



# Teacher Retention in Tennessee

Tennessee Department of Education  
Division of Research and Analysis





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# Executive Summary

Across the nation, teacher shortages are receiving broad attention. Teacher turnover can lead to negative outcomes for students through the replacement of effective teachers by inexperienced or unqualified teachers, increases in class sizes, or reductions in course offerings.

For educators, frequent turnover upsets collaboration, stability, relational trust, and institutional knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the financial cost of replacing a teacher has been estimated to be as high as \$20,000 for urban districts, putting extra strain on districts with limited resources who must absorb the cost of teacher attrition.<sup>2</sup>

Effectively targeting efforts to address shortages requires knowledge of how patterns of teacher mobility, attrition, and retention vary across different types of districts, geographic areas, subject areas, and teachers' levels of effectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Using a snapshot in time between the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years, we look into the retention, movement, and attrition of Tennessee's public school teachers. Tennessee's teacher retention rate is similar to other states,<sup>4</sup> but further analyses suggest that while urban areas require support retaining teachers, efforts to combat high-needs subject shortages should focus on recruiting more teachers into those fields.

## Key Findings



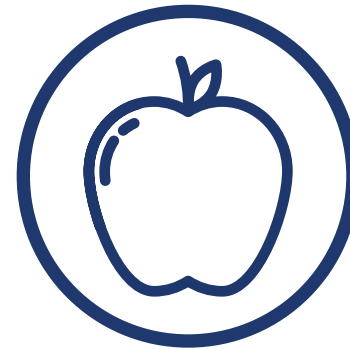
Nine out of 10 teachers remained teaching in Tennessee - Eight of 10 were retained in the same school.



Urban districts had lower retention than other districts, and few teachers moved into an urban district.



Teachers in high-needs subject areas such as secondary math and science were retained at similar rates than other teachers.



Teachers of color were retained at lower rates than white teachers, but teach in places with higher teacher turnover.

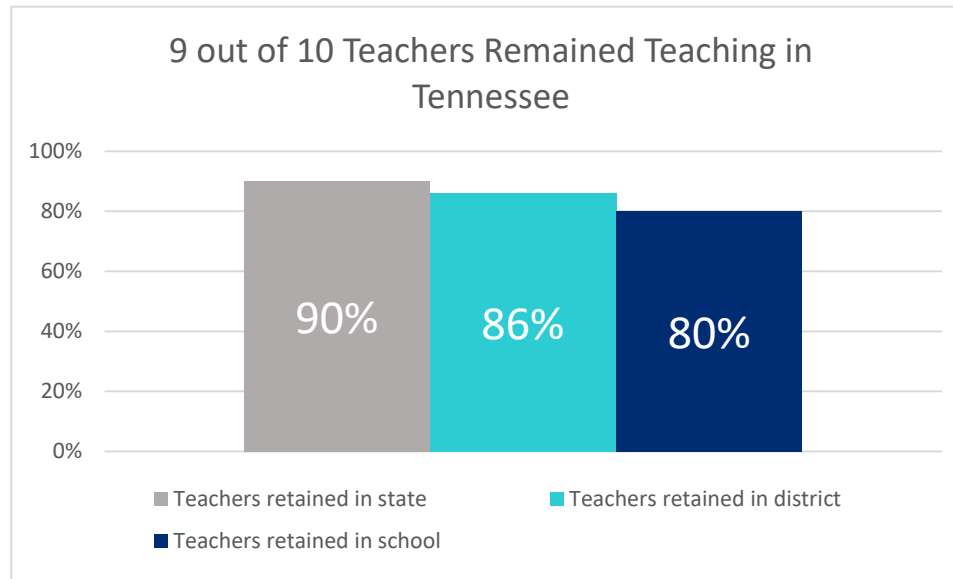


Eighty-seven percent of administrators remained in their role and 78 percent remained in their school.

