

Produced in partnership with **Vanderbilt University**  
and the **Tennessee Education Research Alliance**

SREB

# Recruiting the Next Generation of Teachers: Challenges and Innovations

## *A Literature Review*

### Introduction

Widespread school staffing challenges and teacher shortages have been a topic of national discussion for the past several years. Across the country, more than 36,000 full-time teacher positions are unfilled. Enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs has been declining, and the percentage of teachers not returning to the classroom has increased. With these shortfalls to the pool of available teachers, recruiting and supporting individuals who are willing, able and excited to bridge the gap is of the utmost importance.

Generation Z, born from 1996 to 2012, includes those preparing to enter high school to those approaching their late 20s, meaning they are our newest teachers and our future potential teachers. Several surveys demonstrate that Gen Z values different factors when considering their career options compared to prior generations. Yet, little research in the United States has investigated the extent to which Gen Z is interested in teaching as a profession or what they are looking for in that role.

### *Inside*

Who is Gen Z and what matters to them?	2
What is Gen Z's interest in the teaching profession?	4
What support and structures do Gen Z teachers need?	5
What are states and districts doing to recruit Gen Z to teaching?	7
What does this mean for the pipeline of teachers?	9
References	10

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Crafting programs and policies that address the teacher workforce requires knowledge of Gen Z, their interest in entering the teaching profession, and how to support them as new teachers. In this brief, the research team reviewed the literature on Gen Z's background, interest in teaching as a profession, and what states and districts are doing to try and recruit them. Specifically, the team reviewed findings from research studies to address the following questions:

- Who is Gen Z, and what matters to them?
- What is Gen Z's interest in the teaching profession?
- What support and structures do Gen Z teachers need?
- What are states and districts doing to recruit Gen Z into teaching?

## Who is Gen Z and what matters to them?

*Generation Z is racially and ethnically diverse, tech-savvy and more likely to be enrolled in college than prior generations. Nearly half of Gen Z comes from low-income backgrounds.*

- According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), Generation Z, which makes up 20% of the U.S. population, has the largest percentage of Hispanic (22%) and non-Hispanic Black (15%) people. In comparison, the Greatest Generation (those age 71 and older) is overwhelmingly composed of non-Hispanic White (78%) people, with much smaller percentages of Black and Hispanic (9% and 8%, respectively) people. Census Bureau [data](#) showed that 46% of Gen Z lived in low-income families in 2011 and 2012.
- Pew Research Center [surveys](#) from 2018 of nearly 1,000 U.S. teens and over 10,000 adults reported that, like Millennials, Gen Z positively views the nation's growing diversity.
- Gen Z has grown up with access to computers and smartphones, social media and near-constant internet use, with 97% of Gen Z reporting using at least one major social media platform, according to a 2018 nationally representative [survey](#) of U.S. teens and their parents by the Pew Research Center.
- An [analysis](#) of population surveys over time by the Pew Research Center found that 57% of Gen Z were enrolled in college in 2018 compared to 52% of Millennials in 2003 and 43% of Gen X in 1987.

## *Gen Z is more worried about societal challenges and reports greater mental health needs than other generations.*

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- The American Psychological Association's Stress in America [survey](#) in 2018 reported that gun violence, climate change, immigration and sexual harassment are significant stressors for Gen Z. At the time of the survey in 2018, 72% of Gen Z respondents reported school shootings or the possibility of a shooting occurring as a significant source of stress and nearly one-third reported their mental health as fair or poor.
- In nationally representative consumer [surveys](#) conducted by McKinsey, Gen Z respondents were 1.5 times more likely to report being anxious or depressed than non-Gen Z respondents and 1.4 to 2.3 times more likely to report being diagnosed with a mental health condition.

