The Evidence Project at CRPE

Teachers are not all right: How the COVID-19 pandemic is taking a toll on the nation's teachers

Julia Kaufman and Melissa Diliberti

January 2021

Almost daily, media reports offer vivid accounts of K–12 teachers' successes and struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic: teachers report working longer hours, learning new technology, providing instruction through video calls, experiencing difficulty contacting every student, and struggling to form meaningful connections with students in their classes. Any parent or guardian supporting a child who is learning remotely can attest to how challenging the changing educational environment has been for students. Teachers are navigating those challenges for and with students, likely with varying supports from their state and school system.

Data collected through national surveys of teachers can help provide a holistic picture of how they are faring this school year to complement anecdotal accounts in news reports and social media. Survey data can also provide a more comprehensive picture of teachers' challenges to help identify policies and support initiatives to help them support students effectively throughout the pandemic.

Data from our review of the teacher surveys available to date show:

- Teachers' workloads spiked last spring and haven't let up.

- All teachers, but especially those teaching remotely and in high-poverty schools, are struggling to provide instruction, engage students, manage technology, and much more.

- Morale has fallen sharply and seems to be getting worse as challenges compound and build.

- The teacher workforce is at risk of suffering significant declines in the coming years.

High levels of burnout and low morale among teachers could make it even more difficult for schools to support students effectively. A surge of frustrated teachers leaving the profession would hurt the entire U.S. education system, but would likely disproportionately affect schools serving high concentrations of students of color and students from low-income households.

School systems that support educators in thoughtful ways could build a more positive school environment for teachers and students alike, and ameliorate the pandemic's negative impact on learning. Furthermore, creating space for collaboration and giving teachers a more meaningful say in decision-making could help improve morale and ensure teachers' concerns are addressed as schools continue to alternate between remote, in-person, and hybrid instructional models.

At the same time, school system leaders must start thinking creatively about how to improve teacher working conditions and build a strong, more diverse pipeline of teaching talent. Leaders must act now to mobilize a response that attends not only to teachers' immediate needs, but also stems the tide of student learning loss and rebuilds a stronger teacher workforce.

Teachers' workloads spiked last spring and haven't let up

When all the nation's K–12 public schools physically closed in March 2020, teachers did not stop working. Remote instruction looked drastically different from what teachers were used to providing in person. To adapt to the new learning environment, many teachers had to learn new technology and seek out new strategies and materials for engaging their students virtually. While an *EdWeek* survey suggested teachers were likely spending less time teaching than before the pandemic, RAND research suggested many were spending long hours planning instruction (e.g., creating lessons, ensuring online access for students) to fit the new virtual format. For example, data from one RAND American Teacher Panel survey from May 2020 indicated that nearly one-quarter of U.S. public school teachers were spending more than 30 hours per week just on instructional planning.

Although the initial scramble to provide remote instruction amid the outbreak of the pandemic has faded somewhat, teachers' workloads still seemed to be higher in fall 2020 than they were before the pandemic began. According to data from RAND surveys conducted in October 2020, some 57 percent of teachers reported working more hours per week than they had before the pandemic, with teachers working six more hours per week on average than they were prepandemic. More specifically, half of all surveyed teachers reported working 48 hours or more per week as part of their teaching position in their most recent full week of school, and 24 percent reported working 56 or more hours per week (figure 1).

