



Teacher Pension Perspectives

How teachers really feel about their retirement security, the state of traditional pensions, and alternative systems

By Anthony Randazzo, Sandi Jacobs, Kyle Schnobelen, and Pete Tontillo

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educators devote their careers to helping students, and like other professionals, they deserve a secure retirement: to relax, travel, and spend time with family without worrying about money. Unlike most professionals in the private sector, the large majority of teachers rely on defined benefit retirement plans run by the states they teach in—popularly known as teacher pensions—to provide that secure retirement.

Unfortunately, the details about how pension systems across the country actually work can be incomprehensibly complex. Meanwhile, most state-run systems, which administer the pensions that the large majority of teachers rely on, have substantial and growing financial problems. Discussions about the future of these pensions often take place without a deep understanding of the perspectives that matters most: those of teachers themselves.

Gaining that perspective was the goal of the new **National Teacher Retirement Perspective Survey**, designed and carried out by the [Equable Institute](#), [Hattaway Communications](#), and [EducationCounsel](#), the results of which are summarized in this report. While many past surveys have examined teacher attitudes on a multitude of issues, no robust analysis has provided a comprehensive understanding of teachers' views of their retirement plans, specifically in the context of the challenges that pension systems face in 2019 and in the future.

Among other questions, this survey explores how teachers feel about their current prospects for a secure retirement, and whether they think that traditional pensions work for them. It also explores how they feel about the challenges facing their pension systems, and how they want the state that runs their pensions to act. Finally, it explores how open they are to changes in how their retirement systems are operated. Among other insights, we found that:

- **Retirement is near the top of many teachers' minds—particularly older teachers.**
- **Teachers overall feel somewhat confident in their ability to retire comfortably, but many remain uncertain.**
- **Teachers see their pension plans as central to their retirement security, but aren't satisfied with them—or certain that they'll receive all the pension benefits they earn.**
- **Teachers care that their retirement plan provides guaranteed income and security, and are less interested in the details about how they are provided.**
- **Teachers are relatively open to discussing changes to their current pension plans.**
- **Teachers didn't get into the profession for the retirement benefits—specifically when compared to other, mission-based factors.**
- **Once teachers enter the classroom, keeping their retirement benefits is very important to their decision to continue teaching.**
- **Most teachers aren't aware of any problems with the teacher pension system in their states.**
- **Those who are aware of problems tend to be at least somewhat familiar with them, and see chronic underfunding of pension systems as the largest problem.**
- **Teachers who are aware of pension problems consider them serious, and fear they will be affected on a personal level.**
- **Overwhelmingly, teachers trust their unions and associations, and their fellow teachers—not politicians or technocrats—to look out for their interests.**

Myriad proposals exist to manage pension funds more responsibly, fully fund their obligations, lower levels of investment risk, pay down damaging pension debt, and put all educators on a path to retirement security. Whatever the future holds for traditional pensions, teachers' perspectives need to be a major part of the conversation about how to improve the sustainability of their retirement systems.

METHODOLOGY

The National Teacher Retirement Perspective Survey was developed by staff at Equable Institute, EducationCounsel, and Hattaway Communications, with input from a range of educators, academics, and retirement policy specialists. The 81-question survey was fielded online, in English, between May 15 and June 28, 2019, with a nationally representative sample of 1,210 current teachers.

Respondents closely reflect the overall composition of current teachers across the United States who are enrolled in government-sponsored pension plans, including both teachers at traditional public schools and public charter schools. The survey did not include teachers at private schools or public school teachers enrolled in retirement plans other than pensions (such as guaranteed return plans or defined contribution plans).

Respondents are 76 percent female and 24 percent male; 60 percent live in dual-income households, while 40 percent are their household's sole income-earner; and 80 percent identify as white, while 7 percent identify as African American, and 8 percent as Hispanic/Latino. Respondents are regionally representative, and cover all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia. They cover every age range of working teachers, and span from teachers at the beginning of their careers to those eligible for their full retirement benefits.

Age of respondents		Years of experience teaching	
18–25	5%	5 or fewer	22%
26–30	10%	6–10	20%
31–35	18%	11–15	19%
36–40	16%	16–20	17%
41–45	13%	21 or more	22%
46–49	9%		
50–54	12%		
55–59	10%		
60–64	6%		
65–70	1%		

Table 1

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

The survey's margin of error is $\pm 3\%$ at a 95% confidence level. For further details on the methodology and sample composition, please see Appendices A and B.

WHO WE ARE



Equable Institute is a nonprofit that educates and informs employees, retirees, labor, and taxpayers about how to create real retirement plan sustainability and affordability without sacrificing future income security. We are radically bipartisan, intensely analytical, and unapologetically direct. Equable exists to support public sector workers in understanding how their retirement systems can be improved, and to help state and local governments find ways to both fix threats to municipal finance stability and ensure the retirement security of all public servants.



EducationCounsel is a mission-based education consulting firm that combines significant experience in policy, strategy, law and advocacy to drive improvements in the U.S. education system. We develop and advance evidence-based ideas at the local, state, and national levels to strengthen educational systems and promote expanded opportunities and improved outcomes for all students in order to close achievement gaps and significantly improve education outcomes for all children from early childhood through postsecondary education.



Hattaway Communications is a D.C.-based strategic communications firm with a mission: to help visionary leaders and organizations achieve ambitious goals that benefit people and the planet. We're in the business of communications for impact, not self-promotion.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anthony Randazzo is the executive director of Equable Institute. He has published extensively on the systemic and political behavioral factors that lead to underfunded retirement systems, and has worked directly with numerous governments to improve funding policy and build new public sector retirement system designs. Prior to Equable, Randazzo was managing director of the Pension Integrity Project and director of economic research at Reason Foundation. He graduated from New York University with a multidisciplinary M.A. in behavioral political economy.

Sandi Jacobs is a Principal at EducationCounsel, where her main area of focus is educator quality. Before joining EdCounsel, Sandi was the Senior Vice President for State and District Policy at the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). Sandi previously worked at the U.S. Department of Education on the Reading First and Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration programs. She also taught 4th and 5th grade for nearly a decade in Brooklyn, New York. She holds a master's degree from Columbia University's Teachers College and a BA from Columbia College.

Kyle Schnoebelen is a brand strategist and message researcher at Hattaway Communications, where he works with clients who focus on influencing the policy debate across a range of issues. A former editor at the Center for American Progress, Kyle earned a master's degree in public policy and a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Virginia.

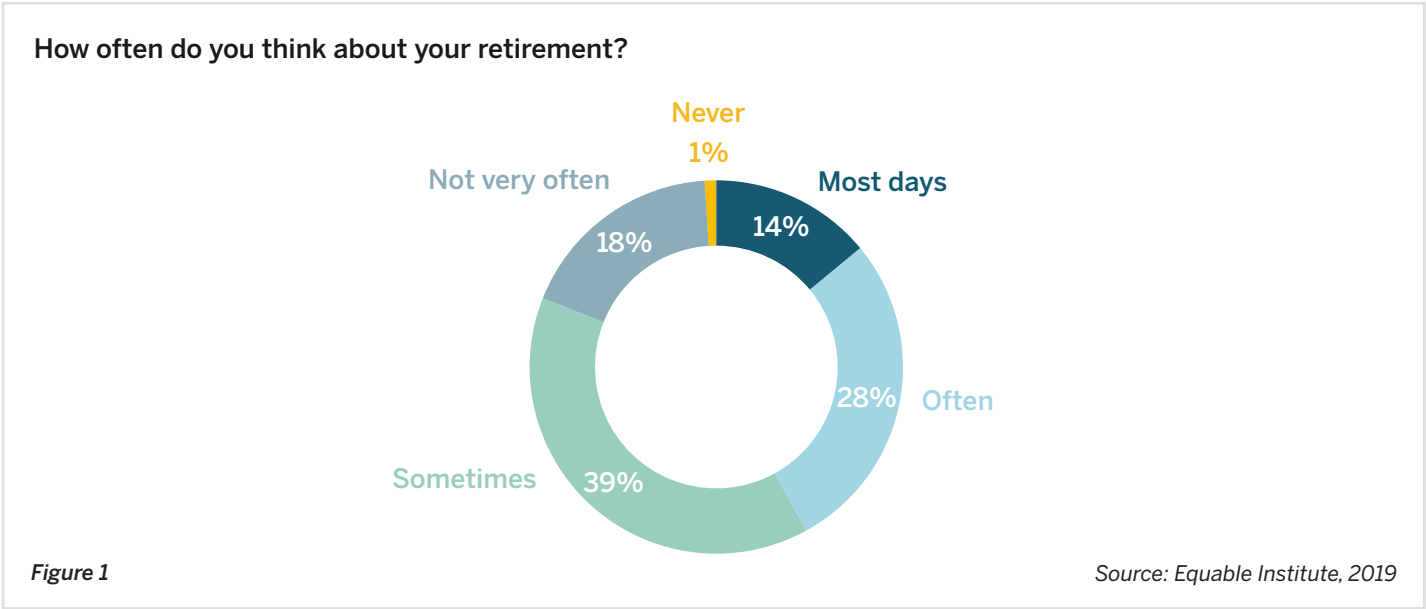
Pete Tontillo is a linguist and senior associate at Hattaway Communications, where he leads innovative qualitative and quantitative research for organizations including the Ford Foundation, HuffPost, and Consumer Reports. A Fulbright scholar, Pete graduated from Georgetown University with a master's degree in linguistics, and from Washington University in St. Louis with a bachelor's degree in classics and African studies.

