

TEACHING PROFESSION FROM OUR RESEARCH CENTER

Teacher Job Satisfaction Hits an All-Time Low

Exclusive new data paints a picture of a profession in crisis

By [Madeline Will](#) — April 14, 2022 ⌚ 11 min read



LéAnn Cassidy, 57, sits in her middle school classroom in Connecticut. The 2018 Connecticut History Teacher of the Year and 2018 finalist for Connecticut Teacher of the Year has been a classroom teacher for 34 years, but is considering retiring early. — Christopher Capozziello for Education Week



Clarification: An earlier version of the first chart that appears in this article has been updated to more clearly and accurately reflect a 10-year gap in data on rates of teacher satisfaction between 2012 and 2022.

Teachers' job satisfaction levels appear to have hit an all-time low this year as the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage schools.

That's according to the [Merrimack College Teacher Survey](#), a nationally representative poll of more than 1,300 teachers conducted by the EdWeek Research Center and commissioned by the Winston School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College. The survey, which was conducted between Jan. 9 and Feb. 23, was designed to replace the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, which ran for more than 25 years and ended in 2012.

The results paint a picture of a disillusioned, exhausted workforce. A little more than half of teachers are satisfied with their jobs, and only 12 percent say they're "very satisfied" with their jobs, down from 39 percent in 2012. More than half of teachers said they likely wouldn't advise their younger self to pursue a career in teaching.

SEE ALSO

TEACHING
OPINION

**Ten Ways
to Use
Retrieval
Practice
in the
Classroom
(Opinion)**



In interviews, teachers say they still love teaching—but they're fed up with everything else. They feel burdened by a constantly growing workload, especially with more students having greater academic and social-emotional needs than ever before. They don't feel like they're paid appropriately for all the work they do. And they don't feel respected as professionals.

“This year has been a struggle more than any others in my career,” said LéAnn Cassidy, 57, a middle school history teacher in Connecticut who is in her 34th year in the classroom.

Teaching has always been stressful, but past surveys show that teachers’ stress levels have skyrocketed since the start of the pandemic. Teachers have had to pivot to teaching online, in socially distanced classrooms, or both at the same time. Staff shortages have added to teachers’ workloads this year and decreased the amount of support they receive. Teachers report that students are behaving badly in class or are disengaged entirely, perhaps due to the trauma of the pandemic. And amidst all of this, teachers have found themselves at the center of divisive political and cultural debates.

“I’ve never seen the number of people break down as I have this year,” Cassidy said. “I think the pandemic has dampened that joy [of teaching], and people are trying to find it again.”

But Cassidy, who was a finalist for her state’s teacher of the year in 2018, said that if she can’t rediscover that joy, she might leave—and so might many of her colleagues. The Merrimack College Teacher Survey found that 44 percent of teachers said they’re likely to quit and find a different job within the next two years.

Takeru Nagayoshi, 30, the 2020 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, was among those who left the classroom last year. After seven years as an award-winning Advanced Placement English teacher, he decided the frustrations of teaching—including “the impossibility of the work-life balance, and the guilt and fatigue that was associated with that”—were no longer sustainable for him. The pandemic had exacerbated students’ needs and changed their relationship with school, which led to lower attendance and less engagement. Students were disconnected from learning, and “it felt so defeating,” Nagayoshi said.

Nagayoshi decided that he could make more of an impact outside the classroom and took on a new role as the professional learning director of community events for Panorama Education, an education technology company with a focus on social-emotional learning. His experience is not an isolated one.

Even so, past research suggests that many of the people who indicate plans to quit won’t actually do so. But experts warn there are negative consequences from a dissatisfied teacher workforce. Research shows that when teachers are stressed, the quality of their instruction, classroom management, and relationships with students all suffer. And students tend to do better in schools with positive work environments.

“What people want is to be able to teach and teach well, and if they can’t do it because they can’t afford to do it or because they have a toxic work environment, that discourages them from acting as teachers who are learning and growing and getting better and increasing their commitment to the work,” said Susan Moore Johnson, a Harvard University professor of education who studies teachers’ working conditions and satisfaction. “That’s the side of satisfaction we need to pay attention to—it’s not just keeping people in their positions.”

Also, the low satisfaction levels of teachers already in the classroom may impact the pipeline of future teachers. Enrollment in teacher-preparation programs has declined by about a third over the past decade, and experts say that is likely in part due to the perception of teaching as a low-paid, thankless career.

Teachers don’t feel respected

The survey found that about a quarter of teachers don’t feel like students’ parents or guardians respect them. In interviews, teachers said some parents can be combative and demanding, with little regard for their professional expertise.

