TEACH PLUS

TEACHING TOWARDS TOMORROW

Building the Systems for Career-Connected Teaching and Learning

Introduction

Texas has made significant investments in college, career, and military readiness (CCMR) to ensure that more students graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary success, long-term economic mobility, and meaningful participation in the workforce–a workforce that sustains the eighth-largest economy in the world.[1] To support this demand, the state has created multiple policy levers to connect high school learning to postsecondary credentials, degrees, and high-wage career pathways.

In 2019, the Texas State Legislature created CCMR outcomes bonus funding as part of HB 3, which provides annual bonus funding to school districts for graduates who demonstrate college, career, or military readiness above the state-set threshold percentages. Combined with targeted CTE programs, industry-based certifications, dual credit, and P-TECH programs, these investments prepare Texas students with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to pursue their chosen postsecondary pathways. The passage of HB 8 in 2025, directs the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to update the CCMR accountability framework as part of the next refresh, tying it to postsecondary and workforce outcomes. HB 2 also requires the TEA to establish a statewide career readiness goal, and districts must now include annual goals for each CCMR indicator in the Student Achievement domain, rather than just a general growth goal. Additionally, HB 2 revises Career and Technical Education requirements so CTE programs are expected to lead to an industry-recognized license, credential, certificate, or postsecondary degree.

While these policies have created important pathways for students, their success depends on what happens inside schools and classrooms every day. A strong CCMR system is not built through accountability measures, program offerings, or credentials alone; it requires educators who are equipped to help students understand their options, connect academic content to real-world opportunities, and navigate the steps between classroom learning and postsecondary success. For the purposes of this report, career-connected teaching and learning refers to an approach that intentionally links academic content to real-world careers and workforce applications, while equipping teachers with the knowledge, experiences, and tools to help students explore pathways, build relevant skills, and see a clear connection between what they learn in the classroom and their future opportunities. At Teach Plus Texas, we do not view this approach as an add-on to instruction; rather, it is a strategy for making learning more rigorous, joyful, authentic, and relevant to students' long-term goals.

We are a group of educators and Teach Plus Policy Fellows who teach across grade levels and subject areas around the state. We believe that teachers like us are central to making that CCMR vision real. Texas' ability to meet its goals for students and the workforce depends on whether teachers have the preparation, resources, and professional conditions necessary to bring these policy investments to life. When teachers are well-prepared, supported, and part of a strong system of career-connected teaching and learning, they can serve as engines of academic success, postsecondary readiness, and long-term prosperity for students.

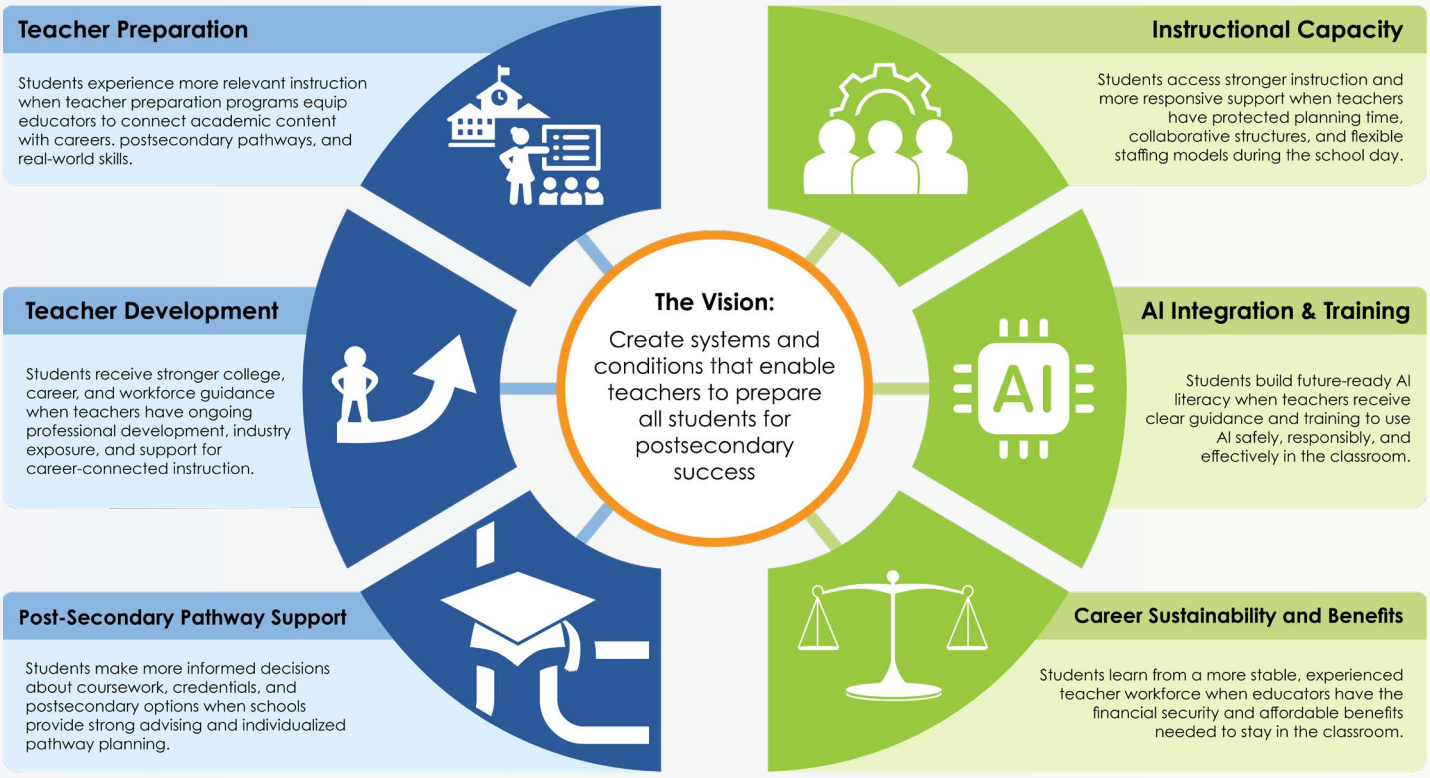
To understand the current state of the systems and conditions that support career-connected teaching and learning, we facilitated focus groups with educators from across the state and conducted a statewide survey. Based on insights shared by over 600 Texas educators, we offer Texas policymakers a practical path to ensure that every student has access to classrooms led by well-supported teachers who can connect learning today to opportunity tomorrow.

Career-connected teaching and learning intentionally links academic content to real-world careers and workforce applications, while equipping teachers with the knowledge, experiences, and tools to help students explore pathways, build relevant skills, and see a clear connection between what they learn in the classroom and their future opportunities.

All Texas students could experience cohesive career-connected teaching and learning and achieve postsecondary success if we create...

Systems that Position Teachers for Career-Connected Teaching and Learning

Conditions that Sustain Career-Connected Teaching and Learning



Executive Summary

We heard…	Policymakers should…
Teacher prep programs are not equipping educators to guide students toward college, career, and military pathways.	Align teacher preparation with the state's college, career, and military readiness initiatives by making career-connected instruction a core competency in educator prep programs.
Teachers want clearer guidance and stronger support for helping students navigate paths to college, careers, and the military.	Equip teachers to guide students through workforce pathways by opening up CTE allotment funds for industry externships and leadership development.
Career-connected teaching and learning opportunities are uneven, poorly coordinated, and out of step with real workforce needs.	Expand access to dual credit, industry credentials, and strong advising, with coaching to support effective implementation.
Growing workloads and competing demands are preventing teachers from prioritizing instruction, strengthening professional growth, and sustaining practices that help students succeed.	Give teachers more protected planning time and let districts build flexible staffing models that fit local needs.
Teachers are left to figure out AI on their own because of unclear expectations and limited training.	Set statewide AI guardrails for classrooms by developing a model AI-use policy framework for K–12 schools.
Pay and healthcare aren't keeping pace with the cost of living, straining teachers' long-term career outlook.	Make healthcare affordable for teachers by lowering out-of-pocket costs and increasing the state's investment in employee coverage.