# Teacher Retention in Tennessee

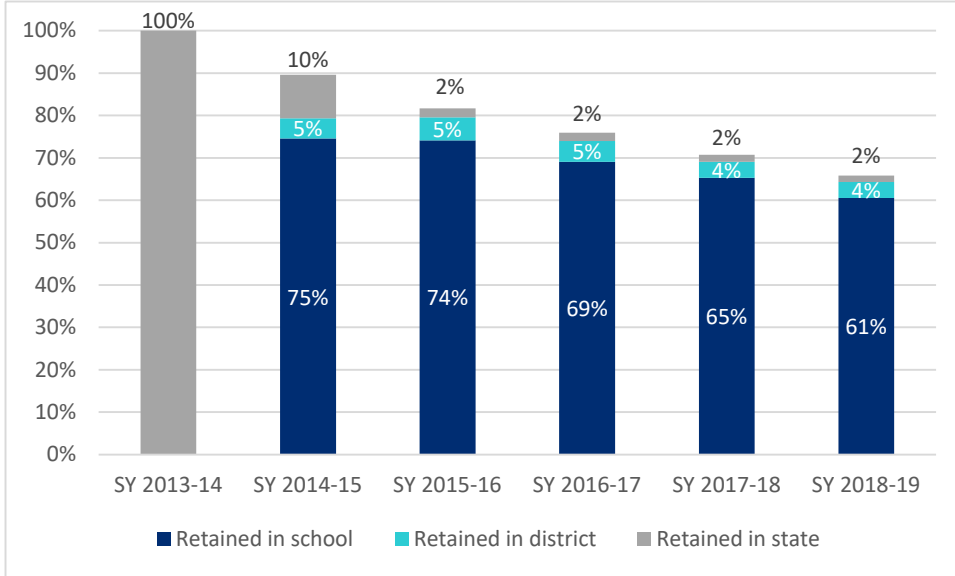
**From the 2017-18 school year to the 2018-19 school year, Tennessee retained 90 percent of its public school teachers.** Since a teacher leaving the classroom means a school must hire another teacher, we only consider a teacher retained if they remained in a teaching role. Three percent of teachers across the state moved into another role such as an instructional coach, interventionist, counselor, or administrator and are not included as retained, though they remain an educator.

**While nine out of 10 teachers continued teaching in the state, only eight out of 10 stayed in the same school.** Six percent of teachers moved to a different school in their district and another four percent moved to another district. This movement can have important implications for schools or districts who have to replace teachers more often than others.

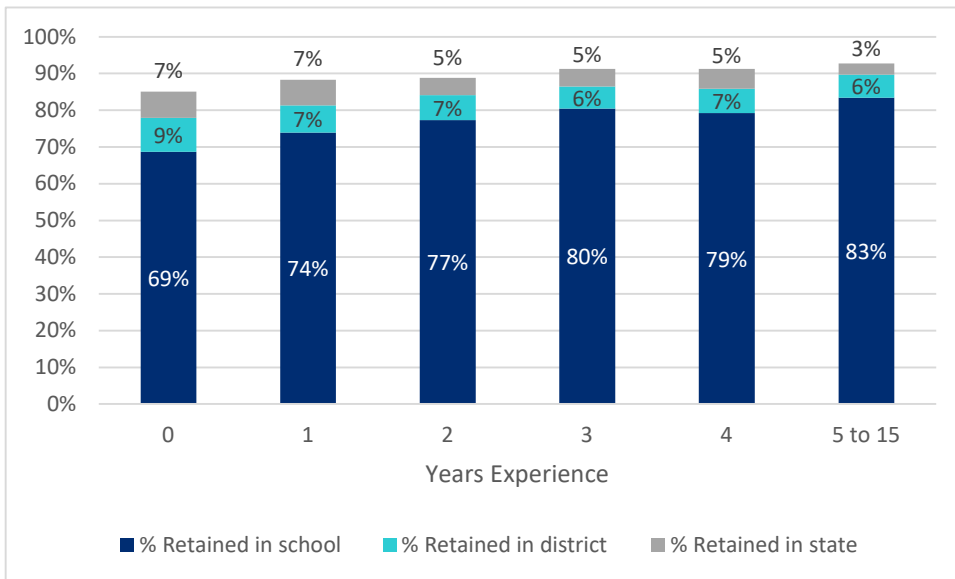


These results are broadly similar to the retention rates found in 2014, which showed that 92 percent of Tennessee teachers in 2011-12 continued to teach the following year, with 82 percent staying in the same school.<sup>5</sup> However, differences in calculations mean these two rates are not directly comparable, though they give a broad idea of retention over time.<sup>6</sup> Tennessee's retention rates are also similar to the states profiled in the most recent IES report (Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota from 2015-16 to 2016-17) where 90 percent of teachers were retained on average.<sup>7</sup> However, looking internationally, school systems in Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada report retention rates as high as 97 percent.<sup>8</sup>

After 5 years, only 6 out of 10 teachers were still teaching in the same school.



Beyond a one year snapshot, a longer term look at retention follows the cohort of teachers who taught in a Tennessee public school in 2013-14. After five years, only six out of 10 teachers were still teaching in the same school.<sup>9</sup>



Unsurprisingly, first year teachers were more likely to move or leave than experienced teachers between 2017-18 and 2018-19. *Less than 70 percent of new teachers stayed at their school compared to 85 percent of more experienced teachers.*<sup>10</sup>

Movement among new teachers could be due to teachers moving to find a better “fit”, a sign of inadequate preparation or support for their school context, or ineffective teachers sorting out of the profession. However, a larger amount of movement in the beginning of a teacher’s career could be especially detrimental for schools with a higher proportion of new teachers.

