

Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Tennessee:

Trends from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey

Kaitlin Binsted

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Introduction

While concerns about a [national teacher shortage](#) first emerged over a decade ago, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue in recent years. Nationally, more teachers left their jobs following the 2021-22 school year than in the previous five years, and in some states, [teacher departures](#) were the highest they had been in a decade. In [Tennessee](#), the number of teachers who reported plans to leave their schools or leave teaching in the state increased from 2021 to 2022. Tennessee has also seen a decline in the number of candidates completing [educator preparation programs](#) in recent years. In response, the state focused its efforts on addressing issues of teacher recruitment and retention by increasing [teacher salaries](#), expanding [Grow Your Own](#) programs, and investing in college [scholarships](#) for future teachers.

The Tennessee Educator Survey provides additional insight into these issues of teacher recruitment and retention. This brief analyzes responses from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey to explore how administrators perceive issues around hiring and recruitment, how and why new teachers are entering the workforce, and trends in educators' retention plans.

Teacher Hiring & Recruitment

- 1 Overall, school leaders reported going into the 2022-23 school year with more hiring needs than in previous years, and those in schools with greater percentages of economically disadvantaged students expressed the greatest challenges with hiring and recruitment.
- 2 Reported pathways and motivations for becoming a teacher varied by race and gender.

Teacher Retention

- 3 About 8 in 10 teachers reported that they plan to continue teaching in their schools next year, but fewer teachers said that they plan to remain in education careers long-term.
- 4 More early-career teachers, teachers of color, and teachers working in schools serving more economically disadvantaged students reported that they plan to continue teaching in their schools than in 2022. Even with this increase in staying intentions, teachers in these same groups were still more likely than other teachers to say that they plan to transfer schools or exit the teaching profession.
- 5 Early-career teachers who reported feeling more prepared and who said they received mentorship supports were more likely to say that they plan to stay in their schools than early-career teachers who felt unprepared by their educator preparation program or who did not receive early-career supports.

In this brief, we use data from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES), specifically responses collected from teachers and school leaders (i.e., school principals and assistant principals). Overall, nearly half of teachers (N=37,056, 50% response rate) and school leaders (N=1,910, 47% response rate) responded to the survey. Longitudinal analyses use data from the 2018-2022 Tennessee Educator Surveys, with teacher response rates ranging from 51% to 62%. To account for differential response rates across school type, region, and economically disadvantaged students served, we use analytic weighting to produce results that are more representative of public school teachers and school leaders in Tennessee.

We analyze responses taken from the Teacher Core and Administrator Core (sections of the survey given to all teachers and school leaders, respectively), as well as responses from the Early-Career Branch (sections of the survey given to teachers in their first three years of teaching, N=3,821) and the Educators Module (one of three randomly assigned teacher modules, N=9,840).

