



The First 30 Days

What the start of the school year reveals about organizational health.

A national evidence review examining the workforce conditions shaping the opening of the 2026–27 school year — and the signals district leaders should be watching now.

The Signal

The first weeks of school do not create organizational conditions.

They reveal them.

Opening a school year compresses many of a district's most consequential organizational demands into a short period of time. Staffing plans become operating realities. New initiatives move from presentation decks into classrooms. Communication systems are tested. Student needs surface. Workload becomes tangible.

The result is more than a busy season. The first 30 days provide an unusually concentrated view of how a school system is functioning.

Five forces converge in the opening month

CAPACITY

Do we have enough people — and are they in the right roles?

CLARITY

Do employees understand what excellent looks like?

LEADERSHIP

Is trust between leaders and staff intact?

CONNECTION

Are teams supported and collaborative?

EXECUTION

Are systems working as designed?

↑ All five converge: **THE FIRST 30 DAYS**

The 2026–27 Operating Environment

This school year is opening under multiple pressures at once.

75%

Student Behavior

Share of educators identifying student behavior as a major concern entering the 2026–27 school year.

70%

Student Engagement

Share of educators identifying student engagement as a major concern entering the 2026–27 school year.

42%

Budget Uncertainty

Share of educators identifying budget uncertainty as a major concern entering the 2026–27 school year.

The pressures employees experience at the start of the year are rarely confined to a single category.

Behavior, engagement, and financial uncertainty do not arrive in sequence. They arrive simultaneously – and they interact. A district managing budget constraints while also responding to elevated student behavioral needs is not facing two separate problems. It is facing one compounded organizational challenge.

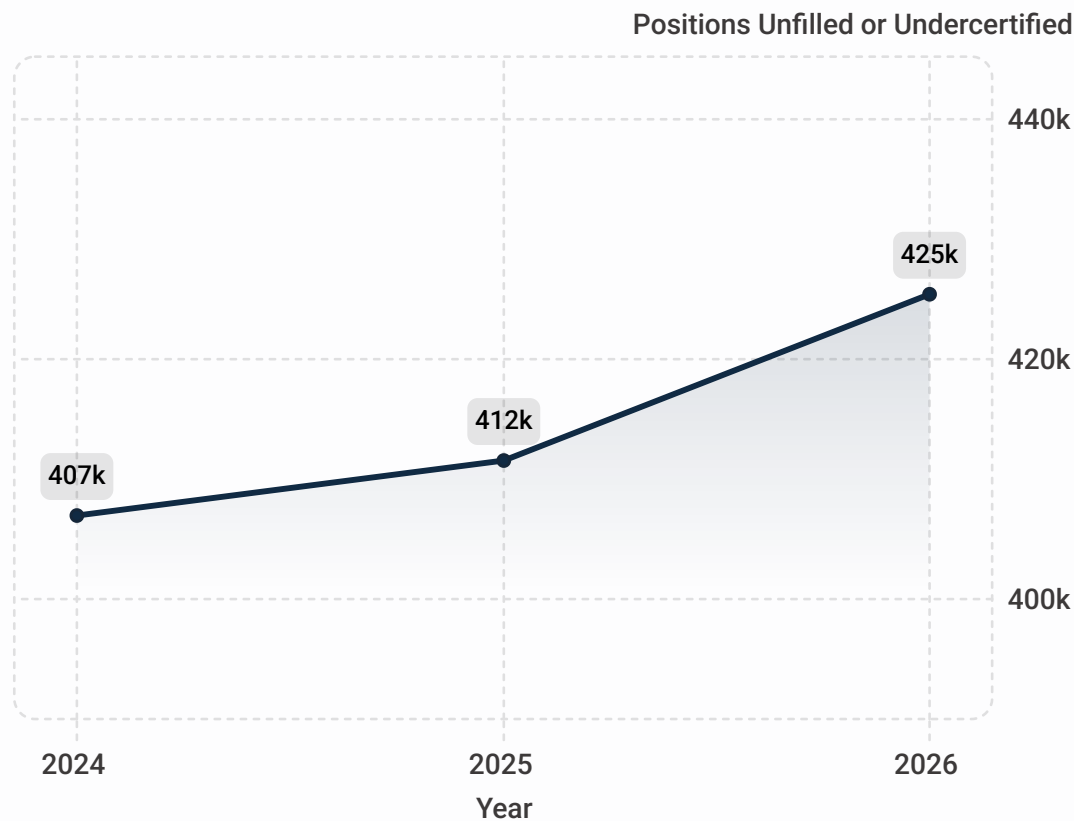
Understanding the 2026–27 opening requires holding all three pressures in view at once.

Source: Education Week Research Center, 2026.

❓ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Do not treat these pressures as separate management problems. When behavior, engagement, and budget uncertainty arrive simultaneously, they interact. Identify where they are compounding each other before assigning resources or responses to any single category.

Staffing: The System Is Still Thin

Staffing pressure has changed shape. It has not disappeared.



Minimum Estimated Teaching Positions
Unfilled or Filled Without Full Certification

425K

2026 Total

Teaching positions either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their assignments — a new high in LPI's national scan.

≈ 1 in 8 teaching positions nationally

Source: Learning Policy Institute, State Teacher Shortages Updates, 2024–2026. LPI describes these figures as minimum estimates because reporting practices vary across states.

