

Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Strengthening the Educator Workforce

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For family and community collaboration (FCC) to be successful, teachers must be trained and supported to develop strong relationships with families. However, school districts have faced major challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff for years — especially since the COVID-19 pandemic began.¹ Low wages, poor working conditions, challenging school climates, and a lack of advancement opportunities discourage people from entering the teaching profession.^{2, 3, 4} These same factors are also causing current teachers to leave the field, perpetuating and worsening the teacher shortage.^{5, 6, 7}

Creating an educational workforce prepared to engage in authentic FCC requires investing in future and current teachers' physical, mental, and financial well-being. When properly supported, these professionals can fully collaborate with families and community organizations to meet the needs of all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these teacher recruitment and retention challenges, we recommend that state and local education agencies embrace reforms including:

- **Support early-career teachers through pre-service compensation.** Just as in other professions, teachers should be paid throughout the final phases of higher education and certification, as they gain foundational knowledge in FCC. Pre-service compensation could have the dual effect of making the field more attractive to new teachers and reflecting respect for all educators.
- **Strengthen loan forgiveness programs to expand and diversify the pool of incoming teachers.** Offsetting the high costs of entering the teaching field can incentivize more college students to consider the profession, expanding the pool of teachers to engage with families.
- **Align federal and state policies to improve teacher salaries and benefits.** Fair wages and benefits provide economic incentives for educators to join and remain in the field to build long-term relationships with families.
- **Improve working conditions and protect teachers' time for FCC.** Creating a healthy work environment can make schools more attractive to new teachers, support experienced teachers' mental health, and foster supportive conditions for FCC.

This policy brief was developed as part of the FHI 360 *Connected & Engaged: Supporting Family and Community Partnerships with School Districts* initiative. This brief is one of a series that highlights policies, strategies, and programs that can be implemented at the local, state, or federal levels to promote successful FCC in all school districts — especially those serving students from marginalized groups and communities. To explore the other policy briefs in this series, visit the [Connected & Engaged](https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org) website.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are vital to family and community collaboration (FCC) since they have the most frequent contact with families, are responsible for building trust, and co-plan with families about student learning and goals.⁸ Though school districts rely on them to conduct FCC activities, there are not enough teachers. The United States is facing a teacher shortage crisis.

Schools are also experiencing high turnover rates, which have reduced the number of experienced educators in classrooms who understand and use FCC best practices. High turnover prevents long-term, ongoing relationships from forming among school staff, families, and communities. With fewer staff in schools, the teachers and principals who remain are stretched thin across administrative and managerial tasks, leaving little to no time for family outreach and participation in collaborative decision-making.

Given the magnitude and pervasiveness of these challenges, major policy changes are needed to strengthen the educator workforce and create a landscape that supports FCC.

Current Challenges to a Strong Teacher Workforce

Understanding the challenges that K-12 education systems face in supporting a strong teacher workforce is critical to designing strategies to overcome them. Due to a variety of market conditions and state policies, school districts face major challenges to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and other critical staff. The resulting shortages and high turnover make it even more challenging for districts to build and maintain strong partnerships with families.

Negative perceptions and shortages discourage potential educators from entering the field

Without teachers in all classrooms to support student learning, communicate about students' growth, and work with caregivers to improve student outcomes, districts cannot effectively engage in FCC. However, recruiting qualified teachers and district staff was a challenge before the pandemic and remains a growing issue in providing students with a quality learning environment.^{9, 10}

As of late 2022, there were at least 36,000 open teaching positions across the United States, with over 163,000 more positions being filled by substitute teachers or by people who are not certified to teach.¹¹ Without qualified educators in classrooms, students do not receive adequate instruction and families lose a necessary partner in supporting student learning.

“I have never seen [teacher turnover] this bad. Right now, it’s number one on the list of issues that are concerning school districts.”⁷⁵

— Dan Domenech,
executive director of
the School
Superintendents
Association

This educator shortage is even worse when considering teachers of color (TOCs) [see Boxes: Barriers to recruiting (p. 3) and retaining (p. 4) teachers of color]. Even though students of color make up approximately half of the students in public schools, TOCs make up less than 20 percent of the educator workforce.¹² Recruiting educators who share the same experiences and identities as the communities they serve is important to nurturing FCC.¹³ Shortages of teachers from specific identity groups puts students and families from marginalized populations at a further disadvantage by having fewer liaisons who understand their background and experience.

