

# Navigating the New Normal: Teachers' Experiences & Perceptions During the Fall Semester of 2021

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*An Upbeat Research Brief*

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UPBEAT

This is an unprecedented time to be a teacher. The pandemic has required teachers to exercise flexibility, change the way in which they deliver instruction, and adjust to different ways of interacting with colleagues. As teachers have increasingly returned to in-person instruction, they are experiencing many challenges unique to a new context of teaching.

In this brief, we explore teachers’ experiences during the fall semester of 2021. Overall, we find that teachers report low satisfaction rates with aspects of work/life balance, professional development, compensation, along with cultural competence and diversity. We explore trends in each of these domains and provide recommendations based on best practices of schools and districts addressing these issues.

## Data & Sample

In the fall of 2021, Teach Upbeat collected responses to their Teacher Engagement Survey from 14,024 teachers working in 425 public schools within 26 districts across 14 states (New York, Louisiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, South Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, Texas, Georgia, Vermont, Nebraska, Arkansas, and Oregon). Teachers responded between September 27, 2021 and November 13, 2021.

This large and diverse sample of respondents is broadly representative of U.S. public school teachers. Teachers in Upbeat’s sample have slightly fewer years of experience, on average, and are slightly more likely to be Black and slightly less likely to be Hispanic/Latinx relative to all public school teachers.

Table 1. Upbeat Sample and National Characteristics of Public School Teachers

	Upbeat Sample	National
Female	79%	76%
Male	18%	24%
Asian	1%	2%
Black	15%	7%
Hispanic/Latinx	3%	9%
Multi-Racial	1%	2%
Native American	0%	1%
White	72%	79%
Years of Experience	11.5	13.7
Pre-K	2%	-
Elementary School	54%	50%
Middle/High School	44%	50%
Teachers in sample	14,024	3,545,000

\*Source: National Center for Education Statistics 2017-18.

# Measures and Terms

## Overall Working Conditions

The Teacher Engagement Survey captures 22 broad domains of teachers’ working conditions. These working conditions are based on evidence that predict and explain teacher retention. We construct a measure of overall working conditions as an average of teachers’ responses to the items across these domains.

Appreciation	Autonomy	Belonging & Wellbeing
Care & Commitment	Collaboration	Compensation & Career Path
Cultural Competence	Diversity	Evaluation
Equity	Inclusion	Instructional Leadership
Parent/Teacher Communication	Principal/Teacher Trust	Professional Development
Recruitment, Hiring, and Onboarding	Resources & Facilities	Satisfaction & Purpose
School Safety & Order	Self-Efficacy	Voice & Leadership
Work/Life Balance		

## Teachers’ Positive Perceptions of Working Conditions

These measures capture the percent of teachers that responded positively (i.e., selected Strongly Agree or Agree) to the items that constitute the working condition domains.

## Student Engagement

Teachers reported on the percent of students regularly engaged in learning. The answer choices for this question were in quintiles.

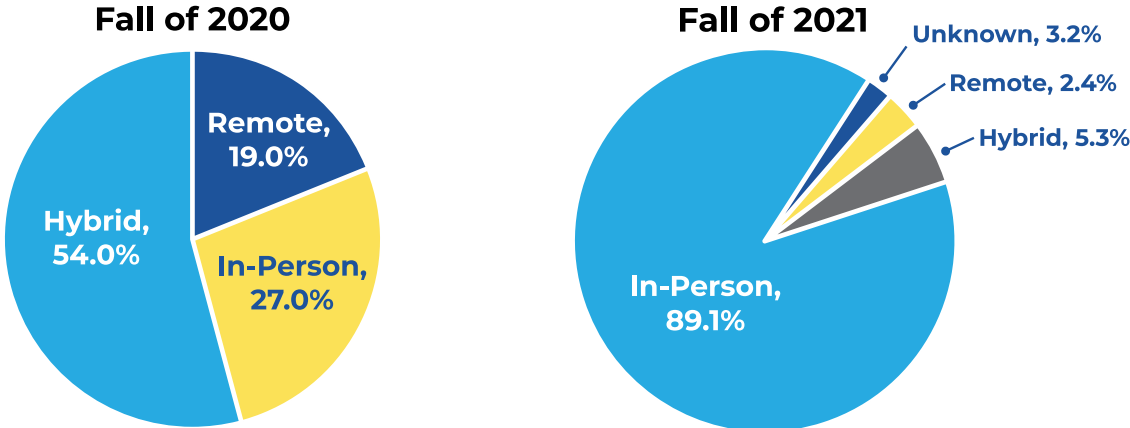
## Teaching Modality

- + In-person only: Teacher teaches exclusively in-person at school.
- + Remote only: Teacher teaches exclusively online (either from home or from school).
- + Hybrid: Teacher teaches some periods/days in-person and other periods/days remotely.

# Returning to In-Person Learning

Teachers have overwhelmingly returned to in person instruction this fall. In Upbeat’s survey from fall of 2020, only 27% of the 11,092 teachers who completed the survey reported teaching in-person. As the pandemic begins to subside this academic year, over 89% of teachers now report returning exclusively to in-person teaching.

