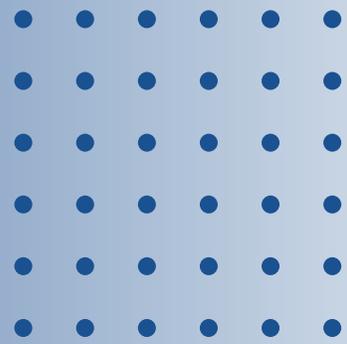


Belonging & Wellbeing: Key Pieces of the Teacher Retention Puzzle

An Upbeat Report

Havala Hanson & Matthew A. Kraft

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The Challenge of Teacher Retention

The longstanding challenge in the United States of attracting and retaining effective educators has grown increasingly formidable over the last several years. In the 2022–23 school year, over 55,000 positions remained unfilled—a 51% jump from the prior year—while 270,000 teachers were hired without being qualified for their position.¹ Persistently lower numbers of graduating teacher candidates, higher percentages of teachers leaving the field, and expiring Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding create a recipe for enduring barriers to teacher recruitment and retention.¹ Given these challenges, school leaders are looking for research-based interventions proven to strengthen retention for teachers.

A school culture that nurtures teachers' sense of belonging and wellbeing can help overcome these barriers. Belonging—feeling connected to the school community and supported by colleagues and administrators—is a fundamental building block for teachers' job satisfaction.^{2,3} Research demonstrates that a strong sense of belonging contributes to high employee motivation, engagement, productivity, retention, and health.⁴ It fosters employees' sense of wellbeing.⁵ In itself, wellbeing contributes to increased productivity, health, and retention.⁶

Nevertheless, belonging and wellbeing are often elusive in the workplace. Research finds that nearly half of employees feel isolated at work.^{7,8} The one teacher per classroom model puts teachers at particularly high risk of isolation by limiting access to meaningful interactions among colleagues during the school day. Moreover, K–12 teachers experience the highest levels of burnout among workers in any other industry, with 52% of teachers reporting they “always” or “very often” feel burned out.⁹

In this report, we examine the challenges schools face in fostering teachers' sense of belonging and wellbeing and illustrate why doing so is critical for teacher retention. We analyze survey responses to the Upbeat K–12 Engagement Survey from over 15,000 teachers working in 26 school districts across 14 states to understand how teachers' perceptions about belonging and wellbeing relate to their decisions of whether or not to return to their schools to teach the following year. To provide insights on how to build a culture of care and belonging, we highlight common practices among schools in which educators have strong positive feelings of belonging and wellbeing alongside reflections and recommendations from these schools' administrators.

How does the Upbeat K–12 Engagement Survey measure Belonging and Wellbeing?

Upbeat’s K–12 Engagement Survey provides insights for education leaders to understand and improve working conditions with the goal of retaining teachers. Survey items capture 23 domains, including the “Belonging & Wellbeing” domain. Six items measure teachers’ perceptions about **Belonging** and **Wellbeing**:



Who is in the study sample?

The results are based on 18,695 Fall, 2021 teachers from 397 schools with at least 10 respondents and at least a 50% survey response rate in 26 districts nationwide. Eighty percent of teachers in the sample responded to the survey. **Teachers in the sample represent various backgrounds. The gender and racial/ethnic composition of the sample is similar to national averages, with the study sample including a higher percentage of Black teachers and a lower percentage of Hispanic/Latino teachers (Table 1).** Elementary teachers comprise 51% of the sample, middle school teachers represent 20% of the sample, high school teachers represent 26% of the sample, and the remaining 3% teach in K-12 schools. On average, teachers have 11 years of experience with 31% of teachers having fewer than five years of experience.¹⁰

Table 1. Demographic composition of the sample

	Study sample*	U.S. Public Schools
Female	80	77
Asian	1	2
Black	16	7
Hispanic/Latino	4	9
White	76	79
Multiracial	2	2

