

The First Years Matter: Research Insights on Early Career Educators



Dr. Brett Jacobsen, SAIS President

What are the **top 5** challenges you are confronting within your school community? Choose up to five.

2025

1

annual fund & capital
campaign support - 47.4%

2

balancing daily demands
with strategy - 44.6%

3

retention & recruitment of
qualified staff - 42.9%

4

tuition & affordability -
30.9%

5

deferred facility maintenance
projects - 24.0%

2024

retention & recruitment of
qualified staff - 51.8%

annual fund & capital
campaign support - 49.2%

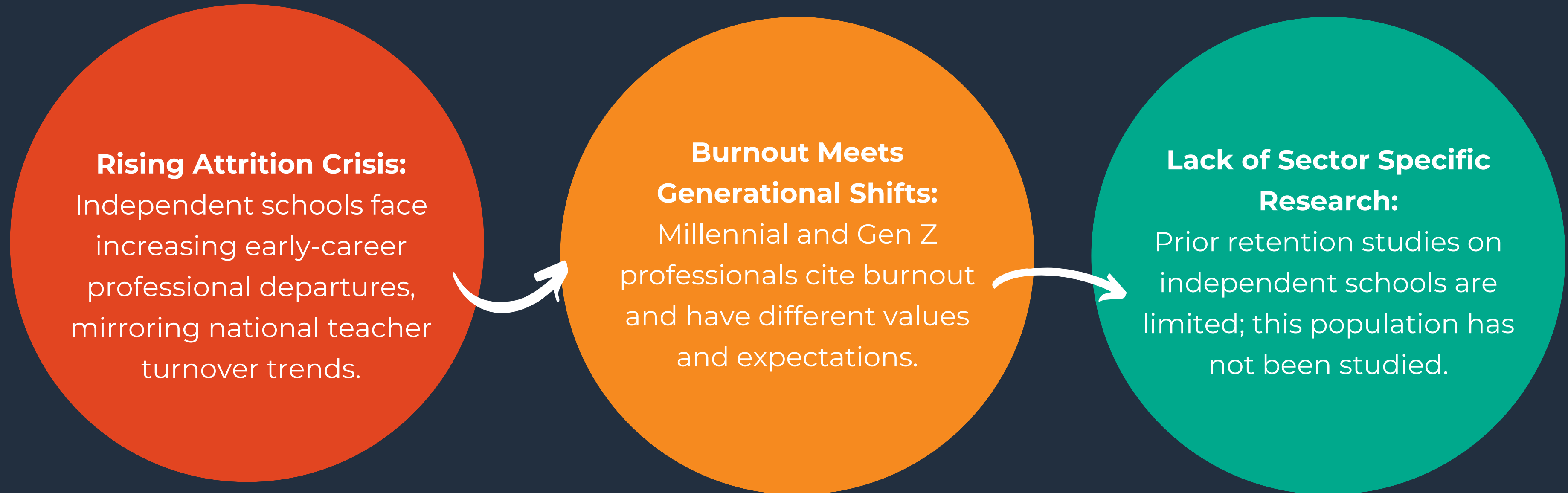
balancing daily demands
with strategy - 42.9%

