

# Listening to the Educator Experience:

*Why Texas Public School  
Teachers Leave and Return  
to the Classroom*

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# Introduction

A large number of teachers leave the profession every year, and a majority are seriously considering leaving the profession in the next few years. The reasons for these departures are well documented. However, a sizable number of teachers leave the profession, then choose to return, and very little insight exists about why they make this choice. This question prompted researchers at the Charles Butt Foundation to understand what impacts this decision from the perspective of the teachers themselves. As part of the [2023 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#), current K-12 public education teachers in Texas were asked the following open-ended questions:

- **Did you ever leave your job as a public school teacher?**
- **What's the main reason you decided to return to public school teaching?**

Of the 1,029 public school teachers who completed the poll, 240 answered in the affirmative to these questions, meaning they left the classroom and shared the main reason for returning as a public school educator. A team of researchers analyzed these open-ended responses using qualitative research analysis methods to unpack why teachers returned to public school teaching. Over 40 codes were identified and condensed into themes. This report represents high-level findings from the analysis. Additional information about the methodology can be found in the appendix.

## Research on teacher retention

Research on teacher attrition reveals the first few years of a teacher's career are critical to determining whether a teacher will leave or remain in the profession (Bartanen & Kwok, 2023; Tompkins, 2023). Studies highlight that early career teachers experience stress from a lack of district support, low salary wages, increased workload, and poor relationships with staff and administrative leadership (Bartanen & Kwok, 2023; Rosenblatt et al., 2019; Tompkins, 2023). Without immediate resolutions, stressors can become chronic, resulting in teachers' decisions to leave the profession.

Research has shown that teachers leave for a variety of reasons. In recent years, teachers have emphasized having limited resources to support diverse student populations, not being advocated for by administrative leadership, and having insubstantial opportunities for mentorship throughout their employment (Rosenblatt et al., 2019; Tompkins, 2023). Due to increasing numbers of teachers leaving the classroom, there is an urgency to understand why teachers choose to withdraw from their roles and what steps stakeholders need to take to keep them in the classroom.

# Theme 1: Caretaking responsibilities

In the most recent [2023 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#), teachers cited poor pay and benefits as the biggest stressor in the teaching profession, peaking at 37% among teachers with young children of their own. Thirty-three percent of overall teachers considered child care paid by the district extremely or very important (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). This number increased to 74% when disaggregated by teachers who are parents or guardians of a child age five or younger in their household (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). A deeper examination of open-ended responses indicated most teachers left the classroom to **care**<sup>1</sup> for children or other family members (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Representative responses follow:

“Yes, to **care for my 3 children.**”

Teachers also stepped away from the profession to care for their partners.

“**Spouse illness.**”

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<sup>1</sup> Bolded words in the body of the report represent the high level findings identified in the [2023 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#) open ended responses.

# Theme 2: Burnout

Teachers cited **burnout** or psychological/emotional health as a critical reason for leaving the classroom (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Research shows that the emotional job demands of teaching (e.g., suppressing one’s own emotions during face-to-face interactions) and having the ability to trust in colleagues (e.g., willingness to be vulnerable with other teachers, staff, and administrators) have a notable impact on a teacher’s emotional, physical, and mental stress and overall quality of one’s work culture and environment (Huang et al., 2017; Yin et al., 2016; Zee et al., 2016).

According to the [2023 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#), excessive workloads, long hours, and a lack of communication and understanding from administrators had the strongest associations with teachers’ mental health in their work environment. In the poll, when teachers were asked to rate their mental health in relation to their job, 41% described it as only fair or poor (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Teachers said that burnout, described as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress in the teaching profession, was a top reason for initially

leaving the classroom. The open-ended responses help contextualize how burnout manifested for teachers and how it influenced their decision to leave.

