

South Carolina Teacher Attrition, Mobility, and Retention Report for 2023–24

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EDUCATOR PIPELINE RESEARCH



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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 will inform policy and practice.

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Teacher Attrition, Mobility, and Retention in South Carolina

+ HIGHLIGHTS

This report takes a comprehensive look at South Carolina’s public school teacher workforce through the lenses of attrition (when teachers leave the profession or the state), mobility (when teachers move between districts or schools), recruitment (when new and returning teachers enter the workforce), and retention (when teachers continue working in the state). By analyzing these data at the state, district, and school levels across 6 academic years, this research provides actionable insights into where, how, and why teachers are entering, leaving, and moving within our state education system. As such, findings can help guide data-informed strategies to improve teacher retention, enhance recruitment efforts, and strengthen the overall teacher pipeline in South Carolina.

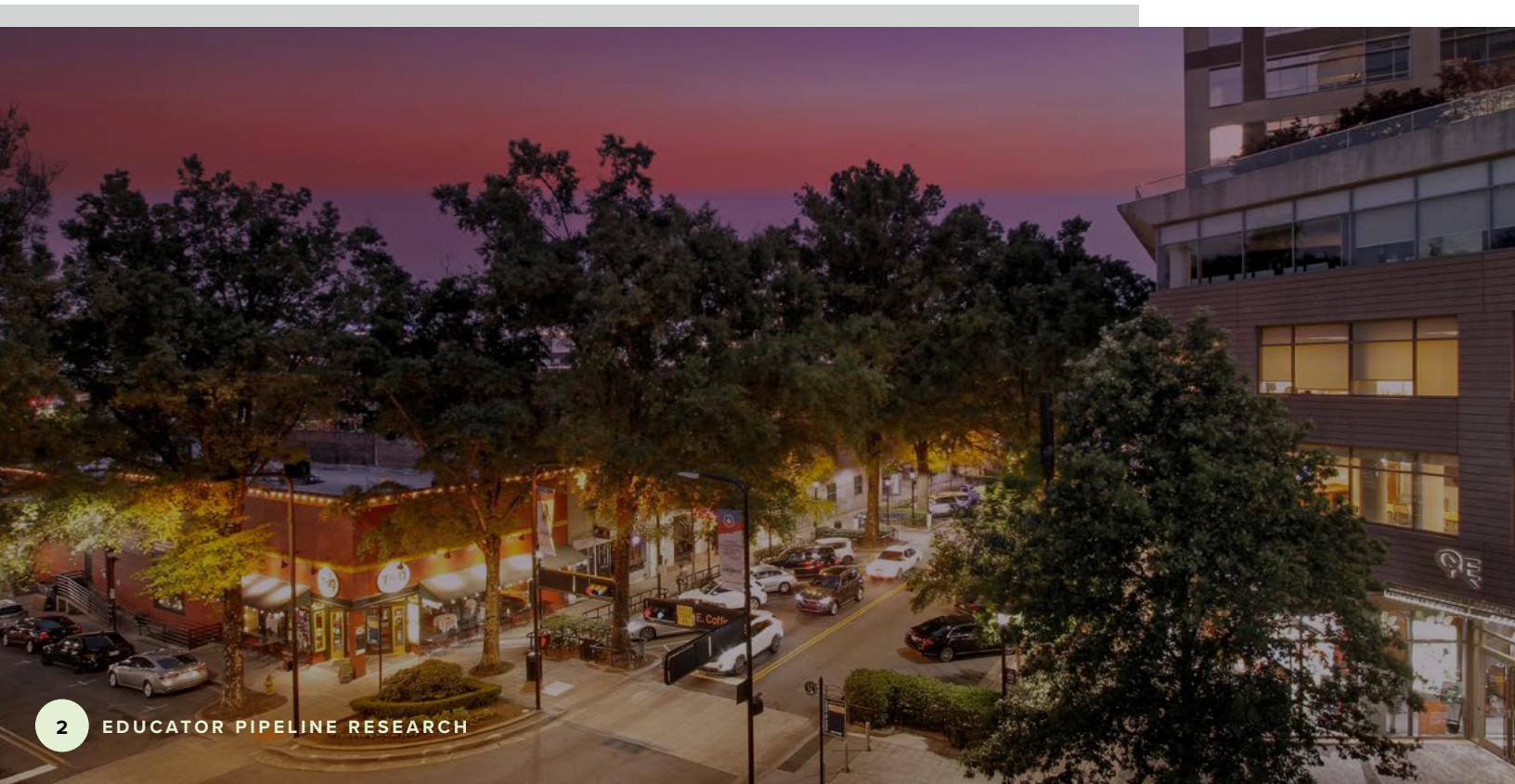
Key Findings

- **At the state level, 1-year retention rates hover around 90%.** District- and school-level rates are notably lower due to educators transferring across or within South Carolina school districts.
- **At the individual school level, high schools maintain the highest retention rates, followed by elementary schools, and then middle schools.** At the state level, elementary teachers had the highest retention for most recent years, with rates converging across organizational levels in 2023–24.
- **Classroom teachers exiting their public schools fall into three key categories: leavers who exit the state teacher workforce entirely, interdistrict lateral movers who shift to another South Carolina school district, and role-changers who transition into nonteaching positions.** While leavers impact both state and district pipelines, lateral movers and role-changers create localized vacancies, emphasizing the need to address retention through improved working conditions and support for district-level stability.
- **South Carolina hired 5,919 new teachers in 2023–24 who were not in the state’s public education system the previous year.** Initial certificate holders (33%) and experienced educators entering via reciprocity (15%) formed the largest groups, while those returning to teach (i.e., boomerangs) contributed a notable 14%. Additionally, 72% of educators transitioning into teaching roles came from support staff positions, highlighting internal pathways for expanding the teacher pipeline.
- **Of districts, 56% experienced net neutral or positive shifts in their teacher workforce in 2023–24, when accounting for lateral movers, leavers, new hires, and role-changers.** Net gains reflect successful recruitment or growth, while net losses may indicate challenges with teacher shortages. Local context remains critical to interpreting these shifts and informing tailored retention and recruitment strategies.

+ INTRODUCTION

Teachers play a profound role in guiding students to develop essential cognitive skills (like critical and systems thinking), intrapersonal skills (like time management and adaptability), interpersonal skills (like collaboration and communication), and technical skills (like information fluency and data literacy) (Geisinger, 2016). Because of this vital contribution, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders have increasingly scrutinized the teaching profession, with particular attention to teacher shortages, turnover, and quality across the United States and around the world (e.g., Tan et al., 2024; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education, 2024; US Department of Education, 2023). To fully address these concerns, a deeper understanding of teacher workforce dynamics is needed, including the ways in which teachers enter the profession, move within it, and ultimately leave teaching altogether (Nguyen et al., 2022).

While recent reports have cited widespread teacher shortages in the US (e.g., Tan et al., 2024; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education, 2024; US Department of Education, 2023), some scholars argue the problem is an uneven distribution of teachers across school districts and states, rather than a true national shortage (e.g., Cowan et al., 2016; Goldhaber et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; McVey & Trinidad, 2019). Understanding whether a region genuinely lacks educators or whether teachers are simply concentrated in more desirable locations requires shifting the level of analysis from a broad national perspective to state, district, and individual school contexts. Each of these “levels” has its own policies, barriers, and incentives that shape teacher retention and mobility.



GLOBAL, NATIONAL, AND STATE-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

At the global level, teacher shortages and migration patterns can reveal how educators move across national borders, raising questions about “brain drain” in some countries, while also offering insights into programs that attract international teachers (Bartlett, 2014; Brown & Stevick, 2014). Closer to home, national-level discussions in the US often revolve around teacher supply and demand across all 50 states (e.g., ABC News, 2022; Natanson, 2022; Randazzo, 2022). Examining the national workforce can reveal patterns in phenomena like interstate teacher mobility. This view may be particularly important as policies change to increase certification reciprocity among states (e.g., the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact; The Council of State Governments, 2023).

State-level analysis is especially pertinent in the US because public school teachers are employees of their respective states, which also set certification requirements. Consequently, it is usually easier for teachers to move from one district to another within the same state rather than move across state lines. This results in state “pipelines” that show how novice teachers enter the profession (often from traditional or alternative certification programs), how teachers exit the workforce (to retire, leave the profession, or move out of state), and how more experienced teachers might return to the classroom (Greene, 2024; Lapp et al., 2018).

Often, these state pipeline depictions are oversimplified. Many diagrams show teachers entering from traditional college-based programs, while overlooking alternative routes that have grown more prevalent in recent years, as well as veteran teachers returning to the classroom after a brief hiatus or retirees returning part-time (Grissom & Reiningger, 2012; King & Yin, 2022; Will, 2022). Moreover, each state comes with its own individual context and needs related to the educator pipeline. A state with a larger existing supply of experienced teachers may not need as many new hires, whereas another state might face ongoing shortages, especially in fields like special education or science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) (Patrick, 2023).