Figure 1. Teachers' Hours Worked Per Week in Fall 2020 Versus Prepandemic
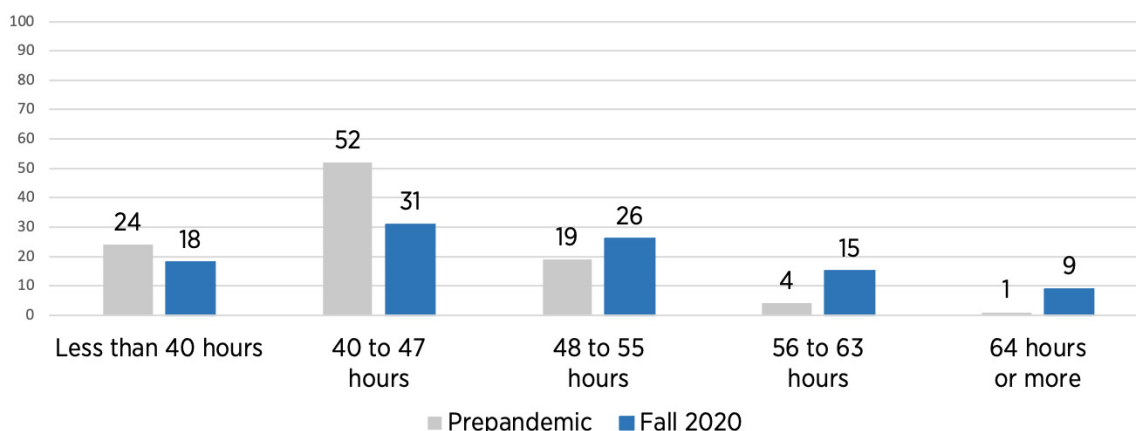
Note: This figure is based on the following survey questions asked to teachers in October 2020: "During your most recent full week of teaching this school year (2020–2021), approximately how many hours did you work as part of your teaching position at your school, excluding any work you do outside of your school system?" And, "During a typical full week of teaching before coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), approximately how many hours did you work as part of your teaching position at your school, excluding any work you do outside of your school system?"

Source: Julia Kaufman et al., *COVID-19 and the State of K-12 Schools: Results and Technical Documentation from the Fall 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).

It is likely that teachers' workloads will not decrease as districts continue to shift between remote and in-person instruction over the rest of this school year. Switching between these models requires shifts in curricula (between those designed to support in-person lessons and those designed to be accessed remotely), shifts in systems for monitoring students' attendance and academic progress, and shifts in methods for engaging students. All of these activities take valuable planning time, which makes it likely teachers will need to put in more hours each time districts shift back and forth between remote and in-person learning. Recent news reports also suggest that teachers who are delivering instruction remotely and in-person simultaneously—likely because many schools are using hybrid models—may be putting in particularly long hours trying to figure out how to support students at home and in their classrooms at the same time.

Teachers—especially those teaching remotely and those teaching more students from low-income households and students of color—are struggling to provide instruction, engage students, manage technology, and much more

Since last spring, we've known that the challenges teachers face are even more profound among those serving larger numbers of students from low-income households and students of color. For example, we know from RAND surveys and other data sources that these students are less likely to have reliable internet access at home and are less likely to have a device to use for their learning. In addition, according to our May 2020 survey results, teachers in schools serving higher percentages of these students were less likely than their counterparts in schools with more affluent students or higher proportions of white students to report:

