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TEACHER ATTRITION BEFORE, DURING, & AFTER COVID

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TEACHER ATTRITION BEFORE, DURING, & AFTER COVID

In some places, teacher turnover dropped in 2020. But a closer look reveals a pressing need to make the teaching job more rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New ERS analysis shows that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher turnover declined during 2020 in six districts we studied — however, this shouldn't be taken at face value. A closer look reveals a deep, pressing need to make the teaching job more rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable.

Before COVID, the shortage of qualified, skilled teachers — especially in our lowest-income communities and hardest-to-staff roles — was among the top challenges facing education leaders. And with the stress of the pandemic, survey data showed that [almost half](#) of the public school teachers who left the profession since March 2020 cite COVID-19 as the main reason.

But as school systems ramp up hiring for next fall, concrete data on actual teacher turnover [is scarce](#). To fill in that gap, ERS worked with six of our district partners — all large, urban districts, spread across the country — to understand their actual teacher turnover patterns in 2020.

What We Found:

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer teachers left these school districts than in previous years. **In these six districts, teacher turnover declined from an average of 17.3 percent over the prior three years, to 12.6 percent in 2020.** In a school with 40 teachers, this is the equivalent of retaining two more teachers than in previous years. Furthermore, we saw lower attrition in all six districts we studied and in virtually all subgroups in each district.¹ The biggest decline occurred among early career teachers in high-poverty schools — a group that typically leaves their districts at the highest rate. This means that, in a uniquely tumultuous year, **students in the highest-poverty schools experienced the greatest increase in staff stability compared to prior years.**²

Unpacking the Findings:

Reduced teacher turnover is undoubtedly a good thing. But it shouldn't justify inaction. Instead, it should be seen as a unique opportunity to improve the teaching job, build on this turn of events, and forestall a potentially huge amount of future turnover. Why?

- ***Even before the pandemic, teaching was a challenging job.*** Teachers were stressed, undercompensated, and feeling underappreciated.³ Turnover was consistently high, especially in higher-poverty schools.
- ***The economy — not improved working conditions or job satisfaction — may be what caused more teachers to stay in their jobs in 2020.*** In the communities we studied, unemployment rates were two to three times higher during summer 2020 than just a few months prior. And historically, when [unemployment rises](#), teachers (like most workers) are less likely to leave their jobs. As the economy improves and unemployment declines, teacher attrition may increase back to previous levels (or worse).
- ***We have a wealth of other indicators that point to a problem.*** Being spread thin with technology challenges and various modes of teaching, declining student engagement, fear of contracting COVID, feeling unappreciated by the general public, and balancing their own caretaking responsibilities have made teaching this year even harder. Signs point to increased [workloads](#) and declining job [satisfaction](#); 84 percent of teachers and administrators say [teacher morale](#) is lower than it was prior to COVID (a number that has increased throughout the course of the pandemic); and [one-third of teachers](#) say working during the pandemic has made them more likely to leave teaching or retire early.

**Where We Go From Here:**

These findings (and the unpacking of these findings) illustrate what an important moment it is for the education field to construct teaching jobs that are better, more rewarding, more collaborative, and more sustainable. Doing so could turn the improved retention we saw in places this year into a long-term pattern, rather than a temporary spike resulting from extreme circumstances. What if...we saw this reduced turnover every year? What if that reduced turnover wasn't due to a tough economy and lack of other options, but rather was because teaching is a great job to have? **What would that mean for our educators and for our students?**

With new federal funding in the picture, there has been a lot of discussion about how to add learning time and provide tutoring — but state, district, and school leaders should also be exploring how to use stimulus dollars in ways that improve the teaching job. This category of spending is one of [ERS' five research-backed "Power Strategies"](#) that aim to address students' urgent academic and social-emotional needs *and* change underlying cost structures to make implementation sustainable.

Districts and schools can build toward making teachers' jobs more rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable by listening to teachers about their pain points and needs, and by investing in the kinds of structures and conditions matter most — such as competitive compensation with opportunities to grow over time, supportive school leadership, sufficient time for collaboration, and teaching loads that make it possible to build relationships with their students and adjust approaches to meet their needs.

By using federal funds to convert systems and practices that often cause teachers to leave into ones that help them thrive can help ensure that the lower teacher turnover we saw in 2020 wasn't an aberration, but the beginning of a trend toward increased satisfaction, job sustainability, workforce stability, and student success.