tuition & affordability -
38.2%

deferred facility maintenance
projects - 31.4%



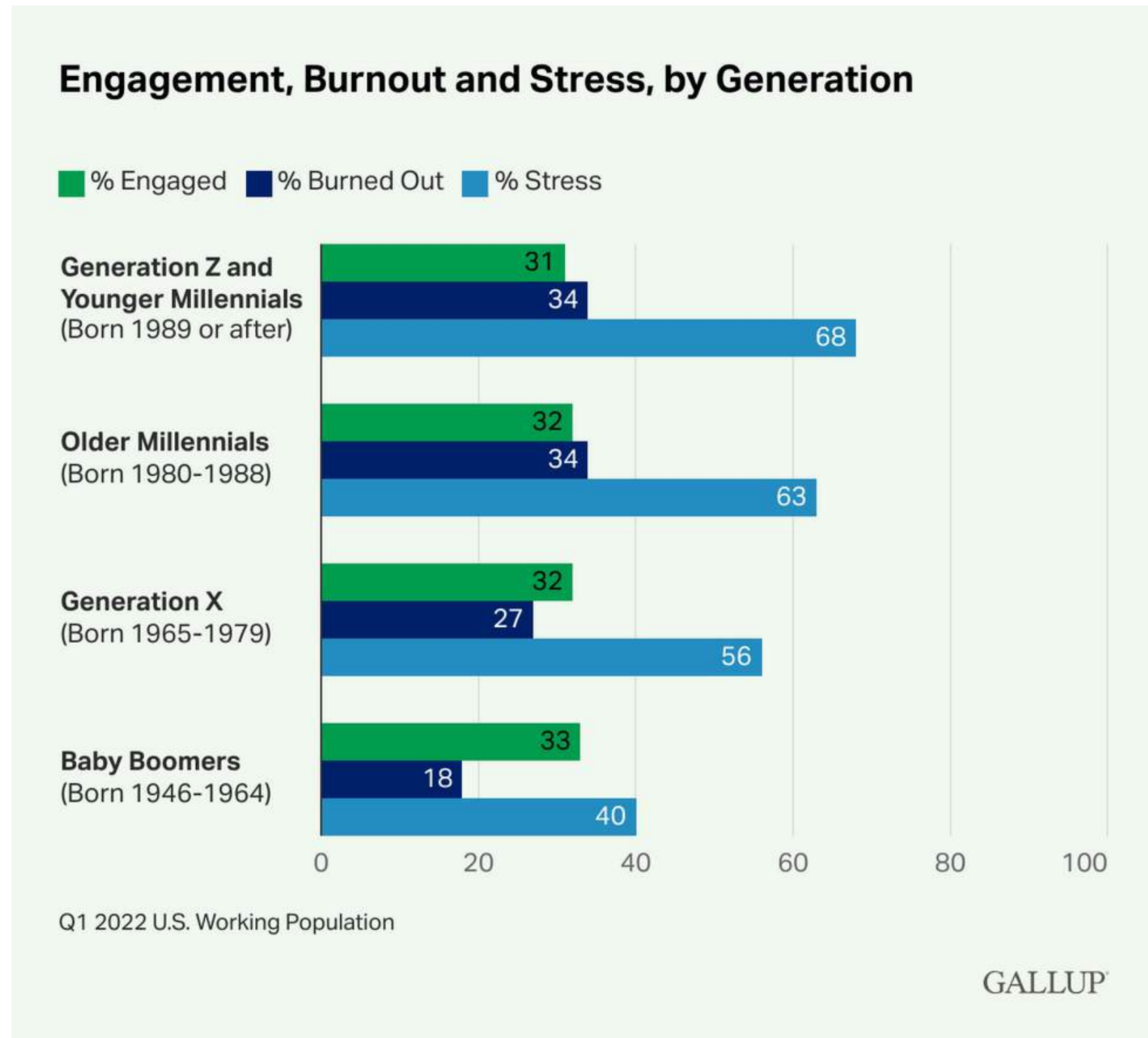
Why this Matters: The Challenge



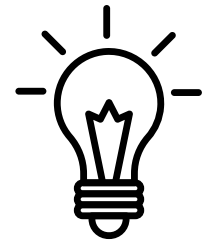
Why This Research Matters: The Challenge

Relative to their older counterparts, younger workers are trending as feeling:

