



SECURING PAY RAISES

THAT MATTER

Recommendations
from Teach Plus

MISSISSIPPI
Policy Fellows

**TEACH
+PLUS**

“As a single mother of two, I have struggled to pay for household expenses. It is definitely not enough money for a one-income household. I strongly discouraged my daughter, who is a recent college graduate, from pursuing a teaching degree because I wanted her to be able to live comfortably.”

—Teacher, Southeast Mississippi

“We are losing good teachers too soon. If there is not a change to teacher salaries soon, particularly new teachers', we will no longer have new teachers entering the field of education in Mississippi.”

—Teacher, Southwest Mississippi

INTRODUCTION

For many Mississippi teachers, remaining in the classroom is no longer a sustainable career choice. Recognizing how low Mississippi teacher salaries are, especially when compared to teachers in other states and professions with similar qualifications, many teachers are protesting with their feet as they leave our classrooms at alarming rates. This is evident in a [recent report](#) by the Mississippi Department of Education, which states that the Magnolia State currently has over 3,000 teacher vacancies.¹ According to a recent report from Mississippi First, over half of Mississippi teachers are likely to leave the classroom within the next year. That same survey also found that for those teachers likely to leave, the biggest factor was compensation.²

As of February 2021, two bills before the Mississippi legislature offered hope to teachers. The [Senate](#) has passed a pay raise bill that includes a \$40,000 starting salary, significant raises every five years of a teacher's career, and a \$4,700 average raise for teachers.³ The [House](#) has also passed a pay raise bill, which includes a \$43,125 starting salary, significant raises for teacher assistants, and includes raises that range between \$4,000-\$6,000.⁴ Both bills indicate that the legislature is committed to making changes in order to improve teacher compensation.

We are a group of Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows and classroom teachers who work across grade levels with diverse populations of students. In order to better understand how teachers and their families have been impacted by the low salaries in Mississippi, we conducted a survey with teachers in the Magnolia State. We also wanted to know which of the current policy proposals Mississippi teachers prefer. We believe that as legislators deliberate policies that affect teacher salaries and benefits, educator input and voice are essential in determining which of the solutions on the table will have the greatest impact on building our teacher pipeline now and in the long term.

The survey spoke volumes about the urgent need to raise teacher salaries. Many teachers shared that their salaries aren't high enough to raise a family, pay bills, and afford health insurance. Teachers expressed concerns that salaries haven't kept up with rising costs of living, rising insurance premiums, or the classroom supplies they purchase out of their own pockets.⁵ In this brief, we present findings from our survey and recommendations for legislators as they both settle on a final teacher pay bill to send to Governor Reeves and contemplate the long-term needs of our teachers, students, and the entire community in our state.

FINDINGS

1. Mississippi teachers overwhelmingly prefer an increase in salary over benefits such as increased contributions to their health insurance or retirement contributions.
2. When it comes to other benefits such as health insurance and retirement plan options, teachers are still prioritizing their immediate financial concerns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Incorporate both a 15% increase in starting salaries and the additional increase every five years into the final version of the teacher pay raise legislation.
2. Listen to teachers when it comes to improving teacher compensation and benefits.
3. Commit to addressing long-term educational challenges with bold policy solutions.



METHODOLOGY

In December 2021, we surveyed over 1,900 Mississippi teachers to identify the compensation policy proposals they want lawmakers to prioritize during the current legislative session. The respondents represented 135 of Mississippi's public school districts and public charter schools. Respondents included teachers with varying years of teaching experience, with two-thirds of teachers indicating they have 10 or more years of experience as a classroom teacher. In addition, 367 respondents identify as a teacher of color.⁶

Five proposals for improving teacher compensation and benefits were presented to survey respondents. The proposals were derived from discussions that took place during the town hall meetings hosted by the Senate Education Committee this past Fall in each of Mississippi's four Congressional Districts. Teachers were presented with the five policy options and were asked to select up to three options they would prioritize and to share their reasons for their selections. The policy proposals presented to teachers were as follows:

- Provide a \$3,000 pay raise for all Mississippi public school teachers.
- Make the annual salary increase (\$495/yr) available for teachers with 1-2 years of experience.
- Include a significant salary increase every 5 years.
- Lower insurance premiums by investing more state funds into the state health insurance plans.
- Give teachers the option to contribute to a 401(k) retirement plan.