Endnotes

- ¹ Subgroup data was analyzed by gender, by race/ethnicity, by grade-level taught, whether or not a teacher taught special education, by school poverty level, and by years of experience.
- ² Our analysis compared employee snapshots from October 2020 to those from October 2016-2019. Note that these findings do not account for teacher absences, substitute shortages, cross-school turnover, or teachers who may have resigned at the end of 2020 or so far in 2021.
- ³ In 2018, the teacher [wage gap](#) hit a record high of 21.4 percent. Despite [broad support](#) for increasing teacher pay, teachers earn less than comparable college-graduate workers in all 50 [states](#), and are three times more likely to balance [multiple jobs](#) (during the school year) than US workers overall. Teachers work an average of [10 hours and 40 minutes](#) each day; [61 percent](#) report finding work "always" or "often" stressful; and 46 percent report [high levels of daily stress](#) — on par with doctors and nurses as the highest among all occupational groups. Yet just [36 percent](#) of US teachers believe American society values the teaching profession.



INTRODUCTION

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, education leaders were increasingly concerned about the shortage of qualified, skilled educators, especially in our lowest-income communities and hardest-to-staff roles. In March 2019, the Economic Policy Institute [reported](#) that “the teacher shortage is real, large and growing, and worse than we thought.” Later that same year, the Center for American Progress [summarized](#) the challenge of attracting and retaining teachers as a trifecta of “low salaries, difficult working conditions, and a lack of career pathway opportunities.”

Then came COVID. Being a teacher has become even more challenging than before, and as noted in a recent [report](#) from the Learning Policy Institute, there are growing worries among district leaders “about future [teacher] shortages given the long-term impacts of the pandemic.”

However, as school systems begin to ramp up recruiting for the fall, concrete data on teacher turnover is [scarce](#). To help fill these gaps, ERS worked with six of our district partners — all large, urban districts spread across the country — to understand their actual teacher turnover patterns in 2020. We analyzed personnel files from October 1 snapshots over the past five years in each district, seeking to understand:

1. What was overall teacher turnover going into the 2020 school year? How did this vary from prior years?
2. Where turnover changed, which groups of teachers were more or less likely to leave than in prior years?
3. Based on this analysis, how might district leaders shape teacher recruitment, development, and retention efforts as part of a cohesive plan for the 2021-22 school year — including through the potential application of federal stimulus funds?

For details about methodology and potential limitations, go to page 13.

EXPLORE THE DATA

The districts included in our analysis collectively employ approximately 18,000 teachers and educate 270,000 students, 77 percent of whom qualify for federal free or reduced lunch.

District	Region	Approximate student enrollment	Percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch	Approximate number of teachers	Average monthly unemployment rate, Apr-Sep 2020	County cumulative COVID case rate, 9/30/20
A	South	50,000	75%	3,000	8.8	2.6%
B	East	50,000	75%	4,200	8.1	2.2%
C	Midwest	30,000	65%	1,600	9.1	2.3%
D	West	20,000	90%	800	12.9	2.9%
E	South	85,000	80%	6,200	11.6	3.4%
F	South	35,000	80%	2,200	9.1	2.7%
National Average:		45,000	77.5%	3,000	9.9	2.7%

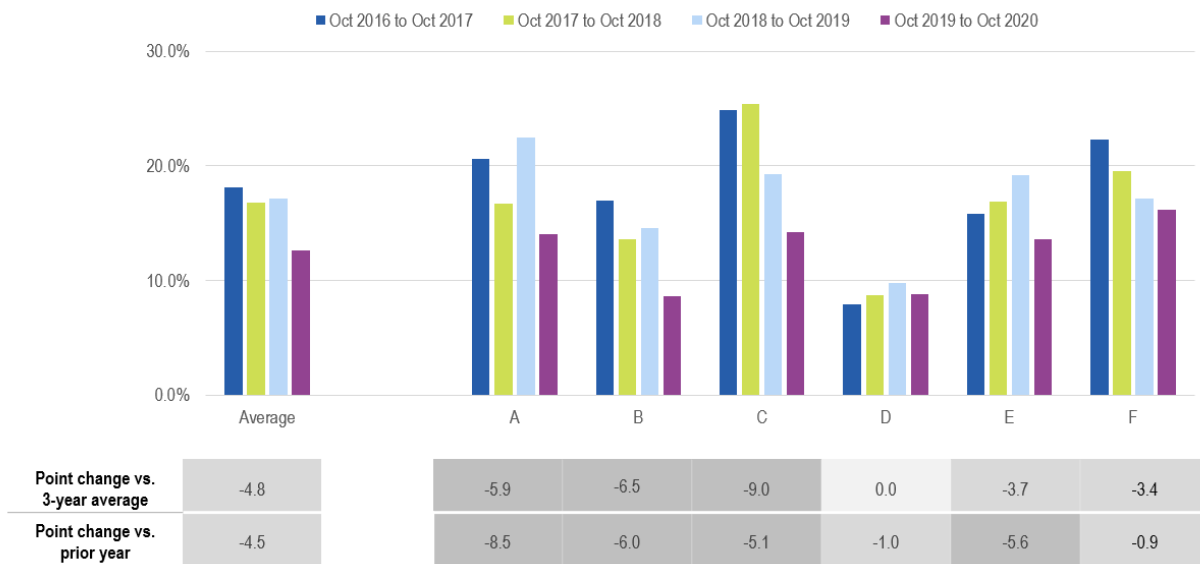


Finding #1

In 2020, teacher turnover declined in all six districts we studied, often by more than we have seen in prior years.

