RAND AMERICAN EDUCATOR PANELS

Data Note

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Pre-K Teacher Well-Being, Pay, and Intentions to Leave in 2024

Findings from the American Pre-K Teacher Survey

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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

Summary of Key Findings

- In spring 2024, almost twice as many public school–based pre-kindergarten (pre-K) teachers reported experiencing frequent job-related stress as did similar working adults.
- Eighteen percent of public school–based pre-K teachers intended to leave their jobs by the end of the 2023–2024 school year, compared with 22 percent of public K–12 teachers and 24 percent of similar working adults.
- Public school–based pre-K teachers' top-ranked sources of job-related stress were managing student behavior, low pay, supporting student mental health and well-being, and administrative work outside of teaching.
- Public school–based pre-K teachers reported earning nearly $7,000 less in base pay, on average, than public K–12 teachers and about $24,000 less than similar working adults.
- Thirty-eight percent of public school–based pre-K teachers said that their base pay was adequate, compared with 36 percent of public K–12 teachers and 51 percent of similar working adults.
- On average, public school–based pre-K teachers reported working 47 hours in a typical week, eight hours more than the 39 hours per week that they were contracted to work.

Overview of the American Pre-Kindergarten Teacher Survey

- In this report, we present results from the American Pre-Kindergarten Teacher Survey (PKTS). We surveyed 1,427 public school–based pre-kindergarten (pre-K) teachers across the country in March and April 2024. The sample was limited to lead or co-lead teachers in general education and special education. We weighted their responses to make them nationally representative of public school–based pre-K teachers in the United States.
- This report provides new information about the well-being, pay, and working conditions of public school–based pre-K teachers that is relevant to state legislators, school district leaders, early childhood program leaders, and public school principals who lead schools with pre-K classrooms.
- Where possible, we compare pre-K teachers' responses with those of public K–12 teachers, elementary grade teachers, and similar working adults, whom we surveyed in January and February 2024 (Doan, Steiner, and Pandey, 2024).
- We provide context about policies related to pre-K teachers' pay and working conditions where such information is available. However, the specifics of such policies, such as whether these teachers are considered to be part of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce or the K–12 workforce, vary across states. For example, the state agency that oversees pre-K programs might contribute to differences in whether public school–based pre-K teachers are on the same salary scale as K–12 teachers, subject to the same educational requirements, and eligible to join K–12 collective bargaining units (Fischer and Weyer, 2024).
- We examined responses for subgroups of pre-K teachers for whom we might expect to see variation in pay or working conditions. We compared teachers who taught part-day classes with those who taught full-day classes; teachers who were special education teachers with those who were general education teachers, and teachers who worked in ECE-only buildings with those who worked in K–12 buildings. Across pre-K and K–12 teachers, we compared teachers' experience, highest degree earned, state collective bargaining status, and locale. We define these groups at the end of this report.
- For simplicity, we sometimes refer to public school–based pre-K teachers as *pre-K teachers* in this report. The term *elementary teachers* refers to public school–based teachers of grades K–5, and *pre-K teachers* refers to public school–based teachers who taught only pre-K or who taught kindergarten or first grade in addition to pre-K. We define *similar working adults* as employed adults who were ages 18 to 64, had at least a bachelor's degree, and reported working at least 35 hours per week (Allegretto, 2022).
- In this report, we present weighted percentages. The sections that describe our data, methods, and limitations and that describe survey findings for K–12 teachers contain recycled text from the technical documentation for those surveys (Doan et al., 2024). Additional details about our methods and technical information about the survey are included at the end of this report.

Limitations

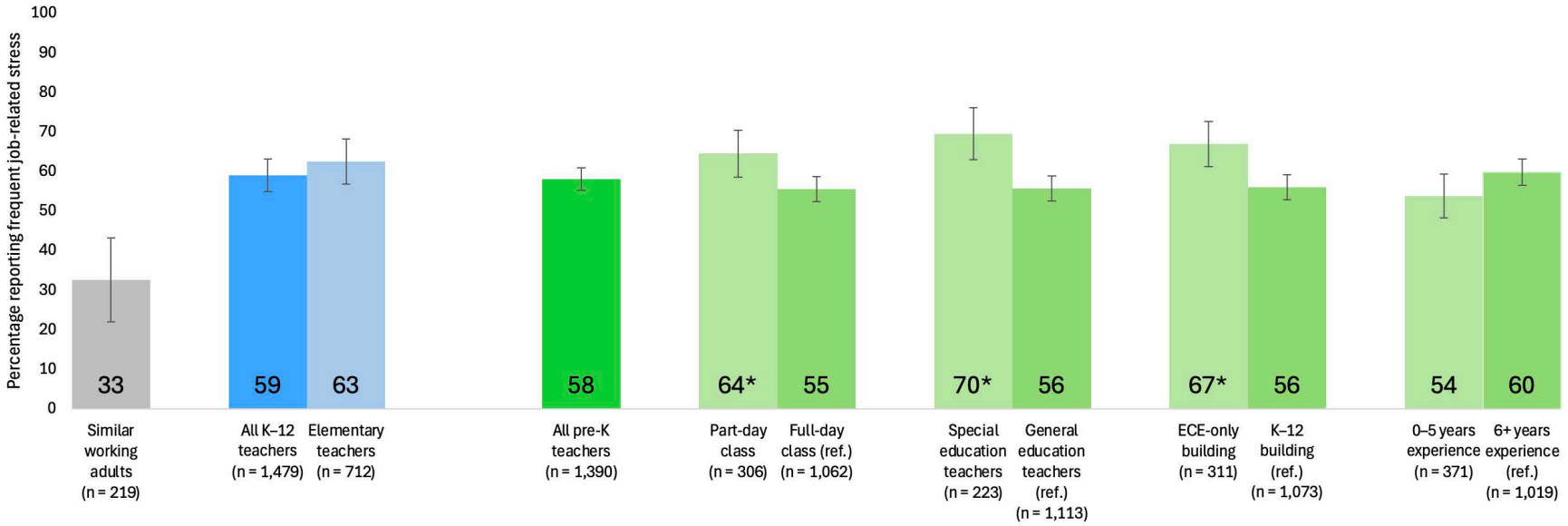
- As with all survey research, the PKTS data are self-reported responses and might be subject to reporting bias. This might be especially true for some topics, such as individual well-being or weekly hours worked.
- Slight differences in survey timing (January–February 2024 for K–12 teachers and general working adults and March–April 2024 for the PKTS) might contribute to some of the observed differences between pre-K teachers and K–12 teachers or similar working adults, particularly for some topics, such as individual well-being or intentions to leave their jobs.
- We provide information from tests of statistical significance to identify differences that might be relevant to education policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. These differences are affected by multiple factors, many of which are unmeasured in our surveys. Therefore, our results should not be interpreted as evidence of causal relationships.
- We present data from the 2024 State of the American Teacher (SoT) survey as comparison points for the 2024 PKTS results, but the data are not weighted to facilitate formal comparisons across samples. Therefore, we were unable to perform tests of statistical significance to compare responses of pre-K teachers with those of other groups.

How to Read the Figures in This Report

- Throughout the figures in this report, we use asterisks and bold text to indicate where pre-K teacher subgroup responses are statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the reference group (indicated with *[ref.]*).
- There are three types of figures in this report: bar charts, heat maps, and range plots.
  - **Bar charts** display the percentage of teachers who reported a given survey response. At the end of each bar, we display the 95-percent confidence intervals as black lines for each estimate.
  - **Heat maps** tabularly display the percentage of teachers who reported a given survey response, using variation in color to emphasize differences in percentages. Lighter-colored cells represent smaller percentages; progressively darker shades represent larger percentages. We order the rows from the most to the least common survey response among pre-K teachers overall. Each column shows responses from a different teacher subgroup.
  - **Range plots** show and compare the percentages of two survey responses within a given group of teachers. Numbers of respondents are unweighted.
- To aid interpretation, we color-coded the bars in figures that present survey results from each group of respondents. Pre-K teachers are presented in green, K–12 teachers are presented in blue, and similar working adults are presented in gray. For select figures, we

describe additional relevant subgroup estimates in text that are not depicted in the figure. Figures 1 through 4 display job-related stress, intentions to leave, and weekly hours worked. Figures 5 through 9 show base pay and perceptions of base pay adequacy. Figure 10 presents reported access to and perceived adequacy of employer-provided benefits.