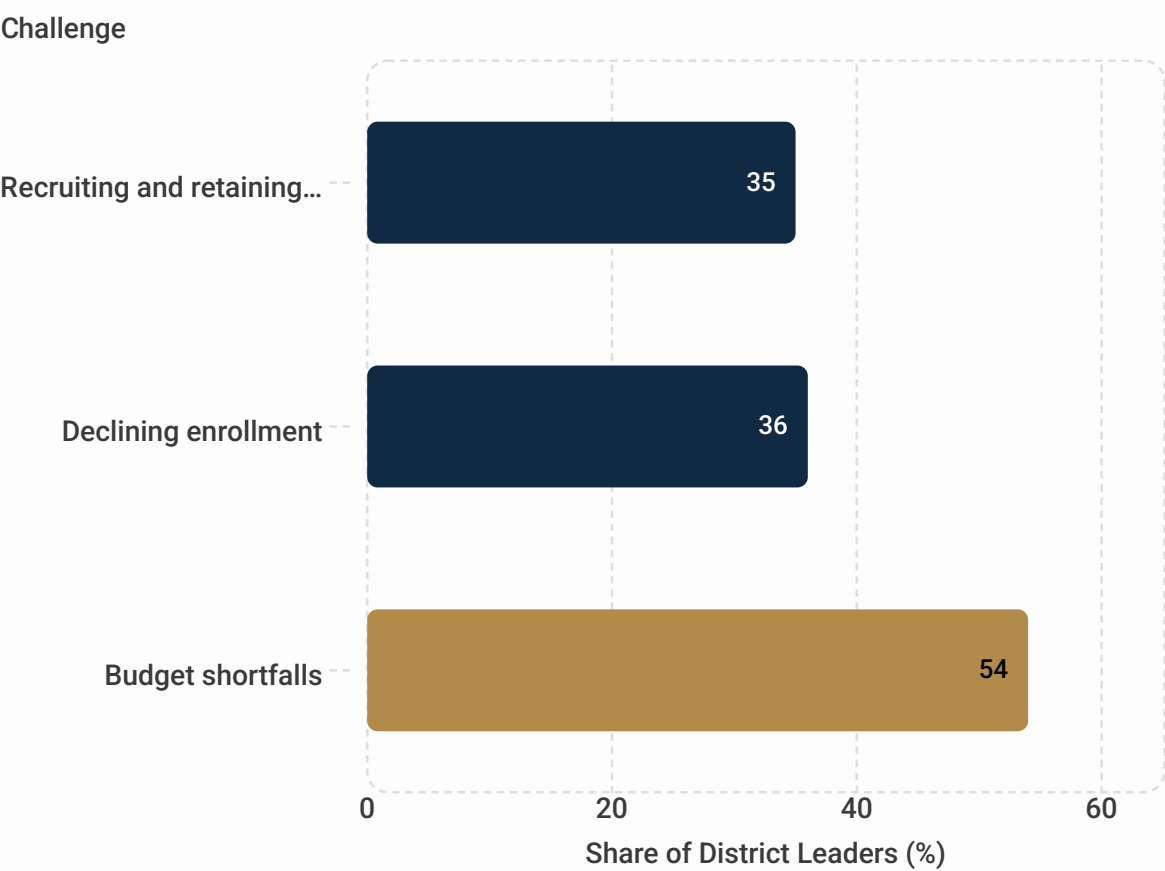
LPI describes these figures as **minimum estimates** because reporting practices vary across states. The true scope of the staffing gap is likely larger than what vacancy counts alone can capture.

- ☑ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Do not use vacancy counts as the sole measure of staffing health. Track where filled positions are held by teachers working outside their certification area, and examine what that means for the students and teams they serve.

The Pressure Has Shifted

For district leaders, the problem set is changing. In spring 2026, financial pressure and enrollment moved ahead of teacher recruitment and retention among the challenges district leaders reported facing.

Challenges District Leaders Reported Facing, Spring 2026



The important signal is not that workforce challenges ended. It is that districts are managing them alongside increasing financial constraints.

Budget shortfalls now rank as the top challenge for district leaders — ahead of teacher recruitment and retention. This signals a shift in the nature of the workforce problem, not its resolution.

Districts navigating financial pressure while simultaneously managing staffing gaps face compounding constraints on their organizational capacity.

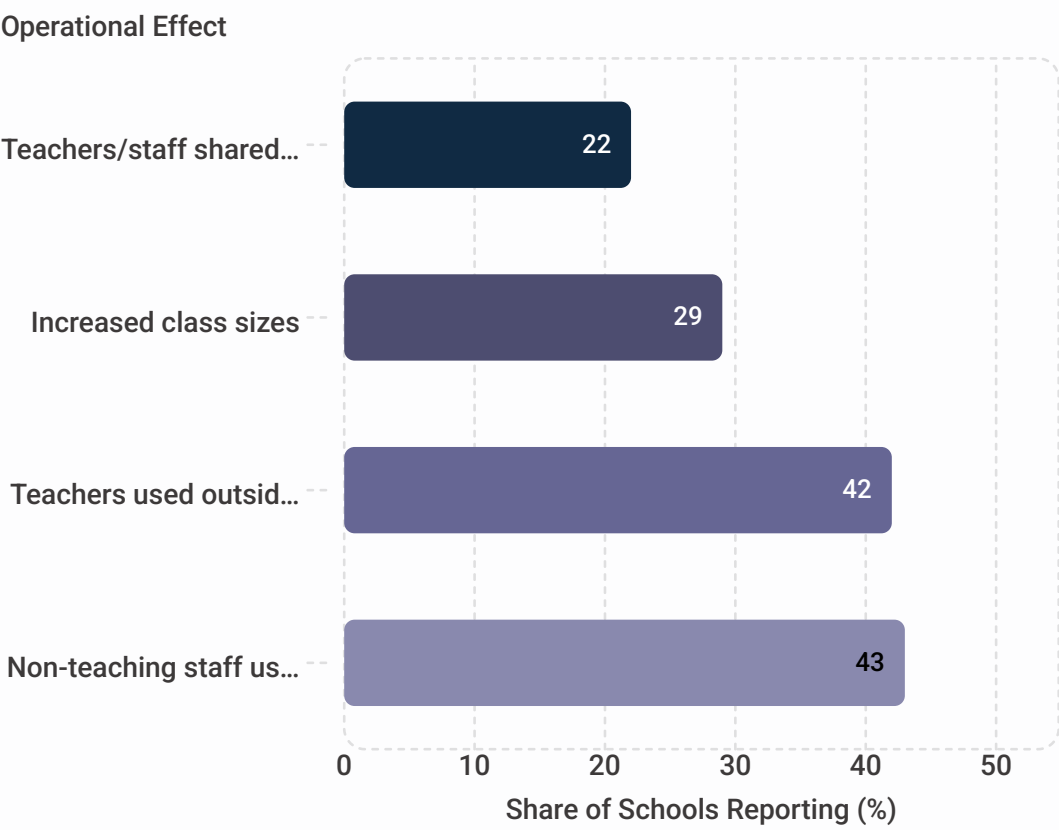
Source: RAND American School District Panel, spring 2026 reporting; cited by K-12 Dive.

