

Teacher self-efficacy and principal support: Key factors in retaining Ohio educators during the Great Resignation

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Abstract: Teacher retention continues to represent a significant challenge for educational systems in the United States, particularly following the disruptions associated with COVID-19 and the Great Resignation. This quantitative study examined the relationship between teacher self-efficacy, perceptions of principal support, and educators' intentions to remain in the profession among 146 public and community school teachers in Ohio. Participants completed the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale and an adapted Principal Efficacy Scale, along with demographic and retention-related survey items. Results indicated that the pandemic and broader workforce instability substantially influenced educators' professional outlooks, with many respondents reporting consideration of career changes or departure from PreK–12 education. Teachers who reported stronger self-efficacy beliefs, particularly in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management, were significantly less likely to consider leaving the profession. Similarly, educators who perceived higher levels of principal support, especially in instructional and moral leadership domains, demonstrated stronger retention-related attitudes. Significant grade-level differences also emerged, with secondary educators reporting lower perceptions of principal support than elementary educators. Although most respondents endorsed higher salaries and retention incentives as beneficial, financial considerations alone did not emerge as the strongest predictors of retention intentions. Findings suggest that improving teacher retention requires comprehensive strategies that extend beyond compensation and address leadership quality, professional support systems, workplace conditions, and opportunities for teacher growth and efficacy development.

Keywords: teacher attrition; teacher retention; teacher shortages

1. Introduction

Teacher attrition continues to challenge school systems nationwide and has been analyzed through multiple theoretical lenses, including human, social, and structural capital frameworks. Noel and Finocchio [1] suggest that a positive psychological perspective may offer unique insight into the internal drivers of educators' career decisions. Their phenomenological inquiry with former teachers surfaced several recurrent themes: gaps in pre-service preparation left novice educators feeling unprepared for classroom realities, fueling early-career disillusionment and departure. Beyond preparation, administrator-centered governance structures, strained relationships with community stakeholders, and weak instructional leadership emerged as significant drivers of turnover [1].

When professional relationships within schools lack depth and reciprocity, teacher dissatisfaction intensifies. Structural pressures, rising costs of living, overcrowded classrooms, demanding workloads, high-stakes testing requirements, and scarce instructional resources further compound the problem. Importantly, psychological assets, including self-efficacy, hopefulness, optimism, and resilience, though often robust at career entry, tend to erode within the first three years, accelerating attrition. This pattern underscores the importance of proactive and sustained psychological support in workforce retention efforts.

In rural and geographically isolated settings, three factors dominate turnover patterns: physical remoteness, dissatisfaction with administrative responsiveness, and poor workplace conditions [2]. Approximately one-fifth of teachers who left these settings cited compensation grievances and dissatisfaction with their assigned roles [2]. Districts in high-poverty, low-performing, or isolated areas frequently respond to vacancies by hiring lateral-entry or provisional educators, an approach that introduces additional instability into already vulnerable teaching forces [3].

Teacher attrition is a worldwide challenge: more than 44% of newly hired teachers exit the profession within five years, with disproportionate losses occurring in urban and rural schools serving predominantly low-income and minority student populations [1, 4]. Mason and Matas [5] argue that attrition cannot be traced to any single cause but emerges instead from a complex, mutually reinforcing set of conditions. Among the reasons documented by Elsayed and Roch [6] are retirement, job insecurity, failure to meet licensure requirements, insufficient access to professional development, and contract non-renewal.

Teachers who are deeply invested in their work often depart not because they seek a different career but because systemic policies and institutional practices erode their sense of purpose [7]. Work environment variables, particularly emotional exhaustion and professional alienation, are consistently associated with turnover intentions [8, 9]. Time constraints imposed by planning, grading, and reporting duties erode the quality of instructional preparation and contribute to disengagement. Teaching carries well-documented occupational stressors, including extended working hours, large class loads, reliance on supplemental employment, high-stakes test accountability pressures, racial biases, limited curricular discretion, and increasingly contested political environments [10]. These conditions have driven an increase in vacancies and a decline in interest in entering the field [9, 10]. Burnout, attributable to the pressure of standardized accountability frameworks, including those embedded in the No Child Left Behind legislation [11], has been directly linked to attrition [12].