KEY FINDINGS

We grouped our findings of teacher perspectives into four sections: 1) retirement security, 2) pension design, 3) motivations for teaching, and 4) funding challenges. In each, we cover the insights that we found most interesting out of responses to a wider range of questions. For the full responses to each question in our survey, please see equable.org/nationalteachersurvey.

Retirement Security

Retirement is near the top of many teachers’ minds—particularly older teachers. A large majority of teachers, 81 percent, think about retirement at least “sometimes,” while 42 percent think about it “most days” or “often.”



Teachers in the last decade of their careers think about retirement more than younger teachers or teachers with less experience: 50 percent of those 50–59 years of age think about retirement “most days” or “often”; the figure rises to 65 percent among those 60 or more years of age.

How often do you think about retirement?						
Age	Most days	Often	Sometimes	Not very often	Never	I don't know
18–34	22%	28%	36%	12%	2%	0%
35–49	14%	26%	42%	17%	1%	0%
50–59	22%	28%	36%	12%	2%	0%
60+	18%	47%	28%	7%	0%	0%

Table 2

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Frequently, responses to questions broken out by years of experience follow the same general pattern as age. While some teachers join the profession later in life, older teachers tend to have more experience and be closer to retirement. On some measures, however, new teachers—those with five or fewer years of experience—stand out from their more experienced colleagues. That cohort, for instance, thinks about retirement less often.

How often do you think about retirement?

Years of experience	Most days	Often	Sometimes	Not very often	Never	I don't know
5 or fewer	10%	21%	39%	28%	3%	0%
6–10	12%	27%	39%	20%	2%	0%
11–15	8%	31%	41%	21%	0%	0%
16–20	17%	26%	44%	12%	1%	0%
21 or more	24%	33%	32%	11%	0%	0%

Table 3

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Teachers overall feel somewhat confident in their ability to retire comfortably, but many remain uncertain.

Only 13 percent of teachers are “very” confident in their ability to live the kind of life they envision in retirement. Meanwhile, a plurality are only “somewhat” confident, and 25 percent are “not very” or “not at all” confident. These results did not differ significantly by teachers’ age or years of experience.

This shaky level of confidence suggests that teachers may not share the common view that traditional pensions afford them a level of retirement security rarely seen in the private sector, or that teachers consciously trade lower salaries during their working years for the promise of iron-clad retirement benefits.

Thinking about your goals for retirement, how confident are you that you’ll be able to live the kind of life you envision?

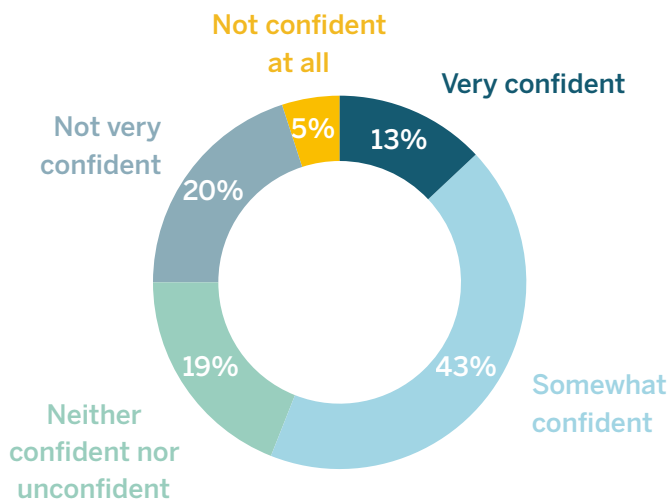
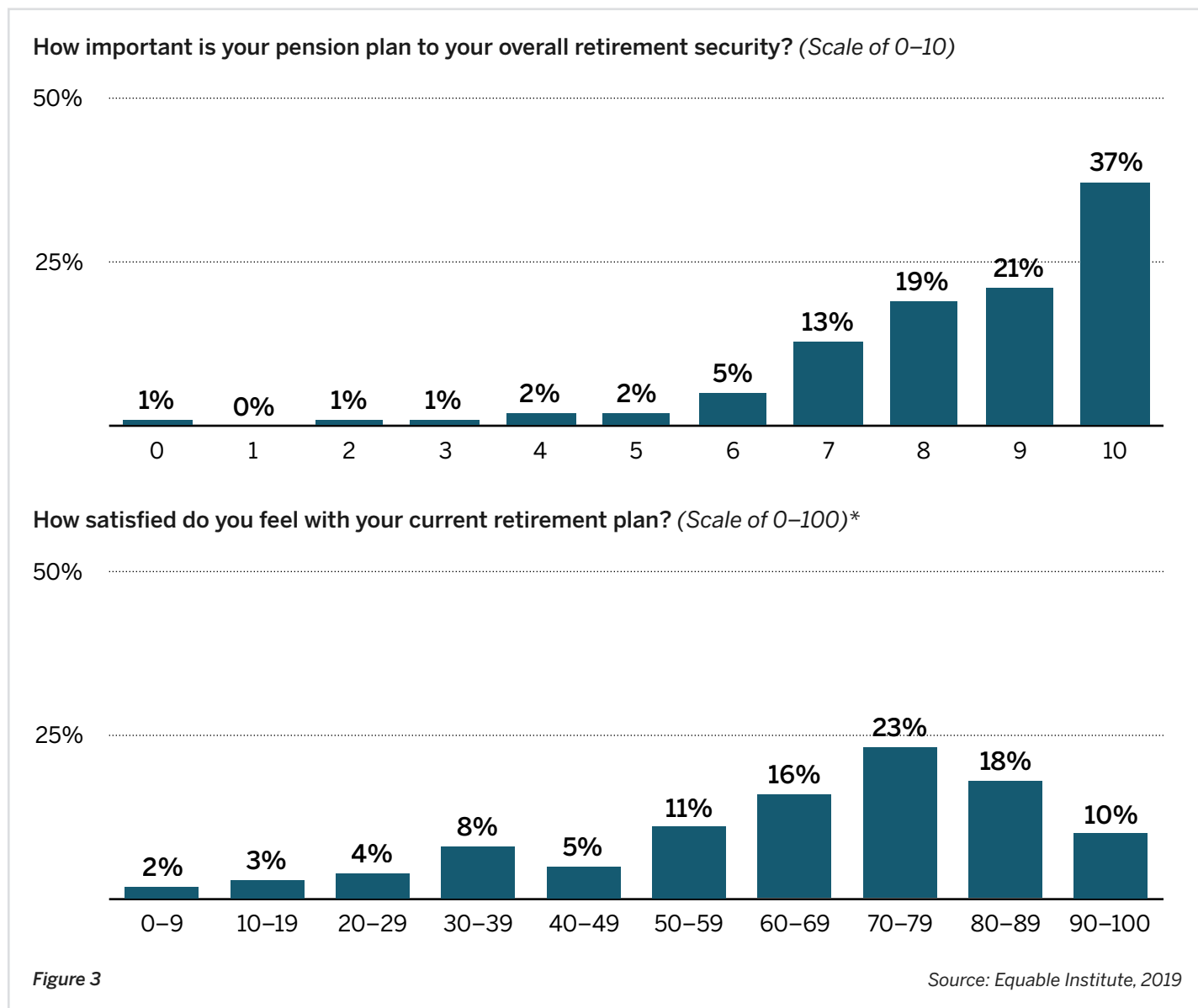


Figure 2

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Teachers see their pension plans as central to their retirement security, but aren't satisfied with them—or even certain that they'll receive their full pension at all. As the charts below show, teachers consider pensions crucial to their retirement security. That attitude reflects the reality that approximately 1 million teachers—more than one third of the workforce—are [ineligible](#) for Social Security, eliminating a source of retirement income that might lessen their reliance on pensions. The chart below, however, reflects a significant level of dissatisfaction with their current retirement plans relative to the importance of those plans to their retirement security.



While teachers could be less than fully satisfied with their current plans for a variety of reasons, these results don't suggest that teachers do not like or want their pensions. The discrepancy between the 77 percent of teachers who rank their pension as very important (defined as an 8 or higher on a 1–10 scale) and the 28 percent who are very satisfied with their plan (defined as an 80 or higher on a 1–100 scale), however, suggests that teachers aren't completely comfortable with their current plans.

** For the purposes of this report, we characterize a response of 7 on a 1–10 scale, or 70–79 on a 1–100 scale, as roughly neutral. That means the respondent is not particularly satisfied or dissatisfied, or inclined or disinclined to take an action. This interpretation is based on trends in market research among American adults that show default responses falling closer to 7 than to 5 when asked similar types of questions structured in the same manner.*

Older and more experienced teachers who are closer to retirement tend to be more satisfied with their retirement plans than their younger colleagues. This could be because benefits become more tangible in their minds as they approach retirement, or because they have a higher likelihood of collecting their full benefits by virtue of having stayed in the profession. Younger teachers face more uncertainty, which could reduce satisfaction.

