



Early-Career Teacher Perceptions

Trends from the 2024 Tennessee Educator Survey



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Introduction

The first years a teacher spends in the classroom are often the [most difficult](#), as new teachers must learn to balance engaging instruction with effective classroom management. Effective preparation and [early-career teacher supports](#) can help accelerate the professional growth of new teachers and improve retention. On the [2023 Tennessee Educator Survey](#), early-career teachers who felt better prepared and who received early-career supports such as mentorship were more likely to say they planned to continue teaching in their schools the following year.

Nationally and in Tennessee, there has been an expansion of [alternate routes](#) to teacher certification in the past decade. Fewer candidates are completing traditional teacher certification programs, while the number of new teachers completing non-traditional (i.e., job-embedded, residency, apprenticeship) programs has increased. Since 2020, Tennessee has expanded its [Grow Your Own](#) initiative to strengthen the teacher pipeline and provide a path to the teaching profession for participants spanning experience, background, and age.

The Early-Career Branch of the Tennessee Educator Survey provides opportunities to understand more about the experiences and perspectives of this unique group of teachers in their first three years of teaching. This data can help inform efforts to recruit new teachers, better prepare them to enter the classroom, support them in their roles, and encourage them to remain in teaching. This brief explores questions around early-career teachers' pathways into the profession, preparation and supports, and retention plans.

Key Findings:

- 1 *More than half of first-year teachers reported that they entered teaching through a non-traditional pathway.*
- 2 *About two-thirds of early-career teachers reported that they were assigned a formal teacher mentor in their first year of teaching, and those who had a mentor reported positive mentorship experiences.*
- 3 *Early-career teachers had similar retention plans to non-early-career teachers.*
- 4 *Early-career teachers more often cited school culture and encouragement from administrators than more veteran teachers when making retention decisions for the next school year.*

DATA & METHODS

In this brief, we used data from the 2024 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES), specifically responses collected from teachers in their first three years of teaching. Overall, 55% of teachers responded to the survey (N=42,104). Longitudinal analyses use data from the 2021-2023 Tennessee Educator Surveys, with teacher response rates ranging from 50% to 55%. To account for differential response rates across school type, region, and economically disadvantaged students served, we use analytic weighting to produce results that are more representative of public school teachers in Tennessee.

We analyzed responses taken from the Teacher Core (given to all teachers) and the Early-Career Branch (given to teachers in their first three years of teaching). Items on the Early-Career Branch of the survey were revised in 2023 and kept consistent in 2024. Teacher respondents in their first three years of teaching who did not previously take the Early-Career Branch were assigned the Early-Career Branch in 2024 (N=5,071). 50% of respondents were in their first year of teaching.



KEY FINDINGS

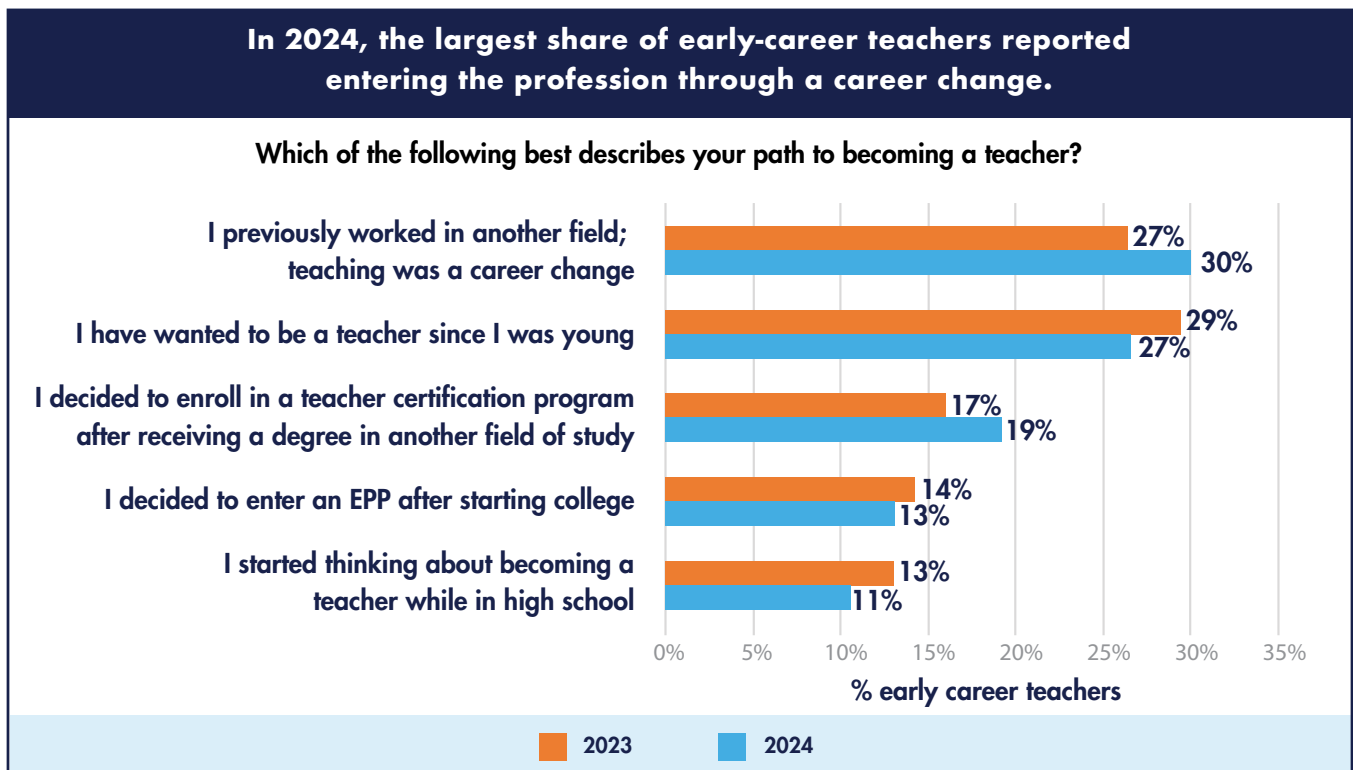
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More than half of first-year teachers reported that they entered teaching through a non-traditional pathway.