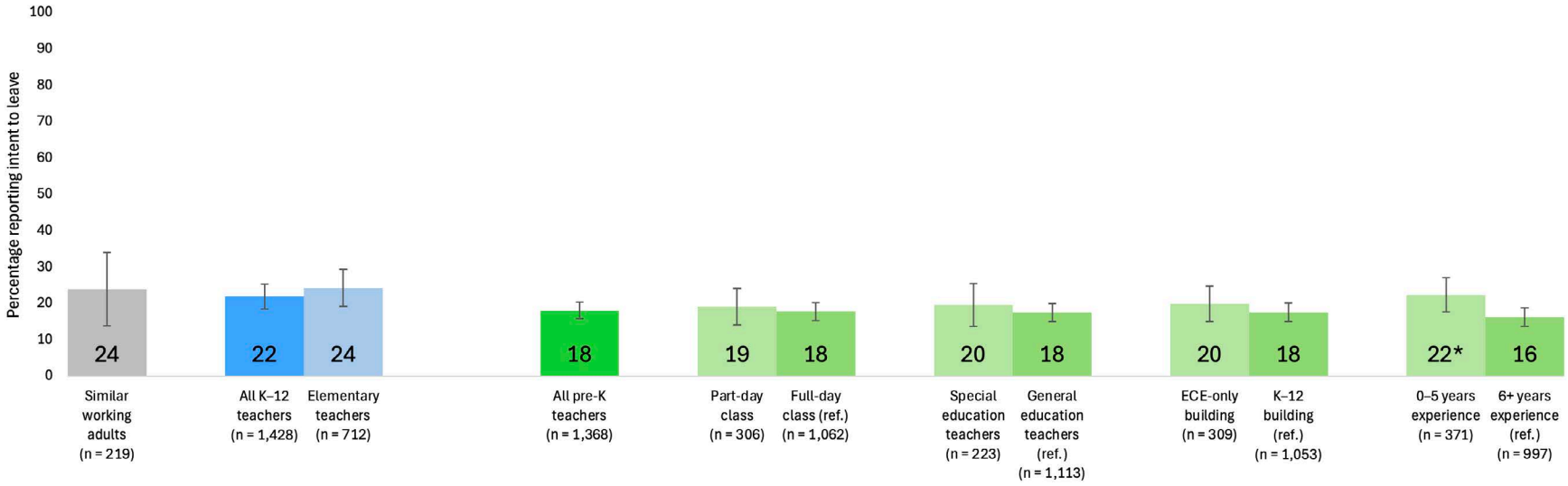
Figure 1. Job-Related Stress of Pre-K Teachers, K–12 Teachers, and Similar Working Adults



NOTE: This figure depicts the responses of pre-K–12 teachers to the survey question "Since the beginning of the 2023–2024 school year, how often has your work been stressful?" Similar working adults responded to the survey question "Since September 2023, how often has your work been stressful?" Response options were "Never," "Hardly Ever," "Sometimes," "Often," and "Always." *Frequent job-related stress* is defined in this figure as a response of "Often" or "Always." An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.).

Figure 1 shows that similar shares of pre-K teachers, K–12 teachers, and elementary teachers reported frequent job-related stress during the 2023–2024 school year. Almost twice as many pre-K teachers reported experiencing frequent job-related stress as did similar working adults. Sixty-four percent of pre-K teachers who taught in part-day classrooms reported experiencing frequent job-related stress, compared with 55 percent of pre-K teachers who taught in full-day classrooms (a statistically significant difference). Special education pre-K teachers and pre-K teachers who worked in ECE-only buildings were also significantly more likely to report frequent job-related stress than their counterparts. Forty-six percent of Black pre-K teachers reported frequent job-related stress, a significantly smaller share than the 60 percent of pre-K teachers of other races and ethnicities who reported the same—a pattern we also observed among K–12 teachers in 2024 (Doan, Steiner, and Pandey, 2024).

Figure 2. Pre-K Teachers', K–12 Teachers', and Similar Working Adults' Reported Intentions to Leave Their Jobs by the End of the 2023–2024 School Year



NOTE: This figure depicts the responses of pre-K–12 teachers to the survey question "What is the likelihood that you will leave your job at your school by the end of the current school year (2023–2024)?" Similar working adults responded to the survey question "What is the likelihood that you will leave your job by September 2024?" Response options were "Very unlikely," "Somewhat unlikely," "Somewhat likely," and "Very likely." *Intention to leave* is defined in this figure as a response of "Somewhat likely" or "Very likely." An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.).

Figure 2 shows that similar shares of pre-K teachers, K–12 teachers, elementary teachers, and similar working adults intended to leave their jobs in 2024. Eighteen percent of pre-K teachers said that they intended to leave, 4 percent fewer than K–12 teachers and 6 percent fewer than similar working adults. Although we did not ask pre-K teachers about their motivations for intending to leave their jobs, it is possible that low pay or perceived adequacy of benefits could be contributing factors, as they are for K–12 teachers (Steiner, Woo, and Doan, 2023; Steiner, Woo, and Doan, 2024). Pre-K teachers in the highest quartile of base pay were significantly less likely to report intending to leave than those in the lower three quartiles. Pre-K teachers who said that they intended to leave were significantly more likely to report that some benefits were inadequate than were pre-K teachers who did not report an intention to leave.

Pre-K teachers with five or fewer years of experience were significantly more likely than pre-K teachers with six or more years of experience to report intending to leave their jobs, a pattern consistent with K–12 teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Lower base pay and reportedly lower access to some benefits are potential explanatory factors. As we show in Figure 5, pre-K teachers with five or fewer years of experience reported earning $9,334 less than their more-experienced peers, on average. Teachers with five or fewer years of experience were significantly less likely than those with six or more years of experience to report access to some employer-provided benefits (e.g., additional compensation for working more than 40 hours a week).

Although intentions to leave do not perfectly predict whether teachers resign, teachers who state an intention to leave are more likely to resign than those who do not state such an intention (Grant and Brantlinger, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). In one recent analysis, roughly 30 percent of K–12 teachers who stated an intention to leave did so within one year (Nguyen et al., 2024). If we apply this estimate to our data, we estimate that approximately 5.4 percent of public school–based pre-K teachers would have left their jobs by the end of the 2023–2024 school year. Recent national estimates of turnover among public school–based pre-K teachers varied from about 7.7 percent in 2019 to about 8.5 percent in 2022, roughly half the rate for K–12 teachers (16 percent) (Fee, 2024; Grunewald, Nunn, and Palmer, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).[1] However, a national estimate of pre-K teachers' reported intentions to leave likely differs from turnover rates calculated from state administrative data. For example, turnover among public school–based pre-K teachers was roughly 24 percent in Virginia in 2024 and roughly 25 percent in Louisiana in 2019, much higher than the national estimates of intention to leave reported in this survey (Bassok et al., 2025; Bellows, Bassok, and Markowitz, 2021).

The discrepancy between the shares of teachers who express intent to leave within a year and those who resign could be explained by a delay in leaving, or it might signal job dissatisfaction rather than a plan to resign (Nguyen et al., 2024; Steiner et al., 2022). Policymakers should use caution when interpreting these results solely as predictors of pre-K teacher turnover prior to the 2024–2025 school year.

[1] *Turnover* is defined as *attrition* (i.e., leaving the teaching profession) plus *mobility* (i.e., leaving a current teaching job for another teaching job).

