

# Better Pay Would Keep Teachers From Quitting. But There's More to It



By [Stephen Sawchuk](#) — July 27, 2022 ⌚ 6 min read



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Even for teachers, money talks.

A new survey from the EdWeek Research Center finds that, given a choice of different ways to increase compensation, teachers say the prospect of salary increases that keep up with inflation are more likely to keep them in the classroom than other financial perks—including

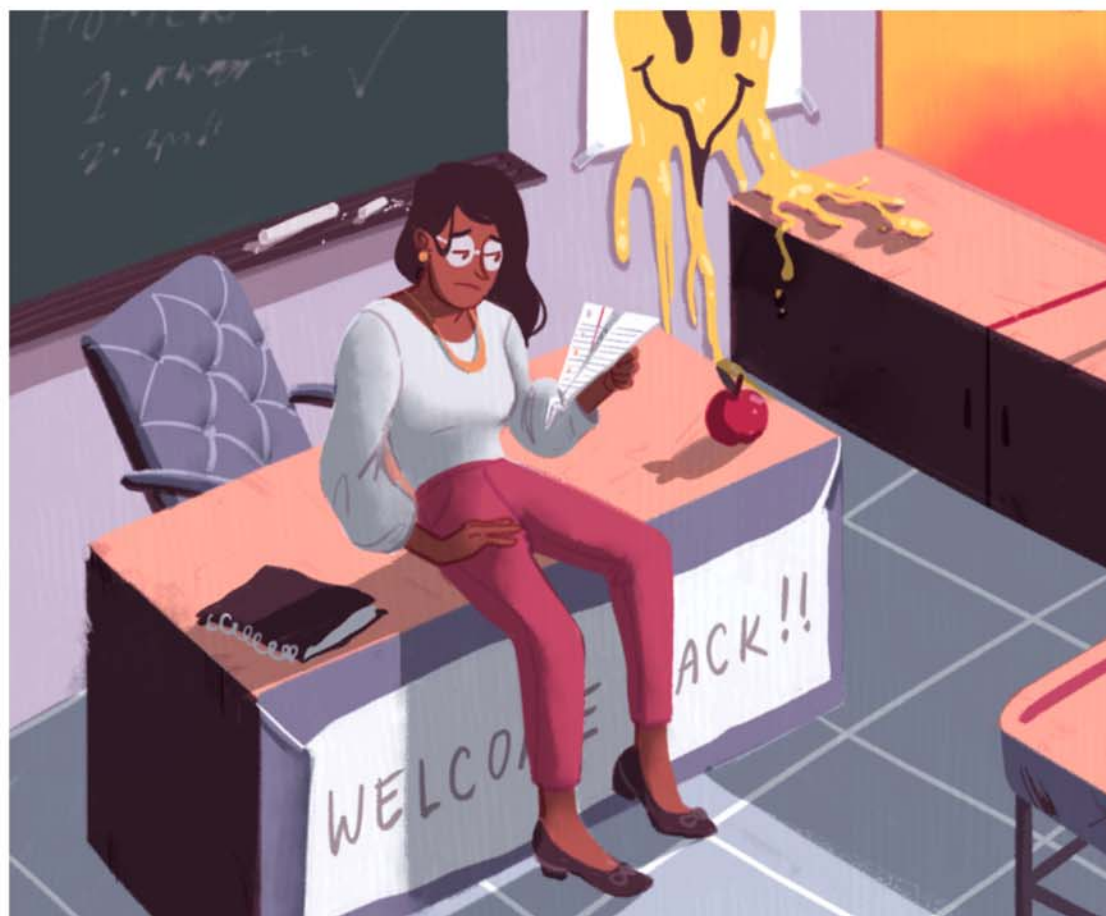
more generous family leave policies.

Meanwhile, one-off bonuses don't seem to be much of a draw at all, unless districts are *really* prepared to shell out for them.