How satisfied do you feel with your current retirement plan? (0–100)

Age	0–9	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	90–100
18–34	1%	4%	5%	7%	4%	11%	21%	25%	14%	8%
35–49	2%	3%	3%	10%	6%	10%	13%	24%	17%	12%
50–59	3%	3%	5%	6%	4%	15%	14%	19%	21%	10%
60+	1%	3%	4%	4%	2%	10%	13%	19%	32%	12%

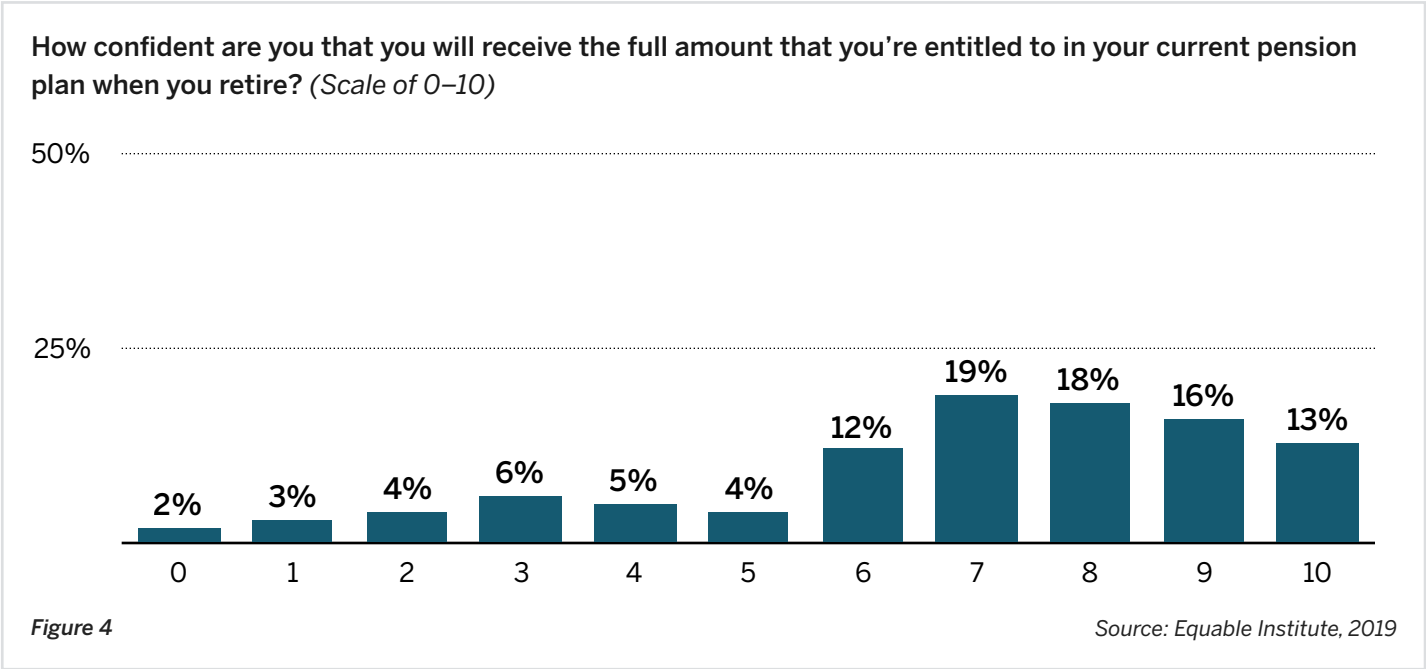
How satisfied do you feel with your current retirement plan? (0–100)

Years of experience	0–9	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	90–100
5 or fewer	1%	3%	6%	7%	4%	13%	21%	24%	14%	7%
6–10	3%	4%	5%	8%	3%	7%	17%	27%	16%	10%
11–15	2%	3%	3%	11%	6%	13%	13%	25%	17%	8%
16–20	2%	1%	4%	10%	6%	11%	14%	18%	19%	11%
21 or more	1%	3%	3%	3%	5%	12%	13%	20%	25%	14%

Table 4

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

As shown in the chart below, some of teachers' uncertainty about retirement security is rooted in a concern that when they do retire, they will receive less than the full pension benefits promised to them. On a scale of 1–10, where ten represents absolute confidence, 53 percent of teachers placed their confidence at only a seven or lower.



That figure is a surprisingly low level of confidence in a guaranteed income in retirement and the common assumption that teachers exchange relatively lower salaries during their working years for iron-clad retirement benefits. Young teachers in particular express a higher degree of uncertainty.

How confident are you that you will receive the full amount that you're entitled to in your current pension plan when you retire? (0–10)

Age	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
18–34	1%	2%	5%	8%	6%	5%	15%	18%	18%	10%	12%
35–49	2%	3%	3%	6%	5%	4%	12%	18%	19%	17%	10%
50–59	3%	3%	3%	5%	3%	5%	7%	23%	15%	19%	15%
60+	1%	0%	1%	2%	3%	2%	9%	12%	16%	25%	28%

How confident are you that you will receive the full amount that you're entitled to in your current pension plan when you retire? (0–10)

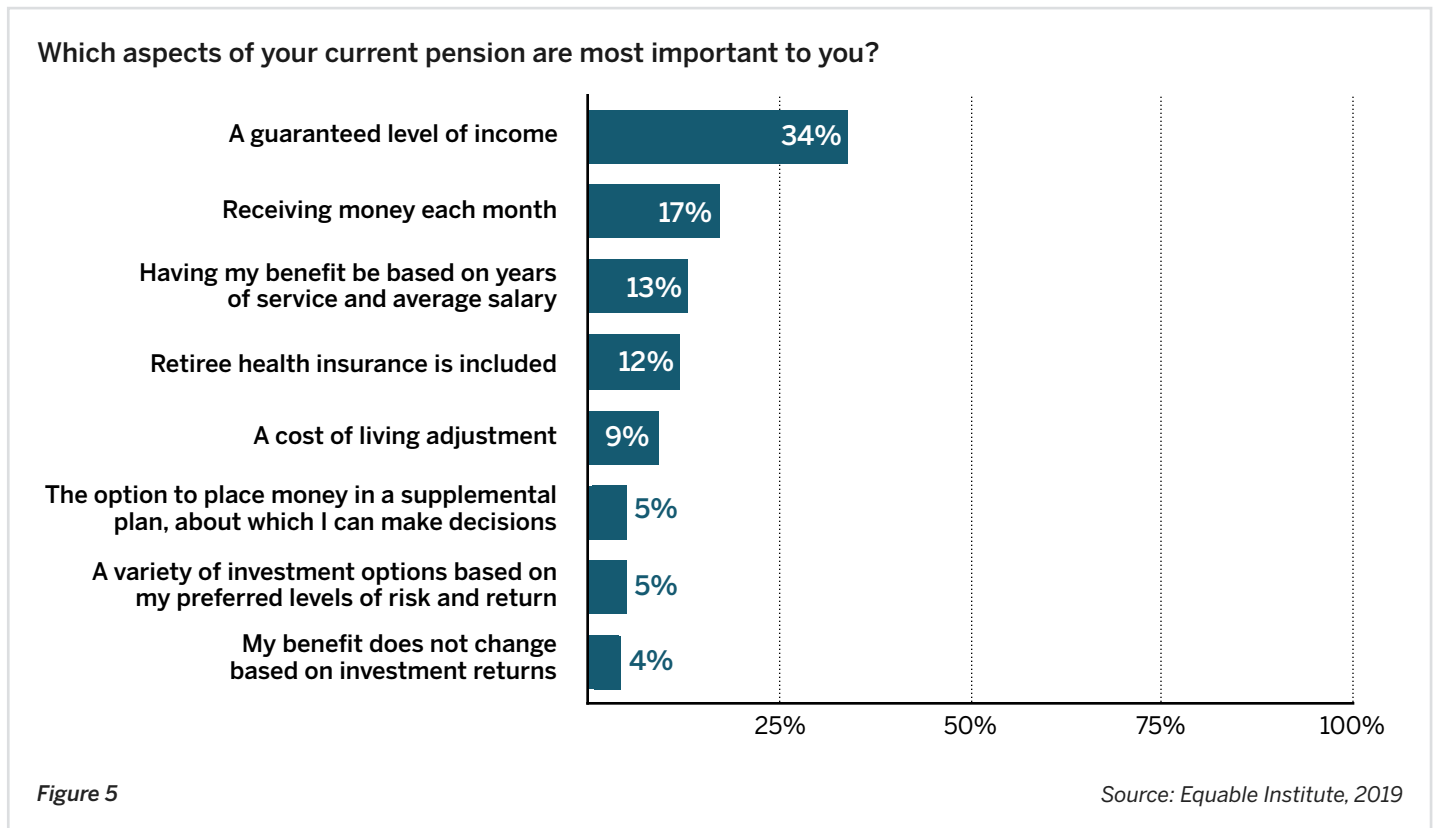
Years of experience	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5 or fewer	1%	1%	3%	9%	4%	6%	16%	21%	16%	10%	12%
6–10	3%	3%	6%	5%	7%	4%	11%	18%	18%	15%	12%
11–15	2%	4%	3%	8%	6%	4%	15%	19%	17%	13%	9%
16–20	3%	4%	3%	5%	5%	4%	7%	18%	19%	19%	11%
21 or more	2%	1%	4%	4%	1%	3%	8%	17%	17%	22%	19%

Table 5

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Pension Design

In addition to teachers' satisfaction with their pensions, the survey asked about which aspects of those pensions they value the most. **Broadly speaking, teachers care that their retirement plan provides guaranteed income and security, and are less interested in the details about how they are provided.** The chart below shows the aspect of their pensions that teachers ranked as most important.



