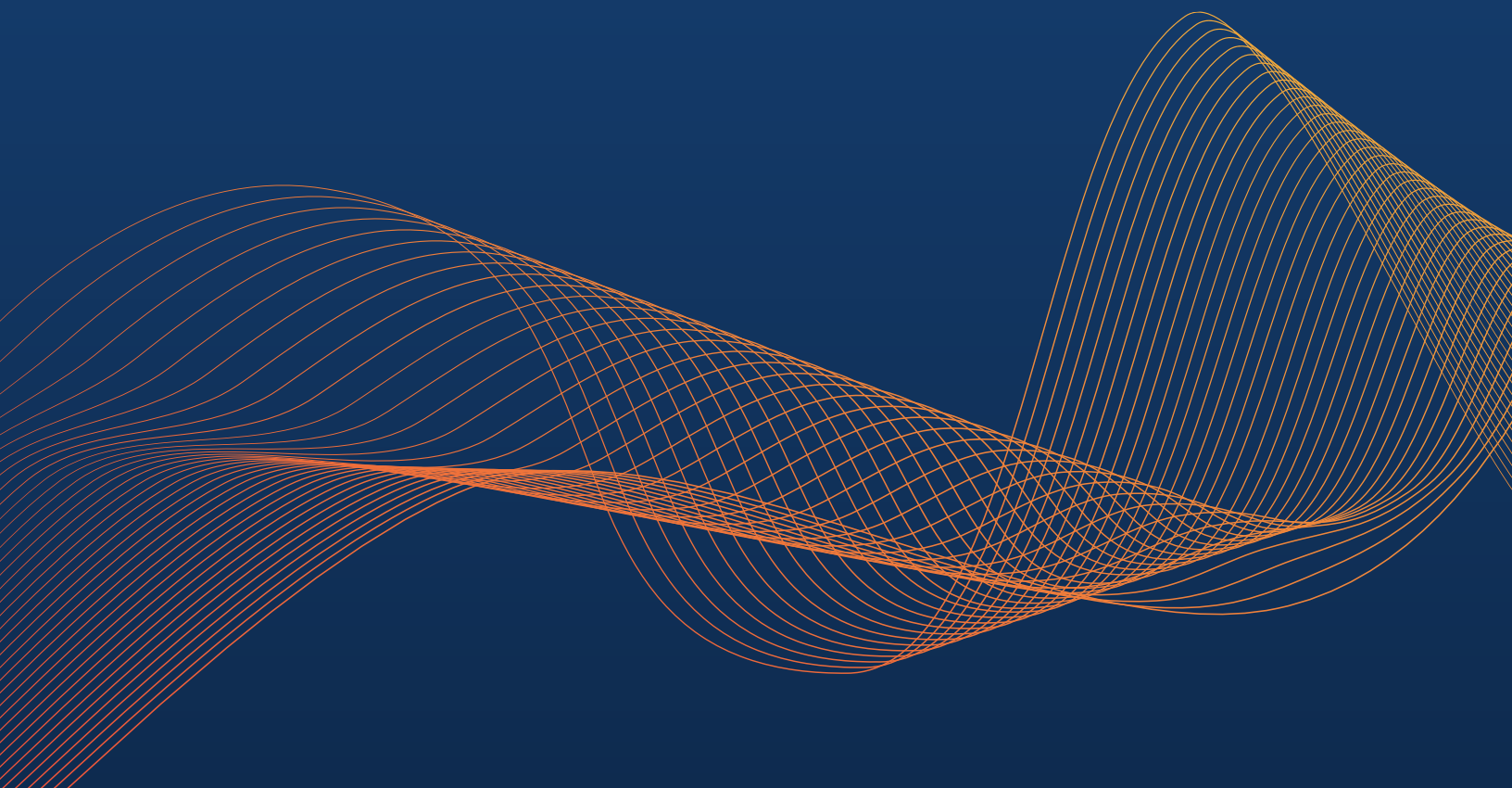


What Drives Retention

A THREE-YEAR ANALYSIS OF TEACHER
ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT

PUBLISHED BY

UPBEAT | RESEARCH & INSIGHTS TEAM





Executive Summary

Teacher turnover continues to challenge school districts nationwide, threatening both financial sustainability and student success. In response, Upbeat conducted a comprehensive three-year analysis of 694 schools across 33 districts (SY22/23–SY24/25) to understand how investments in teacher engagement and well-being influence retention.

