

## Why Texas Teachers Leave the Classroom: A Qualitative Look into Non-Retirement

Rebecca A. Wentworth, PhD  
Associate Professor  
School of Teaching and Learning  
Sam Houston State University  
Huntsville, TX

Jalene P. Potter, PhD  
Associate Professor  
School of Teaching and Learning  
Sam Houston State University  
Huntsville, TX

Daphne D. Johnson, PhD  
Professor  
School of Teaching and Learning  
Sam Houston State University  
Huntsville, TX

Dustin M. Hebert, PhD  
Professor  
Department of Library Science and Technology  
Sam Houston State University  
Huntsville, TX

### Abstract

The attrition of classroom teachers has garnered significant attention due to its impact on education. While past discourse focused on pay as the driving force behind departures, our study delves into the qualitative aspects of attrition. Reviewing a dataset spanning 40+ years, we explore multifaceted reasons behind teachers considering leaving the profession. Our findings, derived from 1,175 data points from Texas State Teachers Association members, reveal seven prevalent themes: Compensation, Workload, Support and Respect, Students, Leadership, Working Conditions and Safety, and Culture. These themes interconnect, painting a comprehensive picture of teachers feeling undervalued, overworked, and lacking support. School leaders and policymakers are crucial agents in mitigating attrition by fostering supportive environments and addressing systemic issues. This study underscores the imperative for informed policy decisions and further research to amplify teacher voices and improve retention efforts.

### Key Words

teacher attrition, school leadership, teacher voice, teacher morale, teacher compensation, teacher retention

In recent years, political leaders, media sources, and the public at large have seen and discussed the high number of public-school classroom teachers who are leaving the profession. Much of the discussion has focused historically on low pay for teachers, which is often compared to professionals in other fields with similar education and experience backgrounds (e.g., Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Allegretto, S., 2023). The media coverage seems to have little impact on bringing teaching salaries in line with what other professionals with similar backgrounds are paid (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Over the last 40+ years, a group of university researchers in conjunction with a professional teacher organization have asked Texas PK-12 teachers if they are seriously considering leaving the teaching profession (Brown et al., 2019; Maninger et al., 2011; Potter et al., 2023). In the context of a questionnaire concerning teacher moonlighting practices, the underlying assumption, perhaps, has been that money is at the root of the decision-making for educators. Current researchers on this project are looking deeper into the data to see if there are other factors contributing to teacher attrition.

### **Background and Need for Study**

Data from the 2022 administration of the teacher moonlighting questionnaire show that a startling 70% of classroom teachers in Texas are seriously considering leaving the profession (Potter et al., 2023). In Texas, schools are already facing unprecedented teacher shortages coupled with funding issues and increased scrutiny from stakeholders. This may mean that addressing the underlying causes of teacher attrition is an area of research interest to those in positions to make changes to the teaching experience, which includes all PK-12 stakeholders. School personnel in leadership

positions such as principals and superintendents are uniquely situated to directly impact change.

Although researchers have delved into the factors contributing to teachers exiting the profession, there has been limited exploration into the stories and motivations of those contemplating departure. The longitudinal study from which we mined the data for the current manuscript has for more than 40 years focused on teachers' moonlighting practices, employment outside of their full-time teaching position.

The questionnaire asks teachers, in addition to other items, what level of pay increase would allow them to quit their moonlighting positions. This question suggests an underlying assumption that teachers moonlight for financial reasons, but the questionnaire also asks teachers if they are "seriously considering leaving the profession" and offers a constructed response opportunity to explain their considerations.

### **Research Question**

Research Question: What trends can be seen in PK-12 teachers' responses to questions regarding the reasons for considering leaving the teaching profession?