☒ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Recognize that budget pressure and workforce pressure are not sequential problems. Districts managing financial constraints while navigating staffing gaps face compounding organizational demands. Decisions made under budget pressure have workforce consequences — and vice versa.

From Vacancies to Capacity

A filled position does not necessarily mean restored capacity. Vacancy counts capture one dimension of workforce health. They do not tell leaders how staffing conditions redistribute work across the organization.

How Staffing Vacancies Changed School Operations



National School Pulse Panel data found that schools with vacancies reported effects including employees working beyond their intended duties and increasing class sizes.

Capacity is not simply "Do we have people?" It is also "What are we asking those people to absorb?"

When non-teaching staff are deployed outside their intended roles, the work they were originally assigned does not disappear. It is deferred, redistributed, or left undone. The organizational cost of a vacancy extends well beyond the empty seat.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, School Pulse Panel, 2024–25.

☐

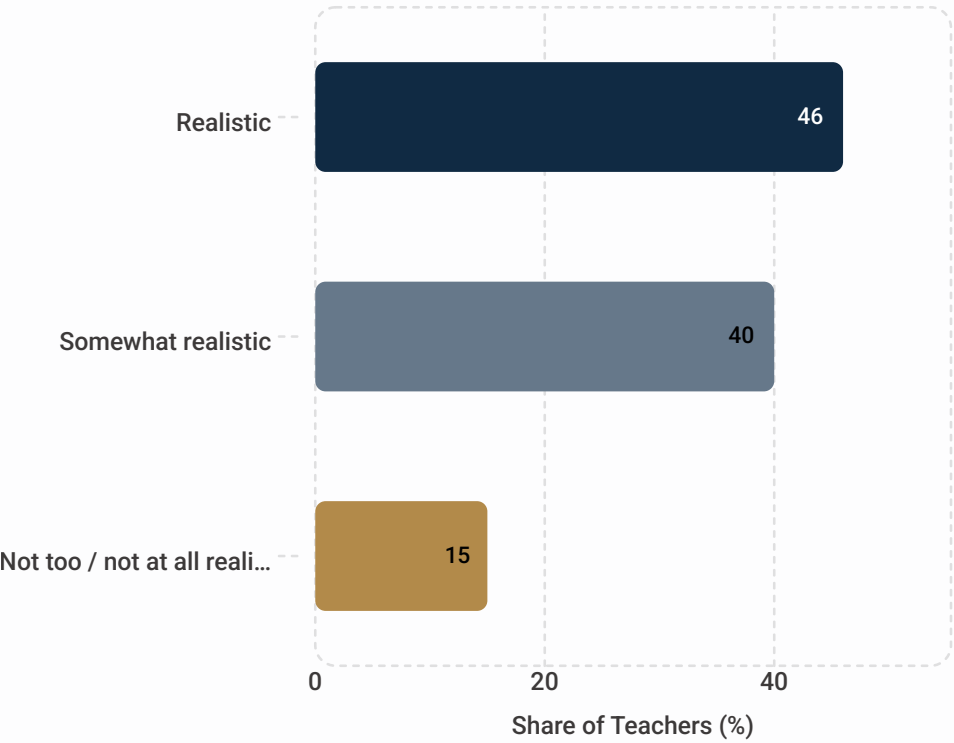
☒ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Ask not only whether positions are filled, but what filling them required. Identify where employees are working outside their intended roles, which teams are absorbing the most coverage work, and whether those patterns are becoming routine.

Clarity: Expectations Meet Reality

Fewer than half of teachers say the expectations for excellent teaching are fully realistic.

Are Expectations for Excellent Teaching Realistic?

Response



Source: Walton Family Foundation–Gallup, *Teaching for Tomorrow: Closing the Expectations Gap, 2026*. Percentages reflect survey rounding and may not total exactly 100%.

46%

Find Expectations Realistic

Less than half of teachers report that expectations for excellent teaching are fully realistic.

77%

Burnout Association

Among teachers reporting unrealistic expectations, 77% reported frequent burnout – a pattern associated with, not caused by, the expectations gap.

Percentages reflect survey rounding and may not total exactly 100%.

¹**LEADER RESPONSE:** Examine whether the expectations communicated to teachers are achievable given current staffing, time, and resource conditions. Where expectations and operating reality diverge, the gap does not stay invisible – it surfaces as burnout, inconsistency, or quiet disengagement.