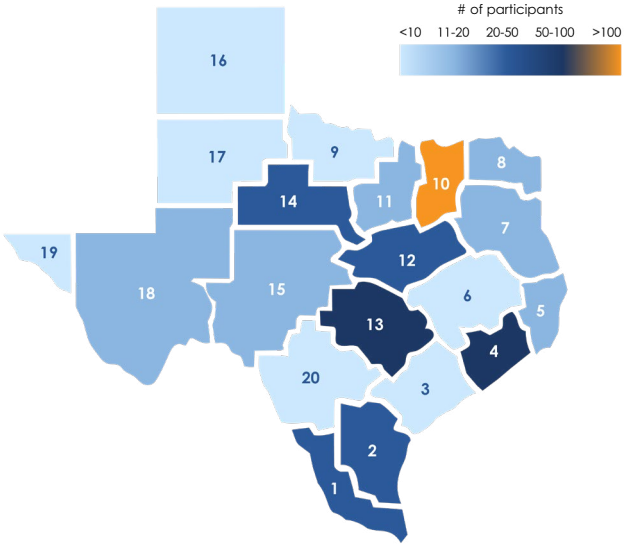
Methodology

To inform our strategy and advocacy, we sought to understand the perspectives of current Texas educators, centered around the following overarching research question:

How can Texas create the systems and conditions that enable teachers to prepare all students to earn a postsecondary credential or degree within six years of graduation?

Specifically, Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows and Teach Plus Texas Houston Policy Fellows sought to learn about teacher perspectives across six areas: teacher preparation reform, teacher development, support for postsecondary pathways, restructured teacher roles, AI integration and training, and career sustainability.

We conducted focus groups and a survey, and heard from 608 educators representing all 20 Education Service Centers (ESC) across the state. Of the total participants, 92 percent were classroom teachers, with representation across grades EC-12 and diverse subjects. See Appendix for further information.



Texas Policy Fellows and Houston Policy Fellows recruited and facilitated focus groups with teachers in their regions and shared the survey with other teachers who could not attend. Focus groups, held between December 2025 and January 2026, ranged in size from five to eight participants and were conducted in line with the principles of trust and open dialogue. Data was systematically coded, analyzed, and synthesized into key themes through a collaborative process between the Teach Plus research team, Teach Plus Texas staff, and the Fellows.

Part I:

Systems that Position Teachers for Career-Connected Teaching and Learning

Part I of this report examines the systems that position teachers to deliver career-connected teaching and learning. The findings and recommendations in this section focus on how educator preparation, teacher leadership, and career-connected learning infrastructure shape teachers' ability to connect classroom instruction to students' postsecondary and workforce opportunities.

Finding: Teacher preparation programs are not equipping educators to guide students toward college, career, and military pathways.

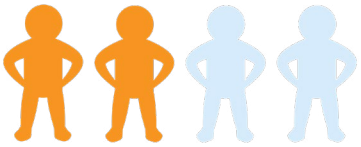
Educator preparation programs play a critical role in shaping how new teachers understand their responsibilities beyond delivering academic content. As Texas continues to emphasize college, career, and military readiness for students, teachers are increasingly expected to help students understand how classroom learning connects to future workforce opportunities. However, many teacher candidates are completing their preparation programs with limited exposure to career-connected instructional practices, workforce systems, or the range of postsecondary pathways available to students.

Inadequate Instructional Preparation

Teachers report needing more preparation in practical strategies that link classroom instruction to workforce applications. They emphasize that preparation programs are often more grounded in theory than in practice and note that a lack of career-connected curriculum in teacher prep programs prevents candidates from adopting a career-connected instructional philosophy.

"I felt my teacher prep program was strongly based in theory and rhetoric. It was only when I began to develop in my classroom experience that I realized that emphasizing to students real-world applications of their learning was paramount." **—high school technology teacher**

Half of surveyed teachers say



major changes are needed to better prepare teachers for career-connected instruction

Without intentional preparation in career-connected pedagogy, teacher candidates enter the classroom without the knowledge and instructional strategies needed to help students connect academic learning to real-world career pathways. As a result, students have fewer opportunities to develop the communication, collaboration, and transferable workplace skills necessary to successfully navigate postsecondary pathways and the workforce.

Limited Industry and Workforce Exposure

Teachers also described a need for stronger preparation in technical skills, industry knowledge, and community-based career opportunities needed to support career-connected learning aligned with workforce demands. Half of the teachers in our survey were not equipped by their preparation programs to build and utilize partnerships with employers, colleges, or community organizations to support career-connected learning. Teachers highlighted the need for exposure to career and technical education pathways, college readiness resources, and workplace skills.

"One change that would have better prepared me to help students connect classroom learning to real-world careers or postsecondary goals is having more hands-on training with career exploration tools and programs. We learned about teaching and lesson planning, but we didn't get as much practice showing students how what they learn in class actually connects to jobs, college programs, or technical careers." **—middle school math teacher**

Teacher preparation programs are not consistently equipping candidates with the technical knowledge, local workforce awareness, and exposure to external partnerships needed to support career-connected learning before they enter the profession. Many teachers also lack awareness of industry opportunities available to students and of how to integrate them into classroom instruction. These gaps limit teachers' ability to connect instruction to students' future careers and postsecondary opportunities.

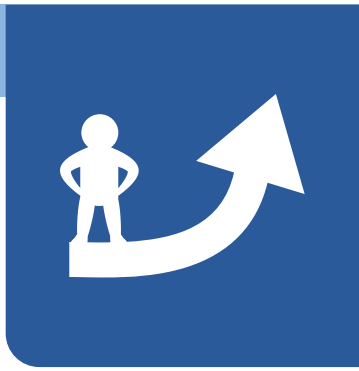
Recommendation: Align teacher preparation with the state's college, career, and military readiness initiatives by making career-connected instruction a core competency in educator prep programs.

The Texas Legislature should direct the State Board for Educator Certification to update educator preparation competencies to explicitly include career-connected instructional practices as a required competency for all teacher candidates. Lawmakers should also support grants that encourage partnerships among educator preparation programs, school districts, and regional workforce partners to provide teacher candidates with hands-on experience in career-connected learning.

Specifically, educator preparation programs should equip candidates to integrate industry-aligned project-based learning, career exploration, and real-world applications directly into core content areas. These programs should also help candidates understand how instructional practices can build workplace-ready communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. State guidance and funding should encourage preparation programs to connect candidates with industry partners, workforce professionals, and local businesses so they enter the profession prepared to make career-connected learning part of everyday instruction.

Embedding career-connected instructional practices into educator preparation program competencies would ensure that all new teachers enter the profession with a foundational understanding of career pathways, workforce relevance, and the instructional strategies needed to connect academic content to students' future opportunities.

Teacher Development



Finding: Teachers want clearer guidance and stronger support for helping students navigate paths to college, careers, and the military.

As schools increasingly prioritize preparing students for postsecondary pathways and economic mobility, educators must also develop the knowledge, practical skills, and leadership competencies necessary to embed career-connected learning within everyday instruction. However, surveyed teachers reported that their schools and districts have traditionally limited professional development to improve teachers' content knowledge and enhance their instructional skills. Consequently, many educators experience a disconnect between the professional learning available to them and the roles they need to fulfill to prepare students for the future.

Misaligned Professional Learning

Only 40 percent of surveyed teachers reported that their district offers structured professional development opportunities to help them build skills as career-connected educators, and only 29 percent said they have received adequate support from their school or district to implement career-connected teaching and learning. Teachers reported that professional development is often generic, repetitive, or impractical, and that districts often fail to provide sufficient support where career-connected university and workshop opportunities exist.

*"In my 17 years (of teaching) there was only one mention of college and career readiness standards, in any training. It would be helpful if we had training specifically designed to support us in this and if we had access to local resources that we could use."***—middle school ELA teacher**

When professional development is misaligned with teachers' career-connected teaching needs, schools miss opportunities to cultivate classroom-based teacher leadership that supports career-connected learning for students.

