

A photograph of a teacher with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a black shirt, leaning over a desk. She is pointing at a laptop screen. Two young students, a boy and a girl, are looking at the screen with interest. The background shows a classroom setting with colorful decorations on the wall.

EducationWeek®

# The **State** of **Teaching**

## **5 Strategies for Supporting K-12 Teachers: Lessons From California**

At a forum in San Francisco, district and school leaders talked with classroom educators about strategies that will keep educators in the profession



From left, Alicia Simba, a transitional kindergarten teacher; Eric Lewis, a science teacher; Vito Chiala, a principal; Chris Hoffman, a school superintendent; and moderator Diana Lambert of EdSource appear on a panel during the State of Teaching discussion in San Francisco on March 19, 2026. The administrators and classroom educators spoke of what it takes to boost teacher morale.

**A** thriving teacher workforce is critical to the success of schools and students. But teacher morale is not a monolith: It varies significantly from state to state and there are an array of factors that weigh down educator job satisfaction across the country. Education Week’s third annual [State of Teaching](#) report indicates that after increasing a year ago, overall job satisfaction among the nation’s public school teachers is slightly lower in 2026 than it was last year. The report also indicates that there are specific ways in which district and school leaders can influence teacher morale and keep educators coming back to work year after year.

On March 19 Education Week and EdSource co-hosted a symposium in San Francisco in which classroom teachers and district and school leaders came together to discuss ways to improve the morale of classroom educators in California amid conditions that seem primed to drag it down, from tightening education budgets to persistent political-cultural intrusions in classrooms to challenges with student attendance and engagement.

The State of Teaching project is based in part on a survey, conducted last fall, of more than 5,800 teachers across the nation. While compensation increases are likely to increase job satisfaction, the survey questions asked teachers to reflect on other factors that would improve their morale. In California, teacher scores on the EdWeek Research Center Teacher Morale Index suggest that the state’s educators are feeling more positively than negatively about their jobs. Teachers in the state also report a positive perception in how their communities view the profession.

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*This paper was written by Kate Rix, a freelance education writer whose work has appeared in a number of publications, including EdSource.*

But California’s teacher corps also faces major challenges: Its classroom educators are older on average than their colleagues nationwide, at 45.5 years of age—compared to 42.9 years across the country, as a whole. An estimated 45 percent of the state’s teachers say they plan to retire within the next decade (the estimate falls within a range of 40-49 percent) compared to 36 percent of teachers nationally who plan to do so.

The San Francisco event, which was supported by the Gates Foundation, featured a number of discussions of strategies for improving teacher morale. A panel of California administrators and educators used the [State of Teaching survey findings](#) as an entry point for a broader discussion on why California teachers might leave the profession and what districts should do to keep them. The panel was moderated by EdSource Senior Reporter Diana Lambert and included Alicia Simba, transitional kindergarten teacher in the Oakland Unified school district; Eric Lewis, a science teacher in the San Francisco Unified schools; Vito Chiala, principal of William Overfelt High School in the East Side Union High School District, in San Jose; and Chris Hoffman, former superintendent, Elk Grove Unified School District, outside of Sacramento.

