

APPLYING RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGIES TO STRATEGIC STAFFING INITIATIVES

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Overview Brief



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

EdResearch for Action
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EdResearch for Action is an initiative based at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University that brings together researchers and education leaders to improve how evidence is used in decision-making. The initiative synthesizes rigorous research into clear, actionable guidance designed for school, district, and state leaders.

EdResearch for Action briefs draw on a wide range of studies, including randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental research, and descriptive evidence, to identify practices that improve student outcomes. Rather than focusing on individual studies, the briefs highlight patterns across the research base and translate those findings into practical strategies that can be implemented in real-world contexts.

A core component of the EdResearch model is collaboration with practitioners. Through an advisory board of school, district, and state leaders, EdResearch works to ensure that each brief addresses high-priority challenges, reflects the realities of implementation, and provides guidance that is both evidence-based and actionable.

The goal of EdResearch for Action is to bridge the gap between research and practice—helping education leaders not only understand what the evidence says, but also use it to make informed decisions that improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AT A GLANCE: EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

APPLYING RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGIES TO STRATEGIC STAFFING INITIATIVES



COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

- 1 Teacher collaboration, defined broadly as seeking and sharing guidance on instruction, curriculum, and problem-solving, is widely viewed as a key lever for improving instruction, student learning, and teacher satisfaction.
- 2 Collaborative instructional models improve student academic outcomes and teacher satisfaction across subjects and grade levels, relative to classes taught by a single teacher.



DIFFERENTIATED ROLES AND CAREER PATHWAYS

- 1 Teacher leadership, defined as teachers influencing colleagues and school practice while staying in the classroom, is consistently associated with higher student achievement, stronger professional collaboration, and higher teacher retention.
- 2 New teachers who receive mentorship from an experienced colleague are both more likely to stay in the profession and improve their instructional practice.
- 3 The effectiveness of subject-area specialization on student achievement depends on how it is implemented. It is likely most effective when schools place subject-strong teachers in specialist roles, and build in structures that protect teacher-student relationships.



DIFFERENTIATED COMPENSATION

- 1 When pay differentials are large enough, tied to meaningful roles, and paired with professional supports, they can improve retention. Pay differentials likely need to be meaningfully large to actually change behavior.
- 2 Additional compensation signals that leadership and expanded roles are valued by the system, helping educators view staffing changes as meaningful professional opportunities rather than added, uncompensated burdens.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can school and district leaders restructure teaching roles to better align educator expertise with student needs and ultimately improve teacher retention, instructional quality, and student outcomes?

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Strategic staffing is a framework for redesigning teaching roles, time, and compensation to better align educator expertise with student needs. It brings together three core components — collaborative teaching, differentiated roles and career pathways, and differentiated compensation — each of which has been shown to improve outcomes for teachers and students. However, the evidence for “name-brand” models that bring together multiple strategies/components remains preliminary.

Why do interest in teaching, teacher satisfaction, and teacher retention matter?

Nearly half of new teachers leave the profession within five years and the pipeline feeding the profession is shrinking, leading to classrooms either left empty or filled by uncertified teachers.

- Interest in teaching in the U.S. has [dropped about 20% over the past decade](#), and high school seniors and college freshmen are [highly unlikely to report wanting to be teachers](#).
- Teachers in high-poverty schools turn over at [roughly double the rate of those in low-poverty schools](#), which means the students with the greatest needs are chronically assigned to teachers who are new to the profession, new to the school, or both. The [negative impacts of teacher turnover on student achievement](#) are well-documented.
- Hard-to-staff roles like special education, math, and science experience [the most severe shortages](#), and the teachers who fill them report the [highest rates of burnout and attrition](#).

How is the current structure of the teaching role lowering interest in teaching and lowering retention?

The teaching role is structurally misaligned with what attracts people to the profession and what keeps them in it. Research points to four compounding factors:

1. The workload is unsustainable:

- In a 2025 survey, [teachers reported working longer hours](#) (49 hours per week, on average) than similar working adults (44 hours per week). Further, twice as many teachers as similar working adults said that job intrusion (e.g., job obligations or worries spilling over into their personal life) affected their life outside of work.
- This workload is by design, as the job itself requires a single teacher to be responsible for nearly every aspect of their students' educational experience simultaneously. [37% of teachers say they take on too many additional responsibilities](#) for which they are not compensated.

2. The profession offers insufficient autonomy and professional respect:

- The occupational prestige of teaching, once high relative to other careers, has [declined considerably since the 1960s](#), and this decline tracks closely with the relative deterioration of teacher wages, working conditions, and professional autonomy compared to other college-educated occupations.
- Teachers who report low levels of classroom autonomy, limited participation in school decision-making, and [poor administrative support](#) are significantly more likely to leave.