The negative perception of the teaching profession is partly to blame for the educator shortage. Many people do not consider becoming a teacher because they recognize that teachers are not appreciated by the public or well compensated; sometimes family and friends actively dissuade them from becoming a teacher. Through reviewing research on the educator shortage, examining national data on the prevalence of the shortage, and conducting focus groups, the Government Accountability Office found that people often do not want to become teachers due to the high cost of becoming an educator.¹⁴ Not only do those interested in teaching need to obtain a bachelor's degree, but they must also take multiple certification exams, pay licensing fees, and complete an unpaid internship.¹⁵ States also differ on what exams and licenses are required for becoming a teacher, making it difficult to navigate the national teaching market. These barriers to teaching keep from the profession interested people who could support students' growth in partnership with families.

A shortage of qualified educators also perpetuates negative perceptions about teaching, thereby making the shortage even worse. As long as the educator shortage remains, districts experience conditions in which teachers are over-stretched with limited ability to engage with families.¹⁶ Without reliable coverage, in which all classrooms are consistently staffed with teachers, districts do not have the capacity to communicate or collaborate with students and families.

Education systems fail to offer fair compensation and benefits.

Compensation has been a longstanding issue for recruiting and retaining teachers, as teachers have lower wages and total compensation than most of their college-educated peers.¹⁷ Nationally, teacher compensation has remained relatively flat since 1996, increasing what experts call the “teacher pay penalty” — the financial hit that teachers take for being in the profession.¹⁸ On average, teachers are paid less now than they were a decade ago, after adjusting for inflation.¹⁹ States and districts vary in their ability

Barriers to recruiting teachers of color

Legacies of racist policies have pushed teachers of color (TOCs) out of the educator workforce and continue to impact the recruitment and retention of TOCs.

Challenges for recruitment include:

- Requiring high-stakes professional exams that regularly change requirements, have high fees, and do not align with TOCs' culturally relevant and social justice pedagogies acts as a major gatekeeper to TOCs.⁷⁶
- The faculty of colleges of education remain predominantly white and female, supporting limited ideas about who can be an educator, perpetuating racist practices, and discouraging TOCs from seeing education as a field for them.
- TOCs are more likely to face racial discrimination and bias in the hiring processes even when they have similar or more advanced qualifications than their white counterparts.⁷⁷

See page 4 for retention challenges.

to compensate teachers, with districts that pay lower teacher salaries facing increased difficulty keeping teachers or enticing former teachers to return to the classroom.^{20, 21}

This low level of compensation means that a mid-career teacher in a family of four would qualify for at least two forms of government benefits in over half the states.²² To make up for the low pay, almost 60 percent of teachers take on additional paid work.²³ This additional work can prevent teachers from recovering from the stress of their normal positions, particularly as most of this work is outside of the school system and not related to their extracurricular or professional development activities.²⁴ Because so much of communicating and engaging with families happens outside of normal class hours, additional jobs reduce the capacity and energy that teachers have to dedicate to FCC.

Financial concerns may be especially pressing for TOCs and teachers in schools that predominantly serve students of color, who also report the highest turnover rates.²⁵ Financial considerations including potential debt burdens are known to influence college students' decisions about which careers to pursue — and are even more influential for college students of color.²⁶

Few school districts support teachers who become caregivers themselves, making it more likely that teachers leave the profession to care for their own families. High numbers of educators leave their position due to child-rearing.²⁷ These teachers often leave because most districts only allow teachers to use accrued annual and sick leave to receive pay after a child is born or adopted.^{28, 29} These trends are detrimental to FCC, as teachers who are also caregivers themselves lose the opportunity to build relationships with their students' families.

