

Pandemic prompts more teachers to consider early retirement or new career

September 16 2021, by Gema Zamarro, Andrew Camp, Dillon Fuchsman, Josh McGee



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The COVID-19 pandemic reduced teachers' commitment to remain in the classroom, [our study](#) on teacher turnover found.

When schools resumed classes in the fall of 2020, teachers faced a host of new challenges. These included things such as adapting to combinations of in-person, hybrid and remote learning models and managing [health](#) concerns during the pandemic. As a result, teachers experienced even [higher levels of stress and burnout](#) than before the pandemic. This in turn has raised concerns about a potential exodus of teachers as well as teacher shortages.

Our study uses new survey data from the nationally representative [Rand American Teacher Panel](#). In March 2021, over 1,000 teachers answered questions about their [jobs](#), job preferences, teaching mode (in-person, online, hybrid), how often they switched teaching modes, their colleagues and COVID-19 risks during the 2020–21 [school year](#).

To assess how teacher attitudes might have changed during the pandemic, we compared [this data](#) with responses to a pre-pandemic survey of almost 5,500 teachers in early 2020.

We found that during the pandemic, teachers became less certain that they would work in the classroom until retirement. In March 2020, [74% of teachers](#) said they expected to work as a teacher until retirement, but the figure [fell to 69%](#) in March 2021. The proportion of teachers answering "I don't know" to this question increased by a similar amount, rising from 16% to 22%.

In addition, teachers reported that their chances of leaving their current state of residence or the profession within the next five years rose from 24% to 30%, on average.

More than 40% of the teachers surveyed said they considered leaving or

retiring, and over half of those said it was because of the pandemic. We found that approaching retirement age—that is, being over 55 years old—having to change instruction modes during the year and health concerns were important predictors of whether teachers had considered leaving or retiring.

Teacher turnover often negatively affects [students' academic success](#). Teacher shortages could also [disrupt subjects or geographic areas](#) that already have staffing challenges.

These include math, science and [special education](#), and schools in rural areas and ones that serve low-income families. Even if teachers remain in the profession, declining [job satisfaction](#) could affect teacher quality and [hinder students' academic progress](#).

Understanding what leads teachers to leave the job can help administrators and others find ways to better support them during these challenging times.

Our results expose three areas where teachers need support.

First, teachers approaching retirement age reported the highest likelihood of having considered leaving or retiring because of COVID-19. This would be problematic if schools begin to lose their more experienced teachers at a higher rate than normal.

Second, when teachers had to change instructional modes, it made them more likely to consider leaving or retiring. This indicates that having to change modes is a factor in [teacher](#) dissatisfaction.

And finally, teachers with higher COVID-19-related health concerns were more likely to consider leaving. So, effectively addressing health concerns could help improve teachers' job satisfaction.

As the [pandemic](#) continues and the delta variant presents new challenges, it is still an open question whether the added stress will push more teachers out. The availability of COVID-19 vaccines and [increasing use of mask mandates](#) by [school districts](#) might address some of the health concerns that teachers expressed. However, some teachers might disagree with COVID-19 vaccine mandates or could be tempted to leave by additional outside employment opportunities as the economy recovers.

In the meantime, addressing [health concerns](#) while trying to minimize [school](#) disruptions and changes in teaching mode could help increase satisfaction and keep teachers on the job.

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