The Clarity Test: AI

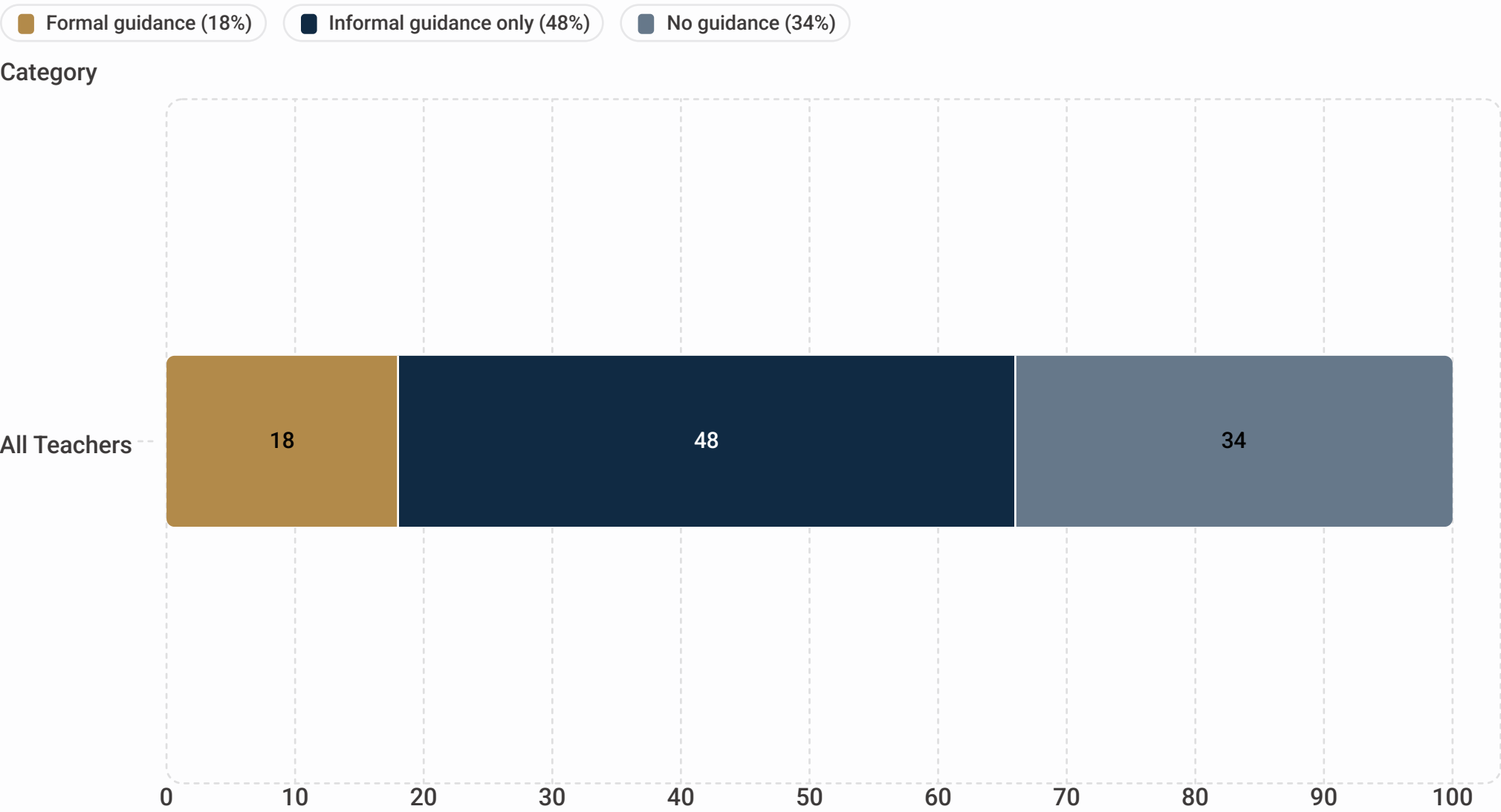
AI provides a real-time example of the expectations gap. Teacher use of AI has expanded rapidly. Formal organizational guidance has not moved at the same pace.

6 in 10

Teachers Using AI for Work

A substantial majority of teachers now report using AI tools in their professional work — yet formal guidance has not kept pace.

Guidance Teachers Receive on AI Use at Work



Source: Walton Family Foundation–Gallup, 2026.

The question for leaders extends beyond AI. When expectations change faster than guidance, employees must create their own interpretations of what "good" looks like.