Self-efficacy beliefs, particularly those grounded in mastery experiences and educators' confidence in their ability to produce meaningful student outcomes, play a central role in shaping retention [13]. Data from the 2017–2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey [14] indicated that over a quarter of public-school teachers (27.8%) perceived the stress and frustrations of teaching as outweighing its rewards, highlighting the urgency of systemic intervention to stem further losses.

2. Impact of COVID-19 and the Great Resignation

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader phenomenon known as the Great Resignation placed extraordinary pressure on the education workforce, amplifying challenges that had been building for decades. Teacher satisfaction fell dramatically, from 62% in 2008 to just 12% by 2022 [15, 16]. The pandemic extended professional demands, heightened stress levels, and triggered widespread re-evaluation of career commitments: by early 2022, an estimated 50% of teachers reported having at least contemplated leaving [17]. Although actual attrition during the pandemic years remained lower than some projections had anticipated, deteriorating conditions and broader cultural shifts led to measurable increases in departures [18]. Educator turnover disrupts school teams, erodes institutional knowledge, and diminishes instructional quality in ways that take years to remedy [3]. Sustaining a stable workforce requires systemic attention to teacher satisfaction, responsive support structures, and equitable workplace conditions.

2.1. Teacher shortages

The persistent shortage of educators is not primarily a problem of insufficient candidates; rather, it reflects working conditions and compensation that fail to attract and retain qualified professionals [10]. Economic pressures are acute: many teachers supplement their income through additional employment, and teachers with comparable educational credentials earn roughly 19.2% less than peers in other fields [19, 20]. Ongoing pay compression has led some educators to exit the profession entirely rather than manage indefinitely on insufficient compensation [20]. Even as the broader economy has grown since the 2007–2009 recession, teaching has retained its characterization as a relatively low-paid, lower-status career [21]. Teachers consistently earn less than those with equivalent educational attainment, and the penalty has widened, from approximately 5% in the 1990s to substantially more in subsequent decades [10]. Data from the Economic Policy Institute confirm that real teacher wages have trended downward since 2010 [22], reinforcing an image of the profession as financially unappealing and lowering its attractiveness to prospective candidates [21].

Low wages

The semi-professional standing sometimes attributed to teaching is, in large part, a product of compensation levels [23]. Debates over teacher pay have a long history in U.S. education, with advocates of salary reform arguing that low wages push educators toward the door [21]. Compensation is intertwined with social capital: it affects teachers' professional status, the conditions under which they work, and the career trajectories available to them [5]. Over three decades, teacher salaries grew only modestly, from an average weekly wage of \$911 in 1979 to \$1,092 in 2015 [21]. According to data from the National Education Association [22], the average starting teacher salary is \$42,844, compared with a national professional average of \$66,745, a gap that depresses enrollment in teacher preparation programs [21]. Teaching ranks among the lowest-compensated professional occupations relative to credential requirements, and salaries have failed to keep pace with the cost of living even as

accountability demands on teachers have risen [24].

While teaching serves as a relatively stable employment option during recessions, attracting candidates who might otherwise choose other fields, it loses comparative appeal during economic expansions, when better-paying alternatives become available. The early 1990s and the 2009 downturns each produced temporary influxes of new teachers, many of whom departed once labor markets improved [21]. Wiggan et al. [19] noted this pattern of economically contingent entry, observing that teaching has attracted individuals during periods of financial uncertainty despite its persistent wage disadvantage. Sustaining an adequate teaching workforce requires more than waiting for recessions to refill the pipeline; it demands structural improvements in pay and working conditions.

2.2. Teacher retention

2.2.1. Ecological culture

Retention outcomes are shaped by an interlocking set of factors: compensation, workplace conditions, access to professional development, and mentoring availability, all filtered through educators' personal beliefs and the organizational contexts in which they work [25,26]. Ecological models of school culture emphasize that individual belief systems, collegial dynamics, institutional norms, and physical work environments interact to produce retention or attrition. Retention-positive conditions typically include collaborative professional structures, meaningful opportunities for growth, manageable workloads, competitive pay, and engagement with school culture [27, 28]. These characteristics align with structural and social capital perspectives that identify strong professional networks and reliable support systems as key mediators of educator satisfaction and longevity [1].