FINDINGS

FINDING 1. Mississippi teachers overwhelmingly prefer an increase in salary over benefits such as increased contributions to their health insurance or retirement contributions.

When teachers were asked, “Which of the following policy options is a top priority for you,” 84 percent of our respondents selected a \$3,000 pay raise as a top priority.⁷ This finding is consistent across subsets of our survey respondents, with 81 percent of teachers of color and 89 percent of teachers with less than five years of experience prioritizing a significant pay raise.⁸

Our survey respondents explained that a significant pay raise would help teachers by making it easier for them to provide for their families and move their salaries closer to the regional average.⁹ Teachers were specifically surveyed about a \$3,000 raise, yet it should be noted that many clarified that \$3,000 was “the bare minimum the legislation can do to retain teachers.”¹⁰ Teachers also stated that a significant salary increase would help teachers feel valued, respected, and fairly compensated.

“In order to compete with surrounding states, money needs to be provided to make salaries competitive. Better salary incentives would also recruit the best candidates for teachers. This would pay off in the classroom with a higher-quality education of our students.”

—Teacher, North Mississippi ¹¹

A majority of survey respondents—over 75%—prioritized amending the salary schedule to include a significant pay increase every five years. This proposal was also strongly supported by teachers of color (71 percent) and by teachers with less than five years of experience (71 percent).¹² Respondents explained that including a significant raise after the 5th year of teaching would incentivize more teachers to remain in the profession.

“My son has worked retail for 8 years. He is 23, and makes \$700 more a month than I do with 20 years of experience in a professional, licensed position that requires a college degree.”

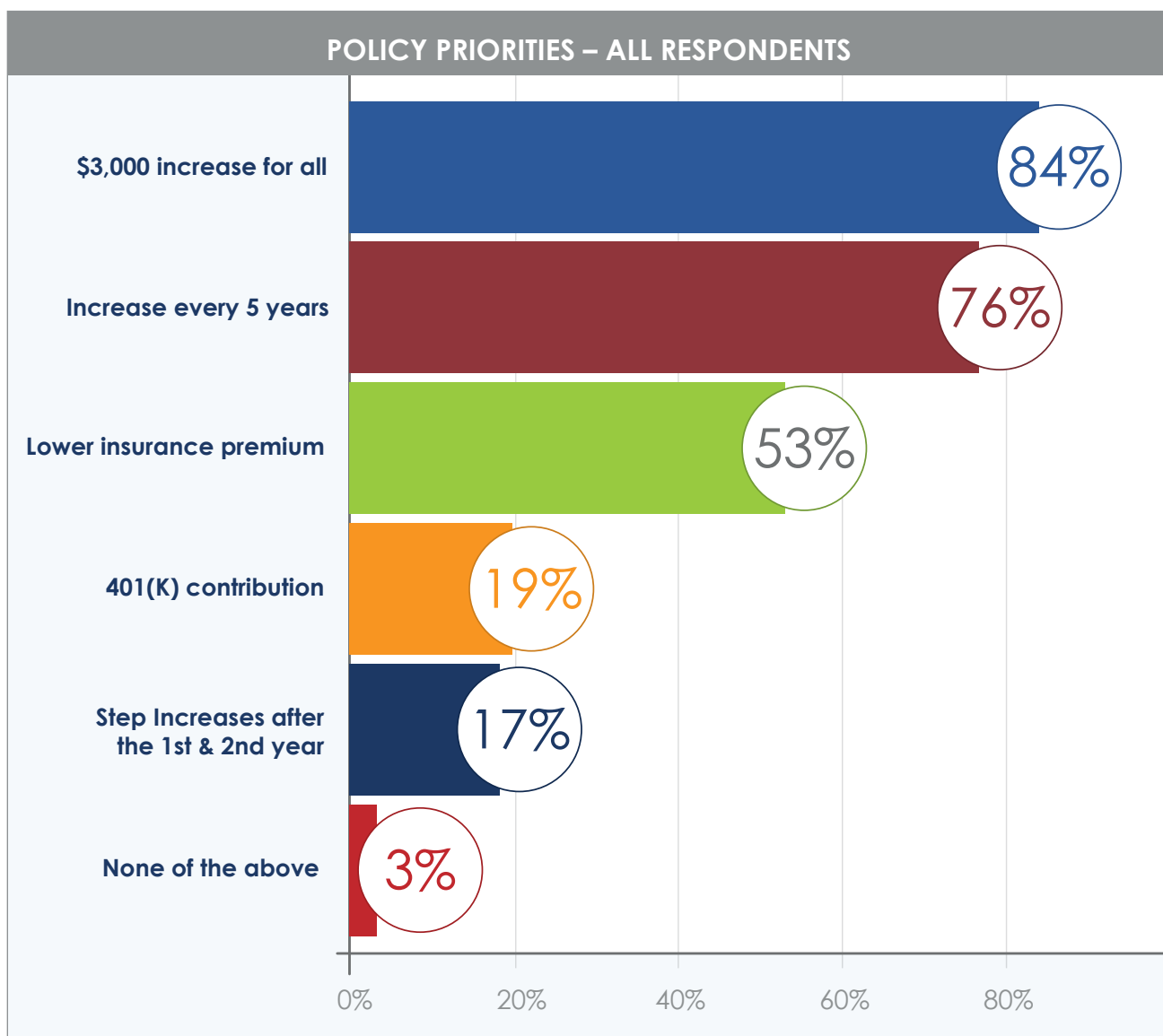
—Teacher, Southeast Mississippi wrote ¹³