Limited Support for Early Career Exploration

To help students access opportunities, teachers must be equipped to embed career awareness into their classrooms early and consistently. However, many schools lack the intentional structures, resources, or training to help teachers facilitate students' connections to career pathways. Teachers lack sufficient opportunities to learn about current workforce environments, trends, and regional labor markets to connect classroom experiences to real-world opportunities. Without regular exposure to workforce trends, teachers may struggle to make academic content feel relevant to students' future goals or to highlight the full range of high-wage, high-demand career pathways available in their region. This limits career-connected instruction to isolated activities rather than making it a consistent part of how students understand the purpose and value of what they are learning.

Forty-five percent of surveyed teachers indicated that students often lack early opportunities to explore careers or understand how academic content connects to the workforce. Yet, students are expected to make decisions about their future careers without consistent exposure to career pathways or meaningful opportunities to connect their education to real-world professions. When exploration is available, teachers reported that it is often introduced too late in students' academic journeys, limiting students' ability to understand the wide range of postsecondary pathways available to them.

*"Partnerships strengthen community connections and ensure that classroom instruction reflects current industry practices and technologies."***—middle school theater teacher**

Many students still experience inconsistent access to career exploration opportunities before high school. Without intentional development of teachers as stewards of students' futures, there will be an increasing mismatch between the educational system and the workforce needs of Texas communities.

Recommendation: Equip teachers to guide students through workforce pathways by opening up career technical education (CTE) allotment funds for industry externships and leadership development.

To build a sustainable career readiness ecosystem, the state must invest in teachers not only as classroom instructors but also as cross-sector navigators who help students understand how their education connects to future workforce pathways.

Texas should ensure that the CTE allotment funds support educator workforce externships and leadership development aligned with career-connected instruction. Amending code to permit a percentage of CTE allotment funds to support educator workforce externships, a short-term, hands-on learning experience in a workplace or industry setting, so teachers better understand real-world career demands and regional labor market needs that can be brought back to the classroom, would allow districts to intentionally invest in teacher capacity-building that directly supports CCMR outcomes. The state should further strengthen this effort by directing CTE funds to support educator externships and workforce literacy training developed in coordination with the Texas Workforce Commission, which supports access to job training and workforce services.

Importantly, these opportunities should include educators across all grade levels. Teachers emphasized that the Texas Education Code provides funding for CTE programs in grades 7–12, leaving elementary students excluded from early exposure to career pathways and workforce knowledge. Providing elementary and early middle school students with such exposure is essential in helping them develop a broad understanding of future opportunities before they select a high school pathway.

"Having earlier exposure to colleges and careers that are prominent in this area could show the students what they could do after high school. Also, having professionals come and speak to middle school students about careers in the area could help them make decisions about the future earlier." **—middle school math and special education teacher**

These changes would better equip teachers across all grade levels to help students navigate diverse college, career, and workforce pathways. Ultimately, these investments will help ensure that more Texas students graduate prepared to pursue credentials, degrees, or career opportunities aligned with their long-term economic mobility and workforce prosperity.

Post-Secondary Pathways Support

Finding: Career-connected teaching and learning opportunities are uneven, poorly coordinated, and out of step with real workforce needs.

Texas has made significant progress in establishing strong policy frameworks to support college, career, and military readiness. Yet, the implementation and support provided to students remain uneven. Across the state, students experience wide variation in their learning experiences that directly impact their preparation for postsecondary pathways.

Dual Credit Access and Credentialing Barriers

Providing students with earlier and greater access to dual credit opportunities builds college readiness, reduces the cost of postsecondary education, and accelerates progress toward a credential or degree. However, our survey participants highlighted that access remains uneven due to structural barriers, including limited course availability, scheduling constraints, and insufficient partnerships with higher education institutions.

*"Reducing barriers such as transportation, costs, and scheduling flexibility, while aligning state accountability to reward credential and degree completion, would help more students persist and graduate with a meaningful postsecondary outcome."***—elementary school teacher**

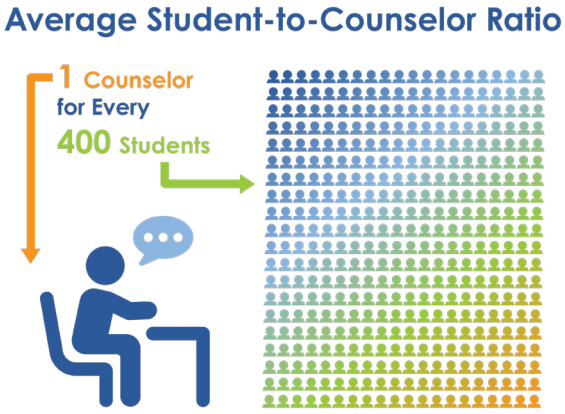
Additionally, faculty qualification requirements for dual credit courses often include graduate-level coursework, which presents financial, time, and logistical barriers for many educators. Consequently, districts that want to expand college and career pathways may lack the qualified instructors needed to offer these courses consistently across campuses.

*"Provide funding and structured opportunities for teachers to enroll in upper-level college coursework required to qualify for teaching dual credit. Removing financial and logistical barriers will expand access to dual credit offerings and strengthen college readiness for students."***—middle school theater teacher**

Without structured support and accessible pathways for teachers to earn the necessary credentials, districts may struggle to expand dual credit and early-college opportunities even when there is strong student demand. If teacher credentialing barriers remain unaddressed, access to dual credit and advanced coursework will remain uneven across districts, particularly in smaller or rural systems.

Inconsistent Advising and Partnerships

Only 47 percent of surveyed teachers noted that their district employs or designates college and career advisors who strengthen advising beyond traditional high school counseling. Teachers we spoke with reported that many high school counselors serve 400 to 500 students, which limits counselors' capacity to provide individualized pathway guidance. Strengthening advising capacity in schools will ensure students receive consistent, individualized guidance on college and career pathways, while also giving counselors and designated advisors the time and capacity to coordinate with higher education, workforce, and industry partners to expand career-connected learning opportunities for students.



*"Districts and the state should strengthen partnerships with colleges, employers, and community organizations to create clearer and more accessible college and career pathways for students. Expanding access to dual credit, certifications, paid internships, and career advising would help students see a direct connection between school and future opportunities."***—elementary school teacher**

Without a stronger advising infrastructure, students are likely to receive limited guidance when selecting coursework and pathway opportunities that align with their long-term goals. Limited partnerships with higher education institutions and industry partners can restrict districts' ability to offer work-based learning experiences, internships, and industry certifications, undermining Texas students' equitable access to the experiences and guidance necessary to prepare for college, careers, or military service.

Recommendation: Expand access to dual credit, industry credentials, and strong advising, with coaching to support effective implementation.

To meet the growing demand for college and career readiness, districts and the state must invest not only in expanding student access but also in developing the educator and advisor capacity required to sustain high-quality programming.

*"Removing financial and logistical barriers will expand access to dual credit offerings and strengthen college readiness for students."***—middle school theater teacher**

Texas should establish a statewide CCMR pathway implementation initiative to help districts build and sustain coherent college and career pathway systems. A middle school theater teacher told us the initiative should include targeted funding and scholarships to *"expand pathways for dual credit and early college awareness and provide funding and structured opportunities for teachers to enroll in upper-level college coursework required to qualify for teaching dual credit."* Additionally, the initiative would include implementation coaching through Education Service Centers to help district leaders design sustainable CCMR systems and expand access to college and career advisors to support student pathway planning.

*"The state should fund more counselors and pathway advisors so students get real guidance, help matching interests to pathways, support with applications, and a clear six-year plan."***—elementary special education teacher**

Implementing such an initiative would strengthen districts' capacity to deliver coherent and accessible college and career pathways for students. Expanding support for teacher credentialing and district implementation infrastructure will better position schools to offer a wider range of dual credit courses and career-pathway opportunities. With improved advising and more structured pathway systems, students can select coursework that aligns with their interests and long-term goals. Over time, this initiative would allow districts to build coherent pathway systems that guide students from early career exploration through advanced coursework and credential attainment, strengthening postsecondary readiness and long-term economic mobility for Texas students.