Figure 3. Pre-K Teachers' Top-Ranked Sources of Job-Related Stress

	All pre-K teachers n = 1,346	Part-day class n = 303	Full-day class (ref.) n = 1,022	Special education teachers n = 222	General education teachers (ref.) n = 1,074	ECE-only building n = 302	K–12 building (ref.) n = 1,038	0–5 years experience n = 357	6+ years experience (ref.) n = 989
Managing student behavior	67	67	68	63	68	63	69	72	66
My salary is too low	42	35*	44	30*	44	39	42	46	40
Supporting my students' mental health and well-being	33	31	33	24*	35	27*	34	34	32
Administrative work outside of teaching (e.g., paperwork, teacher evaluations)	33	41*	30	48*	29	34	32	26*	35
Lacking support from school administrators	21	20	21	22	20	22	21	22	20
I spend too many hours working	21	26*	19	30*	19	24	20	20	21
Taking on extra work because of staff shortages	18	20	18	21	17	23*	16	18	18
Limited voice in decision-making at my school	15	13	15	13	15	18	14	11*	17
The intrusion of political issues and opinions in teaching	13	10	14	6*	15	8*	15	12	14
Feeling like the goals and expectations of the school are unattainable	12	12	11	13	11	17*	10	12	12
Lack of adequate coaching or mentoring	8	8	8	8	8	10	7	9	7
Working in an environment in which I feel physically unsafe	3	2	3	4	3	5	3	5	3

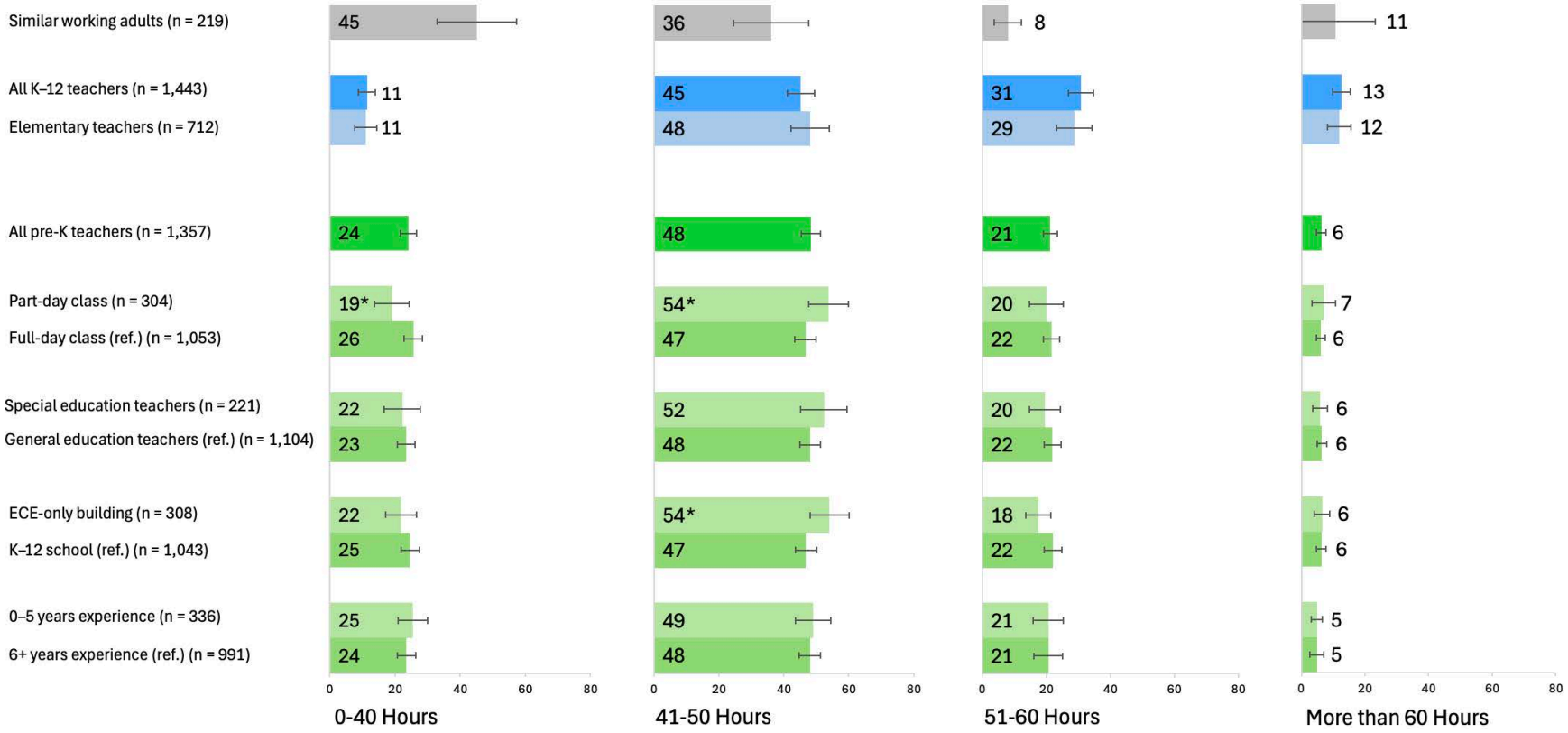
NOTE: This figure shows the weighted percentage of responses to the survey question "What are the top three sources of stress in your job right now?" Responses are shown for all pre-K teachers and pre-K teachers disaggregated by class length, special or general education, building type, and experience. Pre-K teachers were instructed to rank up to three sources of stress; the figure shows the weighted percentage of teachers selecting each source among their top three. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.).

Figure 3 shows the factors that pre-K teachers ranked among their top three sources of job-related stress in March and April 2024. Managing student behavior was a top source of stress for two-thirds of pre-K teachers and was the most common source of stress to be ranked in the top three. The next most commonly ranked sources of stress were low pay, supporting student mental health and well-being, and administrative work outside of teaching. Pre-K teachers in the lowest compensation quartile (those who reported earning between $20,000 and $50,000) were significantly more likely than pre-K teachers in the top three compensation quartiles (those who reported earning between $50,000 and $150,000) to rank low salary in their top three sources of job-related stress.

These findings are consistent with K–12 teachers' reports of their top three sources of job-related stress when they selected from a similar set of possible sources in January and February 2024. K–12 teachers' top-ranked source of job-related stress was managing student behavior, followed by low pay and administrative work outside of teaching (Doan, Steiner, and Pandey, 2024). However, a larger share of pre-K teachers ranked managing student behavior in their top three sources of job-related stress (67 percent) than K–12 teachers (45 percent) (Doan, Steiner, and Pandey, 2024).

Pre-K teachers of part-day classrooms and special education pre-K teachers were significantly more likely than teachers of full-day classrooms and general education teachers, respectively, to include administrative work outside of teaching and working too many hours in their top three sources of job-related stress, despite reporting a similar number of contracted hours and hours worked per week; they were less likely to list low salary as one of their top three sources of job-related stress. These findings suggest that administrative work could be one factor contributing to the higher levels of job-related stress reported by teachers of part-day classrooms and special education teachers in Figure 1.

Figure 4. Reported Total Hours Worked per Week for Pre-K Teachers, K–12 Teachers, and Similar Working Adults

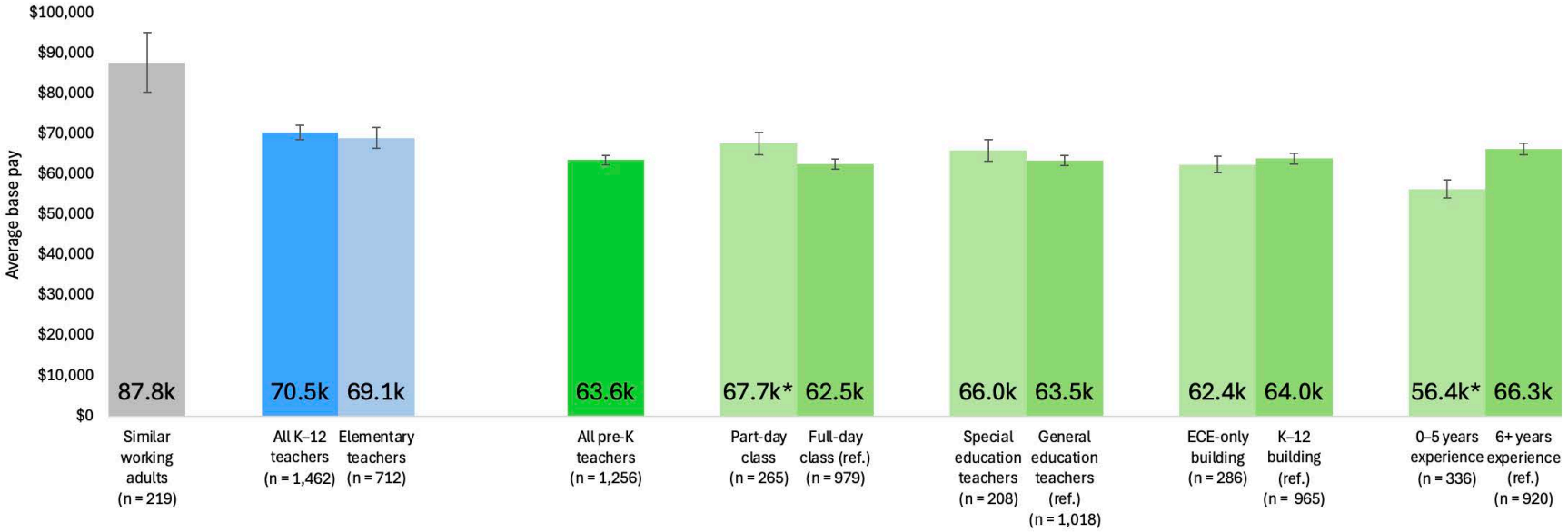


NOTE: This figure depicts the responses of pre-K–12 teachers to the survey question "Including hours spent during the school day, before and after school, and on the weekends, how many total hours do you spend on ALL teaching and other school-related activities during a typical FULL WEEK at THIS school this school year?" Similar working adults responded to the survey question "How many total hours have you worked in a typical full week since September 2023? Include any hours you work that are unpaid, or for which you receive overtime pay." An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.).