Between October 2019 and October 2020, a smaller proportion of teachers left than in the prior 12 months in each of the six districts we studied. In all but one district, turnover rates were lower than in any of the prior three 12-month periods. This is true regardless of prior trends — for example, both District C (which had a five-point *decrease* in turnover between 2018 and 2019) and District A (which saw a six-point *increase* in turnover between 2018 and 2019) experienced significant declines in turnover between October 2019 and October 2020.

Figure 1. Annual district-level turnover*, October snapshots, 2016-2020

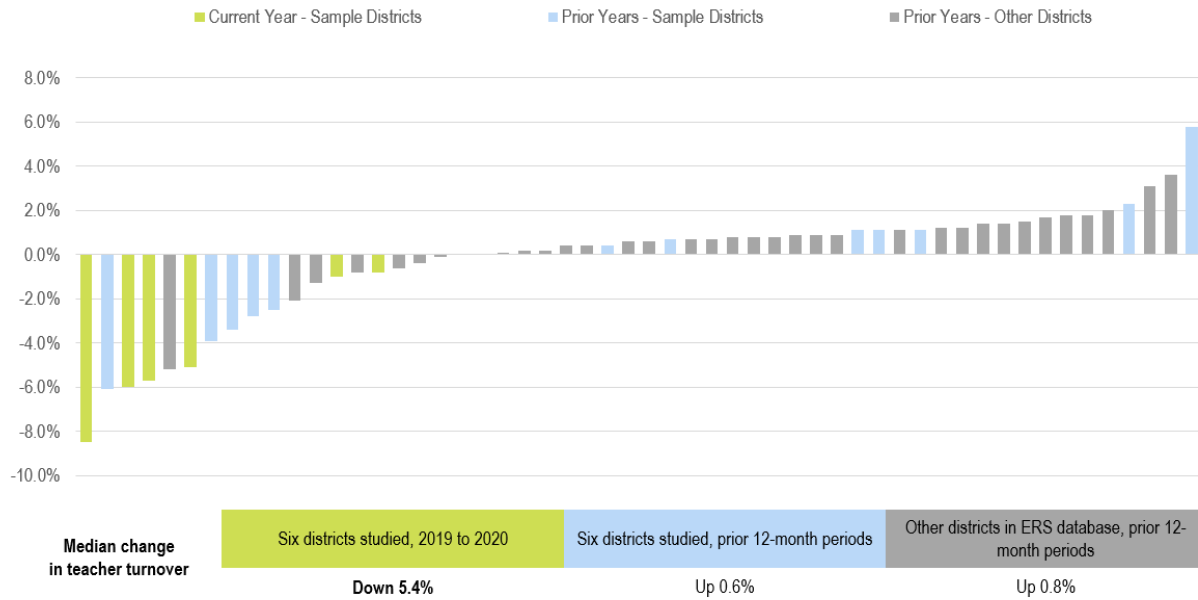


*On the surface, District D is an exception to the trend, with a 2020 turnover of 8.8 percent — the same as the average from 2016 to 2019. However, in 2020, approximately 3 percent of teachers in the district, all early in their careers, were involuntarily released so that instructional coaches could move into teaching roles at the district’s direction. Controlling for this strategy, we estimate District D’s turnover would have been approximately 6 percent, or 2.8 percentage points lower than their prior year average.

Because turnover fluctuates from year to year, we compared the change from October 2019–October 2020 to prior year-over-year changes in these six districts, as well as other districts in the ERS database. As Figure 2 shows, the decline in turnover we observed in four of the six districts is on par with the largest year-over-year declines in our database; the smaller declines in the other two districts are still below the median change from prior years.