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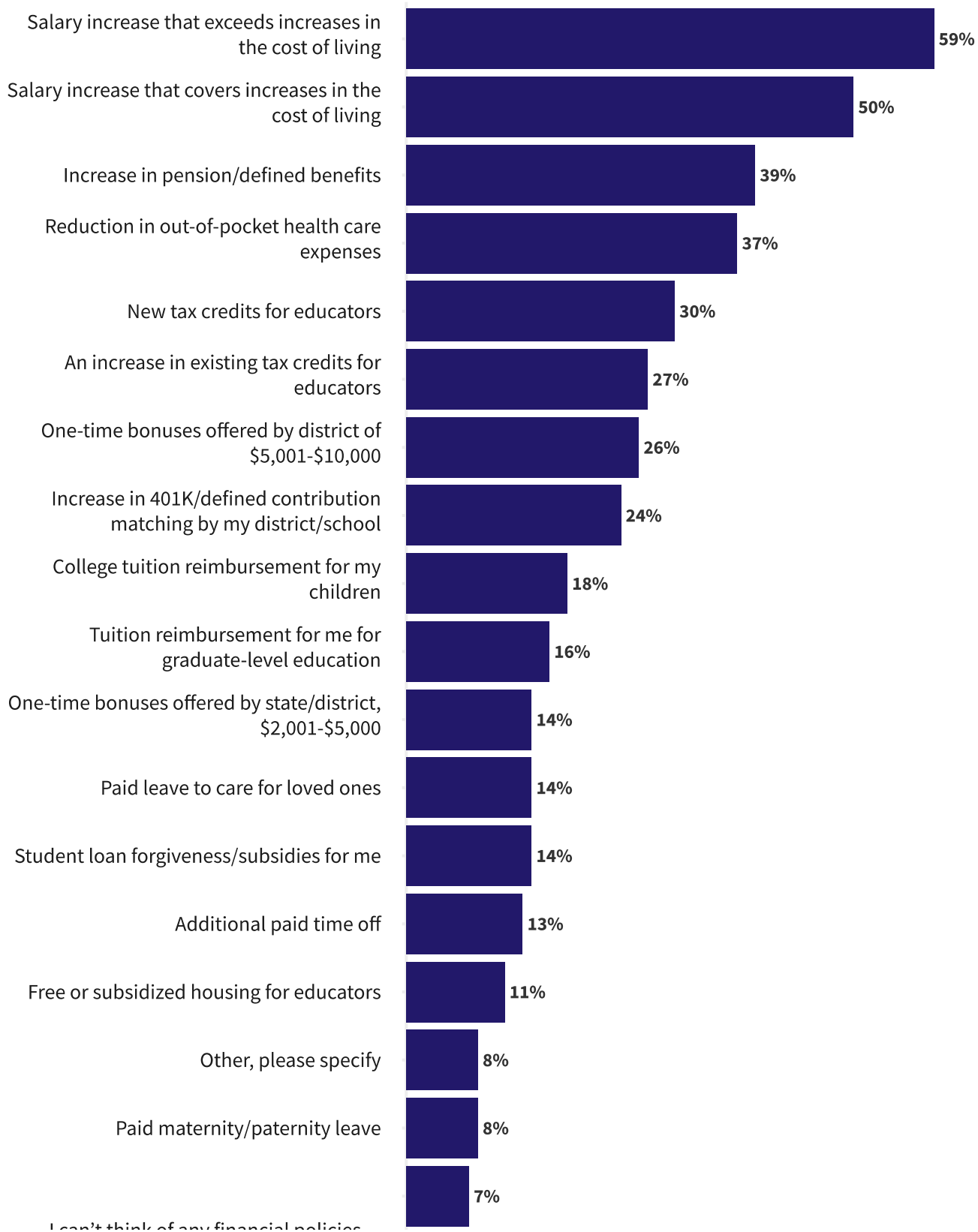
In all, the survey results speak to the complicated financial calculus district leaders make in investing money in ways to hang on to teaching staff. The most effective strategies are also the most expensive ones, long term.

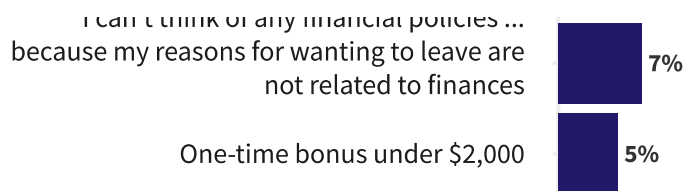
“It’s a question of magnitude, and what motivates people,” said David Rosenberg, a partner at Education Resource Strategies, a nonprofit consulting firm that advises districts on how to spend their money effectively. “\$1,000 is nice, but it reinforces the idea that small amounts are the units of compensation for teachers. They need to feel like they are much more respected—and that districts are willing to do more for them with the money that’s there.”

Finances are only one part of the retention piece, though, he and other experts noted: Teachers want to work in mission-driven places where they enjoy collaborative relationships with peers and support from their principals.

Let's take a look at the results and see how they fit in.

## Which of the following financial policies—if any—would make you more likely to stay in the teaching profession long-term? Select all that apply.





\*Results show responses from teachers.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, July 2022



 A Flourish chart

It's important to keep in mind that while it's common to talk about a “national” teacher shortage, shortages actually tend to be highly localized and regional. They reflect how local markets work, the tendency of teachers to work fairly close to where they grew up, and also how competition for talent differs by subject and grade level.