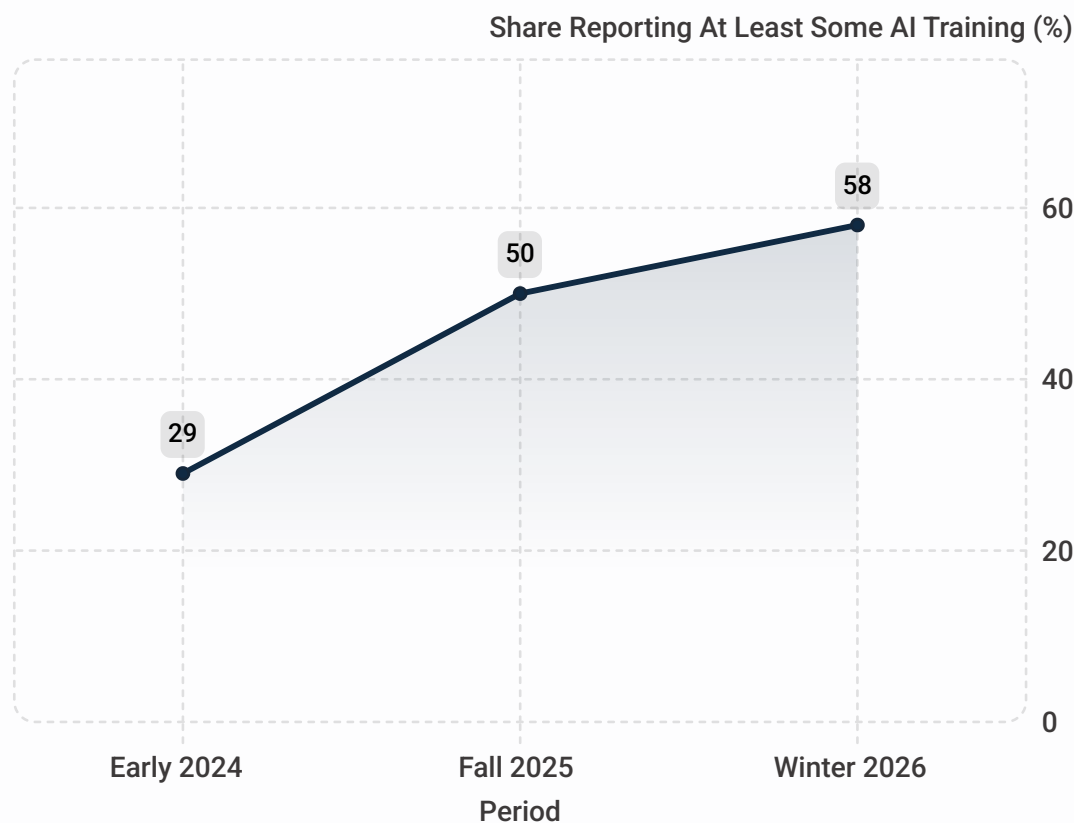
?

☒ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Audit the guidance employees are actually receiving on AI use — not what has been communicated, but what employees report experiencing. Formal policy and lived guidance are not always the same thing. Where they diverge, employees fill the gap themselves.

Support Is Expanding, But Unevenly

AI training is increasing. Consistency remains a work in progress.

Teachers Reporting At Least Some AI Training



Source: Education Week Research Center surveys, 2024–2026.

42%

Still No Training

As of Winter 2026, 42% of teachers still reported receiving no AI training — revealing an uneven distribution of organizational support.

Training volume is only one signal. District leaders also need to understand whether employees experience guidance as clear, relevant, consistent, and usable.

A teacher who has received training but cannot apply it in practice is not meaningfully better positioned than one who received no training at all. The quality and usability of support matters as much as its presence.

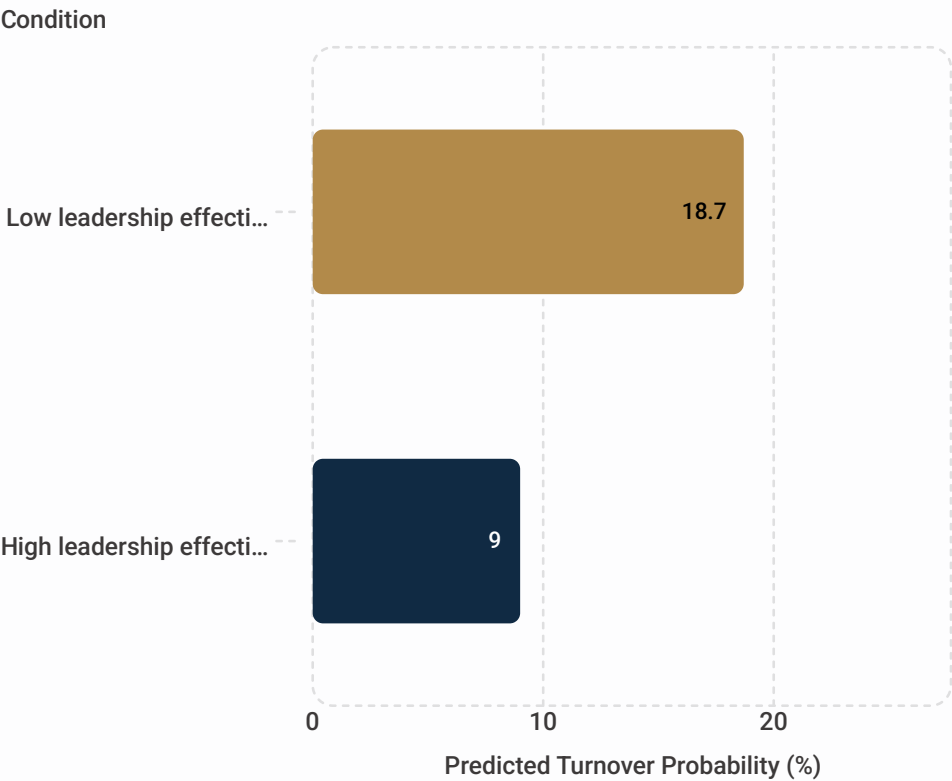


LEADER RESPONSE: Measure training reach and training quality separately. Knowing how many employees received training tells you about distribution. Knowing whether employees found it clear, relevant, and usable tells you about organizational support.

