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No One Wants to Teach: A Review of Why Teachers are Leaving the Profession

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***Abstract*: Many countries are facing a growing teacher shortage. The problem is not only that fewer people want to enter teacher education programs, but also that many current teachers are leaving the profession early. This article reviews recent literature from 2015 to 2026 to examine why teachers are leaving their careers. Using a qualitative literature-review method, the article analyzes evidence from peer-reviewed studies and major international organizations, including UNESCO, OECD, ERIC, and the Learning Policy Institute. The review finds that teacher attrition is not caused by one simple factor. Instead, teachers leave because of a combination of heavy workload, emotional exhaustion, low salary, low professional status, poor working conditions, weak leadership support, student discipline challenges, lack of autonomy, policy pressure, and limited career development. The article argues that teacher shortages should not be understood as a recruitment problem only. They are also a retention problem. If education systems want more people to become teachers and stay in teaching, they must improve the daily working conditions of teachers, not only advertise the profession more positively.**

***Keywords*: teacher shortage, teacher attrition, teacher burnout, teacher retention, workload, teacher well-being, education policy.**

1. Introduction

Across many education systems, the teaching profession is becoming harder to enter, harder to stay in, and harder to promote as an attractive career. The phrase "No one wants to teach" is not completely accurate, but it reflects a real public concern: many countries are experiencing teacher shortages, and many schools struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers. UNESCO's Global Report on Teachers identifies teacher shortages as a serious global challenge and calls for stronger action to recruit, train, support, and retain teachers (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). The OECD also reports that teacher shortages are connected to workforce ageing, salary concerns, working conditions, and long-term planning problems (OECD, 2025).

Teacher shortage is not only a staffing issue. It directly affects students, school stability, and educational quality. When schools cannot retain teachers, students may experience more temporary teachers, larger class sizes, cancelled courses, or less experienced staff. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) argue that teacher turnover harms student achievement and creates financial costs for schools and districts. Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2016) also show that teacher shortages are shaped by both teacher supply and teacher attrition. In other words, a country may train new teachers, but the shortage will continue if many teachers leave early.

This article examines the reasons why teachers are leaving their careers. It uses the following research question: What are the major reasons teachers leave the teaching profession, and what policy responses may help improve teacher retention?

The central argument is that teacher attrition is not mainly a personal weakness problem. Teachers do not leave simply because they are not strong enough or because they dislike students. Instead, many teachers leave because the profession has become structurally difficult. Heavy workload, emotional pressure, low pay, low social respect, weak school leadership, and limited professional autonomy together make teaching less sustainable.

A. Teacher Shortages as a Global Problem

Teacher shortages are now widely discussed in international education policy. UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) describe teacher shortages as a major barrier to quality education. Their report emphasizes that shortages are not only caused by a lack of new teachers but also by poor retention, weak professional support, and difficult working conditions. Similarly, OECD data show that many education systems face pressure because a large share of teachers is older, meaning that retirement will increase the need for new teachers in the coming years (OECD, 2025).

The teacher shortage problem is also uneven. Shortages are often more serious in rural schools, disadvantaged schools, special education, science, mathematics, and language-learning programs. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) show that teacher turnover is especially harmful in high-poverty schools because these schools often have fewer resources and more difficulty attracting experienced teachers. Ingersoll, May, and Collins (2019) also show that teacher retention is influenced by school organization, leadership, and working conditions, not only by teacher supply.

B. Workload and Administrative Burden

One of the most common reasons teachers consider leaving is workload. Teaching is not limited to classroom instruction.

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Teachers also plan lessons, mark assignments, contact parents, attend meetings, prepare reports, manage behavior, complete administrative documents, and respond to policy changes. OECD's work on teacher working conditions notes that teaching is increasingly complex and demanding, while many teachers do not feel properly rewarded for their effort (OECD, 2024).

Research on teacher job satisfaction also shows that manageable workload is strongly related to whether teachers feel satisfied in their work. Toropova, Myrberg, and Johansson (2021) found that school working conditions, including workload and student discipline, are important predictors of teacher job satisfaction. Since job satisfaction is linked to teacher retention, workload is not only a personal stress issue; it is a workforce sustainability issue.

C. Burnout, Stress, and Emotional Exhaustion

Teacher burnout is one of the strongest explanations for teacher attrition. Burnout usually includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of accomplishment. Madigan and Kim's (2021a) meta-analysis found that burnout and job satisfaction are highly important predictors of teachers' intentions to quit. Their study suggests that burnout may be especially dangerous because it strongly increases the risk that teachers will want to leave.

Burnout also affects students. Madigan and Kim (2021b) reviewed evidence showing that teacher burnout is associated with student outcomes. This means that teacher well-being is not separate from student learning. If teachers are exhausted, emotionally distant, or overwhelmed, the classroom learning environment may also suffer. Viac and Fraser (2020) similarly argue that teacher well-being should be studied as a key part of education quality, not as a private problem for individual teachers.