TEACHER HIRING & RECRUITMENT

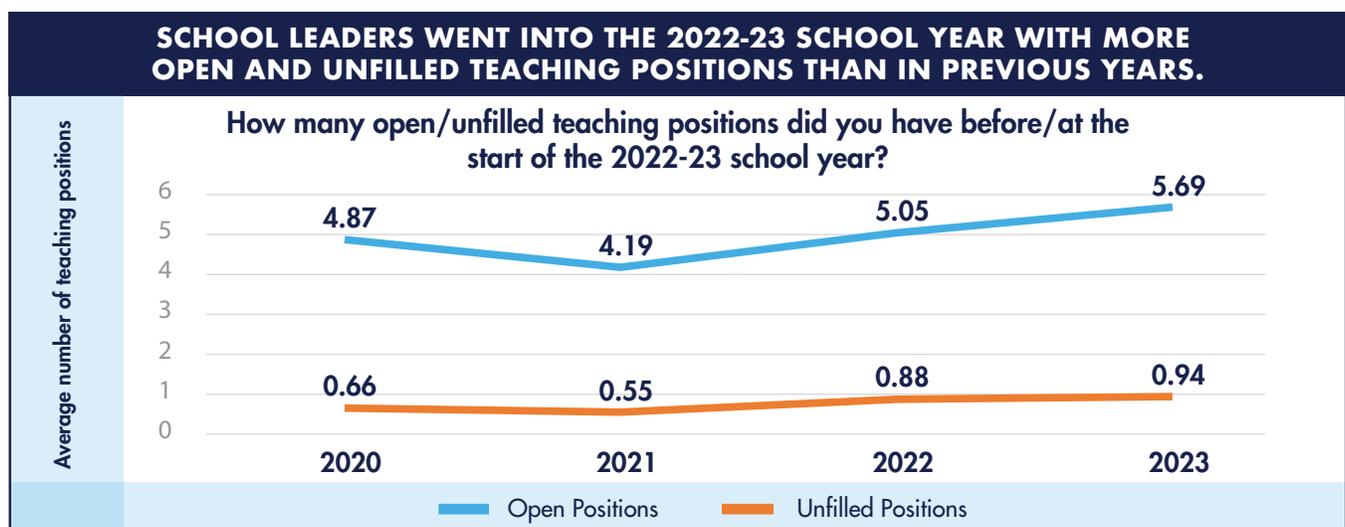


KEY FINDING 1

Overall, school leaders reported going into the 2022-23 school year with more hiring needs than in previous years, and those in schools with greater percentages of economically disadvantaged students expressed the greatest challenges with hiring and recruitment.

After a slight dip in 2021, school leaders have reported an increasing number of open positions before the beginning of the school year and remaining unfilled positions after the start of the school year. As shown in Figure 1, school leaders said they had an average of 5.69 open teaching positions at their schools before the start of the 2022-23 school year, up from 5.05 open positions (i.e., vacant, due to turnover or the creation of a new position) in 2022 and 4.19 open positions in 2021. After the start of the 2022-23 school year, school leaders reported that an average of 0.94 (nearly one per school) of these open teaching positions remained unfilled, compared to 0.88 unfilled positions in 2022 and 0.55 unfilled positions in 2021. The highest numbers of unfilled positions were in elementary, special education, and math subject areas.¹