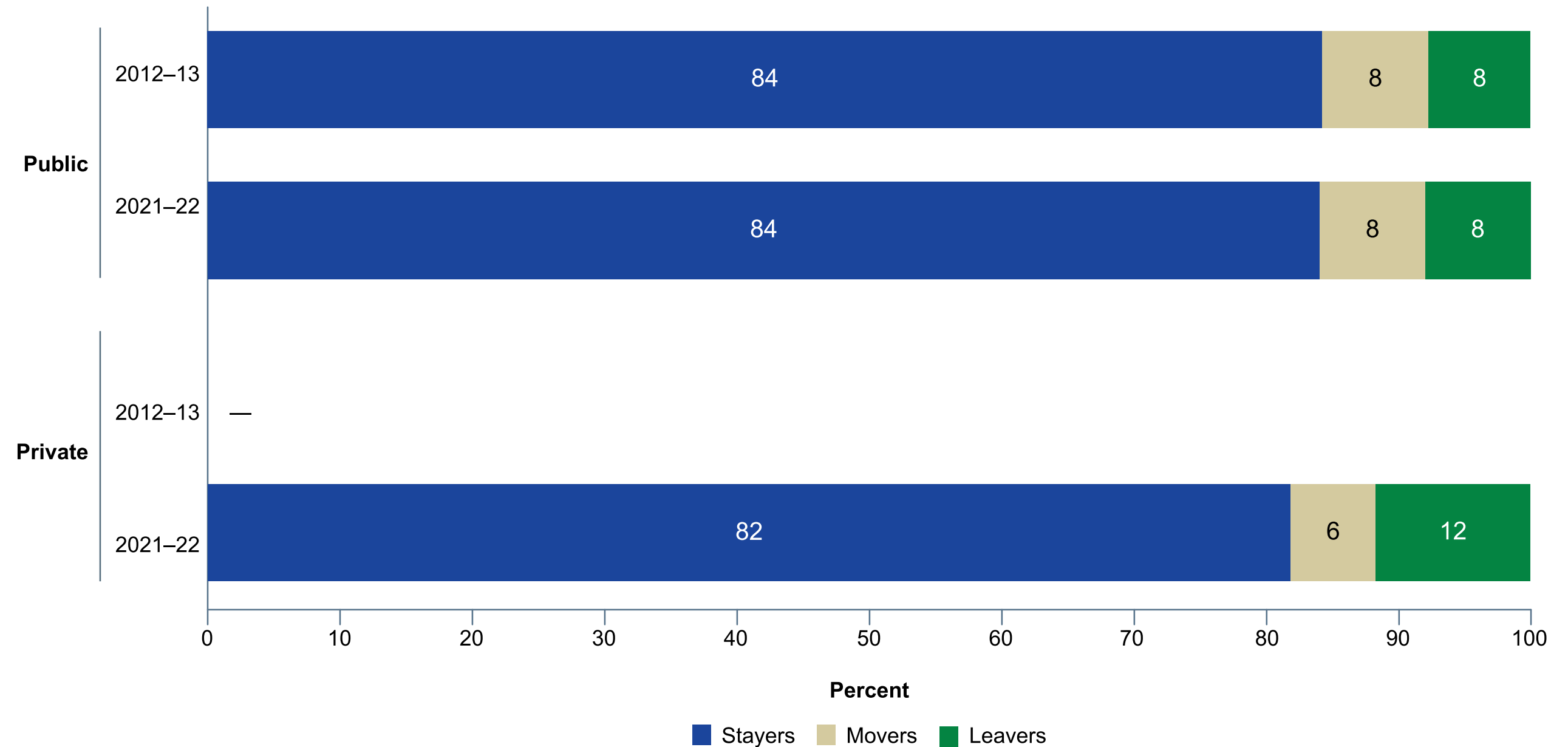
- **Less engaged**
- **More burned out**
- **More stressed**