3. There are limited opportunities for career advancement:

- Unlike many other professions, most teaching positions offer essentially two options for advancement: remain a classroom teacher or leave teaching for administration. Only 25% of teachers [believe the profession provides growth and leadership opportunities](#). While school leadership roles like assistant principal or principal are the primary advancement option, these positions are limited and often [unattractive to teachers who want to remain in the classroom](#). Teaching is an outlier among professions in offering so few ways to grow without leaving the role entirely.

4. Pay is disconnected from expertise and leadership:

- One of the [top reasons teachers report wanting to leave the profession is the desire for higher-paying jobs](#). A 2026 EdWeek survey found that [only 32% of teachers felt their salary was better than or comparable](#) to what their closest family and friends earn. The [single salary schedule](#), in which teacher pay is determined almost entirely by years of experience and educational credentials, remains the dominant compensation model in U.S. public education, leaving teachers feeling undervalued and making higher-paying careers outside education more attractive.
- Teacher licensure requirements, class size provisions, state-mandated pay scales, and collective bargaining agreement (CBA) clauses built around the traditional one-teacher-one-classroom model can [all limit the adoption of innovative staffing structures](#) that require more flexible pay structures.
- Additional compensation is [more commonly provided for advanced degrees or certifications](#) (e.g., National Board Certification) than for taking on leadership or specialized roles, despite [little evidence that these credentials are associated with teacher effectiveness](#).

How does strategic staffing redesign the teaching role to address teacher satisfaction and retention?

These drivers are interconnected, and meaningful improvement requires redesigning the structure of the teaching role itself. Strategic staffing offers a framework for doing exactly that. The table below illustrates how the core components of strategic staffing map onto the structural drivers of teacher satisfaction and retention.

Table 1: How strategic staffing addresses teacher satisfaction and retention

	THE CURRENT ROLE		HOW STRATEGIC STAFFING RESPONDS
Unsustainable workload	One teacher is responsible for instruction, planning, assessment, and family engagement for a full roster.	→	Collaborative teaching shares students, planning, and instructional load across a team of teachers.
Insufficient autonomy & respect	Teachers have limited voice in decisions and few opportunities to shape practice beyond their room.	→	Differentiated roles give ownership of specialized areas (such as instruction or coaching) and a voice in team-level decisions.
Limited career advancement	The only advancement opportunity is leaving the classroom for administration.	→	Differentiated roles create advancement opportunities (such as lead teacher or coach) that keep effective educators in the classroom.
Pay disconnected from expertise	Pay is set almost entirely by years of experience and credentials, regardless of role or expertise.	→	Differentiated compensation rewards teachers who take on leadership, specialization, or hard-to-staff roles with meaningful pay differentials.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

The research below examines the three evidence-based components of strategic staffing — collaborative teaching, differentiated roles and career pathways, and differentiated compensation — rather than the integrated framework as a whole. Each has been studied for decades; the evidence on comprehensive frameworks that combine them is new. Direct evidence on integrated models is reviewed at the end of this section.

What the evidence does and doesn't tell us:

STRONG EVIDENCE	EMERGING EVIDENCE	LIMITED EVIDENCE
What this brief can support	What is becoming clearer	What we cannot yet claim
Each individual component improves student or teacher outcomes when implemented well.	Specific name-brand models that combine components produce positive effects.	That the integrated framework of strategic staffing outperforms its individual components.



COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

Collaborative teaching is the structured, intentional grouping of educators to share responsibility for the same students. Hallmarks include increased collaborative planning and co-teaching.

Teacher collaboration, defined broadly as seeking and sharing guidance on instruction, curriculum, and problem-solving, is widely viewed as a key lever for improving instruction, student learning, and teacher satisfaction.

- Prior [research consistently links collaboration to stronger professional communities](#), improved instructional quality, and [better student outcomes](#). In schools that have cultures and systems in which teacher collaboration is encouraged over working in isolation, teachers are more likely to take collective responsibility for outcomes. Schools with stronger collective responsibility have higher student performance.
- Teacher interaction reduces isolation and builds capacity. Collaborative work helps teachers [expand their instructional skill sets](#), learn from peers, and feel more confident in addressing student needs, especially when collaboration is embedded in everyday practice rather than treated as an add-on.
- Teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) are a common way to boost teacher collaboration. The research is consistent on what makes PLCs effective: collaboration needs to be [centered on the core work of teaching](#) (e.g. observing, discussing student needs, planning lessons). Schools with strong PLCs tend to develop what researchers call a common instructional language: [shared vocabulary and shared expectations about what good teaching looks like](#).
- A study of elementary teachers found that those working in structured, collaborative teams reported [stronger commitment to their schools](#), especially when they were team-teaching and collaborating on curriculum.

