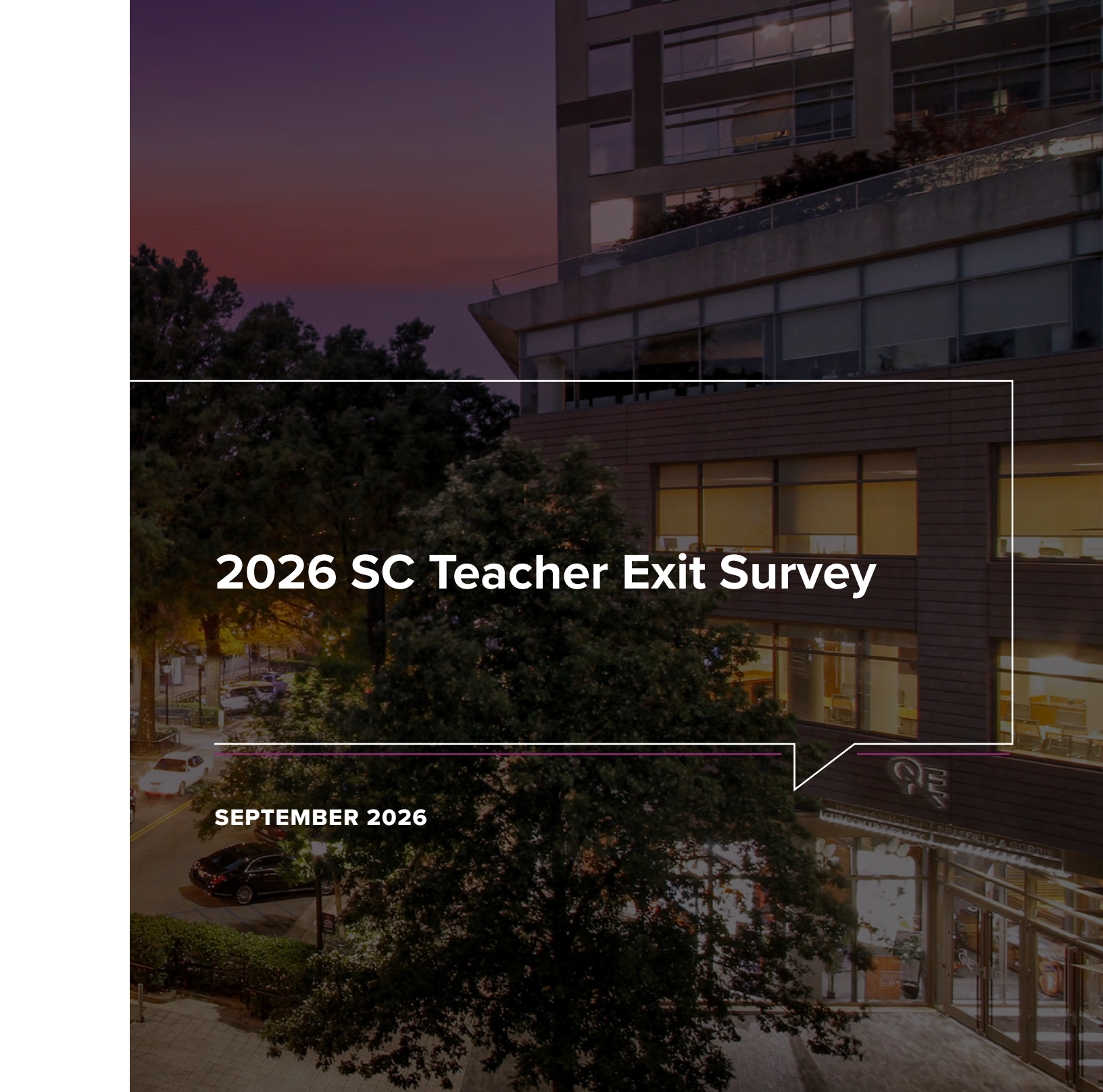


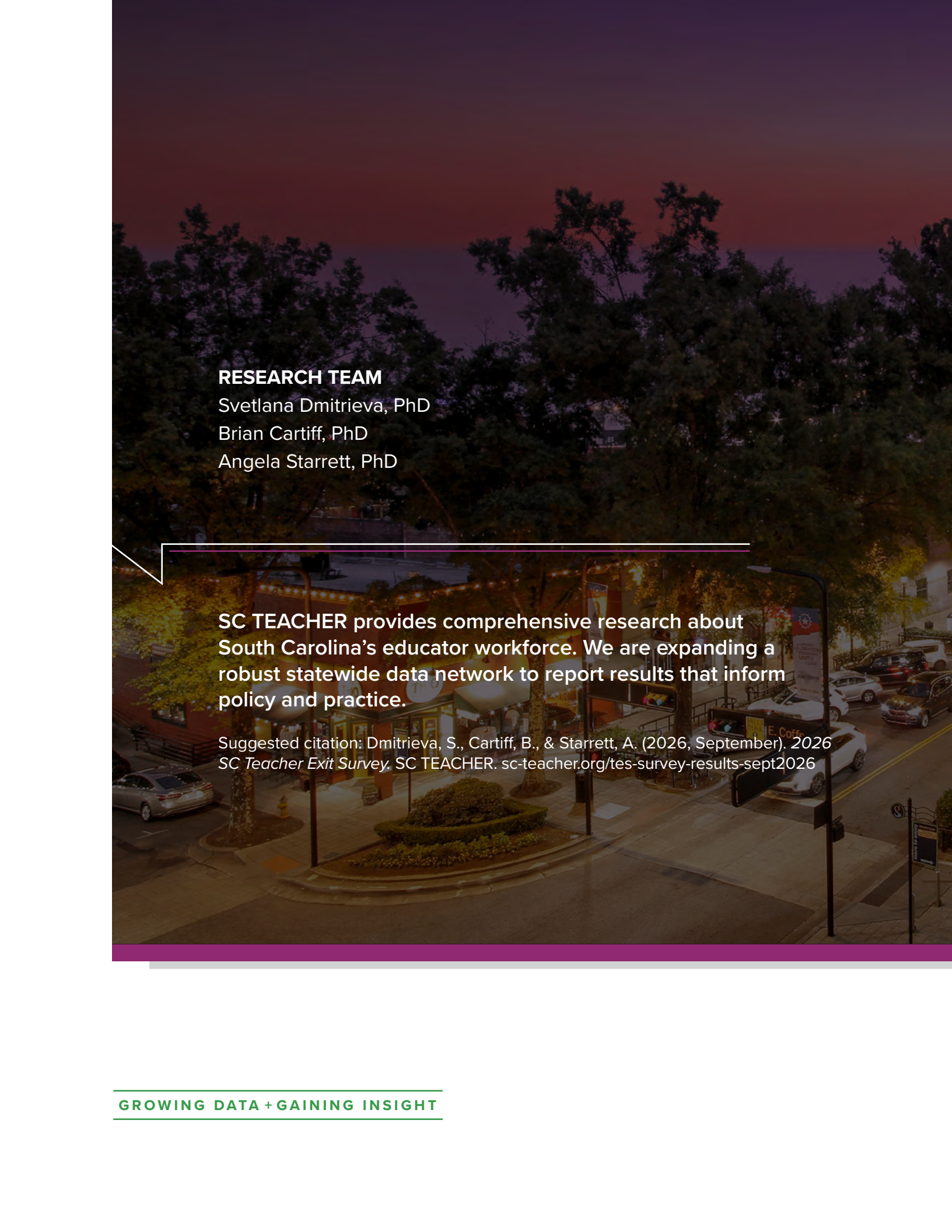


2026 SC Teacher Exit Survey

SEPTEMBER 2026



TEACHER EXIT SURVEY



RESEARCH TEAM

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SC TEACHER provides comprehensive research about South Carolina's educator workforce. We are expanding a robust statewide data network to report results that inform policy and practice.

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SC Teacher Exit Survey

+ HIGHLIGHTS

Each year, SC TEACHER administers the SC Teacher Exit Survey to public PK–12 classroom teachers who are leaving teaching positions in their districts. The survey provides insight into departing teachers' next steps, the factors that contributed to their decisions to leave, and the conditions that might encourage some educators to remain in or return to South Carolina public education.

This report summarizes results from the 2026 SC Teacher Exit Survey, focusing on teachers who left their positions at the end of the 2025–26 academic year. Findings are organized by exit type to distinguish different forms of teacher mobility, including teachers who moved to another South Carolina public school district, changed roles within public education, retired, did not have their contracts renewed, left South Carolina public education entirely, or remained undecided about their future plans at the time of the survey.