Why This Research Matters: The Challenge



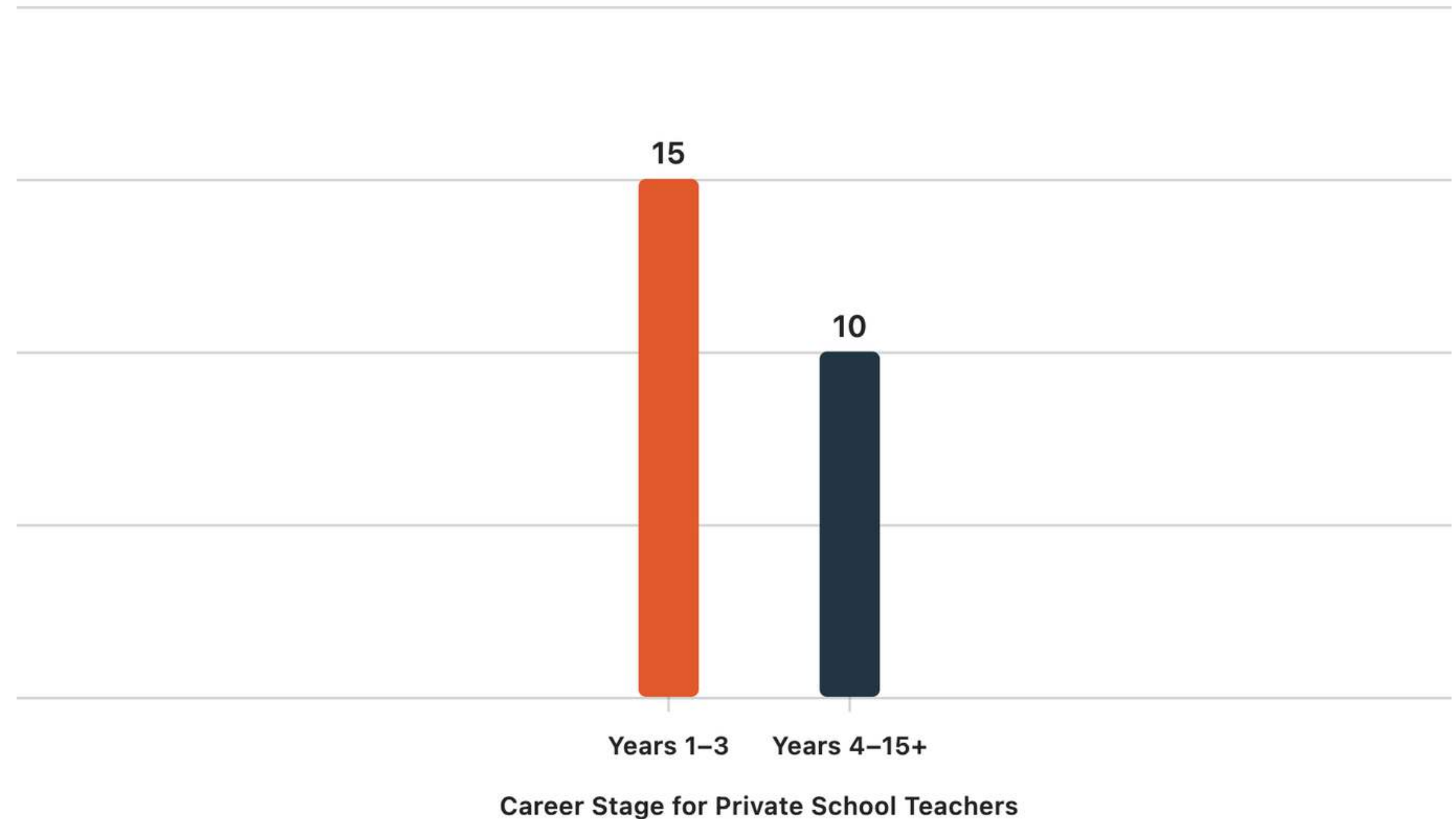
Relative to public schools (8%) more private school teachers are leaving the profession (12%).



Why This Research Matters: The Challenge

The percentages of private school teachers who **leave** the profession in **years 1-3** is **significantly higher** than those who leave in years 4-15.

Private school teachers are **50% more likely** to leave during this period than at any other time in their careers.



Problem of Practice



- Early Career Independent School Professionals' (ECISP) retention is critical to school sustainability
- High turnover disrupts culture, continuity, and costs
- Generational shifts demand new leadership approaches



Focal Population: ECISP



ECISP = Early Career Independent School

Professionals are individuals working in

independent schools between the **ages of 23**

and 35 with **less than 7 years** of experience

working in independent schools; not exclusively

teachers, may serve as staff/administrators



1

What contributes to and mitigates early-career independent school professionals' sense of satisfaction, belongingness, and embeddedness at work?

2

What specific resources do early-career independent school professionals need to enhance their sense of support and motivation to stay?

3

How can independent school leaders support early-career professionals to strengthen their commitment to a long-term career in independent schools?

Research Questions



Participants Profile



SURVEY:

- 73% female, 24% male, 3% prefer not to share
- 14% non-white
- Median salary \$45-49K