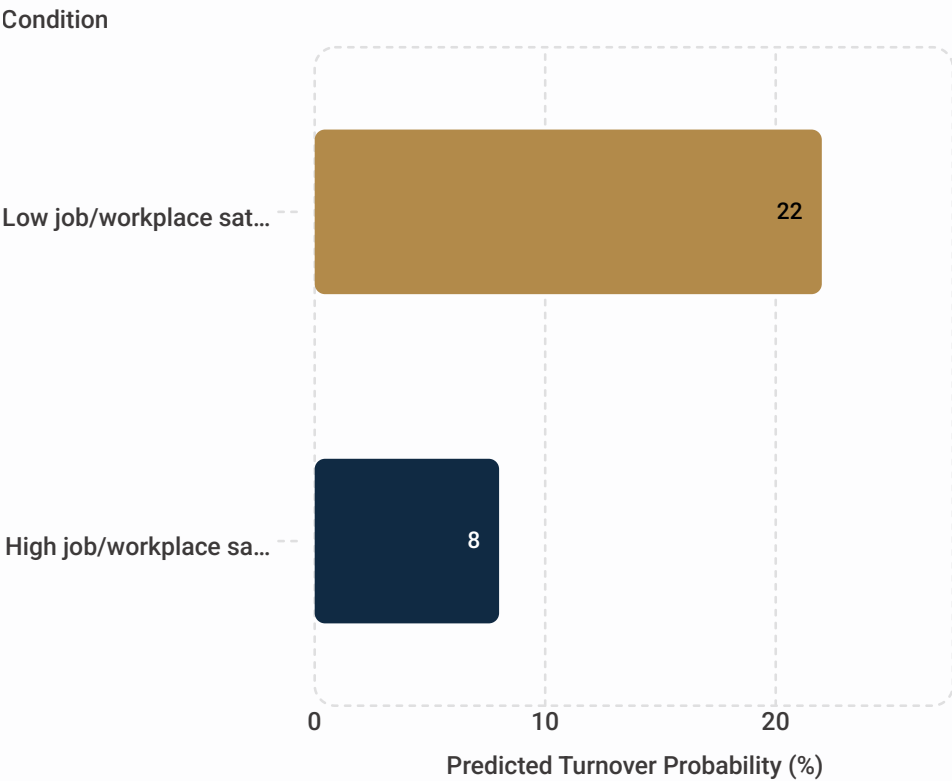
Leadership & Trust: Leadership Is a Workforce Condition

Leadership experience and retention are closely connected. Adjusted associations reported in national teacher turnover analysis.

Predicted Turnover Probability by Leadership Effectiveness/Support



Predicted Turnover Probability by Job/Workplace Satisfaction



Source: Learning Policy Institute, *Teacher Turnover in the United States, 2026*. Both comparisons reflect adjusted associations, not causal proof.

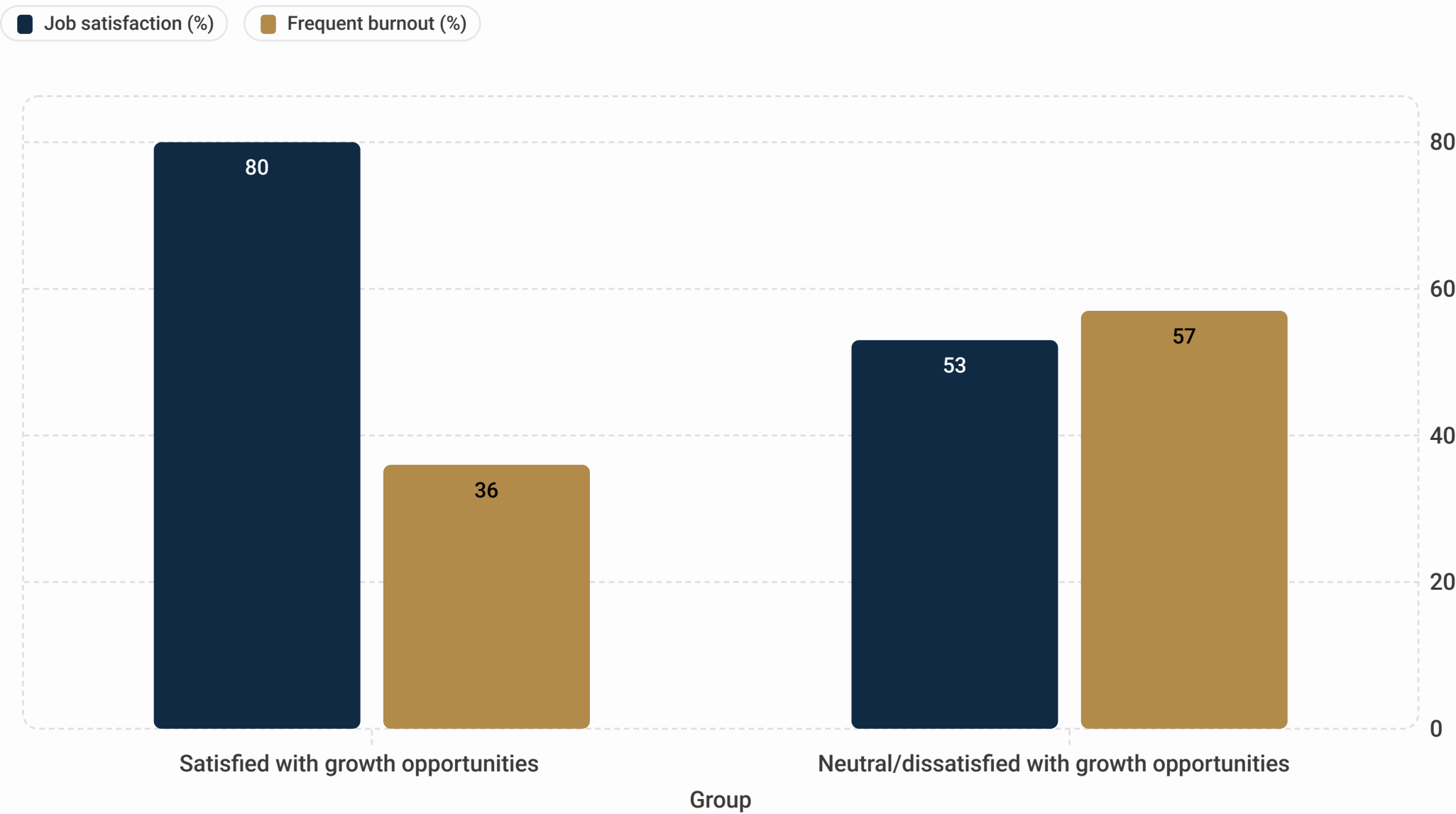
Retention is not only a recruitment problem. It is an organizational experience problem.

