

TEACHING FOR TOMORROW

Closing the Expectations Gap



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Introduction

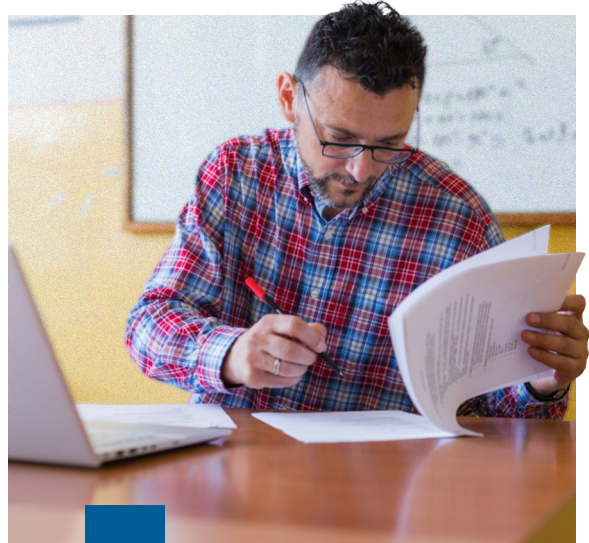
What happens when teachers are asked to do the impossible?

New research from the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup examines how teachers experience their job demands. The Teaching for Tomorrow study reveals just how much unrealistic expectations and lack of role clarity impact key outcomes like job satisfaction and intention to remain in the classroom. While the research finds that many teachers face unrealistic or unclear expectations, it also confirms that with improved job expectations, teachers thrive.

Teachers with realistic expectations are more engaged in the classroom, more likely to remain in the profession and less burned out. Lack of clarity matters too, especially when it comes to how teachers should support students.

The findings show that a meaningful number of teachers feel they don't have a clear guideline for how to support students who are struggling academically or those who are academically ahead. While AI tools are quickly becoming common in schools, more than half of teachers say they receive no guidance at all on how to apply them to tasks like one-to-one tutoring or grading.

With realistic expectations and the guidance to meet them, a thriving teacher workforce could mean fewer students who experience mid-year staff turnover and inconsistent transitions, and more students learning from engaged teachers who find purpose in their work.



Key Findings

1

More than half (55%) of teachers

feel the **expectations for excellent teaching** are only somewhat realistic (40%), not too realistic (12%) or not realistic at all (3%).

2

Teachers who perceive expectations as very realistic

instead of somewhat realistic are 27 percentage points more likely to be **engaged at work**, 21 points more likely to be **satisfied with their job** and 18 points **less likely to be burned out**.

3

One-quarter (25%) of teachers

say that **expectations for how they should support students who are academically behind** are not too or not at all clear. An even greater percentage (32%) say the same about expectations for how they should support academically advanced students.

4

Most teachers are unclear about how AI tools should be used in their work.

For example, 69% say they **receive no guidance** at all about how to apply AI to one-on-one instruction or tutoring and 47% say the same about using it to make assignments and other class materials. Among those who do receive guidance, the vast majority of it is informal.

5

Whether career preparation

is part of a teacher's job remains undefined, even at the high school level. Just 24% of high school teachers say they feel "a great deal" of responsibility for helping students explore what career they want to pursue, with an additional 50% saying they feel "some" responsibility.

6

About four in 10 teachers (43%)

say the **communication from their school leadership is very good or excellent**. These teachers are more likely than their peers to feel their job expectations are realistic and clear, and more likely to feel comfortable reaching out for more clarity when needed.

Detailed Findings

Unrealistic Job Expectations Are Hurting the Teaching Workforce

What does it mean to be an excellent teacher in today's classrooms, and do teachers feel that standard is achievable? For about half of teachers (55%), the expectations that define excellent teaching feel out of reach, which negatively impacts their job satisfaction and intention to remain in the profession. Fifteen percent of teachers feel that expectations for demonstrating excellent teaching are unrealistic, while an additional 40% feel they are only somewhat realistic.