Collaborative instructional models improve student academic outcomes across subjects and grade levels, relative to classes taught by a single teacher.

- A meta-analysis of 76 studies shows that collaborative instructional models [have a positive effect on student academic outcomes](#) on average relative to classes taught by a single teacher across subjects and grade levels. The benefits hold across different instructional models: pairing two general education teachers, a general education and special education teacher, or a general education teacher and a teaching assistant all show gains.
- One randomized controlled trial in Denmark found that a [collaborative instructional model with teacher aides positively impacted student achievement](#), both through allowing for more small-group instruction and supporting classroom management, with particularly large effects for the most vulnerable students. Additional quasi-experimental evidence supports the value of aides: a study from North Carolina found that teacher assistants [raised reading and math achievement](#), with larger effects for students of color and students in high-poverty schools.
- [Clear role structures in collaborative staffing models](#) produce more stable classroom dynamics and better student engagement. Qualitative research on classrooms with paired special and general education teachers emphasizes that [trust and shared goals, not just assigned time, are prerequisites for effective joint practice](#).



DIFFERENTIATED ROLES AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Differentiated roles involve assigning educators specialized responsibilities based on their strengths (e.g., mentoring, parental outreach, data tracking, curriculum design, or team leadership), creating career pathways that expand leadership opportunities without leaving the classroom.

Teacher leadership, defined as teachers influencing colleagues and school practice while staying in the classroom, is consistently associated with higher student achievement, stronger professional collaboration, and higher teacher retention.

- [A meta-analysis of 21 studies](#) found that schools with higher levels of teacher leadership tend to have higher student achievement, with the strongest effects when leadership is focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment rather than administrative tasks.
- Teacher leaders report that their leadership role both [increases and improves collaboration](#) with their colleagues. Teachers in schools where leadership is distributed successfully (e.g., where teachers have a voice in decision-making and administrators are supportive) [are more committed to their schools](#).
- An evaluation of a [New York City teacher leadership program](#) found that teacher leaders were less likely to leave the profession and had higher classroom observation scores than comparison teachers. The nonprofit [Leading Educators has demonstrated causal impacts](#) on student learning through a two-year, job-embedded program where teacher leaders coached small groups of peers through content-focused learning cycles.

New teachers who receive mentorship from an experienced colleague are both more likely to stay in the profession and improve their instructional practice.

- Novice teachers assigned a first-year mentor are [15 percentage points more likely to still be teaching five years later](#) than peers without a mentor. Two reviews of the research confirm that mentoring is positively associated with [teacher retention](#), instructional quality, and [student learning](#). A meta-analysis of 17 research studies on novice teacher induction and mentoring programs found that [induction and mentoring interventions generally have positive effects](#), especially on teacher retention, instructional practices, and support for new teachers.
- Research suggests that [more structured and comprehensive mentoring programs tend to produce stronger effects than informal support](#).

The effectiveness of subject-area specialization on student achievement depends on how it is implemented. It is likely most effective when schools place subject-strong teachers in specialist roles and protect teacher-student relationships.

- When elementary teachers specialize (teach only one or two subjects instead of all four), two things happen that seem to contradict each other. Individual teachers [tend to perform worse](#), likely because she [knows her students less well](#). However, schools that specialize don't necessarily see worse student outcomes, and in some studies, they see better ones. The student outcome is the net of these two forces: schools can offset the teacher-level loss by [concentrating their strongest teachers in the specialist positions](#). If a school specializes by assigning teachers based on schedule convenience or seniority rather than subject-specific effectiveness, the model is unlikely to work.

- Schools that have seen positive results from specialization typically sort [more effective teachers into specialist roles](#), invest explicitly in relationship-building, and monitor outcomes for the students most likely to be affected.
- Moving into a specialist role is associated with [higher within-school retention](#) (teachers staying at the same school year-over-year).



DIFFERENTIATED COMPENSATION

Differentiated compensation means paying educators differently based on roles, responsibilities, expertise, or performance, rather than using a uniform salary schedule based only on experience and credentials.

When pay differentials are large enough, tied to meaningful roles, and paired with professional supports, they can improve retention.