DISTRICT AND SCHOOL PIPELINES

Within each state, districts form their own sub-pipelines of educator movement. This level is typically where teacher hiring and retention data are tracked and analyzed (ERS, 2024). When a teacher decides to leave one district for another, that original district experiences a loss that requires filling a vacancy, even though the teacher has still been retained as an educator in the state. At the same time, teachers may move from one school to another within the same district—a form of lateral mobility that does not subtract from the district workforce but can still disrupt staffing in the original school (Elfers et al., 2006; ERS, 2024). This kind of teacher movement in districts and schools is often driven by personal reasons (needing a school closer to home), professional opportunities (changing grade levels or subject areas), or dissatisfaction with work conditions (school culture, administrative support) (Taie & Lewis, 2023).

From a school's perspective, even a single teacher's departure can be costly, as each new hire might require induction, mentoring, and additional professional development (ERS, 2024; Holme et al., 2018). Schools that struggle with persistent turnover can find themselves in a "vicious cycle," where a revolving door of educators undermines staff cohesion and can depress both student achievement and teacher morale (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p. 32). Stability at the school level is thus a critical piece of the broader workforce.

CLARIFYING WORKFORCE TERMINOLOGY

In examining these workforce patterns, it is useful to define several key terms that sometimes carry different meanings across studies and news reports. This specific research focuses solely on teachers in South Carolina. For easy reference, please refer to the glossary (p. 31), which further defines these terms and others used throughout the report.

Retention refers to teachers staying in the classroom teacher profession over the measured period of time. In this, the specified grain size matters. A teacher is counted as retained at the state level if they simply move to another district in the same state, whereas from a district perspective, that same teacher is considered "lost." At the school level, any teacher who moves—even to another school in the same district—drops from that school's retention count.



Attrition refers to a teacher leaving the classroom teaching profession in South Carolina public schools. This departure may involve retiring, moving out of state to teach, transferring to private or home schools, switching to a nonteaching role, or leaving the profession altogether. A *nonteaching role* is defined as any position within a public school that does not involve direct classroom instruction, such as administrator, instructional coach, or guidance counselor. An educator moving into one of these roles—commonly known as a *role-changer*—removes an individual from the teacher category, thus representing attrition. If a district decides not to renew a teacher’s contract—commonly known as *nonrenewal*—this too constitutes a form of attrition, though it may be deemed beneficial when it aligns with performance improvement efforts, budgetary constraints, or declining student enrollment.

Mobility refers to any movement of teachers between classroom teaching positions in South Carolina public schools, whether transferring to another district or moving between schools within the same district. A *lateral mover* is defined as a public school teacher who shifts from one South Carolina district and/or school to another. More specifically, an *interdistrict lateral mover* transfers from a school in one district to a school in a different South Carolina district, while an *intradistrict lateral mover* transfers between schools within the same district (potentially without the teacher’s choice in cases of nonvoluntary intradistrict assignments).

These definitions matter because they shape how data are interpreted and how workforce challenges are portrayed. At the district or school level, leadership must deal with filling vacant positions promptly, regardless of whether those departures count as “attrition” nationwide or statewide. By carefully distinguishing

between different types of exits and movement, policymakers and administrators can more accurately target potential solutions—whether that means improving teacher support and working conditions, streamlining licensing reciprocity across states, or creating incentives to attract retired teachers back to the classroom.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE SOUTH CAROLINA PERSPECTIVE

These issues take on a specific form in South Carolina, where contexts vary widely from one district to another. Certain areas may have relatively stable staff, while others regularly lose teachers to neighboring states or to more urbanized districts that offer better pay or resources. As such, using a localized lens is vital for addressing challenges. A careful look at teacher attrition and mobility within and across South Carolina districts can highlight whether, for example, rural districts bear the brunt of teacher shortages, whether new hires are adequately supported, and whether alternative certification pipelines are effective in producing committed educators.

By drawing on clear definitions of retention, attrition, and mobility established at the state, district, and school levels, stakeholders in South Carolina can assess the true scope of challenges around teacher supply and demand. In doing so, they may identify solutions better tailored to our state context. Ultimately, this more nuanced and state-specific analysis of workforce dynamics can lead to increasingly strategic policy decisions, efficient resource allocations, and improved long-term outcomes for teachers, students, and communities alike.

DEVELOPING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHER MOVEMENT

Tracking individual teachers, rather than counting vacancies, offers a richer view of attrition, mobility, retention, and recruitment. By following actual educators from year to year, researchers can identify who is leaving, who is moving, and under what circumstances. Changes can then be linked to contextual factors, such as teacher working conditions, school characteristics, or certification pathways. This detailed approach uncovers the specific challenges and opportunities facing teachers and districts, informing the design of effective support programs and policies to address targeted needs, rather than just filling open positions.

To enable this deeper understanding, SC TEACHER has developed a robust, longitudinal data system that integrates educator-level records, survey data, and publicly available data at the state and federal levels. By tracking movement across position codes and school assignments, and by layering in community factors like housing affordability and labor trends, this infrastructure supports an in-depth investigation of teacher retention and attrition in South Carolina. The result is a comprehensive view of the teaching workforce that guides targeted interventions at the state, district, and school levels.



KEY QUESTIONS

Building on the established understanding of retention, attrition, and mobility across the multiple levels of South Carolina’s teacher workforce, this report investigates three specific topics. First, it examines retention over time at the state, district, and school levels to reveal meaningful trends. Second, it explores how teacher retention patterns differ across school characteristics, such as poverty and organizational levels. Third, it delves into statewide dynamics around attrition, mobility, and recruitment in traditional and charter districts.

In this report, we examine the following key questions:

1. What are the trends in teacher retention rates across South Carolina?
2. How do trends in South Carolina teacher retention rates differ by school organizational level?
3. What are the entry and exit points within the teacher pipeline across South Carolina for 2023–24?

In answering these questions, we aim to provide insight into how different contexts shape teacher workforce dynamics. Together, these analyses, complemented by findings in other SC TEACHER reports, can help inform localized strategies aimed at improving South Carolina’s educator pipeline.





DATA, VARIABLES, AND ANALYSES

The analyses in this report draw on educator-level data provided by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) for 6 consecutive academic years (2018–19 through 2023–24). For each year, the main variables of interest were district, school, and educator position codes. Those considered to be in a teaching position included any educators employed as a PK–12 classroom teacher, special education teachers (including resource, itinerant, or self-contained positions), or retired teachers returning to the classroom. All other positions were categorized as nonteaching.

Using each educator’s identifying information, we linked data across adjacent academic years. This process allowed us to determine whether an educator returned to teach in South Carolina public schools the following year and, if so, whether they stayed in the same district, school, or position code. From these merged data, we developed individual-level retention indicators to capture different types of mobility and attrition. All retention data in the report are presented related to the beginning of each academic year. For instance, linking the 2018–19 and 2019–20 data files yielded retention indicators for the start of 2019–20, which is the 1st year included in our longitudinal findings. As a result, even though educator data covered 6 academic years, the retention indicators span 5 academic years.

For 2023–24, the last year examined, we also created indicators showing whether each PK–12 classroom teacher was new to the state, had transitioned from a nonteaching position the prior year, or had changed districts or schools. These additional variables supported a more detailed net loss and gain analysis for that academic year. To expand our understanding of recruitment, we defined ten categories of newly hired teachers based on the combination of three variables: (a) a binary variable indicating whether a teacher had taught in South Carolina since 2017–18, (b) teacher certificate level (e.g., professional, initial, international), and (c) the pathway to teacher certification (e.g., reciprocity, undergraduate). For instance, a teacher who had previously held a teaching position code in South Carolina, had a professional certificate, and went through any certification pathway was defined as a *boomerang*. A teacher who held a professional certificate, achieved certification through reciprocity, and had never taught in South Carolina was defined as a *reciprocity professional teacher*. (Refer to the glossary on p. 31 for further definitions of these and other categories of new teacher.)



After creating these retention indicators, we aggregated the data at the school, district, and state levels. Retention and mobility percentages at each level were calculated based on the total number of educators in that category. At the school level, we treated each teacher-school pairing as a separate case; thus, if a teacher worked in three different schools in 1 academic year, they contributed three distinct data points. For district-level calculations, each teacher-district pairing was counted independently, recognizing that some teachers serve in multiple districts. At the state level, however, each teacher was counted once. In other words, a teacher working across multiple schools still appeared as a single case when calculating state-level retention rates.

All longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons in the report are descriptive since the dataset represents the entire population of South Carolina public school teachers rather than a sample. We used corresponding school-level data from the South Carolina School Report Cards to examine how teacher retention differs by organizational level and poverty level. The SCDE's pupils-in-poverty (PIP) index provided the basis for categorizing schools by poverty level. For each year, all South Carolina schools were ranked by PIP values, and quartiles were used to group them into high-poverty (top 25%), moderate-poverty (middle 50%), and low-poverty (bottom 25%) categories.

+ KEY QUESTION 1:

What are the trends in teacher retention rates across South Carolina?