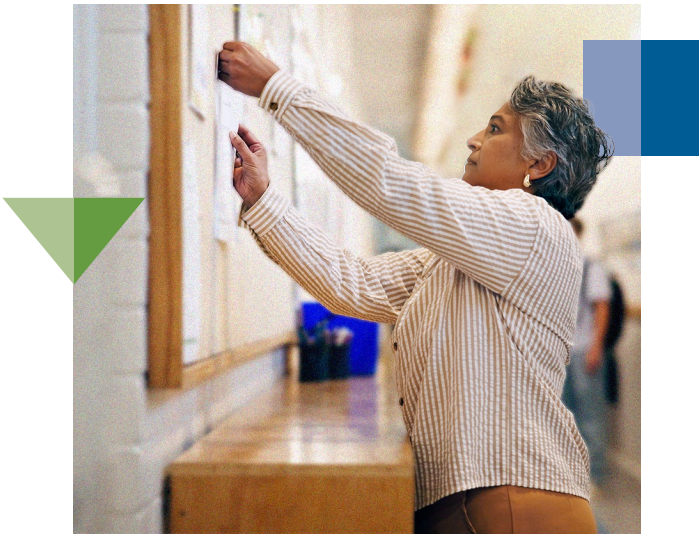
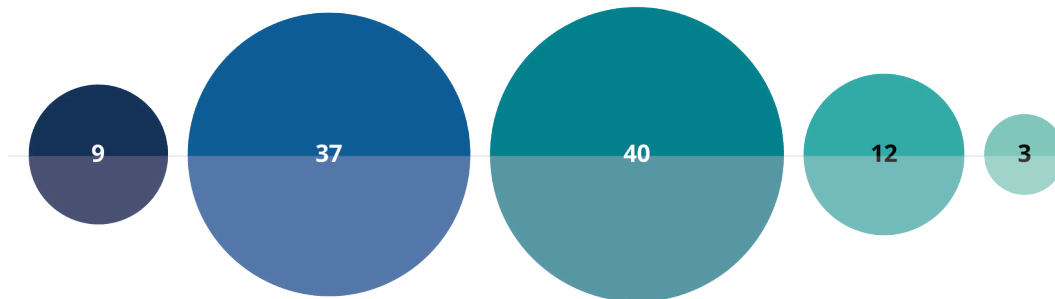


FIGURE 1

How realistic is this aspect of your teaching job? Demonstrating what excellent teaching looks like.

■ % Extremely realistic ■ % Very realistic ■ % Somewhat realistic ■ % Not too realistic
■ % Not realistic at all



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding.

Teachers’ perceptions of whether the standard for excellent teaching is realistic do not vary significantly by teacher age, experience,¹ subject area or school level. However, teachers in the highest-need schools are more likely to say they feel they face unrealistic expectations, compared with those in the wealthiest of schools (18% vs. 10%).²

Teachers who perceive the standard for excellent teaching to be unrealistic are substantially less likely to be engaged at work, less likely to be satisfied with their jobs and more likely to be burned out.

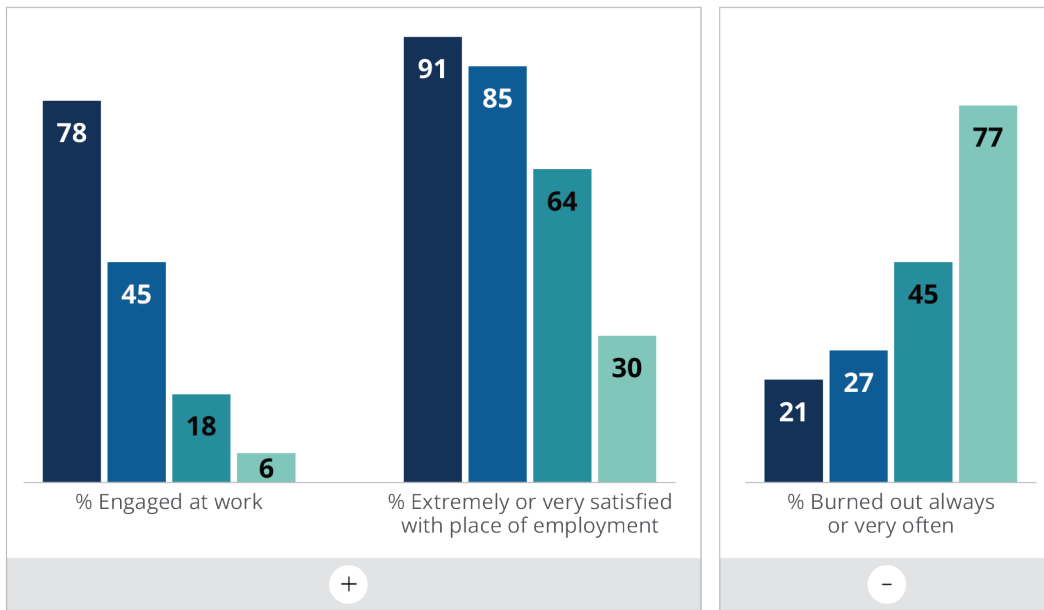
For example, about three-quarters of teachers (77%) who feel they face unrealistic expectations for excellent teaching are frequently burned out, compared with one in five (21%) of those who feel their expectations are extremely realistic.

FIGURE 2

Realistic Expectations for Teaching Is Linked to Key Outcomes

Among teachers with ___ expectations

■ Extremely realistic ■ Very realistic ■ Somewhat realistic ■ Not too realistic or Not realistic at all



1 Due to sample limitations, the groups that can be compared are teachers with more or less than 10 years of experience.
 2 Highest-need schools are those with 76% to 100% of students who receive subsidized lunch (highest quartile). The wealthiest schools are those with 0% to 25% of students who receive subsidized lunch (lowest quartile).

Teachers who find their expectations realistic are also far more likely to plan to stay in the classroom, both in the next year and in the long term.