## *Gen Z wants jobs that give them a sense of purpose, are aligned with their values, allow for flexibility and provide a supportive work environment.*

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- A McKinsey [survey](#) of about 9,000 workers found that employees across generations tend to leave and start new jobs for similar reasons — inadequate compensation, lack of career development and advancement, and uncaring leadership — but Gen Z respondents ranked flexibility, career development, meaningful work and a safe, supportive work environment as more significant factors than compensation when they decide to stay with their current employers.
- In a 2018 [survey](#) of over 6,000 people by Deloitte and the Network of Executive Women, Gen Z respondents rated salary as the most important factor in deciding on a job, but less so than earlier generations. They also rated flexible hours, work-life balance and perks and benefits as important. Gen Z respondents were evenly split between accepting a better-paying but boring job versus taking work that was more interesting but lower paying. Additionally, nearly 4 out of 5 respondents felt that working at an organization aligned with their values was important.
- According to 2022 [surveys](#) of 1,200 full-time employed adults, 42% of Gen Z respondents would rather be at a company that gives them a sense of purpose than one that pays more.
- Gen Z respondents rated flexibility, adaptability, creativity and technological savvy as the top employee behaviors critical to successful businesses on the Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z [Survey](#).
- On the American Opportunity [Survey](#) of nearly 14,000 employed people, over a quarter of Gen Z workers ages 18-24 reported that mental health issues have a major impact on their ability to perform at work, compared to 14% of all employed respondents.

## What is Gen Z's interest in the teaching profession?

*Enrollment in educator preparation programs began declining in 2010 with the end of the Millennial generation and has hit historic lows following Gen Z's entrance into higher education starting in 2014.*

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- [Analysis](#) of state Title II reports by the Center for American Progress found that enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs was 940,000 in 2010, 800,000 in 2013, and 600,000 by 2018. (Note: The U.S. Department of Education refers to Title II by the year reported — one year after the academic year they were collected.)
- Federal Title II [data](#) on the number of students enrolled in traditional educator preparation programs showed a decline in the 1970s and a rise in the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s. Data from state-issued teaching licenses showed that 320,000 licenses were issued in 2006 compared to 215,000 in 2020, despite increasing enrollments in K-12 schools.
- [Analysis](#) of Title II data by SREB, *Elevating the Teacher Workforce and Our Regional Economy*, found a 17.5% decline in teacher preparation program completers across 16 Southern states between 2012-13 and 2020-21.

*Gen Z is less interested in teaching as a career than earlier generations.*

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- Between 2010 and 2014, the number of high school graduates who took an ACT career interest [survey](#) and indicated an interest in becoming a teacher or majoring in education decreased by more than 16%. Gen Z respondents who indicated an interest in teaching had ACT scores below average and were much more likely to be white females.
- Combined nationally representative survey [data](#) showed that interest in teaching has fallen among high school seniors and first-year college students to the lowest level in the last 50 years.
- A Microsoft Education [survey](#) of over 1,000 beginning teachers and student teachers from 10 countries found that, like earlier generations, more than half of Gen Z teachers chose to work in education because they enjoy working with children and want to impact future generations.
- A cross-sectional [study](#) using national surveys of undergraduate students in England found that compared to those who intended to be teachers, those who considered but decided against becoming teachers are less likely to view teaching as intellectually stimulating or allowing one to pursue their academic interest. In addition, they are less likely to see teaching as a high-status profession, offering good promotion prospects and job security.

## What support and structures do Gen Z teachers need?

*Gen Z teachers are entering or working in schools where educators' confidence in the teaching profession is low. Educators reported needing improved salaries, mental and physical health supports, and adequate classroom funding. In particular, Gen Z teachers need access to mental health support and positive school environments, as well as training for teaching diverse learners and using digital technology for instruction.*