To examine retention trends in public PK–12 schools in South Carolina, we calculated 1-year retention rates over the last 5 years (i.e., from 2019–20 to 2023–24). These rates are presented at three levels—state, district, and school—to capture important nuances in teacher movement that otherwise would be obscured.

State-Level Retention

At the state level, retention reflects the percentage of classroom teachers who remain in any South Carolina public PK–12 school from one year to the next. Under this definition, teachers who move to a different district or school are still counted as retained, provided they remain in public teaching roles within the state. For example, to determine the 2023–24 state-level retention rate, we identified all teachers who taught in 2022–23 and continued teaching somewhere in the state for 2023–24, then divided that total by the overall number of teachers in 2022–23.

State retention rates are the highest among the three levels, hovering close to 90% throughout the 5-year span.

District-Level Retention

District-level retention measures the percentage of classroom teachers who return to the same district the following year. Teachers who move to a different South Carolina district (or leave teaching entirely) are not included in this rate, as they are not considered retained by the district. Over the last 5 years, district-level retention has ranged between approximately 83% and 87%. The gap between state- and district-level rates (roughly 3–7 percentage points) largely reflects interdistrict mobility: teachers who continue working in public schools but choose to move to a different district within the state.

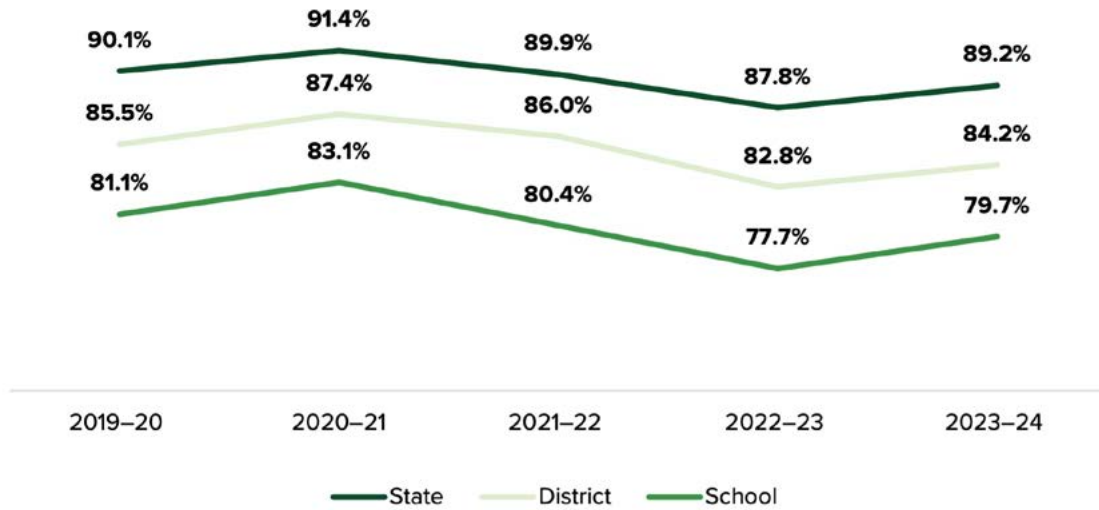
School-Level Retention

School-level retention is the narrowest lens of the three levels. Here, teachers are counted as retained only if they continue in the same school (or are reassigned to a designated “successor school” in the case of a closure or consolidation). Teachers who move to a different school in the same district, switch districts, or leave teaching are excluded from the school-level retention count. The 1-year school retention rates over the last 5 years have fluctuated between about 78% and 83%. Compared with the district-level data, these lower figures reflect intradistrict movement, which is not captured as retention at the school level.

Recent Trends and Effects From the Pandemic

Figure 1 shows the 5-year patterns for all three retention levels. Notably, there was a retention “peak” during the 2020–21 school year, coinciding with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers suggest that limited job mobility and broader economic uncertainty led to fewer voluntary departures at that time (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023; Rosenberg & Anderson, 2021). The subsequent 2-year decline likely included both teachers who might have left under more typical circumstances and those who delayed leaving during the pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Camp et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the state-level rate remained close to 90%, indicating a need to replenish about 10% of the state’s public school teachers annually. Larger dips and lower district-level averages continue to reflect additional interdistrict movement. School-level retention rates are consistently the lowest over time as they take intradistrict moves into account.

Figure 1. Teacher Retention Rates Across South Carolina Over Time



Other Factors Influencing Retention

Certain teacher departures are not always voluntary; districts may opt not to renew contracts for performance reasons or budget constraints (i.e., *nonrenewal*), and some teachers (e.g., international visa holders) may have fixed employment terms. Additionally, shifts in school or district configurations, such as closings, consolidations, or changes in grade spans, can affect how retention rates appear in the data. These structural changes highlight why it is vital to interpret retention not just as a simple percentage but in the broader context and realities of local staffing needs.

Comparisons With Other Southeastern States

Though definitions and reporting practices can vary, comparing South Carolina’s retention rates with those of nearby states offers a useful benchmark. For instance, Georgia’s statewide district-level retention rate for 2021–22 was 86.3%, which is similar to South Carolina’s 86.0% that year (Flamini & Wang, 2024). North Carolina reported an 11.5% attrition rate for 2022–23, which is equivalent to an 88.5% retention rate at the state level and close to South Carolina’s 87.8% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2024). As well, Kentucky and Tennessee recently reported state-level retention rates of 89% and 87%, respectively (Southern Regional Education Board, 2024), also aligning closely with South Carolina’s 87.8%. Such similarities underscore that while each state’s data reflect unique contexts and calculation methods, South Carolina’s retention trends largely parallel regional patterns.

Overall, the retention rates in South Carolina reveal a relatively stable teacher workforce at the state level, while district and school rates underscore the impact of teacher mobility and local variations. Understanding these distinct levels offers a clearer picture of staffing patterns, highlights potential policy needs, and provides a basis for tailoring solutions to local challenges.

+ KEY QUESTION 2:

How do trends in South Carolina teacher retention rates differ by school organizational level?

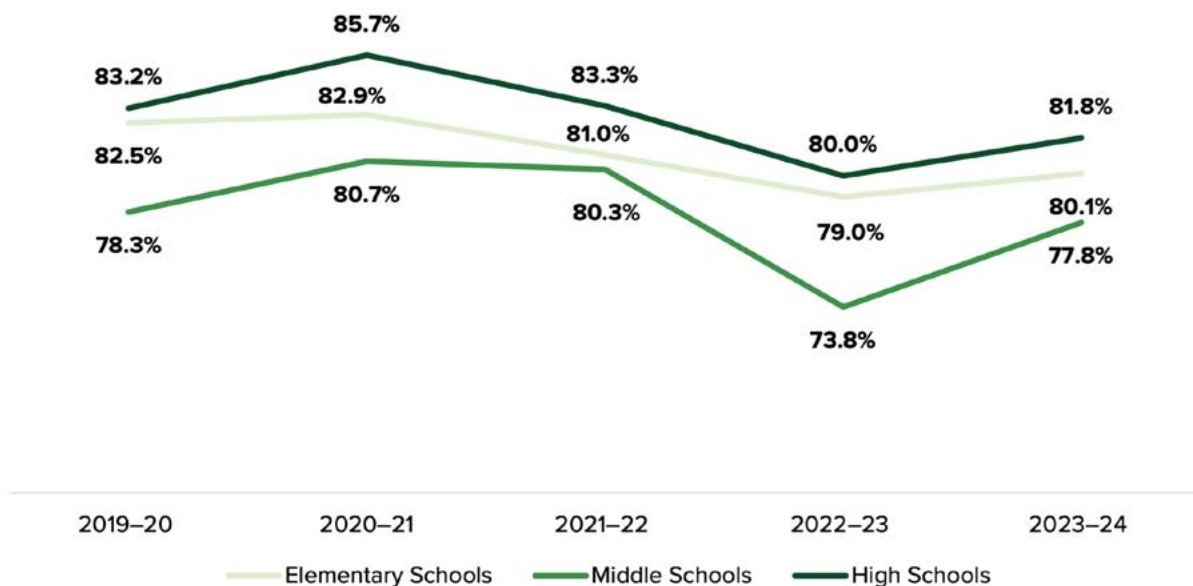
Building on the prior analysis of overall retention trends, this section explores how retention patterns vary by organizational level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) in South Carolina. Research has long suggested that different grade spans can experience distinct retention challenges (Nguyen et al., 2019; Brill & McCartney, 2008). Identifying these differences can guide policies and practices specific to school organizational level to improve teacher retention. With this in mind, we calculated 1-year retention rates for elementary, middle, and high schools, both at the school and state levels, from 2019–20 to 2023–24. Standalone early childhood centers and combined-grade schools were excluded from the analysis due to their small numbers. Recognizing that socioeconomic factors also influence teacher stability (ERS, 2024; Simon & Johnson, 2015), we further examined how retention varies across poverty categories within these school organizational levels.