- The most consistent evidence on differentiated pay comes not from performance pay tied to test scores, but from targeted bonuses for the teachers who are hardest to recruit and retain: special educators, STEM teachers, and teachers in high-poverty schools. Multiple state programs have shown that targeted pay differentials reduce turnover among the teachers they target. [North Carolina's](#) \$1,800 STEM and special education bonus lowered turnover by 17%. [Washington state's](#) \$5,000 annual bonus for National Board-certified teachers in lower-resourced schools increased retention by 30-40%. [Georgia](#) allowed novice STEM teachers to start at a higher salary step, reducing attrition by 18-28%. [Hawaii's](#) \$10,000 special education bonus reduced vacancies and induced general educators to switch into special education.
- Pay differentials must be large enough to change behavior. A meta-analysis of [teacher merit pay](#) found that higher incentives produce larger effects, with the median effective increase at approximately 7.5% of salary (roughly \$5,000). Further, [a study in Arkansas](#) found that increases in salary over \$4,000 significantly decrease turnover, but lower raises have no impact. Smaller pay bumps are unlikely to meaningfully shift teacher or student outcomes.
- The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) combines teacher leadership career ladders with differentiated compensation, classroom observation, and coaching. A South Carolina study found that students exposed to TAP in middle school were significantly more likely to [graduate on time and less likely to be arrested](#). A study of a [similar TAP model in Chicago](#) without performance-based incentives did not produce student gains, suggesting that instructional supports alone were insufficient without increased pay aligned to performance.
- Many merit pay programs have shown [little or no effect](#), particularly those that relied solely on test scores, offered small bonuses, or lacked accompanying professional development. Compensation reform without [clear role definition, adequate incentive magnitude, and multiple performance measures](#) is unlikely to produce student outcomes.

Additional compensation signals that leadership and expanded roles are valued by the system, helping educators view staffing changes as meaningful professional opportunities rather than added, uncompensated burdens.

- Interviews with leaders across six systems that had implemented strategic staffing initiatives found that [compensation helped legitimize additional roles](#) and reduced perceptions that strategic staffing was simply asking teachers to “do more with the same pay.” In systems that offered stipends or higher pay for leadership roles, leaders observed that teachers were more willing to step into and stay in those roles. Focus groups with teacher leaders consistently find that [added responsibilities without added pay are perceived as disrespect](#), not a professional opportunity.

The Evidence on Comprehensive Strategic Staffing Models

Comprehensive strategic staffing models that combine these three components have demonstrated positive impacts on teacher retention and student achievement, though evidence is still largely preliminary.

- Public Impact’s [Opportunity Culture](#) (OC) model, implemented in over 60 sites nationally, places high-performing teachers in Multi-Classroom Leader roles to coach and co-teach with small teams. Students taught by teachers receiving OC coaching [scored approximately 0.11 standard deviations higher in math](#) and no differently from comparable students in reading. Impacts on OC’s blended learning model were negative.
- Arizona State University’s [Next Education Workforce](#) (NEW) model, now in over 30 school systems, places teams of educators with complementary skills in shared responsibility for a larger roster of students. Teachers in NEW models were [half as likely to leave their schools compared to teachers working solo](#). Quasi-experimental analysis finds NEW consistently increased middle school math scores by roughly 0.08 standard deviations, but evidence in other grades and subjects is mixed.
- The [Teacher Advancement Program \(TAP\)](#), operating in at least 15 states, combines teacher leadership career ladders with differentiated compensation and coaching. Studies find [positive impacts on math achievement](#). A South Carolina study found that students exposed to TAP in middle school were [significantly less likely to be arrested and more likely to graduate on time](#).
- We still have a lot more to learn. Each combined model has a limited base of rigorous causal evidence, and research cannot yet identify how the different strategic staffing components interact and work together. Studies on comprehensive models often show heterogeneity in effects, including some negative findings. More research is needed to better understand how these models work.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Strategic staffing is a new way of organizing the profession of teaching to better address what educators and students need to succeed. The programs that have produced lasting results share a consistent set of implementation conditions. This section translates those conditions into five actionable implementation principles.

COMMUNICATE AND BUILD BUY-IN

Strategic staffing initiatives are most likely to be effective when they are grounded in a shared vision, aligned to existing district priorities, and backed by visible and consistent senior leadership.

- Case studies on strategic staffing implementation show that initiatives grounded in a shared vision and aligned to existing district priorities [build stronger buy-in and coherence than those introduced as stand-alone programs](#).
- Case studies of strategic staffing initiatives have found that [visible, consistent support from senior leaders, especially superintendents, helped legitimize the work system-wide](#). In systems where superintendents made frequent public statements reinforcing the importance of strategic staffing, leaders found it easier to overcome resistance and push through bureaucratic barriers. Without this backing, initiative leaders were often left working only with early adopters, limiting scale and impact.
- California principals interviewed for a statewide study consistently emphasized this point: those who had previously worked in or visited schools with alternative staffing models were far more likely to advocate for them, suggesting that [concrete, problem-specific exposure to models](#) is itself a prerequisite for effective design.