### **Literature Review**

Approximately 20% of teachers in the United States will leave the profession by the end of their third year of teaching, and 50% will leave by the end of their fifth year (Boe et al., 2008). Roughly 17% of newly hired teachers depart within their first year, while 10% of experienced educators, those with a decade or more of service, exit the profession annually. This means substantial numbers of teachers are leaving the classroom each year, exploring alternative career avenues (Blatt, 2016). Research indicates that the current relatively high rate of teacher attrition is a primary

contributor to teacher shortages nationally, accounting for close to 90% of annual teacher demand (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The study reveals that retirements account for less than one-third of the national teacher attrition. Essentially, every year, schools across the country must recruit tens of thousands of new teachers due to the departure of those in the early and middle stages of their careers.

Upon thorough reflection on their decision to leave the teaching profession, both novice and seasoned educators expressed their desire to remain but felt compelled to depart due to job-related factors that exerted pressure, leading to their resignation (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). As indicated by most scholars, individuals seldom make career redirection decisions based on one reason.

According to the work by Amitai and Van Houtte (2022), novice teachers commonly cited job conditions as the primary reason for considering departure, particularly grappling with heavy workloads and the uncertainty of achieving tenure. Conversely, experienced teachers predominantly identified the broader career landscape, such as the absence of advancement prospects and fresh challenges, as the main driver behind their contemplation of leaving.

Likewise, Santoro (2021) investigated departure choices stemming from 'demoralization'. These teachers can be considered conscientious objectors, as their decision to leave reflects a refusal to work under conditions that contradict their fundamental beliefs about effective teaching practices. In addition, demoralized educators perceive the school practices or policy mandates they must adhere to are detrimental to students, the overall quality of education, and the teaching profession itself.

## Methods

The data were collected for the current study as part of a longitudinal research project that began in 1980. The questionnaire, which is focused on the practice of teachers working a second job in addition to their fulltime teaching position, has remained largely the same since inception, except for a few context-specific items included as appropriate. For example, the most recent iteration of the survey, 2022, from which data for the current manuscript are considered, included items related to COVID 19 and its impact on the teaching profession.

When the research began in 1980, questionnaires were mailed to Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) members and included self-addressed stamped return envelopes. More recently, this instrument was migrated to a digital platform. The questionnaire link is now distributed by TSTA to its approximately 5,000 members via email.

In 2022, 688 members submitted responses; of those 688, 471 responders completed the constructed response item, "If you answered, 'Yes' to the previous question, why are you considering leaving?" Those 471 responses yielded 1,175 distinct data points. Participants indicated data-use consent by returning the completed survey. At the end of the survey collection period, data were compiled and sorted for further analysis.

## Sample

TSTA members comprised the eligible participants in this study. The survey was sent through TSTA to approximately 5,000 teacher members, and 688 responses were received. Of the respondents, 481, or 70% of respondents, indicated they are seriously considering leaving the teaching profession. Of those 481, 471 provided a constructed response to the question of why they have considered leaving. Because several participants gave multiple answers, the

total number of qualitative data points for this study is 1,175.

### Instrument

The full 2022 questionnaire consisted of 29 items including 5-point Likert scale, multiple choice, multiple answer, and constructed response items. Demographic items addressed topics such as age, gender, marital status, credentials, income, and teaching experience. For the purposes of this manuscript, only the items asking, “Are you seriously considering leaving the teaching profession?” and “If you answered, ‘Yes’ to the previous question, why are you considering leaving?” will be discussed.

### Data collection and analysis

At the end of the data collection period, the survey was closed for responses and the data were compiled to compare demographic data and responses to research items. As noted above, 471 participants provided constructed responses to the item asking why they were ‘seriously considering leaving the profession.’ Those responses were separated into 1,175 distinct data points then coded to facilitate looking for data trends.

To obtain and categorize data from the responses, researchers independently identified codes throughout the data, noting concepts mentioned by the participants that correlated with the research question. The researchers then worked collaboratively to create a master list of initial codes by performing a comparative analysis of the concepts that emerged. They then standardized the codes to create common verbiage. For example, for coding purposes, ‘salary inversion’, ‘low benefits’, and ‘inflation’ were determined to be related concepts, and the standard theme ‘compensation’ was adopted.

With this schema in use, researchers collapsed the initial 105 codes into 21 themes.

