill roles, and support staff with strong community connections. This means that instead of applying the same strategies to everyone, districts prioritize resources such as targeted bonuses, leadership opportunities, or specialized professional development for these key educators. This approach helps maintain instructional quality, stabilize school culture, and protect hard-to-fill positions, all while maximizing the return on the district's investment in recruitment and training. By keeping the right educators in the right roles longer, districts can improve student outcomes and reduce costly turnover.
- **Leadership Development:** Support principals with tools to build positive school cultures and to respond to teachers' needs. Embed educator retention best practices into school leader coaching and evaluation conversations. Promote professional growth by offering leadership roles, such as teacher mentors, team leads, and facilitators, to a wide variety of staff members. Provide feedback that enables educators to build their leadership skills.
- **Teacher Voice and Engagement:** In addition to exit interviews, conduct stay interviews by winter break annually to let teachers know you would like them to continue teaching in their current school and district. Elevate teacher voice in district-level and school-level decision-making (e.g., advisory panels, textbook adoption, feedback loops).
- **Data-Informed Decision-Making:** Use multiple data sources, including the Tennessee Educator Survey, the Educator Preparation Report Card, and local retention and vacancy reports, to understand trends, identify areas of concern,

compare district data to statewide averages or peer districts, and highlight bright spots. Use these insights to make timely, targeted adjustments to retention strategies, such as refining mentorship programs, adjusting workload expectations, or enhancing professional development offerings. Regularly reviewing both quantitative and qualitative data ensures decisions are evidence-based, responsive to educator needs, and focused on sustaining a strong, stable workforce of effective educators, year-over-year.

Foundations for Success: Ensuring High Levels of Educator Retention

To ensure successful implementation and long-term sustainability, districts seeking to strengthen educator retention should begin by aligning vision, leadership, and systems around a clear retention strategy that supports educator well-being, promotes career progression, and addresses the evolving needs of schools and students. School leaders are essential to fostering a culture of belonging, support, and growth, and should be equipped with clear messaging, data-informed strategies, and designated action steps to effectively address educator concerns, encourage engagement, and build a climate of trust and commitment that motivates teachers to continue teaching. Key action steps district leaders can take include:

- **Align Vision, Leadership, and Systems:** Establish a shared commitment to retention, build leadership capacity to support educator development, and ensure that district policies and operational practices reflect a culture that both values and retains talent.
- **Engage People and Utilize Data:** Involve educators and stakeholders through consistent, transparent communication and use data, including the Tennessee Educator Survey, to understand trends, monitor impact, and guide responsive support strategies that encourage educator retention.
- **Emphasize, Invest, and Sustain:** Prioritize supports that matter by investing in mentorship, professional growth, educator wellness, and sustainable, effective practices.

Explore More Resources on Educator Retention

For access to additional tools, guidance, and implementation support on educator retention and other human capital priorities, please contact teachready@tn.gov or visit the [TeachReadyTN webpage](#).