Figure 2. Annual change in teacher turnover rates, October snapshots, districts in ERS database

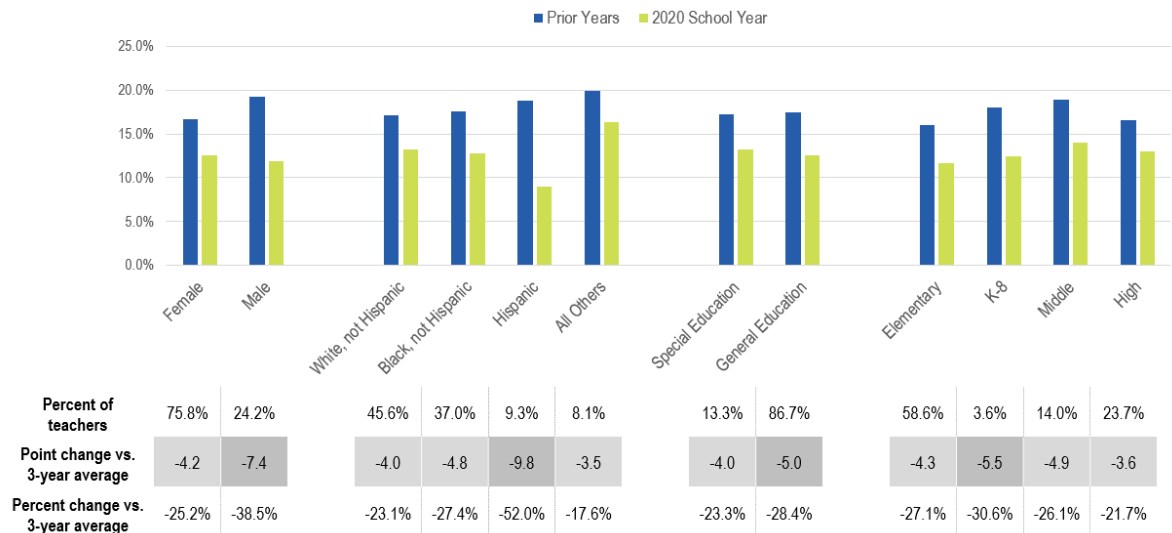


Finding #2

In the districts we studied, turnover declined across all subgroups of teachers.

Among subgroups of teachers — including gender, race/ethnicity, school level, school-level poverty, and years of experience — average turnover declined by 3.3 to 8.2 percentage points when compared to the average of the prior three years. These trends were evident in virtually all of the six districts we studied.

Figure 3. Teacher turnover rate by teacher subgroup*, 6-district average, 2016-2020





*To avoid skewing the averages, two districts were excluded from parts of the race/ethnicity portion of the analysis due to small sample size: District D, where 2 percent of teachers are Black, and District E, where 1 percent of teachers are Hispanic.

Finding #3

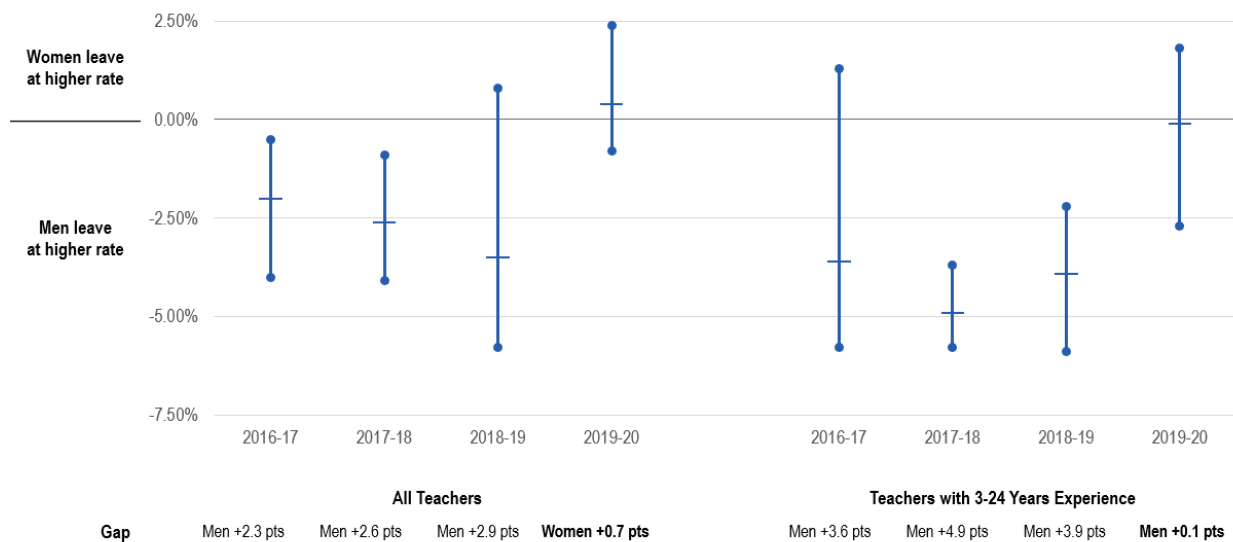
In 2020, the “turnover rate gap” between men and women closed in the districts we studied.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on working women. An [analysis](#) of the US Census Current Population Survey done by McKinsey found that “women have accounted for nearly 56 percent of workforce exits since the start of the pandemic, despite making up just 48 percent of the workforce” — and in February 2021, CBS News [reported](#) that “the urgent need for childcare at home has pushed [many] working mothers to withdraw from the workforce in order to take over childcare responsibilities.”