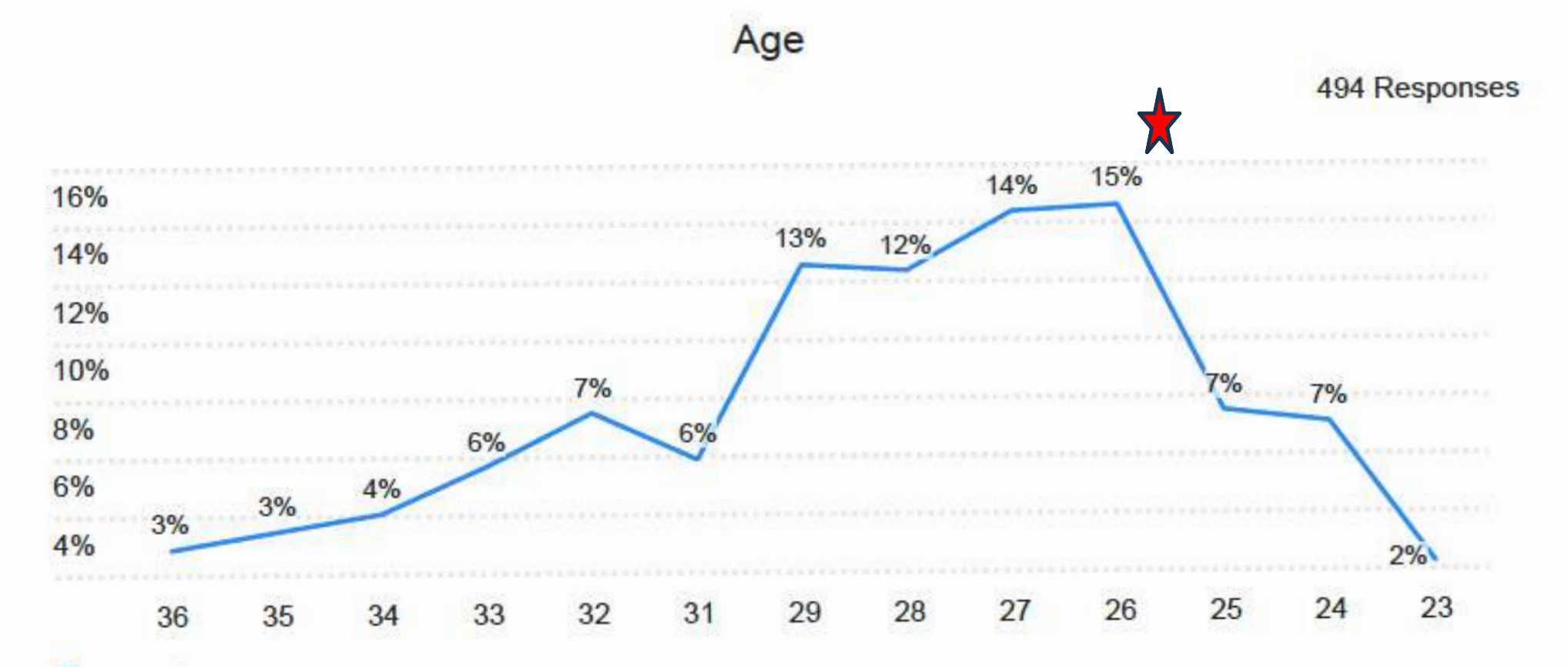
FOCUS GROUPS: 55% female, 45% male



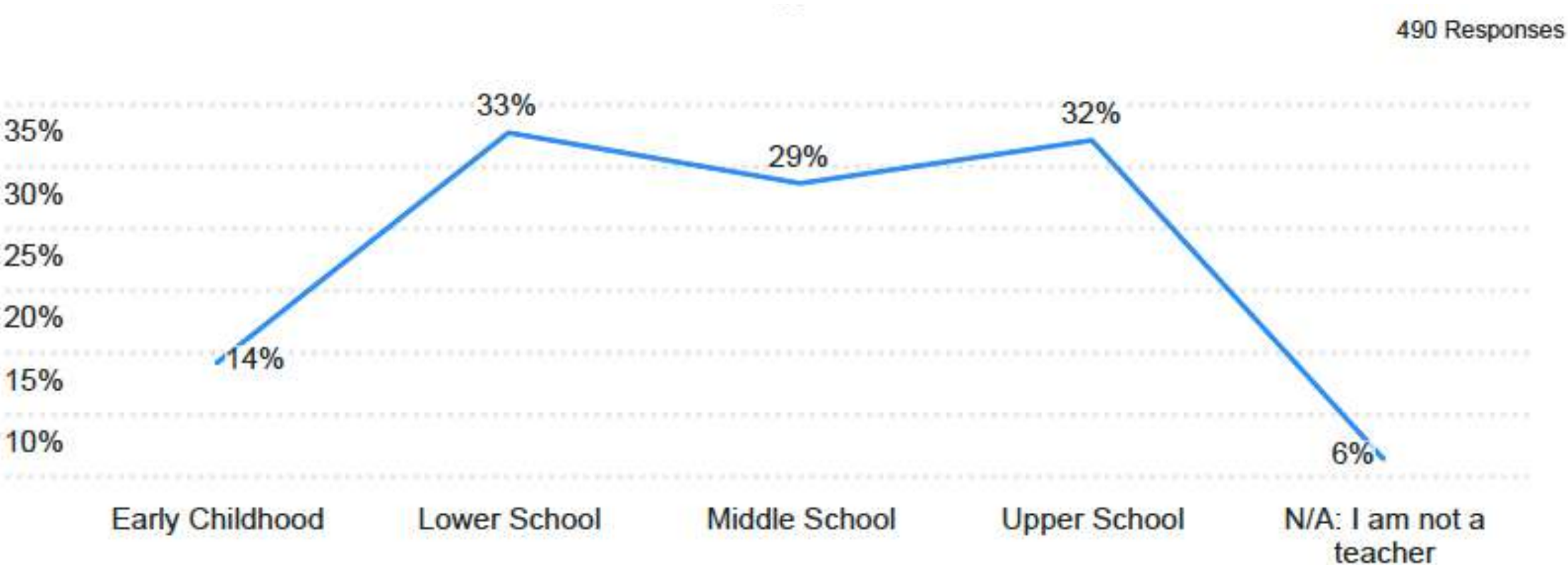
Participants Profile

Most participants in mid-20s
Peak age: **26**

33% Lower School/ 32% Upper/
29% Middle
14% Early Childhood
6% non-teaching professionals



Teaching Level



10 Key Findings



Findings 1-4: Barriers to Retention

1

Unsustainable Workloads

2

Lack of Feedback & Career Pathways

3

Lack of Role Clarity & Transparency

4

Diminished Support Over Time



Finding 1: Burnout is Fueled by Overwork and Invisible Effort

The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me.



4.04

- “Recognition, affirmation, and just the acknowledgement that the great things happening in the classroom are not going unnoticed—that’s being seen.”
- “I’ve stayed loyal, but it feels like that loyalty isn’t rewarded or even acknowledged.”



Finding 1: Burnout is Fueled by Overwork and Invisible Effort