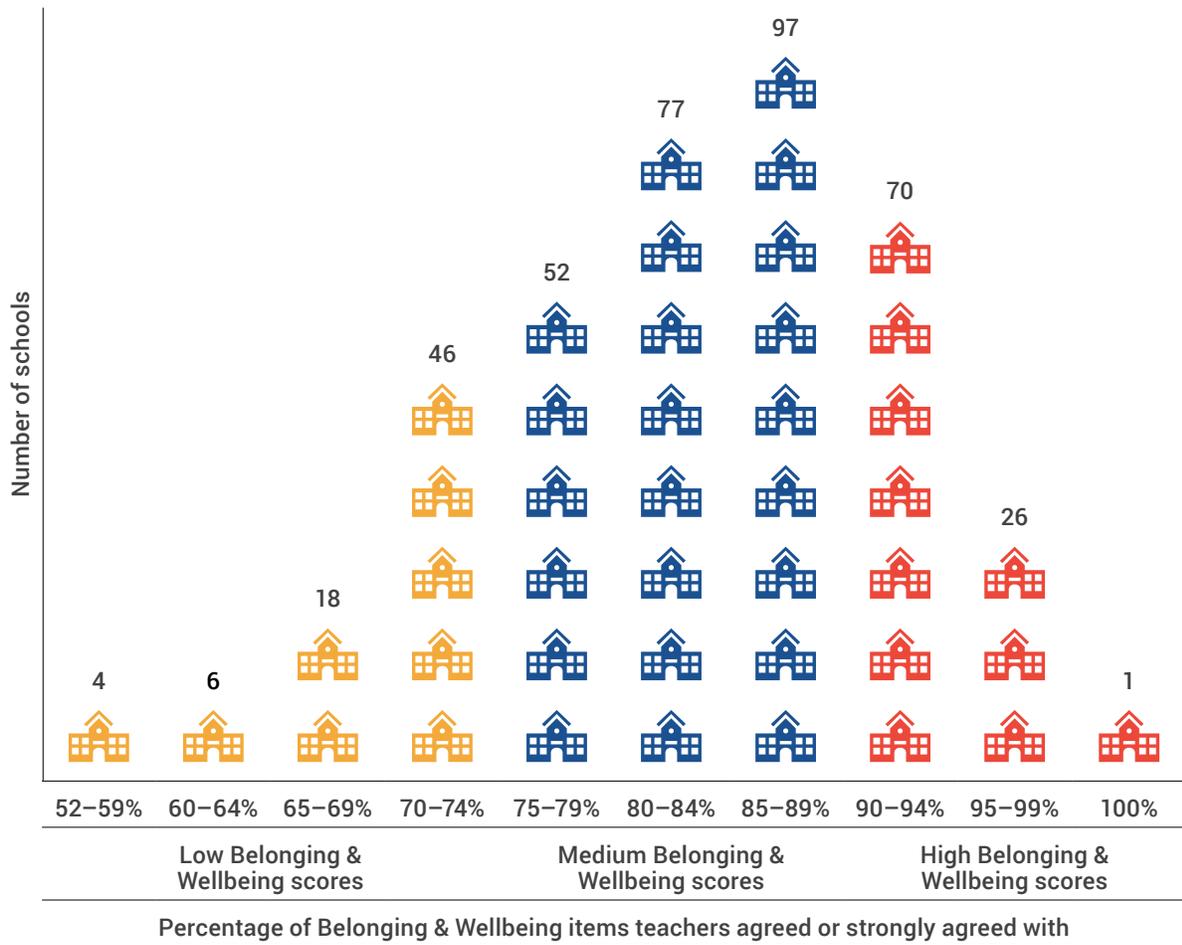
Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). *National Teacher and Principal Survey*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1718_21011202_t1n.asp

*Study sample includes one private school and the national comparison includes only public schools and charter schools that receive federal funding.

How much do teachers' perceptions of Belonging and Wellbeing differ across schools?

Among all teachers who took the survey, 83% of responses to the Belonging & Wellbeing items were “agree” or “strongly agree”. Within schools, however, the percentage of Belonging & Wellbeing items teachers agreed with varied considerably, ranging from as low as 52% to as high as 100% (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The percentage of Belonging & Wellbeing items teachers agreed or strongly agreed with varied across schools.



Percentage of Belonging & Wellbeing items teachers in the school agreed or strongly agreed with