As shown in the chart above, 34 percent of teachers rank “a guaranteed level of income” as the most important factor in any pension—twice as many as “receiving money each month” or even having a plan that provides health insurance in retirement. Far fewer teachers prioritize attributes related to how their plan works (such as traditional years of service and final salary formula for a pension) or what features might be included in the retirement plan (such as having investment options, access to supplemental plans, or cost of living adjustments).

These priorities held true across age groups and years of experience, with only slight variation. The takeaway is clear: Teachers value the idea of a guaranteed income in retirement; more granular features of how their pensions work are secondary.

Some teachers also feel the effect of pension design in their own lives long before they retire or collect a single pension check. **For instance, we found that a lack of pension portability—the fact that teachers’ can’t take pensions with them across state lines—has affected a majority of teachers’ decisions about where to live.** More than half of teachers, 53 percent, say being unable to take pension benefits across state lines has already factored into their decision to move or not move to a different state.

Has the fact that you cannot take the pension benefits you’ve already earned with you ever factored into your decision to move or not move to a different state?

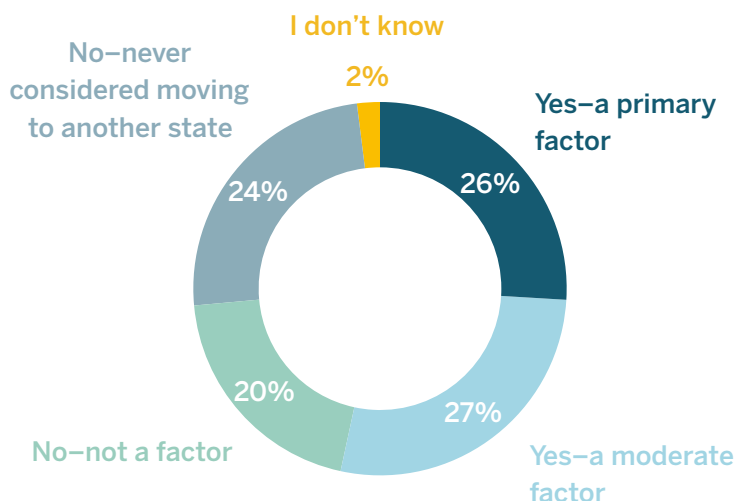


Figure 6

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

The older and more experienced teachers become, the less likely they are to report having factored their pension benefits into their decision to move or not move to a different state. There are several possible interpretations. Younger teachers could be more transient than older teachers, and more likely to consider their inability to take their pensions with them a barrier. Or older teachers who are further along in their careers could be more likely to have decided that they would teach their entire career in the same state, rendering the portability of their pensions a moot point.

Has the fact that you cannot take the pension benefits you've already earned with you ever factored into your decision to move or not move to a different state?

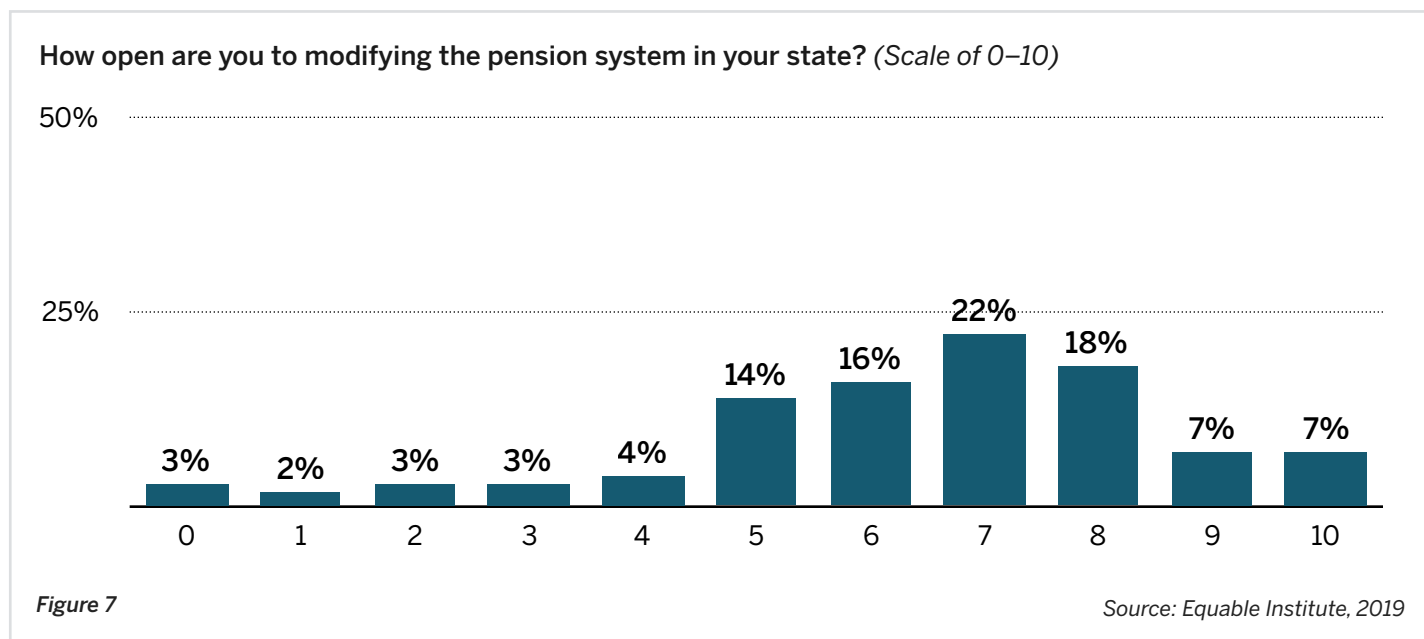
Age	Yes—a primary factor	Yes—a moderate factor	No—not a factor	No—never considered moving to another state	I don't know
18–34	25%	34%	20%	19%	2%
35–49	27%	29%	18%	25%	1%
50–59	30%	20%	22%	27%	2%
60+	14%	13%	30%	38%	4%

Table 6

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

We also asked teachers whether or not they had access to a supplemental retirement plan, such as a 403b or 457 plan, either provided through their state or school district. Such plans can account for an important part of teachers' retirement security, particularly in states where teachers are not allowed to participate in Social Security. The majority of teachers said yes, they do have access to a supplemental plan (62%), while more than a quarter said no (27%), and around one in 10 were unsure (12%). There was no meaningful difference in answers by age or experience.

Teachers are relatively open to discussing changes to their current pension plans. Perhaps because of their less-than-robust level of satisfaction with their current pensions, teachers express a willingness to entertain changes to their pensions as presently structured. On a scale of 1–10, a majority of teachers, or 54%, rank their openness to change at a 7 or higher. By contrast, only 15% could be characterized as flatly opposed to changes (defined as ranking their openness 0–4).



Considering that a majority of teachers say they aren't aware of any problems with the pension systems in their state—and in fact those systems do have substantial problems—this figure may understate how open they would be to change if they had more information about the current status of their pensions or the kinds of changes being suggested.

Of course, this finding doesn't suggest that teachers would be open to *any* change. Teachers put a lot of value in their pensions as a source of retirement savings—particularly given the frequent lack of access to other forms of retirement income. Teachers would naturally consider whether any proposed change ultimately adds or subtracts to their benefits. However, this finding differs significantly from much of the conventional wisdom that teachers are reflexively opposed to any changes in the way their pensions have traditionally been structured and run. A majority, in fact, would be willing to consider alternatives.

Younger teachers are even more open to modifications—39% place themselves at an eight or higher, as opposed to 24% of teachers ages 50–69 who do the same. The differences based on years of experience are even more pronounced. 40% of teachers in the first five years of their careers rank themselves an 8 or higher, versus only 20% of teachers with 21 or more years of experience. This makes sense, given the structure of most pension plans. Pensions are designed for teachers who teach for a full career in the same place, so the teachers who are closer to having done that are more resistant to change.