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- The Educator Confidence Report by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt indicates that teacher and administrator confidence in the teaching profession fell between 2020 (index of 49.0 out of 100) and 2022 (40.0), with some rebound in 2023 (42.0). The 2022 [report](#) indicated that educators' immediate needs include improved salary and benefits, support for educator well-being like mental and physical health, and adequate funding for classroom needs like supplies and resources.
- On the 2023 State of the American Teacher [Survey](#), Gen Z teachers and those from other generations reported high rates of job-related stress (58%) and burnout (56%). These numbers have come down since the height of the pandemic when 78% reported high stress and 59% reported burnout in 2021.
- Teachers also need support dealing with stress-related emotions. In a 2020 [survey](#) of over 5,000 teachers administered by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, the five most-mentioned feelings among all teachers were anxiety, fear, worry, feeling overwhelmed and sadness.
- Mental health issues concern Gen Z teachers from around the world. On a [survey](#) of early-career teachers across 10 countries fielded by the Economist Intelligence Unit, 62% say emotional wellbeing is a priority for their school's administration, while only 26% feel their training equipped them for managing stress and burnout on the job.
- Gen Z teachers need more support teaching diverse students. Early career teachers in [10 countries](#) revealed that though 92% of the next generation of teachers say that classrooms are getting more diverse, only 38% feel they were adequately trained for teaching in a multicultural classroom.

*Gen Z teachers seek advancement opportunities at work and value collaboration, flexibility and ongoing mentorship.*

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- A research [study](#) in Tennessee examined the expressed preferences of teachers who have worked in low-performing schools. The teachers expressed a strong preference for strong administrative support and discipline enforcement, along with higher salaries.
- On Tennessee's 2023 annual educator [survey](#), early-career teachers who reported feeling more prepared and said they received mentoring opportunities were more likely to say they plan to stay in their schools.
- A qualitative [dissertation](#) based on the experiences of six Gen Z teachers found that they wanted more authentic collaboration, more opportunities for growth and advancement, and were concerned that the job would become boring and repetitive.

*Gen Z teachers expect to use instructional technology in their classrooms. Educator preparation programs need to model how to use technology, particularly mobile technology, in instruction.*

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- The Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2022 Educator Confidence [Report](#) reports that 68% of educators report technology has become essential to the classroom. Educators report the following benefits:
    - improved ability for students to access instructional content anytime or anywhere (53%)
    - time savings in workflows and processes (45%)
    - greater ability to experiment and be innovative in the classroom (42%)
    - improved ability to deliver differentiated, individualized instruction (39%)
    - improved student engagement with learning (36%).
  - Thirty eight percent plan to adopt artificial intelligence [tools](#) in the 2023-24 school year, although only one in five feel equipped to harness tools like ChatGPT in the classroom or school.
  - Data from a [survey](#) of early-career teachers fielded by the Economist Intelligence Unit showed that 60% of early-career and pre-service teachers expect to increase the use of technology to help students develop future-ready skills. However, only 38% feel that their training equipped them to use digital technology for instruction.
  - [Data](#) on internet usage worldwide by StatCounter suggest that Gen Z has become accustomed to using mobile and tablet formats as the primary way of accessing and interacting with information on the Internet.
  - A qualitative [dissertation](#) suggests that schools lacking updated technology can dissatisfy Gen Z teachers who grew up using technology at home and in the classroom.
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## What are states and districts doing to recruit Gen Z to teaching?

*Grow-your-own pathways, where districts or community-based organizations partner with teacher education preparation programs and recruit teacher candidates locally, are increasingly being used to address the teacher shortage.*

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- A research [synthesis](#) within and across grow-your-own programs found that they often reduce barriers to entering teaching, and some have higher retention in teaching if students complete the program. This structure may address the flexibility interests of some in Gen Z, but little data are available to show whether GYO programs increase the number of teachers.
- A 50-state landscape [assessment](#) in 2020 found pathways for high school students are the most common type of GYO programs used to recruit high school students to teach in their own communities. California, Colorado, Georgia and Kentucky all have GYO programs that prepare students for careers in education through a mix of high school and college coursework and paid work-based learning. West Virginia has since adopted a state GYO program.
- Across states, GYO [programs](#) appear to have more success in recruiting and retaining a larger proportion of personnel of color than their traditional counterparts and are particularly successful in rural areas.
- [Texas](#) offers three GYO pathways: one for high schoolers, one for paraprofessionals and one for current teaching candidates to give them year-long practicum experiences. They also have more than 50 school districts competing for state grant funding to develop their programs.
- As of 2023, [21 states](#) have federally registered apprenticeship programs, which standardize the GYO program strategies, such as early coursework and shadowing in high school, flexible college coursework and extensive paid work-based learning under a qualified mentor.