School-Level and State-Level Retention Rates by Organizational Level

To measure retention at the school level, we identified the teachers in each organizational level (elementary, middle, high) who remained in the same school from one academic year to the next. We then divided that number by the total number of teachers at that level statewide in the initial year. For instance, to determine the 2023–24 high school retention rate, we identified all high school teachers in 2022–23 who continued to teach at the same high school in 2023–24. From there, we divided that figure by the total number of high school teachers in the state in 2022–23.

Figure 2 presents the school-level retention rates. High schools consistently had the highest levels of retention over the 5-year period (80.0–85.7%), followed by elementary schools (79.0–82.9%), and then middle schools (73.8–80.7%). This pattern aligns with some national findings, although national data often classify middle and high schools together as “secondary” (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2019). Notably, retention rates in all three organizational levels peaked in 2020–21, likely reflecting job security concerns related to the pandemic (as seen in Key Question 1). Although high school and elementary school retention declined in the subsequent 2 years, middle school retention held steady in 2021–22 before dropping sharply by 6.5% the following year. Retention rates rose again across all three levels from 2022–23 to 2023–24.

Figure 2. School-Level Retention Rates Across Organizational Levels Over Time

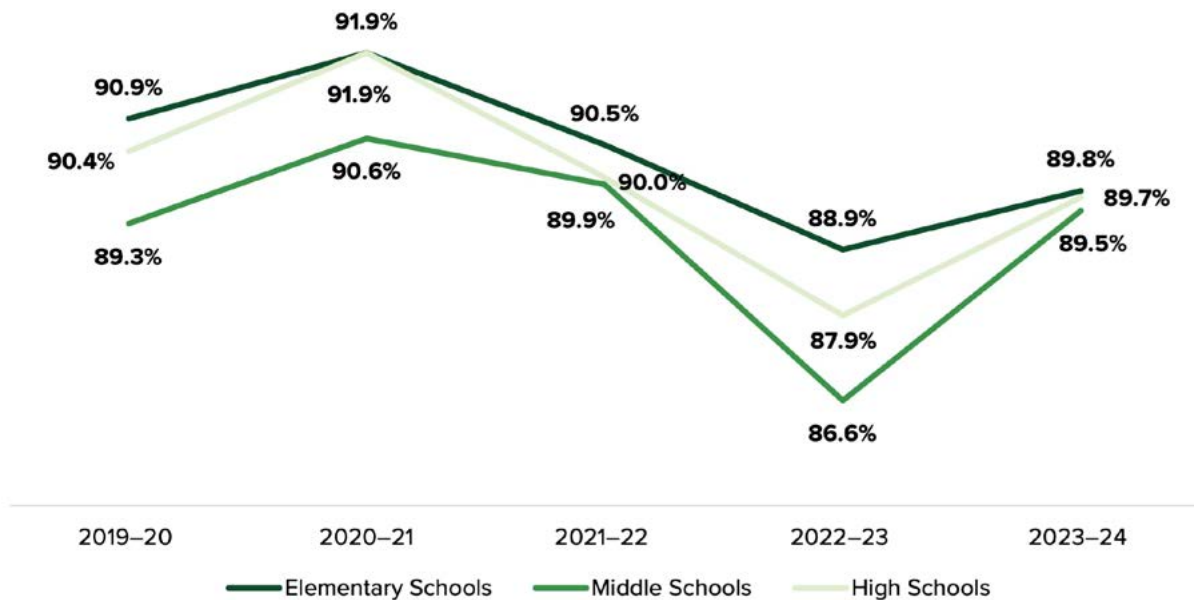


To determine whether these organizational-level departures represented complete exits from the South Carolina teacher workforce, we next calculated state-level retention rates. We measured this by identifying the teachers at each organizational level who continued teaching anywhere in the state. Some educators counted at the state level may have switched grade spans (e.g., from middle to high school), but given certification constraints, this number is likely small.

Figure 3 displays these state-level rates. Note they are altogether higher than the corresponding school-level rates because inter- and intradistrict lateral movers are still classified as retained within the state. Elementary schools recorded the highest state-level retention rates for most of the 5-year span, except in 2020–21 when elementary and high school rates were identical (91.9%). The fact that elementary teachers appear slightly less stable at the school level but more stable at the state level suggests they are switching schools within South Carolina at higher rates than high school teachers. This may be in part because the larger number of elementary schools in the state presents a greater opportunity for elementary teachers to move schools. Notably, the state-level retention rates across all three organizational levels largely converged close to 90% in 2023–24.

Comparing Figures 2 and 3 reveals that many teachers who leave their schools continue to teach within South Carolina. For example, when middle school teacher school-level retention dropped to 73.8% in 2022–23, roughly half of those departing educators remained in the state workforce. This pattern suggests that teachers are often seeking a better school fit, a conclusion supported by the recent SC Teacher Working Conditions Survey (Starrett et al., 2023).

Figure 3. State-Level Retention Rates Across Organizational Levels Over Time



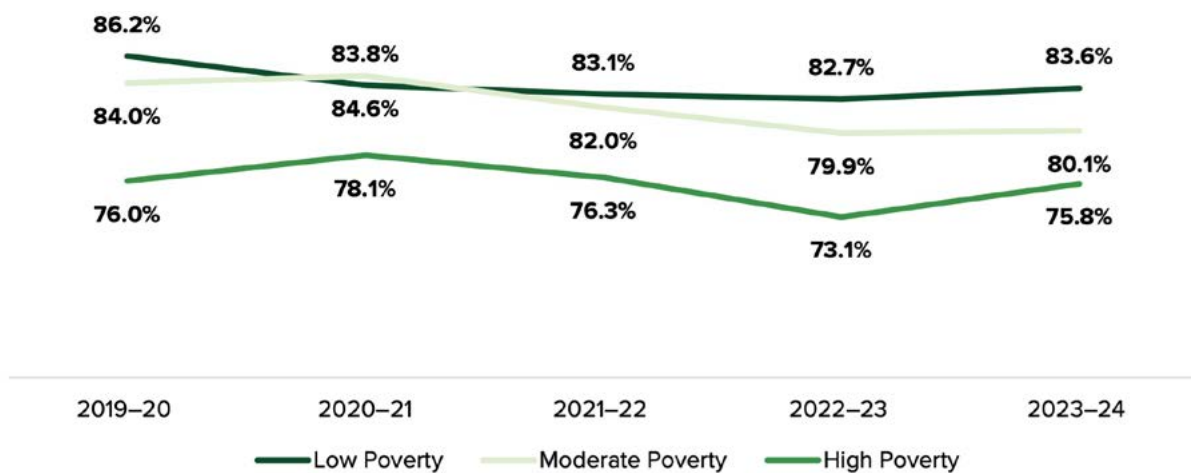
School-Level Retention Rates by Organizational Levels Across Poverty Levels

Previous research consistently finds that poverty level affects teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; ERS, 2024; Taie & Lewis, 2023). Accordingly, we examined how organizational levels interact with poverty categories (low-, moderate-, and high-poverty) regarding teacher retention.

Elementary Schools

The retention rates of elementary schools across school poverty levels are shown in Figure 4. Low-poverty elementary schools consistently recorded the highest retention rates each year except in 2020–21, when moderate-poverty schools held a slight edge. High-poverty elementary schools experienced the lowest rates, at times trailing their low-poverty counterparts by as much as 10 percentage points. However, across 2022–23 and 2023–24, high-poverty elementary schools saw a notable 2.7% increase in retention, while moderate- and low-poverty schools showed smaller gains.

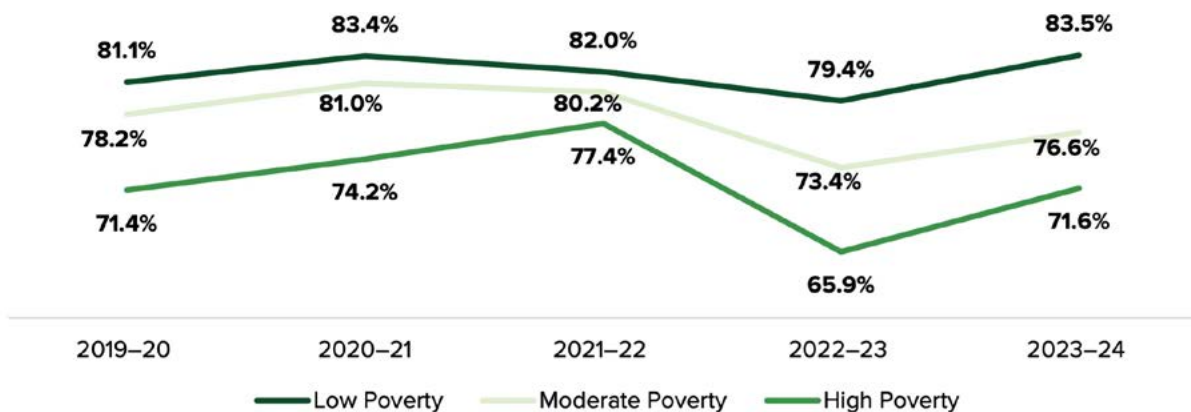
Figure 4. Elementary School Retention Rates Across School Poverty Levels Over Time



Middle Schools

The retention rates of middle schools across school poverty levels are shown in Figure 5. As with elementary schools, middle schools in low-poverty areas had the highest retention each year. From 2021–22 to 2022–23, rates in moderate- and high-poverty schools lagged even more significantly: low-poverty middle schools dropped 2.6%, moderate-poverty schools dropped 6.8%, and high-poverty schools dropped 11.5%. Despite this volatility, retention in all three categories improved from 2022–23 to 2023–24.