On average, pre-K teachers reported working 47 hours in a typical week, fewer than the 53 hours per week reported by K–12 teachers and similar to the 44 hours per week reported by similar working adults. This is eight hours more, on average, than the 39 hours that pre-K teachers reported that they were contracted to work. Figure 4 shows the distribution of reported total hours worked in a typical week for pre-

K teachers, K–12 teachers, elementary teachers, and similar working adults. Similar to K–12 and elementary teachers, just under half of pre-K teachers reported working between 41 and 50 hours in a typical school week during the 2023–2024 school year. More pre-K teachers reported working fewer than 40 hours per week than did K–12 and elementary teachers (24 percent compared with 11 percent). A smaller share of pre-K teachers (27 percent) reported working more than 50 hours per week than K–12 and elementary teachers (44 and 41 percent, respectively). Although a similar share reported working between 41 and 50 hours per week, pre-K teachers with five or fewer years of experience reported working significantly fewer hours in a typical week (45, on average) than pre-K teachers with more experience, who reported working 48 hours per week, on average.

Figure 5. Average Base Pay Reported by Pre-K Teachers, K–12 Teachers, and Similar Working Adults

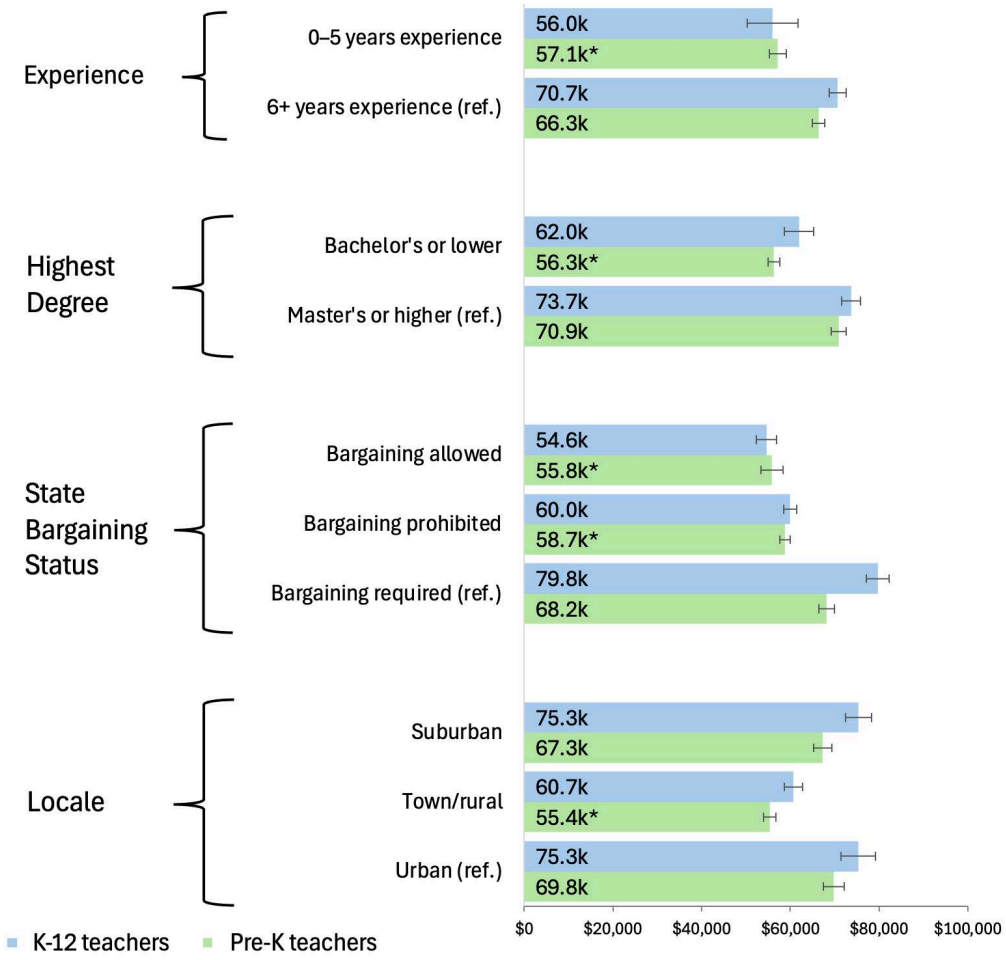


NOTE: This figure shows average self-reported base pay among pre-K–12 teachers and similar working adults. Pre-K teachers were asked, "This school year (2023–2024), what is your base annual pay, before taxes and deductions, for the entire school year? Your base annual pay is your pay before adding any additional compensation for extracurricular or additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses." K–12 teachers were asked, "During the current school year (2023–2024), what is your base teaching salary for the entire school year?" Similar working adults were asked, "What is your annual base salary for 2024? Your base salary is your salary before adding any additional compensation for overtime, additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses." An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.).

Figure 5 shows the average reported base pay of pre-K teachers compared with K–12 teachers, elementary teachers, and similar working adults. Pre-K teachers reported an average base pay of $63,588 for the 2023–2024 school year, $6,876 less than the average base pay reported by K–12 teachers and $24,235 less than that of similar working adults. Larger-than-average wage increases for college-educated workers who were not teachers between 2020 and 2023 (compared with wage increases for teachers) are one possible reason for the large gap in average base pay between pre-K teachers and similar working adults (Council of Economic Advisers, Executive Office of the President, 2025). Differences in state policy regarding whether pre-K teachers are included in K–12 teachers' collective bargaining agreements are a possible reason for the difference in average base pay between pre-K teachers and K–12 teachers (Fischer and Weyer, 2024).

As we would expect, pre-K teachers with five or fewer years of experience reported significantly lower average base pay in 2023–2024 (about $56,400) than pre-K teachers with more than five years of experience ($65,734). Pre-K teachers who teach part-day classrooms reported significantly higher base pay (about $5,200 more) than pre-K teachers who teach full-day classrooms. However, after we controlled for an array of school and teacher characteristics, including hours worked per week, contract hours, and state bargaining status, the average difference in base pay between part-day and full-day teachers decreased to $1,736 and was no longer statistically significant.

Figure 6. Reported Average Base Pay of Pre-K and K–12 Teachers by Experience, Highest Degree, State Bargaining Status, and Locale



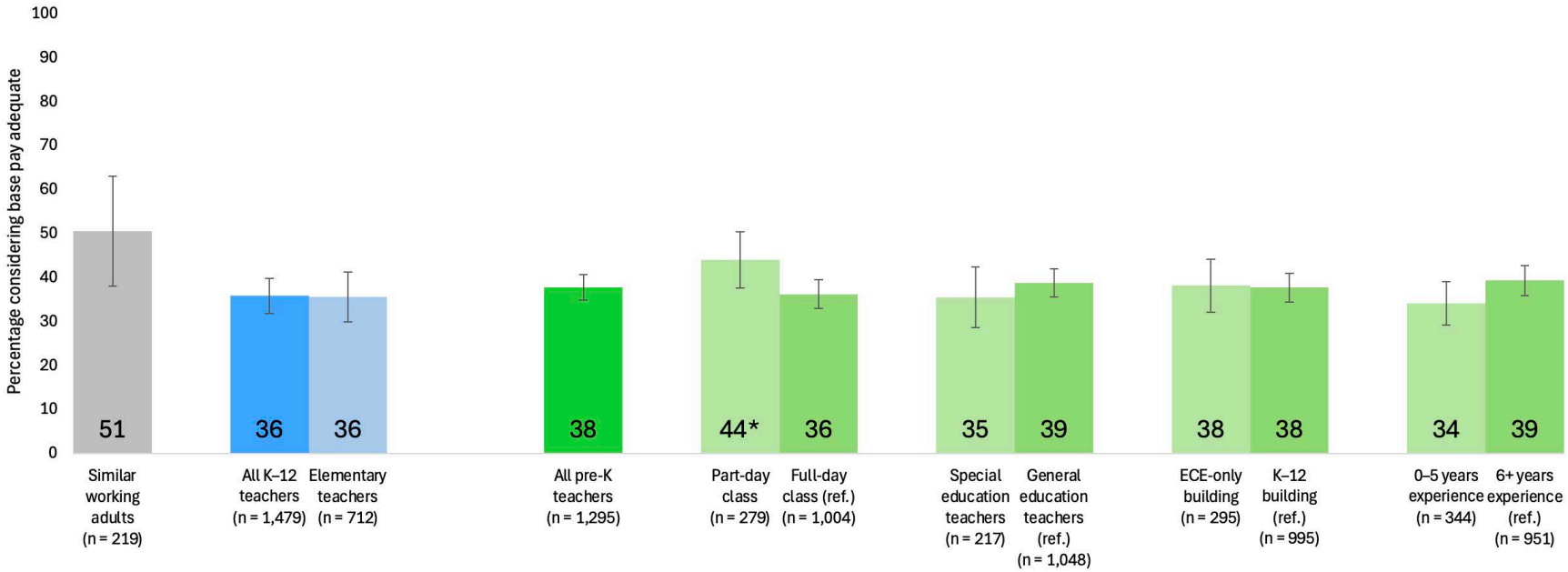
NOTE: This figure shows average self-reported base pay among pre-K–12 teachers by experience, state bargaining status, highest degree, and locale. Pre-K teachers were asked, "This school year (2023–2024), what is your base annual pay, before taxes and deductions, for the entire school year? Your base annual pay is your pay before adding any additional compensation for extracurricular or additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses." K–12 teachers were asked, "During the current school year (2023–2024), what is your base teaching salary for the entire school year?" An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.). Pre-K teachers, n = 196–920; K–12 teachers, n = 46–1,427.