FIGURE 1

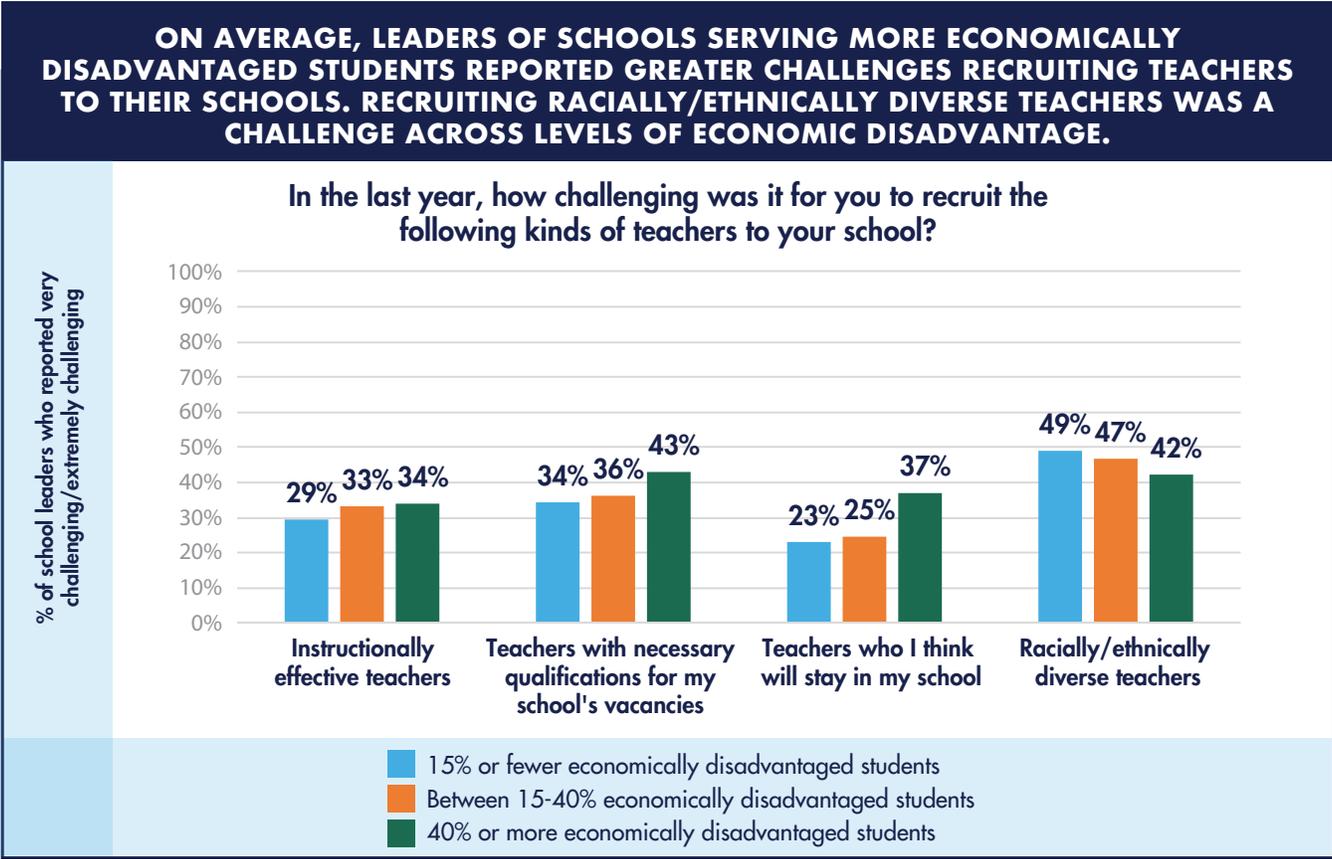


¹ There is large *variation* in the number of unfilled positions between districts and between schools within districts.

While these hiring needs generally reflect school size (i.e., schools with higher student enrollments had more open and unfilled positions), leaders in schools with more economically disadvantaged students were less successful in filling open positions than those with lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Leaders in schools with at least 40% economically disadvantaged students reported fewer open teaching positions going into the 2022-23 school year but more unfilled positions after the start of the school year. Specifically, schools with at least 40% economically disadvantaged students reported an average of 4.8 open teaching positions and 1.0 unfilled teaching positions compared to 6.9 open positions and 0.9 unfilled positions in schools with 15% or less economically disadvantaged students.

Further, leaders in schools with 40% or more economically disadvantaged students were more likely than leaders in schools with fewer economically disadvantaged students to report that it was very challenging or extremely challenging to recruit instructionally effective teachers (34%), teachers with necessary qualifications for their school’s vacancies (43%), and teachers who they thought would stay in their schools (37%). As shown in Figure 2, nearly half of school leaders across all levels of economic disadvantage reported that recruiting racially and ethnically diverse teachers was very challenging or extremely challenging.

FIGURE 2



2 The difference in the average number of open teaching positions reflects a difference in average enrollment. Schools with 40% or more economically disadvantaged students had an average enrollment of 401 students, while schools with 15% or fewer economically disadvantaged students had an average enrollment of 700 students.