Among teachers who feel expectations for excellent teaching are extremely realistic, 94% plan to continue teaching the following school year compared with 74% of teachers who find expectations unrealistic. While intention to stay is multi-factorial, the 20-point gap suggests that making expectations more achievable could be a meaningful lever for improving teacher retention.

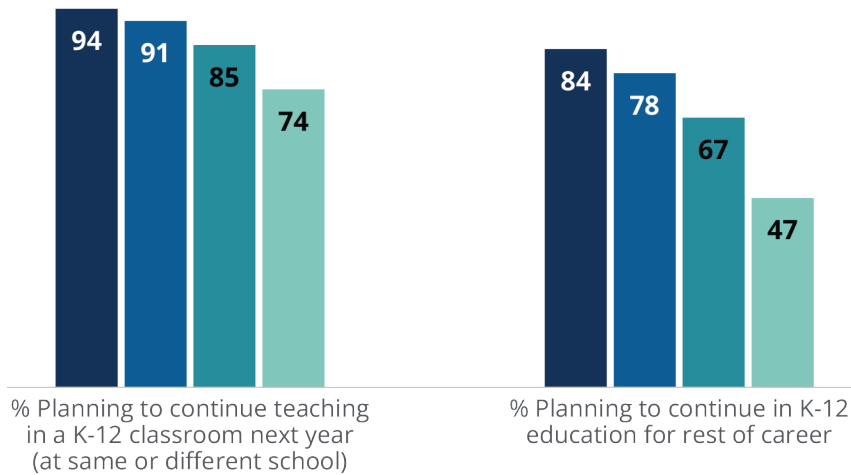


FIGURE 3

Realistic Expectations for Teaching Are Linked to Intention to Stay

Among teachers with ___ expectations

■ Extremely realistic ■ Very realistic ■ Somewhat realistic ■ Not too realistic or Not realistic at all



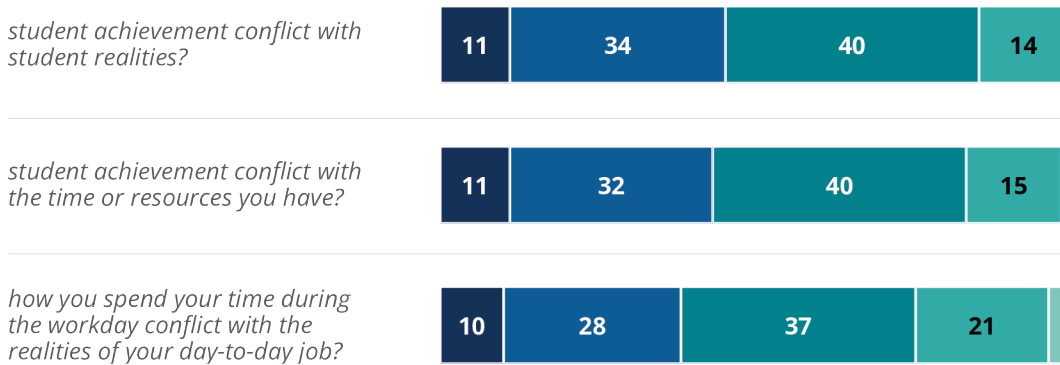
Teachers frequently report that school leaders' expectations clash with the realities of the job. Forty-three percent of teachers say that expectations for student achievement “very often” or “always” conflict with the time and resources available to them; 45% say the same about expectations for student achievement that conflict with students' actual circumstances.

These findings suggest that unrealistic expectations may be, at least in part, due to the limitations on teachers' time and available resources, rather than a lack of capability or individual preparedness for teaching.

FIGURE 4

How often do expectations from school leaders about __?

■ % Always ■ % Very often ■ % Sometimes ■ % Rarely ■ % Never



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.

Teachers at higher-need schools are even more likely to face what they view as unrealistic expectations for their job performance, particularly when it comes to positively influencing student achievement.

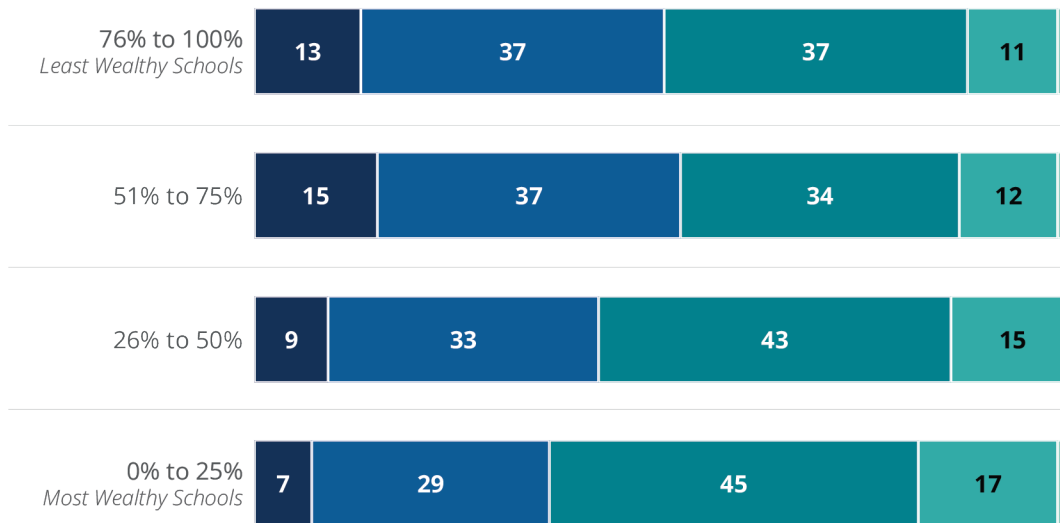
Half of teachers (50%) in the highest-need schools feel that expectations for student achievement conflict with student realities very often or always, compared with 36% of teachers in the wealthiest schools.