The traditional pathway into teaching typically involves entering an educator preparation program as an undergraduate student, completing coursework and a clinical/student teaching experience, and completing requirements for a degree and licensure prior to becoming a teacher. However, the growth of alternative routes to certification have opened different pathways to allow prospective teachers to circumvent some of these components, reducing barriers to the teaching profession for educators from a wider variety of backgrounds. Nationally and in Tennessee, we have seen a decrease in the number of traditionally prepared teacher candidates and an increase in the proportion of new teachers who completed an [alternative preparation route](#).

These patterns are reflected in the 2024 Tennessee Educator Survey, with nearly half of respondents reporting that they entered the profession through a non-traditional pathway. As shown in Figure 1 below, 30% of early-career teachers reported that they entered the profession via a career change and another 19% reported that they completed a teacher certification program after receiving a degree in another field of study. This represents a five-percentage point increase from 2023, when 44% of early-career teachers reported entering teaching through one of these non-traditional pathways¹.

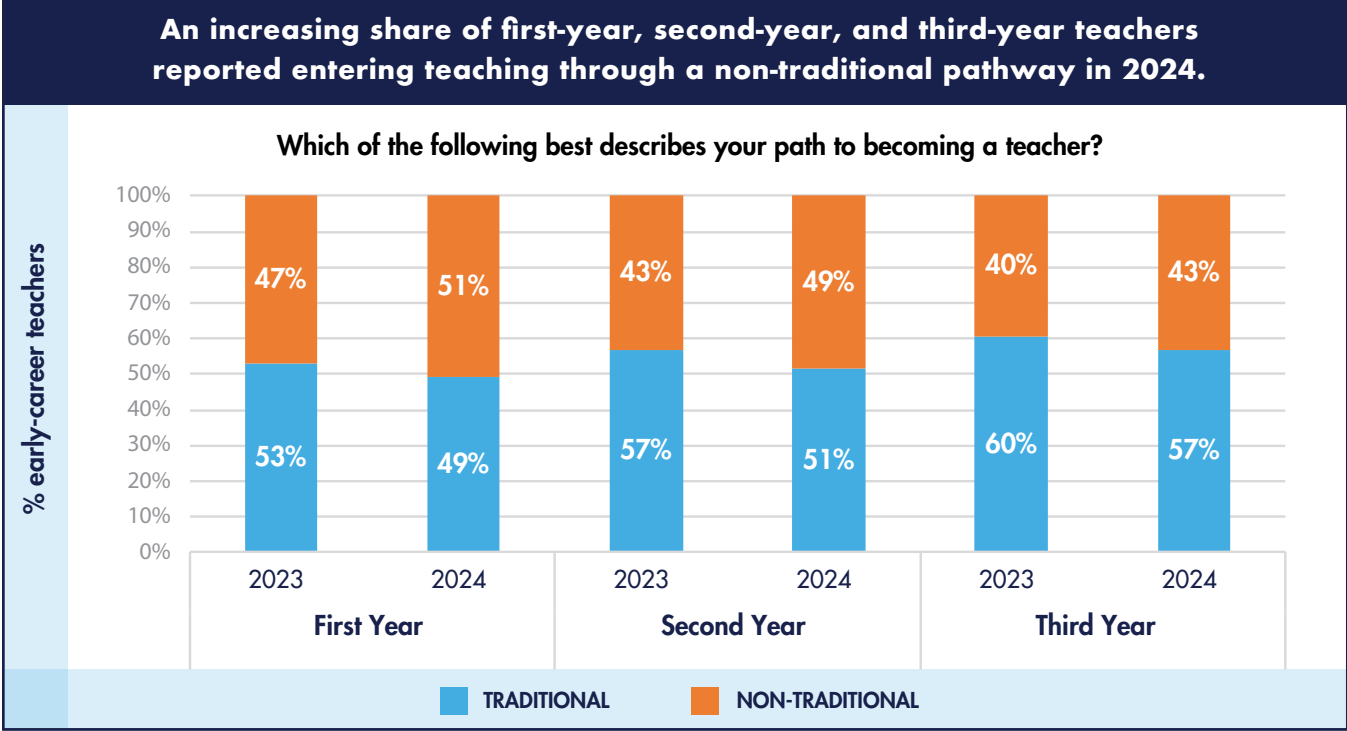
FIGURE 1



¹ Throughout this brief, “non-traditional” preparation refers to respondents who reported entering teaching via a career change or entering a teacher certification program after receiving a degree in another field of study.