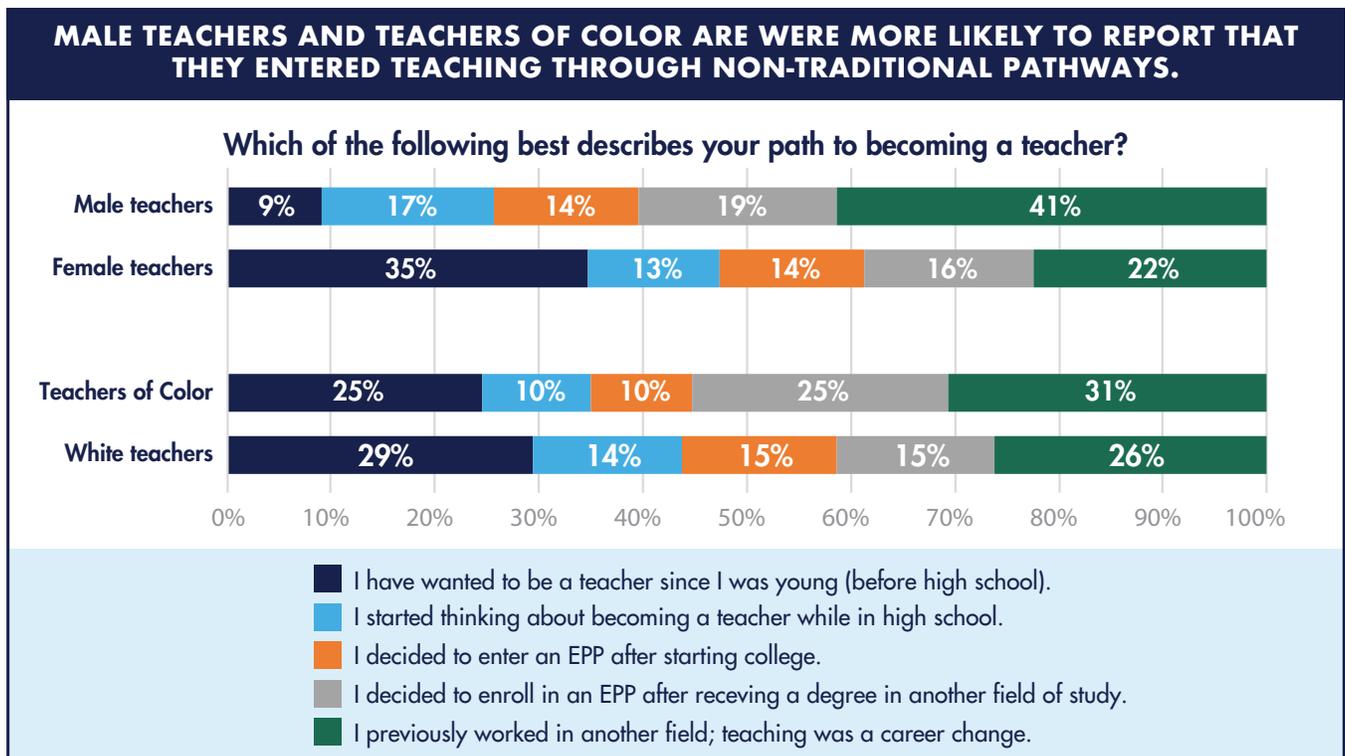
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KEY FINDING 2

Reported pathways and motivations for becoming a teacher varied by race and gender.

As the state, districts, and schools address teacher recruitment challenges, it may be important to consider how and why new teachers enter the workforce. Early-career teachers (respondents in their first three years of teaching) most commonly reported that they entered the profession because they knew that they wanted to be a teacher from a young age (29%) and because they had decided to change careers from another field (27%). However, some key differences emerge when we break down the responses by race and gender. For example, Figure 3 shows that male teachers and teachers of color were more likely to report that they entered teaching through a non-traditional pathway (i.e., a career change or after receiving a degree in another field of study) than their respective female and white peers.

FIGURE 3



Further, teachers most commonly cited their enjoyment working with kids in other settings and their positive experiences in school as a student as motivating reasons for wanting to become an educator, but these responses again varied by race and gender. White teachers were more likely than teachers of color to say that positive experiences with teachers and/or school motivated them to teach (52% vs. 42% of teachers of color), while teachers of color were more likely to say that they wanted to give back to the community (41% vs. 35% of White teachers) and that they previously worked in a school setting (22% vs. 13% of White teachers). Male teachers were more likely than female teachers to identify wanting to give back to the community and wanting to share their passion for their content/subject area as their top motivating reasons for becoming a teacher.