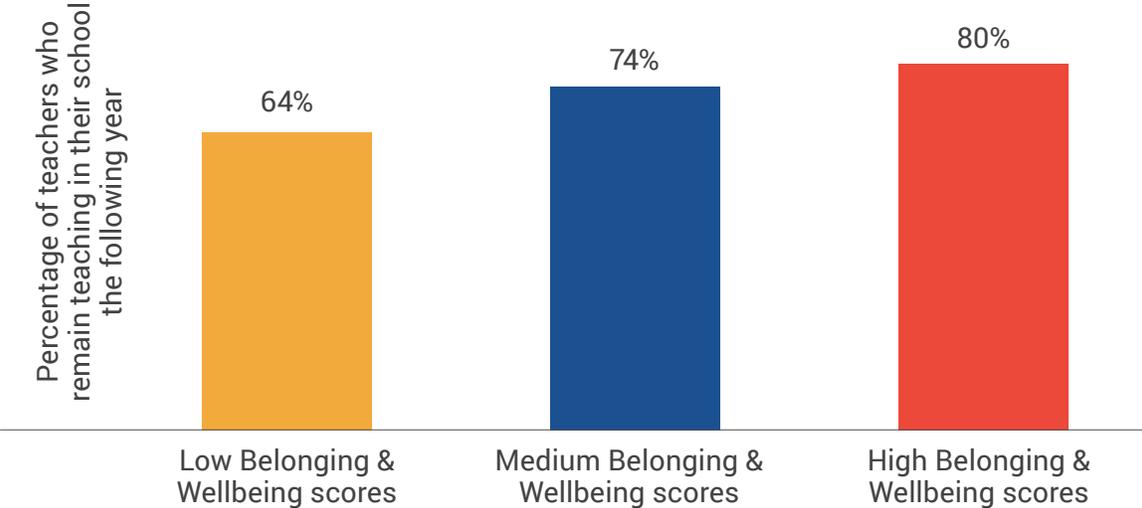
Number of “agree” or “strongly agree” responses to Belonging & Wellbeing items among all teachers in the school

Total number of responses to Belonging & Wellbeing items among all teachers in the school

How do teachers' perceptions of belonging and wellbeing relate to retention?

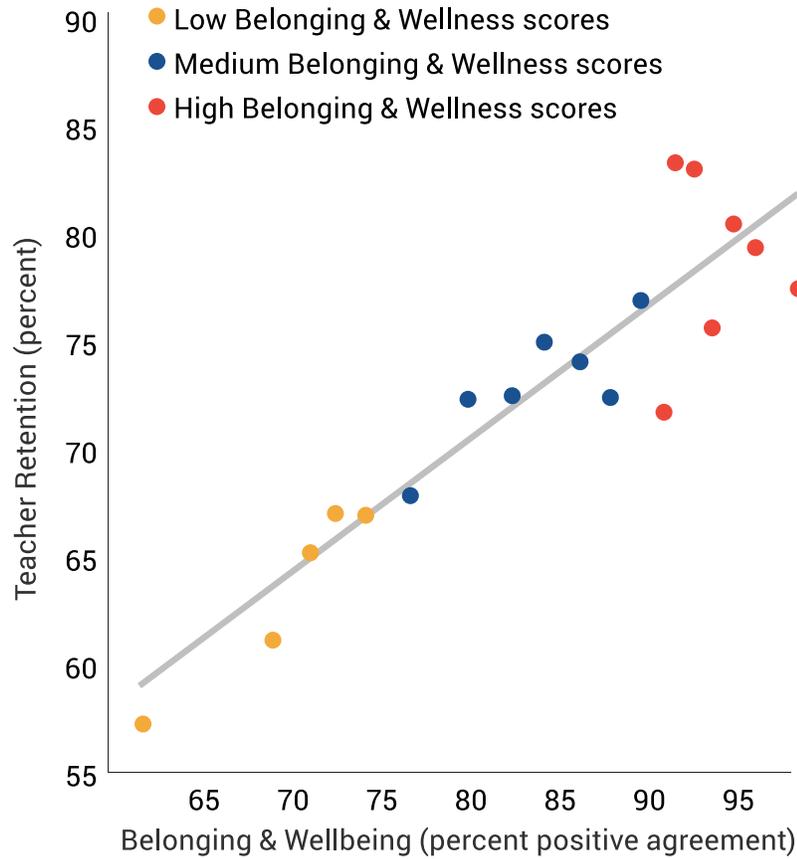
Overall, we find that 73% of teachers in our sample returned to their school to teach the following year. Retention rates also varied widely across schools and were strongly related to the levels of Belonging & Wellbeing teachers reported in their school. In fact, Belonging & Wellbeing has one of the strongest relationships with teacher retention among the 23 Upbeat Engagement Survey domains. When the percentage of positive responses to Belonging & Wellbeing items were low (fell below 75%), schools retained, on average, 64% of their teachers (Figure 2). In contrast, when the percentage of positive responses to Belonging & Wellbeing items was high (at least 90%), schools retained 80% of their teachers, on average.