Part II:
Conditions that Sustain Career-Connected Teaching and Learning

Part II of this report examines the conditions that sustain teachers' ability to deliver career-connected teaching and learning over time. The findings and recommendations in this section focus on how protected planning time, artificial intelligence guidance, and healthcare affordability keep teachers in the profession and enable them to deliver high-quality instruction that connects classroom instruction to students' postsecondary and workforce success.

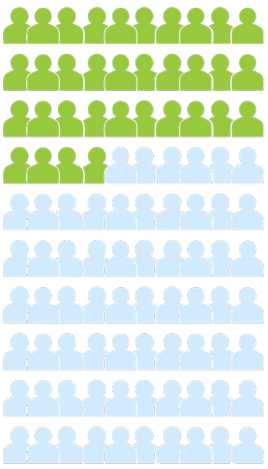
Instructional Capacity

Finding: Growing workloads and competing demands are preventing teachers from prioritizing instruction, strengthening professional growth, and sustaining practices that help students succeed.

Texas' education system often relies on teachers to complete substantial work outside contracted hours. Planning periods intended for lesson design, student data analysis, and instructional collaboration are often fragmented by non-instructional responsibilities, including Admission Review and Dismissal meetings, campus meetings, and other administrative duties. Teachers consistently report that a lack of protected planning time during the instructional day is a major barrier to delivering consistent, high-quality instruction. At the same time, traditional staffing models often fail to account for the increasing complexity of student needs and compliance demands placed on teachers. Together, insufficient planning time and unsustainable staffing structures limit teachers' ability to focus on instruction, collaborate with colleagues, and sustain the work required to support students.

Insufficient Planning Time

Although Texas teachers are legally entitled to at least 450 minutes of planning and preparation time every two weeks, nearly 80 percent of surveyed teachers do not experience this in practice and are unable to complete their current workload within contracted hours. Furthermore, 63 percent of surveyed teachers do not have enough time to collaborate, plan, and prepare effective instruction within their school's structure and schedule, leaving many feeling overwhelmed by non-instructional duties that detract from high-quality student engagement.



Only 34% of teachers surveyed agree

their school's structure and schedule provide enough time for planning, collaborating, and preparing effective instruction.

*"All staff members on my campus seem like they are juggling too many responsibilities, which makes interactions like observations more checklist tasks than authentic opportunities for collaboration and feedback."***—high school ELA teacher**

When teachers are limited to unprotected, fragmented planning periods, they do not have time to create, prepare, and differentiate instructional materials, and as a result, student outcomes may suffer. When planning time is insufficient, interrupted, or reduced, teachers are forced to complete essential instructional preparation outside of the workday, contributing to increased workload and reduced sustainability in the profession.

Unsustainable Staffing Structures

Current public education staffing models often leave teachers feeling isolated, as traditional "one teacher, one classroom" structures fail to account for the increasing complexity of student needs and administrative burdens. Forty-two percent of surveyed teachers reported that staffing roles and responsibilities in their schools are not structured to support effective teaching and learning nor maximize teachers' experience and expertise. Additionally, two-thirds stated that additional staff would enable them to enhance their instruction and better serve their students.

Together, these findings suggest that current staffing structures are not aligned with the instructional and operational demands placed on today's educators. When staffing structures remain unaddressed, the system places additional operational and compliance demands on teachers, limiting their ability to apply their instructional expertise in ways that most directly impact student outcomes.

Recommendation: Give teachers more protected planning time and let districts build flexible staffing models that fit local needs.

To improve teacher capacity and instruction, the Texas Legislature should modernize instructional support structures by increasing protected planning time and enabling flexible, locally driven staffing models. This approach would give teachers more reliable time for planning, collaboration, data analysis, and career-connected teaching and learning while allowing districts to redesign staffing roles to meet student needs.

First, the Legislature should amend Texas Education Code §21.404 to increase the required minimum planning time from 450 minutes to 600 minutes every two weeks. This statute has remained unchanged since 1995 and no longer reflects the expanded responsibilities placed on today's educators, including data analysis, differentiated instruction, and integration of career-connected learning. Increasing protected planning time would allow teachers to complete essential instructional responsibilities within contracted hours, leading to higher-quality lesson design, stronger instructional delivery, and improved student outcomes.

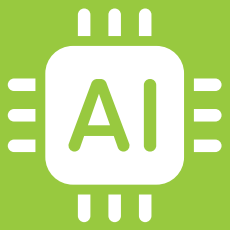
*"Schools could better support teachers by protecting instructional time and reducing the amount of non-instructional tasks that pull us away from students."***—middle school math and special education teacher**

Second, the Legislature should establish a grant program, administered by the Texas Education Agency, to implement strategic staffing beyond teacher residencies and provide districts with flexible funding to redesign staffing models to best meet local needs. Strategic staffing refers to intentionally organizing educators and support personnel so that instructional responsibilities, expertise, and leadership are distributed across a team rather than concentrated in a single classroom teacher. A strategic staffing innovation grant program should support teacher time protection, collaboration models, and role

redesign at scale, while allowing districts the flexibility to implement varied approaches such as team-based staffing, expanded teacher leadership roles, and workload redistribution with, an instructional coach in our survey told us, *"instructional support teams [instructional coaches, data specialists, interventionists] to share responsibility for analysis, documentation, and student support planning."*

Increasing protected planning time and expanding strategic staffing flexibility would leverage educator expertise and allow teachers to focus more consistently on instruction, collaboration, and student support during the workday. Over time, these changes could improve teacher sustainability, reduce workload-related strain, and strengthen school systems' ability to support both teachers and students effectively.

AI Integration and Training



Finding: Teachers are left to figure out artificial intelligence (AI) on their own because of unclear expectations and limited training.

AI is an emerging instructional shift nationally and in Texas. From lesson planning and differentiation to assessment feedback, AI has the potential to improve instructional effectiveness and reduce teachers' workload. But guidance and training remain fragmented, resulting in inconsistent instructional experiences for teachers and students. At the same time, AI is rapidly changing the skills employers seek across industries, making it a critical competency for students to develop, use, evaluate, and collaborate with in authentic learning environments and workplace contexts. Expanding educator training and guidance on AI can have a dual purpose: improving instructional quality and advancing career-connected teaching and learning through AI literacy.

*"Currently, student-facing language around AI is almost entirely about academic dishonesty/plagiarism. Explicit instructions around how to engage AI as a tool for thought rather than a replacement for thought are necessary."***—high school ELA teacher**

Unclear AI Guidance

As of March 2025, 28 states had AI guidance for schools.[2] However, Texas has yet to develop these. Considering that only one-third of surveyed teachers could identify which AI tools best align with their instructional goals, this system of unguided implementation fails to connect classroom problems to 21st-century solutions. Although half of surveyed teachers reported using AI for differentiation, only 29 percent are adjusting instruction based on student learning gaps. This suggests that many teachers are using AI to create or adapt materials without fully leveraging student data to target support. With proper training, support, and guidance, AI can help teachers personalize instruction, differentiate materials, identify learning gaps, and provide targeted interventions to improve student outcomes.

"I am beginning to use AI tools to support student learning by helping with lesson planning, differentiating materials, generating practice activities, and providing feedback that allows me to respond to student needs more efficiently. These tools help save time and create more personalized learning experiences, but they are used thoughtfully and with an emphasis on maintaining academic integrity and student

engagement. Clear guidance on appropriate classroom use, expectations for student-facing AI tools, and professional development on best practices would help teachers feel more confident and consistent in using AI effectively and responsibly."—**elementary school teacher**

The absence of statewide guardrails means that whether a student in Texas benefits from AI-enhanced instruction is determined entirely by district budgets and individual teacher initiative, rather than by any consistent state commitment to access and implementation. When teachers across the state independently navigate plagiarism, ethical use, and student data privacy without consistent standards, students receive different expectations and protections depending on their campus. Without state-level guidance, student experiences will remain inconsistent and inequitable.