Figure 6 presents a comparison of average reported base pay between pre-K and K–12 teachers across years of teaching experience, highest degree earned, state bargaining status, and locale.

Pre-K teachers in each subgroup reported earning less than their K–12 counterparts in the same subgroup, but the size of the gap varied by group. For example, pre-K teachers with a bachelor's degree or lower reported an average base pay that was $5,651 less than that of similarly educated K–12 teachers. The gap between pre-K and K–12 teachers with a master's degree or higher was smaller, at $2,787. Pre-K teachers who worked in suburban areas reported an average base pay that was $8,030 less than the average base pay reported by K–12 teachers who worked in suburban areas, but the differences between the base pay of pre-K and K–12 teachers who worked in urban areas and rural areas were smaller, at $5,462 and $5,267, respectively. The largest difference was in states where collective bargaining is required, in which the average base pay for pre-K teachers was $11,601 less than that of K–12 teachers. However, in states where bargaining is either prohibited or allowed but not required, pre-K and K–12 teachers reported similar average base pay.

Patterns across the subgroups of pre-K and K–12 teachers were similar. Differences in reported average base pay of pre-K teachers by subgroup were unsurprising. Pre-K teachers who worked in states where collective bargaining is required reported significantly higher base pay than those who worked in states where bargaining is allowed but not required or in states where it is prohibited (a pattern that we also observed among K–12 teachers). Pre-K teachers who worked in states where bargaining is required reported earning roughly $12,000 more than their pre-K peers in states where bargaining is allowed and about $9,000 more than pre-K teachers in states where bargaining is prohibited. K–12 teachers who worked in states where bargaining is required reported base pay that was $25,000 more than K–12 teachers who worked in states where bargaining is allowed and nearly $20,000 more than K–12 teachers who worked in states where bargaining is prohibited. Pre-K and K–12 teachers with a bachelor's degree or lower reported an average base pay that was less than that of their counterparts with a master's degree or higher. The size of the gap for pre-K teachers ($14,566) was similar to the size of the gap for K–12 teachers ($15,617). Pre-K and K–12 teachers who worked in urban areas reported the highest base pay, on average, and pre-K and K–12 teachers who worked in rural areas reported the lowest average base pay. The gaps between pre-K teachers in urban and rural areas and K–12 teachers in urban and rural areas were similar—roughly $14,000.

Figure 7. Percentage of Pre-K Teachers, K–12 Teachers, Elementary Teachers, and Similar Working Adults Who Considered Their Base Pay to Be Adequate



NOTE: This figure depicts the responses of pre-K–12 teachers to the survey question "This school year (2023–2024), how adequate do you consider your base annual pay/base hourly pay given your role and responsibilities? Your base pay is your pay before adding any additional compensation for extracurricular or additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses." Similar working adults responded to the survey question "How adequate is your annual base salary given your role and work responsibilities?" Response options were "Completely inadequate," "Somewhat inadequate," "Somewhat adequate," and "Completely adequate." *Adequate* is defined in this figure as a response of "Somewhat adequate" or "Completely adequate." An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group labeled (ref.).

Figure 7 shows the percentage of pre-K teachers who considered their base pay for the 2023–2024 school year to be adequate, compared with K–12 teachers, elementary teachers, and similar working adults. Only 38 percent of pre-K teachers said that their base pay was adequate, a share similar to the 36 percent of K–12 and elementary teachers who reported the same. The similarity between pre-K teachers' and K–12 teachers' perceptions of their base pay is somewhat surprising given that pre-K teachers reported earning $6,876 less in base pay, on average, than K–12 teachers, as shown in Figure 5. This suggests that other factors, such as principal support, hours worked, or student behavior, could influence teachers' perceptions. A much larger share of similar working adults—51 percent—said that their base pay was

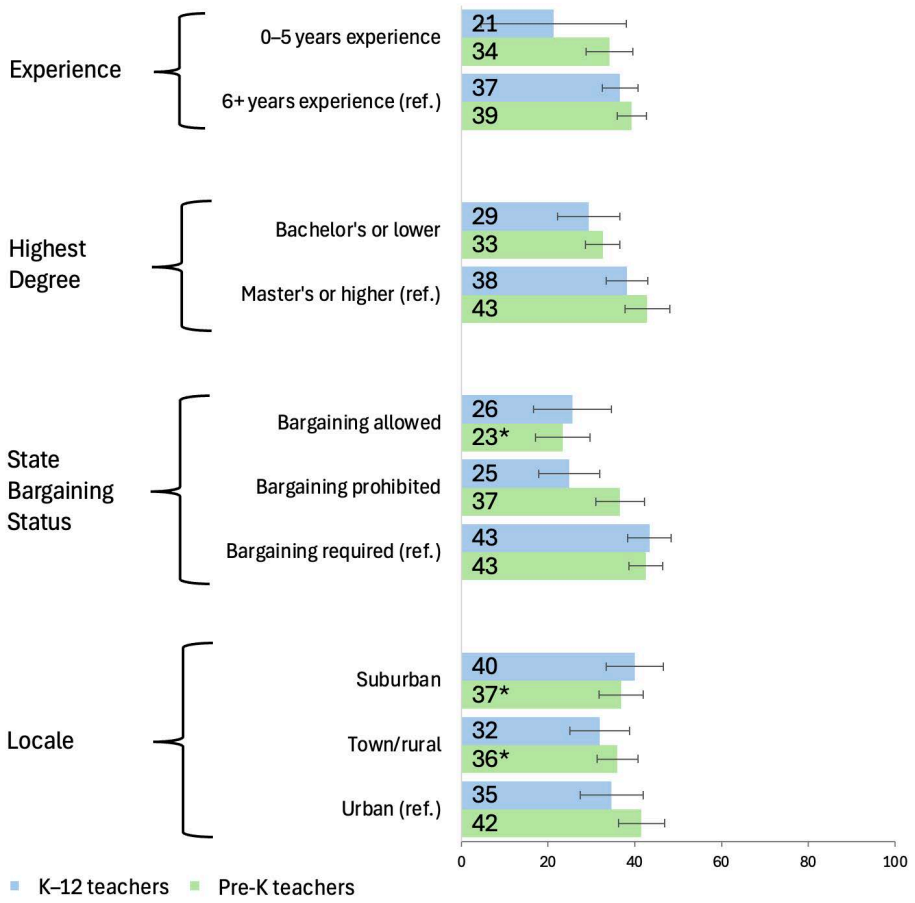
adequate. Pre-K teachers' perceptions of their base pay relative to working adults are unsurprising given that similar working adults reported earning roughly $24,000 more than pre-K teachers on average (Figure 5).

Although examining the reasons for the difference in perceived adequacy of pay relative to reported base pay between pre-K and K–12 teachers was beyond the scope of this report, one possible reason is that pre-K teachers might compare their pay with that of ECE workers in center- or home-based settings, who typically earn substantially less than school-based pre-K teachers (McLean et al., 2024).