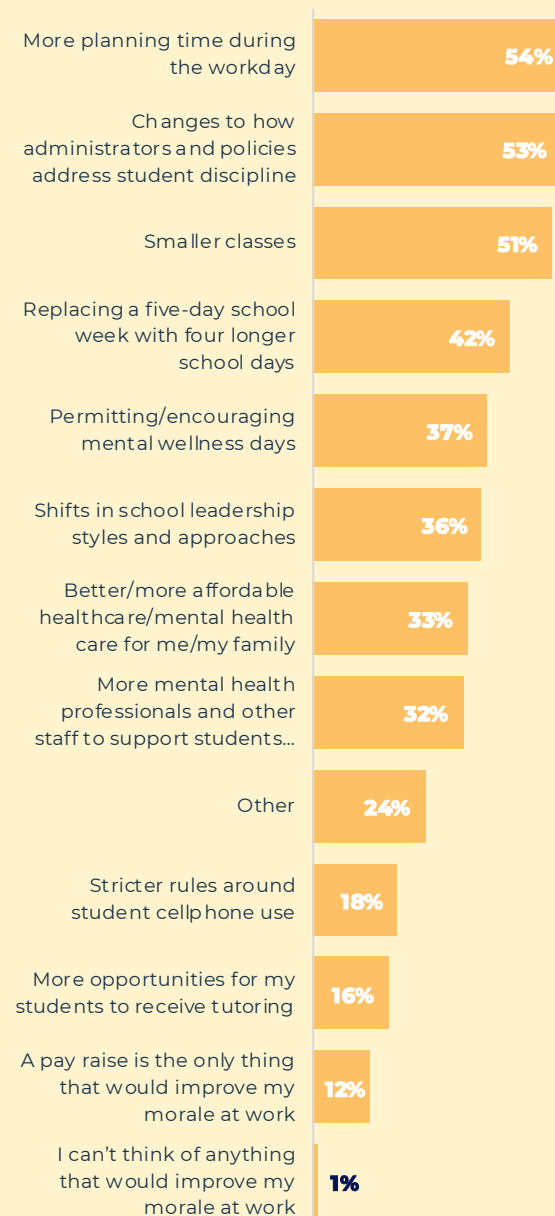
The editorial teams from Education Week and EdSource also led attendees through a roundtable discussion, in which they brought forward ideas for supporting educators through improved working conditions, career pathways and building connections with families in the school community. The event also featured a deep-dive presentation on how California policymakers should interpret the State of Teaching findings for their state.

The discussions during the event covered considerable ground. But five key takeaways emerged on how district and school leaders can create the conditions for teachers to succeed. They can:

- Support teachers who are struggling to maintain student discipline.
- Encourage parents to become teachers’ allies.
- Support paid professional development for classroom educators.
- Treat teachers like professionals and give them input on decisions about the school’s direction.
- Encourage teachers to observe one another in action.

## Educators Prize Planning Time

Other than a pay raise, what type of change would have a major impact on improving your morale? Select all that apply.



DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, The State of Teaching 2026, nationally representative online survey conducted in August-November 2025 of 5,802 teachers.

# 1. Support teachers who are trying to establish classroom discipline.

The teachers surveyed as part of the State of Teaching project believe classroom discipline has gotten worse over the past year. Nearly two-thirds of educators who responded said so, and elementary school teachers were even more likely than their peers in other grade spans to say student behavior has fallen from last year.

At the event, EdWeek Research Center Director Holly Kurtz noted that an estimated 37% of California teachers (on a range of 33-40%) report that student classroom behavior has improved or stayed the same over the past year. Overall, the U.S. average was 36%.

Teachers at the San Francisco forum said student discipline was a major factor undermining educator morale in some schools. The challenge is even more acute when teachers feel that administrators aren't taking the situation seriously. "The struggles that teachers are having in their classrooms are real, but they're just being asked to do more," said Lewis, the science teacher on the panel, referring to pressures brought on by student behavior. "This is missing the boat on the support teachers need from their administrators."

Some school leaders provide exceptional support for classroom educators when disciplinary issues emerge. Transitional kindergarten teacher Simba, who was also on the panel, said the support she gets from her school leader is hands-on and helpful. "When I've had a really hard time with a student and I go to her and say, 'I just need five minutes,' she'll take the student for a walk," Simba said. "She is happy to jump in."

When the Elk Grove district adopted a practice of using restorative practices to manage discipline issues, former superintendent Chris Hoffman said they made sure that all staff understood both the theory and the practice, so they would know what to do when an issue came up and even possibly prevent problems. Restorative justice generally refers to schools using alternatives to traditional discipline that focus on developing relationships with students and building community. "Ninety percent of restorative work is about what you do to get behavior the way you want it to be," Hoffman said on the panel. Effective training, he said, helps educators feel they "have a responsibility for how these kids are behaving."