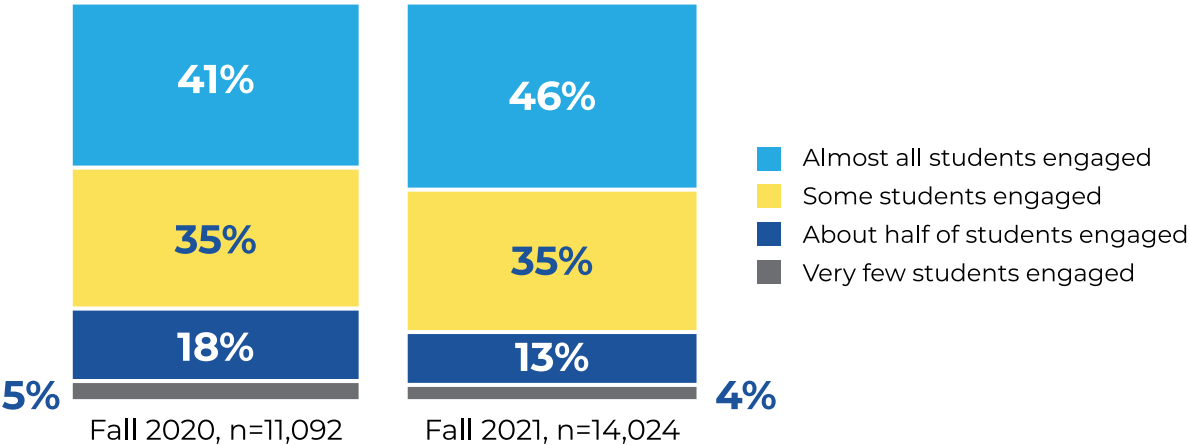
Figure 1. Modality of Instruction Among Teacher Respondents



# Student Engagement

Returning to in-person learning appears to have benefited student engagement. Last fall, 76% of teachers reported that most or almost all of their students were engaged in learning. This fall, 81% of teachers are reporting that most or almost all of their students are engaged in learning.

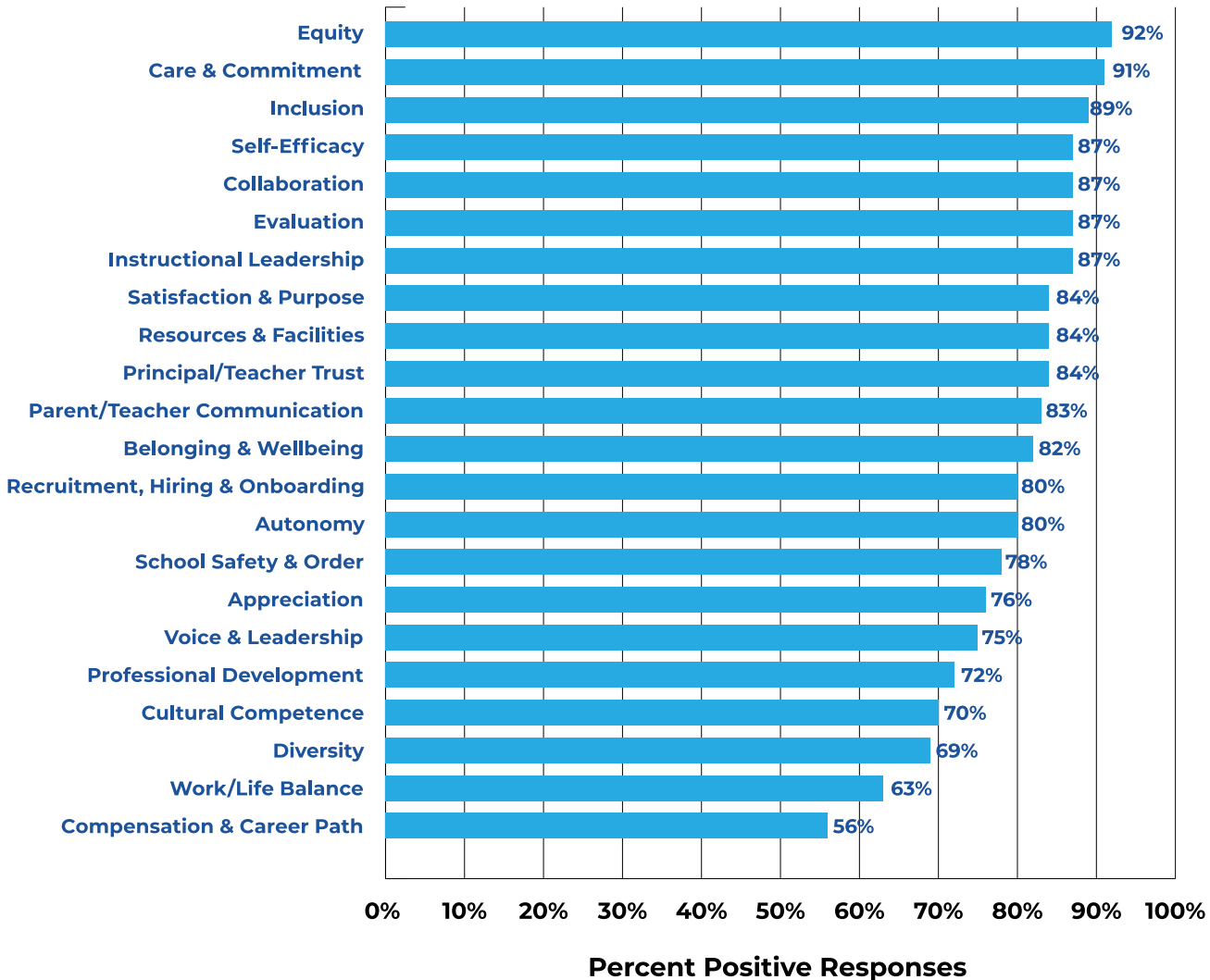
Figure 2. Proportions of Teachers Reporting the Level of Students Engaged in Learning