The raw data were then reconsidered for alignment with these themes. These were further consolidated into 20 themes.

### Findings

In this qualitative research project, the researchers honor the voices of participants by representing their comments and concerns in full. To also be sensitive to the space available, the top seven themes will be discussed in detail and example responses will be included. The complete list of themes is in Table 1 and a pie chart is offered as Figure 1 to help readers visualize each theme’s prevalence. See Appendix.

#### Theme 1: Compensation

It came as no surprise to researchers that teachers feel undercompensated for the work they do. Of course, salary comes to mind first, and many teachers feel they are underpaid given their level of education and experience. One teacher wrote, “After 20 yrs. and multiple degrees, I don’t make enough to support my family of 3 (1 in college & the other a high schooler). I can’t afford to have my skills underpaid and utilized.”

Along with salary, teachers in this survey state that insurance policies cost too much and offer too little in coverage, “Poor benefits (I pay a high premium for low coverage).” Carrying family members on a schoolteacher’s policy can also be too costly. As this teacher stated, “I cannot afford to have my daughter on my health insurance.” Another teacher states, “I cannot afford the copays I require for a major set of tests, so I am having to live in pain even though I have healthcare insurance.”

Health insurance is meant to provide peace of mind, knowledge that if a health need arises, it will be addressed. Respondents to this survey, however, lack security offered by substandard insurance coverage.

Other concerns of teachers when discussing benefits relate to paying for classroom materials out of personal funds, not being compensated for a heavy workload, large class sizes, work that must be done outside the school day, salary compression and inversion, and inflation outpacing pay schedules. When codes were collapsed into themes, compensation stood out as the primary reason for considering leaving the profession. This correlates to research by Potter et al. (2023) which found that 55% of teachers hold second and third jobs in addition to their full-time teaching job.

### **Theme 2: Workload**

Another factor teachers cite in considering leaving the profession is the amount of work classroom teachers are expected to complete both at school and that they take home to work in the evenings and on weekends. One respondent wrote, “All the extra things teacher are needed to do and so many extra hats that teachers need to wear.” Another said, “Having to work at home in order to complete necessary requirements.” One person even called the workload “unrealistic.”

On top of feeling the need and pressure to work outside of their duty day, teachers state that not spending time in the evenings and weekends on work tasks is negatively reflected in their performance reviews. “For years, I have been pressured to work after hours and weekends for no pay by administration. When I can't, I have been unfairly evaluated.”

In cases such as this, workload issues can then further complicate any compensation issues by making it more difficult for teachers to hold moonlighting positions. The intersection of research themes is reflected in the following response, pieces of which can be coded as workload, testing, leadership, compensation, support and respect, and

working conditions.

“As a teacher I feel that we can't teach. The stress and amount of work expected increases. You say the job title and I am sure it [teaching] is expected of teachers. Responsibility and blame are placed on teachers. TTESS evaluations state that no teacher can ever reach distinguished unless they live on campus and spend their days off working with the community. Teachers aren't recognized for the amazing things we do in class. As stated by one of my superiors, ‘If your students’ tests don't show passing then how can I rate you any higher.’ Really!?! Students grow in so many more ways than a test. I put in a lot of time outside work bonding and educating my students’ parents. There are jobs out there that pay more and will allow me to do my job and will recognize me for a job well done without the volunteer hours and extra duties.”

### **Theme 3: Support and Respect**

As educated professionals, teachers expect the support of parents and administrators and their respect. In the responses to this survey, these basic courtesies were cited as lacking for many teachers. Specifically, teachers attest to lack of support from the district, “District support is not adequate, staff development does not exist for new professionals;” administrators, “lack of admin and parental support;” and parents, “Some parents are supportive, but others take the students word above mine in minor situations that escalate to major situations due to lack of communication” and “no support with student behavior from parents and administrators.”

Frequently, more than one stakeholder group is cited in a single response as not adequately supporting classroom teaching, as this response shows, “I do not feel adequately supported by my coworkers or leadership at the building, district, or state levels.” The most common statement indicated a general “lack of support” with little or no explanation of where support was expected.