[Three-quarters](#) of American public school teachers are women. In a typical year in the districts we studied, women are less likely to depart than men: between 2016-2016, an average of 16.7 percent of female teachers left these districts each year, compared to 19.3 percent of male teachers — a gap of 2.6 percentage points, with men more likely to depart.

As overall teacher turnover declined from 2019 to 2020, the *rate* of decline among female teachers was far slower than among male teachers. As a result, the prior “turnover rate gap” was erased: 11.8 percent of male teachers (down 7.5 points) and 12.5 percent of female teachers (down 4.2 points) left their districts — a “reverse gap” of 0.7 percentage points. This trend was particularly notable among teachers with three to 24 years of experience, who might be more likely to be living with children at home. In prior years, male teachers in this group across the districts we studied left at a rate 3.6 to 4.9 percentage points higher than their female peers, but in 2020 men and women left their districts at roughly the same rate.

Figure 4. Turnover rate gap by gender, range, and average among districts studied*, 2016-2020



*Gender data excludes District E due to data limitations.



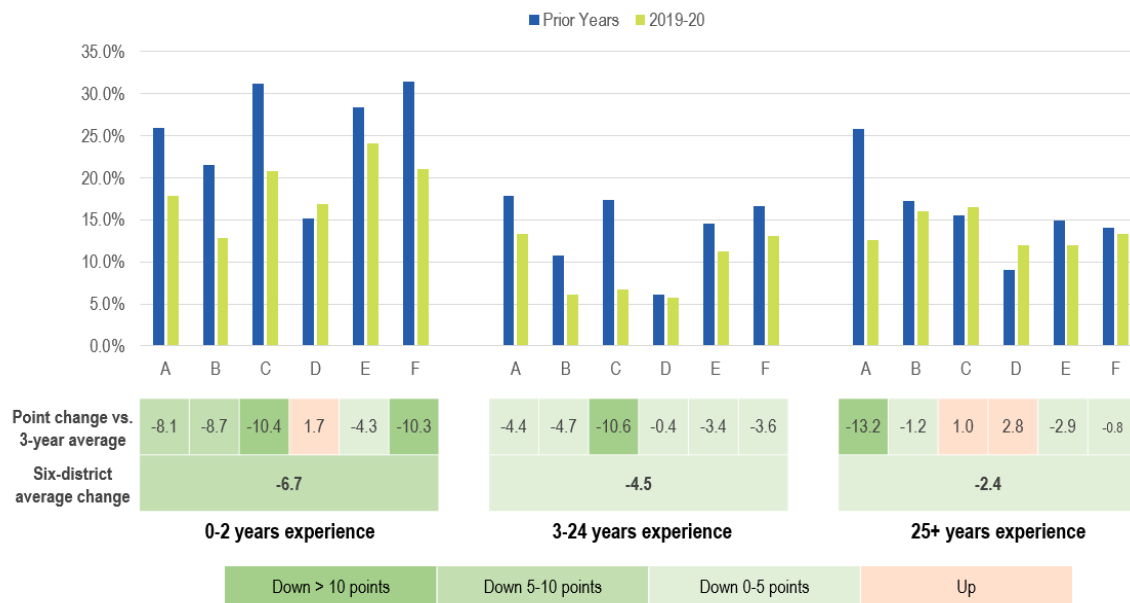
Finding #4

In the districts we studied, turnover among early-career teachers declined more than the turnover among experienced teachers.

Typically, teachers with less than three years of experience leave their districts at much higher rates than their more experienced peers. Burnout, lack of a career fit, and the challenges of growing strong teaching skills and competencies can all contribute to this higher turnover rate.

As teacher turnover dropped across the board in 2020 in the six districts we studied, turnover among rookie teachers dropped more (on a percentage point basis) than that of mid-career or senior teachers. Specifically, from 2016 to 2019, 25.6 percent of rookie teachers left their district annually, compared to 13.9 percent of teachers in years three to 24, and 16.1 percent of teachers with 25 or more years of experience. In 2020, the rookie teacher turnover rate dropped to 19.5 percent — still higher than 9.4 percent and 13.7 percent for mid-career and the most experienced teachers respectively, but closing the gap.

Figure 5. Teacher turnover by district and years of experience*, 2016-2020



*This does not count the rookie teachers in District D who were released to make room for coaches moving into teaching roles in fall 2020; we estimate attrition would have dropped by 2.8 points.

Finding #5

The largest decline in turnover across the six districts we studied occurred among early-career teachers working in the highest-poverty schools — implying increased workforce stability at those schools during 2020 than in prior years.

Rookie teachers are more likely than their more experienced peers to work in the highest-poverty schools. In the six districts we studied, 32.0 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools have less than three years of teaching experience, compared to 22.7 percent in all other schools.