Figure 2. Schools with higher Belonging & Wellbeing scores had higher retention rates



Put differently, the higher a school's Belonging & Wellbeing score, the higher its teacher retention rate, on average (Figure 3). A 10 percentage point increase in overall positive perceptions of Belonging & Wellbeing at a school is associated with a six percentage point increase in school-level retention rates.

Figure 3. As school Belonging & Wellbeing scores increase, so do retention rates.

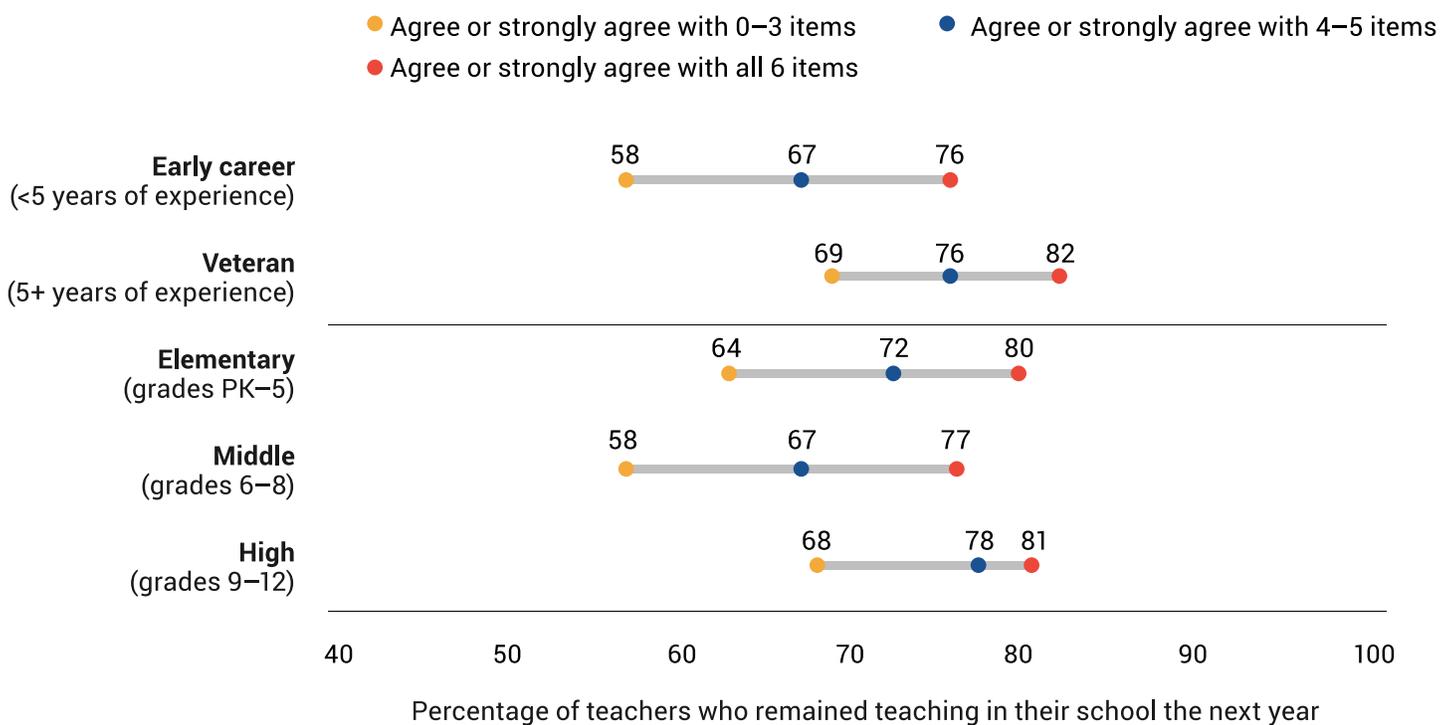


How do perceptions about belonging and wellbeing relate to retention for different groups of teachers?

The strong relationship between perceptions about belonging and wellbeing and teacher retention rates differ across groups of teachers in meaningful ways. We examine these differences by grouping teachers that have a characteristic in common across all schools, such as all elementary school teachers or all early career teachers. Within these groups, we compare the average retention rates of teachers who felt positive about 0–3 items, 4–5 items, or all six Belonging & Wellbeing survey items.

Having strong cultures of belonging and wellbeing appear particularly important for early career teachers and teachers in elementary and middle schools. For example, among teachers with fewer than five years of experience, those who agreed with all six items had retention rates that were 18 percentage points higher than their early career peers who agreed with three or fewer items (Figure 4). In comparison, among teachers with five or more years of experience, those who agreed with all six items had retention rates that were 13 percentage points higher than their veteran peers who agreed with three or fewer items.