2.2.2. Working conditions

Conditions that undermine educators' well-being, including employment insecurity, low compensation, diminished professional standing, and constrained opportunities for advancement, consistently emerge as primary drivers of departure [29]. A longitudinal study tracking experienced teachers who left between 1993 and 2014 found that 60% would consider returning if conditions improved, specifically citing salary, status recognition, workload relief, and stress reduction as top priorities [30]. Mandated curricula, heightened accountability expectations, and job insecurity have been identified as particularly potent drivers of attrition [7]. Structural capital theory contextualizes these dynamics by linking workforce stability to the quality of employment conditions, organizational architecture, career development pathways, and institutional policy [1].

Teachers in Glazer's [7] study expressed confidence in their craft but described frustration with the constraints imposed by curriculum mandates on their professional judgment. These teachers felt that regulatory prescriptions prevented them from achieving the instructional impact they had previously experienced. Scripted or narrowly defined curricula reduced their capacity to differentiate instruction, producing a sense of professional disempowerment. What these educators sought was not

unfettered autonomy but a principled balance, one that respected their expertise within a coherent educational framework while permitting the flexibility needed to respond to students' varying needs [7]. Such a balance, they argued, would restore both job satisfaction and motivation to remain.

2.3. Factors impacting retention

Retention decisions are shaped by push and pull dynamics operating simultaneously [29]. Push factors, deteriorating physical facilities, and hostile or unsupportive working environments propel educators toward the exit and stand in contrast to the structural capital benefits that robust physical and professional resources could provide [7]. Pull factors, opportunities in more financially rewarding or professionally fulfilling fields, or personal life considerations, draw educators away from classroom positions [29]. Gender differences exist in how these forces operate: men are more likely to transition out of teaching in response to external opportunities, while women who depart more often cite relational considerations, connection to students, work-life compatibility, and confidence in their ability to manage the re-entry transition [29]. Individual comfort thresholds and professional identity ultimately shape how any given teacher weighs these competing pressures.

2.3.1. Teacher autonomy

Experienced educators with well-developed instructional repertoires frequently cite bureaucratic overreach and compliance demands, particularly scripted or mandated curricula, as reasons for leaving [7]. Research by Glazer [7] found that departing teachers sought professional agency and genuine ownership over curricular design. These educators also identified the need for an emotional and psychological support infrastructure serving both students and staff, and they called attention to the weight of responsibilities that extend well beyond formal instructional hours. Teachers routinely invest substantial personal time addressing students' social and emotional needs, often without corresponding acknowledgment or institutional support, a pattern that places disproportionate demands on educators' personal reserves [28]. The divergence between what teachers who stay tolerate and what departing teachers refuse to accept points school and district leaders toward a clearer set of actionable priorities [4]. Retention-oriented institutions must build environments that respect professional judgment, minimize unnecessary compliance burdens, and provide comprehensive support systems. Progress on these dimensions is associated with improved job satisfaction and reduced attrition among veterans.

2.3.2. Mentoring and support

Well-designed mentoring programs and systemic support structures represent high-leverage retention mechanisms, particularly in their capacity to buffer against burnout [31]. School leaders can strengthen these systems by creating structured induction programs, hosting new-teacher development seminars, and cultivating collaborative cultures that enable novice educators to develop both professional competence and a sense of institutional belonging [3,32]. Mentoring that incorporates modeling, vicarious learning, and mastery-building experiences strengthens

self-efficacy and enables beginning teachers to construct a credible professional self-image [13,33]. Positive workplace environments, meaningful relationships with administrators, and targeted mentoring have been shown to improve retention [34]. Post-pandemic, administrators have additional reasons to invest in targeted classroom management support, mentoring, and professional learning communities designed to address heightened behavioral and instructional challenges [35]. Comprehensive interventions that address teacher stress, classroom climate, and organizational wellness can reduce the risk of burnout and improve overall workforce satisfaction [36].

