

What’s a Special Education Aide Worth? A \$9,607 Raise, to the Average Teacher

Survey evidence shows teachers would trade additional salary for expert support

WHEN IT COMES TO ATTRACTING and retaining teachers, public attention is typically focused on pay. The driving assumption is that many teachers are underpaid relative to the challenges and importance of their work, and that by improving teacher compensation, we can solve staffing challenges and improve student outcomes.

It sounds reasonable, but it doesn’t match up with exiting teachers’ feedback about their jobs. Teachers rarely cite dissatisfaction with salary when leaving the job. While compensation certainly matters to teachers, working conditions may matter just as much—or more. To figure this out, we designed a survey that asks teachers to choose which school features they prefer when comparing a pair of hypothetical job offers, including salary, school support personnel, class-size reductions, coaching, and childcare subsidies. We then determined the average costs of those features and conducted an analysis to show how much teachers value them in terms of cuts or boosts to their own pay, to compare the relative values of these roles to teachers with their costs to schools and districts.

Teachers’ preferences are clear: they want to work where they will have the support of full-time experts in special education and pediatric physical and mental health. An overwhelming majority describe these supports as “beneficial” or “extremely beneficial” when asked to rate special-education co-teachers (93 percent) and paraprofessionals (92 percent), as well as counselors (89 percent) and school nurses (88 percent).

These roles are so important that teachers are willing to forgo salary increases when asked to choose between the two. Our analysis shows the average teacher is willing to trade a 21 percent raise for the full-time support of a special-education co-teacher and an 18 percent raise for a full-time special-education aide.

While hiring full-time in-class personnel is expensive, we also find examples of support that would cost districts less to provide than what teachers are willing to trade off in additional salary. Teachers value working at a school with a full-time nurse at \$7,041 in additional salary compared to the per-teacher cost of a nurse of \$2,045. They also would trade a \$6,734 raise to work at a school with a full-time counselor, which costs \$2,475 per teacher.

Interestingly, teachers are less willing to trade off pay raises for smaller class sizes, which is a common area of focus in union negotiations and state legislation. Our analysis shows teachers would trade \$1,819 in additional salary for having three fewer students in class compared to a cost of \$7,290. By contrast, teachers also assign a relatively low value to instructional coaching at \$2,245 in additional salary, but that is nearly 50 percent more than the annual cost of \$1,512 per teacher.

These insights suggest that school and district leaders should prioritize the hiring and retention of support staff that make classroom jobs more attractive and should consider benefits beyond pay raises to attract and retain teachers. Union leaders and policymakers should consider broadening their efforts to enable teachers to work alongside more school counselors, nurses, and special-education specialists.

By **VIRGINIA S. LOVISON** and **CECILIA HYUNJUNG MO**



Surveying Teacher Preferences

Our work builds on prior research, which has shown that teachers are more likely to stay on the job when they work with strong school leaders. What other school staff shape teachers' preferences about where they want to work? Although personnel costs are the single largest line item in a school budget, accounting for 79 percent of expenditures in the average public school, we know very little about which staff investments are meaningful from teachers' perspectives. And while many studies have examined teachers' preferences regarding tenure policies, performance incentives, health insurance, and retirement benefits, far too little attention has been paid to preferences for school support personnel.

Our experiment uses what's known as a discrete choice survey, which presents teachers with a pair of hypothetical teaching

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jobs at different schools, defined by seven factors (see "Surveying Teachers' Preferences"). These factors map back to the three most cited reasons teachers leave schools: working conditions, family or personal reasons, and pay. They are: reducing class size; the presence of a full-time school nurse, school counselor, and in-class support for special-education students; individual instructional coaching; a 10 percent increase or decrease in salary; and childcare subsidies worth \$1,500 or \$3,000 per child (capped at two children). We limit each school profile to seven factors to guard against decision fatigue while also giving teachers enough information to choose.

In each choice task, teachers receive the following prompt: "If two schools were otherwise identical in every other way—same building, same principal, same teaching assignment, same students—which school would you prefer?" Teachers then review the two school profiles and indicate their preferred choice. Respondents repeat this choice exercise five times.

The types of comparisons vary. For the salary and class-size attributes, the baseline condition was "same as your current position." For all other attributes, the baseline condition was the absence of the workplace support (i.e., "no nurse," "no childcare

benefits"). The differences in features are designed to present a substantial, but realistic, difference. For example, we defined the salary difference to be a 10 percent increase or decrease, which is a substantively meaningful change in pay but not so large as to be inconceivable. Counselor choices varied from zero to one or two counselors and the nurse choice varied from zero to one, to most closely resemble the distribution of full-time counselors and nurses across American schools. We did not include part-time staffing models in any choice set.