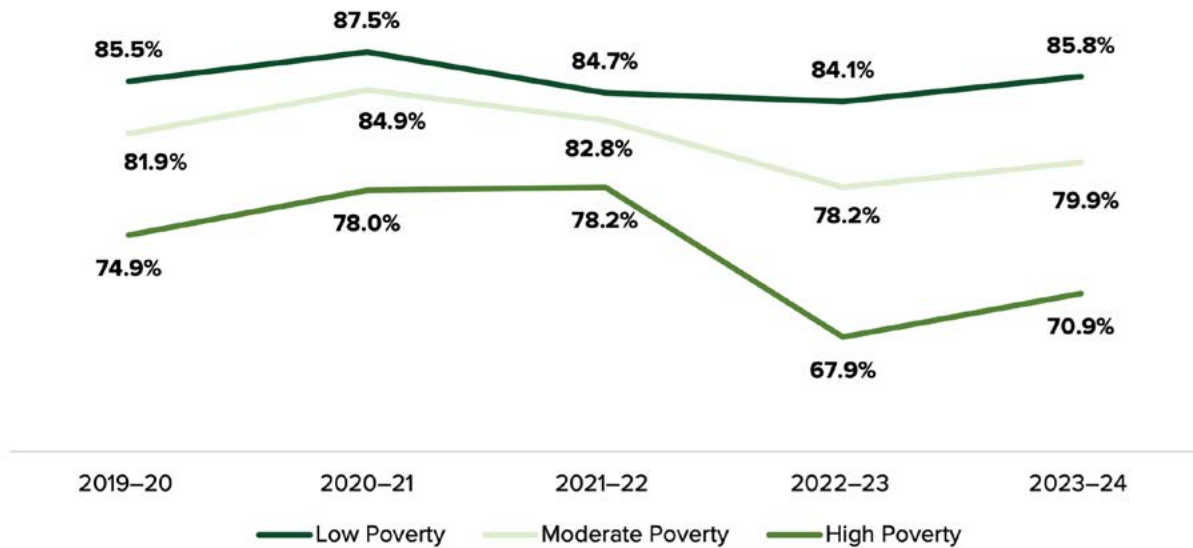
Figure 5. Middle School Retention Rates Across School Poverty Levels Over Time



High Schools

The retention rates of high schools across school poverty levels are shown in Figure 6. Poverty-related patterns in high schools closely resembled those in middle schools—low-poverty high schools performed better than moderate- and high-poverty high schools for most years, with overall retention rates that generally exceeded middle school figures. One exception occurred in 2023–24, when high-poverty middle schools (71.6%) had a slightly higher rate than high-poverty high schools (70.9%).

Figure 6. High School Retention Rates Across School Poverty Levels Over Time



Additional Potential Influences on Teacher Retention

It is important to note that administrative data (i.e., data collected by districts and the state related to operations) alone do not distinguish between voluntary and involuntary departures; some teachers may not have had their contracts renewed (i.e., *nonrenewal*) or may have been involuntarily transferred by district leaders (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010). Additionally, the data presented here do not provide reasons teachers may be leaving. Contextual factors like student behavior or quality of mentor support could be driving differences in teacher decisions. For example, in the 2023 SC Teacher Working Conditions Survey, middle school teachers in South Carolina voiced more concerns about student behavior and engagement than their elementary-level peers (Starrett et al., 2023). Additionally, novice middle school teachers expressed lower satisfaction with their mentorship support than elementary school teachers, an issue further pronounced for middle school teachers in moderate- and high-poverty than for those in low-poverty contexts (Starrett et al., 2023). These findings underscore the value of triangulating administrative records with survey data to inform more targeted, context-specific policies and interventions.

+ KEY QUESTION 3:

What are the entry and exit points within the South Carolina teacher pipeline for 2023–24?

Previous sections of this report focused on teacher retention trends at various levels. This section expands that picture by examining the different ways educators enter and exit South Carolina’s public school teacher pipeline. Teachers may leave the profession entirely, remain in the state but change districts, or shift roles within their current district or school.

Exit Points Within the Teacher Pipeline

Teachers who leave the South Carolina public school teacher workforce create vacancies through three primary exit routes. *Leavers* exit the state pipeline entirely, whether through retirement, moving to other states or private schools, or leaving the profession. *Interdistrict lateral movers* stay in South Carolina’s system but leave vacancies in their former districts as they transfer elsewhere in the state. Lastly, *role-changers* leave classroom positions to be filled as they move into nonteaching roles, such as administration or instructional coaching. Together, these patterns underscore the importance of both statewide and district-level strategies to manage turnover.

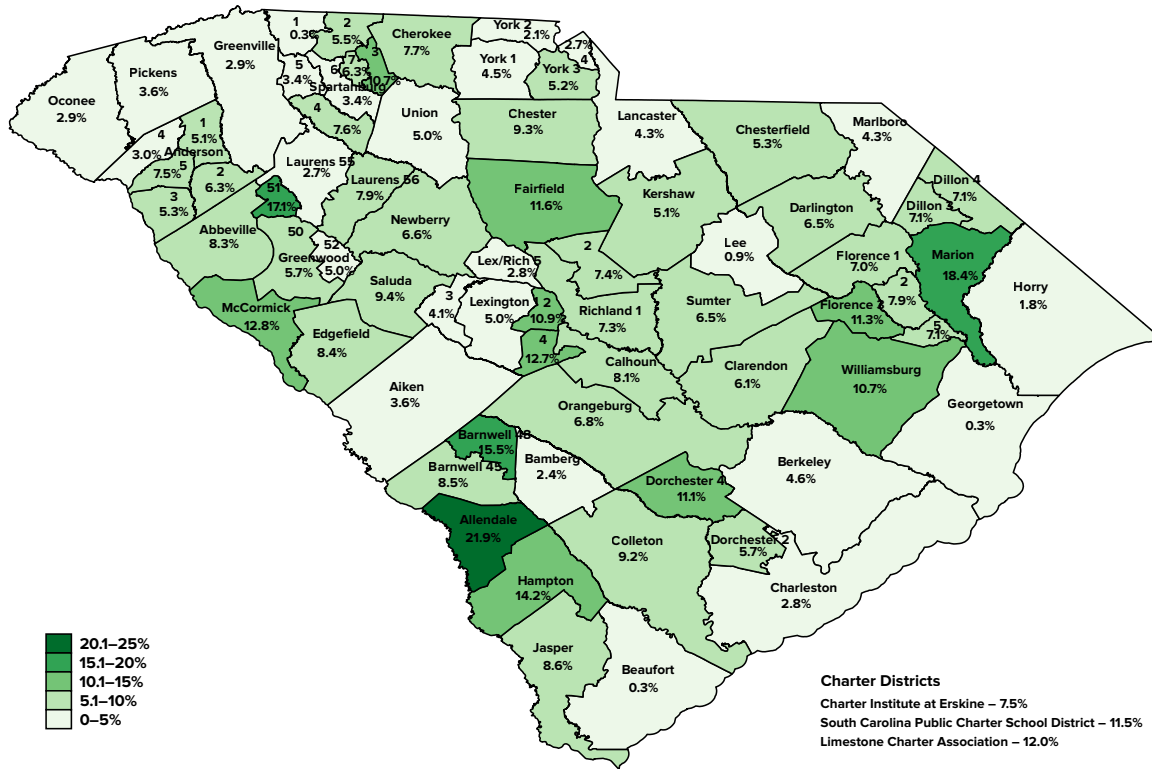
Leavers

Leavers are teachers who do not work in any South Carolina public school the following year and thus need to be replaced both at the state and district levels (unless their positions are eliminated). They may have (a) retired, (b) left the profession early (i.e., before retirement), (c) left to teach in another state or country, or (d) left to teach in a private or home school.

To identify leavers, we tracked South Carolina public school teachers from 2022–23 to 2023–24 to see which teachers were no longer employed in public schools at the start of 2023–24. Figure 7 shows the percentage of leavers in each district, calculated by dividing the number of leavers by the total number of teachers in that district in 2022–23. Smaller districts may have higher percentages with relatively few leavers, underscoring the importance of considering local context. The same is true for districts bordering another state, which may lose more teachers across state lines (Goldhaber et al., 2015), and districts employing international teachers, where time-limited visas can contribute to higher departure rates (Starrett et al., 2024).