The results are clear: schools partnering with Upbeat saw an average retention increase of 1.7 percentage points over three years. That translates to **one additional teacher retained per school**, or roughly **\$373,950 in savings per district** — a measurable and scalable return on investment.

Yet the impact extends far beyond cost savings. Improved teacher retention leads to more stable school environments, stronger relationships between educators and students, and improved academic outcomes. This brief highlights the key drivers of retention and illustrates how Upbeat's survey and coaching model helps districts create the conditions for teachers to stay.

Why Teacher Retention Matters: The National Context

The challenges surrounding teacher retention are well-documented. Nationally, 8% of public school teachers leave the profession annually, a rate that has remained consistent for over a decade (NCES, 2023). This persistent churn costs school districts an average of **\$24,930** per departing teacher (Learning Policy Institute, 2024), amounting to millions of dollars in recruitment, onboarding, and lost instructional quality.

Beyond financial implications, high teacher turnover undermines student achievement, disrupts school culture, and places a significant burden on school leaders. Research highlights that early-career teachers are especially vulnerable, with **nearly 50% leaving the profession within their first five years** (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Contributing factors include lack of professional development, limited support, burnout, and school leadership dynamics (Cells et al., 2023).

The need to strengthen retention has never been more urgent: as of 2024, **1 in 8 teaching positions nationwide are either unfilled or held by someone not fully certified**, with particularly acute shortages in special education and rural schools (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). These gaps are increasingly filled by underqualified personnel or left vacant altogether, while competitive labor markets continue to lure educators away from the classroom.

Districts need proactive, data-driven strategies to retain educators—especially as teacher shortages intensify and qualified teachers become harder to replace.

Study Overview: Upbeat's Longitudinal Retention Study

To assess the ROI of its engagement and coaching model, Upbeat analyzed retention data from **694 schools in 33 districts** that implemented the Upbeat Engagement Survey for three consecutive academic years, collecting over 26,000 responses. On average, each school employed 45 teachers, with participating districts averaging 950 teachers.

Across these schools, the average school-level teacher retention improved by **1.7 percentage points over the three-year period**. This equates to:

- 1 additional teacher retained per school
- 15 additional teachers retained per district
- \$373,950 saved annually per district in replacement costs

Importantly, these gains were realized through strategic, data-informed action. The Upbeat approach empowers school leaders to better understand their teachers' experiences and respond with targeted supports that foster engagement and belonging.

Key Findings at a Glance:

- +1.7 percentage point increase in average school-level teacher retention over three years
- Growth across all 21 Upbeat engagement dimensions
- Teachers who feel a sense of belonging tend to stay at their school
- School leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping a positive school climate