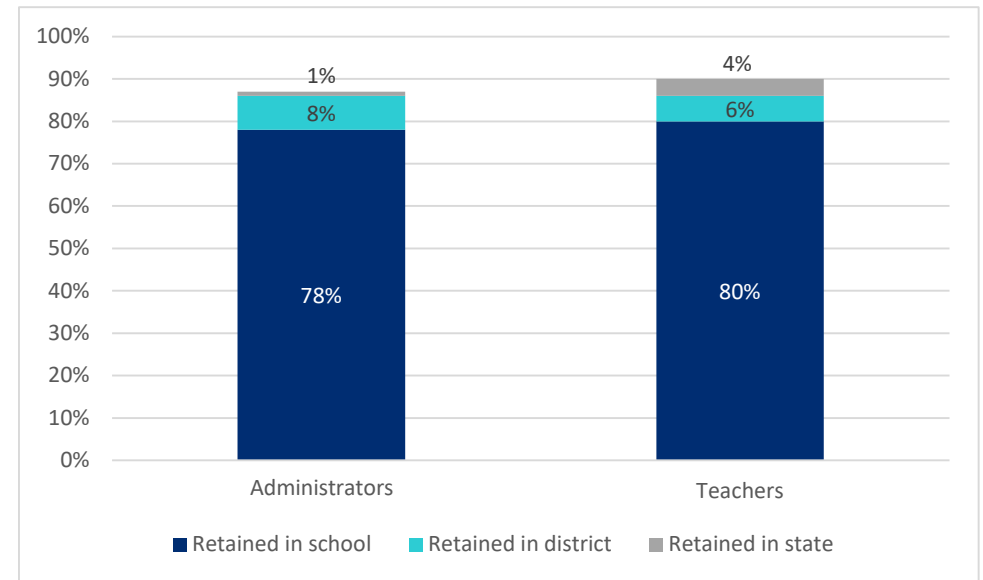
Administrators in Tennessee public schools in 2017-18 were retained at slightly lower levels than teachers. Eighty-seven percent of administrators in 2017-18 remained in an administrative role in 2018-19, and this includes administrators who moved between administrative roles such as moving from an assistant principal to an executive principal. While school level retention is similar for administrators and teachers, when administrators left their school they were less likely than teachers to leave their district.

### ***Retention Rates and Teacher Effectiveness:***

Retaining as many highly-effective teachers as possible is an important human capital strategy to increase the quality of teaching and learning in Tennessee. External analyses of data from 2005-06 to 2015-16 demonstrated that Tennessee retained highly effective teachers at a higher rate than less effective teachers in the period after the 2011 evaluation reform.<sup>11</sup> Current results suggest that, at the state level, Tennessee is now retaining only a slightly greater proportion of our most effective teachers compared to the rest of the teaching force.

### **Levels of Effectiveness in Tennessee**

- 1 = Significantly below expectations
- 2 = Below expectations
- 3 = At expectations
- 4 = Above expectations
- 5 = Significantly above expectations

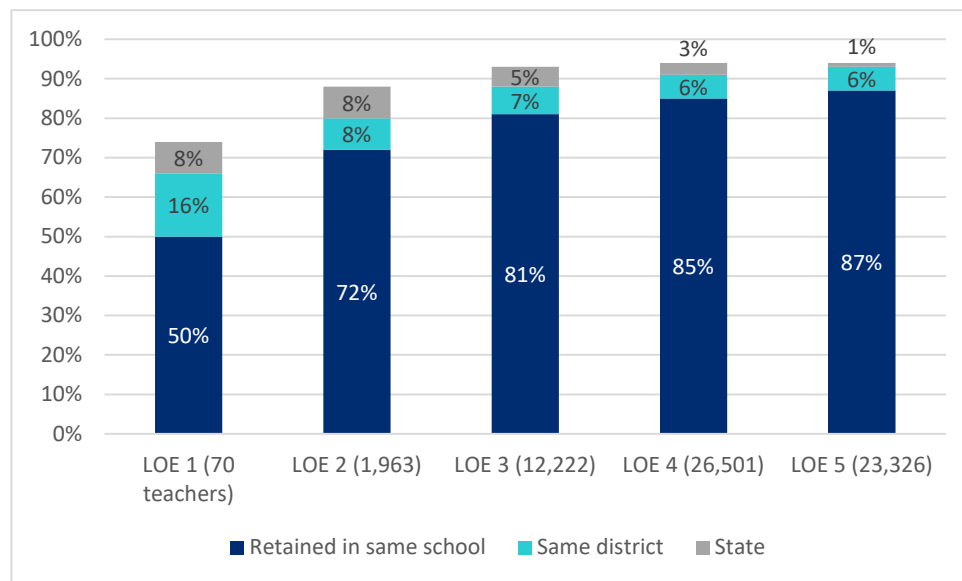


***87% of administrators***

in 2017-18 remained  
in an administrative  
role in 2018-19.