TEACHER RETENTION

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KEY FINDING 3

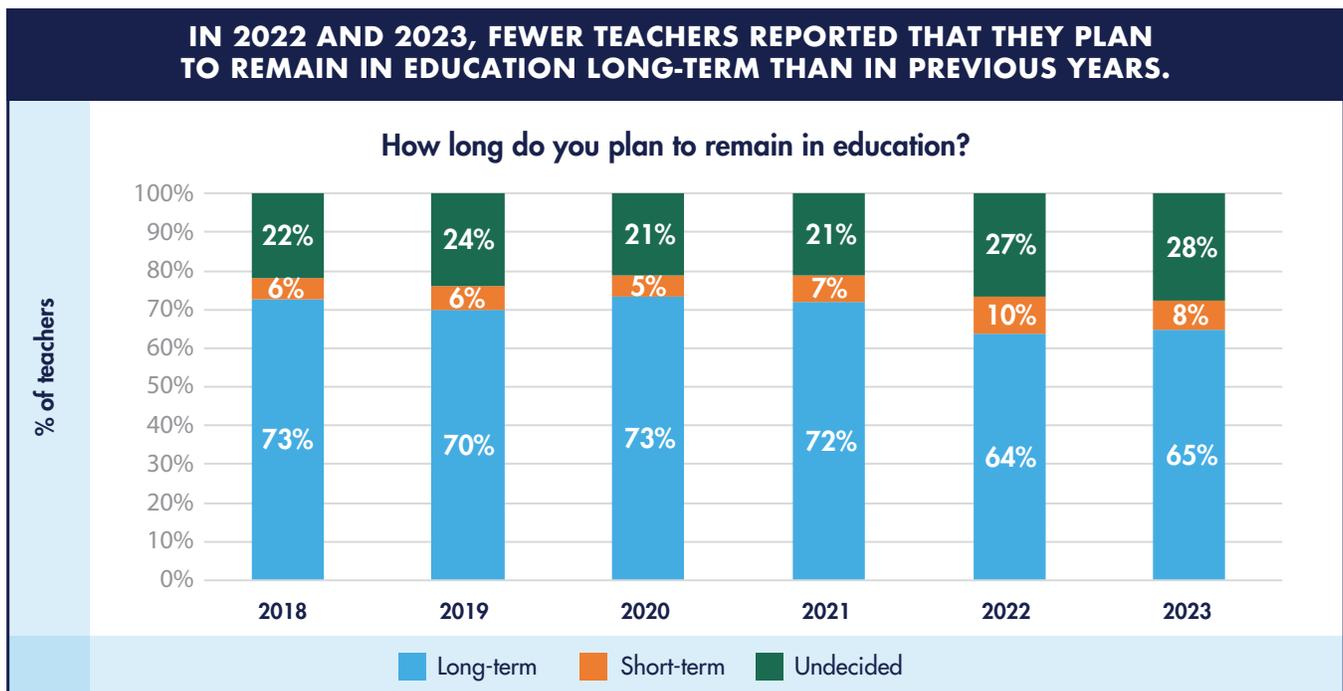
About 8 in 10 teachers reported that they plan to continue teaching in their schools next year, but fewer teachers reported that they plan to remain in education careers long-term.

After dropping from 82% in 2021 to 77% in 2022, the percentage of teachers who said they plan to continue teaching at their school next year increased slightly to 78% in 2023. About 10% of teachers said they planned to turn over (i.e., transfer, exit, move to administration, or retire) and 12% were undecided. Nationally, the annual teacher [turnover rate](#) has hovered around 8% for the past decade; this tends to be higher in schools designated for Title I funding and varies across states and regions.