FIGURE 5

How often do expectations from school leaders about student achievement conflict with student realities?

■ % Always ■ % Very often ■ % Sometimes ■ % Rarely ■ % Never

Percent of Students Qualifying for Free- or Reduced-Priced Lunch



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.

Half of Teachers Say Expectations to Use Curriculum Without Modifications Are Unrealistic

Over the past decade, high-quality, standards-aligned curricular materials (“high-quality instructional materials” or HQIM) have become a promising intervention that many states hope will improve student outcomes if used with fidelity. Proponents of HQIM stress that curricular modifications should be made with caution, especially when those modifications decrease the academic rigor or remove important context from lessons that function as part of a unit.³

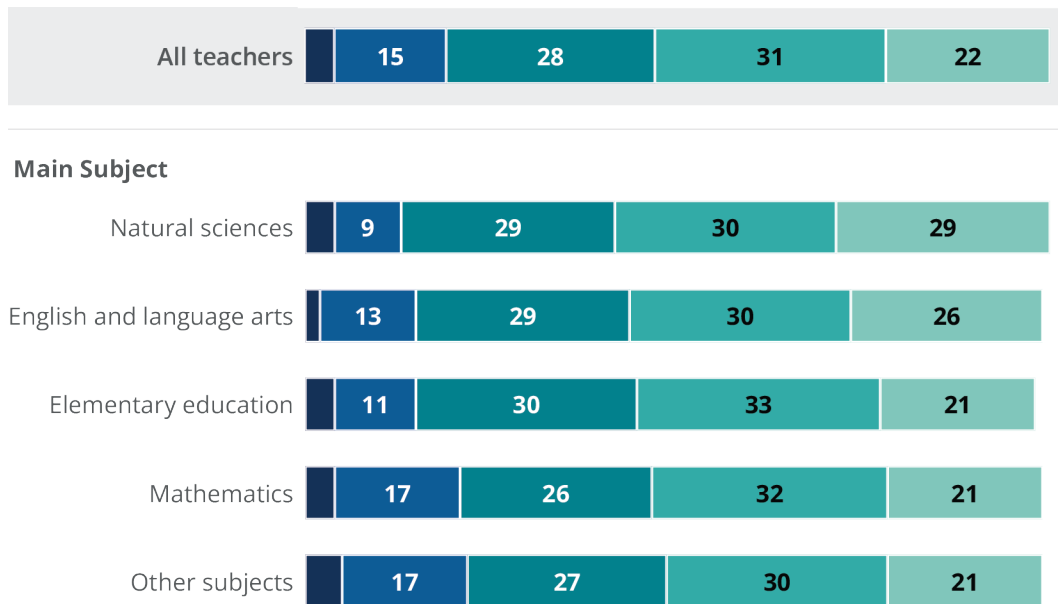
Teachers provide a different perspective on how they experience expectations regarding curriculum, especially when it comes to modifications. When asked specifically about the realism of using curriculum materials without any modifications, half of teachers (53%) say that expectation is “not too realistic” or “not realistic at all.”

FIGURE 6

How realistic is this aspect of your teaching job? Using curriculum materials without any modifications.

Rebased to exclude teachers who say this does not apply to them

■ % Extremely realistic ■ % Very realistic ■ % Somewhat realistic ■ % Not too realistic
■ % Not realistic at all



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.

When it comes to clarity, only 38% of teachers say they have clear expectations for how they may adapt or modify curriculum materials (10% say extremely clear and 28% say very clear).