Uneven AI Training

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers we surveyed have access to AI-based educational tools and platforms, but do not receive sufficient training in using those tools. One high school CTE teacher wrote, *"currently, my use of AI tools to support student learning… remains limited by infrastructure, access, and training,"* suggesting that teachers may not realize how they could leverage AI to improve student outcomes. Teachers like this middle and high school Spanish teacher repeatedly expressed the need for *"clear policies, training, and district-supported tools [so] AI can be leveraged as a powerful resource to enhance instruction, personalize learning, and support student growth while maintaining academic integrity."*

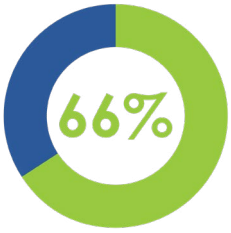
"There is no formal professional development or policy direction on AI use, leaving educators to independently adopt tools such as ChatGPT to bridge critical gaps in communication, accessibility, and instructional differentiation. This approach is unsustainable and inequitable."—**middle school theater teacher**

If AI integration by teachers and students is not clearly and promptly addressed, students' AI exposure and literacy will be directly linked to teachers' familiarity with the technology, and the resulting gaps will continue to affect both instructional quality and student success.

Recommendation: Set statewide AI guardrails for classrooms by developing a model AI-use policy framework for K–12 schools.

The Texas Legislature should direct the Texas Education Agency to develop and disseminate a comprehensive statewide model AI-use policy framework for K–12 districts to ensure that AI literacy does not depend on district policy variability.

"Clear policies on privacy, equitable access, professional development, and curriculum alignment would help teachers use AI more effectively while ensuring student safety and learning quality."—**middle school science teacher**



of surveyed teachers say major changes are needed

Teachers feel major changes to school or district policy are needed to help teachers effectively use AI to support student learning.

- Clear guidelines
- Ongoing support
- Better outcomes for students

The framework should include the following:

- Acceptable use guidance for lesson planning and instructional preparation
- Parameters for AI-supported differentiation and accessibility
- Guidance on ethical AI use in assessment design and feedback
- Expectations for student AI literacy instruction
- Data privacy, procurement, and cybersecurity guardrails
- Considerations for selecting and approving AI tools and vendors

The framework should also include implementation supports, including:

- Sample district policy language
- Scenario-based exemplars of appropriate and inappropriate use
- Alignment with existing TEA, State Board for Educator Certification, and student data privacy laws and regulations
- Professional development guidance for district rollout
- Ongoing review and advisory structures
- Support for engaging families about how and when AI is used in schools

If such a framework were established, educators would benefit from defined guardrails that protect academic integrity and student data while still allowing innovation. With clear policy parameters, teachers can confidently use AI as a planning and differentiation tool, freeing time for high-impact instructional practices such as feedback, small-group support, and relationship-building.

To meet the state's economic mobility and workforce development goals, Texas must shift from fragmented local experimentation to coherent statewide guidance that helps districts use AI responsibly, ethically, and effectively to support student learning. A statewide model AI-use policy framework would provide educators with clearer guardrails, promote consistent implementation across districts, and ensure that AI strengthens instruction rather than deepens uneven access.

Career Sustainability and Benefits

Finding: Pay and healthcare aren't keeping pace with the cost of living, straining teachers' long-term career outlook.

Unsustainable Cost Pressures

More than half of surveyed teachers shared that salary schedules and supplemental incentives offered by districts do not sufficiently support long-term financial stability. The rising cost of living, increasing health insurance premiums, and out-of-pocket medical expenses are making it more difficult for teachers to remain in the classroom. As healthcare costs continue to rise faster than wages, a larger share of educators' base salaries is absorbed by insurance expenses, reducing the real value of their compensation and creating a direct threat to teacher sustainability.

"My districts' healthcare benefits in particular are more expensive then just looking for ACA benefits on the open marketplace. Especially when you are looking for covering your family, it is absolutely unavoidable. Healthcare needs to be fixed in either having it subsidized more by the state or fixed entirely as a industry through state or even country-wide legislation to make it affordable to working Americans." **—middle school math teacher**

Underinvestment in healthcare affordability is making it harder for working families to sustain teaching careers. Many educators are leaving not because they are less committed to students, but because the financial realities of the job are harder to manage. If these pressures continue, teacher retention may decline, especially among experienced educators who support instructional quality, mentorship, and campus stability. Over time, schools in high-need regions may face deeper workforce shortages and lose the leadership needed for long-term student success.

Recommendation: Make healthcare affordable for teachers by lowering out-of-pocket costs and increasing the state's investment in employee coverage.

Because 90 percent of Texas school districts participate in the Teacher Retirement System (TRS)-ActiveCare, the affordability and structure of this system play a central role in determining the real value of teacher compensation statewide.

Texas should strengthen the affordability and structure of TRS-ActiveCare by restructuring plan tiers and increasing the state's contribution toward educator health coverage. Increasing the state's contribution to TRS-ActiveCare would help stabilize coverage costs and reduce the financial burden on educators. At the same time, restructuring the current tiered plan options could create more standardized and predictable coverage levels, helping teachers better anticipate healthcare expenses and avoid high out-of-pocket costs for routine medical care. Simplifying the tier structure and lowering deductibles would make coverage more manageable for educators while ensuring that health insurance functions as a meaningful employment benefit rather than a growing financial liability.

"Beyond salary, Texas districts and the state should prioritize incentives and benefits that improve teacher retention, sustainability, and career growth. Key priorities include: Improved health care and retirement benefits, with attention to rising TRS-ActiveCare costs and long-term financial stability through TRS." **—middle and high school Spanish teacher**

Implementing these updates would result in a meaningful increase in teachers' effective take-home pay without relying solely on local district salary increases. By reducing the cost burden of health insurance premiums and out-of-pocket expenses, the state can ensure that compensation improvements translate into real financial stability for teachers rather than being offset by rising healthcare costs. Reducing healthcare-related financial strain would also strengthen teacher retention across Texas. Over time, these improvements will contribute to a more stable and professionalized educator workforce, one in which teaching remains a financially viable career for working families.

Conclusion

Our recommendations aim to strengthen teaching sustainability and advance Texas' long-term readiness goals, driven by the current classroom realities of teachers across grade levels, subjects, and districts.

These recommendations address the larger systems that shape teachers' capacity to deliver career-connected teaching and learning and sustain long-term classroom careers. Texas has already invested heavily in readiness initiatives to help all students succeed after high school. Acting on these recommendations would ensure that the teachers responsible for connecting classroom learning to postsecondary and workforce opportunities have everything they need to prepare Texas students for a healthy, productive life.

Authors

Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows:

Valton Acree
Klara Aizupitis
Sergio Arjon
Courtney Banks
Kayla Brinkley
Rebekka Carter
Elizabeth Ciccarelli-Rosa
Reagan Curran
Andrea Davis
Imelda De La Rosa
Kritanjali Dhungana
Tevin Dieckhaus-King
Nyla Duperval
JP Fugler
Karla Guevara
Lucero Gutierrez
Janet Harrison
D'Ann Hatler
Cynthia Hopkins
Francesca Houck
Obinna Ibeh
Jasmine Jones
Christian Jovel-Arias
Hannah Landry
Kalua Lauber
Erick Longoria
Kimberly Matchniff
Robert McCraw
Franchesca Mejia
April Ollila
Keke Powell
Reynaurora Resendez
Cartier Robinson
Katrina Sacurom
Ana Sepulveda
Stephanie Smith
Crystal Stipes
Taniece Thompson-Smith
Calver Valdez
Lemuel Vasquez
Nichelle Wallace
Natasha Warchol
Mia Witt

Houston Policy Fellows:

Abdul Adaya
Mary Catherine Holcomb
Sierra Joseph
Kelly Knight
Dwayne Lacy
Ashanna Morgan
Aylyn Munoz
Ijeoma Okotie
Kevin Potter
Yujin Seo
Dylan Smith
Phyllis Tyler

Teach Plus Texas Staff

Antonio Sangueza Jr., Houston Policy Manager
Hjamil Martinez-Vazquez, Texas Policy Program Manager
Sofie Vastano, Texas Program Director and Education Leadership Coach
Natalie Brown, Texas Policy Director
Kevin Malonson, Texas Executive Director

Endnotes

1 Top Texas Touts: Economy, https://gov.texas.gov/top-texas-touts-economy

2 How States Are Responding to the Rise of AI in Education: https://www.ecs.org/artificial-intelligence-ai-education-task-forces/

Appendix

Survey and Focus Group Protocol Questions

Note: Focus group protocol only included open-response questions.