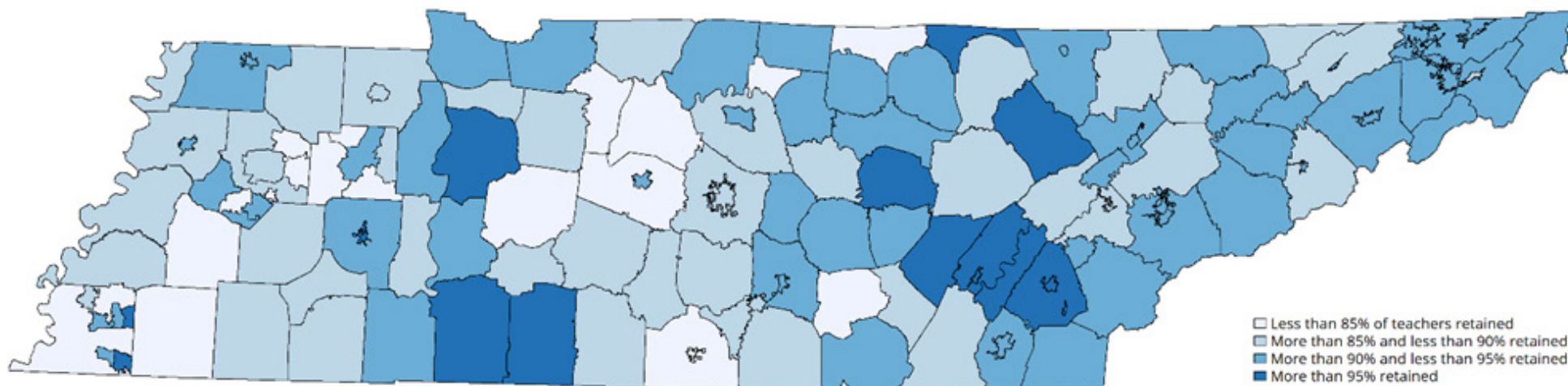
Highly-effective Tennessee teachers, those who received a level 4 or 5 as their level of effectiveness in 2018, were retained at higher rates in their schools and districts than less-effective teachers. However, teachers significantly above expectations (level 5) were retained in Tennessee at a rate only one percentage point higher than those at expectations (level 3).<sup>12</sup>

While strategic retention of Tennessee’s most effective teachers is not evident at the state level, there is evidence that higher-rated principals experience lower turnover among high-performing teachers and higher turnover among the lowest-performing teachers.<sup>13</sup> The pattern is more pronounced in advantaged schools and schools with stable leadership.<sup>14</sup>

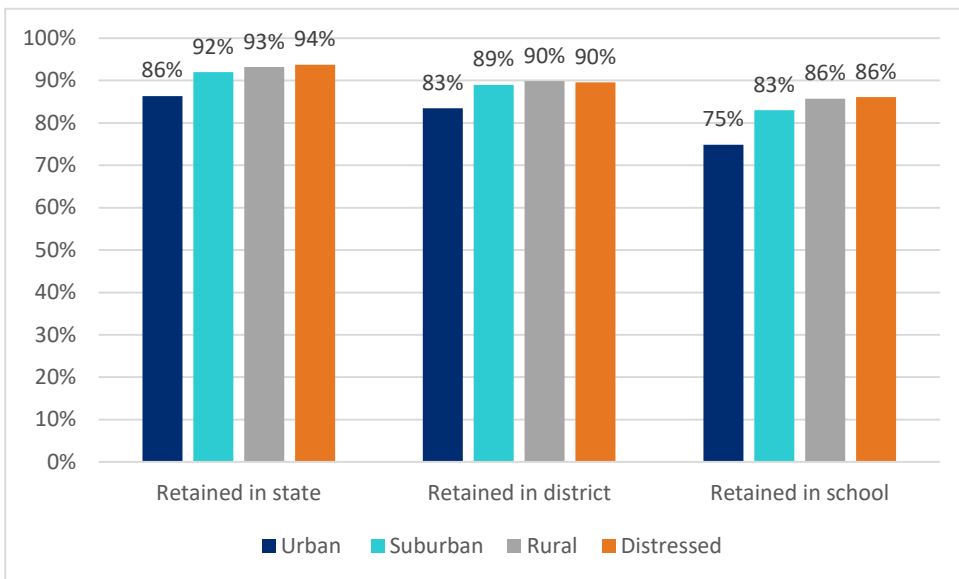


### Variation across Districts and Classifications

While nine out of 10 teachers were retained across the state, there are sizeable differences between retention rates for districts. Districts with the darkest blue on the map below retained over 95 percent of their teachers, while white districts retained less than 85 percent.<sup>15</sup>