*“YES, I WAS **VERY UNHAPPY AND UNAPPRECIATED.**”*

*“Yes, the **burnout** led to **physical health problems.**”*

The dominant trends of teacher attrition discussed thus far necessitate a deeper grounding of why teachers choose to return to the classroom. Despite many teachers leaving because of a range of stressors, many respondents returned in pursuit of *job security, a more accommodating schedule, an opportunity to reconnect with the school community, seeking fulfillment and purpose, and/or a better experience at a different school or district.*

## Theme 3: Job security

**J**ob security was the primary reason teachers shared for returning to the classroom (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Respondents shared that job security in the form of a reliable and steady paycheck and a fixed schedule was an allure to returning to the classroom.

*“Children were in school, and **I needed the money.**”*

*“Given that I had excellent references, I made the decision to go back - and **I’ve stayed since 2016 - not because it’s a healthy work environment (none at all) - but because I have a family to support as a single mom.**”*

*“**Credit card debt, student debt, bills at home.**”*

## Theme 4: Schedules

**I**n the [2022 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#), 85% of Texas public school teachers cited that a schedule with more time for planning or additional district-wide days off for teacher and student well-being would encourage respondents to stay in the teaching profession. As part of the [2023 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#), most respondents who cited **schedules** as a reason for returning emphasized comparable teaching and caretaking schedules. While the findings demonstrate that teachers left the profession for caretaking responsibilities, many of them also returned to the classroom because schedules better aligned with being a caregiver (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Teachers described caretaking of their children when

discussing schedule alignment. Still, a few others described the scheduling needs of caretaking for other family members (e.g., aging parents) as a reason for returning to the classroom.

*“I love the public school system. **It allows me to work in the same school as my kids and be on their schedule.**”*

*“I wanted to be on the **same schedule as my children** with holidays and **breaks off to minimize daycare costs** but also to help plan family vacations.”*

*“**Teaching fit my lifestyle.** It allows me to **be off when my children are off.**”*

## Theme 5: Reconnecting with school communities

**R**esearch on teacher retention highlights the importance of teachers maintaining a healthy social network and surrounding themselves in a space promoting collaboration over individuality (Harfitt, 2015). Nineteen percent of teachers said they do not have adequate support from their campus to create a sense of belonging in their school community (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Factors impacting this sense of belonging included cultivating good relationships among students, creating a space where all students feel empowered to participate, and making a space where students can be their genuine selves. One of the top reasons teachers cited for returning to the classroom was to **reconnect with school communities** (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). This was coded as reestablishing their communication, connection, and positive impact on students, communities, and the teaching profession.

*“I really like the district by my house. **I went through this district as a student.**”*

*“I **missed working with other teachers.** Mostly, I missed working with the students.”*

*“Missed having a **connection with the community.**”*

## Theme 6: Fulfillment and purpose

Teachers described their decision to return to the classroom as an attempt to seek **fulfillment and purpose** through teaching (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Teachers sought opportunities to connect their careers to what was meaningful to them, be intrinsically motivated in their day-to-day work, and pursue their professional goals. Research on teacher motivation demonstrates that teachers value the chance to have a broader impact on society in their careers, particularly through acquired agency and meaningful interactions with students and the greater school community (Kelchtermans, 2017; Simonsz, 2023).

*“To make a difference in the lives of children with learning disabilities and to support their families.”*

*“I missed having a purpose outside of my house.”*

## Theme 7: Teacher mobility

Teacher mobility is defined as the process by which teachers move in and out of the public education system (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2017). Research shows teacher mobility results from a mismatch of needed support, advocacy, and mentorship between a teacher and their school (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2017). More than half of the teachers surveyed in the [2023 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#) planned on being pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 (PK-12) teachers for the entirety of their careers. While teachers initially aspired to remain in the teaching profession, 75% of teachers overall reported seriously considering leaving their job in the classroom in the past year (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). This number remained steady from the [2022 Charles Butt Foundation Texas Teacher Poll](#), 77%, after increasing sharply from 58% in the [2019-2020 academic year](#). Teacher mobility was apparent throughout the findings, as teachers shared their moving from one career or teaching space to another (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). Some respondents presented examples of teacher mobility by deciding to reenter the profession after retiring.