# Working Conditions

The transition back to in-person learning for most schools appears to have benefited students but has also created many new challenges for teachers. These challenges further exacerbate the long-standing areas of improvement that teachers have reported about their working conditions. The figure below shows the percent positive responses in each working conditions category for teachers in the fall of 2021.

Figure 3. Percent Positive Responses by Category, Fall 2021



Low overall satisfaction with compensation & career growth opportunities as well as with work/life balance stand out as areas of acute dissatisfaction for teachers. Consistently with prior years, teachers' responses indicated lower rates of satisfaction with their professional development opportunities and a lack of voice and leadership opportunities at their schools. Teachers also highlighted lower levels of diversity and cultural competence at their schools, while largely agreeing that their schools were workplaces that were committed to equity and inclusion.

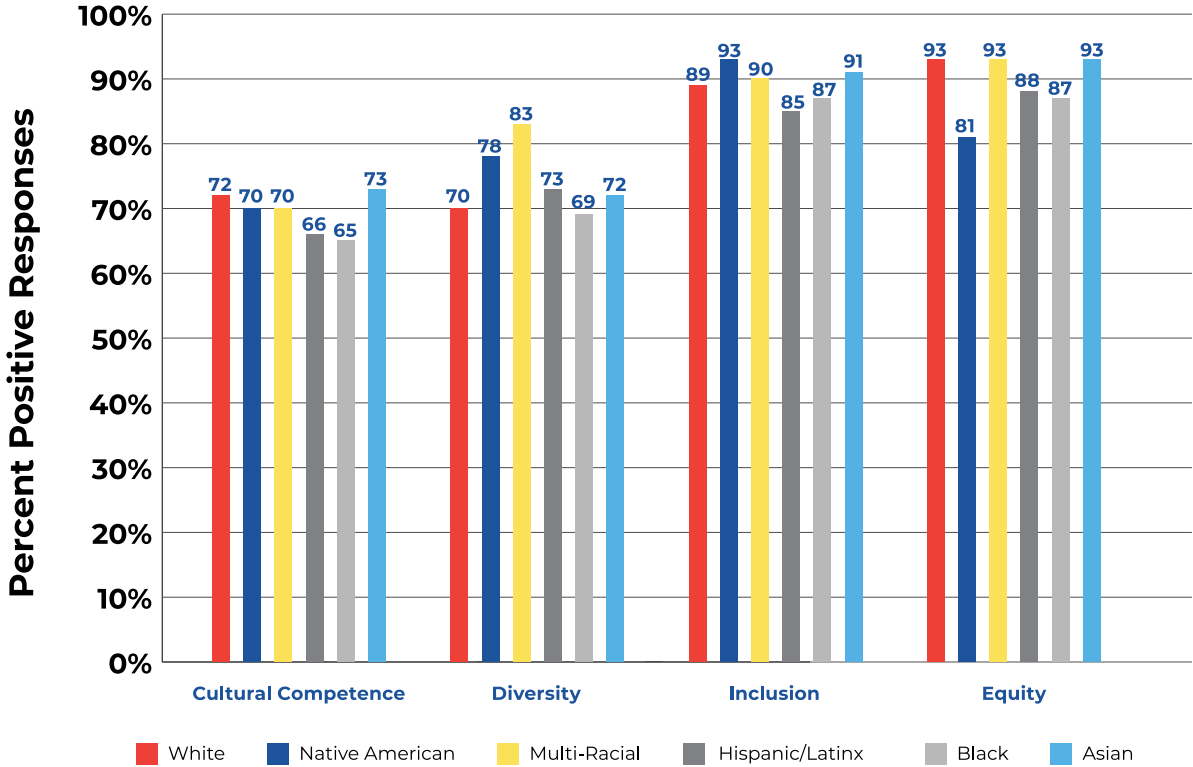
# Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, and Cultural Competence

Upbeat’s survey asks questions in four similar, but distinct domains—equity, inclusion, diversity, and cultural competence. As shown in Figure 3 above, the equity domain questions ask if teachers of all backgrounds feel valued and respected, and whether or not opportunities are accessible to teachers of all backgrounds. The inclusion domain asks teachers about how active their schools are about including families and students from diverse backgrounds. The diversity questions ask about whether the staff is diverse, and reflective of the student population. Lastly, cultural competence questions target whether the school and administration are prepared to discuss and address racism and discrimination.