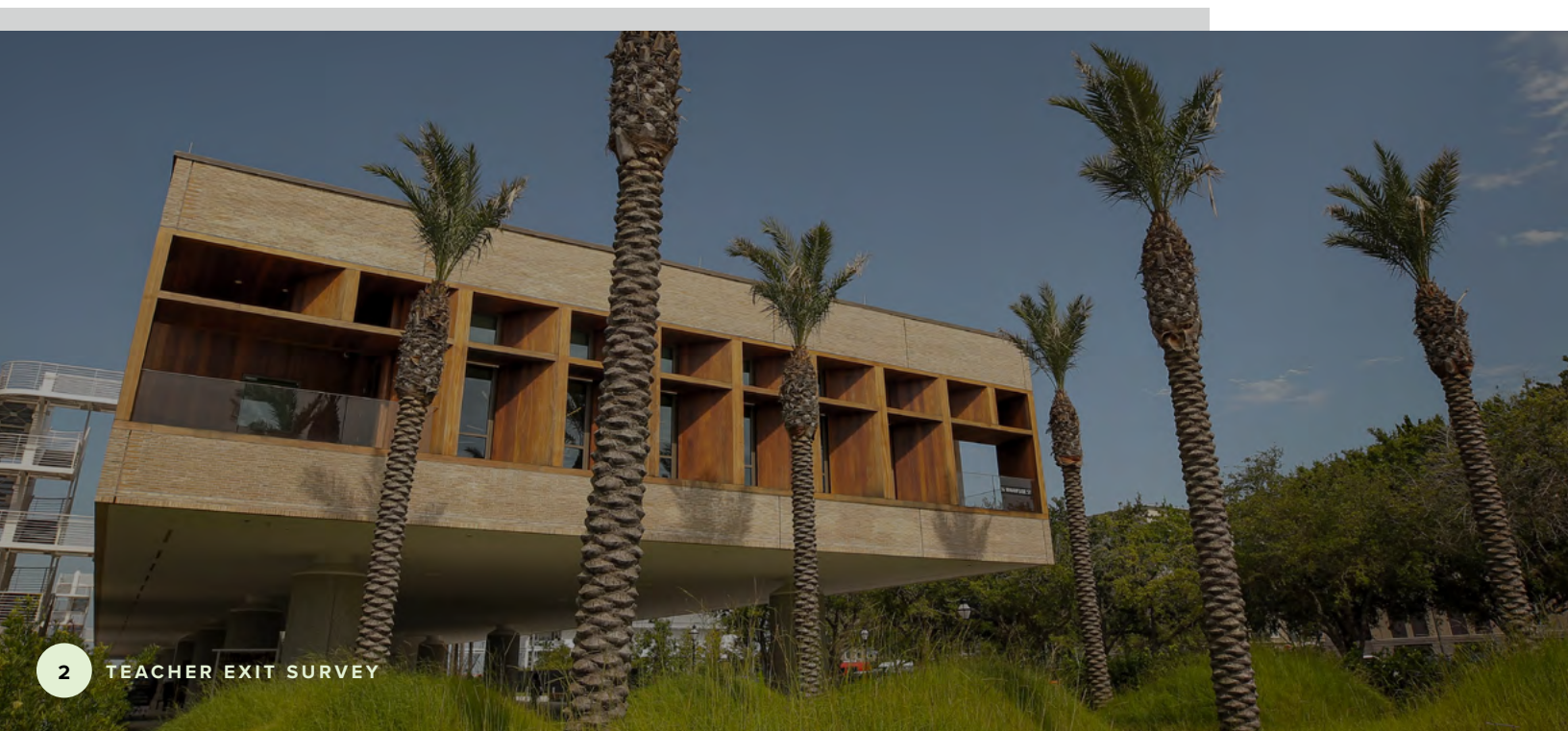
MAIN FINDINGS

- Lateral movers and leavers were the two largest exit groups, representing 35% and 33% of respondents, respectively; retirees accounted for 15%.
- Among nonretiring respondents, nearly half remained in the state's public education system as lateral movers or role-changers.
- Work-life balance was the most consistent reason for leaving, ranked first or second by all voluntary exit groups.
- Lateral movers placed significantly greater importance than leavers on taking a job more conveniently located in relation to where they live.
- School culture and climate was the top factor influencing lateral movers' choice of a new district, followed by school leadership reputation, alignment with educational philosophy, and district leadership reputation.
- Protected planning or break time and increased salary were the top factors that might influence leavers and retirees to return to the classroom. Smaller class sizes, increased special education support, and part-time teaching options also emerged as important considerations.

+ INTRODUCTION

Teachers serve a central role in South Carolina's public schools. Their work supports students' academic growth and long-term success and helps create the conditions in which schools and communities can thrive. Because of this, efforts to recruit, support, and retain effective teachers remain a priority for school districts and policymakers across the state. At the same time, turnover is a normal feature of all labor markets. Some movement is expected as individuals retire, relocate, pursue new opportunities, or seek positions that better match their personal and professional goals. In education, teacher turnover is not inherently negative. When teachers who are less effective or poorly matched to a school context leave at higher rates, the overall effectiveness of the remaining and incoming staff may improve (James & Wyckoff, 2020). New hires can also bring fresh perspectives, additional expertise, or stronger alignment with a school's instructional approach, culture, or community needs (Gibbons et al., 2021).

Even so, frequent or widespread teacher turnover can place considerable strain on schools and districts. High or persistent turnover can increase organizational costs related to recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and induction, and can weaken school climate, morale, and collective efficacy among remaining staff (Jabbar & Holme, 2026; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Departing teachers may also take valuable institutional knowledge about students, families, curricula, and school practices, making it more difficult to maintain stability and instructional consistency (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Schools facing repeated shortages typically must rely on less experienced replacements (Henry & Redding, 2020). These concerns illustrate why teacher retention is a critical issue for public education generally and in South Carolina.



Addressing turnover requires more than knowing how many teachers leave. It requires understanding what next career steps departing teachers are taking and the factors contributing to those decisions. Teachers who leave a classroom position do not all follow the same path. Some retire after many years of service, while others move into nonclassroom roles in public education, such as instructional coaching or administration. Some continue teaching in another South Carolina district, while others leave the state's public school system entirely—whether for private education, out-of-state positions, new careers, or time away from work. Additionally, teachers may exit due to nonrenewed contracts or remain undecided about their future. These distinctions matter because patterns of mobility reflect distinct underlying challenges and may require tailored policy or management responses.

Addressing turnover requires more than knowing how many teachers leave.

Prior research shows that teacher mobility is shaped by a combination of personal, professional, and workplace factors. Personal considerations include family responsibilities, health, relocation, and work-life balance (McFeely, 2018; Sun et al., 2017). Professional factors include compensation, advancement opportunities, and career goals (Pressley et al., 2026). Working conditions also play a critical role: Heavy workloads, student behavior, limited planning time, and weak administrative support are associated with higher turnover, while strong leadership, positive collegial relationships, and meaningful input into school decisions support retention (Bryant et al., 2023; Doughty, 2024; Ingersoll, 2001; Toropova et al., 2021). Broader policy environments may further influence teachers' decisions, particularly when teachers perceive limited voice or misalignment between policy and classroom realities (García et al., 2022; Gillani et al., 2022). In many cases, teachers leave due to a combination of these factors rather than a single issue.





Because teacher mobility is shaped by multiple factors, exit surveys provide information that cannot be captured through administrative records alone. Administrative data can show that a teacher left a district, moved schools, or exited the state workforce. These data are essential for tracking broad trends and identifying staffing patterns. However, administrative data generally do not explain why teachers made those decisions or what might have encouraged them to stay. Exit surveys help fill this gap by asking departing teachers directly about their plans, experiences, and motivations. This information can support more targeted and context-specific responses. For example, if teachers are leaving because of planning time, student behavior, or workload, retention efforts may need to focus on working conditions and school-level supports. If teachers are moving to nearby districts, leaders may need to consider differences in culture, compensation, leadership, commute, or available resources. If experienced teachers are retiring but open to returning, part-time roles, flexible schedules, mentoring positions, or reduced workloads may help districts maintain access to their expertise.

The SC Teacher Exit Survey is designed to provide this type of information for South Carolina. By listening to teachers at the point of exit, the state can better understand not only the challenges that contribute to turnover but also the opportunities for improving working conditions, supporting career development, and encouraging experienced educators to remain in or return to public education.

The value of this information is especially important in the current educator workforce context. Although national concerns about teacher shortages intensified during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, recent evidence suggests that turnover patterns have stabilized in some places (DiNicola et al., 2026; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023). Still, stabilization at the state level does not mean that all schools and districts experience the same staffing conditions. Some districts continue to face persistent shortages, difficulty recruiting qualified applicants, or higher rates of turnover in particular schools, grade levels, or subject areas (Edwards et al., 2025). In these contexts, retaining current teachers may be one of the most effective ways to strengthen the workforce.



This report presents results from the statewide 2026 SC Teacher Exit Survey for teachers who left at the end of the 2025–26 academic year. It describes respondents’ characteristics, differentiates exit pathways, summarizes reasons for leaving, and examines factors that may influence teachers’ decisions to return. The findings are intended to inform efforts to reduce potentially avoidable turnover, strengthen working conditions, and support the recruitment, retention, and reengagement of effective educators across South Carolina.