Even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice.



4.02

- “I really did feel overworked, like I was getting there at 6:30 in the morning, and leaving at like 6:30 at night, and I just was constantly bringing work home.”
- “The better I do at something, the more work I get. It’s like a punishment for being competent.”

Finding 2: Unclear Pathways and Uneven Feedback Undermine Retention

My career goals are well considered by the organization.

“Career growth feels vague and inaccessible unless you push for it yourself. You have to ask, ‘What’s my next step?’ and hope someone has an answer.”



2.97



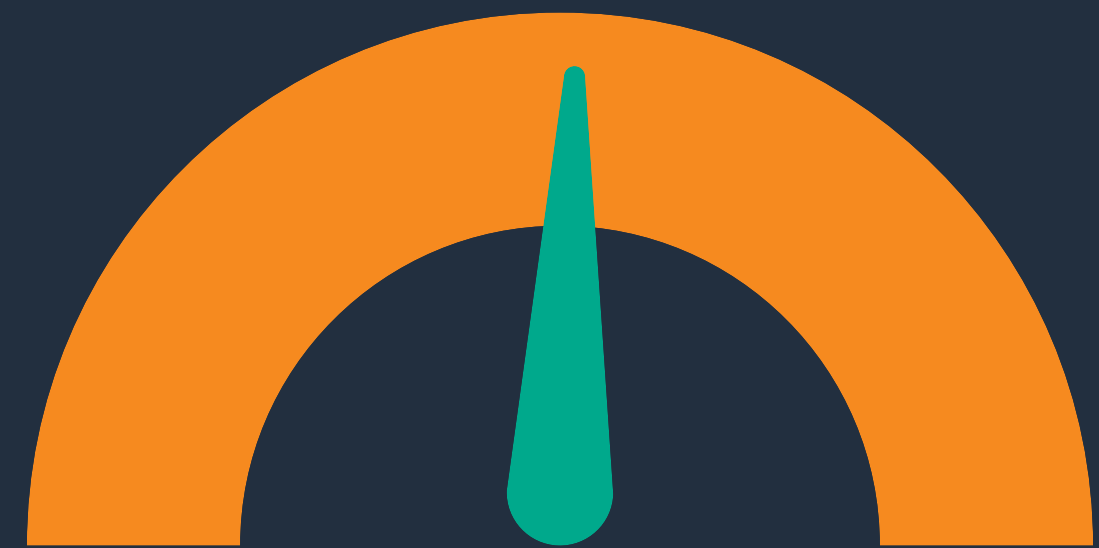
Finding 3: Lack of Role Clarity and Transparency Regarding Extra Duties and Contracts Creates Frustration and Undermines Retention

My accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded at the org.



3.53

I am well compensated for my level of performance in this occupation.