Traditional education pathways rarely offer teachers growth and career advancement opportunities

Teachers have few opportunities for career advancement, which would help keep them in the profession over time.³⁰ Without these ongoing supports, few teachers can receive higher level trainings in FCC or share their own expertise with their peers. For example, only half of teachers are given the time to participate in professional development and fewer than 30 percent are reimbursed for participating in workshops or working outside of their contracted work hours.³¹ Without the opportunity for training — including training in best FCC practices — teachers' professional growth is limited.

Limited career advancement opportunities also could discourage teachers from building expertise in FCC. Advancing in an education career most often involves taking on more administrative tasks, such as becoming a principal or district staff member, and spending

Barriers to retaining teachers of color

Challenges for retention include:

- School climates are hostile to TOCs, demonstrating this by not valuing their contributions, pushing them into unwanted roles (e.g., disciplinarian), requiring them to take on additional duties that are uncompensated, and being evaluated more negatively than other teachers.⁷⁸
- Higher education faculty do not warn their pre-service teachers about the hostile racial climate they will face, making them unprepared for combating racism as an educator.⁷⁹
- TOCs are more likely to teach in districts that do not have the proper organization or resources to support teachers and students.⁸⁰

less time in the classroom. Having minimal opportunities for career advancement contributes to teachers feeling unappreciated.³² When there are no paths for teachers to advance in their careers and remain partially or fully in the classroom, educators might find advancement opportunities outside of education that acknowledge their expertise. Schools and districts that do not provide advancement opportunities lose expertise and educators' connections with families and community organizations.

Working conditions cause burnout and create negative school climates

Challenging working conditions create a cycle with negative implications for FCC. Teachers who remain in the profession lack the support and capacity they need to build strong partnerships with families. As a result, teachers leave the field in high numbers, perpetuating a shortage of educators with the expertise and experience needed to collaborate with families.

Basic employment and instructional conditions demonstrate a lack of concern for educators. In the United States, only about 60 percent of teachers have a permanent contract.³³ This lack of job security compromises teachers' mental health.³⁴ The physical spaces where teachers work also reflect a disregard for educators' wellness. According to the latest data on the quality of public school facilities, there are major problems with many aspects of physical school infrastructure, including floors and foundations (41 percent of schools), roofs (39 percent), ventilation systems (31 percent), air conditioning systems (28 percent), and heating systems (26 percent).³⁵ When over a quarter of the public educator workforce works in buildings with unsafe conditions, states and districts signal to teachers that their needs as humans and professionals are dismissed and ensure they are not able to even teach, much less fully engage in their FCC duties.

School climates also reflect and reinforce negative conditions. Teachers increasingly face violence at school, polarization around what they can and cannot say or teach, and increased harassment from community members around school policies without administrative support to address the challenges they are facing.³⁶ ³⁷ Limited by state policy and fearful of political backlash, district leaders often do not take action to support teachers, increase community support, or alleviate the discrimination and harassment teachers face.³⁸ Lack of administrative support has been identified as the working condition most predictive of teacher turnover.³⁹ School and district administrators should work to understand what support educators need and implement that support for teachers to stay in the profession and continue to build FCC.

Policies governing teachers' day-to-day experiences similarly cause stress and discourage FCC. Districts require teachers to do many

tasks that go beyond what one person can accomplish in a given school day, and teachers lack support to do this work.⁴⁰ Teachers are stressed with too many tasks, ranging from administrative duties, grading, lesson preparation, and picking up the duties of absent teachers — all tasks that do not involve direct instruction of students.⁴¹ On top of this workload, state agencies, districts, and families hold educators responsible for students' achievement scores, which also increases teacher stress.⁴² Finally, frequent policy changes at the local, regional, state, and federal levels add more stress to educators.⁴³

Amid these challenges, teachers report more mental health and anxiety issues than any other profession, including health care workers.⁴⁴ As of 2022, teacher job satisfaction levels were at an all-time low⁴⁵ [see Box: How COVID-19 affected school climate and teacher retention]. Teachers' likelihood of leaving their schools and the profession increases when districts lack support from the community and state.⁴⁶ Building community and district support is crucial to ensuring that engagement and collaboration go both ways — from educators and with educators. Educators must also work in buildings where they feel physically and emotionally safe so they are more likely to stay and be available to work with students and families.