Not all leavers exit permanently. Some retirees return to the classroom (Green, 2024). Other teachers reenter the profession after handling family or health issues (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Henry & Redding, 2020). Recent results from the 2024 SC Teacher Exit Survey show that 2 out of 3 departing teachers would consider coming back (Cartiff et al., 2024), a finding that suggests improving working conditions (Starrett et al., 2023) could reduce the likelihood of permanent or ongoing departures.

Figure 8. Percentages of Interdistrict Lateral Movers Exiting Each District in 2023–24



Role-Changers Leaving Teaching

In addition to leavers and lateral movers, some teachers transition to nonteaching roles (e.g., administrators, instructional coaches) within the public school system. These role-changers continue serving schools but leave classroom vacancies behind. Table 1 shows the statewide number of teachers moving into nonteaching positions between 2022–23 and 2023–24. Though they comprise a smaller subset, these individuals represent an important facet of the dynamics of the teacher workforce. Only state-level figures are presented, as the number of individuals making position changes in some school districts is relatively small.

Most teachers moving into different roles became administrators (e.g., assistant principals or principals) or coaches (e.g., reading/literacy or instructional coaches), or transitioned into other professional instruction-oriented positions (e.g., working with classroom teachers in an instructional or curriculum coordinator capacity). Almost 900 teachers in total moved into nonteaching capacities.

Table 1. Role-Changers Leaving Teaching Roles Across South Carolina in 2023–24

New Position	Number	Percent
Assistant Principal, Co-Principal	215	24.6%
Other Professional Instruction-Oriented	213	24.4%
Reading/Literacy Coach	116	13.3%
Instructional Coach	115	13.2%
Guidance Counselor	45	5.2%
Instructional Aide	44	5.0%
Library Media Specialist	34	3.9%
Special Education Aide	28	3.2%
Purchased-Service Teacher	15	1.7%
Principal	11	1.3%
Speech Therapist	10	1.1%
Kindergarten Aide	10	1.1%
Assistant Director, Career and Technology Education Center	<10	<1.1%
Assistant Superintendent, Instruction	<10	<1.1%
Career Specialist	<10	<1.1%
Child Development Aide	<10	<1.1%
Library Aide	<10	<1.1%
Total	874	100%

Entry Points Within the Teacher Pipeline

Alongside attrition and mobility, South Carolina’s public school workforce is also replenished and strengthened by three primary entry points. The first consists of *new hires*, who did not teach in South Carolina public schools the previous year, including recent graduates, alternative route enrollees, returning educators, and out-of-state or international hires. The second involves *interdistrict lateral movers*, who bring prior classroom experience from another district within the state. Lastly, *role-changers* transition from nonteaching positions into teaching in South Carolina public schools. Understanding each of these entry paths clarifies how diverse groups of teachers enter or reenter the profession and can help districts plan tailored onboarding and support strategies.

New Hires

In 2023–24, there were 5,919 new teachers working in South Carolina public schools. We define *new hires* as teachers who did not work in the state’s public education system in any classroom teaching position code the previous 2022–23 academic year. This means new hires include returning educators who may have taken a break from their professional lives before returning to teaching. To gain a more nuanced understanding of new hires’ professional and educational backgrounds, we examined their certificate level in 2023–24, their pathway to teacher certification, and whether they were returning educators or beginning their teaching careers in South Carolina for the first time.

Table 2 outlines ten categories of new hires. The largest group (about 33%) consists of teachers on initial certificates, including recent graduates of EPPs, some returning educators, and those previously teaching under certain time-limited certificates. Also included in the group are teachers who recently graduated from traditional EPPs in another state with no prior teaching experience in South Carolina and less than 27 months in another state. Additionally, this group includes a small number ($n = 109$) of returning teachers who worked previously either as paraprofessionals or classroom teachers on an initial, provisional initial, internship, or international certificate and took time off before returning to teach on an initial certificate once again. Teachers with initial certificates who previously held international certificates have different work authorization/visa statuses. They have fulfilled all the necessary program and testing requirements for a standard initial certificate.

The second largest group (about 15%) constituted teachers holding a professional teaching certificate who joined the South Carolina teacher workforce via a reciprocity agreement with another state. These teachers had teaching experience in their respective states but were new to the South Carolina public education system in 2023–24.

Returning educators holding a professional teaching certificate made up the state's third largest source of new hires. In total, 1,114 returnees with a professional certificate were rehired after taking time off from the education profession. Among these returnees, 3 out of 4 were boomerangs. A smaller subset of returning educators in this category had not been employed in any role in public education during the 2022–23 school year and had not worked as teachers between 2017–18 and 2021–22. This group includes individuals who worked in nonteaching positions or had undefined positions in South Carolina public schools during the period for which state-level educator data were available. While some may qualify as boomerangs, insufficient data from earlier years prevent a clear determination of their prior teaching experience. (In Table 2, returning educators as a group has been delineated into subsets of *boomerangs* and *other educators reentering*.)

Two more relatively substantial sources of new hires came from employing teachers enrolled in alternative certification programs (about 8%) and international teachers working on J-1/J-2 visas (about 6%). The remaining categories (i.e., career and technical induction, pre-initial certificate, adjunct certificate, and retired certificate teachers) each contributed less than 2% of teachers to the new workforce.

Table 2. Categories and Numbers of New Teacher Hires Across South Carolina in 2023–24

Category	Count	Percent
Initial certificate	1,942	32.8%
Reciprocity professional	901	15.2%
Boomerang	819	13.8%
Alternative route enrollee	455	7.7%
International teacher	374	6.3%
Other educator reentering	295	4.9%
Career and technical induction	108	1.8%
Pre-initial certificate	68	1.2%
Adjunct certificate	43	0.7%
Other	12	0.2%
Retired certificate	9	0.2%
Missing certificate data	893	15.1%
Total	5,919	100%

Note. Refer to the glossary on p. 31 for further definitions of these categories.

Table 3. *Role-Changers Entering Teaching Roles Across South Carolina in 2023–24*

Previous Position	Number	Percent
Instructional Aide	228	30.7%
Special Education Aide	178	24.0%
Kindergarten Aide	74	10.0%
Assistant Principal, Co-Principal	55	7.4%
Reading/Literacy Coach	47	6.3%
Child Development Aide	38	5.1%
Instructional Coach	33	4.4%
Library Media Specialist	26	3.5%
Principal	22	3.0%
Guidance Counselor	18	2.4%
Library Aide	13	1.8%
Assistant Superintendent, Noninstructional	<10	<1.4%
Career Specialist	<10	<1.4%
Other Professional Instruction-Oriented	<10	<1.4%
ROTC Instructor	<10	<1.4%
Speech Therapist	<10	<1.4%
Technology/IT Personnel	<10	<1.4%
Temporary Instruction-Oriented Personnel	<10	<1.4%
Total	743	100%

Net Changes in Workforce Dynamics Across Districts for 2023–24

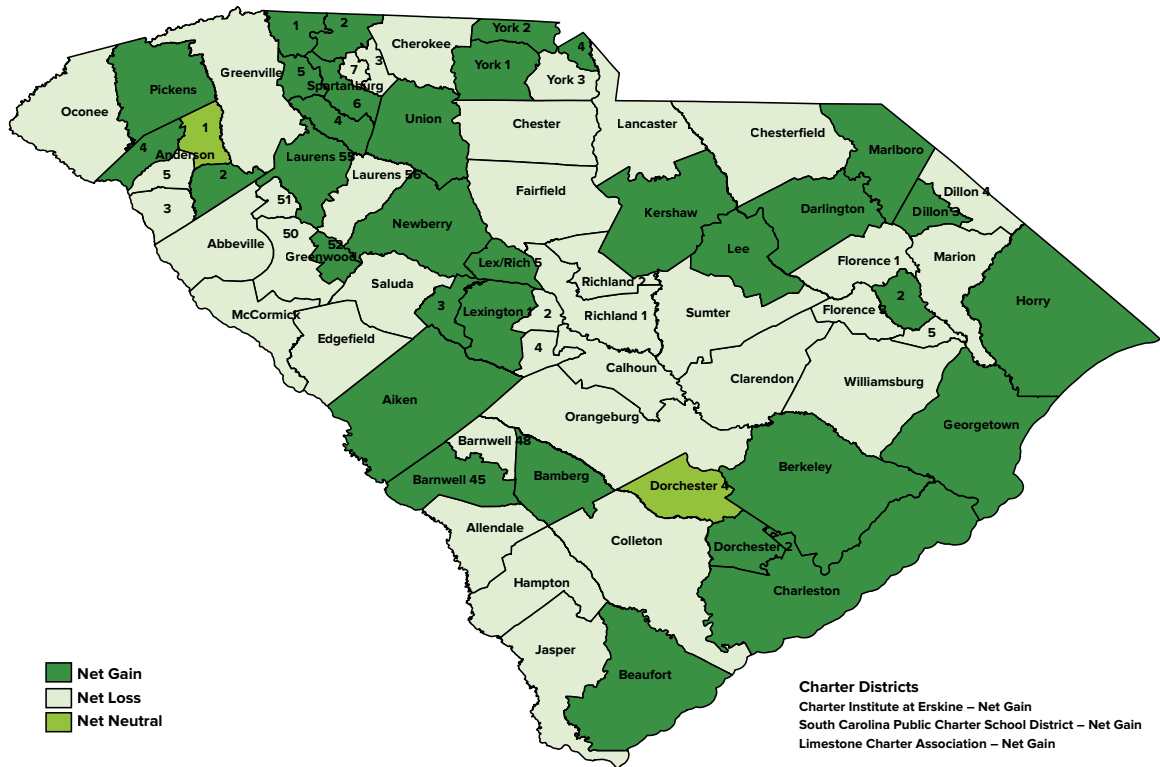
For a more comprehensive picture of district-level workforce changes, we examined net gains and losses from 2022–23 to 2023–24 across multiple categories: (a) the net change in districts’ lateral movers, (b) a comparison of leavers and new hires for each district, and (c) the overall net change in districts’ teachers, including role-changers. Findings are presented as broad categories, with districts either gaining, losing, or staying neutral in their overall teacher count. For example, a gain of one teacher or 100 teachers is classified as the same. Districts should use more refined data to inform their individual situations.