The data are based on a nationally representative sample of 564 teachers. The EdWeek Research Center surveyed them from June 29 to July 18 as part of a regular series of polls tracking the pandemic's effects on schools.

There weren't many significant differences in the responses when we broke the data out by teachers' geographical location or grade levels, but a few are noted below.

## Teachers prefer base salary increases

Teachers say the financial strategy that would most encourage them to stay is to offer increases that exceed the cost of living; at 6 in 10 teachers responding, it was the most popular option. (Right behind it were salary increases that keep pace with the cost of living.)

This is in one sense not a terribly surprising finding: Salary increases would make an immediate difference in teachers' lives; they, along with U.S. consumers as a whole, are dealing with record inflation and higher gas prices connected to pandemic-related supply chain problems and disruption in fuel markets caused by the war in Ukraine.

But it also shows that teachers are financially and politically sophisticated, noted Thomas Dee, a professor at Stanford University's school of education who studies teacher compensation and incentives.

“It doesn't take too many years for a salary increase to work out to be financially better than a



bonus,” he said. “It was striking to me that they privileged these, and it suggests they understand those kind of lifetime benefit issues.”

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No matter how well earned, raises like these are typically an expensive proposition for district leaders.

“If we do those things with the level of funding we have in schools, we can’t do the extra supports, the personalization, the mental-health supports we need to do to respond to the COVID effects,” said Karen Hawley Miles, the president and CEO of ERS.

Some districts have tried to target increases for certain teachers or subjects, rather than offering across-the-board ones; the survey doesn’t ask how teachers feel about them. Historically, they can be politically tricky to pull off because the ethos of teaching is often concerned with fairness and fair treatment. Still, some districts have managed to raise

salaries in different ways—targeting new hires, for example, during those tough first few years on the job.

## Retirement and health compensation are a priority

Nearly 4 in 10 teachers said that an increase in their pension or defined-benefit retirement plan would persuade them to stay. This could reflect a desire for security in the wake of the pandemic—and concern about the dive many retirement accounts took earlier this year when financial markets slumped, the ERS strategists said.

Retirement benefits are a tricky area for district leaders. With the exception of only a few school districts that have their own pension plans, most of the rules about retirements are set by state legislators and pension boards, not directly by district leaders. Districts can do things like picking up part of the share that teachers are required to pay into the pension system, but pensions already make up a growing part of district budgets, particularly for debt servicing on the plans.

On the other hand, districts do control more aspects of health costs—particularly the proportion teachers pay for insurance versus what they pick up. This is often a major factor in collective bargaining negotiations.

Housing and paid leave—even maternity or paternity leave—were far less popular responses, despite skyrocketing housing costs nationwide and increased awareness about the family-care challenges that crop up in the women-dominated teaching profession.

Notably, teachers in urban settings were much more likely to say that paternity or maternity leave would make them more likely to stay, at 17 percent, than those working in rural or suburban districts, at 6 percent and 8 percent, respectively. And curiously, elementary and high school teachers also put this financial perk much higher than middle school teachers.

## Bonuses—unless they're substantial—don't seem to do much

The survey found that bonuses paled next to the other, more substantial forms of compensation. In fact, just 5 percent of teachers said that bonuses less than \$2,000 would be apt to keep them in the profession.

About a quarter said larger bonuses, of \$5,000-\$10,000, could encourage them to stay.

It's a trend that worries Hawley Miles of ERS. Many districts are prioritizing lower bonuses. She favors larger bonuses that can be strategically coupled with efforts to create career pathways for teachers where they could share their expertise with colleagues and improve working conditions for all.

“We have districts all over the place doing this right now, using their [federal COVID relief] funds to do these [smaller bonuses], so I think it's really interesting to contrast that with larger ones,” she said. “You can call them bonuses. Or you could call them stipends for different roles, for teachers who take on more roles with responsibilities and leadership.”

## Working conditions also matter

The limited nature of the survey means these findings don't get into a key question: What is the value of money compared to other kinds of benefits—like working in a collegial environment with supportive administrators?

A minority of teachers, 7 percent, said that *no* financial policy would make a difference because their reasons for wanting to leave didn't hinge on that issue. (Consider, for example, that a recent Khan Academy study found that factors like student behavior and a lack of mental health supports have made the job of catching students up post-pandemic more difficult.)

And decades of research show the connection between retention and good working conditions, such as a positive school culture, respect, and a strong principal. An improved salary might keep teachers in the classrooms for a little while longer—but it's not the only thing teachers look for.

It all points to the need to get a better handle on the multitude of factors. Some districts are now conducting “stay interviews” to get at this question, and past research has suggested that one simple thing principals can do is to ask their best teachers: What would keep you in the classroom?