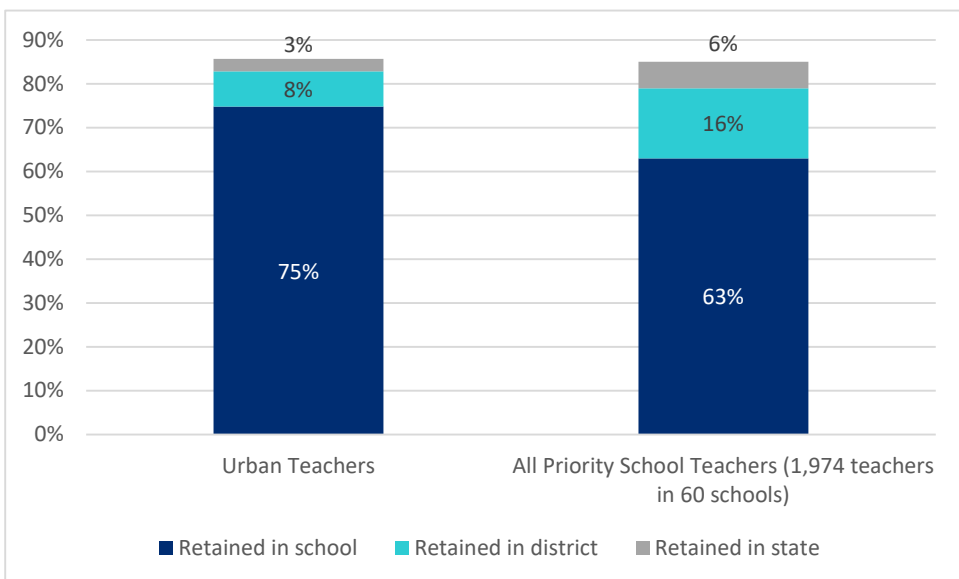






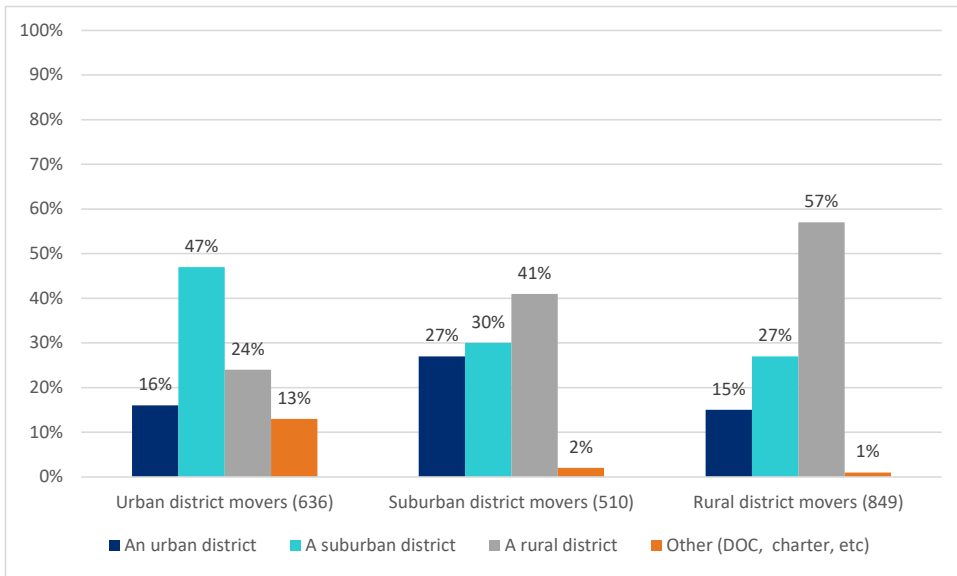
Urban school districts have the lowest teacher retention rates at the state, district, and school level, with only three out of four urban teachers retained at their school.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, support for these districts should focus on the aspects of urban schooling that make teachers more likely to leave. Rural and distressed counties had the highest teacher retention rates.<sup>17</sup> This is most notable at the school level, though there are fewer opportunities for teachers to transfer to a new school within a small, rural district. Leaders in rural districts have reported shortages of qualified teachers, and these findings suggest that support for rural districts should focus on recruitment of teachers into rural districts.

***For the 2013-14 statewide cohort, four in 10 teachers left their school over the course of five years. In priority schools, nearly four in 10 teachers left their school in a single year.***



Priority schools, identified in the state as the lowest performing five percent of schools on proficiency rates, are almost all located in urban districts.<sup>18</sup> Examining retention rates in priority schools provides additional perspective on teacher retention. Teachers in priority schools were much more likely to leave their school or district than other urban teachers. To get a sense of the severity of this level of turnover, recall that, for the 2013-14 statewide cohort, four in ten teachers left their school over the course of five years. In priority schools, nearly four in ten teachers left their school in a single year. While urban districts overall struggle with retention, certain schools within those districts are in need of more support around retention than others.