How COVID-19 affected school climate and teacher retention

Virtual learning fundamentally changed the dynamics of family-school connection throughout the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. While educators, families, and communities navigated economic, emotional, health, and social stresses caused by pandemic lockdowns, schools attempted to continue educational instruction in virtual and hybrid settings. Changes included:

- More frequent communication between teachers and caregivers, as both groups needed to work together to make sure children had what they needed to learn⁸¹
- Revealed and sometimes exacerbated gaps between teachers and caregivers when technology barriers, disability concerns, and other challenges made virtual engagement impossible⁸²
- Heightened tension between the desire to return to in-person instruction and health concerns amid politically charged debates about vaccines and mask mandates⁸³

Policy and Program Solutions to Strengthen the Teacher Workforce

Mutual respect and professionalism are necessary for families and educators to collaborate. Building this respect requires a concerted effort from the public and federal, state, and local levels of government. Federal and state departments of education can support FCC throughout all districts by correcting the negative narrative around teaching and affirming the value of teachers and public education.⁴⁷ District leaders can implement policies that support educators' financial, physical, and emotional wellness. The following policy suggestions for supporting the educator workforce can help districts recruit future educators, retain current educators, and ensure all educators have capacity for FCC.

Support early-career teachers through pre-service compensation

Education systems must take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate respect for teachers early in their careers. Paying pre-service teachers during required student teaching years would be one strategy to acknowledge their worth and support well-being. Similar to medical residents who have completed their degree and act as a physician under the supervision of an attending doctor, student teachers have completed the majority of their degree and create lesson plans, teach students, work with families, and perform all of the tasks as a teacher. However, unlike medical residents — who have an average salary of \$60,000 — student teachers are generally not paid at all.⁴⁸ In fact, student teachers often pay to student teach as this is typically required as part of their university coursework. Some districts are working to pay their student teachers (“intern teachers”),⁴⁹ while some states have used a teacher apprenticeship model^{50, 51} [see Box: Promising examples of pre-service teacher supports]. However, models like these must be tailored for their particular populations, as evidence suggests “Grow Your Own” programs can be detrimental for TOCs unless created thoughtfully and with a strengths-based lens.⁵² Programs must create opportunities for potential educators to build relationships with university and district partners, tailor curriculum to the student body's needs, connect potential educators to TOC educator associations, and celebrate TOCs' successes.⁵³

Pre-service compensation would help acknowledge the work that early career teachers do, including engaging with families about student progress and participating in caregiver/teacher conferences. Compensating early career teachers helps increase equity in education by reducing the barriers to teaching, particularly for those from lower-income communities. This strategy can also support existing teachers; having another professional in the room to assist

Promising examples of pre-service teacher supports:

Tennessee

Tennessee created a “Grow Your Own” apprenticeship model to “provide innovative, no-cost pathways to the teaching profession” through partnerships between preparation programs and local education agencies.⁸⁴ As the country's first federally registered teaching apprenticeship program, the program is funded through a mix of federal and state workforce dollars.

Mississippi

Mississippi piloted a multi-pronged approach to strengthening recruitment of teachers (especially TOCs). The approach includes locally led “Grow Your Own” programs that aim to develop educators from local communities, as well as a state-led teacher residency program that uses philanthropic dollars to recruit and support TOCs on the pathway to certification.⁸⁵

Tuscaloosa, AL

Tuscaloosa City Schools piloted an internship program in 2022, awarding stipends to student teachers. The program had two goals: attract people into the teaching workforce and address immediate staff shortages across the district.⁸⁶

with FCC tasks makes it more possible for veteran teachers to engage with families.

Strengthen loan forgiveness programs to expand and diversify the pool of incoming teachers

Clarifying and expanding loan forgiveness programs would give potential educators more confidence to enter the profession, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Improving loan forgiveness programs could support FCC goals through increasing the size and diversity of the educator workforce.