FINDING 2: When it comes to other benefits such as health insurance and retirement plan options, teachers are still prioritizing their immediate financial concerns.

A majority of respondents—53 percent—prioritized a greater investment in the state health insurance plan in order to lower monthly costs.¹⁴ Many teachers expressed frustration about previous pay raises being followed by higher insurance premiums.¹⁵ Many teachers worry that future increases in health insurance premiums and deductibles may also dilute the impact of any raise that legislators may ultimately pass. Respondents shared that better benefits, including more generous insurance plans, have been a contributing factor to them leaving the state or the profession.

“Insurance premiums are a reason my husband had to make a career change to help support our growing family. Family insurance premiums were too high for our family and would result in me basically working to pay insurance.”

—Teacher, North Mississippi ¹⁶



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from our survey, we recommend that the following provisions be included in the final teacher pay raise legislation:

Recommendation 1

Include both a 15% increase in starting salaries, and the additional increase every 5-years, to the final version of the teacher pay raise legislation.

We recommend that legislators approve a 15% increase, which would set starting teacher salaries at \$42,550. A 15% increase would set starting salaries above the national starting average of \$41,163 and would also surpass the starting salaries of each of our neighboring states.¹⁷ This significant raise would also address our respondents' concerns about financial security and the respect of earning a salary commensurate with their educational attainment.

“Teachers in Mississippi are doing the same job as teachers in other states. The expectations of teachers in Mississippi are high and most of us are doing our job exceptionally well. So why shouldn't we be compensated on the same level as other teachers?”

—Teacher, Southwest Mississippi¹⁸

According to a recent report published by the Southern Regional Education Board, about 45% of teachers in the South are leaving the profession within their first five years.¹⁹ While novice teachers are crucial to filling vacant positions in Mississippi, it is even more important to retain effective teachers, who see the most gains in student achievement within their first five years of experience. A substantial increase every five years, such as the Senate's proposal of at least \$1,300, could incentivize novice teachers to stay in the profession.

“Providing raises every 5 years also helps keep teachers in the teaching career. Most of the previous teachers I know who have left the profession were due to financial reasons and money. The pay boost would help motivate teachers to stay in the profession knowing they are valued and the more time they put in the more value they are.”

—Teacher, Northeast Mississippi²⁰

While our survey didn't include specific questions about teacher assistants, we urge legislators to include equally significant raises in their final bill for these key education professionals.

Recommendation 2

Listen to teachers when it comes to improving teacher compensation and benefits.

