

Educator Recruitment & Retention

“Why I Stay: Educator Retention Survey 2026”

Survey Narrative & Open-Ended Categories

This survey provides a focused view of educator retention in Arizona, capturing the perspectives of appropriately certified teachers who have chosen to remain in the classroom. As such, it highlights the factors that sustain retention, while also reflecting ongoing challenges within a resilient workforce. It is important to note that this dataset does not include educators who have already left the profession, meaning identified challenges likely represent baseline conditions rather than the full extent of attrition drivers.

Overall, the findings show that retained educators are highly committed to their profession, primarily driven by a strong sense of purpose, meaningful relationships with students, and the impact of their work. Student-centered motivation appears in a clear majority of responses, reinforcing that intrinsic factors are the strongest drivers of retention.

At the same time, systemic pressures, particularly workload and compensation, remain significant concerns even within this group.

Objective survey results indicate that school-level conditions are a notable strength. Approximately 70–85% of educators report agreement that they feel safe, respected, and part of a positive school community, with similarly high levels of agreement around instructional autonomy and access to resources. These findings suggest that most retained educators experience strong interpersonal and classroom-level support.

Responses related to leadership, professional growth, and student support systems show more variability, with moderate agreement levels (approximately 55–70%), indicating inconsistencies across schools in communication, coaching, and advancement opportunities.

More significant challenges emerge in workload and compensation. Only 30–50% of respondents indicate that workload, time demands, and class sizes are manageable, suggesting that a substantial portion of educators experience ongoing strain. Additionally, fewer than 40% express satisfaction with salary competitiveness, making compensation one of the lowest-rated areas in the dataset.

Qualitative responses reinforce these findings and provide greater context. Across the dataset, educators consistently identify students as the primary reason they remain in the profession, citing relationships, growth, and the ability to make a difference as their central motivations.

Secondary factors include supportive colleagues, family-aligned schedules, and retirement considerations.

At the same time, responses frequently acknowledge challenges related to workload, compensation, student behavior, and policy conditions. Notably, many educators describe staying despite these challenges. A meaningful subset of responses reflects conditional retention, where educators remain due to retirement proximity, financial necessity, or limited alternatives, indicating that even within this group, future attrition risk exists.

Taken together, the data reflects a clear interaction between strong intrinsic motivation and persistent structural strain. High agreement in school climate (70%+) aligns with qualitative emphasis on supportive teams, while lower agreement in workload (30–50%) and compensation (<40%) highlights systemic pressures that affect sustainability.

In conclusion, Arizona educators who remain in the classroom demonstrate high levels of dedication, purpose, and resilience. Their continued commitment is driven by students and the meaningful impact of their work. However, because this survey reflects only retained educators, the presence of significant challenges within this group underscores the importance of addressing workload, compensation, and system-level supports. Strengthening these areas will be critical to ensuring that educator commitment remains not only strong, but sustainable over time.

Open Ended Frequently Highlighted Categories

The following findings are derived from open-ended survey responses, where teachers shared in their own words the factors that keep them in the profession. Responses were analyzed and grouped into themes using keyword-based qualitative coding to identify the most frequently occurring categories.

- Counts are not mutually exclusive (one response may mention multiple factors).
- That's why totals exceed the number of respondents.
- These are frequency-of-mention counts, which is the correct method for open-ended survey analysis.

1. Relationships & Impact

Count: 1,029 responses

Keyword Indicators: "student, students, kid, kids, child, children"

Theme: Teachers stay primarily because of the meaningful relationships they build with students and the direct impact they have on their growth and success. This sense of purpose is the strongest driver of long-term commitment.

Featured Response:

1. "The students are what keep me here... they need quality guidance to help them reach their potential."

2. School Climate

Count: 342 responses

Keyword Indicators: "admin, administration, principal, leadership, support, coworker, coworkers, team, culture"

Theme: Teachers are more likely to stay when they experience supportive leadership, strong collegial relationships, and a positive school culture. A healthy environment fosters trust, belonging, and professional sustainability.

Featured Responses:

1. "Supportive administration makes all the difference—without it I would leave."
2. "A positive school culture and leadership is why I stay."

3. Financial Consideration

Count: 247 responses

Keyword Indicators: "retire, retirement, pension, asrs, 80 points, vested, benefits"

Theme: Many teachers remain in the profession due to long-term financial incentives, including retirement benefits and pension systems. For some, these structures create a strong incentive to stay until eligibility is reached.

Featured Response:

1. "I've put in too many years... it would not make financial sense to leave now."

4. Educator Passion**Count: 220 responses****Keyword Indicators:** "love teaching, passion, calling, purpose, mission, love what i do"**Theme:** Teachers stay because of a deep passion for teaching and a belief in the meaningful nature of their work. This intrinsic motivation reinforces their commitment despite challenges.**Featured Responses:**

1. "Teaching is not a job but a mission."
2. "It's my calling—I want to make the world a better place through my students."

5. Career Opportunities**Count: 198 responses****Keyword Indicators:** "career, profession, degree, certification, certifications"**Theme:** Professional investment and mobility constraints—teachers stay because their training, experience, and career path are specialized, making it difficult or costly to transition into other professions.

- **Positive (Career Growth / Advancement):** 73 responses
- **Negative (Career Constraint / Feeling Stuck):** 125 responses

Featured Responses:

1. "I have already put in so many years and certifications... it doesn't make sense to start over."
2. "Teaching has provided me with a stable and meaningful career path where I can continue to develop."

6. Work-Life Integration**Count: 166 responses****Keyword Indicators:** "schedule, summer, summers, break, breaks, time off, family, calendar"**Theme:** Work-life balance, particularly predictable schedules, family alignment, and extended breaks, plays a key role in retention. These structures make the profession more manageable and sustainable over time.**Featured Response:**

1. "Teaching gives me enough flexibility and balance to manage both my personal and professional life."