We further explore teachers’ experiences with these domains based on teachers’ race/ethnicity.

- + Black and Hispanic/Latinx teachers reported more negative experiences with diversity, equity, inclusion and cultural competence in their schools than their White and Asian peers.
- + Only 65% of Black teachers and 66% of Hispanic/Latinx teachers reported positive perceptions about cultural competence in their work environment compared to 70-73% of teachers from other racial/ethnic groups.
- + Native American teachers were the most likely to feel as though their schools did not use equitable practices (81% vs. 87-93% for other racial/ethnic groups).

Figure 4. Percent Positive Responses in Selected Domains, by Race/Ethnicity



## **Spotlight on Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, and Cultural Competence *Louisville, Kentucky & Greendale, Wisconsin***

Teachers in Louisville, KY (Jefferson County Public Schools, JCPS) had an average of 83% positive responses in the cultural competence domain, more than 12 percentage points higher than Upbeat's global average in the fall of 2021. District leadership credits this success to several system-wide initiatives, including a solid partnership between the departments of Human Resources and Diversity, Equity, and Poverty (DEP) as part of the racial equity policy. First, DEP implemented a variety of trainings (e.g., implicit bias) to help leadership, teachers, and staff feel better prepared to address cultural diversity. As part of this effort, Employee Resource Groups were created to foster teacher retention and have allowed Black, Hispanic/Latinx, LGBTQ+, Asian, and new teachers to meet regularly to address their needs and foster their professional growth. Second, they focused on the hiring and retention of teachers of color through a partnership with colleges and universities, including the JCPS Louisville Teacher Residency program (University of Louisville). This program provides an alternative certification pathway into teaching and has increased both the hiring and retention of teachers of color. Lastly, district and school leaders partnered with local universities to have professors lead professional development training in diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural competence, which focused extensively on the local context.

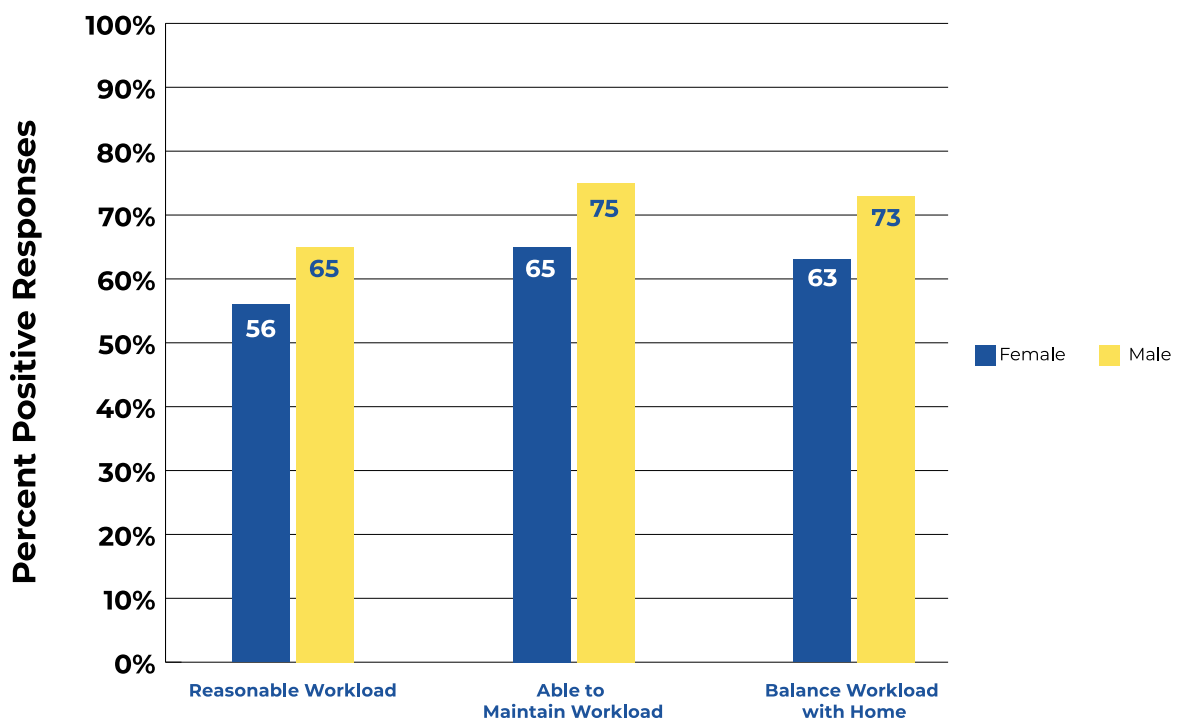
Greendale Schools in Wisconsin also yielded higher than average results in the equity, inclusion and cultural competence domains, with 95% and 93% positive responses in the equity and inclusion domains, respectively. District leadership has addressed these domains directly through policy and practice. In early 2021, the Greendale Board of Education unanimously approved and adopted a policy to promote student equity and confront systemic racism. The policy was developed with input from the community, staff, families, and students and its purpose was to address systemic impact of policies and practices on groups of people with shared demographic characteristics. To put this policy into practice, the district has implemented several programs. For example, one professional development day focused on creating a culture of belonging using Safe Place training as an opportunity to train staff about LGBTQ+ identities, gender, and sexuality, and examine prejudice, assumptions, and privilege. Throughout the year different identities and heritages are celebrated, and the district provides curriculum and activities to support these celebrations. For example, there are celebrations for Hispanic Heritage month and Pride month. Most recently, the district has emphasized hiring teachers of color and ensuring that all new teachers feel a sense of belonging. These strategies have likely contributed to the district's higher than average equity, inclusion, and cultural competence ratings.