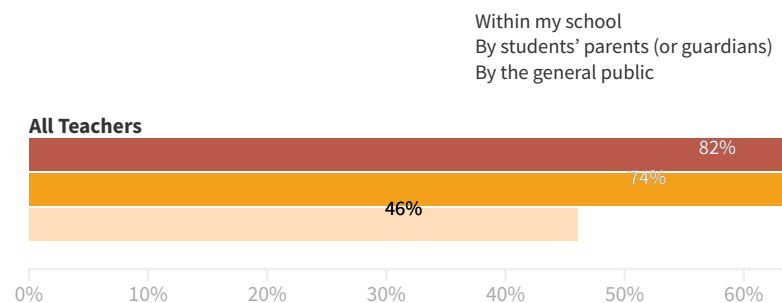
Penny Zhitomi, 54, an English/language arts middle school teacher in Connecticut, pointed to a cartoon that depicts parent-teacher conferences in both the past and present. In the 1960s, the parents turn to their child and ask them to explain their bad grades. In modern times, the parents ask the same question of the teacher.

“Parents don’t always understand how they come across,” said Zhitomi, who is in her 31st year in the classroom. “They don’t always express themselves in a way that’s conducive to teamwork and collaboration.”

Still, about two-thirds of parents give the public school teachers in their communities a grade of A or B, according to a 2021 PDK poll . Most parents are supportive, but the ones who aren’t sting, said Laura Johnston, 56, a high school science teacher in Oklahoma: “It’s a small percentage, but it does wear on you over the years.”

But only 46 percent of teachers say they feel like the general public respects them as professionals, according to the survey. In 2011, 77 percent of teachers felt respected by the public.

‘I am respected and seen as a professional’



SOURCE: Merrimack College and EdWeek Research Center

There's been a steady stream of backlash against teachers over the past couple years, starting with the debates over when and how school buildings should reopen during the pandemic. Teachers' unions pushed to delay a return to in-person instruction until schools implemented certain safety measures, prompting frustration and derision from some parents, politicians, and influential media figures.

"For the first week or two [of the pandemic], we were like the saviors of the earth, ... and then it pivoted so quickly," Zhitomi said. "Two months later, there were people going to our school board meeting and saying, 'Don't pay the teachers, they're not doing anything.' ... Nobody saw us creating PowerPoints and lessons at 11 o'clock at night to keep the kids interested. ... We're never worthy enough."

Also, there's been an onslaught of conservative legislation in states and school board policies to limit how and whether topics such as race, racism, and LGBTQ issues are taught in schools. Since January 2021, 42 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism—and 16 states have imposed these restrictions. Experts say there has been an unprecedented number of attempted or successful bans on books in classrooms or school libraries this year, most of which have to do with LGBTQ identities or race.

And the public rhetoric has become increasingly negative toward teachers, who are being accused of "indoctrinating" students. Fox News host Tucker Carlson on his April 8 show said fathers whose children are taught about gender identity should "go in and thrash the teacher."

Teachers say this debate is trickling down into their own school communities, even if they live in states that have not restricted classroom discussions about racism or LGBTQ issues. "The parents want to yell at us because of CRT or they want to yell at us because they think their child is being treated unfairly, and we've never had that before," said Cheryl Cazeau, 57, a 3rd grade teacher in Massachusetts.

All of this has been especially draining for teachers of color, who make up just 20 percent of the workforce, and LGBTQ teachers. Nagayoshi, who is Japanese American and gay, said he has always felt a pressure to be the one who calls out racism and centers equity in school conversations: "If I don't speak up, other folks won't."

Now that he's out of the classroom, he's relieved not to be mired in the discourse of whether LGBTQ teachers can and should bring their full selves to the classroom, but he's worried about those who remain.