KEY QUESTIONS

This report examines the following questions regarding South Carolina public school teachers who left their teaching positions in their districts at the end of the 2025–26 academic year and participated in the 2026 SC Teacher Exit Survey:

1. What are the characteristics of South Carolina teachers leaving their current positions, and how can their movement best be described and classified?
2. What are the main reasons South Carolina teachers are leaving their positions? What meaningful differences, if any, exist in the motivating factors of those leaving to teach in other public schools (i.e., lateral movers) compared to those leaving public schools completely (i.e., leavers)?
3. What factors might influence teachers’ decisions to return to public schools in South Carolina?

Key terms used throughout this report are defined in the Glossary beginning on p. 21.

SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

The 2026 SC Teacher Exit Survey was designed to identify factors influencing educators' decisions to leave their positions. Eligibility was limited to those exiting classroom teaching positions within their districts; teachers transferring to another teaching position within the same district were not eligible to participate. The survey used branching logic to distinguish between voluntary and nonvoluntary departures. Respondents who reported voluntary departures were directed to additional items organized into five categories: career reasons, job demands, job resources, personal reasons, and policy reasons. Participants who were not planning to teach elsewhere in South Carolina in 2026–27 were asked whether they would consider returning to teach in the state and to rate the importance of specific incentives in motivating that decision.

In April 2026, SC TEACHER invited all South Carolina public school districts to participate by contacting superintendents and personnel administrators. Of the 73 traditional districts, three charter districts, and six specialty districts and schools in the state, 43 provided contact information for teachers who were not renewing their contracts or whose contracts were not renewed. Eligible teachers received survey invitations in waves starting May 11, 2026, with follow-up reminders sent to nonrespondents through survey closure on June 19, 2026.

DATA

A total of 2,584 teachers from 43 districts were identified as eligible to participate in the survey. Of these, 923 teachers from 42 districts^a completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 35.7%. Responses with incomplete data were retained to maximize the available sample; item-level response counts are reported throughout the report.

^a42 includes 41 traditional districts and 1 specialty district.



Survey responses were merged with individual-level demographic data (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity) for PK–12 teachers provided by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE). The administrative data from the SCDE reflect the 2024–25 academic year; therefore, demographic information for teachers that entered the state public educator system in 2025–26 is not included.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings in this report. Participation was voluntary at both the district and teacher levels. Because participating districts and responding teachers may differ from those who did not participate in ways related to their reasons for leaving, the results describe survey respondents and should not be interpreted as statewide estimates of teacher attrition or its causes. In addition, all survey responses, including exit classifications and reasons for leaving, are self-reported.

VARIABLES

The survey collected information on years of teaching experience (both total years of experience in South Carolina and current school tenure) and subject areas taught during the 2025–26 academic year.

Based on self-reported departure status and future plans, respondents were classified into one of six exit categories:

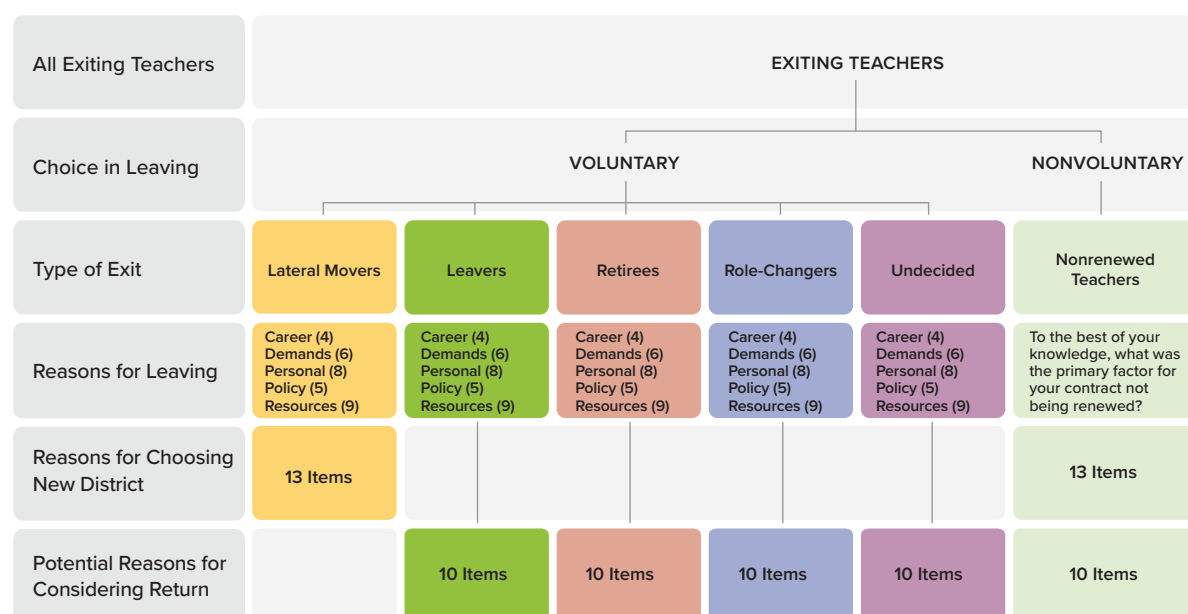
- Lateral movers: teachers who will continue teaching but moved to a different public school district in South Carolina
- Leavers: teachers who exited public education in South Carolina, transitioning to a private or homeschool setting, teaching in another state, or leaving the profession entirely
- Nonrenewed teachers: teachers whose contracts were not renewed due to various circumstances (e.g., position eliminated, school closure; previously referred to as nonvoluntary leavers)
- Retirees: teachers who met the qualifications for retirement and chose to retire at the end of the academic year
- Role-changers: teachers who remain in the public education field in South Carolina but have transitioned to nonteaching roles, such as instructional coaching or administrative positions
- Undecided: teachers who exited their positions without providing definite plans for future employment



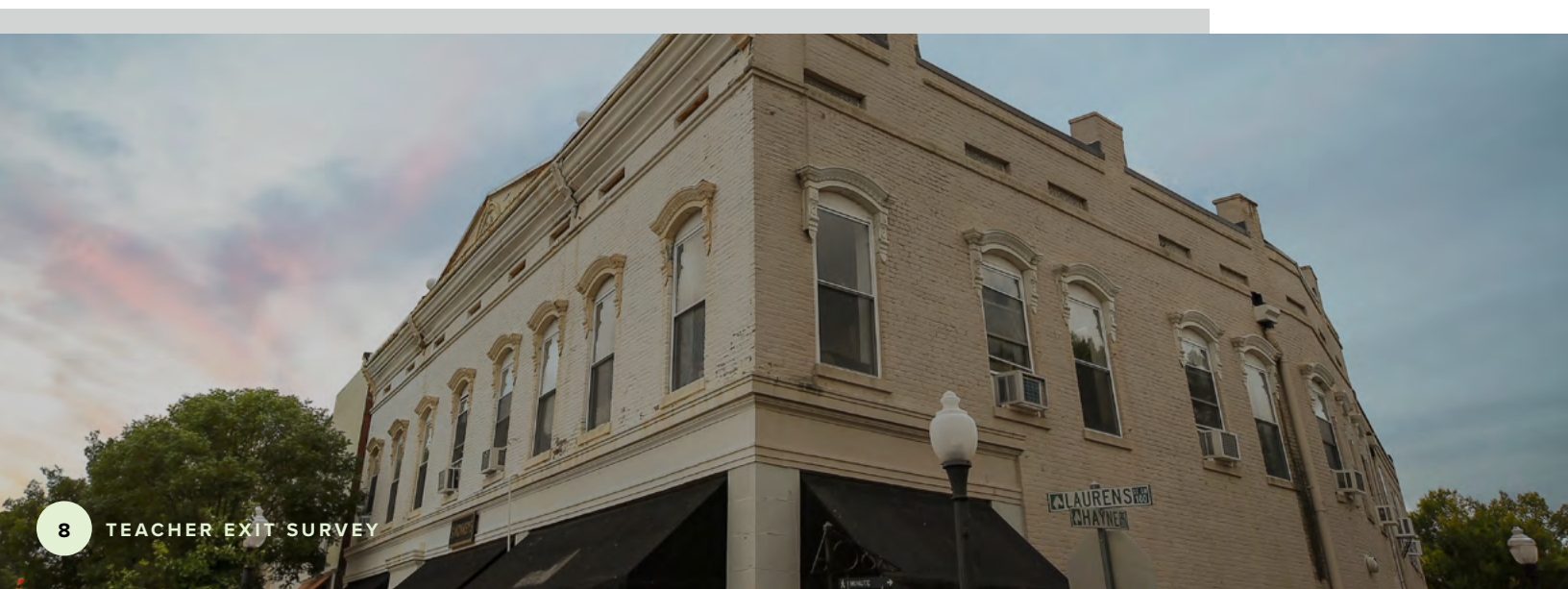
All respondents except retirees and undecided teachers were asked to report whether they had accepted a new position and to compare compensation in their new and prior roles.

Branching survey logic routed respondents to item sets based on exit type (see Figure 1). Nonrenewed teachers identified the primary reason their contract was not renewed. All other respondents rated potential reasons for leaving across five domains: career reasons, job demands, job resources, personal reasons, and policy factors. Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all important*, 2 = *Slightly important*, 3 = *Somewhat important*, 4 = *Very important*, and 5 = *Extremely important*). Respondents also identified the single most important factor among those rated highly.

