



# How to Attract and Retain Generation Z Teachers

States in the South face a mounting educator workforce crisis: interest in the education profession is at historic lows, while nearly one in five current teachers leave annually. Half exit within their first five years.

Generation Z (born 1996–2012), the primary pipeline for future teachers, is not rejecting education as a profession, but the conditions surrounding it. Southern states prepared 25% fewer new teachers in 2023 versus 2013, when Millennials were the largest group entering the workforce. See more education data at [SREB.org/educator-workforce-data](https://www.sreb.org/educator-workforce-data).

States can redesign the profession to align with how newer generations work, learn and lead. The right efforts can help recruit and retain more young professionals into the classroom, while also creating more workforce sustainability and higher student achievement.

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A photograph of a smiling female teacher in a blue shirt leaning over a desk to assist a young girl in an orange shirt. Other students are visible at desks in the background of a classroom.

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# Aligning Teaching Conditions with Next-gen Expectations

State policy can close these gaps, creating a win for all generations.

CURRENT CONDITIONS →



GEN Z INTERESTS →

## Key Findings from SREB & Vanderbilt University

SREB, partnering with Vanderbilt University, [conducted several research studies](#) on Gen Z educators and other early career educators. These studies sought to understand the root cause of the difficulties in attracting and retaining younger professionals to K-12 education.

### Overcome Declining Interest by Stimulating

**Early Inspiration:** Interest in education careers declined among high schoolers from 2013-2023. However, most newly hired teachers report considering the profession early in life, signaling that exposure and messaging during middle and high school grades are critical for increased recruitment.

### Working Conditions, Not Commitment,

**Drive Burnout:** Gen Z teachers cite workload, eroded financial power and lack of support — not lack of passion — as primary reasons for leaving.

### Alternative Pathways Expand

#### Representation — But Require Stronger

**Support:** Non-traditional preparation routes attract more male, Black, Hispanic and older candidates, but these teachers face higher attrition risk without formal clinical experience and structured mentoring and induction support.

### Clinical Preparation Drives Confidence and

**Competence:** New teachers consistently report feeling underprepared, particularly in classroom management and student behavior interventions — stressors that also contribute to [lower student outcomes](#).

# State Policy Changes

## 1 Improve Recruitment Through Early Exposure and Quality Career Pathways

→ **Expand Grow-Your-Own and Registered Apprenticeships:** Formalize quality grow-your-own pathways that allow high school students and paraprofessionals to earn credentials while gaining paid work experience. Enrollment in high school introductory teaching courses (career and technical education courses) and apprentice programs have increased significantly and can help foster early interest in the profession.

→ **Incentivize Pursuit of Teaching Careers:** Non-traditional pathways are vital for attracting male teachers and teachers of various racial and ethnic backgrounds who previously did not pursue an education degree. With low-cost pathways and targeted, state-subsidized financial aid for these candidates, particularly from high-need rural and urban areas, more individuals will be able to attend high-quality, alternative and post-baccalaureate pathways. Making teaching more attractive and sustainable also incentivizes entry.

See SREB's [Preparation and Pathways](#) resources.

## 2 Reform Preparation to Prioritize Career Readiness

→ **Mandate Teacher Residency Models:** Clinical experience consistently ranks as the most valuable preparation component for new teachers. Transition *all* preparation pathways toward paid, year-long residency models under the supervision of effective mentor teachers. Residents should not serve as teachers-of-record during the on-the-job training year, but schools can greatly benefit from incorporating paid, full-time residents into staffing models.

→ **Focus on Classroom Management and High Cognitive Demand:** Require *all* preparation

programs to provide rigorous, practical training in classroom management and student behavioral support — the top areas where Gen Z teachers report feeling underprepared.

Preparation programs also need to provide strong training on identifying and facilitating high cognitive demand assignments using high quality instructional materials.

→ **Streamline Licensure and Reciprocity:** Reduce administrative hurdles for traditional, non-traditional and out-of-state graduates. Require preparation providers to offer structured support for certification testing and application in the state the candidate plans to work.

## 3 Redesign the Teaching Environment for Sustainability

→ **Implement Strong Induction Support and Protections:** States should establish protected induction years that guarantee reduced course loads, mandatory planning time minimums, guidance resources, coaching and access to a trained, credentialed and compensated mentor. Mentoring must be useful, not symbolic, with mentors also provided release time and accountability for coaching impact.

See SREB's [Teacher Induction](#) resources.

→ **Enhance Well-being Resources:** Teacher burnout is increasing according to survey data. Gen Z reports higher rates of mental health needs than previous generations. Ensure access to confidential, no-cost employee wellness supports, including mental health services and resilience training, both of which are critical retention supports for early-career educators.

→ **Address Compensation and Advancement:** Financial stability was a unanimous concern cited by Gen Z teachers in our research. Although salaries have increased, inflation has eroded take-home pay for many teachers. States need competitive starting salaries and benefits that reflect the professional demands of the role.

Career advancement options that increase financial gain for high-impact teachers will help to provide the financial stability that Gen Z craves to achieve a standard quality of life, such as homeownership and families.

See SREB's report on [Teacher Pathways and Advancement](#) and [Strategic Staffing](#).

→ **Address Classroom Technology:** Our research and new [Gallup polling](#) show Gen Z is wary of the harmful effects of artificial intelligence. Gen Z teachers are tech-savvy and expect updated instructional technology, without an overuse of dependency on devices and AI. Provide funding to ensure classrooms have modern tools, but more importantly, fund training on integrating ethical and age-appropriate technology instruction. Refrain from policies that require instruction to overuse technology, which research shows erodes critical thinking practice for students, while acknowledging that technology education is necessary for career readiness.

See SREB's reports on [AI in Education](#).

→ **Improve Public Trust and Autonomy:** Teachers cite a lack of public respect and political interference as major stressors. Policies should prioritize teacher autonomy and foster a culture of professional respect.

#### 4 Strengthen Instructional Leadership

→ **Train School Leaders in Retention Strategies:** Leadership quality is the single strongest school-

level predictor of teacher retention. States can embed early-career educator and leader support as well as retention-focused leadership standards into principal preparation, licensure renewal and leadership growth plan frameworks. This additional focus for school leaders on positive working environments and cultures of support, in addition to strong instructional and operational leadership, can help more schools improve the retention of younger professionals, as well as those of older generations.

See SREB's [School Leadership](#) resources.

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### Recruiting and retaining more Generation Z educators is both an educational and economic imperative.

Without immediate state action, workforce shortages will constrain student achievement and long-term regional competitiveness. By replacing a sink-or-swim model with a structured, supported, professionalized and appropriately compensated career paths, states can secure a more stable educator workforce that is aligned to the expectations of the next generation, while supporting all generations of educators and students.

*See the contributing SREB/Vanderbilt University research findings and literature reviews at [SREB.org/post/educator-workforce-research](https://sreb.org/post/educator-workforce-research).*

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#### **SREB is here to help.**

Find out more about supporting a sustainable, quality educator and school leader workforce:

[SREB.org/TeacherWorkforce](https://sreb.org/TeacherWorkforce)