3.02



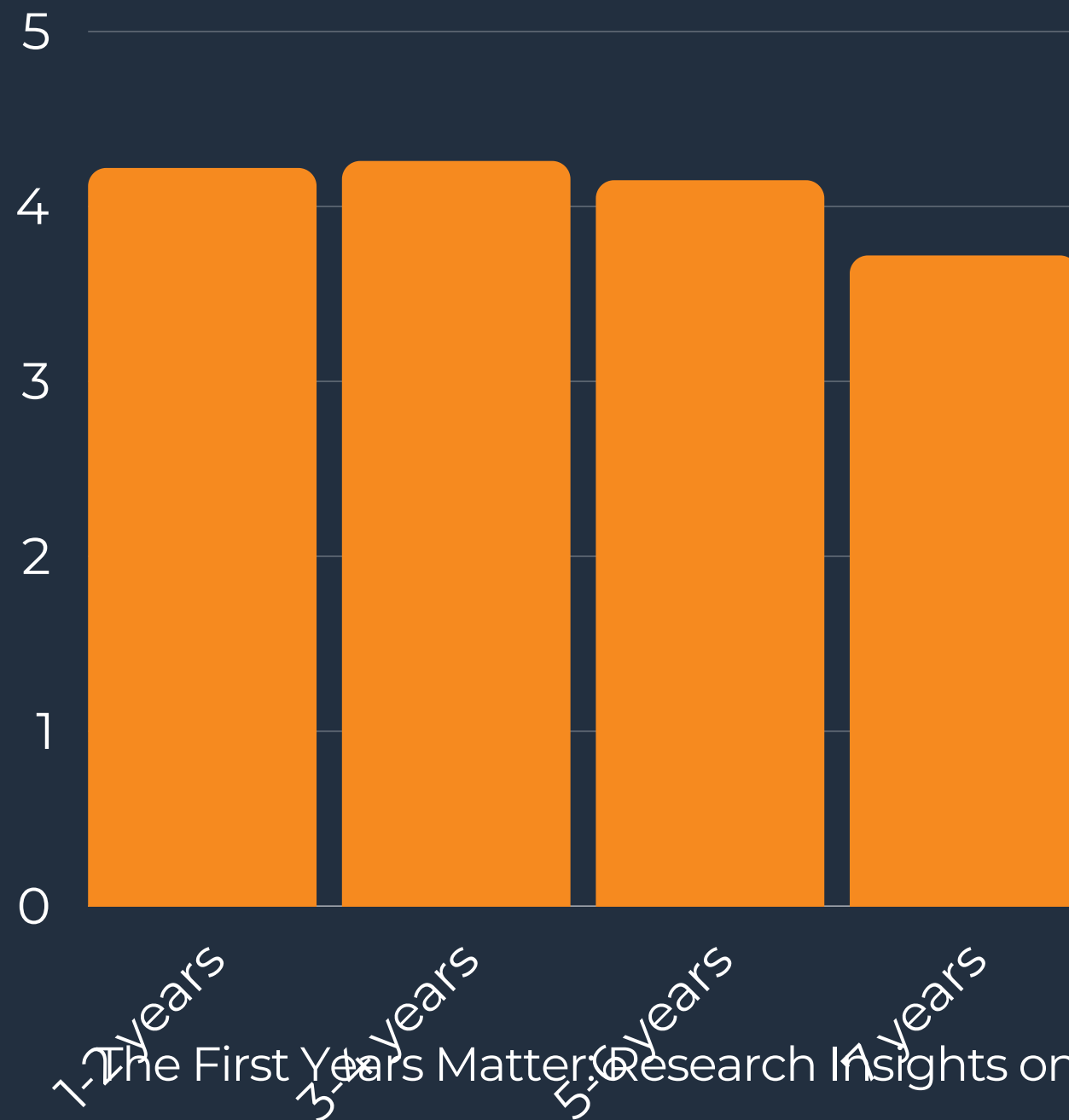
Finding 3: Lack of Role Clarity and Transparency Regarding Extra Duties and Contracts Creates Frustration and Undermines Retention

- “There’s a lack of transparency in contracts—what did you hire me for?”
- “Some extra duties are awarded an extra bonus, and some that are super labor intensive are not. It’s kind of a bummer.”
- “My first two years here I felt like I was drowning because there was so little framework on what I was supposed to be doing...”