Data and Method

We worked with an online survey sampling platform to invite teachers to participate in the survey and create a national sample of 1,030 respondents. The sample is 75 percent female, 81 percent white, 85 percent employed at a public school, and evenly split between primary and secondary teachers, in line with the national teaching workforce. On average, respondents have 10 years of teaching experience. Survey respondents, all of whom were currently working as teachers, participated in the survey between November 2020 and January 2021. In all, they rated 10,300 unique school profiles.

To account for the potential influence of pandemic-related disruptions on teachers' responses, we included a question asking whether the respondent's choices would have been different before the pandemic. Some 90 percent of respondents said they would be the same. In addition, in late 2022, we repeated the original survey with new respondents and administered a newly expanded survey, including five additional attributes related to administrator support, student discipline policy, and student characteristics related to income, race, and achievement. The 2022 study showed that teachers' responses regarding school support personnel did not substantially change after pandemic-related conditions had largely ended, even when additional school attributes were featured.

We assess teachers' responses in two ways. First, we estimate the probability that a teacher would want to work at a school when the school offered a specific benefit, such as one full-time nurse, relative to a school without that benefit, with all other characteristics unchanged. Then we estimate teachers' willingness to pay for each specific benefit by looking at teacher pay based on 2019 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We estimate the per-teacher cost of schoolwide support staff, like counselors and nurses, based on salary averages divided by 33, which is the average number of teachers per school nationwide. We then compare that cost against a 10 percent change in the 2019 median teacher pay of \$54,000, which comes out to a raise or salary cut of \$5,400.

Results

Teachers overwhelmingly prefer to work at schools with expert staff support in special education, nursing, and school counseling and are willing to trade off substantial raises to do

Surveying Teachers' Preferences

To identify which school characteristics teachers value most, an online survey asked teachers to choose between two hypothetical job choices that included variations among these options, which map back to the three most cited reasons teachers leave schools: working conditions, family or personal reasons, and pay.

	CHOICE OPTIONS	COST PER TEACHER
Salary	Same as current position	\$0
	10% raise	\$5,400
	10% decrease	-\$5,400
Special education support	No in-class support	\$0
	FT co-teacher	\$82,350
	FT aide	\$28,000
School counselor	No counselor	\$0
	One FT counselor	\$2,475
	Two FT counselors	\$4,950
School nurse	No nurse	\$0
	One FT nurse	\$2,045
Childcare subsidies (capped at 2 children)*	No subsidy	\$0
	\$1,500 per child	\$3,000
	\$3,000 per child	\$6,000
Class size	Same as current position	\$0
	- 3 students	\$7,290
	+ 3 students	-\$7,290
1:1 coaching	No coaching	\$0
	1 hour/month	\$1,512