3 National Comprehensive Center. (n.d.). *Guide to the implementation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM)*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED650496.pdf>

Unclear Job Expectations Leave Teachers Without a Roadmap for Student Support

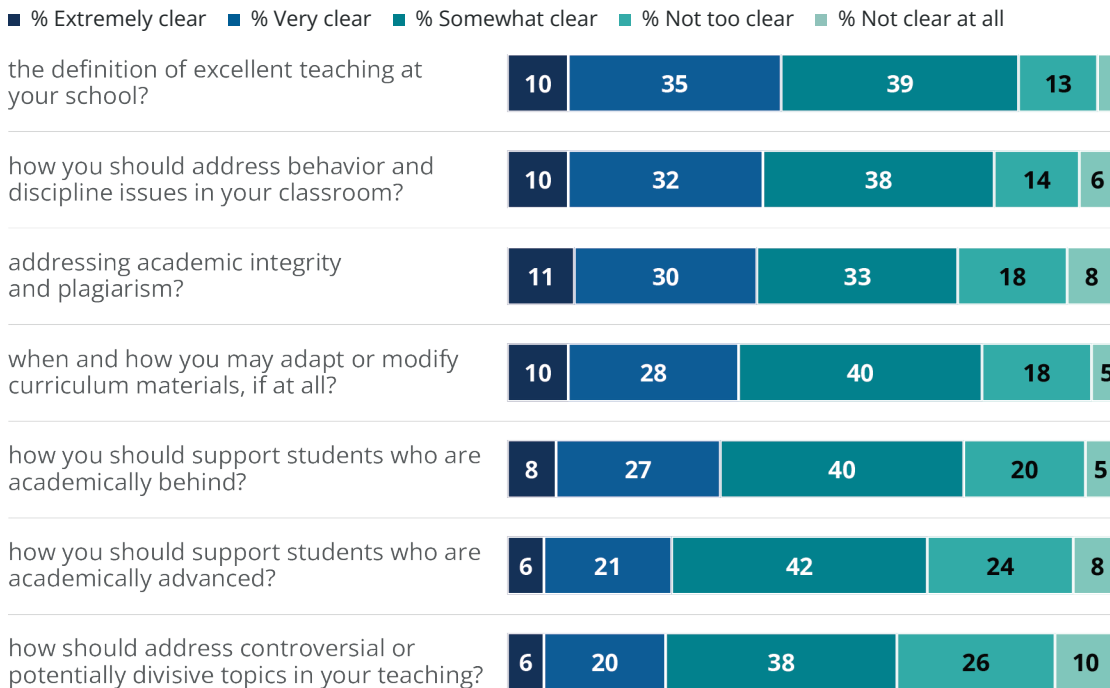
Many teachers say job expectations are not only unrealistic but also unclear. While 45% of teachers say the definition for excellent teaching at their school is “very” or “extremely” clear, 39% say it is only “somewhat” clear and 16% say it is “not too” or “not at all” clear.

Two of the areas where teachers have the least clarity are also among the most consequential for students. One-fourth (25%) of teachers say that expectations for supporting students who are academically behind are not too clear or not clear at all; 32% say the same about supporting students who are academically advanced.



FIGURE 7

How clear are the expectations for ___?



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.

Career Preparation: A Responsibility Without Clear Ownership

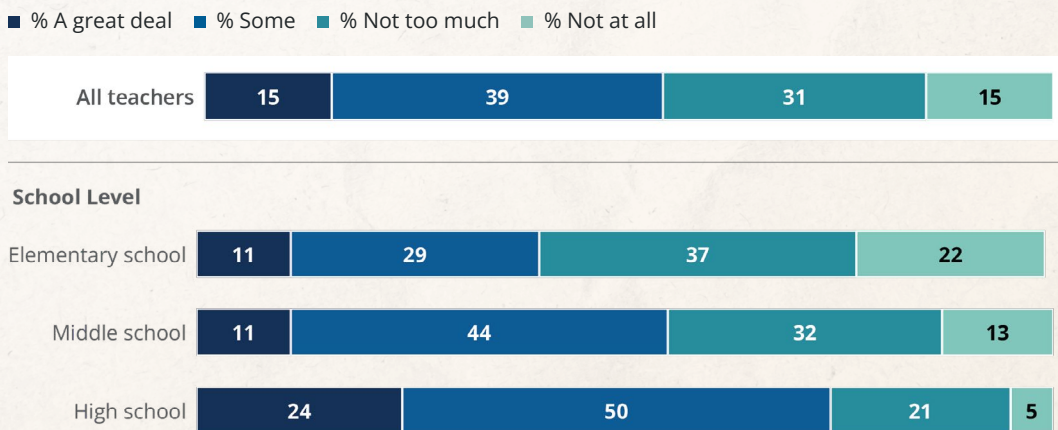
Teachers widely feel empowered to support students’ individual strengths, but fewer say they feel individual responsibility in helping students explore career paths. Whether this responsibility is part of that teacher’s job expectations likely varies by school and grade level, but many states have formal expectations for students’ career readiness at graduation.⁴ In other states, legislative bodies are developing strategies to expand access to career navigation support during the K-12 years.⁵ In some school communities, it may be an unresolved question to what extent teachers are expected to support these initiatives as part of their professional duties.

About one in four high school teachers (24%) feel “a great deal” of responsibility for helping students explore what career they want to pursue, with an additional 50% saying they feel “some” responsibility. Although middle school is increasingly recognized as an important time to start career exploration activities,⁶ middle school teachers are much less likely than high school teachers to say they feel a great deal (11%) or some responsibility (44%) for helping students explore possible options.