Looking at cohorts of early-career teachers as illustrated in Figure 2, first-year teachers in the 2023-24 school year were the most likely to report entering teaching through a non-traditional pathway (51%), compared to second- (49%) and third-year (43%) teachers. The proportion of teachers who said they entered teaching through a non-traditional pathway increased for each of these groups from 2023.

FIGURE 2



Additionally, while early-career teachers who entered teaching through a non-traditional pathway were much less likely to say they had completed a student teaching² experience (54% vs. 91% of traditionally prepared), they reported feeling similarly prepared for most teaching competencies including differentiating instruction, engaging students in critical thinking, and effectively teaching students how to read. Traditionally prepared teachers, however, were more likely to agree that they felt prepared to practice content-specific pedagogy (85% vs. 78% of non-traditionally prepared) and demonstrate in-depth content knowledge for their subject area(s) (85% vs. 77% of non-traditionally prepared). Non-traditionally prepared teachers, on the other hand, were slightly more likely to agree that they felt prepared to implement effective classroom management practices (76% vs. 73% of traditionally prepared) and foster collaboration with families and colleagues (76% vs. 71% of traditionally prepared).

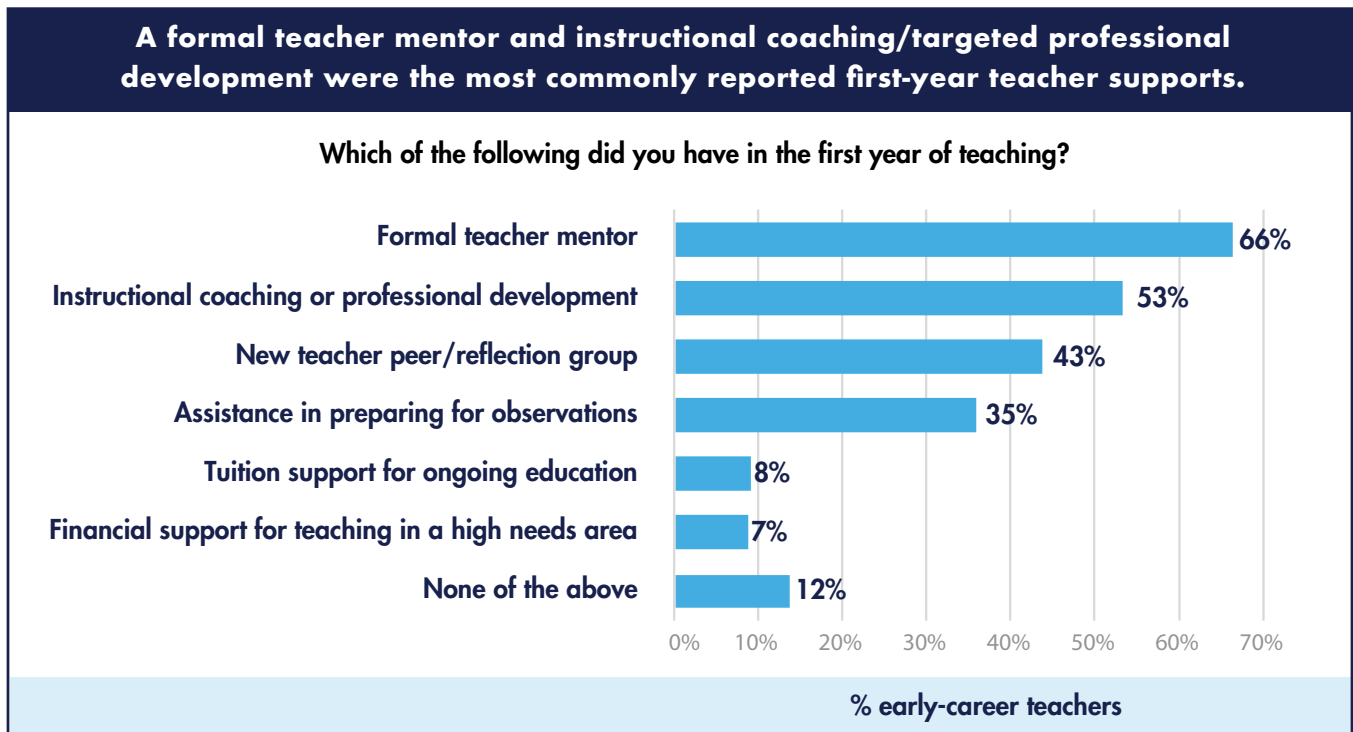
2 Tennessee has three approved pathways for clinical practice: student teaching, internship, and job-embedded.