When asked to share any final messages for legislators regarding their compensation, the vast majority of our respondents wanted policymakers to listen to their challenges and concerns. The teachers' responses generally fall into three distinct areas. First, teachers want lawmakers to recognize the many roles, duties, and responsibilities they take on during and after the standard school day. The workload of most teachers has increased significantly since the start of the pandemic. Mississippi teachers will continue to go above and beyond for their students, and all they ask in return is to be fairly compensated. Second, teachers want lawmakers to seek the input of educators more consistently. This includes both visiting schools across the state, and inviting teachers to give testimony before legislators. Last, teachers want lawmakers to recognize the urgent need to deliver on significant pay raises this year. The longer we wait, the more teachers our state will lose to other states and other professions.²¹

“For every decision policymakers make, the people who are doing the job (teachers, paraprofessionals, principals) should be consulted. Some people have no idea what we do every day and as the decisions they make directly affect us, we should have a say.”

—Teacher, Southwest Mississippi

Recommendation 3

Commit to addressing long-term educational challenges with bold policy solutions.

After passing a \$1,000 pay raise during the 2021 legislative session, legislative leaders indicated that more work would be done to address teacher compensation in the following year. The legislators then conducted hearings and town hall meetings where they listened to teachers, policy advocates, and the public. The work yielded substantial compensation proposals that are currently moving through the legislative process. Teachers in our survey are urging legislators to apply the same commitment and process to addressing other issues that impact the teaching profession and student outcomes. Legislators have an opportunity next year to consider the adverse impact insurance premiums and deductibles have on the health and finances of Mississippi teachers and their families. In the coming years, legislators will have numerous opportunities to ensure that our teachers and our schools have what they need in order to advance equity, opportunity, and success for every Mississippi student.

CONCLUSION

The findings of our survey make it clear that low teacher pay is a significant hindrance to the recruitment and retention of Mississippi teachers. Many teachers cannot afford to remain in the classroom and either leave the profession or leave Mississippi for states with more competitive pay. During the 2022 session, legislators from the Mississippi House and the Senate are expected to reach an agreement on the details of the final teacher pay raise bill, including its size and scope. We strongly urge legislators to reach an agreement with teacher priorities in mind and to deliver a significant pay raise this year. We also urge lawmakers to address the high insurance premiums for Mississippi's teachers and their families. Every student in Mississippi deserves to be taught by an excellent, highly effective teacher. Raising teacher pay doesn't just support educators—teacher pay raises support our students and our communities in the Magnolia State.

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ENDNOTES

1. James, J. (2021). *Teacher shortage: Mississippi lacks 3,000 certified teachers*. Mississippi Today. Retrieved from: <https://mississippitoday.org/2021/12/20/mississippi-teacher-shortage-3000-teacher-vacancies/?s=09>
2. Ballard, T. & Canter, R. (2022). *Voices of the Shortage: 2022 Mississippi Teacher Survey*. Mississippi First. Retrieved from: <https://www.mississippifirst.org/our-work/educator-pipeline-publications/voices-of-the-shortage/>
3. Senate Bill 2444. Mississippi (2022). Retrieved from: <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2022/pdf/history/SB/SB2444.xml>
4. House Bill 530. Mississippi (2022). Retrieved from: <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2022/pdf/history/HB/HB0530.xml>
5. Question: The following is a list of teacher compensation proposals currently being discussed by our legislators. Which of the following proposed teacher incentives do you find most appealing? To indicate your interest or support, we invite you to please select up to THREE options. Responses were grouped into the following categories: "Provide a \$3,000 pay raise for all Mississippi public school teachers. A pay raise would likely include incremental increases over 2-3 years." "Make the annual salary increases (currently \$495/yr) available for teachers with 1-2 years of experience. Currently, annual salary increases are only available after the third year of teaching." "Include a significant salary increase every 5 years. Instead of only one "salary bump" after 25 years, teachers would receive a bump after 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and so on." "Lower insurance premiums by investing more state funds into the state health insurance plan. This would help reduce the cost of premiums for family insurance plans." "Give teachers the option to contribute to a 401(K) retirement plan. Teachers could choose between a 401(k) or the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS)."
6. Survey respondents included 1,987 teachers across 135 Mississippi public and charter school districts. Of these respondents, 9 percent had less than 4 years of teaching experience, 25 percent had between 4-9 years of teaching experience, 23 percent had between 10-15 years of teaching experience, and 44 percent had 15 or more years of teaching experience (percentages rounded to the nearest whole number). 367 respondents identified as a person of color.
7. Question: The following is a list of teacher compensation proposals currently being discussed by our legislators. Which of the following proposed teacher incentives do you find most appealing? To indicate your interest or support, we invite you to please select up to THREE options. Responses were grouped into the following categories: "Provide a \$3,000 pay raise for all Mississippi public school teachers. A pay raise would likely include incremental increases over 2-3 years." "Make the annual salary increases (currently \$495/yr) available for teachers with 1-2 years of experience. Currently, annual salary increases are only available after the third year of teaching." "Include a significant salary increase every 5 years. Instead of only one "salary bump" after 25 years, teachers would receive a bump after 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and so on." "Lower insurance premiums by investing more state funds into the state health insurance plan. This would help reduce the cost of premiums for family insurance plans." "Give teachers the option to contribute to a 401(K) retirement plan. Teachers could choose between a 401(k) or the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS)."

