

Will There Really Be a Mass Exodus of Teachers?

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Survey after survey says the same thing: Teachers are tired and stressed—and ready to quit. But will the nation really see a mass teacher exodus in the coming year?

Typically, 8 percent of teachers leave the profession every year. There’s no national data yet to say whether teachers have left the profession in the past two years at a higher volume, even though [multiple recent surveys](#) have sounded the alarm that teachers are [preparing to head for the exit](#). In one stunning example, the National Education Association [surveyed about 3,600 of its members in January](#) and found that 55 percent of respondents said they are more likely to leave or retire from education sooner than planned because of the pandemic.

“This is a five-alarm crisis,” NEA President Becky Pringle said in a statement, adding that the staff shortages in schools have left teachers burnt out and unable to give students the one-on-one attention they need.

Even so, experts warn caution when making predictions about teacher resignations based on survey results. In the past, such talk has not materialized into action.

“Teacher intentions are not the same as actual teacher turnover behavior, in part because the intention is measured at a single point in time,” said Tuan Nguyen, an assistant professor at Kansas State University who researches teacher policy and the educator labor market. “The way that teachers are feeling at the beginning of the school year or even in early spring isn’t necessarily the same way they’re going to feel in April or early May.”

Nguyen and three other researchers from Boston University, the University of Florida, and Temple University recently [published a working paper](#) comparing teachers’ turnover intentions and actual turnover. The study analyzed three iterations of nationally representative surveys administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, with data from 2003-04, 2007-08, and 2011-12.

Researchers found that for every 100 teachers who indicated they would leave the profession as soon as possible, just 34 left—the rest were still teaching the next year. (Meanwhile, only 7 percent of teachers who didn’t indicate they were planning to leave the profession actually quit the following year.)

It often takes time for teachers to find another job, Nguyen said, adding that many potential leavers might end up staying in the classroom for a couple years as they take classes to pad their resumes or work to expand their networks. And some teachers might change their minds, especially if their working conditions change, he said.

Still, the paper found that teachers who indicate they intend to leave the profession as soon as possible are nearly 27 percentage points more likely to actually leave the profession compared to teachers who indicate otherwise. That effect held true even after researchers controlled for teacher and school characteristics.

Will COVID change the landscape of teacher turnover?

One caveat to the study is that the data used was from before the pandemic. COVID-19 has dramatically altered conditions in school buildings. Some teachers have said they no longer feel safe at work, especially as many states and districts [begin to lift mask mandates](#). And the spread of the virus has led to [high volumes of staff absences](#), causing many teachers to have to skip their planning periods to cover the colleagues’ classes. [Survey results](#) show that [teacher stress levels have increased](#) since 2019.

While federal teacher turnover data from during the pandemic isn’t available yet, early indicators suggest that teachers still aren’t quitting in droves, said Chad Aldeman, the policy director of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University.

“We had this fear in 2020—[it didn’t pan out](#),” he said, noting that some state-level reports showed that teacher turnover may have actually fallen in the fall of 2020. While turnover was a bit higher going into the 2021-22 school year, it was still in line with historical trends, Aldeman said: “It’s hard to characterize that as a mass exodus.”

While some onlookers are worried that the real exodus will happen this school year and summer, [Bureau of Labor Statistics data](#) is not showing significantly higher than normal turnover rates in public education.

Even so, individual districts are reporting higher numbers of vacancies at this point in the school year than they typically do. Aldeman said that could be caused by districts hiring more people, especially since they have an influx of federal COVID-19 relief money to staff more positions. And because so many teachers are reporting dissatisfaction with their current jobs, there may be more churn within districts, as neighboring schools try to poach talent by offering incentives and better conditions.

Also, there have always been perennial shortage areas, Aldeman noted. Districts that serve mostly students from low-income households historically struggle to recruit and retain teachers, as do districts in rural areas. Districts have always had a hard time recruiting teachers for certain subject areas, including special education. These problems may be magnified by the pandemic.

That’s why district leaders still need to take teacher dissatisfaction reports seriously, Nguyen said, even if the data has not borne out a massive exodus just yet.

“It’s not so easy to just try to recruit more teachers into the profession—there’s not a magic button we can push to increase the teaching supply,” he said, adding that retention is key. “Even if we don’t see a huge uptick [in teacher turnover right away], I think if 50 percent of teachers say they want to leave, that indicates to me they are feeling very stressed and very burned out.”

Research has shown that teachers who are experiencing symptoms of burnout are less effective at their jobs.

‘The working conditions were unsustainable’

Teachers who have quit mid-year say they were pushed to a breaking point, and there was no relief in sight.

“I thought I was going to do this for 30-40 years and then retire,” said Clay Michalec, who resigned in January after more than a decade of teaching band and orchestra in Maryland. “I didn’t leave the job because I didn’t like the job or I didn’t like the kids—I left because the working conditions were unsustainable.”

Michalec said he felt like the system was broken before the pandemic, but the pandemic made everything worse. His workload increased, and his stress levels surged. Students were more disruptive than in years past, which Michalec attributed to social and developmental delays due to remote learning.

Political tensions also wormed their way into his classroom: Parents criticized him for displaying Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ pride flags, with one parent even threatening to report him to a state senator. Michalec's principal supported him, and he was able to keep his flags in his classroom, but the experience was still frustrating, Michalec said.

Ultimately, he said, he realized that teaching was taking a serious toll on his mental health. "I reached a point where I knew I had to stop abandoning myself for a career," he said.

Michalec now works for an education technology company. Ever since leaving teaching, he's been able to stop taking antidepressants. He's sleeping and exercising more, and his blood pressure is back to normal: "I feel human again."

Experts say school leaders need to heed these types of stories and find ways to make teaching more sustainable.

"Teachers' intentions are a measure of a single point in time," Nguyen said. "There are things that policymakers, principals, and superintendents can do to affect teacher turnover between now and May. ... Listen to teachers and provide them with support so they feel like they're heard and [can] do their jobs better."

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