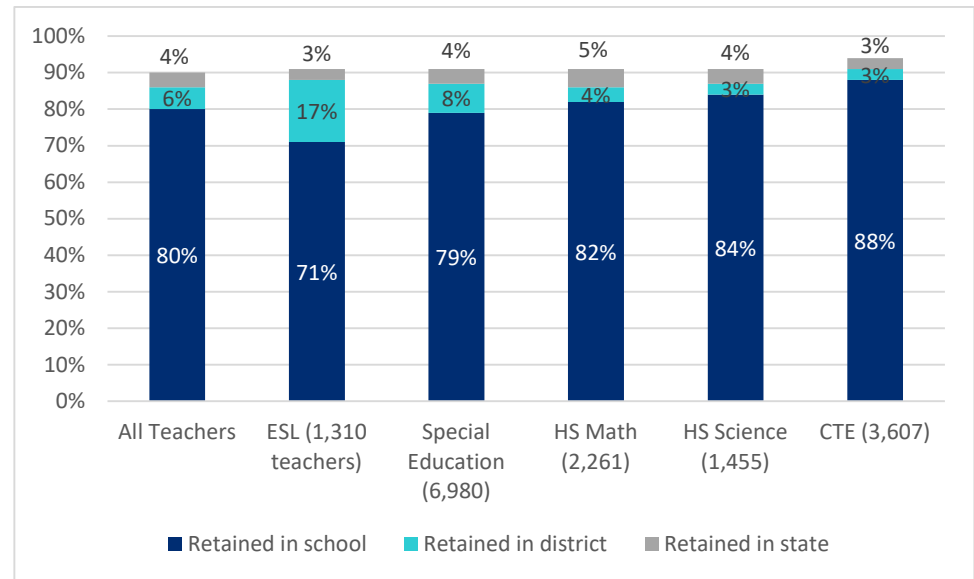
Urban districts were also at a disadvantage when teachers moved between districts. Nearly half of the 636 teachers who left an urban district but remained teaching in the state went to teach in a suburban district. Another quarter went to a rural district. Teachers who left suburban and rural districts were also less likely to move to an urban district.

Lower overall retention rates coupled with little movement into urban districts suggest that when urban schools must fill vacancies, they are likely to look to new teachers who tend to require more support and are more likely to leave sooner than experienced teachers.

## Teacher Retention in High-Needs Content Areas

Not only are some districts struggling to hire more teachers, some content areas are also harder to staff. District leaders report the content areas where they have identified a shortage of qualified teachers on annual surveys. The content areas in the graph below are cited by districts across the state as some of the hardest to staff.

Teachers in these reported shortage areas are retained at similar or higher levels than average. Teachers who teach English as a Second Language or Special Education were more likely than the average teacher to move to a different school in their district, but these higher movement rates may also reflect the fact that teachers in these roles are sometimes assigned to teach in multiple schools. Almost nine out of 10 Career & Technical Education (CTE) teachers were retained in their school.<sup>19</sup> CTE teachers in high-demand career clusters had similar retention rates to other CTE teachers.

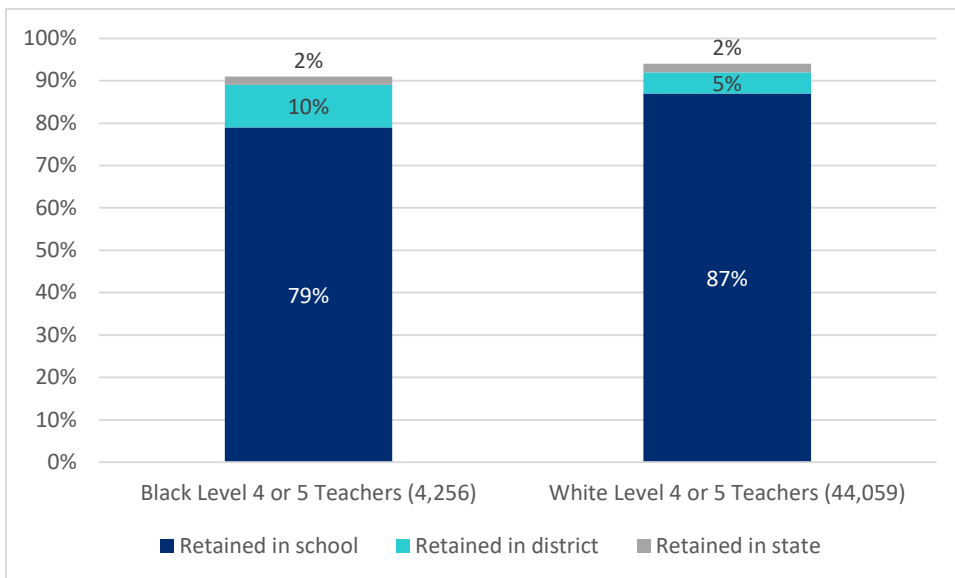


Overall, teachers in reported shortage areas are retained at similar or higher rates than other teachers. These findings suggest that to address teacher shortages in specific content areas, Tennessee should rely on strategies to increase the number of teachers recruited into those fields.