Teachers are stretched thin with increasing demands

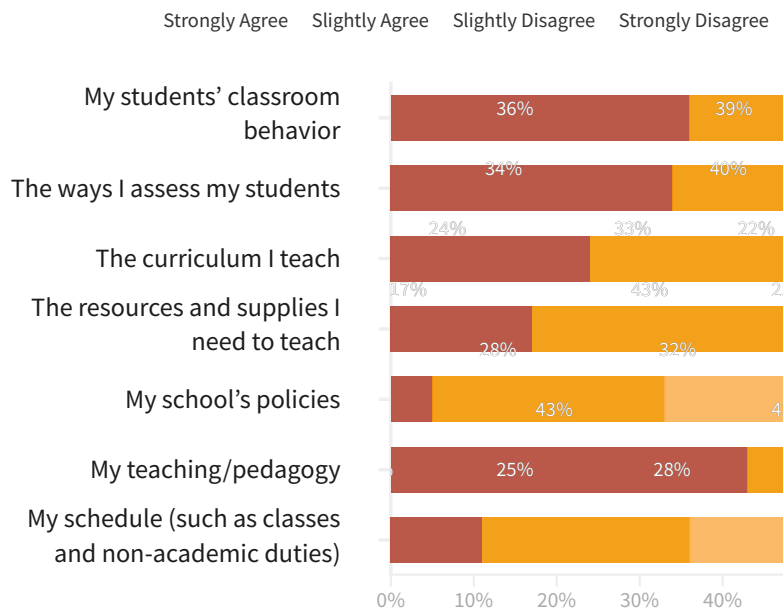
According to the Merrimack College Teacher Survey, teachers spend a median of 54 hours per week working. Teachers say they feel as if new demands and expectations are constantly being put on their plates—but nothing is taken off. And the influx of student needs this year has made the workload more pressing.

Teachers are stretched thin and in need of more support, said Cassidy, the middle school history teacher in Connecticut: "It's a vicious cycle right now. We need more than what we have the ability right now to put forth, because we're just trying to get through each day."

It doesn't help that teachers repeatedly say they feel micromanaged and left out of the decisionmaking rooms. Just a third of teachers say they have a lot of control over their school's policies, and 57 percent say they have a lot of control over the curriculum they teach.

“We joke as professionals—before any legislator makes a law about education, they should be required to sit in our classroom for a week,” said Johnston, the Oklahoma science teacher.

I have control and influence over ...



NOTE: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.
 SOURCE: Merrimack College and EdWeek Research Center

A Flourish chart

Zhitomi, the middle school teacher in Connecticut, said her district switched to a scripted curriculum this year, and it's been “heartbreaking.” Teachers are now given a timeline of their year, with the quizzes and homework assignments already predetermined.

“We kind of lost our individuality,” she said. “I relish making up a lesson. I relish doing some research, trying to make it fun. ... Districts are focusing too much on the science [of teaching] with data and test scores, ... and we have really lost sight of the fact that it's [also] an art.”

The change in curriculum, along with a general lack of support and exhaustion after two years of pandemic teaching, has prompted her decision to retire early this year, at least four years ahead of schedule, even though that means she will lose out on a full pension.

“I just felt so stifled,” Zhitomi said. “I lost my desire to go [into work every day], and I've never felt that way. I've always been so excited to go to work.”

Cierra Levay Broadway, 33, a 4th grade English/language arts teacher in a public charter school in Atlanta, is also leaving the classroom at the end of the year. Many of her students experienced many roadblocks during remote learning—including unreliable internet access and traumatic experiences at home—and the fallout from those inequities has been hard to see. Teachers don't have the support they need to adequately address all these issues, she said.

“We fight so hard for these students,” Broadway said. “It feels like we're on a hamster wheel going nowhere. We're disregarded in all of the big decisions, we're not respected as professionals in our field, we're micromanaged all the time—we just want to teach.”

Is this rock bottom?

Teachers say they're worried about the state of their profession—and they hope policymakers will take note and make meaningful changes. The Merrimack College Teacher Survey found that 85 percent of teachers say that their working conditions and school climate should get more attention in the news, topping every other educational issue that was asked about.

“We need to do something so education is seen as that respected field again,” said Cassidy, the Connecticut history teacher.

Raising pay could help, teachers say. Seventy-four percent of teachers do not believe that their salary is fair for the work they do, according to the survey, up from 65 percent in 2012.

Some states, like [Alabama](#) and [Mississippi](#), have passed legislation to give teachers a raise this year. But Johnson, the Harvard professor, said that while raising pay is an important piece of the puzzle, it's not the only factor policymakers need to pay attention to.

“There is a belief right now that policymakers need to find one lever that will solve this problem, and it really is going to require a multipronged strategy at all levels,” she said, adding that the working conditions in teachers' schools matter a lot. Principals should be the instructional leaders of the school, giving teachers support and voice, Johnson said.

Otherwise, teachers warn they and their colleagues won't stay in the profession long-term.

“Our experiences are so universal, and it sounds like we're complaining,” said Dina Ley, 39, a high school English teacher in Pennsylvania who is considering leaving at the end of the year. “We're not complaining, we are hurting. ... Teachers truly, truly love their jobs. It's sad to see how many of us are so disillusioned with it all.”