The main federal loan forgiveness programs that teachers can use are complex and inadequate, such that people may be discouraged from entering the profession. These programs vary in terms of the source of loans and the type of schools eligible for loan forgiveness [see Box: Federal student loan forgiveness programs for teachers]. The timeline for loan forgiveness is long (10 years), and many eligible applicants in the past decade have been denied due to administrative errors and loan holders' confusion about forgiveness requirements.⁵⁴

Federal agencies should provide a simple and accessible guide for high school students considering teaching as well as for current teachers who may qualify for loan forgiveness. The guide could include questions to help students decide which loan forgiveness option works best for their situation and understand which teaching positions are eligible. While some progress has been made to shorten the timeline for forgiveness, increase support for loan holders in the forgiveness application process, and clarify the difference between the programs, much reform is still needed.⁵⁵ Federal agencies should shorten loan forgiveness timelines to two or three years and count student teaching years toward these timelines, as is done for medical residents in short-staffed areas.⁵⁶

To make loan forgiveness simpler for teachers and increase the number of teachers, federal and state agencies should support loan forgiveness for teachers in all public schools and all subjects. Evidence suggests that borrowers with four to five years remaining on their loan payments face psychological distress and engage in riskier behaviors than their peers in the last year of repayment or who have full forgiveness.⁵⁷ Decreasing the timeline on forgiveness for teachers who are already distressed could help retain them, thereby supporting FCC in the future.

Align federal and state policies to improve teacher salaries and benefits

Improving teacher pay and benefits would incentivize people to both enter and stay in the teaching profession. Paying teachers professional salaries can help recruit and retain teachers, reducing

Federal student loan forgiveness programs for teachers

Public Student Loan Forgiveness: Forgives the remaining balance of the borrower's Federal Direct Loans after 120 qualifying payments (estimated over 10 years).

Teacher Loan Forgiveness: Forgives up to \$17,500 of the borrower's Direct or FFEL Subsidized or Unsubsidized Loans after five complete and consecutive years of teaching at a qualifying school.

Perkins Loan Cancellation for Teachers: Forgives up to 100 percent of the borrower's Federal Perkins Loan if they teach full-time at a low-income school or teach certain subjects.⁸⁷

the teacher shortage. This would provide districts with more people who not only can teach their students, but also can work with families and community members to improve student outcomes.

At the federal level, reform could include changing regulations in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to ensure teachers are compensated for all hours worked.⁵⁸ As of 2023, most teachers are not eligible to receive overtime pay if they work more than 40 hours in one week and earn less than the FLSA salary threshold. On average, teachers in the United States work about 47 hours per week, with many working as much as 60 hours per week during the school year and at least half-time during summer and winter “breaks.”^{59, 60} Teacher workload in the United States is more than most teachers in 49 countries surveyed.⁶¹ By properly compensating teachers fairly for all hours worked, education agencies can support teachers from groups that are in highest demand, such as young teachers and TOCs.⁶²

At the state level, multiple policies could be implemented to align teacher salaries with those of other professions. Most states deny stipends or salary adjustments for teachers who have additional credentials, National Board Certification, or advanced degrees; some other states defer to the district or local governing bodies to make that decision.⁶³ Creating statewide minimum salaries for master's degrees, doctoral degrees, and National Board Certification can support the recruitment of people with those qualifications and the retention of teachers who have gone above the necessary qualifications to improve their teaching.

Additionally, the lack of statewide teacher salary schedules and policies results in considerable variation in teacher pay among states and school districts [see Box: State variation in teacher compensation].⁶⁴ To illustrate, Montana pays the lowest starting teacher salary (\$32,495 in 2022) while New Jersey has the highest average starting salary (\$54,053 in 2022). State policy can and should support state minimum salaries that reflect the local cost of living, acknowledge teachers' expertise, and bridge the disparities in pay between teachers and other professionals. Proper compensation incentivizes teachers who may work overtime to engage in FCC activities (e.g., attend evening events) and reduces the need for educators to take second jobs, which takes away from their FCC work and rest time.