Figure 1. Survey Flow Diagram for Different Categories of Exiting Teachers



Note. The numbers in parentheses regarding reasons for leaving represent the number of items on the survey related to that factor.





Lateral movers and nonrenewed teachers who indicated they had accepted a teaching position in a new district in South Carolina additionally rated 13 items related to district selection. All participants, other than lateral movers, indicated whether they would consider returning to South Carolina public schools. Respondents who indicated they were open to returning (i.e., those who selected *Neutral*, *Agree*, or *Strongly agree*) rated factors that might influence their potential return using the same 5-point importance scale and identified the most influential factor.

ANALYSES

Descriptive statistics were used to address all three key research questions. Composite scores were calculated for career reasons, job demands, job resources, and policy factors by averaging items within each category. Personal reasons were analyzed individually due to a lack of a single underlying construct.

For Key Question 2, mean differences between lateral movers and leavers, the two largest groups, were also examined to identify differences in departure motivations. Additional methodological details for the analysis related to Key Question 2 are available in the Technical Appendix (p. 25).

+ KEY QUESTION 1:

What are the characteristics of South Carolina teachers leaving their current positions, and how can their movement best be described and classified?

A primary objective of this report is to examine the characteristics of South Carolina teachers who left their positions at the end of the 2025–26 academic year. This section summarizes respondents’ demographic characteristics (gender and race/ethnicity), teaching experience, school tenure, subject areas, and exit classifications. Where appropriate, respondent characteristics are compared with those of the statewide public school teacher workforce to provide context.

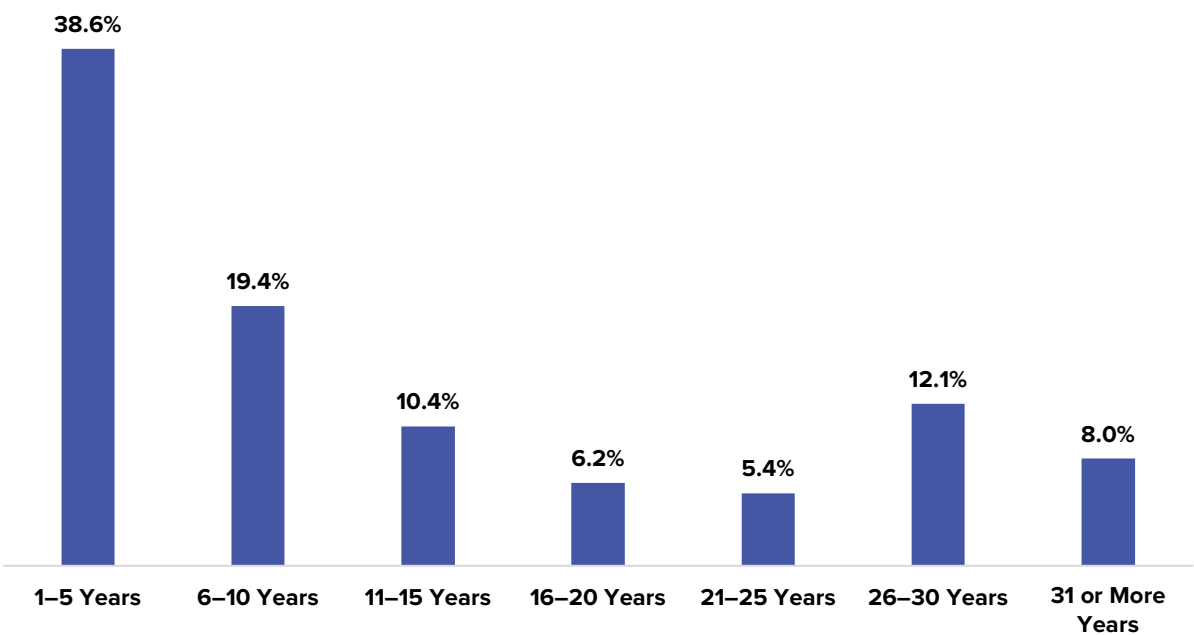
Demographic Characteristics

Among survey respondents, 83.5% were female, compared with 79.3% of the statewide teacher workforce (Dmitrieva et al., 2026). The racial and ethnic composition of respondents generally reflected that of the broader teacher population. Most respondents identified as White (74.0%), slightly lower than the statewide proportion (76.5%). Respondents identifying as Black (18.9%) and Asian (3.3%) represented slightly larger shares than the statewide teacher workforce (17.3% and 2.5%, respectively). The proportion of respondents identifying as Hispanic (2.6%) was consistent with the statewide teacher population (2.7%).

Teaching Experience in South Carolina and School Tenure

Survey respondents averaged 13.3 years of teaching experience in the state, with a range from less than 1 year to 54 years. Figure 2 presents the distribution of respondents by years of teaching experience. More than one-third (38.6%) of respondents were in their first 5 years of teaching, an increase of 4.7 percentage points from the previous year’s exit survey (33.9%; Cartiff et al., 2025). Because the districts participating in this exit survey vary from year to year, this comparison reflects differences among respondent samples rather than a measured change in statewide attrition patterns. An additional 19.4% had between 6 and 10 years of experience, while 10.4% had between 11 and 15 years of experience. Teachers with 26 or more years of teaching experience in South Carolina accounted for 20.1% of respondents.

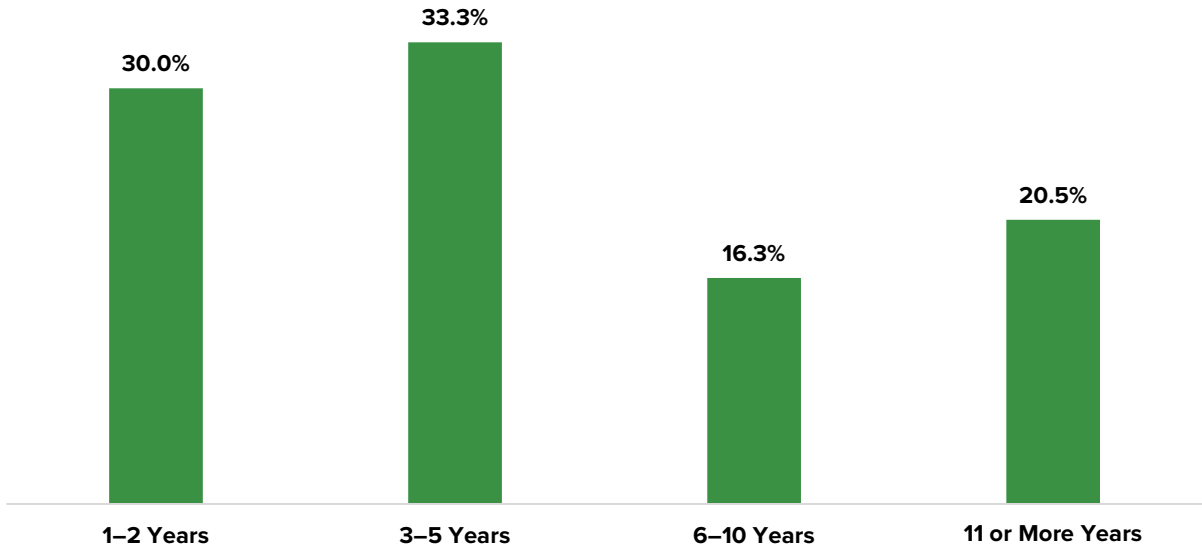
Figure 2. Distribution of Exiting Teachers by Years of Experience in South Carolina



Note. n = 887.

Participants also reported the length of time they had taught at their current school. As shown in Figure 3, more than half of respondents reported tenures of 5 years or less, including 30.0% who were in their 1st or 2nd year. These findings provide additional context regarding school-level turnover and staff stability.

Figure 3. *Distribution of Exiting Teachers by Years at Current School*



Note. $n = 914$.

Subject Areas Taught

Respondents reported the subject areas they taught during the 2025–26 academic year. Nearly one-third (31.7%) taught multiple subject areas. Elementary education was the most frequently reported assignment (19.7%), followed by special education (10.0%) and early childhood education (9.4%). These subject areas also represented the three largest groups among respondents in the 2025 exit survey (Cartiff et al., 2025). Reading (8.8%) and mathematics (6.8%) were the next most frequently reported subject areas and likewise ranked among the top five in the previous year's survey.

Table 1. Percentages of Exiting Teachers by Subject Area Taught

	Percent of reported subject areas
Elementary education	19.7%
Special education	10.0%
Early childhood	9.4%
Reading	8.8%
Mathematics	6.8%
Social studies	4.9%
English	4.8%
Gifted and talented	4.6%
Career and technical education	4.0%
Literacy	4.0%
Fine arts	3.8%
Science	3.6%
Other	15.6%
Total	100.0%

Note. Because 31.7% of respondents reported teaching more than one subject area, percentages are based on the total number of reported subject-area assignments ($n = 1,294$) rather than on the number of individual survey respondents. The table lists only subject areas representing more than 3% of reported assignments; the Other category combines those representing less than 3%.