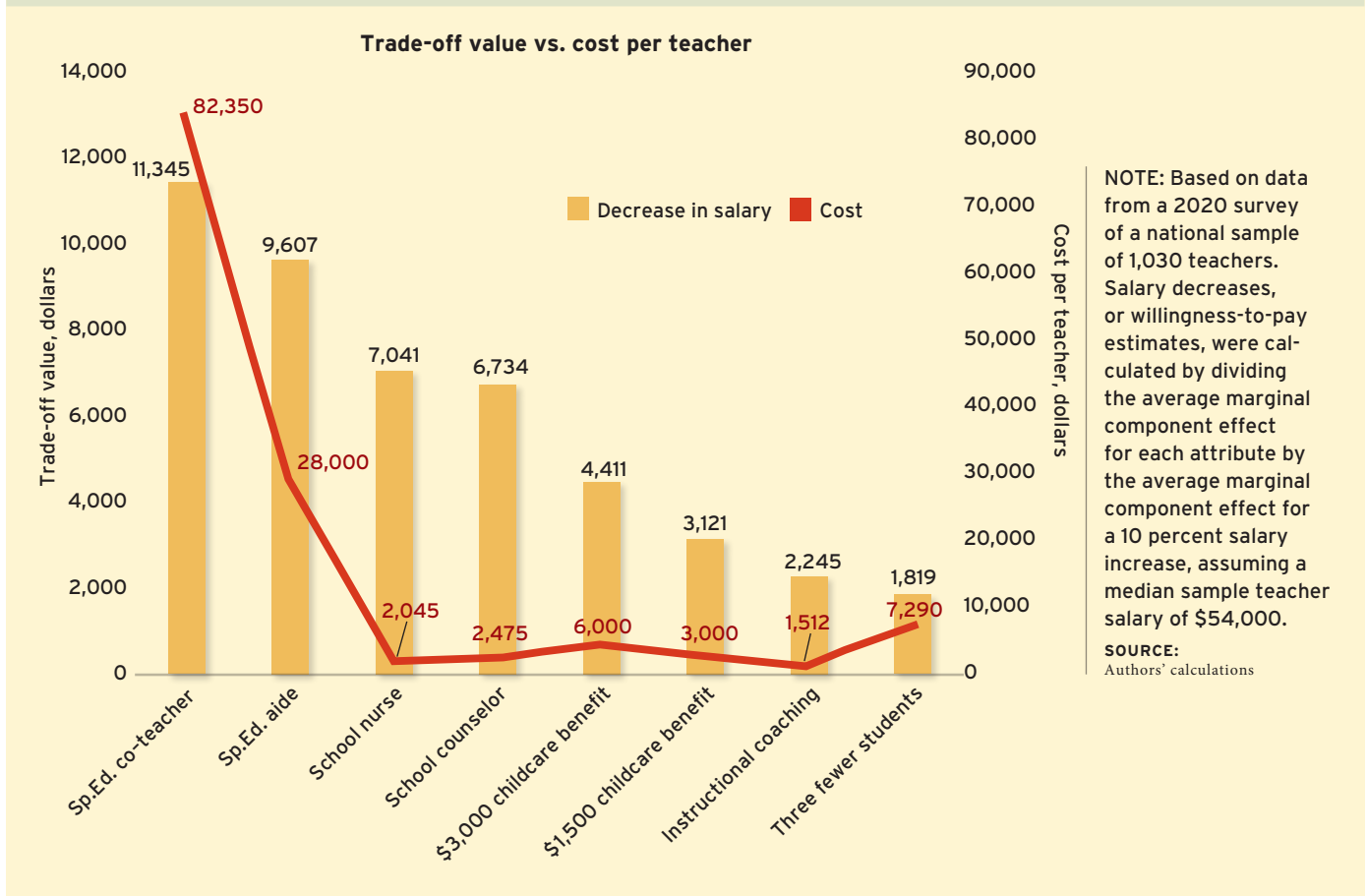
NOTE: Costs based on 2019 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, adjusted to increase by 35 percent based on benefits for all roles except para-professional. Class size reductions of 10 percent (2-3 students) based on 10 percent of average teacher salary and benefits, totaling \$72,900. Eligible expenses for subsidies include cost of attendance at a licensed program (e.g., daycare, before/after school care, summer camp) for children ages 0-12.

In all, 1,303 teachers rated 10,300 unique school profiles, including this example: “If two schools were otherwise identical in every way—same building, same teaching assignment, same students—which would you prefer?”

	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B
School nurse	One full-time nurse	One full-time nurse
Salary	10% more than current position	10% more than current position
In-class support for students with special needs	Full-time support from special-education co-teacher	Full-time support from paraprofessional
School counselor	One full-time counselor	No counselor
Average class size	Same as your current position	3 students fewer than your current position
One-on-one instructional coaching	1 hours of coaching per month	No coaching
Childcare subsidies	No childcare subsidies	\$3,000 per child

Teachers Value Counselors, Nurses, and Special-Education Specialists More Than Pay (Figure 1)

Teachers strongly prefer to work at schools with noninstructional support staff, but the relative costs and value of these roles to teachers varies. Teachers would forgo \$11,345 in salary for a full-time special education co-teacher, which costs \$82,350 a year. A full-time aide is worth nearly as much to teachers at \$9,607, but is one-third of the cost at \$28,000. While teachers place a lower value on monthly instructional coaching at \$2,245, that is greater than its average cost of \$1,512 per year.



so (see Figure 1). The 10 most attractive school profiles all have at least one counselor on staff and at least two additional sources of support, from either a nurse, instructional coach, or full-time special-education co-teacher or aide. Teachers place lower values on class-size reductions, and those with young children treat a \$3,000 per-child subsidy that expires at age 12 as a near-match for an increase in pay.