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About two-thirds of early-career teachers reported that they were assigned a formal teacher mentor in their first year of teaching, and those who had a mentor reported positive mentorship experiences.

Providing new teachers with high-quality [induction programs](#) can help accelerate their development, improve retention, and increase student learning. Components of a high-quality induction program include mentorship, targeted professional learning opportunities, learning communities, and onboarding. In 2024, their school or district assigned them a formal teacher mentor and was the most reported support early-career teachers³ received in their first year of teaching, followed by instructional coaching or targeted professional development. As shown in Figure 3, 66% of early-career teachers reported that they had a formal mentor teacher assigned in their first-year teaching in 2024, up slightly from 65% in 2023. Early-career teachers in 2024 were also slightly more likely than early-career teachers in 2023 to say they received other first-year supports such as instructional coaching or targeted professional development (53% vs. 51% in 2023), new teacher peer/reflection groups (43% vs. 40% in 2023), and assistance in preparing for observations (35% vs. 32% in 2023).

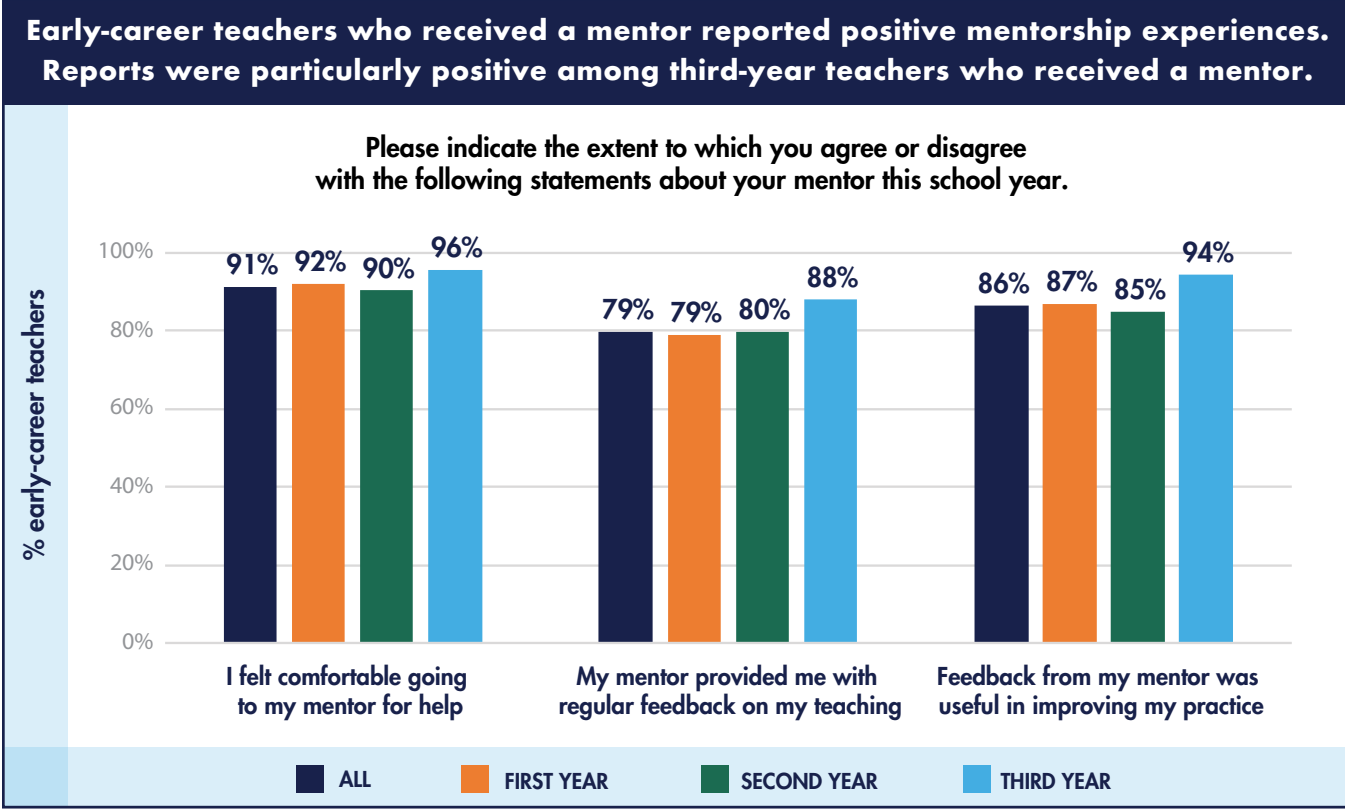
FIGURE 3



³ Teachers completing a clinical pathway are required to have an assigned mentor. Additionally, educators on a permit teaching EOCs are required to be assigned a mentor. An individual who is issued a temporary teaching permit to teach a course for which an end-of-course examination is required must be assigned a mentor teacher by the director of schools or the director of the public charter school (49-5-106).

First-year teachers were the most likely to say they had a mentor in the 2023-24 school year, with 78% of first-year respondents reporting they had a mentor assigned by their school or district, compared to 52% of second-year teachers and 30% of third-year teachers. As Figure 4 illustrates, those who had a mentor reported positive experiences with their mentor: over 91% agreed they felt comfortable going to their mentor for help, 79% agreed that their mentor provided regular feedback on their teaching, and 86% agreed that the feedback from their mentor was useful in improving their practice. Third-year teachers who received a mentor reported particularly positive experiences with their mentor – 96% said they felt comfortable going to their mentor for help, and 94% said feedback from their mentor was useful.