D. Low Salary and Low Professional Status

Low pay is another major reason teaching becomes unattractive. OECD data show that teachers' salaries are often lower than those of similarly educated workers in many countries, and teacher satisfaction with salary is limited (OECD, 2024). This matters because teachers usually need university degrees, professional training, emotional labor, and long working hours. When salary does not match the level of responsibility, people may choose other careers or leave teaching after a few years.

However, salary is not the only issue. Professional status also matters. Teachers may feel that society expects them to solve many social problems but does not respect their expertise. OECD TALIS 2018 data show that teacher professionalism, preparation, and school conditions are important for understanding the teaching workforce (OECD, 2019). If teachers feel that they are treated as low-status workers rather than educational professionals, their motivation to stay may decline.

E. Weak Leadership and Lack of Support

School leadership plays an important role in teacher retention. Teachers are more likely to stay when they feel supported by principals, colleagues, and school systems. They are more likely to leave when they feel isolated, blamed, ignored, or unsupported. Ingersoll et al. (2019) found that school organization, management, and leadership affect teacher retention. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) also argue that better preparation, mentoring, and working conditions can reduce turnover.

Nguyen, Pham, Springer, and Crouch (2020) also identify school working conditions as important factors in teacher attrition and retention. Their review suggests that retaining teachers requires improving the environment in which teachers work, rather than focusing only on individual teacher motivation.

F. Student Discipline, Classroom Safety, and Emotional Labor

Another reason teachers leave is the emotional and behavioral difficulty of classroom work. Teachers must manage student behavior, support students' emotional needs, communicate with parents, and respond to social problems that enter the classroom. Toropova et al. (2021) found that student discipline is related to teacher job satisfaction. When classroom behavior is difficult and teachers do not receive enough support, teaching can become emotionally exhausting.

This problem became more visible after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many teachers reported greater student learning gaps, behavior problems, mental health concerns, and parent communication pressure. Although the pandemic did not create every teacher-retention problem, it intensified existing pressures. UNESCO's 2024 report emphasizes that teacher shortages must be addressed through resilient education systems that support teachers' professional and personal well-being (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

G. Lack of Autonomy and Policy Pressure

Teachers also leave when they feel they have little control over their work. Excessive testing, frequent curriculum changes, strict accountability systems, and top-down reforms can reduce teachers' sense of professional autonomy. When teachers feel that they are only implementing orders rather than exercising professional judgment, teaching may become less meaningful.

OECD TALIS 2018 highlights the importance of teacher professionalism and the need to understand teachers' voices in education systems (OECD, 2019). Viac and Fraser (2020) also include cognitive and subjective well-being in their teacher's well-being framework, showing that teachers' sense of competence, purpose, and professional control matters.

H. Early-Career Teachers and the Problem of Weak Induction

Early-career teachers are especially vulnerable to leaving. New teachers often face full teaching responsibilities before they have developed strong classroom-management skills, curriculum knowledge, or emotional resilience. Sutcher et al. (2016) argue that teacher preparation and early support are important parts of solving teacher shortages. Without mentoring and induction, new teachers may enter the profession

with idealism but leave after experiencing stress, isolation, and unrealistic expectations.

This issue is also connected to teacher education. If teacher-preparation programs do not provide enough practical classroom experience, new teachers may feel unprepared. If schools do not support them after hiring, the transition from training to full-time teaching becomes too difficult.

2. Materials and Methods

This article uses a qualitative literature-review method. It does not collect new survey or interview data. Instead, it reviews recent research and policy reports related to teacher shortages, teacher attrition, teacher burnout, teacher retention, teacher well-being, and working conditions.

The sources were selected according to four criteria. First, each source had to be published between 2015 and 2026. Second, each source had to focus directly on teacher shortage, teacher attrition, teacher retention, teacher well-being, burnout, workload, salary, leadership, or school working conditions. Third, the sources had to be reliable and accessible, including peer-reviewed journal articles, ERIC-indexed reports, OECD reports, UNESCO reports, or major research institutes. Fourth, the sources had to help explain why teachers leave the profession or what systems can do to improve retention.

The analysis followed a thematic review approach. The selected literature was grouped into seven themes: teacher shortages, workload, burnout, salary and status, school leadership, classroom conditions, and teacher autonomy. After grouping the sources, the article compared findings across studies and identified common explanations for teacher attrition.

3. Results and Discussion

A. Teacher's Attrition is a Structural Problem, Not Only an Individual Problem

The first major result is that teachers leave because of structural working conditions, not only personal weakness or lack of passion. Across literature, teacher attrition is connected to workload, stress, salary, leadership, preparation, and school climate. UNESCO and OECD both treat teacher shortages as system-level problems that require policy responses, not simply individual motivation campaigns (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024; OECD, 2025). This finding challenges the common public idea that teachers leave because they are not dedicated enough. Many teachers enter the profession with a strong desire to help students. However, when the working environment becomes unsustainable, dedication alone is not enough.