The construct of respect is similarly treated in survey responses. Teachers report they are “Not respected as a professional: everything is micromanaged, no autonomy,” and “Students and parents are abusive, and teachers are not respected anymore. I even had students telling other students: are you gonna let her talk to you like that?”

Teachers are demoralized when they are not shown the basic courtesy of being respected as trained professionals with knowledge and experience born of years of hard work and training. Some teachers state exactly the source of disrespect, as this response shows, “General lack of respect for teachers in society and on campus.” Similar to what was found regarding the construct of support, many respondents simply stated that “No respect” was at least in part informing their consideration of leaving the classroom.

#### **Theme 4: Students**

Daily, teachers come into contact with students more than any other group of people. It is easy to understand, then, why a person who says they are thinking of leaving the profession “Because behavior of students” might contemplate this action. Throughout the survey, respondents commented that “discipline is out of control throughout the school,” and “Student behaviors getting more difficult to handle.” When this is coupled with the lack of support from both parents and administrators, classroom behavior issues are causing stress, burnout, and teacher attrition.

One teacher summed up the situation saying, “Finally the discipline system in schools need to improve. Students aren't being held responsible for their actions. They are out of hand in so many areas.”

In addition to behavior issues, several respondents mentioned the academic preparation and performances of students. One teacher stated, “majority of students are academically and socially low, which has made it very difficult to teach and reach reasonable expectations.” Another wrote, “The students are extremely low and the pressure from the administration to get kids to pass the STAAR is unnecessary.” Another wrote about how various factors play into an overwhelming internal pressure to leave teaching:

“Too much nonsense. We are taught to differentiate in our teaching and then we give standardized tests. Go figure. Kids are mixed together, on-level and special ed, so both groups suffer. Teachers are required to pass kids even if they don't do the work. Little or no support from administration.”

#### **Theme 5: Leadership**

As stated previously, respondents not only felt a general lack of support from their administration but also a lack of leadership and, in fact, “harassment by administration.” Another teacher stated, “just this morning my boss got on my case for drinking coffee.” When a lack of leadership leads to bullying, the stress level of teachers rises causing increased tension in the classroom.

Additionally, teachers indicated that school and district leaders have unrealistic expectations stating that, “the administration does not care about our life's outside of school

they think they own us 24/7.” In contrast, students are not held to such high expectations and teachers are required to assign grades that were not earned as indicated by, “administration now demands that we give no grade below a 50!

That is a disservice to the students and a slap in the face to the teacher. High School diploma is the biggest participation trophy in America.” Again, teachers are expected to unrealistically pass students while working in stressful situations all the while lacking true leadership.

### **Theme 6: Working Conditions and Safety**

The lack of realistic boundaries and the encouragement to prioritize work over other activities was another area of respondent concern. Teachers felt that the working conditions in school have deteriorated over time. Several indicated that lunch and planning time were a luxury. “We were understaffed. I did not have a scheduled lunch or prep” and “lack of support and lack of planning time needed to teach AP classes, classes too large, lack of pay” were just two examples of unrealistic boundaries.

Not only were teachers worried about teaching working conditions, but they were very concerned about the safety of the environment for students and themselves stating, “The students were physically and verbally aggressive and the staffing situation did not allow for a safe or productive environment.” In fact, several teachers indicated that injuries to teachers were not uncommon. “Teachers get assaulted DAILY at my school and no punishment is given to the student” due to the “lack of leadership support, no discipline of unruly students, and injuries of teachers/staff by students.” One respondent went so far as to say, “Terrorism unchecked, pathetic pay, and even worse working conditions under corrupt

administration/principals.” All these things work together to create poor working conditions and safety concerns.

### **Theme 7: Culture**

According to Fullan (2007), culture can be defined as the beliefs and values that guide and are evident in the way a school operates. Many respondents indicated that their school culture was unhealthy. One shared:

The fact that our state has limited what we can teach historically and has jumped on the book ban bandwagon says so much about the state of education in Texas. So much racism, xenophobia, and bigotry taking over our educational system. What does that say to our [student]’s and families of color who are seeing their histories erased? It’s disgusting.