How open are you to modifying the pension system in your state? (0–10)

Age	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
18–34	1%	2%	5%	8%	6%	5%	15%	18%	18%	10%	12%
35–49	2%	3%	3%	6%	5%	4%	12%	18%	19%	17%	10%
50–59	3%	3%	3%	5%	3%	5%	7%	23%	15%	19%	15%
60+	1%	0%	1%	2%	3%	2%	9%	12%	16%	25%	28%

How open are you to modifying the pension system in your state? (0–10)

Years of experience	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5 or fewer	1%	0%	1%	2%	4%	12%	15%	26%	19%	11%	10%
6–10	1%	2%	3%	4%	2%	12%	17%	20%	16%	11%	11%
11–15	4%	3%	1%	6%	6%	15%	19%	16%	15%	6%	9%
16–20	6%	6%	3%	6%	4%	13%	17%	22%	12%	6%	4%
21 or more	9%	6%	6%	5%	5%	15%	14%	19%	12%	4%	4%

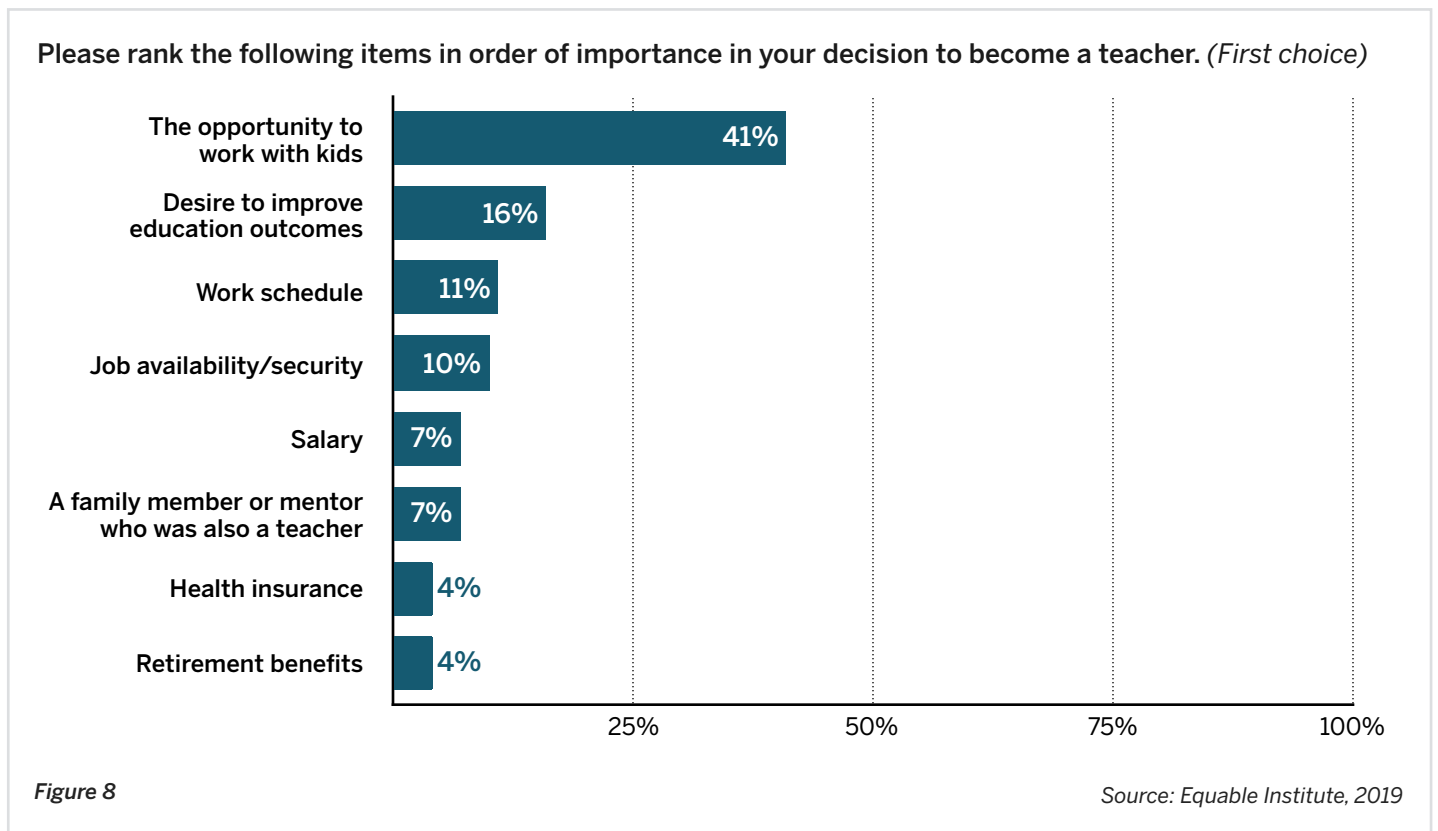
Table 7

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

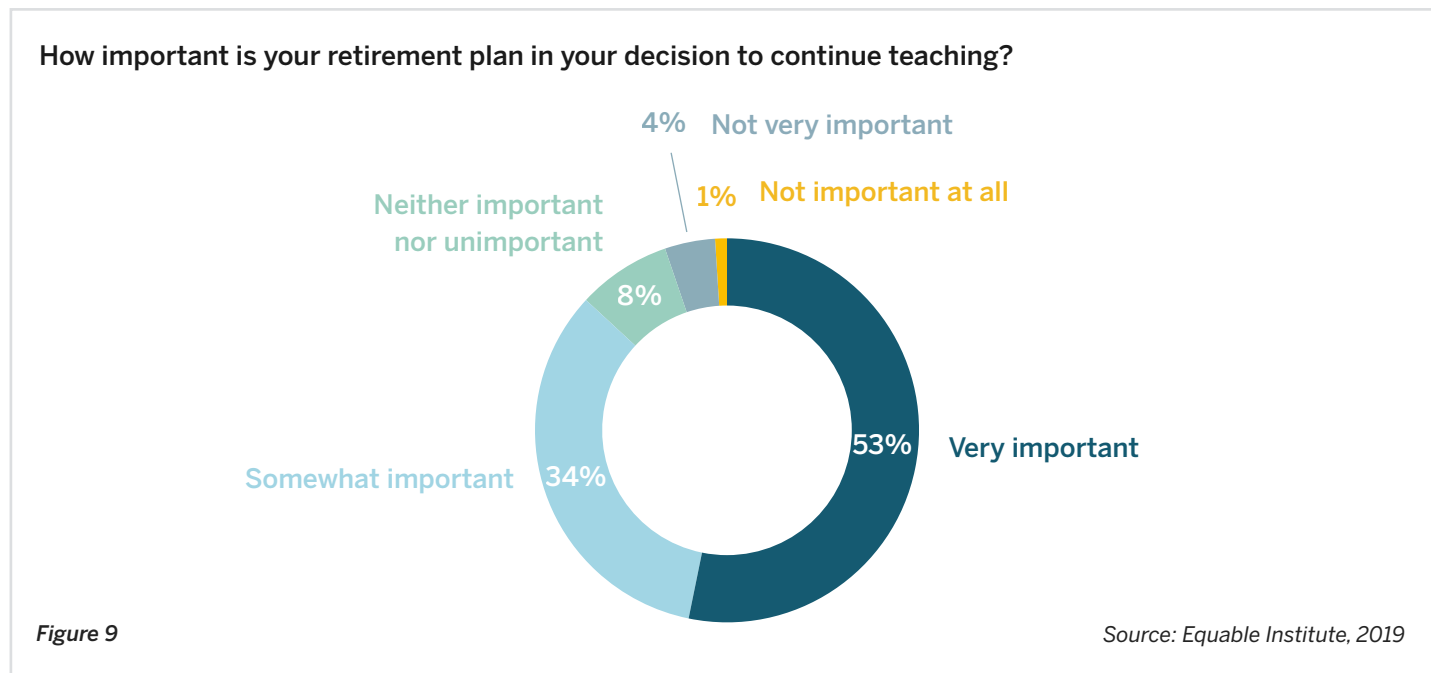
Motivation for Teaching

The survey also explored the role of pensions in recruiting and retaining teachers, testing a common argument that pensions are central to both. We found, conclusively, that **teachers didn't get into the profession for the retirement benefits—specifically when compared to other, mission-based factors. And once teachers enter the classroom, keeping their retirement benefits is very important to their decision to continue teaching.**

As the chart below shows, teachers overwhelmingly get into the profession to work with kids and improve education (57%), not to secure concrete benefits. A substantial number (21%) also cite lifestyle benefits—work schedule and job security—as their primary reason for becoming a teacher. By contrast, fewer (15%) say they decided to become a teacher to secure financial benefits such as a salary, insurance, or retirement benefits. And these results are consistent across age groups.



At the same time, when asked directly how important their pension is in their decision to continue teaching, a clear majority say it is “very” important, and 87 percent say it is at least “somewhat” important.



In other words, teachers don’t get into this profession to get rich or for a specific benefit package—even if they welcome and value those benefits. Once they’ve become teachers, however, threatening the benefits they’ve been promised later on could compromise their commitment to continue teaching. This is especially true of older teachers who are nearer to retirement.

How important is your retirement plan in your decision to continue teaching?