- being able to contact most students and/or their families

- having resources for students to engage with counselors or psychologists

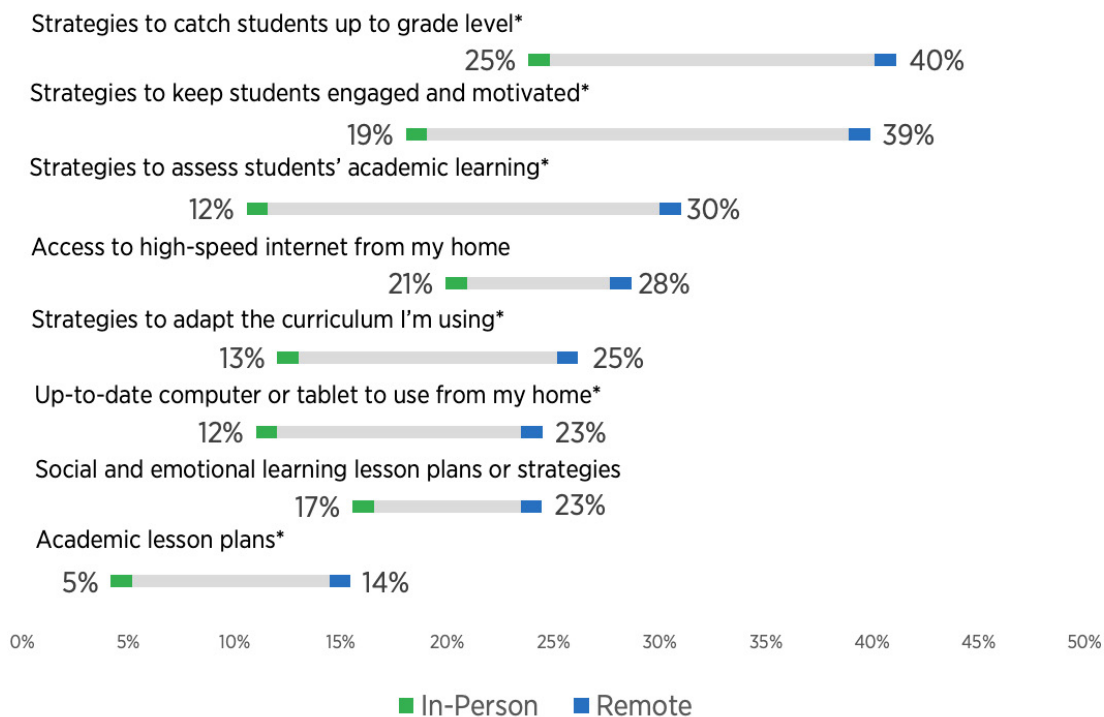- having resources to support students' social and emotional well-being

In many cases, these disparities have carried over into the fall, although there are some exceptions. For example, while attendance rates are still lower for the highest-poverty schools—defined as those with 75 percent or more of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL)—compared to the lowest-poverty schools (those with less than 25 percent FRL-eligible students), we did not observe significant differences between the highest- and lowest-poverty schools in the percentage of students and families that teachers indicated being able to contact since the school year started. Yet the percentage of students who teachers report are completing all or almost all their assignments in fall 2020 was much lower in highest-poverty schools compared to their lowest-poverty counterparts (61 percent versus 78 percent). As might be expected, teachers in the highest-poverty schools were far more likely than those in the lowest-poverty schools to report that their students were "significantly" less prepared to participate in grade-level work this school year (2020-21) than last year (33 percent of teachers in highest-poverty schools versus 16 percent in lowest-poverty schools).

Teachers in schools serving high percentages of vulnerable students thus face even more of an uphill battle in helping students learn grade-level content, and they have much deeper and more significant needs for support.

In addition to the challenges presented to teachers who serve more vulnerable students, teachers who are providing remote instruction face particular challenges, according to our survey data. We asked teachers about their need for additional support from their school or district on

issues ranging from strategies to assess students' learning to lesson plans to strategies to help support students' academic, social, and emotional needs. For nearly every support we asked about, higher percentages of remote-only versus in-person teachers expressed a major or very major need for support (figure 2). The needs of teachers providing hybrid (some combination of in-person and remote instruction) fell somewhere in between the needs of those delivering remote versus in-person instruction.

Figure 2. Percentage of Teachers Who Reported a Major or Very Major Need for Various Supports

Strategies to catch students up to grade level*
25% — 40%

Strategies to keep students engaged and motivated*
19% — 39%

Strategies to assess students' academic learning*
12% — 30%

Access to high-speed internet from my home
21% — 28%

Strategies to adapt the curriculum I'm using*
13% — 25%

Up-to-date computer or tablet to use from my home*
12% — 23%

Social and emotional learning lesson plans or strategies
17% — 23%

Academic lesson plans*
5% — 14%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45% 50%

■ In-Person   ■ Remote

Note: This figure is based on the following survey question asked to teachers in October 2020: "Please indicate your current level of need for additional support from school or district leaders in each of the following areas." Response options were "no need," "very minor need," "minor need," "moderate need," "major need," and "very major need." * indicates a significant difference (p < 0.05) between educators in schools providing in-person instruction and educators providing fully remote instruction.
Source: Melissa Diliberti and Julia H. Kaufman, *Will This School Year Be Another Casualty of the Pandemic? Key Findings from the American Educator Panels Fall 2020 COVID-19 Surveys.* Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).