## Work/Life Balance

Questions in the work/life balance domains ask teachers how reasonable their workload is, and whether they feel they can maintain that workload and balance it with their responsibilities at home. The work/life domain ranks very low for fall of 2021, with just 63% of all teachers responding positively. We further explore teachers' experiences by disaggregating results by teachers' gender and years of experience.

- + Female teachers were much less likely (10 percentage points) to report that they felt positively about maintaining their workload and that they were able to balance home responsibilities with work responsibilities.
- + Only 56% of female teachers agreed that their workload was reasonable.

Figure 5. Percent Positive Responses in Work/Life Balance Domain, by Gender

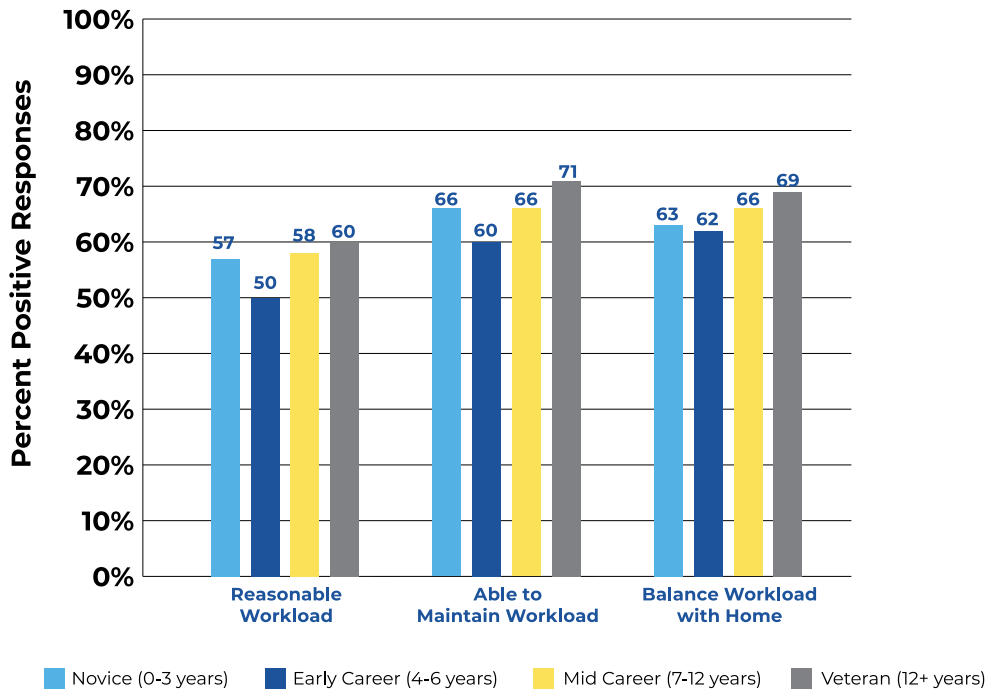


Teachers in their early career years (four to six years of experience teaching) were most negatively affected by work/life balance. These are likely the years when teachers are starting to build a family and therefore their home life has many more demands.

- + Only 60% of early career teachers agreed that they would be able to maintain their workload long term, while 66-71% of teachers with other experience levels agreed.
- + On the other hand, veteran teachers are most comfortable with their work/life balance, especially their ability to maintain their workload long term; 71% of veteran teachers responded positively to maintaining their workload.