Age	Very important	Somewhat important	Neither important nor unimportant	Not very important	Not important at all	I don’t know
18–34	37%	41%	13%	7%	2%	1%
35–49	58%	32%	6%	4%	1%	1%
50–59	66%	26%	5%	3%	0%	0%
60+	59%	35%	5%	0%	0%	1%

Table 8 Source: Equable Institute, 2019

How important is your retirement plan in your decision to continue teaching? (Ages 50–59)

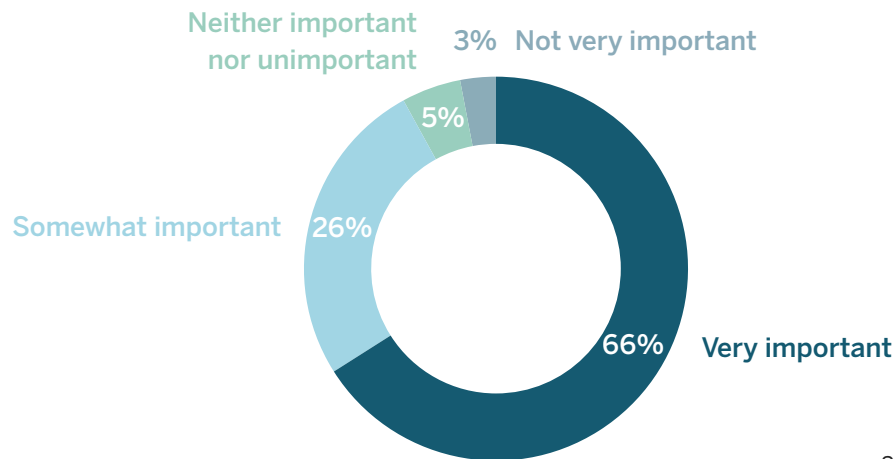


Figure 10

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

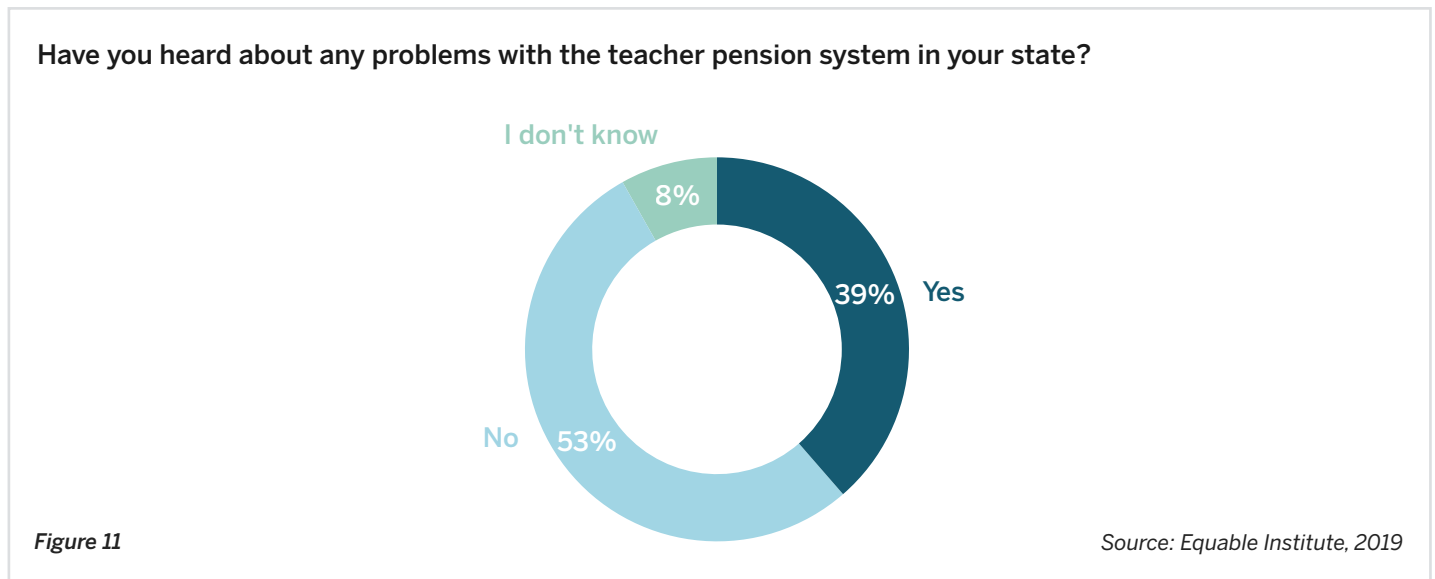
Again, a range of factors contribute to teachers staying or leaving the profession. Our findings should not be interpreted as saying that retirement benefits are the only factor driving retention, or that they outweigh various other factors—just that teachers consider them a very important factor in their decision making.

Funding Challenges

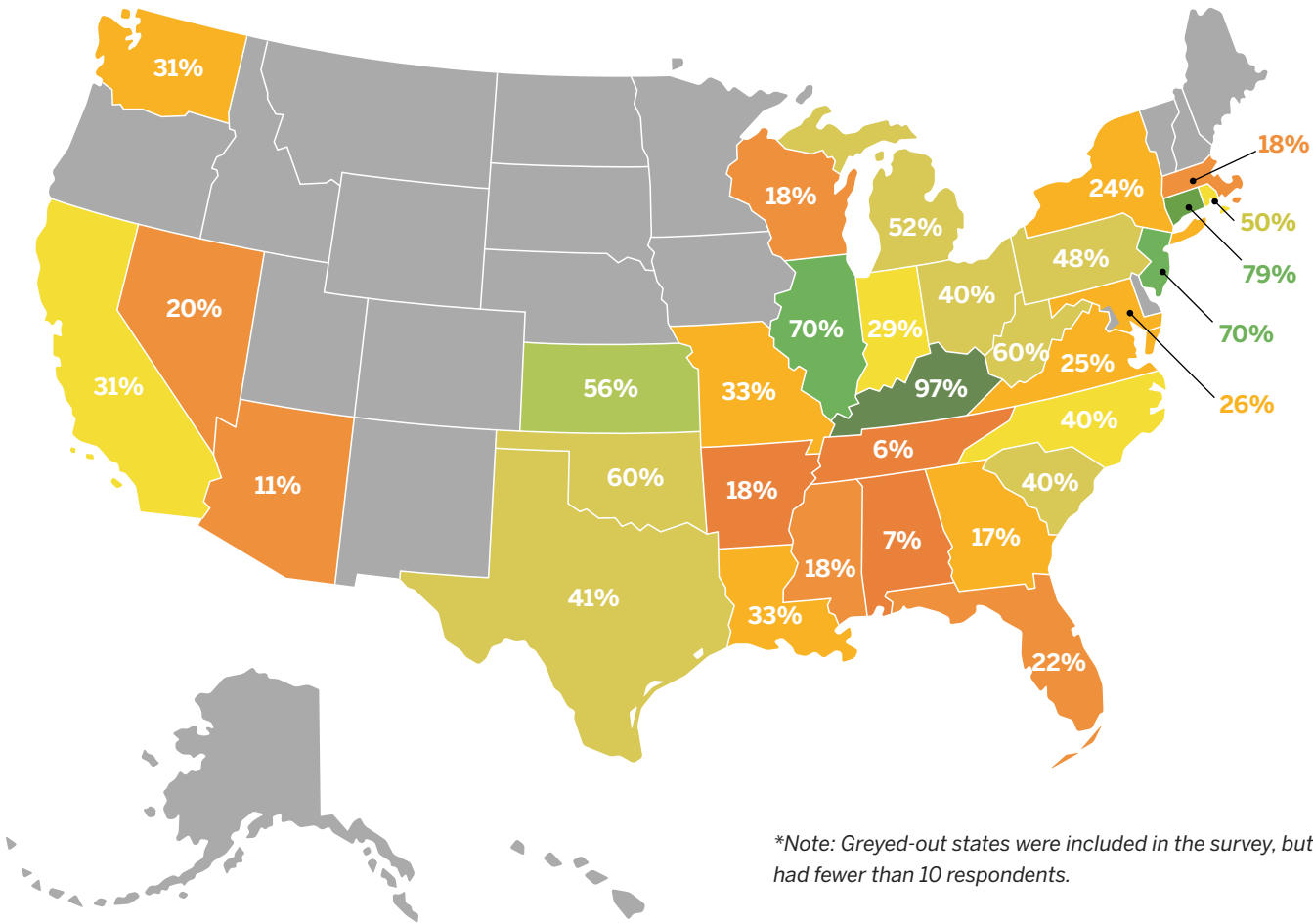
Most pension systems around the country face significant funding challenges. According to data for FY2017, the most recent year for which complete data are available, only four teachers pension systems have a [funded ratio](#) above 95%. Nationally, unfunded liabilities for state and local pension plans covering teachers are [approaching](#) \$700 billion, and amortization payments on that debt [account](#) for 64 cents out of every dollar employers contribute to the pension system on behalf of teachers.

We wanted to gauge teachers' awareness of these problems. **We found that most teachers say they aren't aware of any problems at all. Those who are aware of problems in their states tend to be at least somewhat familiar with those problems, suggesting that raising awareness often spurs teachers to seek out more information.**

Nationally, only 39 percent of teachers have heard about any problems with the teacher pension system in their state. This figure can vary significantly across states. In California, for example, only 31% have heard about issues. In Texas, teachers are more aware—41% have heard about problems—and in Illinois, that number rises to a large majority of 70%.



Percentage of teachers in each state who report having heard about problems with their pension system.*



*Note: Greyed-out states were included in the survey, but had fewer than 10 respondents.