+1.7%

+1.7 percentage point increase in average school-level teacher retention

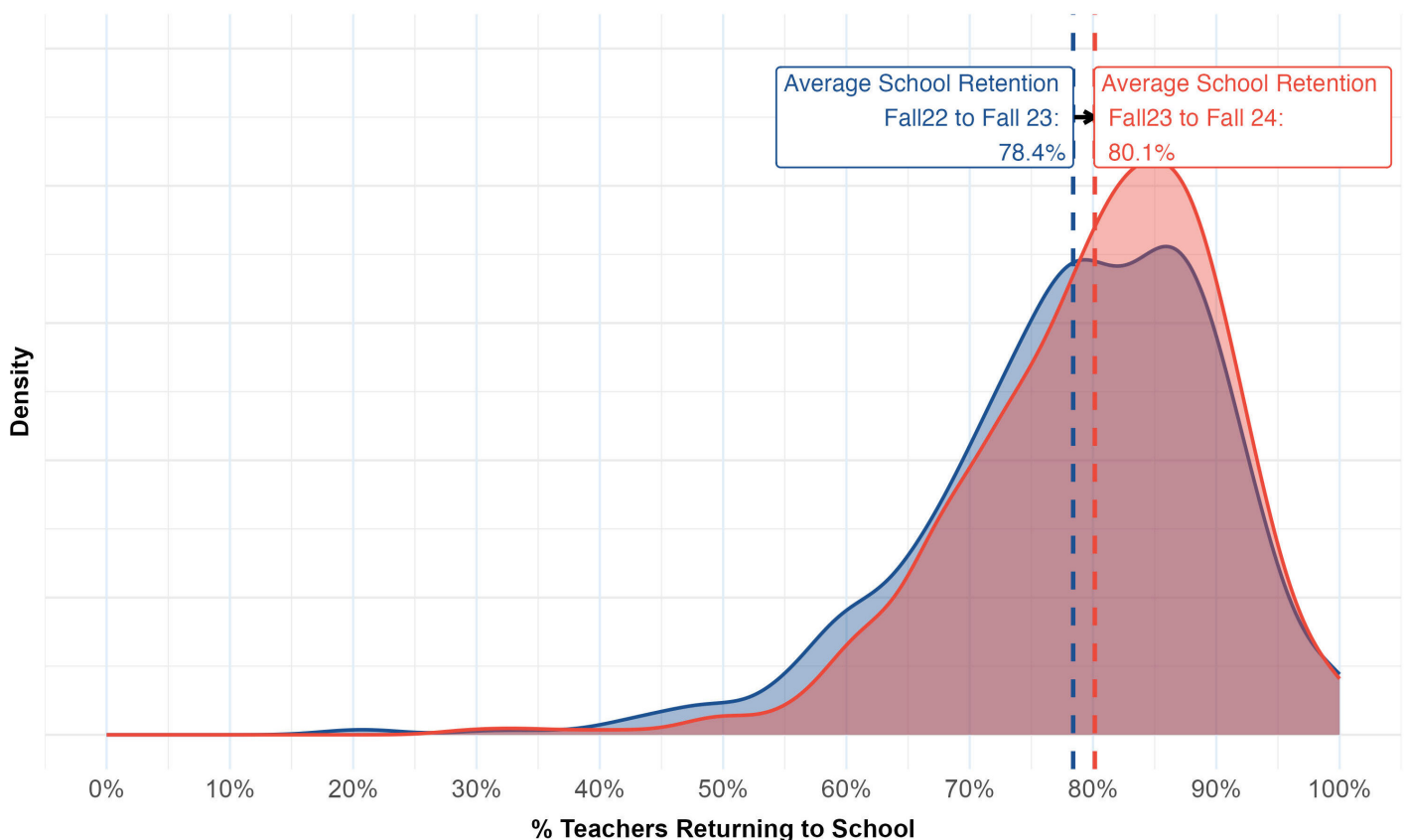
What Drives Retention? Insights from the Data

Upbeat's three-year analysis found that teacher retention improved when schools actively supported teacher engagement through targeted leadership action. This section outlines the engagement areas with the greatest impact — and how leaders translated data into meaningful change.

Improvements in School Retention

For returning schools, has Fall-Fall roster retention improved? (n=694)

Period  Fall22-Fall23  Fall23-Fall24



Data source: Upbeat Surveys SY22-SY24

UPBEAT IN ACTION: LESSONS FROM JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The most compelling example of Upbeat's approach in practice comes from Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) in Kentucky, where teacher retention improved by **12.5% in pilot schools** and continued to grow districtwide after full implementation. The JCPS team partnered with Upbeat to launch the **Improvement Cycle**, which includes:

- 1 **Administering Upbeat's research-backed survey** to assess engagement
- 2 **One-on-one coaching with principals** to analyze the data and build action plans
- 3 **Ongoing leadership support and accountability** to implement strategies and track progress

Principals used this process to turn insight into action:

- At Zachary Taylor Elementary, Principal Analese Cravens responded to low scores on teacher autonomy by facilitating schoolwide discussions and clarifying what decisions were made at the district vs. school level. This **"data to discussion"** approach increased trust and transparency.
- At Minors Lane Elementary, Principal Ramon Wales conducted empathy interviews and created informal check-ins to strengthen **teacher wellbeing**. His school saw a **14-point increase in retention** in one year.
- At Thomas Jefferson Middle School, Principal Joshua Bourgeois restructured staff schedules to provide teachers with additional planning time, boosting both **work-life balance** and **appreciation**, and raising retention to nearly **90%**.

1 Belonging & Wellbeing

87% of teachers responded positively to Belonging & Wellbeing indicators (**+3% from baseline**).

The highest growth was in:

"My school is a place that supports teachers' mental wellbeing." → **+8% growth** (75% to 81%)

According to a 2023 study by Hanson & Kraft, *belonging and wellbeing were among the strongest predictors of school-level retention*, with clear links between positive teacher perceptions and the likelihood to stay.