## Morale has fallen sharply and seems to be getting worse as challenges compound and build

Surveys conducted by *EdWeek* and RAND suggest that teacher morale declined with the shift to remote learning in spring 2020 and has only continued to decline as the pandemic persists. Teacher burnout is of particular concern right now. Prepandemic studies associated teacher burnout with a range of stressors that teachers may experience regularly, including the social and emotional demands of working with large numbers of students with varying needs at the same time, the imbalance between teaching demands and available resources, and lack of control over their work environment. The pandemic is likely exacerbating all of these issues. By last May, one-quarter of teachers indicated that burnout was a major concern, according to our

RAND surveys. By October, this number had shot up to 57 percent. Those teaching remotely this fall, either fully or as part of a hybrid model, were especially likely to report concerns of burnout. These findings on higher burnout among teachers providing remote instruction are particularly concerning now that many districts that were providing in-person instruction have switched back to remote instruction due to increasing COVID-19 infection rates. As we noted above, switching between remote and in-person instruction—and the uncertainty associated with those shifts—likely increases the work on teachers' plates and the potential for burnout.

Aside from feelings of burnout, there is evidence that teachers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the profession. Some of this dissatisfaction may be related to teachers feeling inadequately prepared to teach successfully in a rapidly-changing teaching environment. According to teacher survey data from researchers at Brown University and the City University of New York, more than half of teachers reported feeling less successful in their job during the spring 2020 school closures. Teachers' feelings of dissatisfaction may also be related to frustrations with their districts' decision-making. According to RAND survey data, some 28 percent of teachers reported feeling dissatisfied specifically with the decisions their school or district had made with respect to remote and in-person learning, with another 36 percent reporting mixed feelings.

Frustration with their districts' decision-making, lack of clear guidance, fear that they aren't being successful, feelings of burnout, and challenges with new technology may be contributing to teachers' belief that it is not worth it to continue in the profession. In fact, some 42 percent of teachers in fall 2020 said the stress and disappointments of teaching aren't worth it—up from 28 percent who had similar feelings before the pandemic began, as reflected by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) teacher survey data (figure 3). Higher percentages of teachers also reported other negative feelings toward the profession than before the pandemic began. For example, in years past, less than half of U.S. teachers surveyed by the NCES agreed with statements indicating they did not have as much enthusiasm for teaching as when they began teaching and would consider leaving if they could find a higher-paying job. In October 2020, majorities of teachers agreed with these statements.