Net Changes in Lateral Movers

Districts in the state will likely both lose and gain some lateral teachers each year. Districts that net no change in lateral movers (i.e., net neutral) will only have to recruit teachers new to the state teacher workforce to fill new positions (e.g., in a new school) or positions left open from attrition (i.e., left by leavers and role-changers). Districts with a positive net change in lateral movers have gained more lateral movers than they lost. Some of these incoming teachers will fill new positions or positions previously occupied by leavers or role-changers. Districts with a negative net change in lateral movers will likely have to fill new positions or positions affected by attrition more so with new recruits to the state workforce unless the number of positions in their districts also decreases (e.g., due to school closures, consolidation, or decreasing student population).

The change in lateral movers is shown as a net neutral, net loss, or net gain for each district in Figure 10. This was determined by subtracting the lateral movers lost from those gained in 2023–24. Neutral indicates a difference of zero between the two figures. Any positive difference was classified as a net gain, and any negative difference was categorized as a net loss. Approximately half of the districts were either neutral or positive, and all three charter districts experienced a net gain.

Figure 10. *Net Changes in Lateral Movers per District in 2023–24*

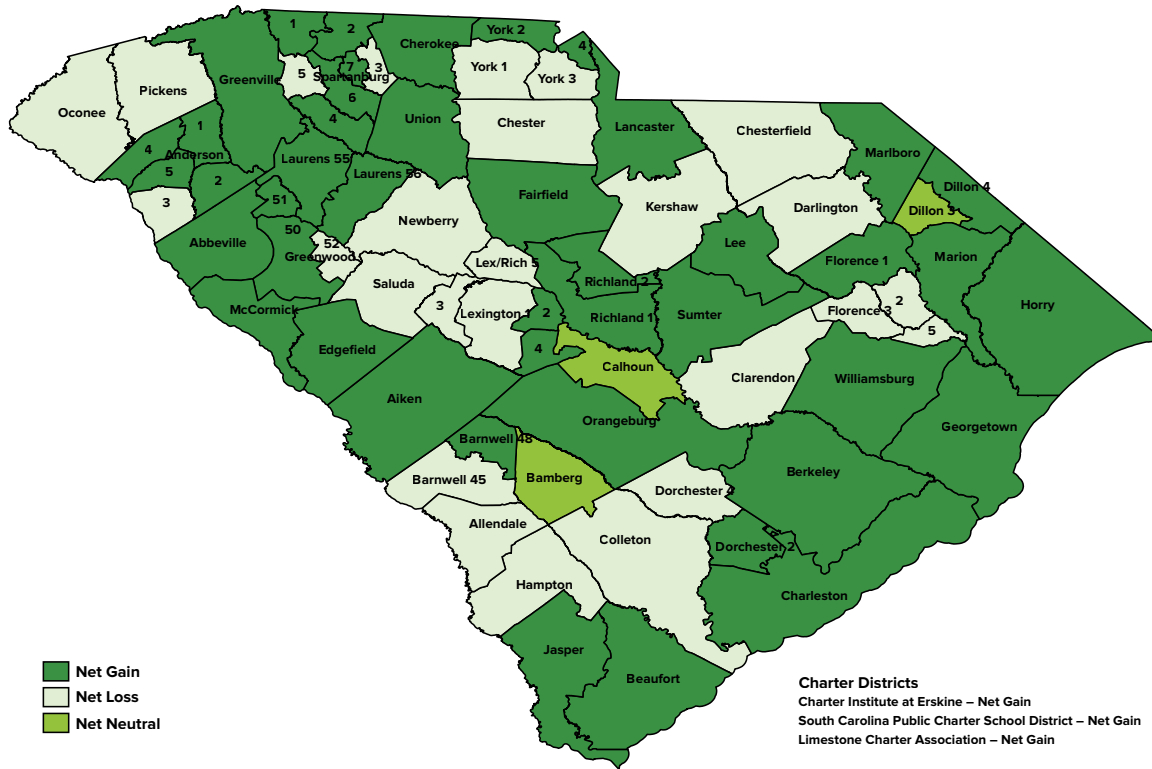


Net Changes in Leavers and New Hires

While some leavers may be replaced by role-changers or by lateral movers coming into districts, many, if not most, will need to be replaced by individuals newly entering the workforce. These new hires may be novice teachers joining the state workforce after completing a traditional certification pathway or enrolling in an alternative certification program. They can also be boomerangs, teachers from another state, or international teachers. Comparing leavers and new hires helps illustrate districts’ abilities to fill necessary positions.

Figure 11 shows the net change for each district in terms of leavers and new hires. Those districts categorized as having a net gain had more new hires in 2023–24 than leavers. Those classified as having a net loss had fewer new hires than leavers. Approximately 65% of the districts were either net neutral or net positive, and all three charter districts experienced a net gain. Three districts (i.e., Bamberg County School District, Calhoun County Public Schools, and Dillon School District 3) had the same number of leavers and new hires.

Figure 11. Net Changes in Leavers and New Hires per District in 2023–24



Total Net Changes in Teachers

Finally, Figure 12 depicts each district’s total net change in teachers when lateral movers, leavers, new hires, and role-changers (both entering and leaving teaching) are combined. Most districts either increased or decreased in size by at least one teacher, with just two—Dorchester School District Two and McCormick County School District—having no net change overall. More than half (56%) of the traditional and charter districts were either net neutral or net positive. All three charter districts opened new schools and/or expanded grade offerings for existing schools. A net loss may indicate recruitment challenges or a declining student population, whereas a net gain might reflect successful hiring efforts, enrollment growth, or new school openings.

Regardless of the net change described here, district leadership and stakeholders should examine their unique contexts to understand why increases, decreases, or neutral outcomes occurred. For instance, a net loss could reflect teacher shortages or strategic decisions not to fill certain positions. Ultimately, these local insights, combined with the broader statewide patterns, can help shape effective policies for retaining and recruiting quality educators across South Carolina.

+ FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This report provides an overview of recent and current teacher workforce dynamics in South Carolina, examining attrition, mobility, and recruitment at the state, district, and school levels. Findings help administrators and policymakers see a clearer picture of how teachers move into, within, and out of the profession. Additionally, a more nuanced understanding of teacher workforce patterns can help prospective teachers make informed career choices. Individuals preparing for certification might consider entering hard-to-staff areas, such as special education or math, rather than fields with a consistent oversupply, such as elementary education (McVey & Trinidad, 2019). Beyond the investigation in this report, there are additional considerations that could enhance and extend these insights if explored.

Examining Motivations for Teacher Movement

Although this report focuses on workforce patterns, it does not directly capture teachers' underlying reasons for moving or leaving positions. Leaders at the state, district, and school levels should consult other data sources, such as the most recent SC Teacher Exit Survey (Cartiff et al., 2024) and the biennial SC Teacher Working Conditions Survey (Starrett et al., 2023) for findings of that nature. These resources offer valuable information on the factors driving teachers' decisions—insights that can aid in crafting policies and programs to address common challenges, such as working conditions, support for specific subject areas, or compensation concerns. Moreover, understanding teachers' motivations may help districts reengage boomerang teachers who may have exited only temporarily.

Understanding District-Level Recruitment to Inform Retention

Districts can benefit from a deeper look into the educational and professional backgrounds of newly recruited teachers to better determine key supports. Novice teachers, for instance, may need robust mentoring or induction programs, whereas interdistrict lateral movers may require less introductory guidance but still benefit from instruction on district- or school-specific practices. Educators from other states often have different needs than international teachers, who may require assistance with visa regulations and cultural adaptation. Districts that rely on alternative certification programs might develop targeted professional development to ensure these teachers receive the pedagogical and classroom management training they need to be successful. By analyzing the composition of their recruited teachers, districts can adopt more effective, context-specific strategies to increase retention.