Upbeat Internal Research (2023) found that a *10% schoolwide increase in belonging correlates with a +5.5% improvement in individual teacher retention.*

2 Satisfaction & Purpose

91% of teachers responded positively to Satisfaction & Purpose indicators (+1% over an already high baseline).

This domain captures how teachers perceive the significance of their work and whether they feel supported in making meaningful contributions to their school community.

Research consistently shows that when teachers feel they are making a difference, their commitment to the profession grows.

Upbeat's synthesis of prior research highlights that administrators can strengthen purpose and satisfaction by fostering collaborative, supportive school cultures that recognize teacher impact and input.

3 Leadership Influence

+9% growth on:

"Administrators at my school actively seek input from teachers when making important decisions." (68% → 74%)

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping school climate. Teachers who feel supported by their administrators — especially when their voices are heard — are significantly more likely to stay.

As Hanson & Kraft (2023) emphasize, *strong leadership practices such as teacher inclusion and recognition are central to retention.*

4 Career Advancement & Work-Life Balance

- **+15 points:** *"Teachers at my school have opportunities to advance their careers."* (72% → 83%)
- **+9 points:** *"The workload expected of teachers is reasonable."*
- **+9 points:** *"I am able to balance my workload with responsibilities outside of school."* (65% → 71%)

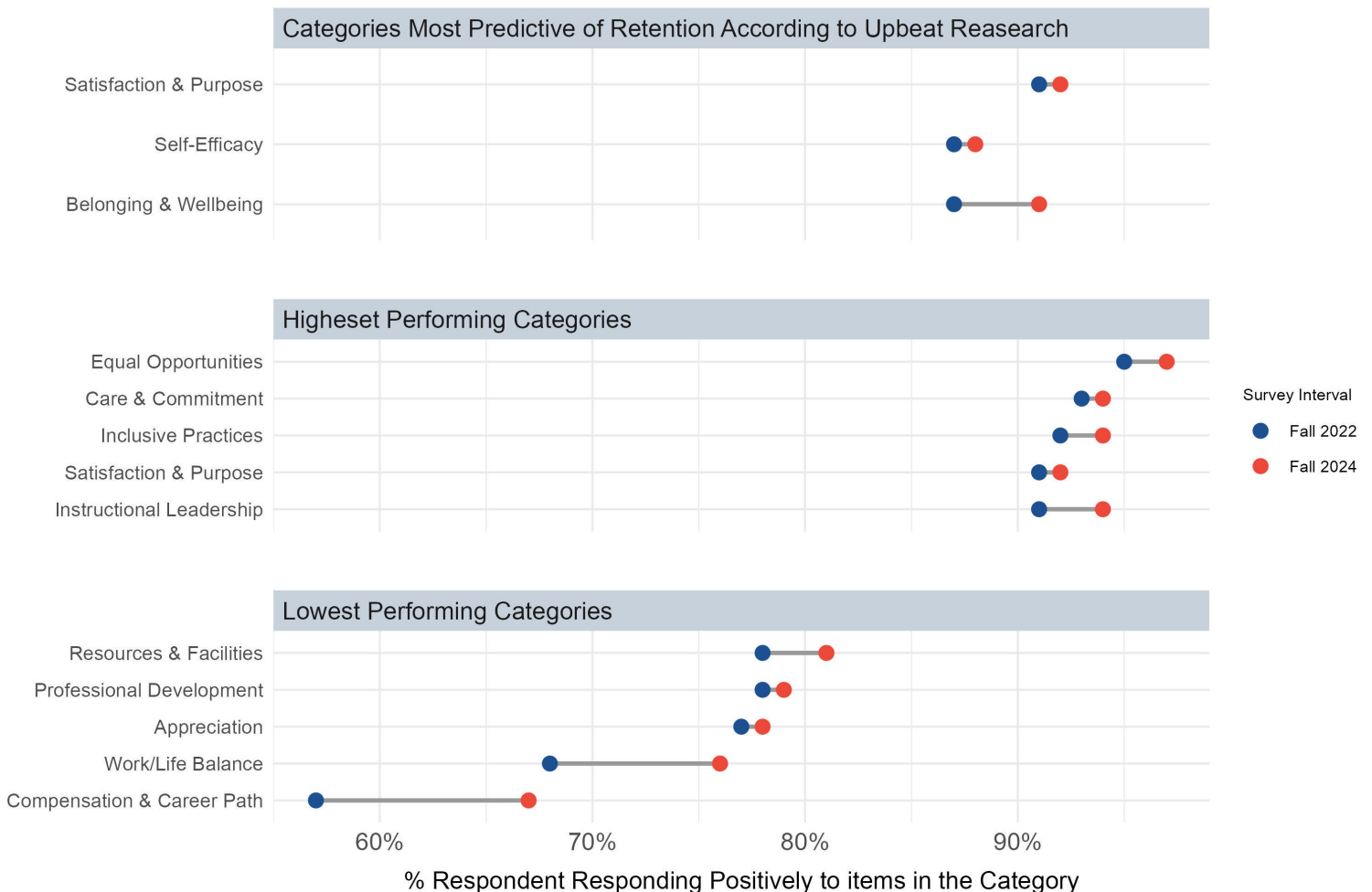
Burnout and lack of growth opportunities continue to be top reasons for leaving the profession, particularly among early-career educators (Cells et al., 2023).