B. Heavy Workload is One of the Clearest Reasons Teachers Leave

The second result is that workload is a major driver of teacher dissatisfaction. Teachers are expected to teach, plan, mark, manage behavior, communicate with parents, complete administrative work, attend meetings, and adapt to reforms. When these demands are too high, teachers may feel that the profession takes over their personal lives. Toropova et al. (2021) found that working conditions are strongly related to teacher job satisfaction. OECD also notes that teaching is increasingly demanding and that many teachers feel their efforts are not properly rewarded (OECD, 2024). Therefore, workload reduction should be viewed as a retention policy, not only a wellness policy.

C. Burnout is Strongly Linked to Teachers' Intention to Quit

The third result is that burnout is one of the strongest predictors of teachers' intention to leave. Madigan and Kim's (2021a) meta-analysis found that burnout and job satisfaction are closely related to teachers' intention to quit. Burnout is especially serious because it affects teachers emotionally, physically, and professionally. This finding means that teacher-retention policies must address mental health and emotional sustainability. It is not enough to tell teachers to be resilient. Schools and governments must reduce the conditions that create burnout in the first place.

D. Salary Matters, But Money Alone is Not Enough

The fourth result is that salary is important, but it is not the only factor. Low salary makes teaching less competitive compared with other graduate professions. OECD reports show that teacher pay is often lower than that of similarly educated workers in many countries (OECD, 2024). However, salary increases alone may not solve teacher attrition if workload, leadership, discipline, and professional respect remain poor. Teachers may accept modest pay when they feel respected, supported, and professionally valued. But when low pay is combined with high stress and low status, leaving becomes more likely.

E. Leadership and School Climate Influence Retention

The fifth result is that teachers are more likely to remain in schools where leadership is supportive and working conditions are positive. Ingersoll et al. (2019) show that school organization and leadership affect teacher retention. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) also argue that turnover can be reduced through better preparation, mentoring, and teaching conditions. This suggests that teacher retention is partly a school-management issue. Even national policy reforms may fail if teachers' daily school environment remains unsupportive.

F. Teacher Shortages Affect Disadvantaged Schools More Seriously

The sixth result is that teacher shortages are unequal. Schools serving disadvantaged communities often experience more severe turnover and more difficulty hiring qualified teachers. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) show that high-poverty schools are more affected by turnover. Ingersoll et al. (2019) also connect retention with school conditions, which often differ across communities. This means teacher attrition can increase educational inequality. Students who already need strong support may be more likely to experience unstable staffing.

G. Recruitment Campaigns Will Fail if Retention is Ignored

The seventh result is that teacher shortages cannot be solved by recruitment alone. If new teachers enter the profession but leave after a few years, the system remains unstable. Sutcher et al. (2016) argue that teacher shortages come from both supply and demand problems, including attrition. UNESCO's 2024 report also emphasizes that education systems must support and retain teachers, not only recruit them. Therefore, governments should not ask only, "How can we get more people to become teachers?" They must also ask, "Why are current teachers leaving, and what would make them stay?"

The findings show that teacher attrition is a multi-cause problem. Teachers leave not because they lack care, but because the profession often demands too much while offering too little support. The strongest causes are heavy workload, burnout, low pay, low status, weak leadership support, student-behavior pressure, lack of autonomy, and poor early-career support.

A key implication is that education systems need to treat teacher retention as a central part of education quality. If teachers leave frequently, schools lose experience, relationships, and stability. Students also lose continuity. Teacher retention should therefore be seen as a student-learning issue, not only a human-resources issue.

Another implication is that policy should focus on teachers' daily working lives. Governments often respond to teacher shortages with recruitment campaigns, scholarships, or emergency certification. These may help in the short term, but they do not solve the deeper problem if teachers continue to experience unsustainable workloads. A serious retention policy should reduce unnecessary administrative tasks, protect planning time, provide classroom support, and improve teacher-student ratios where possible.

Salary also requires serious attention. While money alone cannot solve teacher attrition, low pay sends a message that society does not value teachers' work. Competitive pay is especially important for attracting strong candidates and retaining teachers in expensive cities or difficult-to-staff schools. School leadership is also central. Teachers are more likely to stay when they feel respected, trusted, and supported. Strong principles can help create professional communities, protect teachers from unnecessary pressure, and support new teachers. Weak leadership can make even passionate teachers leave.

Finally, the profession needs stronger respect and autonomy. Teachers should not be treated only as curriculum deliverers or test-score producers. They are professionals who make complex decisions every day. If education systems want teachers to stay, they must give teachers time, trust, support, and voice. In conclusion, the statement "No one wants to teach" should be understood as a warning, not a final truth. Many people still want to teach, and many teachers still love teaching. The deeper problem is that the teaching conditions have become difficult to sustain. To solve teacher shortages, societies must make teaching a profession that skilled people can enter, survive in, grow in, and remain proud of.

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