Many districts have experimented with “pay for performance” programs, in which districts offer financial incentives for specific teacher or student outcomes. While decades of research on this concept show mixed results, some versions of pay for performance programs have been found to increase student performance, such as those that change teachers' base salary, incorporate coaching and multiple career paths, or remove bonuses at the end of the year if targets are not met (through what is known as a “loss aversion”

State variation in teacher compensation

States differ in paying teachers more for National Board Certification. Some states pay an annual sum, such as Alabama and Arkansas, which provide certified teachers an extra \$5,000 a year.⁸⁸ Other states provide additional pay based on the teacher's base salary. For example, Delaware raises base pay 12 percent each year for teachers with valid certificates.⁸⁹

Ohio has a minimum salary schedule for teachers based on years of service and education level (less than a bachelor's degree, a bachelor's degree, five years of training but no master's degree, and a master's degree or higher) (Ohio Revised Code, Title 33, Section 3317.13).

strategy).^{65,66} Given the teacher shortage and need for districts to reach staffing levels that allow teachers sufficient time to engage with families, district and state policymakers should focus on simply raising base compensation for all educators rather than attempting complex incentive structures.

Another promising practice is providing educators with fully paid parental leave. To support educators in engaging with families and communities, districts and states must make sure all educators have the physical and mental well-being to do their jobs. By one estimate, fewer than 20 percent of school districts provide any paid parental leave.⁶⁷ El Paso Independent School District in El Paso, TX, is an outlier, with 10 days of paid parental leave for both birthing and non-birthing parents (e.g., fathers, adoptive parents).⁶⁸

State governments have the power to make this change. For example, Delaware now requires 12 weeks of paid leave for all state employees, including educators.⁶⁹ As paid parental leave policies impact infant mortality and child health, providing educators with this benefit can support their retention in the district and likelihood of returning by supporting their mental health and need for income.⁷⁰ States should adopt or expand this benefit to recruit more teachers who are both caregivers and educators.

Improve working conditions and protect teachers' time for FCC

To retain teachers, district leaders must ensure that their district has a school climate improvement plan in which families, staff, and students create a shared vision of what a safe and inclusive school environment looks like.⁷¹ These improvement plans should reflect a holistic understanding of working and learning environments that improve physical safety, address discipline, and support the mental and emotional health of all people in the school building — students, teachers, administrators, and families. To improve conditions for all teachers, especially TOCs, districts must make sure that curricula and learning environments reflect and respect a diversity of perspectives from all racial and ethnic groups.⁷² Improving day-to-day working conditions is critical to retaining the essential players in FCC.

Teachers' daily schedules should include dedicated time for FCC, as well as time for taking care of their own needs and well-being. States can create laws that require duty-free breaks for educators so they have time to eat lunch, go to the bathroom, and plan. While breaks may be technically included in educators' schedules, states must ensure schools and districts follow through in protecting this time for their teachers. For example, in 2022 South Carolina passed a law to give certain teachers (only elementary and special education teachers) a 30-minute break in their day.⁷³ This is a small step forward for creating conditions where teachers not only can

have time for engaging in FCC but can also be mentally and physically ready their work.

States must also encourage districts to help teachers advance their careers over time, without leaving the field and taking their FCC expertise with them. Some districts find success with teacher leader positions, in which effective teachers mentor and support other teachers and are compensated with stipends or higher salaries in return.⁷⁴ Creating new career advancement structures or learning from existing ones in other states and countries can encourage educators to stay by providing them a clear path for growth.

Conclusion

Teachers are an essential component of FCC, serving as a first point of contact for most families. Current challenges in the field of education, including negative perceptions of the teaching field, low compensation, poor benefits, and bad working conditions, perpetuate teacher shortages and high turnover rates. Without enough teachers in classrooms and working conditions that support teachers' well-being, districts cannot use FCC best practices to improve student outcomes. Federal policymakers can support recruitment and retention efforts by improving loan forgiveness programs, making it more financially feasible for potential teachers to enter the field. State policymakers and district administrators can support recruiting and retaining teachers by improving salaries, benefits, and overtime rules. To make FCC possible in every school district, policies at every level must recognize and respect the value of teachers in collaborating with families and supporting student learning.

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