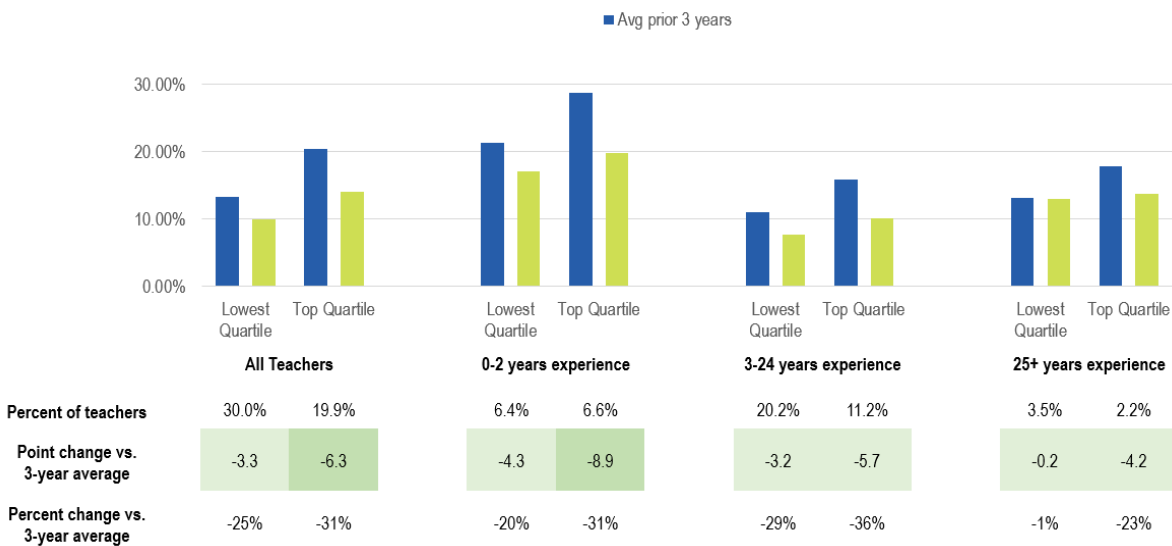
This higher representation of rookie teachers in high-poverty schools contributes to overall higher rates of turnover in these schools — precisely the schools where staff stability is most crucial to accelerating student



learning. Therefore in 2020, these schools disproportionately benefited from the decreased turnover among rookie teachers.

In a typical year, rookie teachers in high-poverty schools are the most likely to leave their district, departing at a rate seven percentage points higher than their rookie peers in lower-poverty schools, and 11 to 18 points higher than more experienced teachers in any subset of schools. But in 2020, rookie turnover in high-poverty schools dropped more than that of any other group, significantly reducing the gap between rookie teacher turnover in high-poverty schools vs. those at higher-income schools.

Figure 6. Turnover rate by years of experience and school poverty, 2016-2020



UNPACKING THE FINDINGS

Reduced teacher turnover is undoubtedly a good thing. But it shouldn't justify inaction. Instead, it should be seen as a unique opportunity to improve the teaching job, build on this turn of events, and forestall a potentially huge amount of future turnover. Why?

- **Even before the pandemic, teaching was a challenging job.** Teachers were stressed, undercompensated, and feeling underappreciated. Turnover was consistently high, especially in higher-poverty schools.
- **The economy — not improved working conditions or job satisfaction — may be what caused more teachers to stay in their jobs in 2020.** In the communities we studied, unemployment rates were two to three times higher during summer 2020 than just a few months prior. And historically, when [unemployment rises](#), teachers (like most workers) are less likely to leave their jobs. As the economy improves and unemployment declines, teacher attrition may increase back to previous levels (or worse).
- **We have a wealth of other indicators that point to a problem.** Being spread thin with technology challenges and various modes of teaching, declining student engagement, fear of contracting COVID, feeling unappreciated by the general public, and balancing their own caretaking



responsibilities have made teaching this year even harder. Signs point to increased [workloads](#) and declining job [satisfaction](#); 84 percent of teachers and administrators say [teacher morale](#) is lower than it was prior to COVID (a number that has increased throughout the course of the pandemic); and [one-third of teachers](#) say working during the pandemic has made them more likely to leave teaching or retire early.