3. Methods

3.1. Study objective

The primary purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the factors associated with the retention of public and community school teachers across K–12 grade levels and licensure areas within Ohio. A secondary aim was to detect retention-related variation attributable to demographic and professional characteristics, including gender, racial identity, age, educational credentials, licensure type, grade-level assignment, and years of experience. The inquiry was motivated by the disruptions associated with the Great Resignation and the recognized need for a current, empirically grounded understanding of what sustains or undermines teacher retention in the post-resignation landscape.

3.2. Research questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) How has the Great Resignation influenced educators' decisions to remain in preK-12 education or continue as classroom teachers?
- 2) What elements of teacher self-efficacy are associated with the decision to persist in preK-12 education?
 - What factors moderate teacher self-efficacy (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, years of service, school location, subject area, education level, and licensure)?
- 3) What aspects of leadership efficacy relate to teachers' decisions to remain in preK-12 education?
 - What factors moderate perceptions of principal efficacy (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, years of service, school location, subject area, education level, and licensure)?
 - Do salary increases or retention incentives affect educators' decisions to continue as classroom teachers?

3.3. Participants

The target population was K–12 teachers employed in Ohio's public and community schools. Ohio's public education system encompasses 611 traditional school districts, collectively serving approximately 1,611,956 students, as well as community schools, private schools, and online learning institutions. Traditional and

community schoolteachers were selected as the primary focus because they represent the largest segment of the state's educator workforce: 111,062 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, constituting 78% of Ohio's public school educators, with demographic data available for 108,210 of that group. Recruitment sought to capture diverse perspectives across school types and geographic settings throughout Ohio, yielding a final sample of 146 respondents.

3.4. Instrumentation

Two validated self-report instruments were administered. The first was the long form of the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) [36], a 24-item measure assessing teacher competence beliefs across three subscales: student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.90, 0.86, and 0.91, respectively, indicating strong internal consistency. The second instrument was an adapted version of the Principal Efficacy Scale (PES) [37], modified to capture teacher-rated perceptions of their principals' effectiveness across management, instructional leadership, and moral leadership domains (18 items total). Both instruments employed a Likert-type response format anchored at 1 (none) and 9 (a great deal). Supplemental yes/no items assessed the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on career decisions and the potential influence of retention incentive strategies. Demographic items provided contextual data for all analyses.

3.5. Procedures

Data collection proceeded under Institutional Review Board approval from Youngstown State University (protocol code 2024-158 and 01/17/2024). Participant recruitment used a snowball sampling strategy, beginning with direct outreach to known educators and expanding through professional and social networking platforms. The survey was administered via Google Forms, which provided a secure and anonymized data collection environment. Participants were informed of confidentiality protections and provided consent before completing the survey; no personally identifiable information was collected. A correlational research design was employed to examine associations among teacher self-efficacy, principal efficacy perceptions, and teacher retention intentions. The data collection window spanned three weeks.

4. Results

4.1. Participant characteristics

The final sample comprised 146 public school educators in Ohio (80.1% female; 19.9% male). Participants ranged broadly in age, with the largest cohorts in the 51–55 (22.6%) and 56-and-older (19.9%) age groups, and the smallest in the 21–25 range (2.1%). Racially, the sample was predominantly White, non-Hispanic (73.3%), followed by Black, non-Hispanic (20.5%), Multiracial (2.7%), Hispanic (2.1%), and Other (1.4%). Most participants worked in urban settings (87.7%), with smaller proportions in suburban (8.9%) and rural (3.4%) communities. Traditional public schools accounted for 94.5% of worksites; the remainder worked in community

schools.

Teaching experience varied widely: approximately one-third of respondents had 16–25 years of service, while roughly 17% had 26–30 years. The most commonly taught contexts were PreK–6 generalist instruction (26.0%), English language arts (20.5%), and mild/moderate intervention (17.8%). Regarding educational attainment, 43.2% held a master's degree, 36.3% held a master's degree plus 20 credit hours, and only 0.7% held a doctoral degree. A strong majority (80.8%) held a 5-year professional teaching license in Ohio.