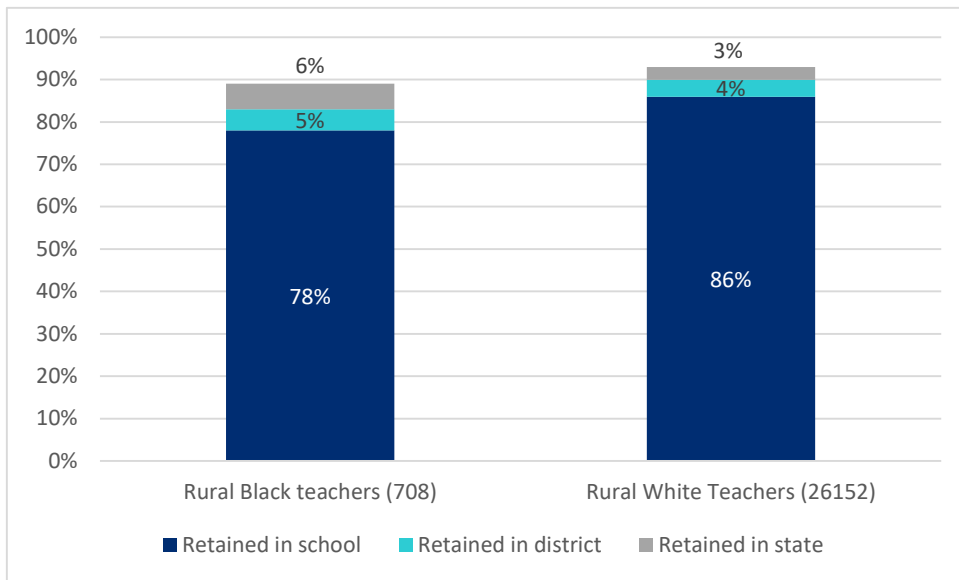
## Retention of Teachers of Color

Educators of color are important to increasing student outcomes, especially for students of color.<sup>20</sup> In Tennessee, only 13 percent of Tennessee teachers identify as teachers of color while 37 percent of Tennessee students identify as a race other than white. Diversifying Tennessee’s teaching force requires recruiting more educators of color into the profession and ensuring they receive adequate support.

At the state level, teachers of color in Tennessee were retained at lower rates than white teachers. Nearly nine in 10 of Tennessee’s teachers of color are black, and only two-thirds of black teachers remained in the same school between 2017-18 and 2018-19 compared to 83 percent of white teachers. Highly-effective black teachers are also retained at lower rates than highly-effective white teachers. Because non-black teachers of color make up such a small portion of the overall teaching force, we focus our analyses on comparing black and white teachers.



**13%**  
*of teachers*  
identify as teachers of color



The vast majority of Tennessee’s black teachers teach in urban districts which have lower retention rates than suburban or rural districts. While a part of the difference in retention of black teachers is tied to issues in urban schools, lower retention of black teachers is not unique to urban districts. Rural black teachers are less likely to be retained in their district than rural white teachers.

***Because schools with low retention rates employ a larger-than-average proportion of teachers of color, targeting these schools could advance the state’s goals of increasing teacher diversity.***

Research from the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) suggests that, within a particular school, black teachers are retained at higher rates than white teachers, and conclude that the overall correlation between race and retention is driven entirely by the tendency of black teachers to work in schools with lower overall retention rates. The implication they draw is that in order to benefit a larger proportion of teachers of color, retention efforts are best focused on schools with low retention rates. Because schools with low retention rates employ a larger-than-average proportion of teachers of color, targeting these schools could still advance the state’s goals of increasing teacher diversity. Recruitment of teachers of color into schools with more favorable working conditions and lower turnover might also increase the number of teachers of color working in the state, provide a broader range of students with access to teachers of color, and bring parity to retention rates between teachers of color and their white peers.<sup>21</sup>

# Next Steps

The findings here have broad implications for policies to build and maintain a stronger teaching force. Tennessee retained nine out of 10 teachers from 2017-18 to 2018-19, but just eight of 10 teachers remained in the same school as the prior year. While these numbers appear broadly in line with historical and national data on teacher retention, international school systems report retention rates much higher than Tennessee or other states.

Within Tennessee, urban districts and especially priority schools experienced substantially more teachers leaving their school and district. Differences across districts and schools suggest that improving teacher retention calls for a targeted approach focusing on schools and districts in the most need. Additional support for this conclusion comes from the fact that hard-to-staff content areas, on average, had similar or higher retention rates than other content areas, and TERA's analyses have shown that the differences in retention rates across teacher race are driven by the fact that teachers of color are more likely to work in schools with lower overall retention rates.

Policies to target and improve teacher retention within particular schools should focus on factors linked to teachers' decisions to stay or leave. Most notably, teachers consistently express a need for strong and supportive leadership from their principal, and effective principals are linked to higher rates of teacher retention. In addition, increased compensation for highly-effective teachers in high-need schools in Tennessee was shown to incentivize highly effective teachers to stay an additional year, and thereby significantly improved learning opportunities for historically marginalized students. Additionally, permanent salary increases led to a much larger impact in reducing teacher turnover than did one-time bonus payouts.