ACTION STEPS

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, children across the country need even more opportunities for differentiated, high-quality learning, even stronger relationships with the adults in their school, and even more streamlined access to social-emotional support. And these needs are even more deeply felt in our lowest-income communities and by Black and Latinx students, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

Teacher turnover makes addressing these challenges even more difficult — and a closer look at these findings illustrates what an important moment it is for the education field to construct teaching jobs that are better, more rewarding, more collaborative, and more sustainable. Doing so could turn the improved retention we saw in places this year into a long-term pattern, rather than a temporary spike resulting from extreme circumstances. What if...we saw this reduced turnover every year? What if that reduced turnover wasn't due to a tough economy and lack of other options, but rather was because teaching is a great job to have? **What would that mean for our educators and for our students?**

With new federal funding in the picture, there has been a lot of discussion about how to add learning time and provide tutoring — but state, district, and school leaders should also be exploring how to use stimulus dollars in ways that improve the teaching job both now and in the future. As they embark on this work, employing a [“do now, build toward” approach](#) can create the conditions for less turnover, more school- and system-wide stability, and more robust student growth and support — without leaving systems with inflated and unfunded budget obligations.

The “build toward” vision of a more rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable teaching job includes more time for teachers to reflect, collaborate, and build connections with students; lower class sizes and student loads in high-priority and high-need subjects; differentiated support for new teachers; and opportunities for teachers to grow and share their strengths in well-compensated teacher-leadership roles.

To get there, education leaders should invest in “do now” structures that can work as stepping stones as they build toward their vision for a better teaching job. Here are six places to start:

- 1. Increasing time for teacher collaboration.** In many cases, a silver lining of the shift to remote school has been significant increases in time for teacher collaboration, due to the creation of once-weekly full planning days and the lack of in-person non-teaching responsibilities and duties. In the upcoming school year, new funding could be used to ensure all teachers have at least 90 minutes per week for shared-content collaboration, plus regular shared-student touch points.
- 2. Expanding teacher-leadership roles.** These leaders would be drawn from the most effective educators with the greatest potential to help peers improve their practice. Ideally, teacher-leadership roles would include additional time for planning, peer observation, and providing growth-oriented feedback on a weekly or biweekly basis. These teacher-leaders will need support and coaching from other instructional experts to maximize their impact.



3. **Implementing “shelter-and-develop” models for pre-service and rookie teachers.** New teachers are typically assigned workloads that are on par with, and sometimes greater than, their more experienced peers. A more strategic approach would create well-supported pre-service experiences for future teachers
4. **Strengthening and diversifying teacher pipelines.** Leaders can supplement a “shelter-and-develop” strategy with investments in broader and deeper outreach to potential pools of new teachers, as well as near-term financial incentives, such as signing bonuses and loan forgiveness, to smooth the path into teaching for teachers of color and candidates from lower-income backgrounds.
5. **Increasing support for principals.** In its synthesis of 219 studies on school principals over the past twenty years, the [Wallace Foundation found](#) that “effective principals carry out four key behaviors — engaging in ‘high-leverage’ instructional activities, such as teacher evaluation and feedback; establishing a productive climate; building collaboration and professional learning communities; and managing personnel and resources strategically.” Leaders can invest new funds to help principals develop and sustain the “people skills, organizational skills and instructional skills” they need to practice these behaviors.
6. **Creating opportunities for self-care and collaborative support.** Like so many of us, teachers are exhausted by the strains of the past twelve months. System and school leaders have an opportunity to invest in supports that help teachers care for their own and their families’ well-being, through formal and informal networks as well as high-quality, accessible physical, mental, and emotional health services.

SUMMARY OF DISTRICT-LEVEL TURNOVER RATES

	Average		District A		District B		District C		District D		District E		District F	
	Prior year avg	19-20	Prior year avg	19-20	Prior year avg	19-20	Prior year avg	19-20	Prior year avg	19-20	Prior year avg	19-20	Prior year avg	19-20
Overall	17.3%	12.6%	19.9%	14.0%	15.1%	8.6%	23.2%	14.2%	8.8%	8.8%	17.3%	13.6%	19.6%	16.2%
Women	16.7%	12.5%	19.3%	14.2%	14.3%	8.4%	22.8%	14.1%	8.0%	9.4%	*	*	19.3%	16.4%
Men	19.3%	11.8%	21.9%	12.9%	17.0%	9.2%	25.1%	14.5%	10.8%	7.0%	*	*	21.4%	15.6%
White	17.1%	13.2%	17.6%	14.6%	14.8%	9.7%	22.5%	13.3%	8.8%	8.9%	19.7%	14.8%	19.5%	18.0%
Black	19.1%	12.5%	20.5%	14.2%	15.0%	8.5%	24.1%	14.4%	*	*	15.8%	10.7%	19.9%	14.5%
Hispanic	17.0%	8.8%	18.9%	2.8%	14.4%	5.6%	*	*	7.4%	5.9%	21.6%	16.4%	22.9%	13.3%
Other	19.9%	16.4%	21.4%	12.3%	16.5%	8.1%	32.0%	26.5%	11.0%	14.4%	18.6%	25.8%	19.7%	11.1%
Special Ed	17.3%	13.3%	23.0%	14.5%	13.4%	8.0%	22.3%	13.6%	13.6%	15.1%	14.3%	10.9%	17.1%	17.5%