These findings should be interpreted with caution. Although elementary education accounted for the largest share of responses, it also represents a substantial proportion of the overall teaching workforce; therefore, this finding alone does not suggest disproportionately high attrition in this subject area. Similar considerations apply to other subject areas. Additionally, because the SC Teacher Exit Survey includes only respondents from participating districts, the results may not be representative of statewide subject-area attrition patterns. Rather, they describe the distribution of teaching assignments among survey respondents.

Exit Type Classification

Respondents were classified into one of six exit types based on their responses regarding whether their departure was voluntary and their planned next steps (see Table 2). Respondents who indicated they were not leaving their positions voluntarily were classified as nonrenewed teachers.

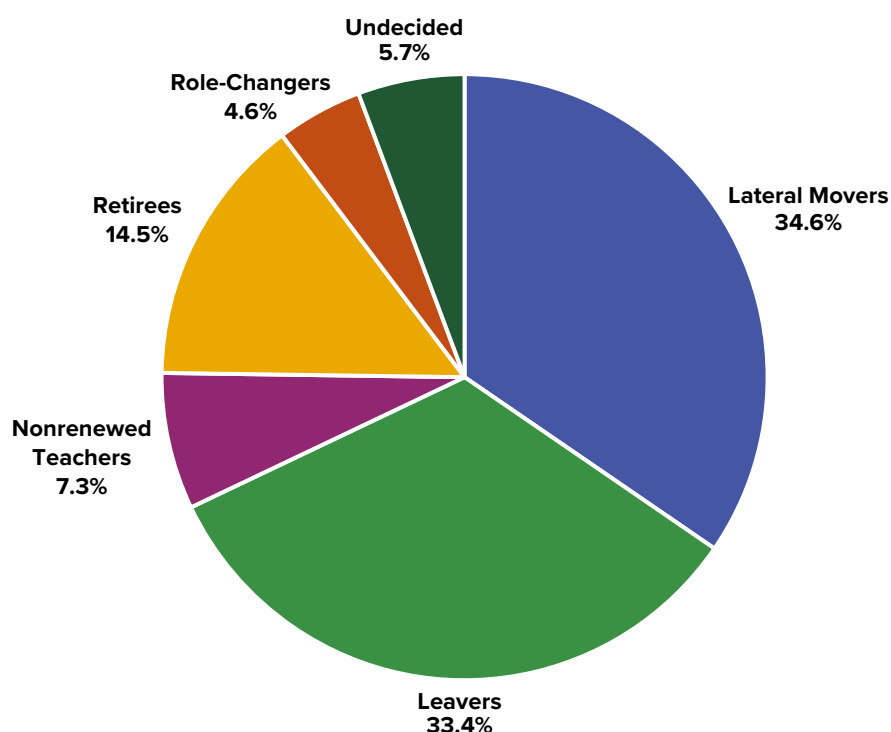
Table 2. Exit Type Classification

Exit type	Left voluntarily	Survey response options regarding next career steps
Lateral mover	Yes	Teaching at a public school in South Carolina
Leaver	Yes	Teaching at a public school in another state
		Teaching outside of the United States
		Teaching at a postsecondary institution (e.g., community college)
		Pursuing further education in the field of education
		Pursuing further education outside the field of education
		Pursuing a teaching-related position outside the field of education (e.g., training)
		Pursuing a different career outside the field of education
		Homeschooling
		Teaching at a private school
		Taking a career break
Retiree	Yes	Retiring from working
Role-changer	Yes	Working in school administration within South Carolina public education
		Working in district administration within South Carolina public education
		Working in instructional support/coaching within South Carolina public education
		Working in another nonteaching role within South Carolina public education
Undecided	Yes	Undecided
Nonrenewed teachers	No	N/A

Lateral movers and leavers were the largest groups in exit type, each comprising approximately one-third of respondents (see Figure 4). Retirees accounted for 14.5% of respondents, followed by nonrenewed teachers (7.3%). Respondents who were undecided about their future plans (5.7%) and role-changers (4.6%) represented the smallest exit categories.

Among the 789 nonretiring respondents, 45.8% were classified as lateral movers or role-changers, meaning nearly half remained in South Carolina public education. This finding underscores the importance of distinguishing among exit categories, as many departures do not constitute attrition from the state's public education system.

Figure 4. Percentages of Exiting Teachers by Exit Type



Note. $n = 923$.

Among nonretiring respondents with confirmed future plans, 75.9% had already secured a new position. Approximately 40% of these individuals anticipated somewhat or much higher compensation in their new roles (see Table 3). Expectations of higher compensation were most common among role-changers (57.1%). In contrast, 43.0% of lateral movers expected to earn about the same compensation in their new teaching positions. Leavers showed the most balanced distribution of compensation expectations, with 32.6% anticipating lower compensation and 39.6% anticipating higher compensation.

Table 3. Distributions for Compensation in the New Position

	Much lower	Somewhat lower	About the same	Somewhat higher	Much higher
Lateral movers	3.6%	15.5%	43.0%	22.7%	15.2%
Leavers	15.5%	17.1%	27.9%	19.4%	20.2%
Nonrenewed teachers	9.1%	18.2%	36.4%	31.8%	4.5%
Role-changers	8.6%	11.4%	22.9%	31.4%	25.7%
Overall	7.6%	15.8%	36.9%	22.9%	16.8%

Note. Percentages are based on respondents in the following categories who reported having accepted a new position: lateral movers ($n = 277$), leavers ($n = 129$), nonrenewed teachers ($n = 22$), and role-changers ($n = 35$).

+ KEY QUESTION 2:

What are the main reasons South Carolina teachers are leaving their positions? What meaningful differences, if any, exist in the motivating factors of those leaving to teach in other public schools (i.e., lateral movers) compared to those leaving public schools completely (i.e., leavers)?

Nonrenewed teachers were analyzed separately because they were not administered the full set of survey items on motivations for leaving. All other respondents—lateral movers, leavers, retirees, role-changers, and those undecided about their future plans—were classified as voluntary exits. Analyses focused primarily on differences between lateral movers and leavers, the two largest exit groups.

Nonrenewed Teachers

Sixty-seven respondents reported that their contracts were not renewed. These respondents were asked to identify the factor they believed most contributed to the nonrenewal decision rather than complete the full section on reasons for leaving. Fifteen respondents did not answer the item, and 10 reported being unsure. Six respondents indicated they had not obtained teacher certification. Although "other" was the most frequently selected response category, many of the accompanying written explanations reflected existing response options, such as failure to obtain certification or elimination of position because of budget reductions. Several respondents also cited district policies regarding the rehiring of retired educators.

Reasons for Leaving Among Voluntary Exit Types

For respondents who voluntarily left their positions, average ratings were calculated for four composite factors—career reasons, job demands, job resources, and policy reasons—as well as individual items related to personal reasons. Table 4 presents the five highest-rated reasons for each exit group.

The desire for a better work-life balance was ranked either first or second across all voluntary exit groups. "Other personal reasons" also appeared among the top five reasons for every group and ranked highest among retirees and respondents who were undecided about their future plans. Review of open-ended responses indicated that most "other" reasons closely aligned with factors already represented in the survey.

Table 4. *Top Five Reasons for Leaving Position by Exit Type*

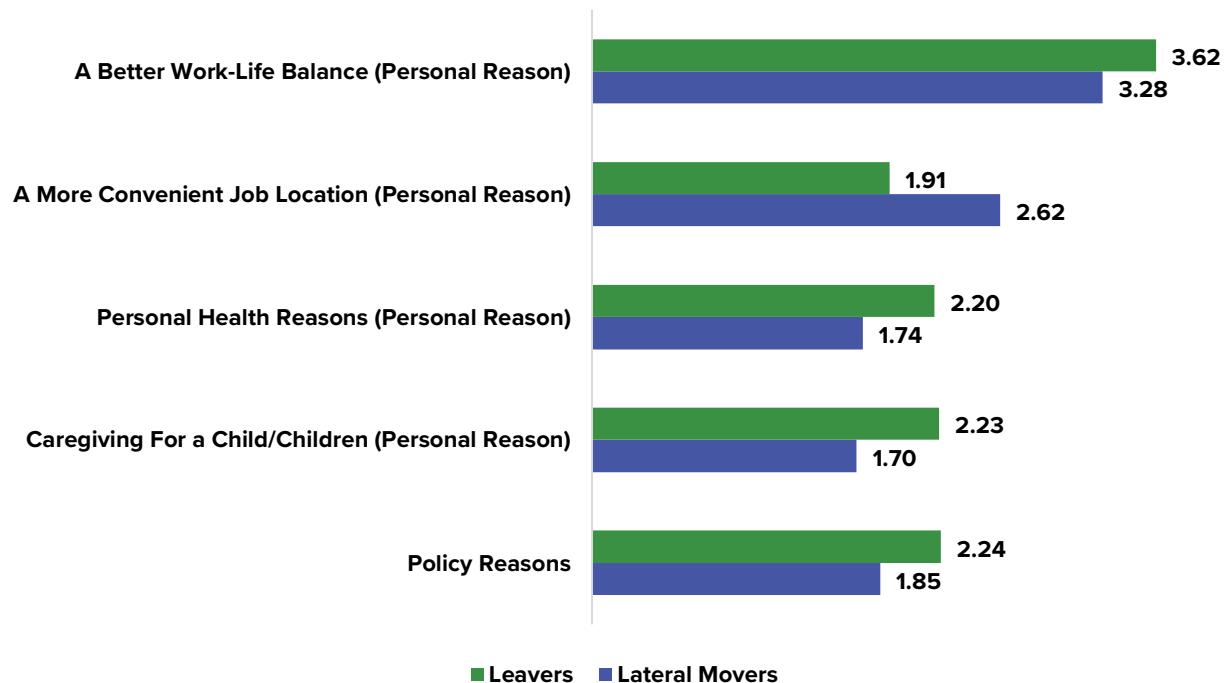
Rank	Lateral movers	Leavers	Retirees	Role-changers	Undecided
1	Better work-life balance	Better work-life balance	Other personal reasons	Better work-life balance	Other personal reasons
2	Other personal reasons	Other personal reasons	Better work-life balance	Other personal reasons	Better work-life balance
3	To take a job more conveniently located close to where I live	Job demands	To receive the maximum retirement benefit ^a	Job demands	Job demands
4	Job demands	Policy reasons	Caregiving for an adult family member	Career reasons	Personal health reasons
5	Career reasons	Caregiving for a child	Personal health reasons	Policy reasons	Job resources