FIGURE 4



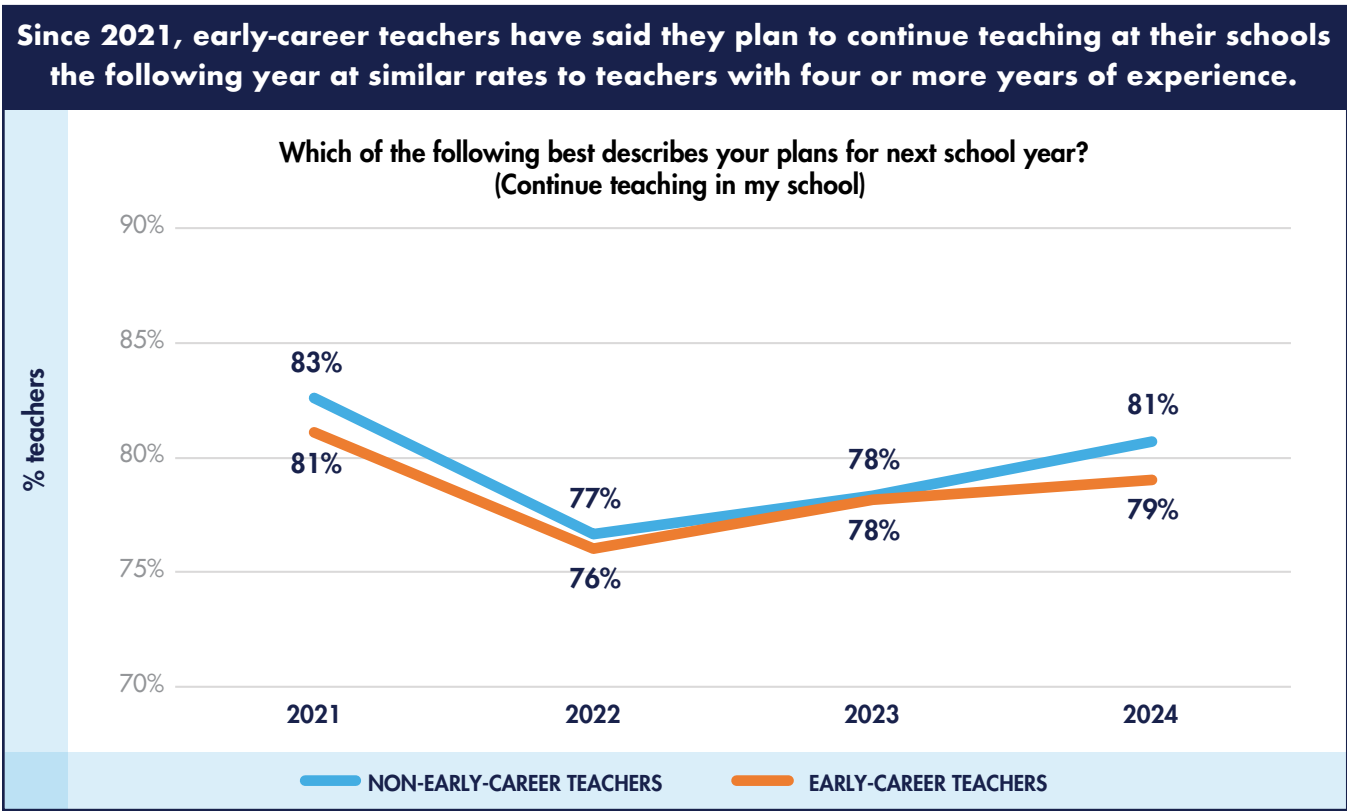
Traditionally and non-traditionally prepared early-career teachers were similarly likely to report that they received various first-year teaching supports including new teacher peer/reflection groups (43% and 44%, respectively), instructional coaching or targeted professional development (53% for both), and assistance in preparing for observations (34% and 36%, respectively). However, traditionally prepared teachers were about five percentage points more likely to say they received a formal mentor in their first year (69% vs. 64%), while non-traditionally prepared teachers were about five percentage points more likely to say they received tuition support for ongoing education in their first year (10% vs. 5%).

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Early-career teachers reported similar retention plans to non-early career teachers.