In general, pre-K teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of their base pay aligned with their reported base pay. For example, only 24 percent of pre-K teachers in the lowest quartile of reported base pay (earning less than $50,000) said that their base pay was adequate. In comparison, 60 percent of pre-K teachers in the highest quartile (earning more than $72,000) said that their base pay was adequate, a statistically significant difference. Furthermore, teachers who said their base pay was adequate reported, on average, significantly higher base pay ($70,300) than pre-K teachers who said their base pay was inadequate ($62,000).

Pre-K teachers in part-day classrooms were significantly more likely to consider their base to be pay adequate than were pre-K teachers in full-day classrooms, a pattern that is consistent with the higher base pay reported by part-day pre-K teachers, as displayed in Figure 5. Black pre-K teachers were significantly more likely to consider their base pay to be adequate than were teachers who did not identify as Black, even though they did not report significantly higher average base pay. Forty-seven percent of Black pre-K teachers said that their base pay was adequate, compared with 37 percent of teachers who did not identify as Black.

Figure 8. Percentage of Pre-K and K–12 Teachers Who Considered Their Base Pay to Be Adequate, by Experience, Highest Degree, State Bargaining Status, and Locale



NOTE: This figure depicts the responses of pre-K–12 teachers to the survey question "This school year (2023–2024), how adequate do you consider your base annual pay/base hourly pay given your role and responsibilities? Your base pay is your pay before adding any additional compensation for extracurricular or additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses," by experience, highest degree, state bargaining status, and locale. Response options were "Completely inadequate," "Somewhat inadequate," "Somewhat adequate," and "Completely adequate." *Adequate* is defined in this figure as a response of "Somewhat adequate" or "Completely adequate." An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group (ref.). Pre-K teachers, n = 203–951; K–12 teachers, n = 46–1,381.

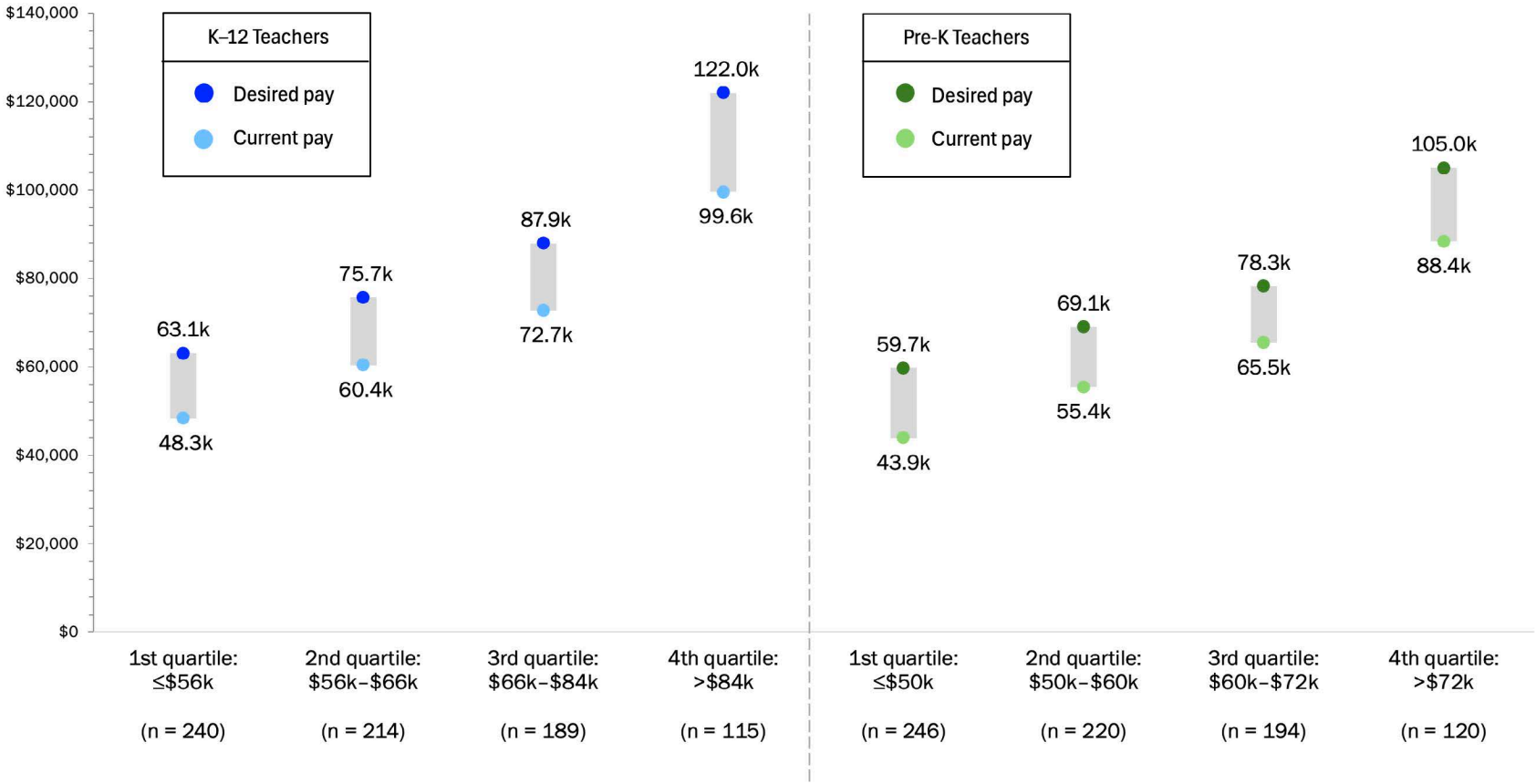
Figure 8 compares the shares of pre-K and K–12 teachers who considered their base pay to be adequate across years of teaching experience, highest degree earned, state bargaining status, and locale. In most subgroups, pre-K teachers' perceptions of their base pay were similar to or more positive than those of K–12 teachers. This is surprising, given that pre-K teachers reported lower base pay than K–12 teachers in almost all subgroups, as shown in Figure 6, and suggests that other factors, such as working conditions (e.g., principal support, administrative duties, or student behavior), could influence teachers' perceptions of their base pay. The fewer weekly hours worked reported by pre-K teachers (47 hours), relative to those reported by K–12 teachers (53 hours), could also play a role in pre-K teachers' more positive perceptions of their base pay. It is also possible that pre-K teachers compared themselves with ECE workers in home- or center-based settings, who typically receive lower pay (McLean et al., 2024).

In states where bargaining is prohibited, 37 percent of pre-K teachers and 25 percent of K–12 teachers, respectively, said that their base pay was adequate, a difference of 12 percentage points, even though average reported base pay was similar (as shown in Figure 6). Similarly, although pre-K teachers with five or fewer years of experience reported similar average base pay as K–12 teachers with the same experience, more pre-K teachers reported considering their base pay to be adequate.

Pre-K teachers who worked in rural and suburban areas were significantly less likely (6 and 5 percentage points, respectively) than pre-K teachers working in urban areas to consider their base pay to be adequate. The significantly lower average reported base pay of pre-K teachers who worked in rural areas compared with that of pre-K teachers who worked in urban areas could explain their reported lower perceptions of adequacy. However, pre-K teachers who worked in suburban areas did not report significantly different pay than those who worked in urban areas, so their lower reported perceptions of base pay adequacy are somewhat surprising.

Pre-K teachers who worked in states where bargaining is allowed but not required were significantly less likely than pre-K teachers who worked in states where bargaining is required to consider their base pay to be adequate. This is another gap that could be explained by the significantly lower average reported base pay among the former group. This difference remained even when we controlled for school and teacher characteristics (see "How This Analysis Was Conducted" for full list of variables in the multivariate model).