^aThis item was asked only of those respondents who were retiring.

Comparisons Between Leavers and Lateral Movers

To better understand differences between the two largest exit groups, statistical tests were conducted comparing average ratings for career reasons, job demands, job resources, policy reasons, and individual items related to personal reasons. The categories or item-level personal reasons with averages that were statistically different between the two groups are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. *Reasons With Statistically Different Averages of Importance for Leavers and Lateral Movers*



Note. All differences shown are statistically significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons. Effect sizes ranged from $d = .22$ (a better work-life balance) to $d = .45$ (a more conveniently located job); see Table A3 in the Technical Appendix.

Although both groups rated work-life balance as their most important consideration, leavers assigned significantly greater importance to this factor than lateral movers. Leavers also reported significantly higher ratings for personal health reasons, caregiving responsibilities for children, and policy-related concerns. In contrast, lateral movers placed significantly greater importance on obtaining a position closer to where they lived, which represented the largest difference observed between the two groups.

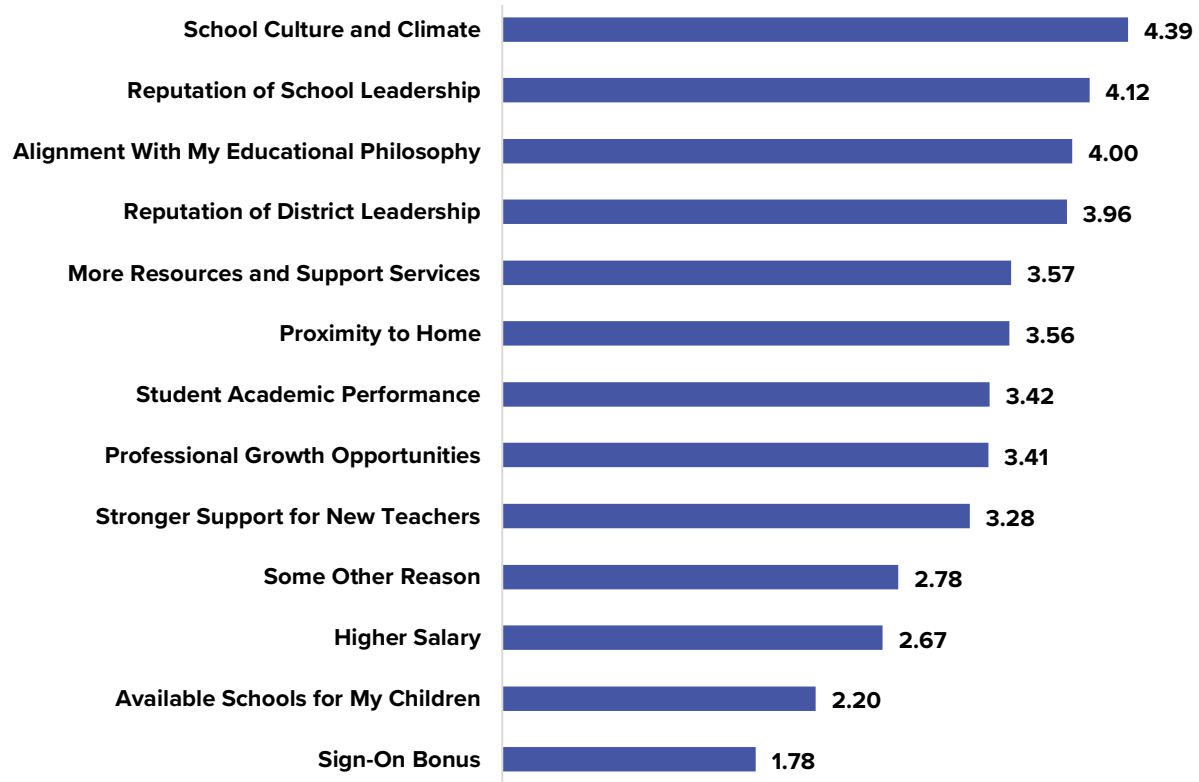
No statistically significant differences were observed between leavers and lateral movers related to career reasons, job demands, or job resources. This finding differs from last year's results, in which lateral movers reported a significantly higher rating on the importance of job resources compared to leavers (Cartiff et al., 2025).

Reasons for Choosing a New District

Lateral movers and nonrenewed teachers who indicated that they had already accepted a new teaching position in a different South Carolina district completed an additional set of 13 items examining factors that influenced their selection of a new district. Figure 6 presents average importance ratings for each factor.

School culture and climate received the highest average rating, indicating it was the most influential factor in respondents' district selection. Other highly rated factors included the reputation of school leadership, the reputation of district leadership, and the alignment between the district's educational philosophy and respondents' own professional beliefs. Sign-on bonuses received the lowest average rating. The overall pattern of responses was consistent with findings from the previous year's survey (Cartiff et al., 2025).

Figure 6. *Averages of Importance for Reasons Lateral Movers and Nonrenewed Teachers Chose Their New District*



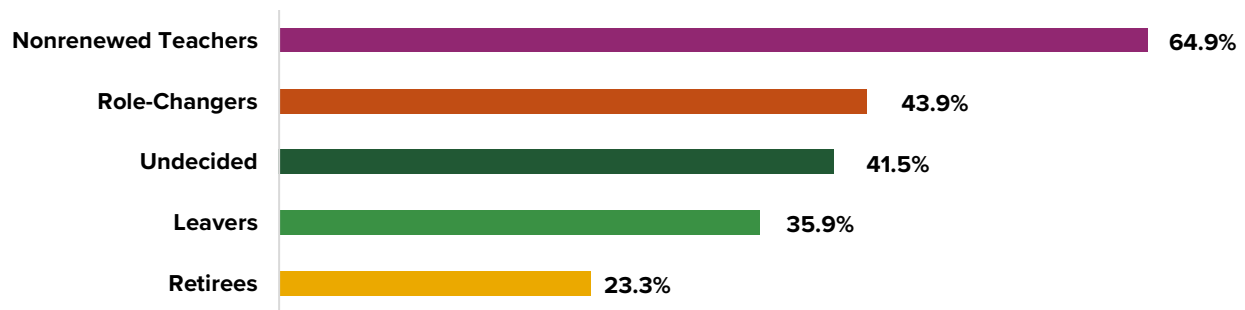
KEY QUESTION 3:

What factors might influence teachers' decisions to return to public schools in South Carolina?

A key objective of the SC Teacher Exit Survey is to assess the potential for former teachers to return to South Carolina public schools. Accordingly, all respondents except lateral movers were asked whether they would consider returning to teach in a South Carolina public school and to rate factors that might influence that decision.

Figure 7 presents the percentage of respondents in each exit group who agreed or strongly agreed that they would consider returning to the state's public school system. Nonrenewed teachers were the most likely to report that they would consider returning (64.9%). Although fewer than half of respondents in the remaining exit groups indicated they would do so, notable proportions of leavers (35.9%), respondents who were undecided about their future plans (41.5%), and role-changers (43.9%) expressed an openness to reentering the South Carolina public school teacher workforce. These findings suggest exiting teachers may represent a potential pool of candidates to help fill future vacancies.