Figure 12

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Awareness compared to funded ratio in each state

State	Percentage of teachers who report having heard about problems with their pension system*	Actual funded ratio of teacher pension system**	State	Percentage of teachers who report having heard about problems with their pension system*	Actual funded ratio of teacher pension system**
Alabama	7%	70%	Montana	N/A	68%
Alaska	N/A	76%	Nebraska	N/A	89%
Arizona	11%	71%	Nevada	20%	75%
Arkansas	18%	80%	New Hampshire	N/A	64%
California	31%	64%	New Jersey	70%	43%
Colorado	N/A	58%	New Mexico	N/A	64%
Connecticut	79%	58%	New York State	24%	98%
Washington, D.C.	N/A	93%	North Carolina	40%	88%
Delaware	N/A	86%	North Dakota	N/A	65%
Florida	22%	84%	Ohio	40%	76%
Georgia	17%	74%	Oklahoma	60%	73%
Hawaii	N/A	55%	Oregon	N/A	80%
Idaho	N/A	91%	Pennsylvania	48%	56%
Illinois	70%	41%	Rhode Island	N/A	54%
Indiana	29%	46%	South Carolina	40%	55%
Iowa	N/A	82%	South Dakota	N/A	100%
Kansas	56%	68%	Texas	41%	77%
Kentucky	97%	58%	Tennessee	6%	93%
Louisiana	33%	66%	Utah	N/A	88%
Maine	N/A	81%	Vermont	N/A	54%
Maryland	26%	75%	Virginia	25%	79%
Massachusetts	18%	52%	Washington	31%	91%
Michigan	52%	61%	West Virginia	60%	67%
Minnesota	N/A	77%	Wisconsin	18%	100%
Mississippi	18%	62%	Wyoming	N/A	74%
Missouri	33%	84%			

Table 9

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

*The margin of error for these results vary considerably from state to state, with more populous states generally having lower margins. The more populous states with more survey respondents have margins of error of plus or minus 6% at an 80% confidence level, while some less populous states have margins of plus or minus 18% at the same level. For states with fewer than 10 respondents, we wrote "N/A." These results should be interpreted as suggesting general trends; more data and larger sample sizes in each state, particularly less populous ones, would be needed to establish the level of awareness at a meaningful level of confidence.

**The term "funded ratio" refers to the ratio of dollars currently in the pension fund to the value of the benefits that the fund has promised to eventually pay. Any funded ratio below 100% means the plan has not saved enough to pay the benefits earned.

How familiar are you with those problems? (Among those who reported hearing about problems.)

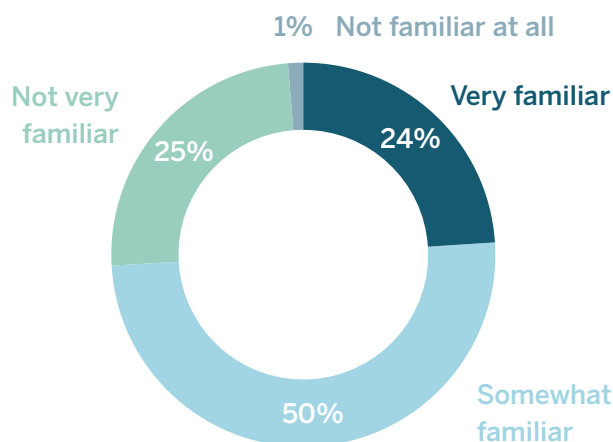


Figure 13

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

There are also some differences in awareness based on age levels: The older the teacher, the less likely they are to have heard about problems. Less than half of the youngest cohort of teachers, or 49%, say they haven't heard about problems, while 68% of teachers over 60 years of age say the same. Years of experience, by contrast, isn't as strong of an indicator for awareness. In fact, the percentages of teachers who have heard about problems among those with fewer than five years of experience (34%) and those with 21 or more years of experience (36%) are separated by less than the margin of error.

While these differences by age group and experience are significant, they're comparatively less than differences based on where a teacher lives.

Have you heard about any problems with the teacher pension system in your state?

Age	Yes	No	I don't know
18–34	43%	49%	8%
35–49	39%	52%	9%
50–59	36%	56%	8%
60+	26%	68%	5%

Have you heard about any problems with the teacher pension system in your state?

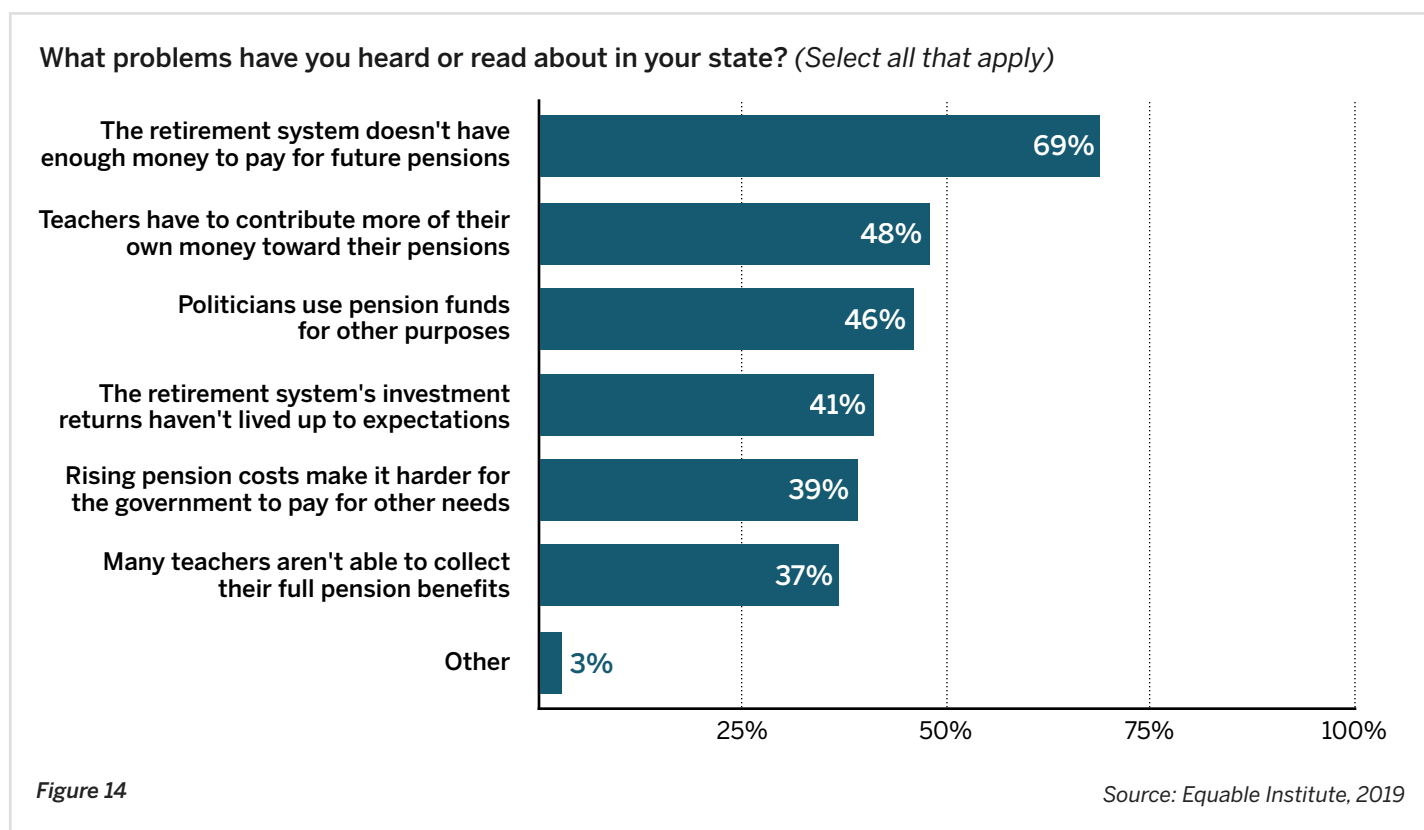
Years of experience	Yes	No	I don't know
5 or fewer	34%	58%	8%
6–10	39%	53%	7%
11–15	47%	46%	7%
16–20	37%	52%	10%
21 or more	36%	55%	8%

Table 10

Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Teachers who have heard about pension problems see the chronic underfunding of pension systems as the largest problem. They also recognize tangible problems, such as the increasing contributions that come out of their paychecks, as well as more technical issues, such as investment returns not meeting expectations. These results suggest that teachers who are aware of problems have developed a fairly comprehensive understanding of the issue—how systemic problems arise, as well as how they are personally affected.

Some problems that teachers report hearing about reflect common arguments used to frame problems rather than technically accurate descriptions. For instance, when people argue that “politicians use pension funds for other purposes,” state legislators aren’t actually taking funds out of pension systems—they’re declining to properly fund pensions in the first place in favor of other priorities. Similarly, 37 percent of teachers have heard that current teachers may not be able to collect their full pensions—even though a teacher who has worked their full career and earned their full benefits has constitutional protections against cuts to those benefits in virtually every state.



Teachers who are aware of pension problems consider them serious, and fear they will be affected on a personal level. As the charts below show, among teachers who have heard about pension problems in their state, an enormous majority, 96 percent, think those problems are serious, and a majority (54 percent) think they are “very serious.” Importantly, 88 percent of teachers also think those problems could impact their personal finances in retirement, easily relating the larger issue to their personal lives.

Based on what you have heard or read, overall, how serious do you think those problems are?