FIGURE 8

Teachers’ Role in Students’ Career Exploration

How much responsibility do you feel for helping students explore what career they want to pursue?



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding.

Teachers are more likely to feel empowered to encourage students to pursue their strengths, interests or talents than they are to help them explore specific career pathways. Forty-one percent of high school teachers say they feel a great deal of responsibility to encourage students’ strengths and 47% say they feel some responsibility in that regard.

4 Falcone, M. A., Kreamer, K., Maldonado, L., & Langellotti, J. (2025). *Making career readiness count: A 2025 update — 10 years of measuring what matters*. Advance CTE. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED673893.pdf>

5 Cuevas, E. (2025, September 23). *State legislatures in 2025 embrace expanding students’ access to personalized career guidance*. Britebound Center for Career Navigation at JFF. <https://asacarenav.jff.org/state-legislatures-in-2025-embrace-expanding-students-access-to-personalized-career-guidance/>

6 Lammers, J. (2026, March 17). *States work to strengthen middle school career exploration nationwide*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/julielammers/2026/03/17/states-work-to-strengthen-middle-school-career-exploration-nationwide/>

Most Teachers Receive No Formal Guidance on AI Use

The general lack of clarity extends to an increasingly important topic: guidance on the use of AI tools for teaching responsibilities.

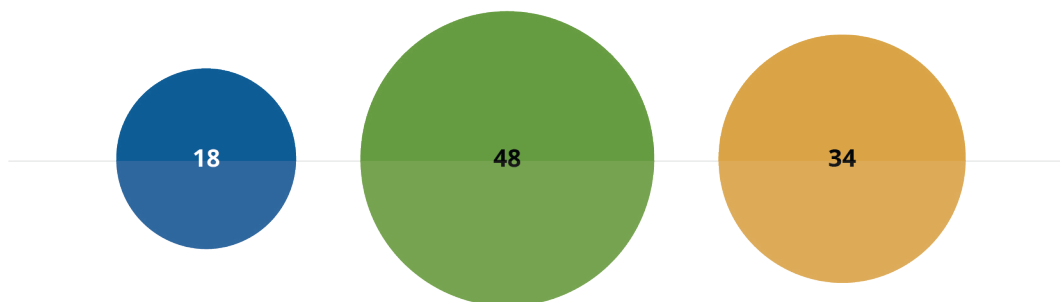
Despite adoption of AI tools (six in 10 teachers use them for work),⁷ **about eight in 10 teachers (82%) say they receive no formal guidance** on how they should apply AI tools to their work, across multiple types of work tasks, and one in three (34%) receive no guidance at all, even from informal sources such as verbal conversations or peers.

FIGURE 9

What type of guidance, if any, have you received about using AI tools for the following specific purposes?

Among teachers for whom these tasks are applicable*

- % Formal guidance on at least one area
- % Informal guidance only (no formal guidance on any area)
- % No guidance on any area



*Summary of guidance received across 10 tasks.