 **LEADER RESPONSE:** Treat leadership quality as a measurable workforce condition, not a fixed organizational trait. Where employee experience of leadership varies substantially across schools, that variation is itself a signal worth investigating — before it appears in turnover data.

Culture & Connection: Collaboration Is Not an Extra

Collaboration changes how work is experienced. The start of the year often concentrates professional learning, team-building, planning, and onboarding into a short window. Whether those experiences create usable support – or simply additional activity – matters.

Professional Growth Experience and Teacher Outcomes



Source: Gallup, *Teachers Who Collaborate, Learn at Work Are More Satisfied*, 2025.

Teachers satisfied with professional growth opportunities report substantially higher job satisfaction and lower burnout than those who are neutral or dissatisfied – suggesting that the quality of collaborative experience, not just its presence, shapes outcomes.

☒ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Distinguish between professional learning that is scheduled and professional learning that is experienced as useful. The presence of collaboration time does not guarantee that employees experience it as supportive. Ask both questions.

The Human Capacity Behind the Org Chart

The workforce enters the year with pressures that an org chart cannot show.

71%

Hold a Second Job

Share of teachers reporting at least one second job.

31%

Second Job Outside Education

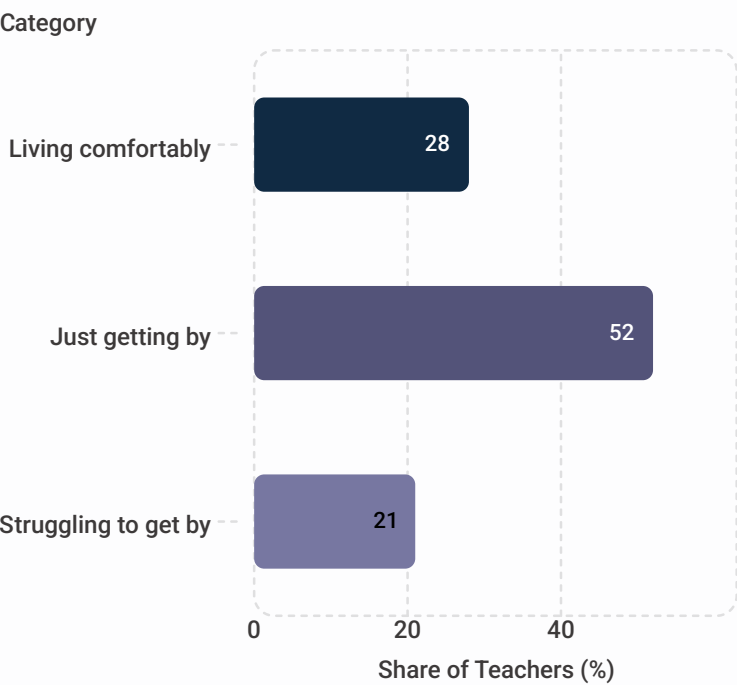
Share of teachers reporting a second job outside the education sector.

21%

Struggling to Get By

Share of teachers who say they are struggling to get by on current household income.

Household Financial Experience



Note: Percentages may vary slightly due to rounding. Source: Walton Family Foundation and Gallup, Teaching for Tomorrow: Staying Power, 2026.

Employee capacity begins before the workday starts.

❓ ☒ **LEADER RESPONSE:** Recognize that employee capacity is shaped by conditions that exist before the school day begins. Financial stress, second jobs, and economic uncertainty are not personal matters separate from organizational performance — they are part of the operating context leaders are managing.

The First-30-Days Signal Map

What should leaders be watching now?

☐ *This framework is a conceptual synthesis based on the evidence reviewed. It is not a diagnostic instrument.*

CAPACITY

Watch for: Coverage work becoming routine; employees operating outside intended roles; workload clustering in particular teams; growing reliance on workarounds.

Where is the system absorbing more work than the formal structure suggests?

CLARITY

Watch for: Repeated requests for clarification; inconsistent interpretation of new expectations; policy-to-practice variation; employees creating local rules because central guidance is unclear.

Where do employees understand the "what" but not the "how" or "why"?

LEADERSHIP & TRUST

Watch for: Concerns escalating around local leadership; communication that differs substantially by school; decisions employees experience as disconnected from operating reality.

Where might leadership intent and employee experience be diverging?

CULTURE & CONNECTION

Watch for: Uneven onboarding experiences; isolation among new employees; weak collaboration; teams carrying substantially different levels of stress.

Which groups are experiencing the same district differently?

SYSTEMS & EXECUTION

Watch for: New initiatives creating duplicate work; inconsistent implementation; unofficial processes replacing official ones; priorities competing for the same time.

Where is friction signaling a system problem rather than an individual performance problem?

What the First 30 Days Cannot Tell You

A signal is not a diagnosis.