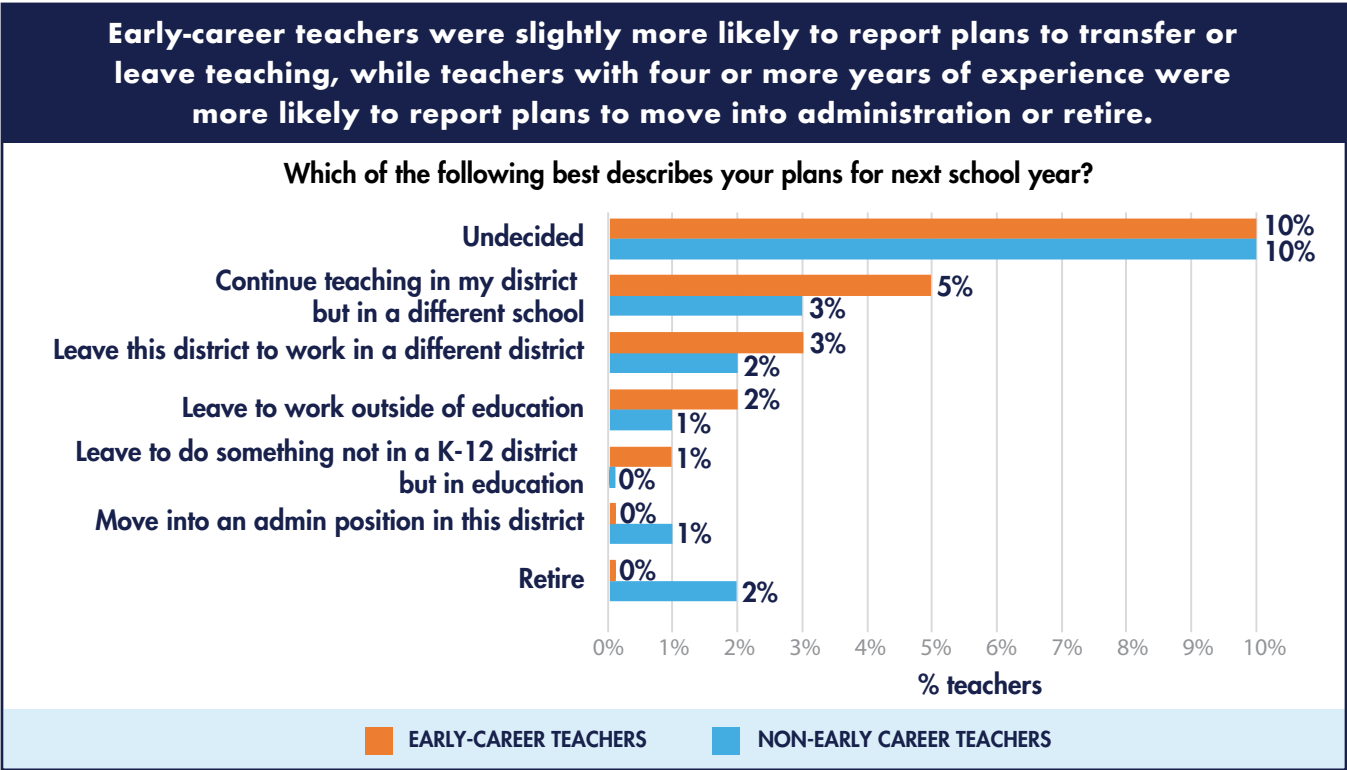
[Turnover](#) tends to be higher among teachers who are new to the profession, and this turnover can negatively impact [students](#). Therefore, it is important to monitor retention, especially among this group of early-career teachers. In 2024, 79% of early-career teachers and 81% of teachers with at least four years of experience reported that they planned to continue teaching at their schools next year. Figure 5 shows that the percentage of early-career teachers who said they plan to continue teaching in their schools the following year has increased from 76% in 2022 after falling from 81% in 2021. Since 2021, the percentage of early-career teachers planning to stay at their schools the following year has been within two percentage points of teachers with four or more years of experience.