*Considering the costs of ongoing teacher attrition to both students and budgets, district leaders should act immediately to place strong leaders in high-needs schools and provide increased salary incentives to retain the most effective teachers in those schools.*

# Notes

- 1 Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover>.
- 2 Barnes, G., Crowe, E., & Schaefer, B. (2007). The Cost of Teacher Turnover in Five School Districts: A Pilot Study. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- 3 Meyer, S. J., Espel, E. V., Weston-Sementelli, J. L., & Serdiouk, M. (2019). Teacher retention, mobility, and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota. (REL 2019-001). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL\\_2019001.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL_2019001.pdf); Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 4-36.
- 4 Barnes, et al (2007).
- 5 [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/rpt\\_teacher\\_retention.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/rpt_teacher_retention.pdf)
- 6 Changes to the methods were made to align calculations throughout the department so that, for instance, Human Capital Data Reports, InformTN, and research reports will all use the same methods.
- 7 Meyer et al, (2019).
- 8 Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover>.
- 9 Movement of the 13-14 cohort of teachers to other districts in 2014-15 likely reflects changes in districts around Memphis in 2014-15.
- 10 Retention rates for teachers with 5 – 15 years of experience remain relatively steady, with a gradual increase from 81 percent at five-seven years of experience to 86 percent at 12, 14, and 15 years of experience.
- 11 Rodriguez, L. A., Springer, M. G., & Swain, W. A. (2018). Sorting through Performance Evaluations: The Effects of Performance Evaluation Reform on Teacher Attrition and Mobility. (Working Paper). Nashville, Tennessee.
- 12 In 2017-18, only about 2,000 teachers across the state received a 1 or a 2, so we gain more insight into teacher differences by comparing teachers who received a 5 with those who received a 3. Noticeable differences between teachers who received a 5 or a 3 occur in rates of movement—teachers who received a 5 were much less likely to leave their school or district than teachers who received a 3.

13 Rodriguez, L. A., Springer, M. G., & Swain, W. A. (2018). Sorting through Performance Evaluations: The Effects of Performance Evaluation Reform on Teacher Attrition and Mobility. (Working Paper). Nashville, Tennessee.

14 Grissom, J. A., & Bartanen, B. (2019). Strategic retention: Principal effectiveness and teacher turnover in multiple-measure teacher evaluation systems. *American Educational Research Journal*, 56(2), 514-555.

15 Half of Tennessee districts had retention rates between 84 and 93 percent. Less than one in ten districts had retention rates below 74 percent, the lowest being 67 percent.

16 District level data retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/>. Urban districts include districts classified as “city: large” and “city: mid-size”, suburban districts include those classified as “city: small” and “suburb”, rural districts include those classified as “town” or “rural”. Knox County’s designation was revised to “urban” and Williamson County was revised to “suburban.”

17 Distressed counties are defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission and include 15 counties in Tennessee. The 15 distressed counties in Tennessee include: Lake, Lauderdale, Hardeman, McNairy, Perry, Wayne, Jackson, Clay, Grundy, Bledsoe, Fentress, Morgan, Scott, Hancock and Cocke. <https://www.tn.gov/transparenttn/open-eecd/openecd/tnecd-performance-metrics/openecd-long-term-objectives-quick-stats/distressed-counties.html>

18 76 of 82 priority schools in 2018 were located within counties we classified as urban.

19 CTE teachers include any teacher who taught a CTE course and captures teachers with both academic and occupational licenses. This broad definition means that it is possible that a CTE teacher is retained in the same school, but does not continue teaching any CTE courses.

20 [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/rpt\\_teacher\\_admin\\_diversity.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/rpt_teacher_admin_diversity.pdf); Dee, T. S. (2005). A teacher like me: Does race, ethnicity, or gender matter?. *American Economic Review*, 95(2), 158-165.

21 Ravenell, A., Grissom, J. A., & Bartanen, B. (2018). Exploring turnover and retention patterns among Tennessee’s teachers of color. Research brief. Nashville, TN: Tennessee Education Research Alliance. [https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TERA/files/Retention\\_Patterns\\_Among\\_Teachers\\_of\\_Color\\_FINAL.pdf](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TERA/files/Retention_Patterns_Among_Teachers_of_Color_FINAL.pdf)

22 Grissom, J. A. (2011). Can good principals keep teachers in disadvantaged schools? Linking principal effectiveness to teacher satisfaction and turnover in hard-to-staff environments. *Teachers College Record*, 113(11), 2552-2585.

23 Springer, M. G., Swain, W. A., & Rodriguez, L. A. (2016). Effective teacher retention bonuses: Evidence from Tennessee. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(2), 199-221.

24 Swain, W.A., Rodriguez, L.A., and Springer, M.G., Selective Retention Bonuses for Highly Effective Teachers in High Poverty Schools: Evidence from Tennessee. Forthcoming. *Economics of Education Review*.