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your workload? (Options: Unsure, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
    a. My current workload can be completed within my contracted hours while still allowing me to effectively meet my students' needs.
    b. My school and district provide the resources and supports needed to help teachers deliver effective instruction and best serve students.
    c. My school's structure and schedule provide enough time for planning, collaborating, and preparing effective instruction.
    d. Staffing roles and responsibilities in my school are structured in a way that supports effective teaching and learning and maximizes the expertise of teachers and support professionals.
    e. My non-instructional responsibilities align with my role as a teacher and support my ability to effectively serve my students.
    f. My non-instructional responsibilities interfere with my ability to deliver effective instruction.
    g. Major changes to school structure or policy are needed to maximize teachers' ability to deliver effective instruction and serve students.
2. Of these supports, which are the top three priorities that would enable you to enhance your instruction and better serve your students?
    - ☐ Instructional materials with high-quality lessons and resources
    - ☐ AI resources and training
    - ☐ Structured time for planning and preparation
    - ☐ Structured time for collaboration
    - ☐ Increased staffing to help manage responsibilities
    - ☐ Fewer non-instructional responsibilities
    - ☐ Other, write in
3. What school structures, policy changes, or resources would create a better balance between non-instructional and instructional responsibilities so that you can more effectively serve students?
    a. Open response

4. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about AI? (Options: Unsure, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
    a. My school or district provides teachers with access to AI-based educational tools and platforms.
    b. I have received sufficient training or professional development on how to use AI tools in my instruction.
    c. I can identify which AI tools best align with my instructional goals and content area.
    d. I use AI tools to deliver differentiated, personalized learning experiences for my students.
    e. I use AI-generated insights to identify student learning gaps and adjust my instruction accordingly.
    f. AI tools help me save time on routine tasks such as grading, feedback, or lesson planning.
    g. My school or district provides students with access to AI-based educational tools and platforms.
    h. Students are using AI as an intentional part of the curriculum.
    i. Major changes to school or district policy are needed to help teachers effectively use AI to support student learning.
5. How are you currently using AI tools to support student learning, and what guidance or policies would help teachers use them more effectively?
    a. Open response
6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about compensation and incentives? (Options: Unsure, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
    a. The salary schedule and supplemental incentives (e.g., salary increases based on length of tenure, TIA, stipends, bonuses) offered by my district sufficiently support my long-term financial stability.
    b. My district is actively working to find solutions to increase teacher compensation (e.g., Teacher Incentive Allotment, stipends, bonuses).
    c. The benefits package provided by my district positively influences my decision to remain in the teaching profession.
    d. My district provides or facilitates access to non-salary incentives such as housing assistance, student loan support, or childcare benefits.
    e. Major changes to district or state compensation structures are needed to make teaching a more sustainable and upwardly mobile profession.
7. Beyond salary, what forms of incentives or benefits should districts and the state prioritize to make teaching a more sustainable and upwardly mobile profession?
    a. Open response
8. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about teacher preparation? (Options: Unsure, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
    a. My preparation program equipped me to connect academic content to real-world careers and postsecondary pathways.
    b. My program included sufficient hands-on experiences (e.g., clinical hours, projects, partnerships) that modeled career-connected instruction.

c. My preparation program equipped me to build and utilize partnerships with employers, colleges, or community organizations to support career-connected learning.

d. My preparation program prepared me to evaluate students' ability to apply what they learn in ways relevant to future careers or postsecondary goals.

e. Major changes are needed in my preparation program to better prepare teachers for career-connected instruction.

9. What changes or additions to your educator preparation program would have better equipped you to help students connect classroom learning to real-world careers or postsecondary goals?

a. Open response

10. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about school/district support? (Options: Unsure, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

a. Career-connected teaching is a clearly communicated district priority reflected in professional development and instructional expectations.

b. My district has clearly defined teacher competencies related to career-connected learning and workforce readiness.

c. Professional development in my district is clearly aligned with goals related to college, career, and workforce readiness.

d. My district offers clearly defined leadership pathways for teachers who lead or champion career-connected learning.

e. My district collaborates with external partners (e.g., higher education, workforce boards, local industry) to enhance professional development for career-connected teaching.

f. Major changes to district policy or structure are needed to support teachers' growth as career-connected educators.

11. How is your district currently supporting teachers to develop as career-connected educators, and what additional leadership training or competencies would strengthen these efforts?

a. Open response

12. My district offers the following college and career pathway programs or initiatives for students. (Mark all that apply)

- □ Dual Credit Coursework
- □ Advanced Coursework (AP, IB)
- □ Programs in Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- □ Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH)
- □ Other, write in
- □ My district does not have any programs or initiatives in place.

13. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about career-connected teaching and learning? (Options: Unsure, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

a. My district offers structured professional development opportunities that enable teachers to build skills as career-connected educators.

b. My district employs or designates college and career advisors who strengthen advising beyond traditional high school counseling.

c. My district collaborates with postsecondary institutions to align high school coursework with college and career pathway requirements.

d. Since entering the classroom, I have received adequate support from my school or district to implement career-connected teaching.

e. My instructional design enables students to apply academic learning to career-connected contexts.

f. Major changes to district or state policy are needed to ensure every student has access to effective college and career pathways.

14. What other changes should districts, the state, and other partners make to strengthen college and career pathways so more students earn a work credential or degree within six years of graduation?

a. Open response

Demographic Data

Data Collection Method	Frequency
Survey Total	349
Focus Group Total	305
Both	46

What best describes your current role?	Frequency
Coach, specialist, or interventionist	24
Counselor or librarian	3
Support staff (teaching assistant, paraprofessional, etc.)	8
Teacher	559
Other - Write In	14
Total:	608

Region	Frequency
3	Less than 10
6	Less than 10
9	Less than 10
16	Less than 10
17	Less than 10
19	Less than 10
20	Less than 10
5	11-20
7	11-20
8	11-20
11	11-20
15	11-20
18	11-20
1	20-50
2	20-50
12	20-50
14	20-50
4	50-100
13	50-100
10	More than 100

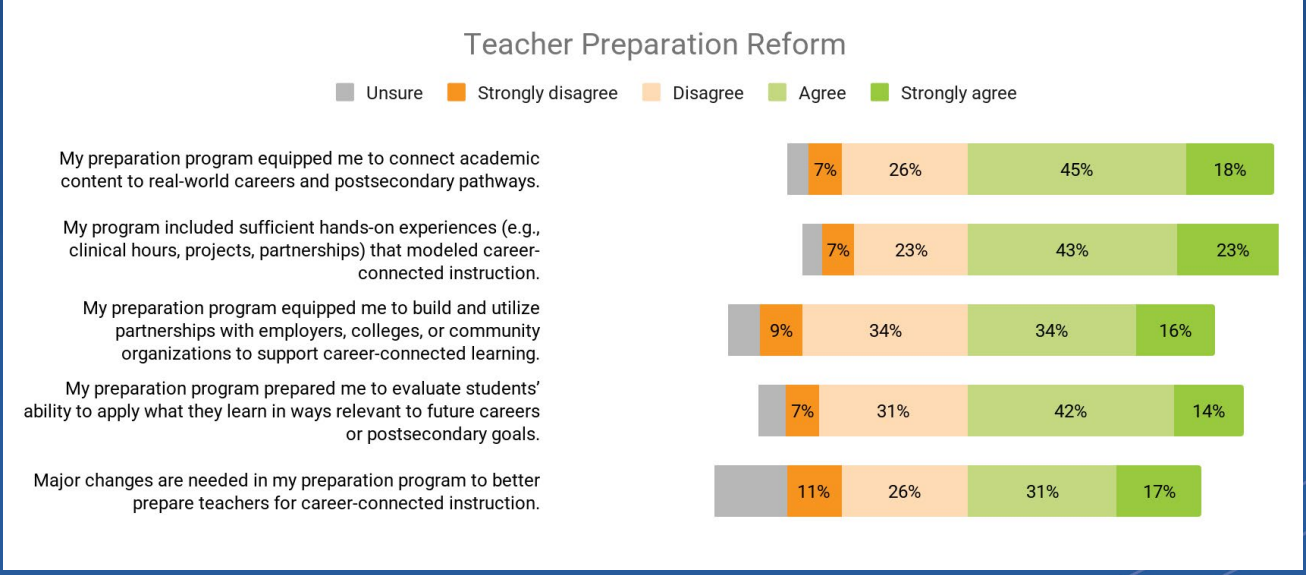
What grade level do you currently teach? Select all that apply.	Frequency
Early childhood	20
Kindergarten	49
1st grade	55
2nd grade	61
3rd grade	84
4th grade	83
5th grade	80
6th grade	82
7th grade	94
8th grade	123
9th grade	146
10th grade	173
11th grade	162
12th grade	157