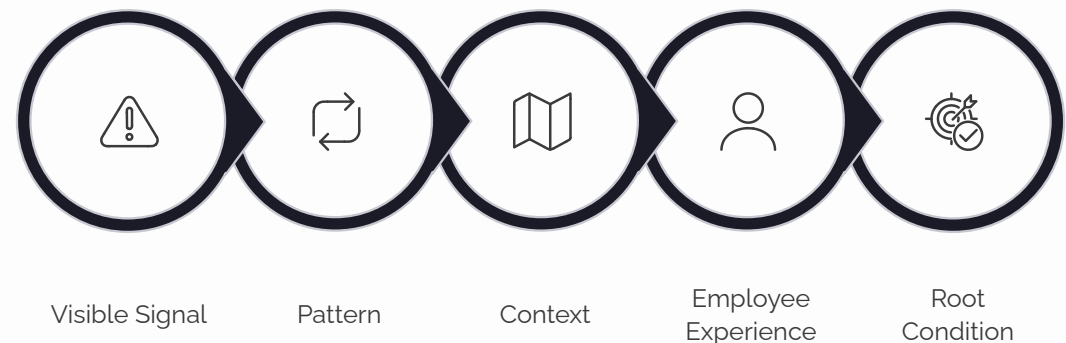
Early indicators matter because they tell leaders where to look — not because they automatically explain why something is happening.

A workload problem may reflect staffing. Or process design. Or unclear priorities. Or uneven implementation. Or an unexpected student need. Often, it reflects several conditions at once.

Observation tells you WHERE friction exists.
Research helps determine WHY.

This distinction is central to organizational research: leaders should resist solving for an assumed cause before testing whether the assumption is correct.

From Signal to Root Condition



Each step in this sequence requires a different kind of inquiry. Moving too quickly from visible signal to assumed root condition is one of the most common errors in organizational problem-solving.

Questions Worth Asking Now

Before the first quarter closes, what do you actually know?

- 1 Where has workload increased unexpectedly?
- 2 Which expectations are being interpreted differently across schools or departments?
- 3 Where are employees relying on workarounds to get the job done?
- 4 Which teams are receiving the clearest support — and which are not?
- 5 How consistently are new initiatives being implemented?
- 1 Where are principals absorbing challenges that have not yet reached central leadership?
- 2 What are new employees learning about the organization through their first month of experience?
- 3 Which concerns are isolated incidents, and which appear across roles or locations?
- 4 Where does leadership's perception of the year differ from the employee experience?
- 5 What are you assuming is the cause of friction that has not yet been tested?

THE WARREN PERSPECTIVE

DO NOT SOLVE THE LOUDEST SYMPTOM. UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM UNDERNEATH IT.

The first 30 days are a window. No single metric can explain organizational health. Vacancies matter. So do workload, communication, leadership, trust, employee voice, implementation, and the way those conditions interact. The beginning of the year gives leaders a valuable opportunity to identify where friction is emerging while there is still time to understand it.

Warren Research — Independent organizational research for K–12.

Research Notes & Sources

This issue synthesizes national research and survey evidence available through September 2026. Sources vary in methodology, sample population, timing, and unit of analysis. Findings should not be interpreted as describing every school or district.

1. Learning Policy Institute. *State Teacher Shortages 2026 Update: Teaching Positions Left Vacant or Filled by Teachers Without Full Certification*. July 2026.
2. Learning Policy Institute. *Teacher Turnover in the United States: Who Moves, Who Leaves, and Why*. 2026.
3. Education Week Research Center. *The State of Teaching, 2026 Edition*.
4. Education Week. "75% of Educators Expect Student Behavior to Be a Challenge This Year. What Else?" August 2026.
5. RAND American School District Panel. Spring 2026 district leader findings concerning budget shortfalls, enrollment, recruitment, and retention.
6. Walton Family Foundation and Gallup. *Teaching for Tomorrow: Closing the Expectations Gap*. 2026.
7. Walton Family Foundation, Bipartisan Policy Center, and Gallup. *Teaching for Tomorrow: Staying Power*. 2026.
8. Gallup. "Teachers Who Collaborate, Learn at Work Are More Satisfied." September 2025.
9. National Center for Education Statistics. School Pulse Panel staffing and vacancy findings, 2024–25.
10. Education Week Research Center surveys on artificial intelligence professional development and guidance, 2024–2026.

Methods & Limitations

Warren Research synthesized publicly available national research and survey evidence available through September 2026. The underlying studies use different samples, survey questions, methodologies, and data collection years. They should not be interpreted as one combined dataset. All findings are descriptive unless otherwise noted and should not be interpreted as establishing causality. Sources vary in methodology, sample population, timing, and unit of analysis. Findings should not be interpreted as describing every school or district.

Primary Sources

Learning Policy Institute. <i>State Teacher Shortages 2026 Update.</i> July 2026. lpi.org	Learning Policy Institute. <i>Teacher Turnover in the United States.</i> 2026. lpi.org	Walton Family Foundation, Bipartisan Policy Center, and Gallup. <i>Teaching for Tomorrow: Staying Power.</i> 2026.	Gallup. "Teachers Who Collaborate, Learn at Work Are More Satisfied." September 2025. gallup.com
Education Week Research Center. <i>The State of Teaching, 2026 Edition.</i> edweek.org	RAND American School District Panel. Spring 2026 district leader findings. rand.org	National Center for Education Statistics. <i>School Pulse Panel, 2024–25.</i> nces.ed.gov	Education Week Research Center surveys on AI professional development, 2024–2026. edweek.org
Walton Family Foundation and Gallup. <i>Teaching for Tomorrow: Closing the Expectations Gap.</i> 2026.			