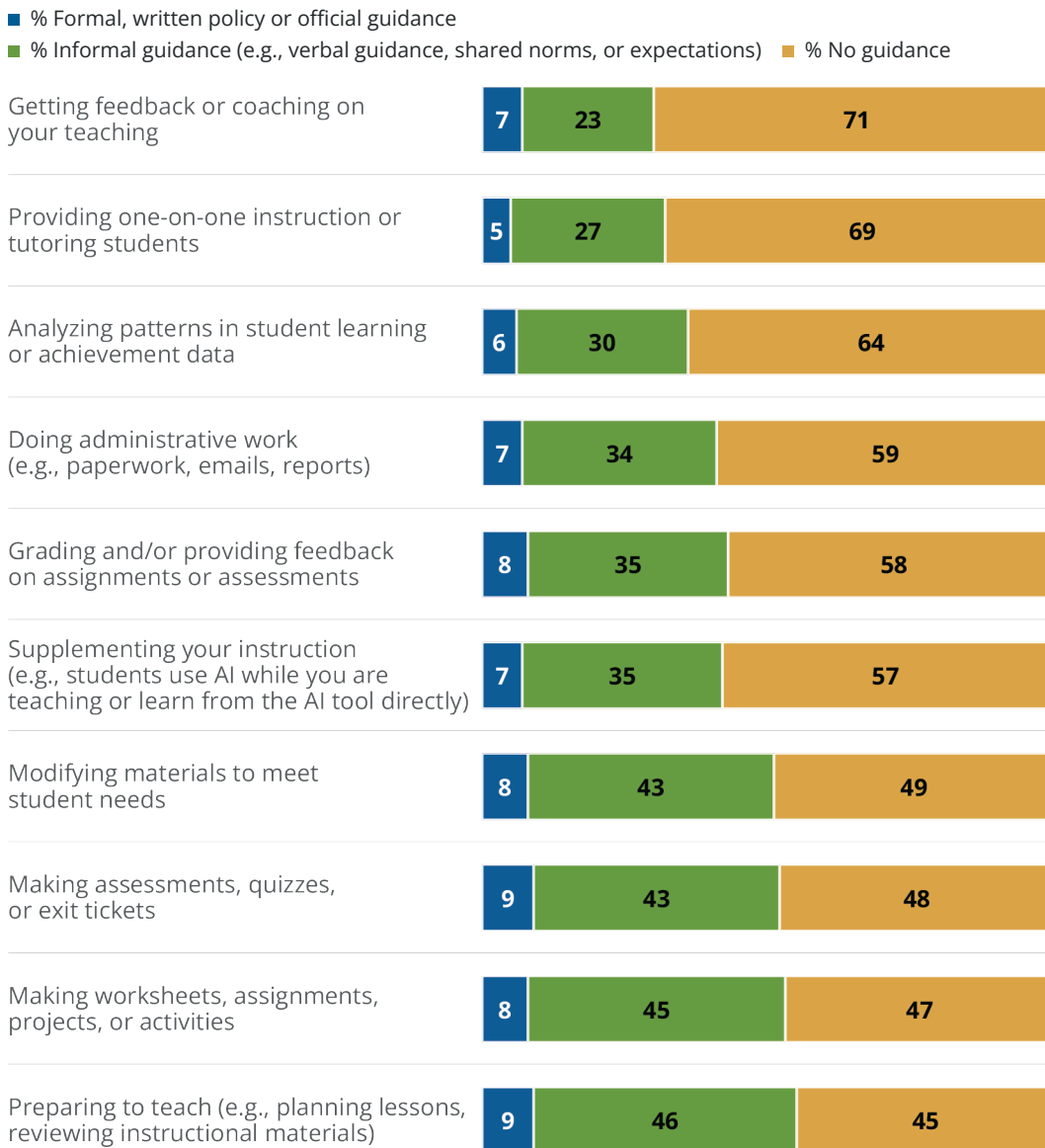
Teachers report that they receive less guidance on using AI for some tasks than others. For example, 58% receive no guidance on how to use AI for grading and providing feedback and 69% say the same about applying AI in settings with one-on-one instruction or tutoring. Among teachers who do receive guidance, the vast majority of it is informal. For many teachers, decisions about if, when and how to use AI are being made individually, in the absence of clear institutional expectations.

⁷ Malek Ash, A. (2025, June 25). *Three in 10 teachers use AI weekly, saving six weeks a year*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/691967/three-teachers-weekly-saving-six-weeks-year.aspx>

FIGURE 10

What type of guidance, if any, have you received about using AI tools for the following specific purposes?

Among teachers for whom this task is applicable



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding.

Teachers in higher-needs schools are less likely to receive guidance than those in wealthier schools, especially when it comes to how they should apply AI tools to the creation of student materials. For example, 59% of teachers in the wealthiest schools receive some type of guidance on how to use AI tools in making worksheets and assignments, compared with 49% of teachers in the highest-need schools. With few exceptions, guidance does not differ much by other characteristics such as the grade level or main subject taught.

Communication From School Leadership Is a Key Lever to Helping Teachers Thrive

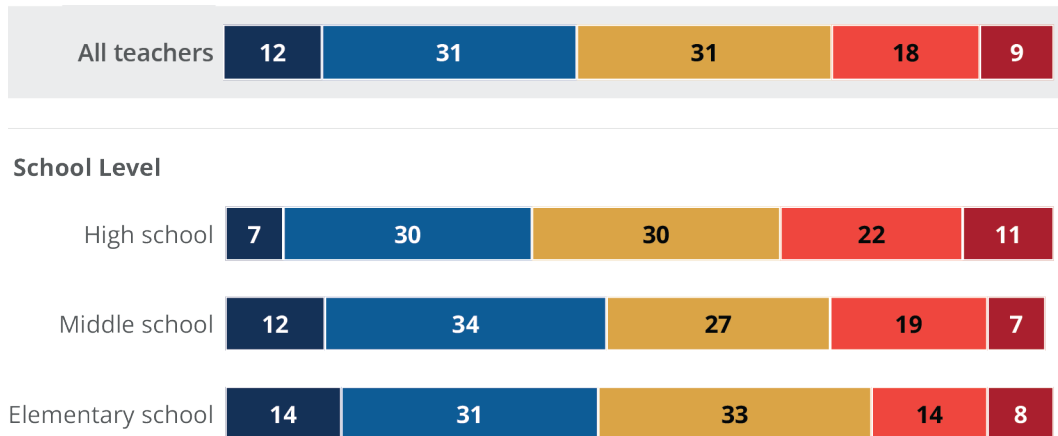
For some teachers, unrealistic or unclear expectations may be related to a breakdown in communication between teachers and school leadership. About four in 10 teachers (43%) say the communication from their school leadership is “very good” or “excellent.” Conversely, nearly three in 10 teachers (27%) say their leadership’s communication about school policies is “fair” or “poor,” and an additional 31% say the communication is “good.” High school teachers are more likely to report fair or poor communication than elementary school teachers (33% vs. 22%).