4.2. Scale reliability and descriptive statistics

The internal consistency of the six efficacy factors derived from the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale and the Principal Efficacy Scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Results indicated strong reliability across all subscales, with alpha values ranging from 0.861 to 0.956. The teacher efficacy dimensions demonstrated high levels of internal consistency, including Student Engagement ($\alpha = 0.896$), Instructional Strategies ($\alpha = 0.861$), and Classroom Management ($\alpha = 0.913$). Similarly, the principal efficacy dimensions exhibited excellent reliability, with Efficacy Management ($\alpha = 0.947$), Instructional Leadership ($\alpha = 0.956$), and Moral Leadership ($\alpha = 0.933$) all exceeding commonly accepted standards for scale reliability [38,39]. Collectively, these findings suggest that the measures used in the study demonstrated strong internal consistency and were appropriate for subsequent analyses.

Descriptive statistics revealed generally high levels of perceived efficacy among participants across both teacher and principal leadership domains. Among the teacher efficacy factors, Instructional Strategies produced the highest mean score ($M = 7.03$, $SD = 1.00$), followed by Classroom Management ($M = 6.81$, $SD = 1.27$) and Student Engagement ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 1.24$). Within the principal efficacy dimensions, Efficacy Management yielded the highest mean ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 1.95$), followed by Moral Leadership ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 2.02$) and Instructional Leadership ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 2.08$). These findings indicate that participants generally reported confidence in their ability to perform both instructional and leadership-related responsibilities.

Assessment of distributional characteristics supported the assumption of approximate normality. Skewness values ranged from -0.85 to -0.34 , indicating only slight negative skew across variables, while kurtosis values ranged from -0.81 to 1.41 . All values fell well within recommended thresholds for normality (absolute skewness less than 2.0 and absolute kurtosis less than 5.0) [38,39], suggesting that the variables were suitable for parametric statistical analyses.

4.3. Research question one: The impact of the Great Resignation on educator retention

The first research question examined whether the Great Resignation phenomenon has influenced educators' intentions to remain in PreK–12 education following the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked a series of yes/no questions regarding changes in their professional attitudes and career considerations since the onset of the

pandemic.

Results suggest substantial shifts in educators' perceptions of their profession. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64.4%) reported that their feelings about working in education had changed since COVID-19. Similarly, 57.5% reported considering a career change. Even more concerning, 62.3% reported having considered leaving PreK–12 education entirely, while 64.4% had considered pursuing a different role within the educational field. These findings suggest that the pandemic has prompted many educators to reevaluate their professional futures, reflecting patterns commonly associated with the broader Great Resignation movement.

To further investigate these relationships, a series of chi-square tests of independence were conducted to determine whether changes in feelings about working in education since COVID-19 were associated with career-related intentions. Significant relationships emerged for two of the three outcomes examined. Educators who reported changes in their feelings about the profession were significantly more likely to have considered changing career paths ($\chi^2(1) = 20.40, p < 0.001$), with a moderate effect size ($r = 0.374$). Likewise, changes in professional outlook were significantly associated with considering leaving PreK–12 education altogether ($\chi^2(1) = 6.99, p = 0.008$).

In contrast, no significant relationship was found between changed feelings about working in education and consideration of a different role within PreK–12 education, $\chi^2(1) = 0.29, p = 0.593$. This finding suggests that while educators experiencing shifts in professional attitudes may be more likely to contemplate leaving education or pursuing an entirely different career, such changes do not necessarily increase the likelihood of seeking an alternative position within the educational system itself.

Overall, the results provide evidence that pandemic-related changes in educators' perceptions of their profession are associated with increased consideration of career changes and departure from the field. The strongest relationship observed was between changed feelings about education and consideration of a different career path, indicating that broader workforce retention challenges may continue to affect the education sector in the years following the pandemic.

4.4. Research question two: Teacher self-efficacy and decisions to remain in PreK–12

The second research question examined whether teacher self-efficacy was associated with educators' consideration of leaving PreK–12 education. A multivariate general linear model (GLM) was conducted, leaving education completely as the independent variable and the three teacher efficacy dimensions, Student Engagement, Instructional Strategies, and Classroom Management, as dependent variables.