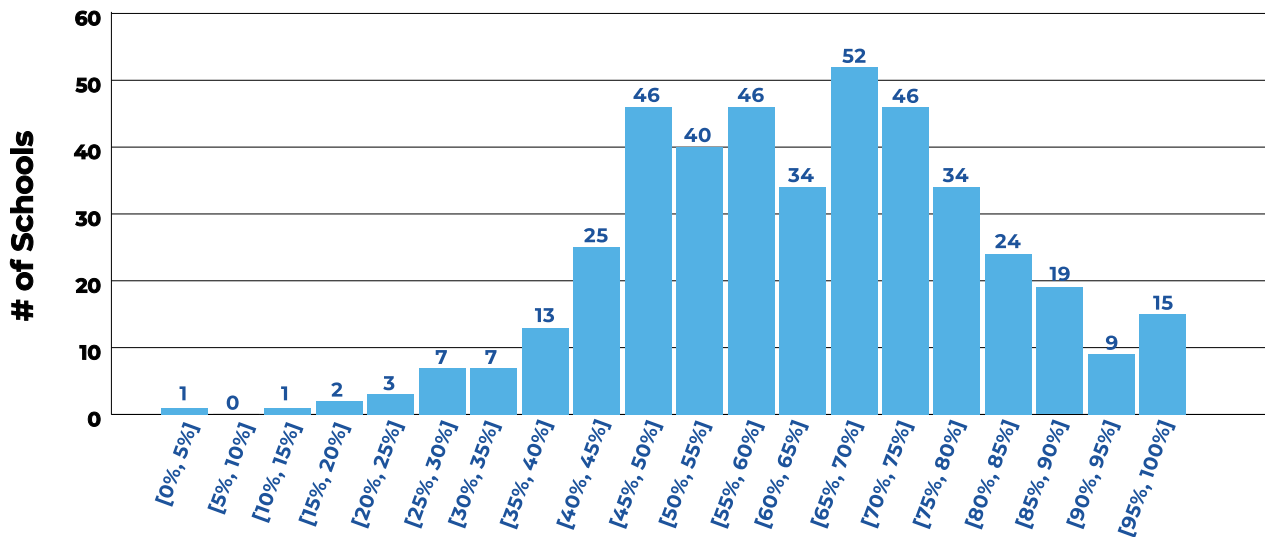


Figure 6. Percent Positive Responses in Work/Life Balance Domain, by Experience Level



Although work/life balance is a general challenge this fall, not all teachers report that it is a concern. In Figure 7 below, we display the wide variation that exists across schools in teachers' average perceptions of their work/life balance. This figure reveals that some schools are excelling in this domain and that it is possible to support teachers to achieve a healthy balance even during these difficult times.

Figure 7. Histogram of Percent Positive Responses in Work/Life Balance Domain, by School (n schools=423)



## Spotlight on Work/Life Balance | *Chicago, Illinois and Covington, Georgia*

Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS) Bucktown, part of the Distinctive Schools network in Chicago, had 73% positive responses in the work/life balance domain, nearly 9 percentage points higher than Upbeat's global average and over 6 percentage points higher than the Distinctive Schools average. The principal of CICS Bucktown, Sarah O'Connell, attributes the high rates to improving the efficiency of meetings, thereby giving time back to teachers. For example, Principal O'Connell reviewed meeting schedules to ensure the team holds only the "necessary" meetings each week. At the start of each meeting, she explicitly states the purpose of the meeting and the desired outcome, and often brings snacks for staff. She also takes a look at the upcoming month or week to determine where she can either give time back to teachers or "do something that brings joy or shows appreciation." This has shown teachers that their time is valued, and has resulted in a positive outlook on work/life balance.

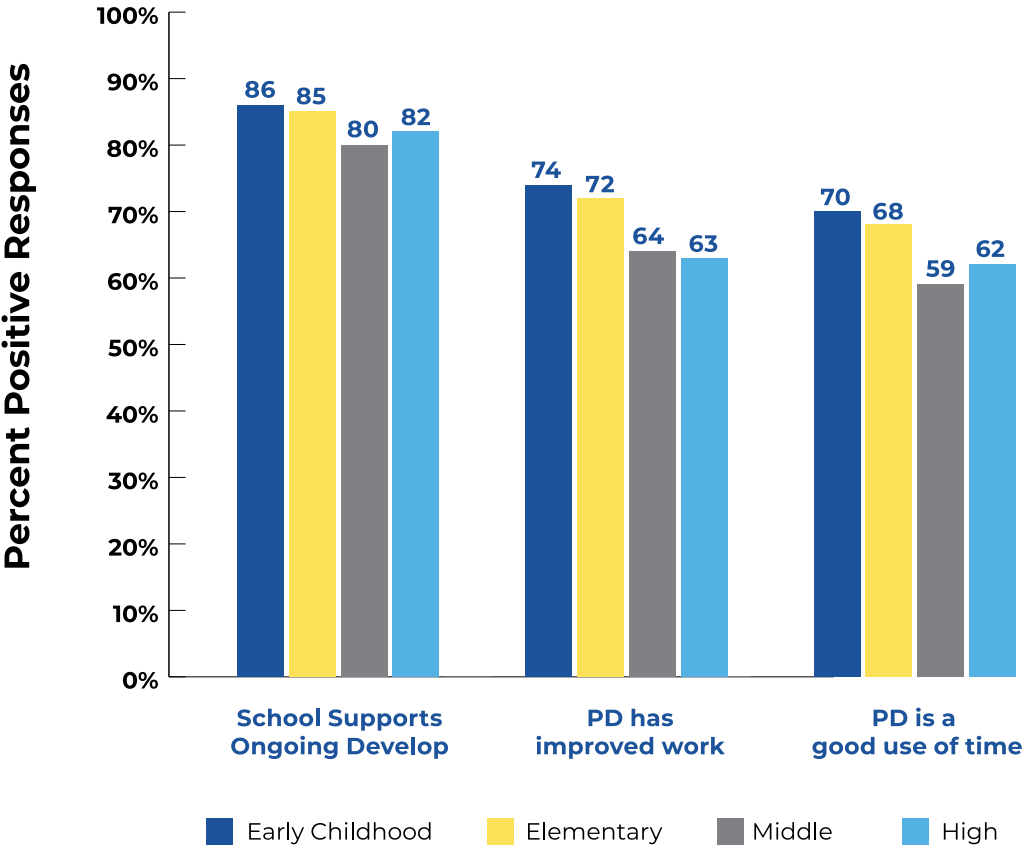
Within Newton County Schools in Georgia, Principal Chris Haymore of Mansfield Elementary School has also been using strategies to address work/life balance and mental wellbeing, resulting in 89% positive responses in the work/life balance domain and a 98% positive rating in the belonging and wellbeing domain. Principal Haymore will often start the year by thanking teachers ahead of time for working late and show his appreciation for their commitment to the school. However, he believes that teachers should not let their "commitment become a sacrifice." He encourages his teachers to maintain a proper balance between work and home life. Furthermore, the instructional coach at his school came up with an idea to host "Wellness Wednesdays" as a way to help maintain a better balance between work and wellness. On these days, teachers are able to wear more casual attire, the PE teacher creates morning workouts to get the teachers up and moving, and school partners donate healthy snacks for teachers. Principal Haymore attributes these gestures to the higher than average work/life balance rates.