Others voiced concerns over the curriculum or lack thereof, “I feel now we’re just babysitting, watering down curriculum, appeasing parents, and thinking a brand new program of software can solve the problems.”

Other themes can be found in Table 1. One respondent seemed to summarize the whole study in one comment, “lack of professional appreciation, lack of agency, poor pay, poor benefits (I pay a high premium for low coverage), lack of respect, lack of joy, toxic environment, lack of adequate communication, lack of transparency by administration.”

### **Discussion**

Seven prevalent themes emerged from the data and answer the research question of what trends exist among PK-12 teachers and their reasons for considering career changes. Those were compensation, workload, support and respect,

students, leadership, working conditions and safety, and culture. Teachers reported:

- Pay and benefits are low for the education and experience required to be successful professionals (Compensation).
- Demands of time and tasks create unmanageable and unrealistic workloads, and these demands affect performance and performance evaluations negatively (Workload).
- Parents and school leaders express limited support of and respect for teachers (Support and Respect).
- Students create difficult discipline situations, and they are not held accountable for their actions, which in turn empowers them to continue or escalate disruption (Students).
- Pressure about student performance, especially on state standardized tests, compromises the student-teacher relationship (Students).
- School leaders hold teachers to unrealistic on-the-job expectations and use intimidation as an accountability tool (Leadership).
- Lack of unencumbered time like lunch breaks and planning periods creates stressful working conditions (Working Conditions and Safety).
- Concerns about personal safety and well-being while on school campuses result in elevated stress and anxiety (Working Conditions and Safety).
- Societal movements and regulation have potential to marginalize some students and families (Culture).
- Limited positive interactions with students, parents, and school leaders lead to low morale (Culture).

Findings show that no theme is mutually exclusive among the seven. In fact, just the opposite is true; causal relationships can be drawn among any combination of the seven. Previous findings showed that 70% of Texas teachers were seriously considering leaving the profession (Potter et al., 2023). The themes discussed here answer any questions of why and support existing literature from studies in the same timeframe.

Teachers believe they are overworked and undervalued in a 360-degree space. Demands for higher student achievement and increased bureaucratic tasks from school leaders contribute to feelings of being overwhelmed and overworked. Disrespectful, threatening, and apathetic students created undue challenges and pressures that contribute to workload and teachers' perceived lack of respect and value.

Drastically differing levels of parental engagement impact teachers' workload, morale, and working conditions because at any given time, teachers struggle to engage withdrawn parents and appease intrusive ones.

### **Implications**

This study's findings reveal implications for school leaders, district-level leaders, and policy makers. Among these three groups are those who create and enforce policy and hire and supervise teachers. Understanding the teacher experience is critical to understanding the implications of policy and action. Data from



teachers show that school leaders have direct and significant impact on teacher morale. School leaders are responsible for teacher workloads and working conditions, give or deny support to teachers, and set the tone for school culture.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study target, namely, school leaders and district-level leaders.

#### **School leaders**

School leaders must be aware of the expectations they place on teachers and how they interact with and treat teachers. They must be cognizant of the time and talent demands they place on teachers and avoid single-handedly creating a work/life imbalance for teachers. Teachers need school leaders' support to be successful, but many feel that school leaders' actions are predominantly punitive. School leaders could benefit from frank, unvarnished conversations with their teachers to determine what challenges, needs, and concerns exist.

#### **District-level leaders**

District-level leaders hold school leaders accountable; however, they must be informed

of conditions in school settings. Therefore, district-level leaders must engage directly with teachers to know how school leaders are performing in both the technical tasks of managing and the adaptive duties of leading. Like teachers, school leaders must be supported and held accountable but by district-level leaders directly. Soliciting input directly from teachers on school leader performance, the teacher experience, and school climate would help district-level leaders make informed decisions.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Expanding the sample and replicating the study with school leaders could provide greater utility to research on this topic. First, because the sample was limited to members of one professional Texas teacher association, it represents a small population of Texas teachers. Second, replicating the study, albeit with adjusted questions, with school leaders would provide data from the population the findings target primarily. Just like teacher voice, school leader voice is important, and a replicated study with that population would provide valuable data for comparison to determine where the two populations' perspectives agree and differ.