*“I came back after being gone for 4 years because I needed a decent wage than what I was making working in a non-profit, and the only place that was hiring ASAP at that time was the school district.”*

*“I came into teaching after retirement because teachers were needed.”*

Among the teachers that moved were those that relocated to a private school and then returned. Some respondents shuffled between public and private school for better access to resources and overall job satisfaction.

*“I worked at a private school for 3 years but **came back to public [school] for better pay.**”*

*“To work at a private school, **frustrated by public [school].**”*

Some teachers moved to other districts in hopes of a more positive work culture and environment.

*“I left a district with extremely demanding tasks and responsibilities and weak administration (no support in discipline).”*

*“I found **a new district / community that is a great fit for me.**”*

*“I wondered if a **different district would be less stressful.**”*

Other teachers moved back to Texas from another state or abroad.

*“Yes, **to do volunteer work overseas**, then I returned to teaching after returning to the US.”*

*“**Moved to NYC** and returned back to Texas.”*

*“Yes, **I moved out of state** for 9 years and worked at a university.”*

Some teachers transitioned back to the classroom from an administrative position. Teachers expressed that leaving their administrative role for a teaching position would provide them with guaranteed employment security through a teaching contract. Other respondents were unsatisfied with their administrative work and regretted leaving their position as a teacher.

*“Previous administrative position was at-will. **Sought the security of a term contract position.**”*

*“I did not like working as a **proto-administrator** (coordinator position).”*

Some respondents who moved to other districts shared they did so because of anticipated additional resources, including higher pay, classroom materials, and support for social and emotional learning. Of these respondents, a few considered leaving the profession again as these anticipated resources were absent in their new positions.



*“I missed being in the classroom. **The politics of everything became worse when I did come back.** The indiscretion in pay and other financial issues within our district along with administrative problems **makes me regret returning.**”*

*“**The verbiage on flyers prompted higher pay but upon accepting the job the pay was lower.** Very disappointing and when I inquired about it through various HR Personnel I was told I could resend my offer and go back to the district I came from. [Teaching] is just not the same and **this would most likely be my last year.**”*

*“**I intend to leave in 2 years, after my youngest son graduates. The disrespect is unreal.**”*

The number of teachers considering leaving the profession in Texas is striking, yet little is known about why those who leave choose to return. The findings in this report indicate that while teachers have a desire for impact in the teaching profession, they need support with improved working conditions to continue fulfilling their purpose as Texas educators. The Charles Butt Foundation hopes that these preliminary findings can support those educators seeking to return to classrooms through a deeper understanding of their reasons for doing so. By listening to the voices of teachers, the state of Texas can gain educational insight on how to pursue a more equitable and prosperous future together.

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# Appendix

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## Methodology

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Sampling and data collection for this report were conducted by SSRS of Glen Mills, Pa., at the direction of Langer Research Associates.

Using the Texas Education Agency’s 2021-22 list of 376,397 public school teachers, 32,801 names and email addresses were randomly selected, stratified by metro status, region, race and ethnicity, years of teaching experience, and charter status. Oversamples were drawn to obtain results from at least 100 teachers in each of these groups: East, West, and Central regions; Black teachers; those with no more than two years experience and/or younger than 30; and charter school teachers.

Most email addresses in the TEA list are personal (typically with a .com suffix). To increase contact opportunity, a third-party vendor, MDR, appended school-based email addresses as available, adding them to 14,922 records.

Sampled teachers were sent personalized email invitations signed by Dr. Shari Albright, president of the Charles Butt Foundation, with a unique passcode-embedded link to complete the survey online. The sample was released in two waves, with the second wave designed to ensure adequate sample sizes from subgroups. Multiple email invitations were sent to all sampled teachers. Fieldwork was conducted March 22 through May 1, 2023, and June 13 through June 15, 2023. The final sample included 1,029 Texas public school teachers. Data were weighted to address unequal probabilities of selection based on the number of available email addresses and to match known parameters from the TEA list. The survey has a design effect due to a weighting of 1.41, for a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points for the full sample. Results are highly representative in terms of known demographic values.