The percentage of teachers who reported they plan to remain in education long-term (i.e., as long as they are able or until they are eligible for retirement benefits) has also declined in recent years, as shown in Figure 4. From 2018 to 2021, the percentage of teachers planning to remain in education careers long-term hovered between 70% and 73%. This fell to 64% in 2022 and increased slightly to 65% in 2023. Further, over a quarter of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they think about transferring to another school, and nearly half of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they think about leaving the teaching profession.

Importantly, previous [TERA research](#) and a similar study in [Michigan](#) found that teachers' stated intentions about leaving tend to predict actual trends in teacher turnover the following year.

FIGURE 4



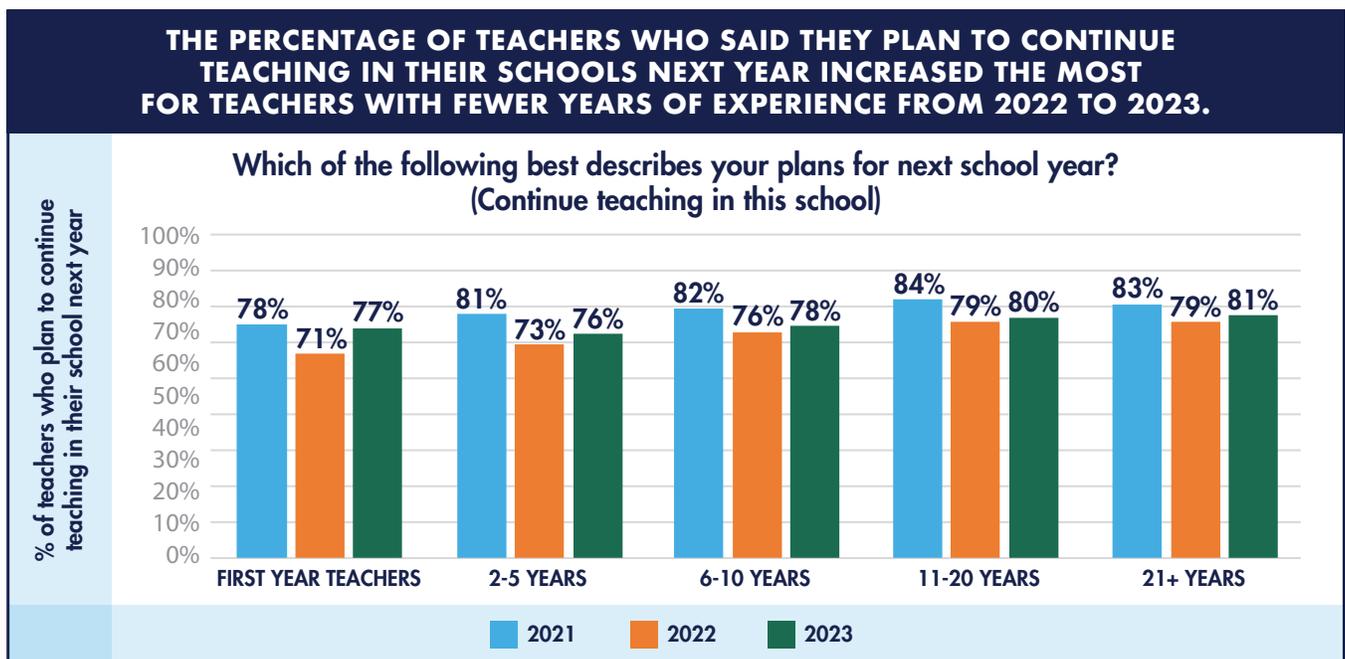
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KEY FINDING 4

More early-career teachers, teachers of color, and teachers working in schools serving more economically disadvantaged students reported that they plan to continue teaching in their schools than in 2022. Even with this increase in staying intentions, teachers in these same groups were still more likely than other teachers to say that they plan to transfer schools or exit the teaching profession.