Figure 9. The Gap Between the Current and Desired Base Pay of Pre-K and K–12 Teachers, Among Those Who Considered Their Base Pay to Be Inadequate



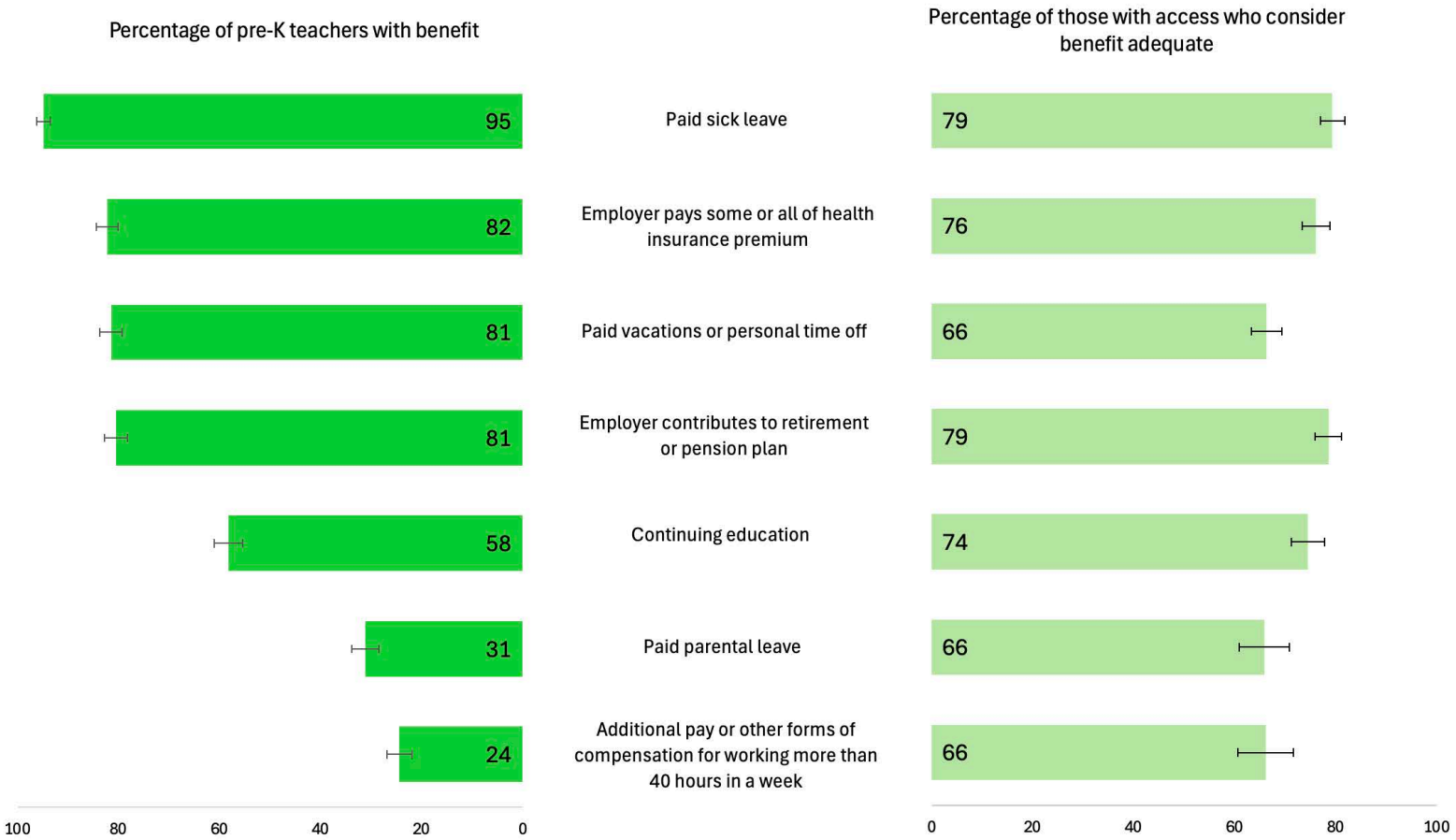
NOTE: This figure shows the difference between the average current and average desired pay of pre-K–12 teachers who, within each base pay quartile, considered their base pay to be somewhat or completely inadequate. Pre-K teachers were asked, "This school year (2023–2024), assuming your role and responsibilities remain the same, how much would your base annual pay have to be for you to consider it completely adequate? Your base annual pay is your pay before adding any additional compensation for extracurricular or additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses," and "This school year (2023–2024), what is your base annual pay, before taxes and deductions, for the entire school year? Your base annual pay is your pay before adding any additional compensation for extracurricular or additional activities, merit pay, or bonuses." K–12 teachers were asked, "Assuming your role and responsibilities remain the same, how much would your base teaching salary have to be for you to consider it completely adequate?" and "During the current school year (2023–2024), what is your base teaching salary for the entire school year?" Base pay quartile calculations included those who considered their base pay to be adequate.

Figure 9 shows the differences between reported current and desired base pay for the 2023–2024 school year by current base pay quartile among pre-K and K–12 teachers who considered their base pay to be somewhat or completely inadequate. Pre-K teachers who said that their base pay was inadequate desired a $14,600 raise on average, which amounts to about 25 percent of their reported average base pay. Compared with the roughly $16,000, or 22 percent, base pay increase desired by K–12 teachers, pre-K teachers desired a smaller absolute but larger relative increase.

Among pre-K teachers who considered their base pay to be inadequate, those in the first and fourth base pay quartiles desired the largest average increases in pay—roughly $16,000, on average. However, relative to reported base pay, those in the first quartile desired the largest increase at 36 percent, compared with 19 percent for teachers in the fourth quartile. Pre-K teachers in the second and third base pay quartiles who considered their base pay to be inadequate desired average increases of $13,600 and $12,800, or 25 and 20 percent of their current base pay, respectively.

The Department of Education reported about 71,000 U.S. public school pre-K teachers in the 2022–2023 school year (Common Core of Data, undated). Applying our estimate of the percentage of pre-K teachers who considered their base pay to be inadequate (62 percent) to this number suggests that there were roughly 44,020 pre-K teachers working in public schools who considered their base pay to be inadequate. If these pre-K teachers desired an average base pay increase of $14,600, as our sample suggests, paying each of them their desired salary increase during the 2023–2024 school year would have amounted to roughly $643 million.

Figure 10. Pre-K Teachers' Access to and Perceived Adequacy of Benefits



NOTE: This figure shows pre-K teachers' responses to the question "During this current school year (2023–2024) which benefits do you receive from the school or school system in which you work, and how inadequate or adequate do you consider each benefit?" regarding the benefits listed. Response options were "I do not have this benefit"; "I have this benefit, but it is completely inadequate"; "I have this benefit, but it is somewhat inadequate"; "I have this benefit, and it is somewhat adequate"; "I have this benefit, and it is completely adequate"; "This benefit is not applicable to me"; and "I don't know." *Having a benefit* is defined in this figure as a response of "I have this benefit, but it is completely inadequate"; "I have this benefit, but it is somewhat inadequate"; "I have this benefit, and it is somewhat adequate"; or "I have this benefit, and it is completely adequate." *Considering a benefit adequate* is defined in this figure as a response option of "I have this benefit, and it is somewhat adequate" or "I have this benefit, and it is completely adequate." Teachers who responded "This benefit is not applicable to me" or "I don't know" are excluded from the denominator. Teachers who had each benefit (left side of figure), *n* = 1,368–1,371; teachers who considered each benefit to be adequate (right side of figure), *n* = 328–1,294.

Figure 10 displays the percentages of pre-K teachers who reported access to common employer-provided benefits alongside the percentages of those with access to each benefit who considered them to be adequate. The most common benefit among pre-K teachers was paid sick leave, to which 95 percent reported access. The least common benefit was additional pay or other compensation for working more than 40 hours in a week. Only 24 percent of pre-K teachers reported access to this benefit, which suggests that a large share of the three-quarters of pre-K teachers who worked more than 40 hours a week did so without receiving additional pay or compensation.

Around two-thirds of pre-K teachers who had paid vacations or paid time off, paid parental leave, and additional pay or compensation for working more than 40 hours a week said that these benefits were adequate. The percentages of pre-K teachers who reported access to other benefits that we asked about and said that they were adequate were higher, falling between 70 and 79 percent. More pre-K teachers who had access to employer-subsidized health insurance, employer contributions to retirement or pension plans, and paid parental leave said that those benefits were adequate than did K–12 teachers who had access to those benefits. Differences for K–12 teachers ranged from 11 to 20 percentage points (Steiner, Woo, and Doan, 2024).

Although we were unable to explore the reasons for the difference between pre-K and K–12 teachers' perceptions in our survey data, one possible explanation is differences in workplace factors (e.g., student behavior, administrator support). Another possible explanation is that school-based pre-K teachers might compare the adequacy of their benefits with those of ECE workers in other settings, who receive employer benefits at much lower rates than school-based teachers (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2024).