Figure 4. Differences in retention rates between teachers who agreed with all six Belonging & Wellbeing items and teachers who disagreed with at least one item varied across groups.



Belonging and wellbeing were also more important for retention among elementary and middle school teachers than they were for high school teachers. Elementary and middle school teachers who agreed with all six items had retention rates that were 16 and 19 percentage points higher, respectively, than peers teaching students in the same grade bands who agreed with three or fewer items. The relationship was still meaningful among high school teachers. Those who agreed with all six items had retention rates that were 13 percentage points higher than teachers who agreed with three or fewer items.

Where could school leaders focus to improve teachers' perceptions of belonging and wellbeing?

Of course, improving teachers' perceptions of belonging and wellbeing is not likely to happen in isolation from improvements to other working conditions. Understanding the relationships between the Belonging & Wellbeing domain and the other domains on the survey can point to possible pathways for improving perceptions about belonging and wellbeing. For example, teachers in schools that have high levels of agreement with Belonging & Wellbeing items are also likely to have positive perceptions of work-life balance, feel appreciated for their efforts and the quality of their work, and have strong senses of professional satisfaction and purpose.

Administrators can take concrete steps to foster belonging and wellbeing in their schools. For example, teachers in schools with high agreement among Belonging & Wellbeing items often report that their principals acknowledge when teachers are working hard and doing great work. Administrators in these schools view teachers as experts and support ongoing professional growth. Moreover, teachers agree that their administrator looks out for their wellbeing and actively works towards creating an inclusive school culture, including for newly hired teachers.

Principals of schools that improved or sustained high Belonging & Wellbeing scores shared several ideas for fostering belonging and wellbeing among their teachers. They often built structured efforts to check on teachers' wellbeing and introduced venues for teachers to build relationships with one another. For example, one principal holds daily, optional stand-up meetings before school for teachers to share affirmations and self-care strategies. She uses these meetings to ask teachers, "What do you need from me?" and "How can I help you?" Another principal instituted "Wellness Wednesdays", giving teachers opportunities to exercise and participate in activities together. Similarly, one principal initiated "Monday Morning Check-ins." Teachers give a status update ranging from "Great" to "Drowning (Help!)." The principal then takes steps to address teachers' needs, including writing responses, putting chocolate in teachers' boxes, and sitting down to talk with individual teachers.

Principals often attribute improvements in teachers' perceptions about belonging and wellbeing to distributing leadership to teachers. For example, a principal asked teachers to provide input on how the school could lighten their workloads. In response, she created schedules that protected time for planning and collaboration, consolidated daily emails into one weekly email, and did not send emails on weekends. They also identified "heavy lift" periods on the school calendar and adjusted the timing of other school activities to avoid overloading teachers. In addition, while many school leaders share wellness tips with

teachers, others offer space for teachers to present the self-care strategies they employ to their colleagues. This can help improve the relevance of the advice and enable dialogue and relationship building.

In sum, this study shows that improving teachers' perceptions of belonging and wellbeing, as measured by Upbeat's K–12 Teacher Engagement Survey, is a promising strategy for increasing teacher retention. Importantly, the results suggest that administrators' leadership and school policies can support teachers' senses of belonging and wellbeing. Rather than leaving teachers to fend for themselves in the classroom, schools with the highest Belonging & Wellbeing scores had administrators who took a proactive approach to build organizational cultures and school practices where teachers could thrive. The practices principals attribute to improving teachers' senses of belonging and wellbeing emphasize the importance of intentional efforts to support teachers' mental health, help them manage stress and achieve work-life balance, and strengthen their connections to school leaders and colleagues.

Endnotes

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- 10 It is important to note that the results reflect averages across all schools in the sample. Each school has its own unique context. These results won't always be the same in one school as they are for the average among all schools. But, in general, strong positive relationships between domain means and retention rates for the whole group imply that there will be a positive relationship for most schools.

About Upbeat

Upbeat is a leading education research and consulting company solely focused on supporting and retaining teachers. We believe that teacher retention is essential to student achievement, and orient all of our work toward keeping great teachers in the classroom so that students can thrive. K-12 district leaders across the country use our research-backed survey instrument and robust data dashboard to assess the climate and culture of individual schools and the district as a whole. Principals trust our experienced leadership coaches to aggregate & interpret the data and help them identify concrete ways to better engage and retain teachers.

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