EdWeek Staff Writer Ileana Najarro, who covers race and opportunity in schools across the country, spoke during the State of Teaching discussion in San Francisco on March 19, 2026.

## 2. Encourage parents to become teachers' allies.

Asked what remedies could have a positive impact on student behavior, the highest percentage of teachers surveyed (63%) said smaller class sizes, but not far behind were efforts to help parents teach children how to behave appropriately in schools (58%), and limiting parents' ability to undermine school-imposed disciplinary consequences (54%). But getting parents to support teachers on disciplinary issues is easier said than done. During the roundtable discussion a school principal said that it's challenging to give families strategies that align with the work of schools. "We have tried several methods to offer parents information about how to handle tantrums or screen time or behavior," said Lyndsay Remmen, principal of Aileen Colburn Elementary in Atwater. "It's hard to find a way to get that in front of parents. There are some things where there's got to be a partnership."

Another educator at the event said parents have become increasingly likely to challenge a teacher's assessment about their child's behavior than they were years ago. During parent-teacher conferences about disciplinary issues, parents want to see a written policy that requires children

to behave in the classroom. "We expect students to behave in a respectful manner," she said, "but how are we communicating our expectations?"

Building positive relationships with parents early in the school year can help, another teacher said. Sharing positive observations about children with their parents may help to make hard conversations about misbehavior go more smoothly. "If you're calling a parent because the child has done something negative, the parent is less likely to feel that you are targeting their child," the teacher said.

Teachers who responded to an open-ended question on the EdWeek Research Center's survey voiced frustrations about parents' unwillingness to help them with student behavior. "Parents are a major issue in education today," a high school ELA teacher in Indiana wrote. "So many of them believe that their children are faultless and should not be asked to change their behavior in any way ... When parents are so quick to take away any possible inconvenience from their kids, they hurt our ability to educate them and their ability to thrive in the world."

**"Parents are a major issue in education today. So many of them believe that their children are faultless and should not be asked to change their behavior in any way."**

—High school ELA teacher in Indiana

### 3. Support paid professional development.

The State of Teaching surveys have not found a direct correlation between higher teacher morale and higher pay. But attendees at the San Francisco event say fair compensation can be a potent incentive to stay in the profession. That's especially true for newer teachers without the seniority to earn higher salaries, said Lewis, seeking out paid opportunities to earn while learning can build strong job satisfaction.

Earning a national board certification will add to a teacher's income, he said. Administrators are wise to encourage teachers to pursue professional development and additional training that will increase their earning potential while adding to their skill sets. "If you are not learning more as a teacher, you are falling behind," Lewis added. "We need to have it built in as an expectation at districts so

there are clearly delineated pathways for growth."