We investigate differences by school type and years of experience and find that elementary school teachers hold slightly stronger preferences for working at a school with a full-time nurse and care more about class size and instructional coaching. Meanwhile, secondary teachers are somewhat more averse to taking a reduction in salary and hold slightly stronger preferences

for working at a school that employs school counselors. Novice teachers more strongly prefer smaller classes compared to more experienced teachers. They also have a marked preference for schools with more support staff, which is consistent with the notion that early-career teachers require more support.

Special Education

Of all the features we study, teachers place the highest value on special education staffing support. The average teacher is willing to trade a 21 percent increase in pay, or \$11,345, for full-time support from a special-education co-teacher. For a full-time special-education paraprofessional, the average teacher is willing to forgo an 18 percent raise, or \$9,607.

Special-education teachers are consistently in demand, and the share of U.S. students who qualify for special-education services has grown to 15 percent. Some 95 percent of those students attend traditional public schools, and two-thirds spend most of the school day in general education classrooms. A Massachusetts study found that students in co-taught classrooms scored higher on standardized tests than those in classrooms led by a single teacher (see “Are Two Teachers Better Than One?,” *research*, Winter 2023).

Providing this level of support is expensive, and the value teachers place on it does not match the full cost. The average cost for a full-time special-education co-teacher with benefits is \$82,350. A full-time paraprofessional aide, typically hired without benefits, costs approximately \$28,000 per year.

It is therefore noteworthy that, although teachers strongly value in-class support for special-education students, they do not overwhelmingly prefer a co-teacher to a paraprofessional. Recent research from North Carolina suggests teaching assistants, who meet the same credential requirements as paraprofessionals, improve student outcomes. With salaries for full-time paraprofessionals about one-third of those for full-time co-teachers, this may be a compelling staffing option for school districts and policymakers to support.

That said, system-level decisions to hire special-education specialists should depend first and foremost on student need. These results highlight strong positive externalities for teachers where these investments are made.

School Nurses

Teachers are willing to trade a 13 percent increase in salary, or \$7,041, to work at a school with a nurse. That is more than triple the per-teacher cost of employing a full-time nurse at an average salary of \$67,500, or \$2,045 per teacher. Yet the best available data shows that only three-fourths of U.S. schools have a nurse onsite at least part of the time. According to the Civil Rights Data Collection, 67 percent of elementary schools, 63 percent of middle schools, and 57 percent of high schools employ a full-time nurse.

Prior research has found that teachers believe nurses are vital because they address and mitigate health barriers that interfere with student learning. For example, an estimated 14 million students—about 20 percent of all U.S. enrollment—have a chronic health condition like asthma and type 1 diabetes, many of which require daily visits to the school nurse. In addition, a study of North Carolina public schools found better health and learning outcomes in schools with lower school nurse-to-student ratios.

School Counselors

Much like school nurses, teachers strongly value school counselors and are willing to trade off additional income to work at a school with a counselor. Teachers are willing to trade a 12.5 percent increase in pay, or \$6,734, to work in a school with

one full-time counselor—more than double the per-teacher cost of \$2,475 at a school of average size, based on an average counselor salary of \$81,689. Working at a school that employs two full-time counselors is worth trading off \$8,959 in additional salary to teachers, which is almost 1.8 times the per-teacher cost of \$4,950.

School counselors are in relatively short supply in American schools: just 65 percent of elementary schools, 71 percent of middle schools, and 79 percent of high schools have a full-time counselor on staff, and 11 percent do not employ any counselor at all. Four out of five schools do not meet the recommended counselor-to-student ratio of 250:1.

School counselors are trained to support students’ mental

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health, including during personal challenges and global emergencies. A Massachusetts study found that effective school counselors also boost college readiness and educational attainment (see “Better School Counselors, Better Outcomes,” *research*, summer 2020).

Instructional Coaches

An estimated two-thirds of U.S. schools offer teachers access to instructional coaching, either from a dedicated coach or school leader, which is a growing area of focus in research and reform efforts in recent years (see “Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale,” *research*, fall 2018). Prior research has found that teachers value opportunities for professional growth. On the whole, however, teachers in our sample strictly prefer investments in counselors, nurses, and special-education specialists to investments in instructional coaching. Teachers are willing to trade a 4.2 percent raise, or \$2,245 in additional salary, for one hour of individual coaching per month.