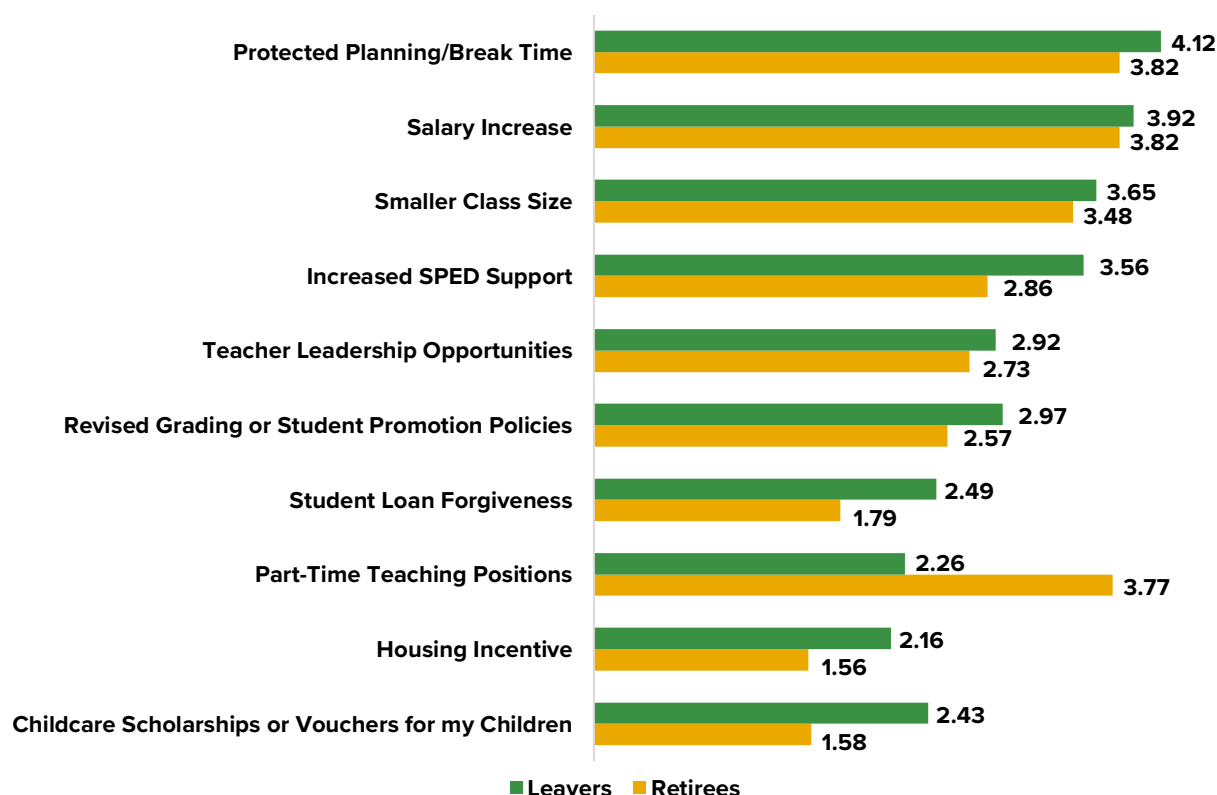
Figure 7. Percentages of Exiting Teachers Who Might Consider Returning to Teach in South Carolina Public Schools



Note. Percentages are based on the number of respondents in each group who answered this item: nonrenewed teachers ($n = 37$), role-changers ($n = 41$), undecided ($n = 53$), leavers ($n = 306$), and retirees ($n = 133$).

To better understand the conditions under which former teachers might return, average importance ratings were calculated for incentive-related factors among leavers and retirees, the two largest respondent groups (see Figure 8). These items were completed only by respondents who indicated openness to returning (i.e., those who selected *Neutral*, *Agree*, or *Strongly agree*); the ratings therefore reflect the views of potential returners rather than of all leavers and retirees. Across nearly all factors, leavers reported higher average importance ratings than retirees. The only exception was the availability of part-time teaching positions, which retirees rated as more important. Unlike the comparisons between lateral movers and leavers reported for Key Question 2, these comparisons are descriptive and were not tested for statistical significance.

Figure 8. *Averages of Importance for Reasons Leavers and Retirees Might Return to Teach*



Note. Items were administered only to respondents who indicated openness to returning to a South Carolina public school (i.e., those who selected *Neutral*, *Agree*, or *Strongly agree*): leavers ($n = 186$) and retirees ($n = 67$). Ratings were made on the 5-point importance scale (1 = *Not at all important* to 5 = *Extremely important*).

Protected planning or break time and increased salary emerged as the strongest potential incentives for both leavers and retirees to return to South Carolina public school classrooms. Smaller class sizes were also important, especially for leavers, while retirees reported comparatively higher average ratings for part-time teaching opportunities. Leavers reported a higher average rating for increased special education support than retirees, suggesting that additional classroom support for working with students with disabilities may be particularly relevant for teachers who left before retirement.

By contrast, housing assistance and childcare scholarships or vouchers received relatively low ratings from both groups, indicating that these incentives may be less effective as stand-alone reengagement strategies. Overall, these results closely mirror findings from the 2025 SC Teacher Exit Survey (Cartiff et al., 2025).

+ CONCLUSION

This report summarizes findings from the 2026 administration of the SC Teacher Exit Survey, offering a statewide view of teachers who left classroom positions in their districts at the end of the 2025–26 academic year. In addition to describing the characteristics of exiting teachers and classifying their next steps, the report examines the factors teachers identified as contributing to their decisions and the conditions that might influence some former teachers to return to South Carolina public schools. The survey included responses from 923 teachers across 41 traditional districts and one specialty district.

The findings underscore the importance of distinguishing among different types of teacher exits. Lateral movers and leavers were the largest respondent groups, accounting for 34.6% and 33.4% of respondents, respectively, while retirees represented 14.5%. Among nonretiring respondents, nearly half were classified as either lateral movers or role-changers, meaning they continued to work in the South Carolina public education system.

Across voluntary exit groups, better work-life balance emerged as a central reason for leaving, ranked first or second by lateral movers, leavers, retirees, role-changers, and respondents who were undecided about their future plans. Compared with lateral movers, leavers placed greater importance on work-life balance, personal health, caregiving responsibilities for children, and policy-related concerns; lateral movers, in turn, placed greater importance on obtaining a position closer to where they lived. For lateral movers and nonrenewed teachers who had already secured a new teaching position, school culture and climate, school leadership, alignment with educational philosophy, and district leadership were rated as more influential in their choice of the new district than incentives like sign-on bonuses, suggesting that working conditions and organizational fit may matter more than one-time benefits.

The survey results also point to opportunities for both retention and reengagement. Notable shares of leavers, role-changers, undecided respondents, and nonrenewed teachers indicated they would consider returning to teach in South Carolina public schools. Among leavers and retirees open to returning, protected planning or break time and increased salary were among the highest-rated factors that might influence a return, with smaller class sizes, increased special education support, and part-time teaching options also emerging as relevant considerations. Taken together, these findings can support districts in developing targeted strategies to strengthen early-career support, improve working conditions, retain teachers who might otherwise move to another district or leave public education, and reengage former educators who may be willing to return.

+ GLOSSARY

The following definitions and clarifications address how terms are used in the context of this report and all SC TEACHER reports. Reports and resources published prior to 2025 may use terms differently. SC TEACHER works continuously to establish consistent terminology for the most accurate understanding of our research.

Career Reasons

Factors related to professional advancement, compensation, or job change preferences that may influence a teacher's decision to leave their current position.

Demands (Job Demands)

The physical, social, psychological, and organizational aspects of a job that require sustained effort and are associated with psychological or physiological costs.

Exit Type

A classification assigned to teachers based on their self-reported employment plans after leaving their position. Categories include lateral mover, leaver, retiree, role-changer, nonrenewed teacher, and undecided.

Lateral Mover

A teacher who will continue teaching in a public school in South Carolina but has moved to a different district.

Leaver

A teacher who exited public education in South Carolina, transitioning to a private or homeschool setting, teaching in another state, or leaving the profession entirely.

Nonrenewed Teacher

A teacher whose employment was ended due to contract nonrenewal or other involuntary circumstances. Examples include position elimination, certification issues, or school closure. In SC Teacher Exit Survey reports published prior to 2026, the term *nonvoluntary leaver* was used to describe this category.

Personal Reasons

Factors related to life circumstances, such as family responsibilities, health, relocation, or work-life balance, that may contribute to a teacher's decision to leave their current position.

Policy Reasons

Factors related to teachers' dissatisfaction with local, state, or federal education policies, which may contribute to their decision to leave their current role.

Position Code

A numerical designation assigned by the state or district to categorize an educator's role within the school system (e.g., classroom teacher, instructional coach, administrator). Teachers of record are those with position codes 3–9, which include PK–12 classroom teachers, special education teachers (i.e., self-contained, resource, itinerant), and retired teachers returning to teach.

Recruitment

The process of bringing new teachers into the public school workforce. From the state perspective, this may include hiring recent graduates of traditional or alternative preparation programs, teachers from other states or countries, or teachers returning to the classroom. From a district perspective, recruitment also encompasses bringing in teachers from other South Carolina districts.

