

# Paid Parental Leave for Teachers Is Happening in More States and Districts



By Madeline Will — June 22, 2023

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Most educators don't have access to paid parental leave—a frustrating, sometimes painful reality for many educators hoping to grow their families. But that's changing in a growing number of states and districts.

This spring, at least three states—Oklahoma, Tennessee, and South Carolina—have enacted new laws giving paid maternity leave for educators. Chicago public schools, the nation's fourth-largest school system, recently implemented this type of paid leave, too.

Research shows that access to paid parental leave can lead to improved health outcomes for both the infant and the mother. Policymakers are also hoping that it will be a recruitment and retention tool, as school districts report struggling to fill high numbers of teacher vacancies. The teaching profession is predominately made up of women, many of whom are in their childbearing years.

“Paid family leave is proven to help with employee recruitment, retention, morale, and productivity,” said Feroza Freeland, the policy manager of the southern office at A Better Balance, a national nonprofit advocacy group. “It has positive influences in all of those areas, and we know that many states are struggling with teacher shortages.”

There's also a growing awareness of the “impossible situation” many educators are in when it comes to growing their families, she said.

Without access to designated paid parental leave, educators may cobble together sick days to have some paid time off with their newborns, and sometimes supplement that with unpaid leave. Many teachers say they try to time their pregnancies so they can give birth in the summer months.

Educators can qualify for 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected time off under the Family Medical Leave Act, which applies to employees who have been at their job for at least a year. But many can't afford to take unpaid or partially paid leave and have had to return to the classroom before they're physically or emotionally ready.

This problem is especially pronounced among early-career teachers, who have not had the chance to accumulate much sick leave. On average, public school teachers receive about a dozen sick and personal days per year, which can roll over from year to year.

But educators say that relying on sick days to make up parental leave is stressful. If they deplete their store of sick time during parental leave, they might be unable to take time off down the road if their baby gets sick, for instance.

In November, the National Council on Teacher Quality, a research and policy group, analyzed the family leave policies of the 100 largest school districts in the country, the largest district in each state, and the member districts of the Council of Great City Schools. Of those 148 districts, just 18 percent provided full or partially paid parental leave of some kind.

The amount of paid parental leave offered varied widely, from one day to five months, with most districts offering less than a month.

Short-term disability insurance typically provides birthing parents six to eight weeks of partial income depending on the type of delivery, but NCTQ said that benefit wasn't commonly provided for teachers. (The group did not count short-term disability in its analysis of district leave policies.)

But the landscape is starting to shift with some recent high-profile announcements. Earlier this month, for example, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, a Democrat, announced that educators—both birthing and non-birthing parents alike—will get up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave at the start of the 2023-24 school year. Currently, birthing parents are eligible for six to eight weeks of short-term disability leave, and non-birth parents receive two weeks of paid leave.

Other big-city school districts, like Washington, D.C., and New York City, already offered paid parental leave for educators.

## **A growing list of states that offer paid parental leave for educators**

A handful of states, including Delaware, New Jersey, and Washington, have offered paid parental leave for educators for several years now. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, a Republican, added the Peach State to the list in 2021, when he signed a measure to provide three weeks of paid parental leave for state workers, including teachers.

This spring, Tennessee lawmakers unanimously passed legislation to provide all public school teachers and administrators six weeks of paid parental leave for childbirth, adoption, or stillbirth. School districts will be reimbursed by the state for the cost of the leave.

In Oklahoma, six weeks of paid leave for school employees who give birth was part of the GOP education plan this year, which also included teacher pay raises and tax credits for families who send their child to a private or charter

school. The education package, which was signed into law by Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt, designated \$12 million in funding for the leave. (Non-birthing parents are not eligible for this paid leave.)

Katherine Bishop, the president of the Oklahoma Education Association, said she's not aware of any school district in the state that had offered paid maternity leave before the new law. It wasn't even on local teachers' unions' radar, she said, because the price tag seemed out of reach.

"We're like, 'Wow, we didn't even realize we could get this,'" she said. "Districts couldn't do it. ... It was unaffordable."

Meanwhile, in South Carolina, educators who give birth or are the primary caregivers of an adopted child will soon qualify for six weeks of paid parental leave. (The non-birthing parent will receive two weeks of paid leave.)

"When it comes to a student's academic achievement, we know that quality teachers matter the most," Republican Gov. Henry McMaster wrote on Twitter to announce that he signed the bipartisan measure. "This gives us yet another tool to recruit and retain the very best educators around."

The state legislature did not allocate any additional money for the paid leave, leaving it up to districts to figure out how to pay for it.

It's too early to tell what the cost will be, said Sherry East, the president of the South Carolina Education Association. But it's doable, she said: Four school districts had already begun offering paid parental leave for employees before the new law was signed.

And teachers, she said, are excited: "A lot of people don't have babies because they can't afford it. Until you teach three to four years and never take a sick day, you don't have enough paid leave to do that."

## **Could the upfront cost save money in the long term?**

Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a Republican, has also signed into law 12 weeks of paid maternity leave for state employees who give birth or adopt a child. Public school educators will only qualify if their school district or charter school elects to participate in a cost-sharing agreement for the expenses.

That would mean that the district or charter school would pay half the costs for their employees' maternity leave, and the state would pick up the other half.

The cost associated with expanding paid parental leave has historically been a deterrent for districts. In California, for instance, Gov. Gavin Newsom and his predecessor, Gov. Jerry Brown, both Democrats, vetoed bills in 2019 and 2017 that would have given teachers at least six weeks of paid leave for pregnancy, childbirth, or miscarriage. A coalition of organizations that represent school districts in the state had urged the governors to veto the bills because of the financial pressure they would have placed on schools.

But Heather Peske, the NCTQ president, said offering paid family leave could help reduce teacher turnover—which is also expensive for districts. "What might at first seem a costly endeavor may, in the long term, save money," she said.

Paid parental leave will help make teaching a more competitive, attractive profession, said Bishop, the Oklahoma teachers' union president.

“This is huge for all of our educators,” she said. “They can have a family, be able to do a job that they’re so passionate about, and know they can return and still have sick leave available to take later on. ... To me, this is a sign of respect.”