8. Of the 1,978 teachers surveyed, 247 respondents (12.44%) had less than five years of teaching experience and 367 respondents (18.79%) identified as persons of color.
9. Question 12: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top teacher compensation proposals.
10. Question 13: Is there anything else you would like educational leaders and policymakers to know as they consider increasing teacher compensation?
11. Question 12: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top teacher compensation proposals.
12. Question: The following is a list of teacher compensation proposals currently being discussed by our legislators. Which of the following proposed teacher incentives do you find most appealing? To indicate your interest or support, we invite you to please select up to THREE options. Responses were grouped into the following categories: "Provide a \$3,000 pay raise for all Mississippi public school teachers. A pay raise would likely include incremental increases over 2-3 years." "Make the annual salary increases (currently \$495/yr) available for teachers with 1-2 years of experience. Currently, annual salary increases are only available after the third year of teaching." "Include a significant salary increase every 5 years. Instead of only one "salary bump" after 25 years, teachers would receive a bump after 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and so on." "Lower insurance premiums by investing more state funds into the state health insurance plan. This would help reduce the cost of premiums for family insurance plans." "Give teachers the option to contribute to a 401(K) retirement plan. Teachers could choose between a 401(k) or the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS)."; Of the 1,978 teachers surveyed, 247 respondents (12.44%) had less than five years of teaching experience and 367 respondents (18.79%) identified as a person of color.
13. In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top teacher compensation proposals.
14. Question: The following is a list of teacher compensation proposals currently being discussed by our legislators. Which of the following proposed teacher incentives do you find most appealing? To indicate your interest or support, we invite you to please select up to THREE options. Responses were grouped into the following categories: "Provide a \$3,000 pay raise for all Mississippi public school teachers. A pay raise would likely include incremental increases over 2-3 years." "Make the annual salary increases (currently \$495/yr) available for teachers with 1-2 years of experience. Currently, annual salary increases are only available after the third year of teaching." "Include a significant salary increase every 5 years. Instead of only one "salary bump" after 25 years, teachers would receive a bump after 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and so on." "Lower insurance premiums by investing more state funds into the state health insurance plan. This would help reduce the cost of premiums for family insurance plans." "Give teachers the option to contribute to a 401(K) retirement plan. Teachers could choose between a 401(k) or the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS)."
15. Question: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top teacher compensation proposals. (open response question)

16. Question 13: Is there anything else you would like educational leaders and policymakers to know as they consider increasing teacher compensation? (open response question)
17. National Education Association. (2021). *Teacher Pay and Student Spending: How Does Your State Rank?* Retrieved from: <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/teacher-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank>
18. Question 13: Is there anything else you would like educational leaders and policymakers to know as they consider increasing teacher compensation? (open response question)
19. Southern Regional Education Board. (2021). *Addressing Mississippi's Teacher Shortage: A Collective Action Plan - Mississippi Governor's Education Human Capital Task Force: Final Recommendation Report*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sreb.org/publication/addressing-mississippi-teacher-shortage-collaborative-action-plan>
20. Question: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top teacher compensation proposals. (open response question)
21. Question 13: Is there anything else you would like educational leaders and policymakers to know as they consider increasing teacher compensation? (open response question)



ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all.

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