Descriptive results indicated a consistent pattern across all three efficacy domains. Educators who had not considered leaving the profession reported higher levels of self-efficacy than those who had contemplated leaving. Specifically, teachers who had not considered leaving education reported higher efficacy in Student Engagement ($M = 6.67, SD = 1.25$) compared to those who had considered leaving ($M = 6.06, SD = 1.18$). Similar differences were observed for Instructional Strategies ($M = 7.28, SD =$

1.01 versus $M = 6.89$, $SD = 0.98$) and Classroom Management ($M = 7.09$, $SD = 1.37$ versus $M = 6.64$, $SD = 1.19$).

Preliminary analyses supported the appropriateness of the multivariate model. Zero-order correlations revealed significant negative relationships between consideration of leaving education and all three teacher efficacy factors, indicating that educators with lower perceptions of efficacy were more likely to report thoughts of leaving the profession. The strongest association emerged for Student Engagement ($r = -0.238$, $p < 0.01$), followed by Instructional Strategies ($r = -0.187$, $p < 0.05$) and Classroom Management ($r = -0.172$, $p < 0.05$). No evidence of multicollinearity was observed among the dependent variables, and tests of homogeneity of variance and covariance assumptions were satisfied.

The overall multivariate model was statistically significant (Hotelling's $T = 0.063$, $F(3, 142) = 2.99$, $p = 0.033$), indicating that consideration of leaving education was associated with differences across the combined teacher efficacy measures. Follow-up univariate analyses demonstrated significant effects for each efficacy factor. The largest effect was observed for Student Engagement, $F(1, 144) = 8.62$, $p = 0.004$, with strong observed power (0.83). Significant differences were also found for Instructional Strategies, $F(1, 144) = 5.22$, $p = 0.024$, and Classroom Management, $F(1, 144) = 4.38$, $p = 0.038$. These findings suggest that educators contemplating departure from the profession perceive themselves as less effective across multiple dimensions of teaching practice.

To further explore factors associated with teacher efficacy, correlations were examined between the efficacy dimensions and a range of demographic and professional variables. Student Engagement was significantly related only to the current grade level ($r = -0.191$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that perceptions of effectiveness in engaging students varied somewhat across instructional levels. No significant demographic moderators emerged for Instructional Strategies.

Classroom Management demonstrated the strongest pattern of demographic associations. Higher classroom management efficacy was associated with older age ($r = 0.237$, $p < 0.01$), greater years of public-school teaching experience ($r = 0.226$, $p < 0.01$), and higher levels of educational attainment ($r = 0.208$, $p < 0.05$). A significant negative relationship was also observed with ethnicity ($r = -0.222$, $p < 0.01$), indicating variation in classroom management efficacy across ethnic groups represented in the sample. Collectively, these findings suggest that experience and educational preparation may contribute to teachers' confidence in managing classroom environments, while efficacy related to instructional strategies appears relatively stable across demographic characteristics.

Overall, the results indicate that teacher self-efficacy is significantly associated with educators' intentions to remain in the profession. Educators who reported considering leaving PreK–12 education consistently demonstrated lower levels of efficacy across all teaching domains, particularly in their perceived ability to engage students effectively.

4.5. Research question three: Principal efficacy and educator retention

The third research question investigated the relationship between perceptions of principal efficacy, used as a proxy for principal support, and educator retention. A multivariate GLM was conducted using changes in educators' feelings about working in education since COVID-19 as the independent variable and three principal support dimensions—Efficacy Management, Instructional Leadership, and Moral Leadership—as dependent variables.

Descriptive statistics revealed a clear pattern: educators whose feelings about working in education had not changed since the pandemic reported stronger perceptions of principal support across all dimensions. Teachers reporting no change in professional outlook rated their principals higher in Efficacy Management ($M = 7.04$, $SD = 1.52$) than those reporting a change in feelings ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 2.07$). Similar differences were observed for Instructional Leadership ($M = 6.60$ versus $M = 5.66$) and Moral Leadership ($M = 6.73$ versus $M = 5.86$).

Correlation analyses further demonstrated that perceptions of principal support were significantly related to multiple indicators of educator retention. All three principal support dimensions were negatively associated with changed feelings about working in education since COVID-19, consideration of changing career paths, and consideration of leaving education entirely. The strongest relationships were observed for consideration of leaving PreK–12 education completely, with correlations ranging from $r = -0.315$ to $r = -0.336$. These findings indicate that educators who perceived stronger principal support were substantially less likely to contemplate leaving the profession.