Exploring Other Influential Factors

Within this area of research, several questions remain unanswered, warranting further investigation:

- 1. Motivations by experience level:** Do novice teachers have different reasons for staying, moving, or leaving compared to experienced educators?
- 2. Subject and certification areas:** Does attrition or mobility vary by subject (e.g., science) or certification category (e.g., special education)?
- 3. Incentives for boomerangs and retirees:** What incentives could encourage retirees or other former teachers to return?

A deeper examination of these issues could lead to more informed decisions at the local and state levels. For example, identifying specific subject areas with high turnover might help districts design retention bonuses or targeted recruitment efforts.

Considerations for Timing and Definitions

Capturing a perfect “snapshot in time” for the teacher workforce is inherently complex. Data sources vary in both their collection schedules and reporting deadlines: contract data often represent the start of the academic year, survey responses may reflect conditions mid-year, and official headcounts might be taken at fixed intervals. As a result, some teachers who appear “active” in one dataset may have already moved or left the profession before another dataset is updated. In addition, some data sources track individual teachers while others count vacancies, leading to further discrepancies. These variations highlight the challenges in obtaining a precise and consistent picture of the teacher workforce at any given moment.

The definition of teacher varies depending on context, making it a complex term. South Carolina law (§59-1-130) provides a broad definition, classifying any full-time or part-time school district employee who teaches or supervises teaching as a teacher. However, different organizations refine this definition for specific purposes. SC TEACHER defines a teacher as any PK–12 classroom teacher, special education teacher (including resource, itinerant, or self-contained positions), or retired teacher returning to the classroom. This definition closely aligns with the evaluation system for classroom-based teachers, except that SC TEACHER’s definition does not include speech therapists and purchased-service teachers. SCDE takes a broader approach when reporting on certified teaching positions, incorporating media specialists and school counselors. The school climate indicator on the state report card extends the definition even further to include ROTC instructors and career specialists, capturing all educator positions eligible for teacher supply funds. These variations highlight the need for clear communication and well-defined data-sharing policies to ensure consistency in reporting and analysis.

+ CONCLUSION

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of attrition, mobility, and recruitment patterns within South Carolina's public school teacher workforce across 6 academic years. Exploring data at the state, district, and school levels sheds light on where and why teachers are leaving, how they move within the system, and the pathways through which new and returning teachers enter the workforce. Key findings reveal that while state-level retention remains relatively stable, localized turnover can present nuanced challenges. High schools exhibit the highest retention rates, while elementary teachers show greater mobility within the state. Teacher exit points from the district pipeline, whether through leaving the profession, lateral movement, or role changes, highlight the importance of addressing working conditions and district-level stability. Meanwhile, types of teachers entering the workforce, including novice educators, returning professionals, and support staff transitioning into teaching, underscore opportunities to strengthen the pipeline. These insights offer education leaders and policymakers a foundation for data-driven strategies to improve recruitment efforts, enhance teacher retention, and ultimately support a sustainable, effective workforce across South Carolina schools.

+ GLOSSARY

Note: The following definitions and clarifications address how terms are used in the context of this report, as well as all future SC TEACHER reports. Past reports and resources may use terms differently. SC TEACHER works continuously to establish consistent meanings and terminology for the most accurate understanding of our research.

Adjunct Certificate

An educator credential requested by the hiring school or district for the certification of either (a) a locally identified content area expert or (b) an eligible candidate for the Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE).

Alternative Route Enrollee

An individual hired on a conditional alternative route certificate based on their enrollment in one of South Carolina's 16 approved alternative route certification programs. By definition, these teachers have also (a) obtained a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited university, (b) not participated in student teaching in a traditional education preparation program, and (c) not participated in another state-approved alternative route certification program.

Attrition

When a teacher leaves the classroom teaching profession in South Carolina public schools. This includes retiring, moving to teach out of state, leaving to teach in private or home schools, switching to a nonteaching role, or exiting the profession entirely.

Boomerang Teacher (Boomerang)

An individual who previously worked as a public school teacher in South Carolina, left the state's teaching workforce, and later returned. For this report, the teacher must have departed during or after the 2017–18 school year and reentered by 2023–24. Boomerangs may include retirees who returned to the classroom or teachers who took temporary leave.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) Certification

A 5-year certification process through which classroom teachers can be hired, designed for those with industry work experience in specific career and technical fields. During the first two years, the educator is issued a CTE induction certificate. During years 3 through 5, the educator holds a CTE pre-professional certificate. Upon successful completion of the CTE certification process, the educator is eligible to advance to a standard 5-year renewable certificate.

Initial Certificate

An educator credential valid for 3 school years, issued to individuals who have completed an approved undergraduate or graduate educator preparation program. This certificate is primarily granted to beginning educators or those returning to teaching without recent experience. An out-of-state certified educator who meets all South Carolina certification requirements but has less than 27 months of qualifying teaching experience in the last 7 years in their previous state will also be issued this certificate type.

International Teacher

A teacher hired from outside the United States through specific visiting visa programs (i.e., J-1, J-2) and issued an international certificate. Such teachers typically fill positions on a temporary basis, bringing diversity and cultural exchange to classrooms but also contributing to attrition when visa terms expire.

Lateral Mover

A public school teacher who moved from one South Carolina public school district and/or school to another.

- **Interdistrict Lateral Mover:** A public school teacher who moved from a school in one district to a school in a different South Carolina district.
- **Intradistrict Lateral Mover:** A public school teacher who moved between schools within the same South Carolina district. In cases where districts may reassign teachers without their choice, teachers are called *nonvoluntary intradistrict lateral movers*.

Leaver

A teacher who has left public school teaching in South Carolina. Such teachers may have retired, relocated to teach in another state or country, moved to a private or home school, or left the profession for other reasons

Mobility

Any movement of teachers between classroom teaching positions within South Carolina public schools, including interdistrict and intradistrict transfers.

New Hire

A teacher who did not work in the state's public education system in any position code (i.e., teaching or nonteaching) during the previous academic year.

Nonrenewal

A district's decision not to renew a teacher's contract for various reasons (e.g., performance, budgetary constraints). Although leading to a form of attrition, the decision may be viewed as beneficial in cases where it aligns with performance improvement goals or decreased student enrollment.

Nonteaching Role

Any position in a public school that does not involve direct classroom teaching responsibilities (e.g., administrator, instructional coach, guidance counselor). Moving to one of these roles typically removes an individual from the teacher category (see *teacher* definition) unless they later return to a teaching position

Novice Teachers

A teacher who did not work in the state's public education system in any position code (i.e., teaching or nonteaching) during the previous academic year (i.e., a *new hire*) that was also employed on an initial certificate in the most recent school year. In this report, that refers to the 2023–24 academic year.

Other Educator Reentering

An educator who returned to South Carolina public schools after not being employed in any role in public education during the 2022–23 school year. This group includes individuals who worked in nonteaching positions or had undefined roles in South Carolina public schools between 2017–18 and 2021–22. Due to limited data from previous years, it is unclear whether these individuals had prior teaching experience in South Carolina or held other positions, distinguishing them from boomerang teachers.

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). For all SC TEACHER reports, teachers 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.

Pre-Initial Certificate

A category of teaching certificate that includes provisional initial certificates (given to individuals that have completed all requirements of an approved, traditional educator preparation program but have not earned a passing score on one or more required certification exams) and internship certificates (given to individuals that have completed all requirements of an educator preparation program with the exception of student teaching and have earned passing scores on all required certification exams).

Reciprocity

A process that streamlines hiring for districts and enables qualified teachers to move more easily across state lines. SCDE, through the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) Interstate Agreement, recognizes valid, standard teaching credentials from other states, provided they meet specific criteria. If the out-of-state credential reflects completion of an approved educator preparation program (traditional or alternative route) and is a standard (not temporary, emergency, or provisional) certificate, South Carolina will issue a comparable certificate, if one exists.

Reciprocity Professional

A teacher hired in a South Carolina public school having entered the state via reciprocity and received a professional teaching certificate. These individuals hold valid, standard educator credentials from other jurisdictions recognized through South Carolina's participation in the NASDTEC Interstate Agreement, provided the credentials meet specified requirements.

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.

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.
- **School-Level Retention:** When a teacher continues to teach in the same school.

Retired Certificate

An educator credential awarded to an individual who retired from a South Carolina public school and is hired for the purpose of substituting only.

Role-Changer

A public school educator who changes 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 (e.g., classroom aide) into teaching.

SC Teacher Exit Survey

An annual survey administered by SC TEACHER used to collect information from teachers who leave their South Carolina public school teaching positions. The survey aims to reveal reasons for attrition and inform potential policy or programmatic responses to reduce turnover.

SC Teacher Working Conditions Survey (SCTWCS)

A biennial survey administered by SC TEACHER to gather data on South Carolina public school teachers' perceptions of resources (e.g., administrative support), demands (e.g., student behavior), and other factors influencing teacher satisfaction and retention.

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.

Teacher Pipeline

A conceptual model depicting how teachers enter, move within, and exit the public school workforce. It includes new teachers (e.g., recent graduates, out-of-state hires), returning educators (e.g., retirees, boomerangs), and those leaving or moving between schools and districts.

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