[Teachers in their first five years of teaching](#) are more likely to move schools or exit teaching, and turnover is [higher](#) in schools with higher proportions of low-income students and among teachers of color, who are more likely to teach in these schools. Therefore, it is encouraging that more novice teachers in 2023 reported that they plan to continue teaching in their schools next year. As Figure 5 shows, the percentage of first-year teachers who said they plan to remain in their schools the following year dropped considerably between 2021 and 2022 (78% to 71%), but increased again in 2023 to 77%. For teachers with two to five years of experience, the percentage of teachers who said they plan to continue teaching in their schools next year rose to 76% after dropping to 73% in 2022.

FIGURE 5



Additionally, about 73% of teachers working in schools serving the greatest percentage of economically disadvantaged students reported that they plan to continue in their schools (up from 71% in 2022), and 70% of teachers of color said the same (up from 69% in 2022).

Despite some improvements in 2023, teachers with fewer years of experience, teachers in schools with more economically disadvantaged students, and teachers of color remain more likely than other teachers to say that they plan to transfer schools or exit teaching. On average, about 7% of teachers reported that they plan to transfer schools or exit teaching next school year. However, this number was higher for first-year teachers (11%), teachers with two to five years of experience (10%), teachers in schools with at least 40% economically disadvantaged students (9%) and teachers of color (9%).

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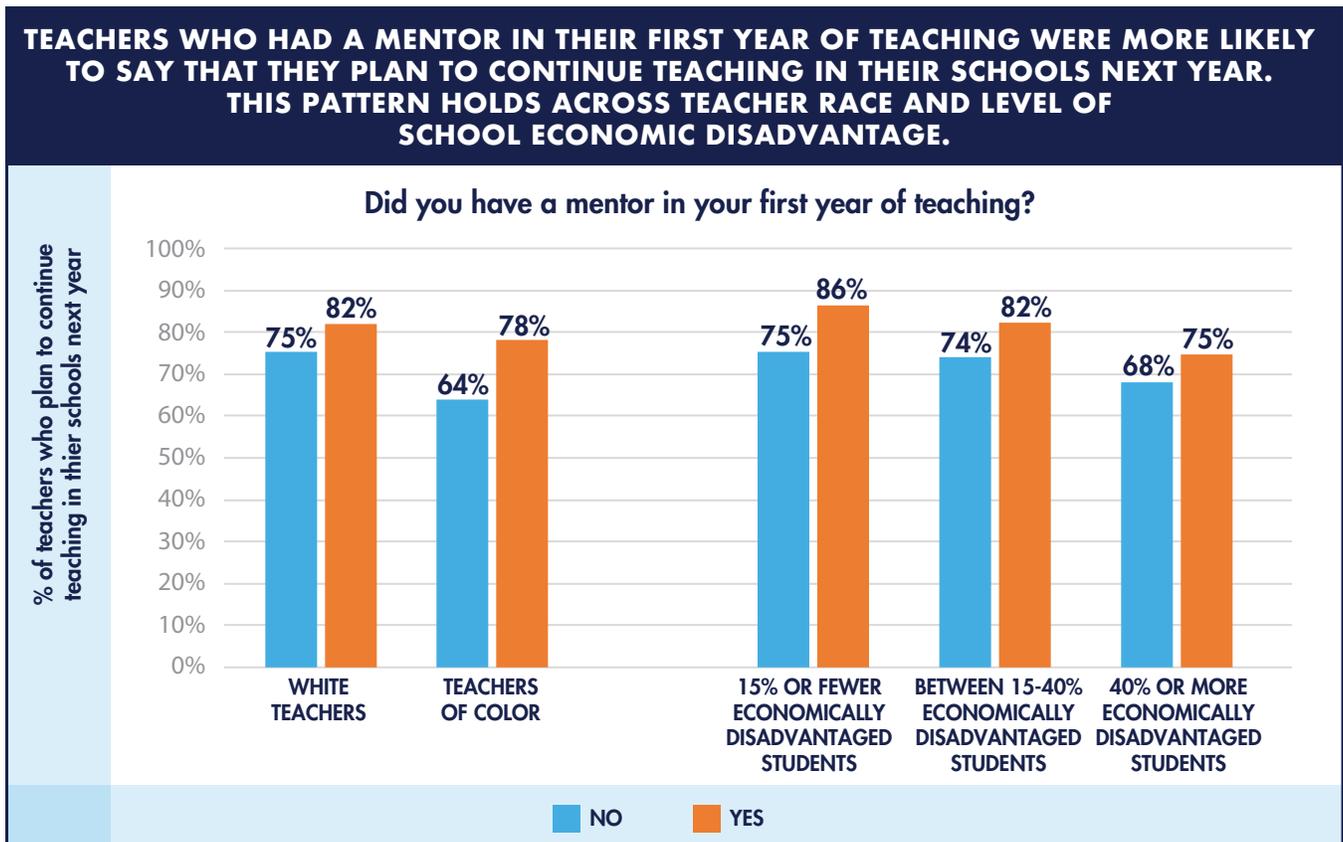
KEY FINDING 5