What subject do you teach? Select all that apply.	Frequency
General education	75
English Language Arts	185
Math	150
Science	138
Social Studies or History	132
Technology	21
Special Education	59
Other - Write In	121

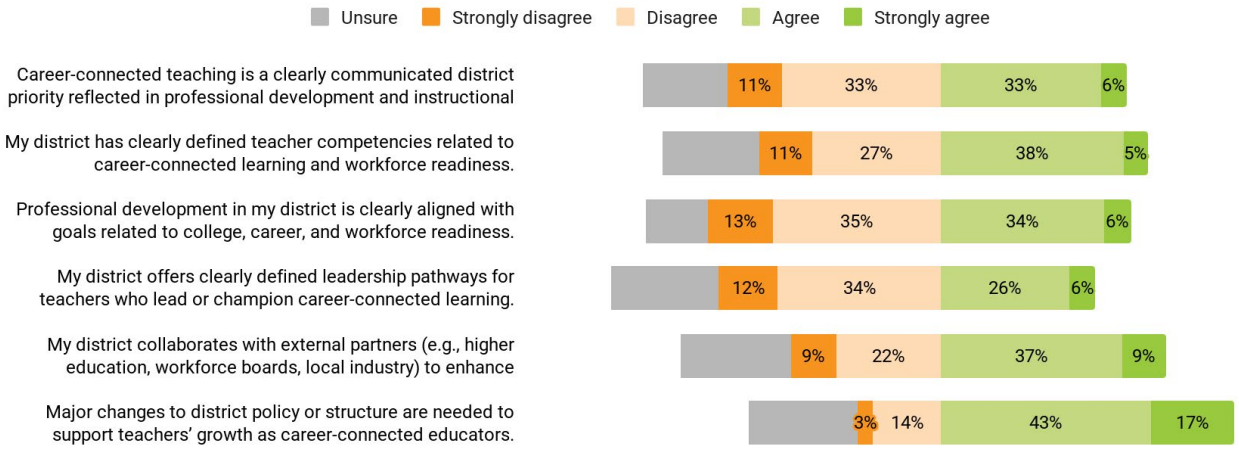
Years of Experience	Frequency
Less than 5 years	113
4-9 years	133
10-20 years	231
More than 20 years	127
Total:	604

What best describes your pathway into teaching?	Frequency
Alternative certification	272
Emergency certification	4
Non-certified	22
Traditional higher education program	293
Other - Write In	16
Total:	607