CO-DESIGN WITH TEACHERS

Including teachers early in the design of new roles, schedules, and compensation systems increases buy-in and ensures staffing models fit the realities of classrooms and school operations.

- Teachers and principals hold critical, context-specific knowledge about what staffing structures will work in their schools. Research on school change finds that improvement depends less on any single program and more on [how adults in the system organize themselves around a shared improvement aim](#). In schools where principals, district leaders, and instructional leaders shared a clear understanding of what they were trying to improve (e.g., instructional quality, student learning) and how their roles connected to that goal, reforms were more likely to be implemented deeply and consistently.
- Strategic staffing often challenges deeply held assumptions about teaching roles, authority, and collaboration. Leaders describe the need for continuous communication, listening to concerns, clarifying misunderstandings, and naming setbacks to [prevent skepticism from hardening into resistance](#).

BUILD CAPACITY THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Providing sufficient professional learning related to the implementation of strategic staffing is essential. Simply giving teachers time, new responsibilities, or additional pay will not, on its own, lead to expected results.

- Giving teachers extra [time to collaborate does not, on its own, lead to successful collaboration](#) or improved student outcomes. Collaboration is most effective when teachers are [equipped with the right tools and training and then given the professional autonomy to lead](#).
- Co-teaching in particular requires interpersonal and instructional skills beyond traditional solo teaching. Without professional development, [co-teaching teams default to one teacher "leading" and the other "assisting,"](#) a pattern that undermines the intended benefits of the model. Co-teachers who receive professional development demonstrate [more effective joint instructional practices and higher fidelity implementation](#).
- Similarly, teachers stepping into new leadership or mentoring roles [need structured support to build the skills required for those roles](#) and to sustain their practice through leadership or staff turnover.

ALIGN POLICY AND SYSTEMS

Implementing strategic staffing at scale requires alignment across different levels of the educational system: schools, districts, and states.

- Strategic staffing requires alignment across the full system- school, district, and state. School-level leaders manage scheduling and daily functions. District leaders handle HR, contracts, and budget. State policy creates the enabling conditions, or the barriers, through funding formulas, credentialing codes, and collective bargaining frameworks. District and school leaders can do everything right at the local level and still hit a ceiling that only state action can move. A national policy scan [identified ten concrete things states can do, or stop doing](#), to make strategic staffing easier to implement at the school and district level. This framework translates a vague problem into a concrete policy checklist that legislators and state education agencies could act on directly.
- [Administrative software](#) and [existing data structures](#) often impede innovation in education systems. Aligning district policies (e.g., the school calendar, student data systems, and HR transfer processes) with strategic staffing models prevents logistical barriers from undermining promising reforms.
- The [U.S. Department of Education's 2026 Dear Colleague](#) letter explicitly names strategic staffing models as allowable uses of Title II funds, opening a direct funding pathway for districts.

WORK WITH UNIONS

Districts that have successfully navigated CBA constraints have used several concrete strategies:

- **Build relationships.** Research across 25 districts in six states found that [formal union-management committees and collaborative partnerships](#) improve student achievement even in high-poverty schools, and lead to more extensive collaboration among teachers as well as between teachers and administrators. In states with strong collective bargaining rights and long-established uniform salary structures, these barriers are real and may require a multi-year labor relations strategy, not just a program design conversation. The time invested in a labor-management partnership at the outset is almost always less costly than redesigning a model after it has generated resistance.

- **Start with a pilot.** When [Hoover Middle School](#) in Albuquerque launched its team-based staffing model in fall 2025, it started with a single 6th-grade pilot team, three general education teachers and three special education teachers, rather than rolling out the model district-wide. The pilot gave the school's leadership team evidence of what worked before expanding: by early 2026, the school had launched a second math-focused team, with plans to extend the model across all grade levels the following year. Starting small also allowed administrators to learn what conditions the model actually required, including protecting four shared planning periods per week, before committing to those structures at scale. The Albuquerque Public Schools took the same phased approach, beginning with six schools in its first cohort in 2025 and adding nine more middle schools in 2026.
- **Set up non-conventional "reform tables."** In New Haven, Connecticut, the superintendent's office set up [nonconventional "reform tables" to talk about broad-ranging issues and engage all stakeholders](#), including teachers and administrators, outside of standard contract negotiations. Structures like these allow districts and unions to design new roles collaboratively, rather than treating the contract as the starting point.

This EdResearch for Action brief is a collaboration among:



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