# Professional Development

The professional development domain measures satisfaction across three questions: whether the schools support ongoing professional growth, whether professional development (PD) has helped teachers to improve their work, and whether professional development is a good use of teachers' time.

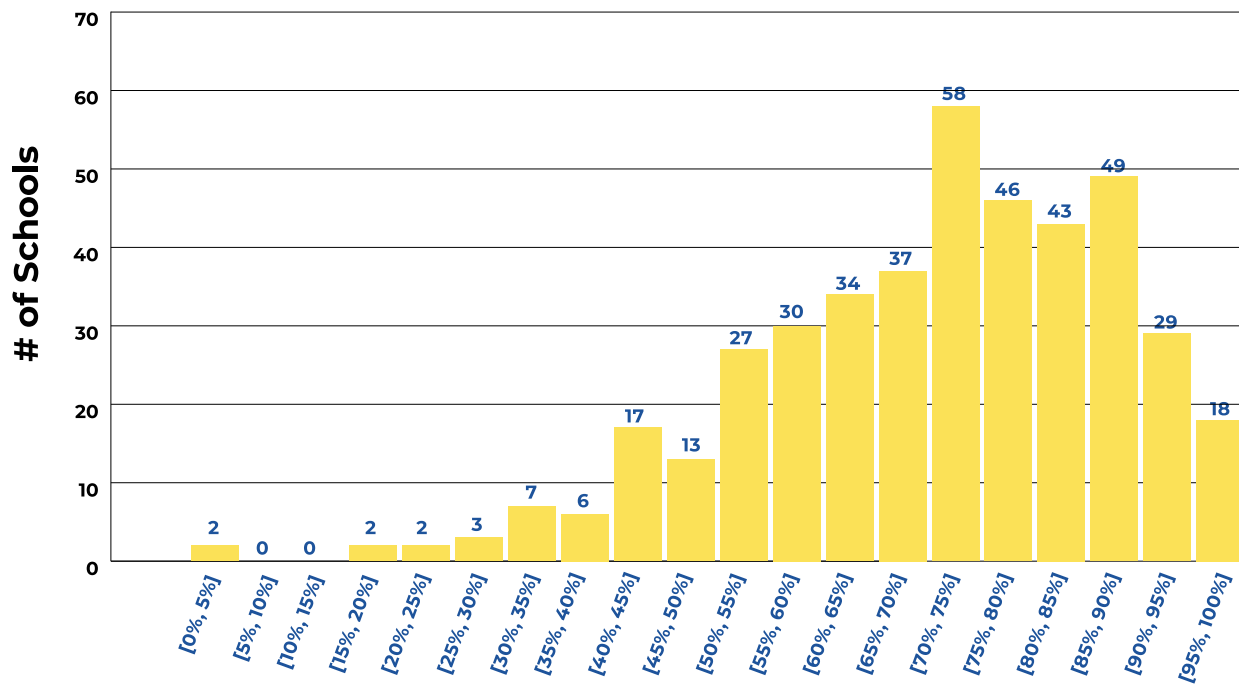
- + In general, teachers tend to agree at higher rates that their schools support their ongoing development than they agree that PD is effective or a good use of time.
- + Teachers in middle or high school grades are less satisfied with professional development in general than their elementary or early childhood peers.

Figure 8. Percent Positive Responses in Professional Development Domain, by Grade Level



In Figure 9, we show the variation in teachers' perspective on PD across individual schools. This histogram illustrates how there are a substantial number of schools that are succeeding at providing PD activities that teachers find meaningful.