Figure 3. Teachers Are More Dissatisfied with the Profession Than Before the Pandemic Began
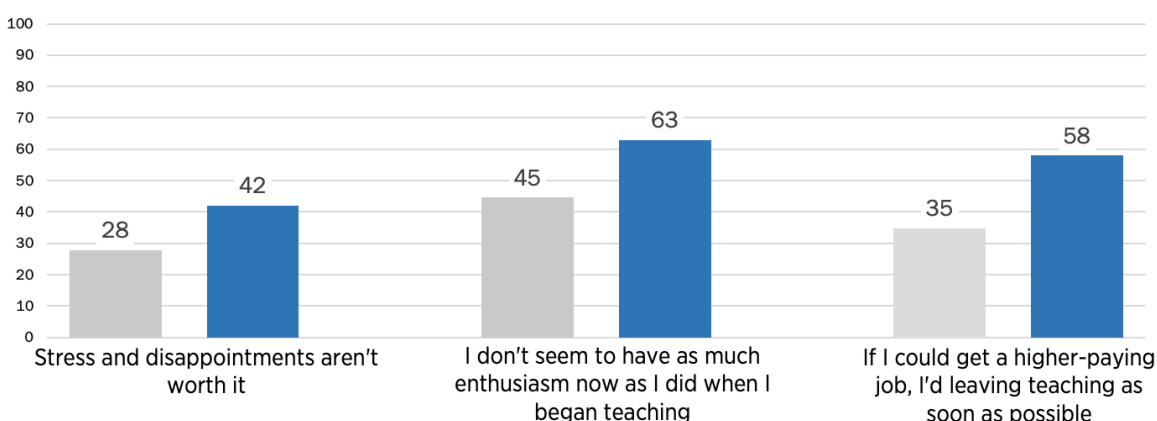
Note: This figure is based on the following survey question asked to teachers: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your work at this school?" Response options were "strongly disagree," "somewhat disagree," "somewhat agree," and "strongly agree." This figure shows the percentage who responded "somewhat or strongly agree." Data for the prepandemic estimates are from the 2017-18 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, while data for the fall 2020 estimates are from surveys conducted by the RAND Corporation in October 2020. *Source:* Julia Kaufman et al., *COVID-19 and the State of K–12 Schools: Results and Technical Documentation from the Fall 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).

The teacher workforce is at risk of suffering significant declines in the coming years

Increased feelings of burnout and dissatisfaction may result in large numbers of teachers leaving the profession. As of October 2020, about one-quarter of all teachers reported that they were likely to leave the teaching profession by the end of the year, according to our RAND survey—roughly three times the number that leave the profession during a typical school year.[1] The pandemic is responsible for much of this spike; 17 percent of teachers reported they were unlikely to leave before the pandemic but likely to leave now. And it's not just experienced teachers near retirement age who say they might leave. According to our survey data, similar percentages of early-, mid-, and late-career teachers said the pandemic made them more likely to leave the profession. These findings have been corroborated by other sources, including *EdWeek* and research in England.

[1] Data from the *Teacher Follow-Up Survey of the Schools and Staffing Survey* (SASS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) suggest that roughly 8 percent of teachers leave the teaching profession annually.

Some teachers have already left. Arizona saw a 75 percent increase in the number of teachers leaving the profession in August 2020 compared to 2019, with 43 percent of departing teachers reporting that COVID-19 drove their decision to leave. According to a survey fielded to a convenience sample of Minnesota Teacher Professional Association members, 30 percent of the 10,000 responding educators reported that they have considered leaving or retiring from the classroom.

All that said, it may be difficult to truly understand the extent to which the pandemic has led or will lead to large increases in teacher attrition. Research has thus far uncovered little in the way of clear teacher leaving patterns that can isolate the impact of the pandemic from other causes, such as shifts in state retirement options. And other forces might push against rising teacher attrition. For example, teachers may have fewer job alternatives beyond teaching if employment rates remain lower than prepandemic averages, and teachers' feelings of burnout and stress may recede somewhat if COVID-19 risks recede and schools begin to reopen permanently in greater numbers.

In addition, fewer teachers are entering the profession right now. Half of principals and district administrators surveyed by *EdWeek* this fall said they have received fewer job applications than in past years.

High teacher attrition is a concern for many reasons. It affects student achievement in obvious ways by increasing the need for schools to bring in substitute teachers, to cancel courses in harder-to-staff advanced subjects in math and science, and to rely on less experienced teachers who remain in the profession. Teacher attrition also increases recruitment and hiring costs in schools and districts. Research documents that these effects of attrition are typically felt most deeply in hard-to-staff schools with more students from low-income households, and there is no reason to think that any teacher attrition due to the pandemic will not also hit these vulnerable students harder.