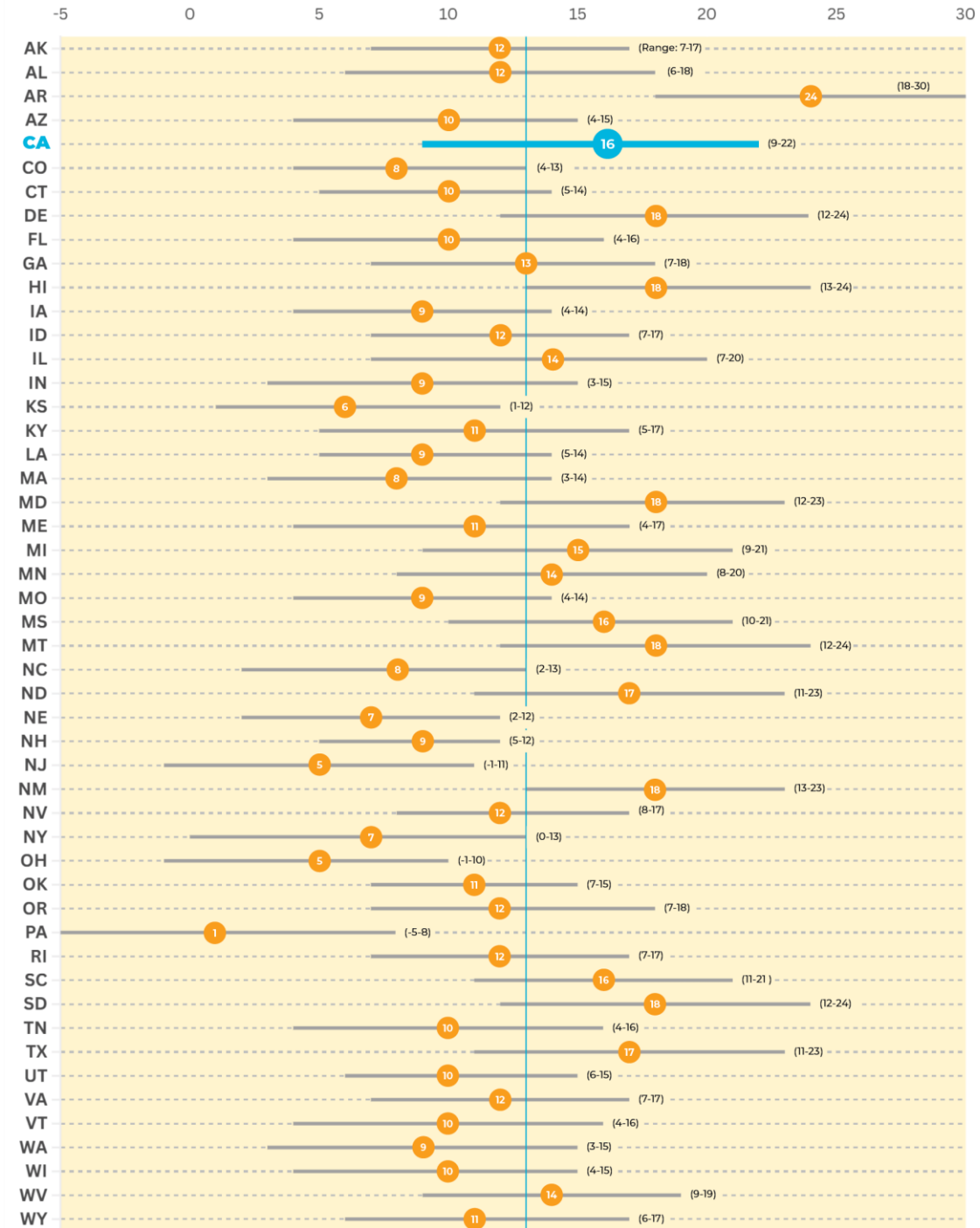
Districts spent about \$2,000 more per teacher on in-service training in 2022 than in 2001. Yet that makes up only about 3.5% of district budgets--the same share as two decades ago, according to [a new analysis of federal data on school finances](#), as reported by Education Week. Districts' professional development spending climbed from \$6,250 per teacher in 2001 (just before the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which required new teacher-quality strategies) to more than \$8,300 per teacher in 2022. That amount includes teacher stipends, pay for instructional coaches, services from outside vendors, conference fees, and supplies.



Audience members listen to panelists during the State of Teaching discussion in San Francisco. Attendees pointed to a need for schools to forge stronger ties with parents and bring them on as partners in helping to address student discipline.

# Teacher Morale Index 2026

State scores on the index are shown below. Each state's estimated score appears in orange along with ranges that are provided to indicate the level of precision for each estimate.



Results from the first state-level State of Teaching survey in 2025 are not comparable to state-level results from subsequent years due to a methodological shift that improved the validity of the analysis.

DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, The State of Teaching 2026, nationally representative online survey conducted in August-November 2025 of 5,802 teachers

Data visualization by Maya Riser-Kositsky

## 4. Treat teachers like professionals and give them opportunities to prove input on the school's direction.

Related to concerns about how discipline issues are often handled, teachers at roundtables during the California event said parents are more likely to argue and push back on observations teachers make about their students. They said that these challenges to their expertise can negatively affect morale.

"I see my job as a profession and I want to be treated like a professional," said Lewis, who has been teaching for 27 years. "We are grappling with some really odd things in the classroom--things that if you were in another profession you would probably be calling the police. And yet this is just another day for many teachers."

What negatively impacts morale, he said, is when teachers try to work in a professional manner but not being treated like a professional. He said many teachers are not clear about what their specific job requires and may not understand the vision of the school where they work.

School Principal Vito Chiala agreed and added that teachers are more likely to feel satisfied on the job if their work is done as a team. While working as a teacher, he said, his

principal encouraged the teaching staff to share their opinions about school direction. "I appreciated having a say about what I thought would work with the kids we had then," he said. "We have to hold teachers in high regard."

Part of the power of this approach, he said, is that it can make teachers feel that they're being treated like professionals. One principal at the event said that she strives to make sure teachers are part of conversations about school discipline policy. When there is an issue between a teacher and a student, for example, she addresses the student's behavior but also makes time to work with the classroom educator directly and make sure that their expertise was heard.

It can take a teacher two or three years to understand the school and its population of families, Chiala said. When teachers feel respected, and engaged in school governance, they are more likely to stay in the district.

"Turnover results in low morale," he said, "as well as having an impact on students."

### The State of Teaching in California | By the Numbers

California's overall score on the **Teacher Morale Index is +16**, with an overall score estimate that falls within a range of +9 and +22. The **national average is +13**. Arkansas teachers' morale was the best of any state at +24 (the range was +18 to +30) and Pennsylvania was the worst at +1. (the range was -5 to +8).

**37% of teachers in California say student behavior has improved or stayed the same** in the past year (the range is 33-40%) which is roughly the same as the 36% national average.

When asked about the major factors that would improve their morale, California teachers' survey responses were, on the whole, very similar to those of their peers nationwide:

- **+55%** said changes to how administrators and policies address student discipline: 55% (50%-60%)
- **53%** said smaller class sizes (47% to 59%)
- **52%** said more planning time during the workday (49%-55%)
- **35%** said shifts in school leadership styles and approaches: (33%-37%)
- **34%** said permitting/encouraging mental wellness days. (31%-37%)

The numbers in parentheses are error terms that indicate how state-level estimates might have been different if, through the luck of the draw, a different set of teachers had taken the survey.

## 5. Give teachers more opportunities to observe one another in action.

New teachers need more support than they typically get, Lewis said. As apprentice educators, new teachers should be given frequent opportunities to observe more experienced teachers in action. Mentorship and classroom observations should be built into schedules, even for teachers who are not brand new to the profession. (By contrast, many teachers have told Education Week they don't like it when school principals—their bosses—drop in to observe their work, and regard those check-ins as unhelpful and unlikely to provide school leaders with an accurate representation of their work.)

Simba, the transitional kindergarten teacher, earned both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in education before getting her teaching credential. By the time she received her first teaching assignment, however, she felt unprepared. “I went the traditional way and studied education,” she said, “and I still didn't know what to do in the moment.”

There are other teachers who work as paraeducators first, Simba said. But for those who need it, observing experienced teachers at work has the potential to expose an educator to innovative classroom strategies that are supported by evidence. “When a new teacher makes a mistake, show them ways to improve,” Lewis said. “That will give them hope to become a better professional.”



Deborah Clark, the CEO of EdSource, speaks at the State of Teaching event, which drew district and school leaders and classroom educators.



Explore the full array of Education Week's 2026 **State of Teaching** reporting and survey data.

[edw.site.TheStateOfTeaching](https://edw.site.TheStateOfTeaching)

### Gates Foundation

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