All others	17.7%	12.5%	19.7%	13.9%	15.7%	8.5%	24.2%	14.4%	8.2%	8.1%	17.8%	13.9%	20.4%	16.0%
Elementary	16.0%	11.7%	19.4%	13.1%	13.1%	7.8%	21.0%	12.4%	6.9%	8.2%	16.4%	11.8%	19.4%	16.8%
K-8	18.0%	12.5%	22.2%	13.7%	14.3%	7.2%	*	*	*	*	17.6%	16.6%		
Middle	18.9%	14.0%	22.1%	16.1%	17.3%	9.2%	15.4%	15.7%	15.2%	8.0%	19.9%	16.8%	23.8%	18.3%
High	16.6%	13.0%	18.3%	13.3%	17.7%	9.7%	21.2%	17.3%	7.2%	9.5%	17.4%	14.3%	17.9%	13.9%
<75% FRL	14.2%	10.8%	14.2%	9.4%	13.8%	8.7%	19.1%	12.7%	6.2%	9.6%	16.4%	13.1%	15.3%	11.5%
75%+ FRL	18.8%	13.6%	22.1%	15.9%	16.8%	7.9%	23.7%	16.2%	8.6%	8.6%	20.6%	15.3%	20.9%	17.7%
0-2	25.6%	18.9%	25.9%	17.8%	21.5%	12.9%	31.1%	20.7%	15.1%	16.8%	28.3%	24.0%	31.4%	21.0%
3-7	17.4%	12.2%	21.0%	14.6%	11.8%	6.6%	20.9%	8.7%	9.2%	7.9%	19.7%	18.7%	21.9%	16.7%
8-15	13.4%	8.1%	18.4%	14.5%	10.1%	5.0%	17.3%	4.0%	4.6%	3.1%	14.4%	9.1%	15.8%	12.7%
16-24	10.7%	7.2%	15.0%	11.1%	8.5%	6.6%	12.9%	5.2%	5.5%	5.6%	10.0%	5.0%	12.3%	9.3%
25+	16.1%	13.7%	25.8%	12.6%	17.2%	16.0%	15.5%	16.4%	9.1%	11.9%	14.9%	12.0%	14.1%	13.3%
0-2	25.6%	18.9%	25.9%	17.8%	21.5%	12.9%	31.1%	20.7%	15.1%	16.8%	28.3%	24.0%	31.4%	21.0%
3-24	13.9%	9.4%	17.8%	13.3%	10.8%	6.1%	17.3%	6.8%	6.1%	5.8%	14.5%	11.2%	16.6%	13.0%
25+	16.1%	13.7%	25.8%	12.6%	17.2%	16.0%	15.5%	16.4%	9.1%	11.9%	14.9%	12.0%	14.1%	13.3%

* Data unavailable or limited

Source: District HR files, ERS analysis.



APPENDIX

Methodology

We looked at teachers who were employed in each district on October 1 in each year from 2016 to 2020. We excluded teaching aides, administrators, other school-level staff and teachers who were not assigned to a school location.

We calculated turnover rates within each district as the number of teachers who were employed on October 1 of year n and were still employed in the same district on October 1 of year $n+1$, divided by the total number of teachers employed on October 1, year n .

Prior year averages represent the straight, unweighted average of turnover rates from 2016 to 2017, 2017 to 2018 and 2018 to 2019.

Cross-district averages are calculated as a straight, unweighted average of turnover rates across districts among a given group of teachers. In other words, district size does not affect the relative impact of one district's experience over another.

Limitations of the Data

Teacher turnover dynamics are often shaped by local context factors. For example, in Michigan, a state that has experienced surging COVID-19 cases, there has been a 44 percent [spike in retirements](#) between August 2020 and February 2021, when compared to previous years; in South Carolina, the pandemic has intensified existing teacher [workforce challenges](#); and in California, teacher [shortages remain](#) in certain areas, such as math, science, and bilingual education. In 2020, a notable local context factor included the prevalence of in-person, remote, and hybrid models. In each district we studied, virtually all teaching and learning was fully remote as of October 1, 2020, which was true in many, but far from all, communities at that time.

Additionally, because our analysis compared personnel snapshots from October 2020 to those from October 2016-2019, our findings do not account for other important changes that may have occurred, such as teacher absences, substitute shortages, cross-school turnover, or teachers who may have resigned at the end of 2020 or so far in 2021.

Lastly, the data does not shed light on what teachers in these districts might do in advance of next school year. Identifying the resource conditions and practices that could predict teachers' likelihood to leave their jobs is core to our work at ERS, and we continue to track new opinion research emerging in the field to gain more insight on how teachers respond in this unprecedented year.