FIGURE 11

How would you rate the communication you receive from school leadership about school policies?

■ % Excellent ■ % Very good ■ % Good ■ % Fair ■ % Poor



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding.

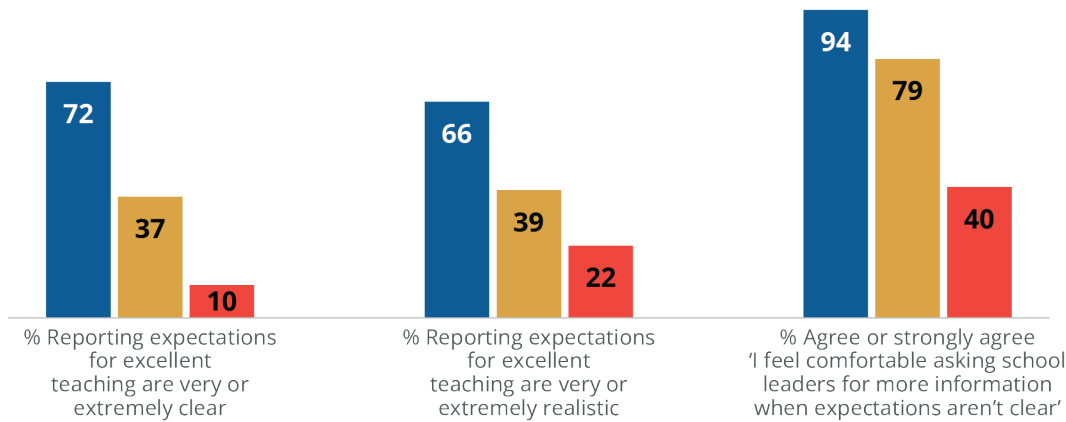
Teachers who say they receive better communication from school leadership are more likely to feel their job expectations are realistic and clear, and more likely to feel comfortable reaching out for more clarity when needed. Two-thirds of teachers (66%) who receive the best communication from leadership feel they have realistic expectations for excellent teaching, compared with 22% of those who report poor or fair communication. The disparity is even greater when it comes to clarity; 72% of teachers with the best communication from leadership feel they have realistic expectations for excellent teaching, compared with 22% of those who report poor or fair communication. The disparity is even greater when it comes to clarity; 72% of teachers with the best communication from leadership say the expectations for excellent teaching are very or extremely clear, compared with only 10% of teachers who say they receive poor or fair communication from leadership.

FIGURE 12

Higher-Quality Communication From School Leaders is Linked to More Realistic, Clear Expectations

Among those who say:

- Communication from leadership is very good or excellent
- Communication from leadership is good
- Communication from leadership is fair or poor



This relationship may explain why teachers who experience better communication also exhibit stronger outcomes such as higher job satisfaction, higher engagement and lower burnout. Compared with teachers who receive poor or fair communication, teachers who receive excellent or very good communication from school leadership are:

57 points
more likely to be **satisfied with their job** (91% vs. 34%⁸)

51 points
more likely to be **engaged at work** (56% vs. 5%)

38 points
less likely to be **frequently burned out** (27% vs. 65%⁹)

8 Percent who rate satisfaction a "5" – extremely satisfied or "4" (out of 5).

9 Percent who feel burned out very often or always.

Conclusion

Prior research from the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup Teaching for Tomorrow study has emphasized that a sustainable teaching career (one that means less turnover for kids and more classes with experienced teachers) isn't just about a pay raise or reducing hours. It's also about giving teachers the conditions they need to do what they came to do — teach effectively, with adequate support, a manageable workload and the right tools for the job. Results from this study add more nuance to those findings, showing that conditions for a sustainable teaching career are shaped by the expectations teachers receive and the clarity with which those expectations are communicated. Unrealistic expectations for teachers are contributing to burnout and reduced career longevity, and a lack of clarity on expectations only exacerbates those effects.

When teachers are asked to do too much with too little support, the fallout affects the teachers as well as the students they serve.



Methodology

Results are based on a web survey conducted Feb. 9 – Mar. 2, 2026, with a sample of 2,069 U.S. teachers working in public K-12 schools. Teachers were recruited from the RAND American Teacher Panel, a nationally representative, probability-based panel of U.S. public school teachers. More information about the RAND American Teacher Panel is available [here](#).

The final sample was weighted to match the school- and teacher-level demographics of K-12 public school teachers in the U.S., including school level, student poverty, student race and Hispanic ethnicity, school size, school urbanicity, teacher gender, teacher race and Hispanic ethnicity and teachers' years of experience. Targets for these characteristics were retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics. Teacher-level characteristics were based on the 2020-2021 National Teacher and Principal Survey, while school-level characteristics were based on the 2024-2025 Common Core of Data.

For the total sample of 2,069 U.S. teachers, the margin of sampling error is ± 2.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher. All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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