Resources (Job Resources)

The physical, social, psychological, and organizational aspects of a job that support employees in reaching their work goals, promoting their growth, and, in some cases, reducing their job demands.

Retention

When a teacher remains in the South Carolina public school teaching profession from one year to the next. Retention can be analyzed at multiple levels:

- **State-Level Retention:** When a teacher continues to teach in a South Carolina public school, regardless of district or school changes.
- **District-Level Retention:** When a teacher continues to teach in the same district, even if they switch schools within that district.

Retention can also be analyzed at the school-level in many cases, but SC Teacher Exit Survey results are not disaggregated by school level.

Retiree

A teacher who met the qualifications for retirement and chose to retire at the end of the academic year.

Role-Changer

A public school educator who changed positions within South Carolina public schools from one year to the next. This includes moving from teaching to a nonteaching role (e.g., administrator, instructional coach) or moving from a nonteaching role into teaching. For the purpose of the SC Teacher Exit Survey, the category includes only those leaving teaching for nonteaching positions.

SC Teacher Exit Survey

An annual statewide survey administered by SC TEACHER to gather data from South Carolina public school teachers who are not renewing their teaching contracts. The survey collects information about exit type, motivations for leaving, and conditions that might influence a return to the profession.

Teacher

Any public school educator in South Carolina assigned a position code of 3–9. This includes PK–12 classroom teachers, special education teachers (i.e., self-contained, resource, itinerant), and retired teachers returning to teach.

Undecided

A teacher who reported leaving their position in a South Carolina public school but had not yet made a definitive decision about their future employment plans at the time of survey completion.

Voluntary Leaver

A teacher who leaves their position in a South Carolina public school by choice, rather than as a result of contract nonrenewal or other involuntary factors.

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+ TECHNICAL APPENDIX

For Key Questions 1 and 3, the analyses were conducted using descriptive statistics, and results are fully discussed in the body of the report. As such, only additional descriptive and inferential statistical analyses conducted for Key Question 2 are addressed in this Technical Appendix.

KEY QUESTION 2: What are the main reasons South Carolina teachers are leaving their positions? What meaningful differences, if any, exist in the motivating factors of those leaving to teach in other public schools (i.e., lateral movers) compared to those leaving public schools completely (i.e., leavers)?

For this key question, the analyses examined reported reasons for leaving among voluntary exit groups. Mean scores were calculated for four composite subscales (career, job demands, job resources, policy). Personal reasons were analyzed at the item level due to low internal consistency. Responses identifying the single most important reason were rank ordered.

Table A1 provides averages and standard deviations for reasons to leave for each group, with the exception of nonrenewed teachers. Averages for career reasons, job demands, job resources, and policy reasons were below the value of 3.0 (*Somewhat important*) for every group of teachers. The highest observed averages were reported for personal reason seven (“a better work-life balance”) and personal reason eight (“other personal reasons”).

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics for Reasons to Leave by Exit Type

	Lateral movers		Leavers		Retirees		Role-changers		Undecided	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>
Career reasons	2.35 (1.02)	298	2.19 (1.00)	303	1.53 (0.77)	132	2.59 (1.06)	40	2.11 (0.95)	51
Job resources	2.34 (1.12)	296	2.13 (1.05)	299	1.57 (0.75)	131	2.13 (0.96)	39	2.41 (1.12)	50
Job demands	2.58 (1.14)	295	2.79 (1.16)	295	2.16 (1.05)	131	2.80 (1.21)	38	2.83 (1.08)	50
Policy reasons	1.85 (0.90)	293	2.24 (1.04)	294	1.84 (0.89)	131	2.24 (1.16)	38	2.20 (1.00)	50
Personal reason one	1.43 (1.07)	293	1.58 (1.16)	300	2.35 (1.59)	133	1.35 (0.92)	40	1.80 (1.36)	51
Personal reason two	1.70 (1.37)	292	2.23 (1.61)	301	1.80 (1.36)	133	1.63 (1.35)	40	1.90 (1.51)	51
Personal reason three	1.74 (1.32)	292	2.20 (1.44)	300	2.26 (1.41)	133	1.93 (1.31)	40	2.57 (1.49)	51
Personal reason four	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2.48 (1.61)	133	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Personal reason five	2.62 (1.66)	294	1.91 (1.43)	300	1.32 (0.84)	132	2.15 (1.67)	40	2.12 (1.46)	51
Personal reason six	2.09 (1.63)	294	2.22 (1.69)	300	1.49 (1.13)	133	1.58 (1.26)	40	1.67 (1.34)	51
Personal reason seven	3.28 (1.57)	296	3.62 (1.50)	300	2.68 (1.59)	133	3.63 (1.50)	40	3.25 (1.55)	51
Personal reason eight	2.80 (1.89)	245	3.32 (1.50)	263	3.18 (1.83)	128	2.94 (1.84)	31	4.04 (1.49)	47

Note. Personal reason one refers to “caregiving for an adult family member.” Personal reason two refers to “caregiving for a child/children.” Personal reason three refers to “personal health reasons.” Personal reason four (only presented to retirees) refers to “to receive the maximum retirement benefit.” Personal reason five refers to “to take a job more conveniently located close to where I live.” Personal reason six refers to “moving or planning to move.” Personal reason seven refers to “a better work-life balance.” Personal reason eight refers to “other personal reasons.”

Table A2 provides response frequencies for the top ten reasons selected by the respondents as the single reason that played the largest role in the decision to leave. Most teachers identified a personal reason as the factor that played the largest role in their decision to leave. Additionally, the top ten reasons to leave included one job resources item (“insufficient administrative support”), one job demands item (“frequency with which students misbehaved”), and one career item (“wanting or needing a higher salary and/or better benefits”).

Table A2. *Counts and Percentages for the Most Frequently Endorsed Primary Reason to Leave*

Reason	Count	Percent
Other major reason you are leaving your current position	177	22.2%
Personal reason: Moving or planning to move	75	9.4%
Personal reason: A better work-life balance	69	8.7%
Job resources reason: Insufficient administrative support	50	6.3%
Personal reason: To take a job more conveniently located close to where I live	40	5.0%
Personal reason: Caregiving for a child/children	39	4.9%
Job demands reason: Frequency with which students misbehaved	35	4.4%
Career reason: Wanting or needing a higher salary and/or better benefits	31	3.9%
Personal reason: Caregiving for an adult family member	25	3.1%
Personal reason: Other personal reasons	18	2.3%
Remaining items combined	237	29.8%
Total	796	100.0%

For lateral movers and leavers, independent *t*-tests were conducted for the average scores of career reasons, job demands, job resources, and policy reasons, as well as for all individual personal reason items, except item four (“to receive the maximum retirement benefits”) and item eight (“other personal reasons”) (Table A3). The homogeneity of variance assumption was violated for job resources, policy reasons, and scores on three personal items. In these cases, Welch’s test was used for comparing means with unequal variances.

The differences in means between lateral movers and leavers were statistically significant for policy reasons and four personal reasons. In particular, compared to lateral movers, leavers assigned higher importance to policy reasons ($p < .001$, $d = .40$). Additionally, leavers rated higher the importance of personal reason two (“caregiving for a child/children”; $p < .001$, $d = .35$), personal reason three (“personal health reasons”; $p < .001$, $d = .33$), and personal reason seven (“a better work-life balance”; $p < .05$, $d = .22$). On the other hand, the score on personal reason five (“to take a job more conveniently located close to where I live”) was statistically significantly higher for lateral movers compared to leavers ($p < .001$, $d = .45$). This represented the greatest difference in reasons for leaving among the ten comparisons.

Table A3. Results Comparing Lateral Movers' and Leavers' Reasons for Leaving

	Lateral movers	Leavers							
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i> _{adj}	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Career reasons	2.35	1.02	2.19	1.00	599	2.01	.045	.136	.16
Job demands	2.58	1.14	2.79	1.16	588	-2.22	.027	.110	.18
Job resources	2.34	1.12	2.13	1.05	589.6a	2.30	.022	.110	.19
Policy reasons	1.85	0.90	2.24	1.04	573.4a	-4.80	< .001	< .001	.40
Personal reason one	1.43	1.07	1.58	1.16	591	-1.63	.103	.206	.13
Personal reason two	1.70	1.37	2.23	1.61	580.8a	-4.32	< .001	< .001	.35
Personal reason three	1.74	1.32	2.20	1.44	587.8a	-4.03	< .001	< .001	.33
Personal reason five	2.62	1.66	1.91	1.43	575.5a	5.52	< .001	< .001	.45
Personal reason six	2.09	1.63	2.22	1.69	592	-0.96	.336	.336	.08
Personal reason seven	3.28	1.57	3.62	1.50	594	-2.67	.008	.046	.22

Note. Personal reason one refers to “caregiving for an adult family member.” Personal reason two refers to “caregiving for a child/children.” Personal reason three refers to “personal health reasons.” Personal reason five refers to “to take a job more conveniently located close to where I live.” Personal reason six refers to “moving or planning to move.” Personal reason seven refers to “a better work-life balance.”

^a*df* were calculated based on Satterthwaite’s approximation formula due to unequal variances.