Pre-K teachers who considered their base pay to be adequate were significantly more likely than pre-K teachers who considered their base pay to be inadequate to report access to paid parental leave, continuing education, and additional pay for working more than 40 hours a week. They were also significantly more likely to consider their benefits (with the exception of health insurance) to be adequate. This positive relationship between perceptions of adequacy of base pay and adequacy of benefits aligns with 2024 findings for K–12 teachers, adding to the evidence that access to high-quality employer-provided benefits is related to how teachers feel about their salary (Steiner, Woo, and Doan, 2024).

Pre-K teachers who worked in states where collective bargaining is required or allowed were significantly more likely to report access to health insurance and retirement or pension contributions, additional pay for working more than 40 hours in a week, paid parental leave, paid sick leave, and continuing education than were those who worked in states where it is prohibited. Pre-K teachers who worked in states where bargaining is allowed or required were also significantly more likely than those who worked in states where collective bargaining is prohibited to say that several of these benefits—employer health insurance contributions, retirement or pension contributions, and paid sick leave—were adequate.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

RAND researchers fielded the first PKTS to 1,427 public school–based pre-K teachers in March and April 2024. RAND randomly sampled pre-K teachers across the United States and invited them to enroll in the American Teacher Panel (ATP). Teachers who met our screening criteria were invited to take the PKTS (Grant et al., 2025a). Our screening criteria were teaching pre-K; teaching only kindergarten or first grade in addition to pre-K; and teaching as their main subject any of the following: elementary education (including pre-K), special education, English language arts, English as a second language, mathematics, natural sciences, or social sciences.[2] The sample was limited to lead or co-lead teachers in general education and special education. Among the 1,815 enrollees, 1,494 were eligible for and directed to the survey focused on pre-K teachers. Of those, 1,368 completed the survey, for a survey completion rate of 91.6 percent.

Each PKTS respondent was assigned a weight to ensure that estimates reflect the national population of pre-K teachers. Characteristics that factor into this process were descriptors at the individual level (e.g., age, race or ethnicity) and school-level characteristics (e.g., school size, locale). For more information on the recruitment process and weighting approach for the PKTS, see Grant et al., 2025a, and Grant et al., 2025b.

In this report, we compare teacher responses across subgroups defined by various teacher and school characteristics, testing for whether average responses for certain subgroups differed from a specified reference subgroup. We do not report exhaustively on all subgroup estimates on all survey items because the purpose of this report is to provide readers with figures and tables highlighting a selection of substantively important findings on the topics of teacher well-being, pay, and intentions to leave. The teacher and school subgroups that we discuss in this report were defined using information self-reported by teachers in the survey.[3] These subgroups are teaching in a part-day or full-day classroom, working as a special education teacher or general education teacher, working in an ECE-only building or a K–12 building, and years of teaching experience (five or fewer years, six or more years). In some cases, we report results by teacher race or ethnicity to compare pre-K and K–12 teachers. In some cases, we also run a multivariate regression model that includes school type, locale, years of experience, educational attainment, and bargaining status to assess whether differences are robust to inclusion of other measurable characteristics.

We defined *part-day teachers* as those who reported that 75–100 percent of their students were enrolled for fewer than five hours per day. We defined *full-day teachers* as those who reported that 75–100 percent of their students were enrolled for more than five hours per day. We defined *special education teachers* as those who said that their primary role was "special education teacher" or who selected "other" and then described their role as general education and special education teacher. We defined *general education teachers* as those who said that their primary role was "Lead or co-lead teacher." We defined teachers as *working in ECE-only buildings* if they worked in school buildings that had

[2] It was necessary to ask teachers about all potential grades and subjects taught to appropriately categorize teachers and weight the data. This approach also provides the panel with correct information for misclassified teachers who do not teach pre-K but are otherwise eligible to join our panel and respond to other surveys.

[3] Teachers self-reported school-level information that was not available in public-use data.

only early grades (pre-K to third) or only early childhood classrooms (serving children ages five and under). We defined pre-K teachers as *working in K–12 buildings* if they worked in other building configurations (e.g., grades pre-K to 5 or pre-K to 12). These definitions are based on respondent survey reports.

We relied on information provided by the National Education Association (NEA) to construct our categories of state-level collective bargaining. NEA provided information indicating the states where collective bargaining is required if teachers choose to vote for union representation (Alaska; California; Connecticut; Delaware; Florida; Hawaii; Idaho; Illinois; Indiana; Iowa; Kansas; Maine; Maryland; Massachusetts; Michigan; Minnesota; Missouri; Montana; Nebraska; Nevada; New Hampshire; New Jersey; New Mexico; New York; North Dakota; Ohio; Oklahoma; Oregon; Pennsylvania; Rhode Island; South Dakota; Vermont; Washington, D.C.; Washington; and Wisconsin), states where collective bargaining is allowed but not required (Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming), and states where bargaining is prohibited (Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas). We grouped Tennessee, where collaborative conferencing is permitted, with states where bargaining is allowed but not required. We obtained the data on district characteristics (e.g., locale) by linking survey data files to the 2023–2024 Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics.

We also used data from the 2024 SoT survey fielded to RAND's ATP and the 2024 SoT companion survey of similar working adults in the United States fielded to RAND's American Life Panel (ALP). The SoT survey has been administered yearly to K–12 teachers in January via the ATP since 2021. The 2024 SoT survey and ALP companion survey were completed by 1,479 and 501 respondents, respectively, across the months of January and February 2024. Each SoT survey respondent was assigned a weight to ensure that estimates reflect the national population of teachers, and each ALP respondent was assigned a weight to ensure that estimates reflect the national population of working adults. For more information about the SoT, see Doan et al., 2024.

The measures of job-related stress used in this report were previously fielded in the 2021, 2022, and 2023 SoT surveys. *Frequent job-related stress* is defined as a response of "Often" or "Always" to the question "Since the beginning of the 2023–2024 school year, how often has your work been stressful?" Working adults were asked to respond about their work stress since September 2023.

In Figures 5–9, we present averages of teachers' current reported base salaries and the salaries that teachers indicated would be "Completely adequate" for their roles and responsibilities, which we refer to as *desired salaries*. Our review of these data found substantial rates of outlier responses, with 4 and 11 percent of respondents inputting a current or desired salary, respectively, below $20,000 or above $250,000. We omitted these responses in calculating the average salaries presented in this report. We also omitted the responses of pre-K teachers who reported that they were paid by the hour (6 percent of respondents).

All estimates presented in this report are sample-wide or subgroup-specific estimates that are unadjusted for statistical controls. Estimates for each survey are separately produced using cross-sectional survey weights designed specifically to provide nationally representative estimates at the time that the survey was administered. We used linear regression models to test whether estimates for a particular subgroup

differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from estimates for the reference subgroup in that category without the use of any statistical controls. Subgroup estimates that are statistically significantly different from reference group estimates are denoted with an asterisk (*) throughout the report. Because the intent of this report is to provide exploratory, descriptive information rather than to test specific hypotheses, we did not make statistical adjustments for multiple comparisons. Readers should not interpret subgroup differences that are statistically significant as evidence of an effect of any specific teacher or school characteristic because there is substantial evidence that many teacher and school characteristics of interest are correlated with one another (Hansen and Quintero, 2018). Rather, our results are intended to highlight differences in reported experiences across subgroups of teachers and encourage additional research on the sources and causes of these differences.

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About This Report

In this report, we present selected findings from the first American Pre-K Teacher Survey (PKTS), conducted with public school–based pre-K teachers on the American Teacher Panel (ATP) in March and April 2024. The ATP is one of three survey panels that compose the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative.

The AEP Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of educator survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting, see *American Public School Pre-K Teacher Survey: Spring 2024 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (Grant et al., 2025b). If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other AEP-related publications, visit www.rand.org/aep or contact aep@rand.org.

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Funding

This report is based on research funded by the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit gatesfoundation.org.

Acknowledgments

We are extremely grateful to the educators who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. We thank Brian Kim and Daniel Ibarrola for serving as the survey managers and Gerald Hunter and Ruolin Lu for serving as the data managers for this survey, and Julie Newell, Tim Colvin, and Roberto Guevara for programming the survey. Thanks to Joshua Egan and Claude Messan Setodji for producing the sampling and weighting for these analyses. We also greatly appreciate the administrative support provided by Tina Petrossian and AEP management provided by Lisa Wagner. We are grateful to colleagues at the Gates Foundation for their support and collaboration. We thank PKTS team members Christopher Doss, Jill Cannon, Lynn Karoly, Emma Kassan, and Ashley Woo for their helpful feedback on this report. We thank Sy Doan, Benjamin Master, and Molly Michie for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report. We thank Anna Bloom for her editorial expertise and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process.