Figure 9. Histogram of Percent Positive Responses in Professional Development Domain, by School (n=422)



## Spotlight on Professional Development | Covington, Georgia

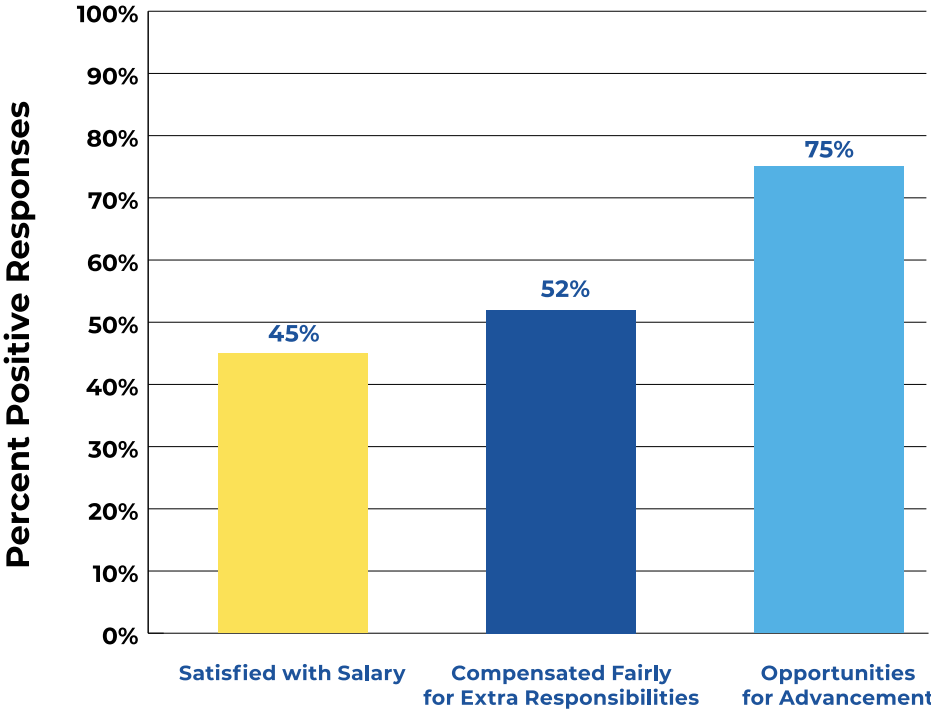
Heard-Mixon Elementary in Newton County Schools (Georgia) received an impressive 100% positive response on all three questions in the PD domain. When asked about why their professional development was so successful, school leaders pointed to the work of the Instructional Coach (IC). The IC used data to personalize professional development opportunities to meet the identified needs of teacher teams. To achieve this, the IC administers a survey at the beginning of the year to gather teacher feedback on what PD they feel would be most beneficial. The IC performs classroom observations and plans with teachers, which also provides data about PD needs. From this point, PD is planned and adapted to each grade level and needs of the individual teacher. For example, data showed that small group reading instruction was something that would be beneficial to address. PD was then created for each grade level of teachers, and each PD meeting starts with an explicit tie to this data and a discussion of why the PD is important. Overall, the trust that the IC has gained with their teachers regarding relevant and personalized learning is evident.

## Compensation and Career Path

Compensation and career path continually ranks at the bottom of teacher satisfaction. Three questions comprise the compensation and career domain, two are related to compensation and one is related to career path.

- + Only 56% of teachers responded positively overall in the compensation and career path domain about opportunities to advance careers through new or expanded roles (see Figure 3).
- + Teachers are least satisfied with their salary, followed by the compensation for extra responsibilities question. However, the career path question is actually ranked fairly highly in terms of percent positive responses.

Figure 10. Percent Positive Responses in the Compensation and Career Path Domain



## Spotlight on Compensation & Career Path | *Beaufort County, South Carolina*

Although it may seem like there is little that school and district leaders can do to influence the salaries of their employees, there are actions that some school districts have taken to start to address this issue. For example, Beaufort County Schools (South Carolina) implements a salary study every five to six years to ensure that salaries in the district remain competitive and equitable, not just compared to other local districts, but also within the industry as a whole and within the district among employees with similar titles and job responsibilities. They also make adjustments for cost of living and strive to ensure that salaries reflect the “professionalism” of teaching. The district states that they “want salaries to be removed as a reason why people don’t stay” in Beaufort County.

## Conclusion

Overall, these results suggest that teachers are adjusting to a new normal as many schools transition back to fully in-person learning. There are several domains in which teachers report dissatisfaction. Teachers report struggling with work/life balance, something that principals can take action to address. Principals might get creative in their efforts to ease the burden on teachers (and on themselves, as well) by enacting some of the successful strategies we highlight above. Our results also shine a light on the importance of further investing in a more diverse teacher workforce and equipping teachers with tools and frameworks to address issues of race, racism and discrimination. Districts can likely improve teachers’ experiences by providing more effective professional development that teachers view as a good use of their time.

Lastly, teachers continue to report that they are dissatisfied with their compensation, yet seem to be more satisfied with their opportunities for advancement—which is a lever that principals can continue to pull to increase overall satisfaction in this area.

Schools’ efforts to improve these areas of teachers’ working conditions will likely be more successful at attracting, supporting, and retaining teachers during these challenging times.



## **About Upbeat**

*Upbeat works with K-12 districts across the country to administer a research-grounded survey to elevate teacher engagement and retention by fostering strong school environments. Founded and led by former educators, we bring together data scientists, technologists, and experienced former school leaders to deliver a research-backed solution. Our surveys paired with tailored toolkits and intervention strategies, surface real-time insights so that principals and district leaders are able to better understand and uncover the conditions affecting employee morale and establish actionable plans to improve teacher and staff retention.*