FIGURE 5



Early-career teachers were slightly more likely than teachers with four or more years of experience to say they planned to transfer to a different school in their district or move to another district (8% vs. 5%) or to say they planned to leave K-12 teaching (3% vs. 1%). Additionally, they were less likely than their more experienced counterparts to say they planned to move into an administrative position in the district or retire.

FIGURE 6



Note: This chart does not include respondents who indicated they plan to continue teaching in their current school next year.

While [retention rates](#) tend to vary among types of alternate certification programs, there do not appear to be large differences in retention between traditionally and non-traditionally prepared teachers. In line with this trend, traditionally prepared and non-traditionally prepared early-career teachers reported similar retention plans on the TES, with 80% of traditionally prepared and 77% of non-traditionally prepared teachers stating that they planned to continue teaching in their schools. About 8% of both groups said they planned to transfer to another school or district, and 3% of traditionally prepared and 4% of non-traditionally prepared teachers reported plans to leave K-12 teaching. However, when asked about long-term plans to remain in education, non-traditionally prepared teachers were about seven percentage points more likely to say they were undecided about how long they would remain in education (25% vs. 18% of traditionally prepared).

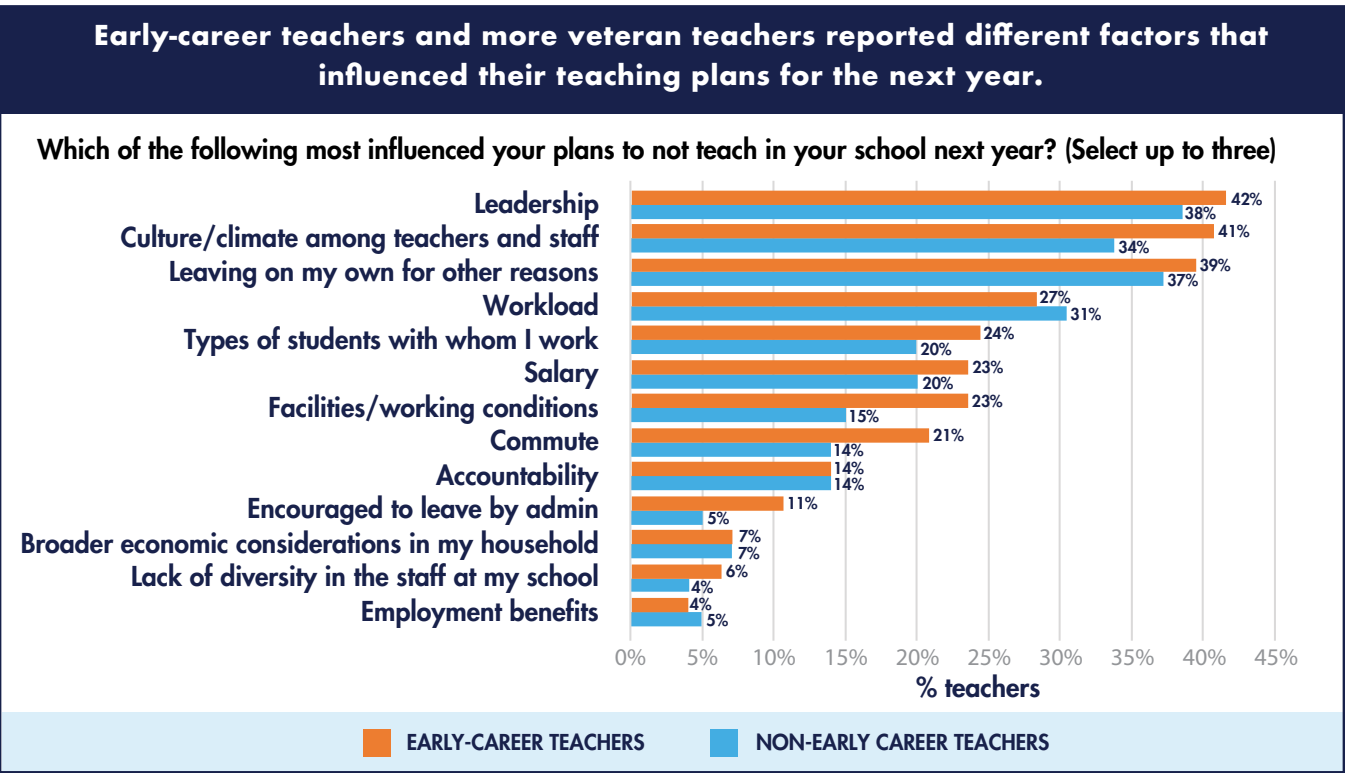


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Early-career teachers more often cited school culture and encouragement from administrators than more veteran teachers when making retention decisions for the next school year.

Understanding teachers’ reasons for wanting to stay in or leave their schools can provide schools and districts with important feedback about how to improve retention. While reported retention plans were similar for early-career teachers and their more experienced peers, early-career teachers often cited different factors that contributed to their decisions to stay in or leave their schools. As shown in Figure 7, among those planning to leave their schools, early-career teachers more often identified culture/climate among teachers and staff (41% vs. 34% of non-early-career teachers) and being encouraged to leave by administration (11% vs. 5% of non-early-career teachers). They were also more likely to say the facilities and working conditions at their schools (23% vs. 15% of non-early-career teachers) and their commute (21% vs. 14% of non-early-career teachers) factored into their plans to leave.

FIGURE 7