Although the offer of coaching does not appear to influence teachers’ employment preferences as much as the availability of special-education specialists, nurses, and school counselors, the value teachers place on coaching exceeds its cost. Based on the average full-time salary and benefits package of \$89,100 and assuming three hours of worktime per coaching session, including observation, preparation, delivery, and administrative support, a full year of monthly coaching would cost \$1,511 per teacher—about two-thirds of what teachers are willing to forgo in salary increases for that support.

Childcare Subsidies

To date, research on teachers' preferences has largely overlooked the question of whether offering teachers childcare benefits would be a fruitful strategy to recruit or retain teachers. Districts rarely offer this benefit, which may be a missed opportunity—a robust body of evidence suggests childcare benefits increase women's participation in the labor market, and the challenge of juggling family and professional responsibilities without institutionalized, family-friendly workplace supports has long been a top reason women exit the teaching profession.

We therefore include two childcare subsidy amounts in our survey, both of which are capped at two children: \$1,500 and \$3,000 per child, for maximum subsidies of \$3,000 and

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\$6,000 per year. These benefits reimburse teachers for eligible expenses like daycare and after-school programs and expire when a child turns 12.

Teachers treat the smaller subsidy as a nearly one-to-one swap in pay, whether or not they have qualifying children at home: the average teacher is willing to trade off a 5.8 percent increase in salary, or \$3,121, for a \$1,500 per-child benefit that is capped at \$3,000. For the larger benefit capped at \$6,000, teachers would trade an 8.2 percent pay increase, or \$4,411 in additional salary.

Some 43 percent of teachers in our sample had at least one child under 12 at the time of the survey; 57 percent did not and would be ineligible for these benefits. We compare their responses and find that, intuitively, the size of the childcare benefit matters most to eligible teachers, who would trade a \$3,148 raise for a \$3,000 subsidy and a \$5,924 raise for a \$6,000 subsidy. Ineligible teachers are willing to trade off about the same amount, approximately 6 percent or \$3,200 in additional salary, for both subsidy sizes. This suggests that even teachers who would not immediately benefit from a childcare subsidy still value it.

For a hypothetical teacher making \$60,000 with two children under 12, providing the larger childcare subsidy in lieu of a 10 percent raise would be far less expensive in the long run. Districts can cap subsidies at a fixed amount, and only a subset of the teaching workforce is eligible. A childcare subsidy expires as children age out, unlike a pay raise.

Implications

No school or district has unlimited resources, so choosing how to spend a finite budget that supports students and teachers alike is an urgent responsibility for every system leader. Similarly, state departments of education face trade-offs in how to allocate taxpayer dollars to best support district needs. During budget season, union leaders are tasked with representing teachers' points of view. However, we find that actual teacher preferences may differ somewhat from what is discussed in typical negotiations.

First, policies that exclusively focus on salary increases or class size as incentives to attract and retain teachers are poorly aligned with teachers' preferences. Other benefits, such as childcare subsidies, can influence where teachers want to work.

Second, noninstructional staff like nurses, counselors, and special-education aides are critically important to teachers. Our analysis highlights both the substantial expense of noninstructional staff members and the highly valued services they provide.

This insight is relevant to an ongoing debate about the value of such staff. One view holds that investments in support staff are investments in the teaching workforce, since these colleagues relieve teachers of peripheral responsibilities and enable them to prioritize core instructional tasks. On the other hand, funds dedicated to noninstructional staff could otherwise be allocated to increasing teacher compensation, either through salary or benefits like childcare subsidies.

Our work points to sources of support that are both valued by teachers and may be cost-effective for school districts, such as full-time school nurses and counselors. We also show that, compared to any other factor in our survey, teachers place the highest values on full-time, in-class special-education colleagues and would trade off raises of up to 21 percent for this support. While these are the most expensive factors in our survey, we also find that teachers value paraprofessionals nearly as much as co-teachers, who are three times as expensive to hire.

Our study casts a new light on staff shortages—including the novel insight that shortages in support staff may aggravate teacher shortages. In a 2022 nationally representative federal survey, 48 percent of principals said they were hard-pressed to fill vacant teaching positions, while 60 percent indicated they were struggling to fill non-teaching positions. The worst shortages were for specialists in special education and mental health.

The substantial shares of students who need nursing, counseling, and special-education services clearly benefit when specialized staff are onsite at their schools. Classroom teachers strongly value their contributions as well. Policymakers focused on supporting the teaching workforce should address the critical need to increase the supply of individuals who can serve in these roles.

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