Although statistical tests identified some violations of homogeneity assumptions, these were deemed acceptable given the sample size and the robustness of multivariate procedures. The overall multivariate model was statistically significant, Hotelling's $T = 0.15$, $F(9, 404) = 2.18$, $p = 0.022$, with strong statistical power (0.89), suggesting meaningful differences in perceptions of principal support across educator groups.

Follow-up analyses revealed significant effects for two of the three principal support dimensions. Instructional Leadership demonstrated a significant effect, $F(3, 138) = 3.78$, $p = 0.012$, as did Moral Leadership, $F(3, 138) = 3.97$, $p = 0.010$. In contrast, Efficacy Management did not reach statistical significance, $F(3, 138) = 1.78$, $p = 0.154$. These findings suggest that principals' instructional and moral leadership behaviors may play a particularly important role in shaping educators' attitudes toward remaining in the profession.

Post-hoc analyses indicated that grade level contributed to these differences. Significant disparities emerged primarily between elementary-grade educators and high school teachers. Teachers in Grades 9–12 consistently reported lower perceptions of principal efficacy than educators teaching younger students, particularly when compared to those in PreK–3 and Grades 4–6. Differences were evident across Efficacy Management, Instructional Leadership, and Moral Leadership, suggesting that perceptions of administrative support may decline at higher grade levels.

Taken together, these findings provide evidence that principal support is closely linked to educator retention. Teachers who perceived stronger leadership, particularly

in the instructional and moral domains, were less likely to report negative changes in their professional outlook or intentions to leave education. The results highlight the critical role of school leadership in supporting educator commitment and retention following the disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.6. Research question four: The role of salary and retention incentives

The fourth research question examined whether financial incentives and salary increases might influence educators' decisions to remain in the profession. Participants responded to two survey items assessing whether retention incentives would affect their career decisions and whether additional salary would motivate them to remain in the classroom.

Results indicated substantial support for retention-focused incentives. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (66.4%) reported that retention incentives would influence their decision regarding role changes, while more than four-fifths (82.2%) indicated that additional salary would help motivate them to remain in the classroom. These findings suggest that many educators view financial support as a potentially meaningful component of retention efforts.

Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine whether perceptions of incentives and salary were associated with career-related intentions. Retention incentives were significantly associated with consideration of leaving PreK–12 education entirely, $\chi^2(1) = 5.60, p = 0.018, r = 0.20$. Educators who had contemplated leaving the profession were more likely to indicate that retention incentives would affect their decision-making than those who had not considered leaving. This finding suggests that targeted retention support may be particularly relevant to educators already questioning whether to remain in the field.

In contrast, retention incentives were not significantly related to consideration of changing career paths outside of education, $\chi^2(1) = 2.21, p = 0.137$. Similarly, additional salary was not significantly associated with either consideration of changing careers ($\chi^2(1) = 0.18, p = 0.675$) or consideration of leaving education entirely ($\chi^2(1) = 0.29, p = 0.590$). Although educators generally endorsed higher salaries as motivating, salary alone did not appear to distinguish those considering departure from those intending to remain.

Cross-tabulation analyses provided additional insight into these patterns. Approximately 17.1% of respondents reported no intention of leaving education and indicated that incentives would not influence their decisions. Another 20.5% had not considered leaving education but nevertheless believed incentives would affect their choices. A smaller group (16.4%) reported contemplating leaving education, while indicating that incentives would not alter their decisions. The largest segment of respondents were educators who had considered leaving education and believed that retention incentives could influence their decision-making.

Overall, the findings suggest that while salary remains an important concern for educators, broader retention incentives may exert a greater influence on decisions to remain in the profession. Retention strategies that extend beyond compensation alone and address professional support, recognition, working conditions, and career

sustainability may therefore be more effective in mitigating educator attrition.