### Author Biographies

Rebecca Wentworth is a professor of education at Sam Houston State University's School of Teaching and Learning. Her research interests include curriculum development, ethics in education, teacher preparation and teacher morale. She has multiple research publications in addition to numerous international, national and state conference presentations. E-mail: raw034@shsu.edu

Jalene Potter is an associate professor of education in the School of Teaching and Learning at Sam Houston State University. Her research interests include instructional coaching, lesson design, curriculum alignment, engagement and teacher preparation. She has multiple research publications in addition to numerous international, national and state conference presentations. E-mail: jpp015@shsu.edu

Daphne Johnson is a professor of education at Sam Houston State University's School of Teaching and Learning. Her research interests include curriculum development, literacy across all content areas, teacher preparation and teacher morale. She has multiple research publications in addition to numerous international, national and state conference presentations. E-mail: edu\_dxe@shsu.edu

Dustin Hebert is a professor in Sam Houston State University's College of Education in Huntsville, TX. His professional work includes teaching, presenting and publishing in his academic disciplines of business education, educational technology and leadership. E-mail: dmh104@shsu.edu

## References

- Allegretto, S. (2023). *Teacher pay penalty still looms large: Trends in teacher wages and compensation through 2022*. Center for Economic and Policy Research. <https://www.epi.org/publication/teacher-pay-in-2022/>
- Amitai, A., & Van Houtte, M. (2022). Being pushed out of the career: former teachers' reasons for leaving the profession. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 110*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103540>
- Boe, E. E., Cook, L. H., & Sunderland, R. J. (2008). Teacher turnover: Examining exit attrition, teaching area transfer, and school migration. *Exceptional Children, 75*(1), 7-31.
- Blatt, D. (2016, January 13). Prosperity policy: Teacher shortage a growing problem. *The Journal Record*. <https://journalrecord.com/2016/01/prosperity-policy-teacher-shortage-a-growing-problem-opinion/>
- Brown, S., Sullivan, S., & Maninger, B. (2019). Moonlighting and morale: The impact on educators who moonlight and how classroom teaching suffers. *The Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research, 1*(1), Article 8.
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover: How teacher attrition affects students and schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives / Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas / Arquivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas, 27*(34-39), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3699>
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change*. Routledge.
- Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2019). *Low relative pay and high incidence of moonlighting play a role in the teacher shortage, particularly in high-poverty schools. The third report in "the perfect storm in the teacher labor market" series*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED598208>
- Maninger, R., Edgington, W., Johnson, D., Sullivan, S., & Rice, M. (2011). Moonlighting and teacher status: What are the implications for professional practice? *The Texas Forum of Teacher Education, 1*, 63-76.
- Potter, J. P., Johnson, D. D., Wentworth, R. A., & Hebert, D. M. (2023). Exploring trends and perspectives: A 40+ year study of Texas teachers' moonlighting practices and career considerations. *The Texas Forum of Teacher Education, 14*, 52-64.
- Santoro, D. A. (2021). *Demoralized: Why teachers leave the profession they love and how they can stay*. Harvard Education Press.

## APPENDIX

The complete list of themes is in Table 1 and a pie chart is offered as Figure 1 to help readers visualize each theme's prevalence.

Table 1

*Final Themes and Occurrence Count*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Occurrence</b>
compensation	242
workload	235
Support and respect	215
students	80
leadership	75
working conditions	68
culture	44
safety/health	39
retirement	36
testing	36
burnout	33
politics	31
student needs not addressed	13
budget	7
parents	7
communication	4
professional development	3
change in career	2
covid	2
technology	2

Figure 1

*Final Themes and Occurrence Count*