Among those planning to stay in their schools, early-career teachers again more often cited culture and climate among teachers and staff (73% vs. 66% of non-early-career teachers) and being encouraged to stay by administration and/or other faculty (42% vs. 31% of non-early-career teachers) as factors that contributed to their decisions.

Additionally, among those early-career teachers planning to leave their schools next year, traditionally prepared and non-traditionally prepared teachers cited different factors that influenced those plans. Non-traditionally prepared teachers were 10 percentage points more likely than traditionally prepared teachers to name leadership (47% vs. 37%) and salary (28% vs. 18%) as a factor in their decision. Traditionally prepared teachers, on the other hand, more often cited workload (29% vs. 22%) as a factor that influenced their plans.

CONCLUSION

The early-career branch of the Tennessee Educator Survey can provide important insights into the experiences of our early-career teachers, who represent the future of our teacher workforce. In recent years, we have seen changes in the demographic make-up, background, and preparation of new teachers in the state. The [typical early-career teacher](#) of today is older, more likely to have working experience in another career field, and more likely to enter teaching through an alternative pathway than the typical early-career teacher 10 years ago. TES data reveals that about half of early-career teachers in 2024 entered teaching through a non-traditional pathway; this group may have different needs and priorities than traditionally prepared teachers. State, district, and school leaders may need to consider these differences when providing support and when implementing strategies around retention.

The 2024 TES also provides evidence that educator preparation programs (both traditional and alternate route) are developing teacher candidates who feel well prepared for various aspects of their roles. Traditionally prepared and non-traditionally prepared early-career teachers expressed high satisfaction with their level of preparedness for a range of teaching competencies. Further, TES responses indicate that districts and schools are increasing support for new teachers. This could have important implications for retention down the line, and indeed we have seen a gradual increase in the percentage of early-career teachers planning to continue teaching in their schools since 2022. We must continue to be receptive to the needs of this changing group of educators, as experiences in the early years in the profession have lasting impacts for these teachers and the students they serve.



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