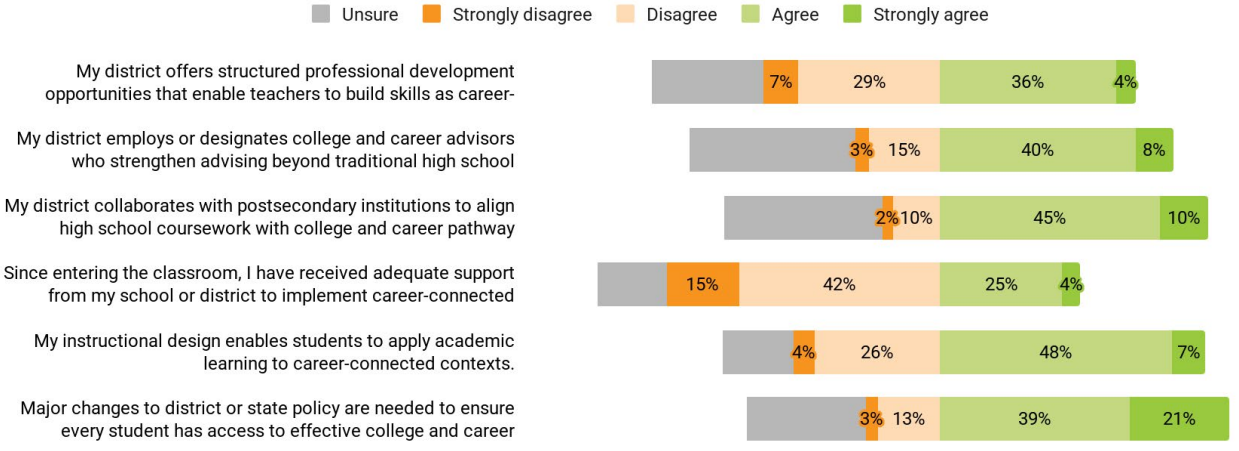
Response Data



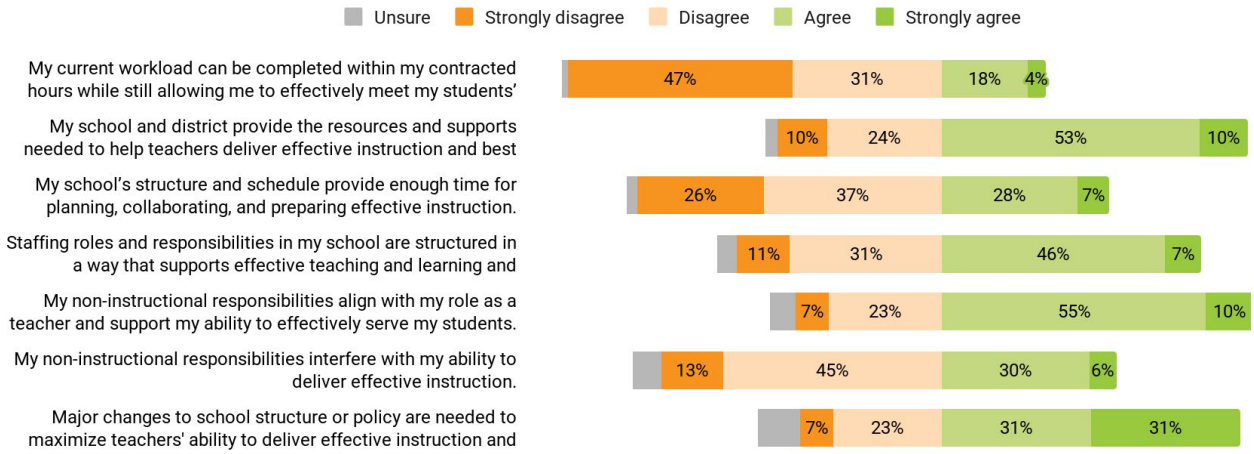
Career-Connected Teacher Development



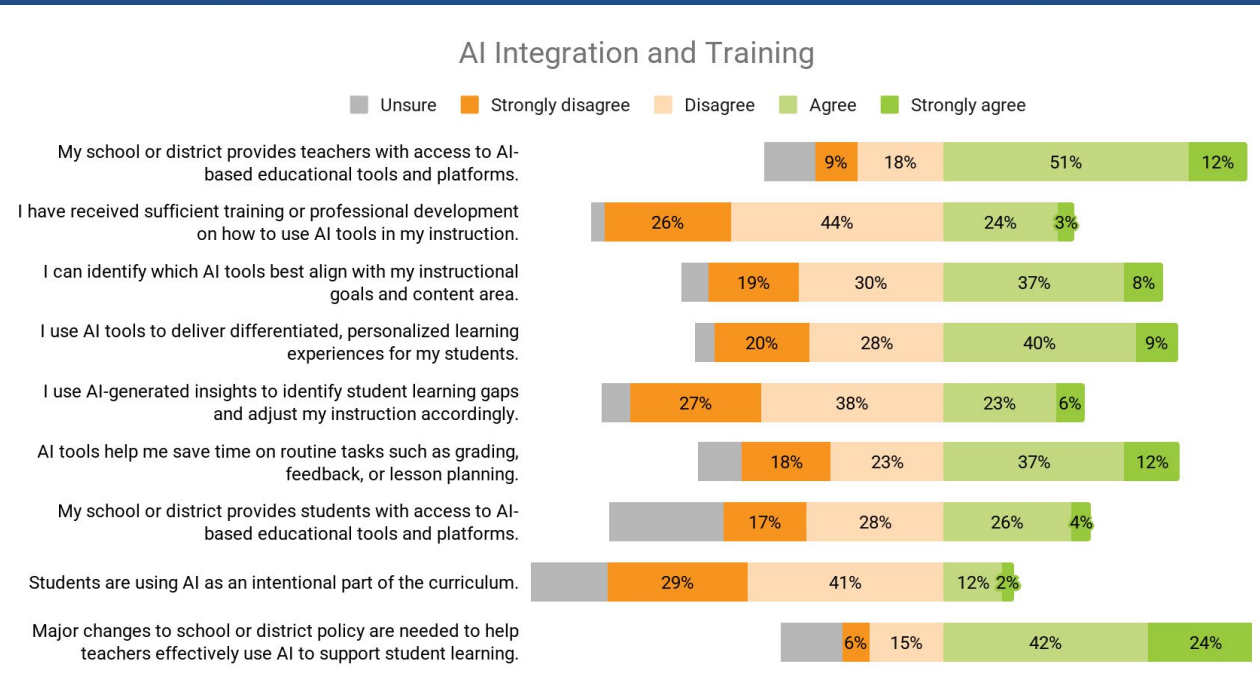
Support for Postsecondary Pathways

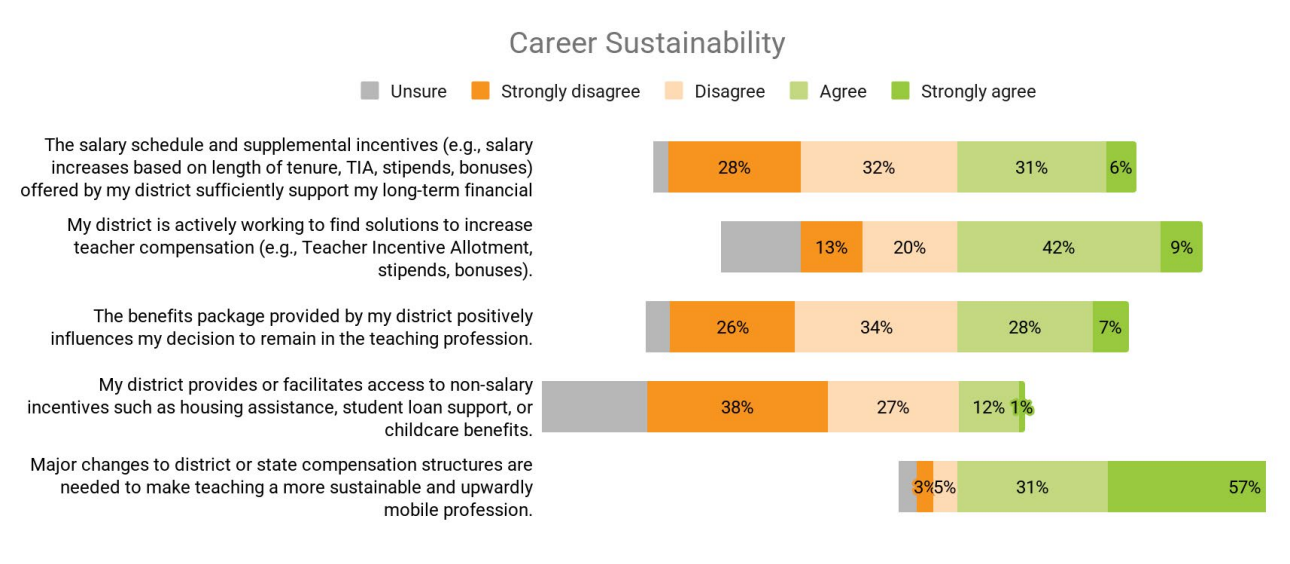


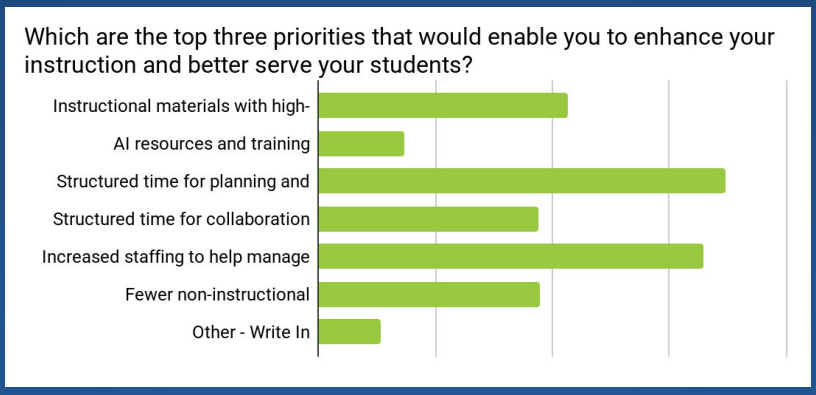
Restructured Teacher Roles

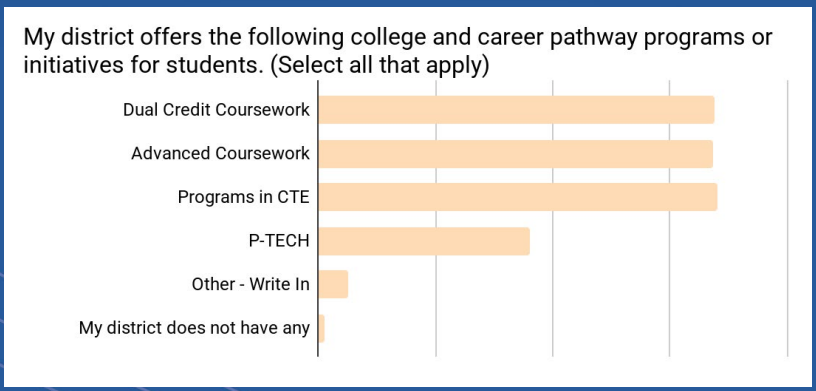


AI Integration and Training




Career Sustainability
Unsure
Strongly disagree
Disagree
Agree
Strongly agree
The salary schedule and supplemental incentives (e.g., salary increases based on length of tenure, TIA, stipends, bonuses) offered by my district sufficiently support my long-term financial
28%
32%
31%
6%
My district is actively working to find solutions to increase teacher compensation (e.g., Teacher Incentive Allotment, stipends, bonuses).
13%
20%
42%
9%
The benefits package provided by my district positively influences my decision to remain in the teaching profession.
26%
34%
28%
7%
My district provides or facilitates access to non-salary incentives such as housing assistance, student loan support, or childcare benefits.
38%
27%
12%
1%
Major changes to district or state compensation structures are needed to make teaching a more sustainable and upwardly mobile profession.
3%
5%
31%
57%


Which are the top three priorities that would enable you to enhance your instruction and better serve your students?
Instructional materials with high-
AI resources and training
Structured time for planning and
Structured time for collaboration
Increased staffing to help manage
Fewer non-instructional
Other - Write In


My district offers the following college and career pathway programs or initiatives for students. (Select all that apply)
Dual Credit Coursework
Advanced Coursework
Programs in CTE
P-TECH
Other - Write In
My district does not have any

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. In pursuing our mission, Teach Plus is guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: To act boldly and create the conditions where every student can imagine their future—and experience an education that delivers the opportunity to realize it. 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 for students. teachplus.org/tx

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