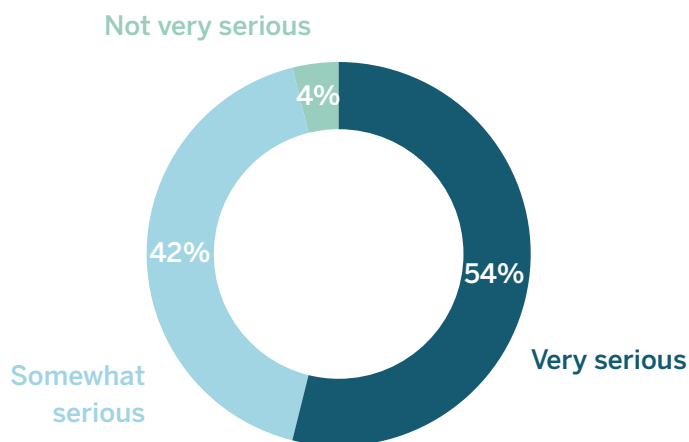
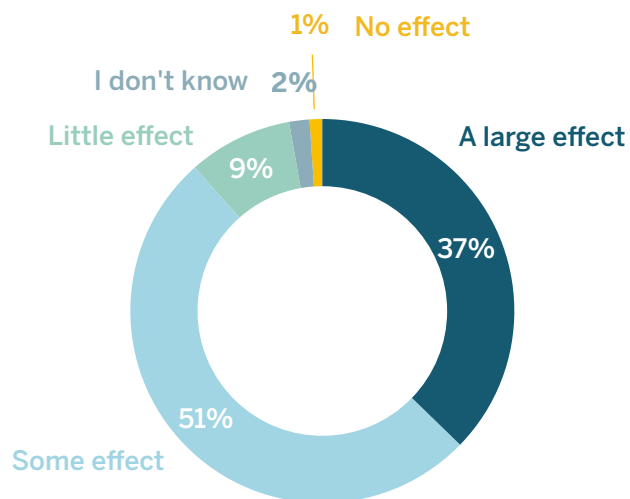


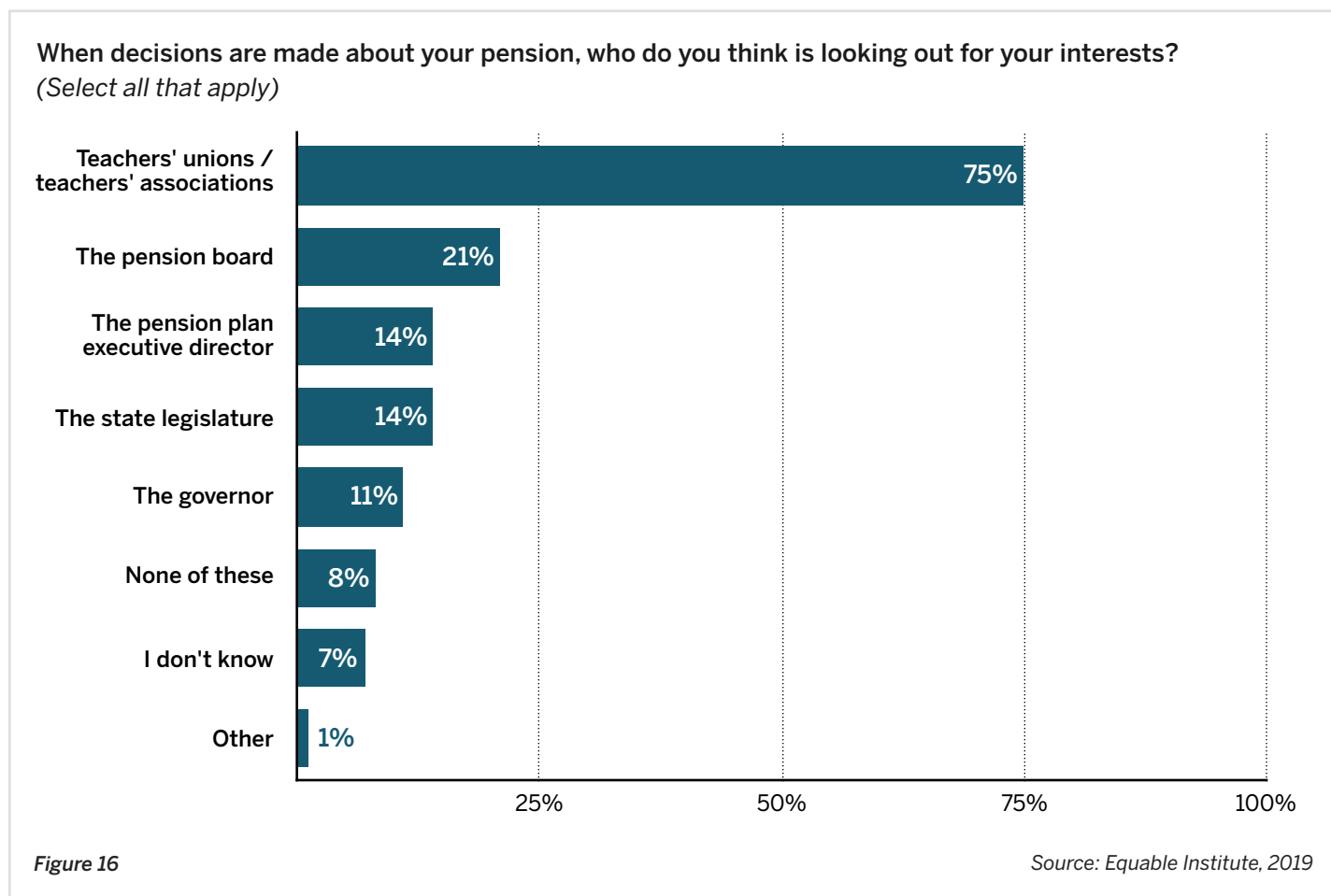
Figure 15

How much do you think the problems you've heard about will affect the pension benefits you personally receive in retirement?



Source: Equable Institute, 2019

Finally, when it comes to communicating about pensions, our survey found that all messengers aren't created equal. **Overwhelmingly, teachers trust their unions and associations, and their fellow teachers—not politicians or technocrats—to look out for their interests.** These trends hold true across states and demographic groups. Notably, trust in politicians to look out for their interests does not appear to be affected by political alignment with those politicians. Teachers in overwhelmingly blue states with Democratic-controlled governments trust politicians as little as teachers in states with Republican-controlled governments. By the same token, teachers in small and large states are equally distrustful of their elected representatives.



Traditional pensions remain crucial to teachers' outlook on retirement security, especially given the inconsistent coverage by Social Security and lack of other retirement plan options. At the same time, most teachers haven't heard about challenges those pensions face. Teachers who have heard, however, are concerned.

Increased awareness of those challenges, coupled with their relative openness to change, could lead teachers to entertain changes that would improve sustainability. Whether they would support specific adjustments likely depends on whether those adjustments would ensure that their retirement plan provides a real guarantee of income security when their teaching days are over.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Composition

We constructed the sample to closely match the composition of public and public charter school teachers across the country who are enrolled in public pension plans. For racial, gender, age, and geographic data, we relied on the National Center for Education Statistics “Condition of Education” [report](#).

- 100% were current, full-time teachers
- 100% were currently enrolled in public pension plan
- 96% were teaching at a public school; 4% were teaching at a public charter school
- 76% identified as female; 24% as male
- 80% identified as non-Hispanic white; 8% identified as Hispanic; 7% identified as black; 2% identified as Asian; 2% identified as mixed race; 1% identified as Native American
- 32% were ages 18–34; 38% were ages 35–49; 22% were ages 50–59; 8% were ages 60 or older
- 26% worked in the Midwest, 25% worked in the Northeast, 36% worked in the South, 14% worked in the West
- 24% worked in a large city; 20% worked in a small city; 33% worked in a suburb; 11% worked in a small town; 13% worked in a rural area
- 39% worked in a grade school; 18% worked in a middle school; 19% worked in a high school; and 24% reported working in multiple levels
- 73% were members of a teachers' union or association; 26% were nonmembers
- 22% had 5 or fewer years of teaching experience; 20% had 6–10 years of experience; 19% had 11–15 years of experience; 17% had 16–20 years of experience; 22% had 21 or more years of experience
- 60% were members of dual-earner households, 40% were members of single-earner households

Appendix B: Recruiting Methods and Quality Control

This survey was designed by Hattaway Communications in concert with staff from the Equable Institute and Education Counsel. Respondents were recruited from a traditional, actively managed market research panel provided by Qualtrics. Hard-to-reach populations—such as teachers in more rural areas—were reached using niche panels brought about through specialized recruitment campaigns.

All panel partners employed continuous monitoring and quality control checks. Respondents were recruited randomly, and received an email invitation inviting them to take part in a survey for research purposes only, for which they received a small cash incentive. To avoid self-selection bias, the survey invitation did not include specific details about the contents of the survey.

To ensure quality, the sample excluded respondents who straight-lined through the survey, meaning they clicked through rapidly and checked the same answer choices for entire sequences of questions. It also excluded respondents who finished in less than one third of the average survey completion time, to ensure that all completed responses were thoughtful. All respondents were also required to respond in the affirmative that they would thoughtfully provide their best answers to each question in the survey. Hattaway Communications staff spot-checked completed responses as an additional layer of quality check.

Standard survey research best practices were employed to design questions that did not systematically bias responses. The margin of error for this survey is 3% at a 95% confidence level.



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