Early-career teachers who reported feeling more prepared and who said they received mentorship supports were more likely to say that they plan to stay in their schools than early-career teachers who felt unprepared by their educator preparation program or who did not receive early-career supports.

Minimizing attrition among early-career teachers (where turnover tends to be high) could have positive impacts on the long-term stability of the teacher workforce in Tennessee. Early-career teachers (respondents in their first three years of teaching) who reported feeling prepared by their educator preparation program for their current role, particularly through their clinical experience and coaching/mentorship, were 14 percentage points more likely to say that they plan to continue teaching in their schools the following year. Early-career teachers who were provided with supports in their first year of teaching, such as a formal teacher mentor, new teacher/peer reflection groups, assistance in preparing for observations, and instructional coaching/professional development, were also more likely to say they plan to stay in their schools next year.

Providing mentorship to first-year teachers appears to be particularly salient, as Figure 6 illustrates. Early-career teachers who had a formal teacher mentor in their first year of teaching were nine percentage points more likely to say that they planned to continue teaching in their school next year. This pattern holds across teacher race and level of school economic disadvantage. Further, mentorship may be particularly important for teachers of color – teachers of color who had a mentor in their first year of teaching were 14 percentage points more likely to plan to stay in their schools next year than teachers of color who did not have a formal mentor. However, teachers of color and teachers in schools with the most economically disadvantaged students were less likely to report that they received a formal mentor in their first year of teaching.

FIGURE 6



CONCLUSION

Responses from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey provide insights on the challenges with teacher hiring and recruitment, how new teachers are entering the teacher workforce, teachers' short-term and long-term career plans, and how preparation and early-career supports are related to career plans.

School leaders in Tennessee reported greater numbers of open and unfilled positions going into the 2022-23 school year, than in previous school years. At the same time, we have seen a decline in the number of teachers who say they plan to remain in education long-term. Our analysis reveals that schools with more economically disadvantaged students have greater staffing and retention challenges, and it is difficult to recruit and retain ethnically/racially diverse teachers. As many early-career teachers report entering the teaching profession through non-traditional pathways, expanding pathways into teaching could help increase the state's supply of teachers from diverse backgrounds. Finally, this analysis finds that preparation and early-career support, particularly in the form of mentorship, could have important links to teacher retention.

These findings align with many state efforts that are already underway to confront these challenges with teacher recruitment and retention. Tennessee is expanding its Grow Your Own programs, and in 2022 it established the first registered apprenticeship program for teaching. The state is also piloting a scholarship program that covers full tuition and fees for eligible college juniors and seniors enrolled in an EPP. The Tennessee Education Research Alliance has received a \$1.7 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to investigate pipelines into teaching for Tennessee teachers of color. To address teacher retention, the Tennessee Department of Education recently completed a Tennessee Retention Listening Tour to gather feedback from the state's teachers; one of the main findings was the importance of mentorship and collaboration. As the state continues its work around building and strengthening teacher pipelines, the Tennessee Educator Survey can serve as an important tool in informing and monitoring these efforts.



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