5. Discussion

Maintaining a stable teaching workforce is foundational to institutional effectiveness in education. Yet interest in entering and remaining in the profession continues to decline, with shortfalls among male educators and candidates from underrepresented backgrounds. Addressing this problem requires a clear-eyed understanding of what drives turnover and what conditions might counteract it. Early-career attrition, loss within the first five years, constitutes a global crisis with high economic and educational costs [7,40]. Retention data can help districts develop more targeted and evidence-informed strategies for both recruitment and long-term workforce development.

The Great Resignation, which gained momentum in 2020, provides important context for understanding elevated departure rates across many sectors, including education [41]. Inadequate pay, professional dissatisfaction, and diminished societal regard for teaching as a valued career have all contributed to staffing shortfalls [42]. The research literature consistently identifies positive working conditions, authentic professional development, and teacher agency as retention-promoting factors [43]. Qualitative evidence, including the phenomenological work of Noel and Finocchio [1], adds texture to this picture by illuminating the conditions that make teaching unsustainable for those who ultimately leave.

Understanding persistence—what keeps committed educators in their roles—offers actionable knowledge for preparation programs, leadership development, and policy design. Strong self-efficacy beliefs, responsive administrative support, and access to meaningful professional development are among the factors most closely associated with durable careers in teaching. Attending systematically to these dimensions can strengthen the profession and amplify its broader social contributions. Ohio's Grow Your Own Program [44] represents one policy effort aligned with these priorities, using scholarship support to cultivate teaching pipelines within districts by incentivizing school employees and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to complete preparation programs and return to their communities as certified educators [44]. Similar pipeline and support investments will be needed across states if the profession is to be stabilized.

5.1. Implications of the findings

Teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession stem from a wide array of factors, with financial considerations playing a prominent but not singular role. Research indicates that urban schools face disproportionately high turnover due to converging pressures: depressed compensation, demanding conditions, and high concentrations of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds [45]. Targeted financial interventions, loan forgiveness programs, signing or retention bonuses, hold promises but do not reliably produce sustained retention gains on their own. Performance- or commitment-contingent incentives, such as merit pay structures tied to professional development milestones, appear more effective [46,47]. Incentive

designs that ignore the underlying quality of the work environment, however, risk producing diminishing returns or unintended consequences. Policymakers and district leaders must approach compensation and incentive architecture with care, ensuring that financial strategies are paired with, rather than substituted for, improvements in the professional conditions that ultimately determine whether educators stay.

5.2. Limitations

This study surveyed 146 teachers; a small sample compared to the over 100,000 educators in Ohio. Most participants were from urban areas, limiting insights into rural and suburban districts. Furthermore, the study lacked diversity in respondent demographics, including ethnicity, gender, and grade level. It also excluded private, parochial, and charter schools, leaving gaps in understanding other educational environments. Expanding the scope and diversity of participants in future studies would enhance the generalizability of findings.

5.3. Future research directions

The findings of this study offer critical insights into the factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Specifically, the study highlights respondents' perceptions of classroom management and a perceived lack of support from principals, particularly at upper grade levels, in addressing classroom behavior challenges. While the primary focus was on teacher retention, the results underscored the need for further research into disciplinary practices and their impact on classroom management and intervention strategies in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape. Interestingly, the study found no significant correlation between teachers' classroom management and their classroom management efficacy. This lack of correlation warrants further investigation to understand the underlying reasons for the disconnect between these two constructs. Exploring this relationship in greater depth could provide valuable insights into how teacher efficacy influences and is influenced by classroom management practices and support structures within schools.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study align with the four-capital model framework, encompassing human, social, structural, and positive psychological capital [7], providing a theoretically coherent account of teacher retention. Principal support and teacher self-efficacy are both significant retention-protective factors, and their importance has been magnified by the pandemic-era intensification of educational challenges. Proactively addressing classroom management and investing in professional development cultivates human and social capital among educators. Complementary structural support, particularly compensation improvements and incentive programs designed around structured professional commitments, provides the institutional scaffolding needed to retain teachers over time. Ultimately, educators who hold strong professional self-efficacy beliefs and work within environments characterized by genuine administrative support are better positioned to sustain their commitment to teaching through adversity. Applying the four-capital model as an

organizing lens and attending closely to how principal leadership shapes turnover and retention dynamics can equip education policymakers and administrators to build more resilient and stable teacher workforces [7,48].

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