*States are using more alternatives to traditional teacher preparation and licensure programs, including recruiting retired teachers and using financial incentives to attract more people into teaching.*

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- Education Commission of the States' 2018 Policy [Snapshot](#) for Targeted Teacher Recruitment identified 47 bills enacted across 23 states to recruit teachers to high-need schools and subjects.
  - ECS reports that these bills enact a range of strategies to fill teacher vacancies, including developing traditional educator preparation programs that train candidates to work in specific subject areas or with particular student populations; creating or expanding alternative routes or abbreviated educator preparation programs; altering licensure requirement for teachers willing to work in challenging and hard-to-staff subjects and schools; and using financial rewards such as scholarships or grants, loan forgiveness, hiring bonuses or salary increases to recruit teachers to fill vacancies.
  - Affordable housing options and mortgage loan assistance programs are less common but exist in some states and districts.
- ECS's 2022 [report](#) 50-State Comparison: Teacher Recruitment and Retention totaled state efforts of recruiting and retaining teachers to include:
  - 32 states offer a pathway, program or incentive through statute or regulation to recruit high school students into teaching
  - 25 states offer a pathway, program or incentive through statute or regulation to recruit paraprofessionals to teach
  - 21 states created or support teacher residency programs through statute or regulation
  - 37 states have one or more scholarships to recruit teachers in underserved schools or shortage disciplines
  - 25 states have a loan program to also recruit teachers in underserved schools or shortage disciplines
  - 14 states incentivize people of color to teach and another 13 states prioritize teachers of color in scholarship or loan forgiveness programs or provide teacher prep program support for recruiting teachers of color.
- A [report](#) by the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education points out that Texas has the largest alternative certification sector not administered through higher education institutions, hosting 41 programs that together account for 68% of enrollment in educator preparation programs in the state.



## What does this mean for the pipeline of teachers?

As our population in the U.S. ages, so does the age of our teacher workforce. As the baby boomer generation retires and the teaching profession grows less attractive, vacancies are increasing. The pipeline of teachers from the newer generations is not currently filling the gap. Attracting and retaining Gen Z to teaching is crucial to filling the supply gap of educators to lead our classrooms to prepare youth for their future as contributing members of society. But how do we tackle this challenge?

The research thus far shows that to attract Gen Z to teaching, our schools must adapt to Gen Z's needs to compete with other professions. Education already provides a strong sense of purpose and high value to society. However, the profession lacks several other key benefits and supports generally not provided to future or current teachers around the nation:

1. Competitive, professional starting pay and affordable college degree options
2. Supportive leadership and collaborative work environments
3. Growth opportunities and career advancement
4. Job safety and mental health resources
5. Flexibility and work-life balance
6. Access to updated technology and innovation

Adapting the career pathways of teachers and their working environments in these ways will require rethinking the profession and the structure and funding of schools.

More research is needed to fully understand the interest level of Gen Z in education and how to effectively recruit and retain them. The Southern Regional Education Board and researchers at the Vanderbilt University Peabody School of Education have formed a research partnership to further study the issue of recruiting and retaining Gen Z to the teaching profession to help find effective policy and practice solutions. We are studying select state and other sources of data to identify trends in early student interest in teaching, pursuit and completion of a teaching degree, certification, or employment as a teacher, and how these trends compare to the trends of the millennial generation. We are also looking into the professional conditions and supports that may or may not be affecting these trends. These findings will help to answer some of the unanswered questions about recruitment and retention of future teachers.

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