While the potential of high teacher attrition rates are concerning for the stability of the education system, low teacher morale doesn't just matter for teacher attrition. It matters because teachers who are less optimistic and less satisfied with their job have greater odds of delivering instruction that does not support student achievement, and teachers experiencing greater stress and frustration at work are less likely to have positive relationships with their students.

Recommendations

We know that many K–12 students are experiencing numerous challenges during the pandemic. Our nation's teachers are taking on the bulk of those challenges and need our support to make schools a productive, positive place for learning and recovery.

In the short-term, we recommend four steps for states, districts, and school leaders:

1. State, district, and school leaders should make sure that teachers have the necessary instructional resources, guidance, and technology that might reduce their workloads, best support their students, and help mitigate student learning loss. For example, teachers need states and districts to provide good training and software platforms that allow them to assess and support student learning, whether they're teaching students remotely or in-person.

   Teachers also need clear recommendations on curriculum materials and lesson plans. Some states and school systems are doing an excellent job of providing suggestions for high-quality curriculum materials and resources. For example, even before the pandemic, Louisiana's Department of Education was providing reviews of high-quality resources and professional development to guide instruction, some of which are available for free online. In addition, organizations like Open Up Resources and UnboundEd provide free, high-quality comprehensive curricula for mathematics and English language arts on their websites.

   Finally, teachers need government, district, and philanthropic efforts to ensure their students have internet connections and devices at home, and access to technical support so all students can participate in school without having to rely on teachers to troubleshoot computer glitches or figure out online learning software.

2. Districts and school leaders should engage teachers in decisions they make over the rest of the year. Research has long shown that teachers' feelings of connectedness with colleagues, support, and involvement in decision-making influence their satisfaction with teaching. Teachers would likely feel more energized and more supported if they were able to shape or provide valued input on the instructional approaches in their schools and districts.

3. All teachers providing instruction during the pandemic need resources and recommendations to support their own well-being. Districts and schools may want to gather data from teachers on the school-related issues that are causing them stress in order to intervene by providing solutions or supports. Resources like Edutopia and Greater Good in Education at the University of California Berkeley have provided a range of ideas for supporting staff well-being in schools, including stress management techniques and staff meetings that increase teacher voice in decision-making and focus on community-building over and above logistics.

4. Clear federal and state guidance is needed on both the necessary conditions for school closures and ways to keep students, teachers, and families safe. This guidance could help teachers feel more confident about returning to in-person instruction and potentially more give them satisfaction regarding decision-making in their school system. Currently, many states have different thresholds and metrics for determining

when schools and other businesses close and are sending disparate messages regarding school safety precautions. Better federal and state guidance requires more data collection and more information about what works. Right now, the Rockefeller Foundation is collecting a great deal of evidence to inform procedures for COVID-19 testing in schools, which could support and scale testing processes that help teachers and students feel more safe. Efforts like this could provide the evidence that the federal government needs to set clear recommendations and help districts follow suit.

In the longer term, schools and districts will face many challenges, even after remote learning is no longer necessary.

If teachers do leave the profession in the numbers suggested by survey data, districts will need to take new steps to build talent pipelines that provide schools with a diverse set of strong teachers. Some evidence suggests that within-district teacher preparation programs could potentially solve some of these teacher needs in large districts, although there is a substantial cost for such programs. In smaller districts, state and regional consortiums might attract a new generation of teachers to public schools.

In addition, learning loss will be a major challenge for teachers and schools in the long run. If researchers—along with districts and schools—could collect evidence for what is working to mitigate learning loss and train teachers and new staff to be ready to address those challenges on day one of the 2021–22 school year, teachers will feel more confident in their work and will not be scrambling to find resources for students.

Summer is also a period when students who need to catch up could receive tutoring and support. But schools and districts may want to consider how to partner with community organizations to provide tutoring and summer instruction so that teachers who have worked hard all year have a break to recharge, regroup, and be ready to jump into their work in 2021–22.