HIGH-IMPACT GROWTH AREAS

CATEGORY	GROWTH
Compensation & Career Path	+10%
Work/Life Balance	+8%
School Safety & Order	+5%
Belonging & Wellbeing	+4%
Instructional Leadership	+3%

Category Growth from Fall 2022 to Fall 2024

Change in Survey Results for Key Categories



How Upbeat Improves Retention

The 694 schools in this study have undergone the Teach Upbeat Improvement Cycle. Through the Upbeat Engagement Survey, schools establish a baseline understanding of teacher engagement and satisfaction. Upbeat leadership coaches then meet in-person one-on-one with principals to analyze the baseline data and generate action plans. Coaches check-in with principals over the sequent year to provide ongoing counsel and maintain accountability.



Upbeat’s platform boasts:

- **92% of leaders** reporting that coaching was extremely or very helpful
- Average survey completion rates exceeding **80%**
- **100% positive feedback** from district partners on the quality and usability of reports (Fall 2024 survey)

CLIENT SUCCESS SNAPSHOTS		
DISTRICT	RETENTION BEFORE	RETENTION NOW
Newton County, GA	81%	84.4%
Austin ISD (71 Title I Schools), TX	63%	83.2%
Laurens County 55, SC	81.5%	89.9%
Clarksville-Montgomery, TN	82.4%	87.5%
Columbus Public Schools, NE	80%	88.1%

Conclusion: Retention is a Strategic Investment

Teacher turnover is not an unavoidable cost of doing business — it's a solvable challenge.

Upbeat's three-year study shows that targeted investments in teacher engagement and leadership coaching lead to measurable gains in retention, with schools seeing a 1.7 percentage point increase in retention on average.

The return is both fiscal and foundational: districts save hundreds of thousands in replacement costs, principals retain stronger teams, and students benefit from greater continuity and instructional quality. Retention is not just an HR issue — it's a strategic lever for school success. Upbeat equips district leaders with the tools to understand why teachers leave — and more importantly, what makes them stay.



References

- **Learning Policy Institute. (2024a).** *What's the cost of teacher turnover?* <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/2024-whats-cost-teacher-turnover>
- **Learning Policy Institute. (2024b).** *State teacher shortages and vacancy resource tool: 2024 update.* <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/state-teacher-shortages-vacancy-resource-tool-2024>
- **National Center for Education Statistics. (2023).** *Teacher follow-up survey 2021–22.* U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023046>
- **Marietta, G. (2024).** *Tackling teacher retention with a multi-faceted, whole-person approach in Jefferson County Public Schools.* Teach Upbeat Inc. <https://teachupbeat.com/casestudies>
- **Cells, P., Sabina, L. L., Touchton, D., Shankar-Brown, R., & Sabina, K. L. (2023).** Addressing teacher retention within the first three to five years of employment. *Athens Journal of Education*, 10(2), 345–364. <https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.10-2-9>
- **Hanson, H., & Kraft, M. A. (2023).** *Connecting teacher engagement and retention: Findings from Upbeat K–12 survey analysis.* Upbeat Research Brief.
- **Teach Upbeat Inc. (2025).** *Upbeat school engagement survey, 2022–2024.*