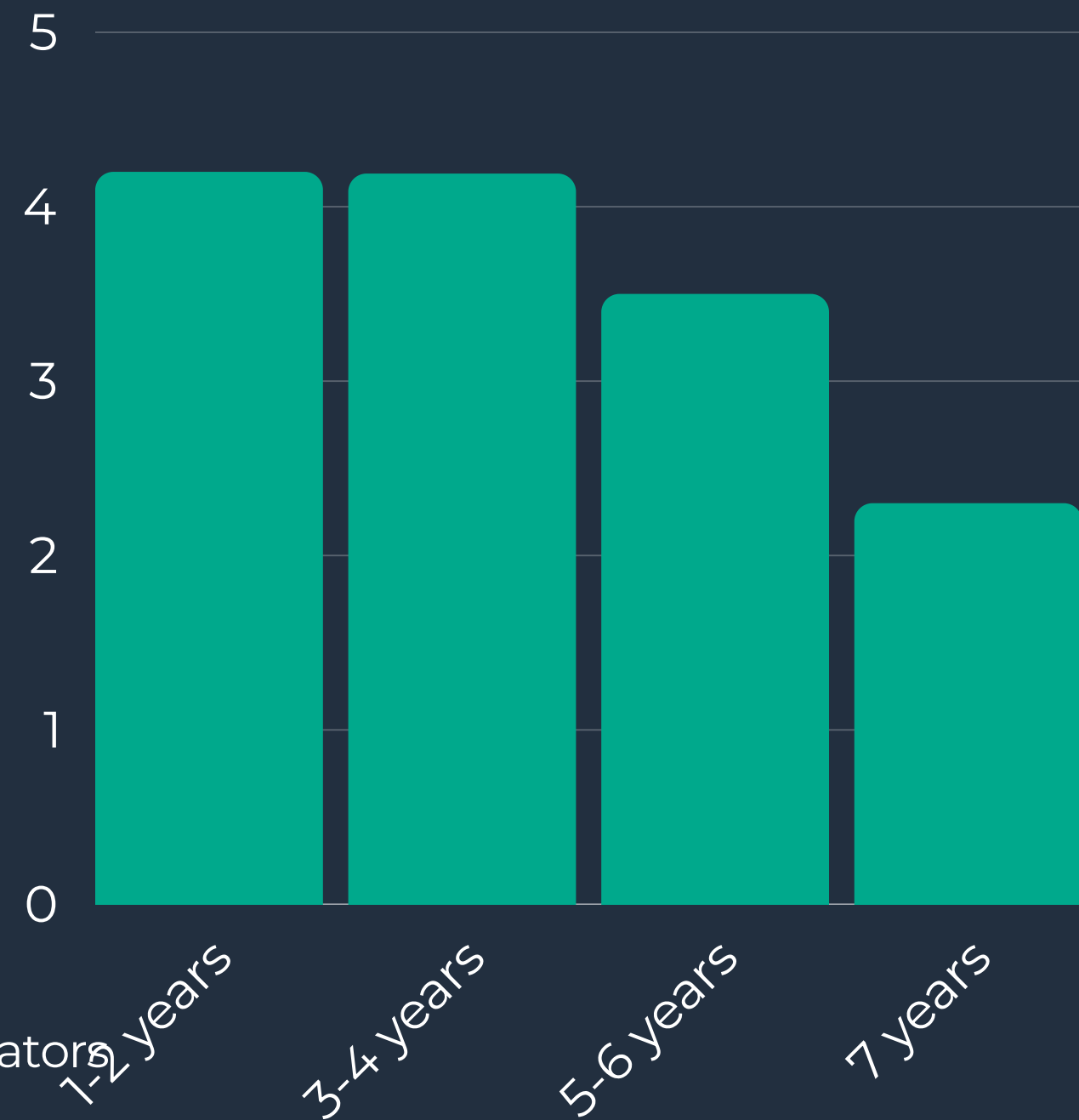


Finding 4: Support Perceptions Decline with Increased ECISP Tenure

Help is available from the organization when I have a problem.



The organization is willing to extend itself in order to help me perform my job to the best of my ability.





Pause for Questions



Findings 5-10: Drivers of Retention

5

Acts of Care

6

Professional Development

7

Recognition & Feeling Seen

8

Relationships & Community

9

Trust

10

Flexibility & Autonomy



Finding 5: Acts of Care from and Access to Leaders are Foundational Retention Factors

Beyond words, concrete supportive acts and availability of leaders drive ECISP retention.



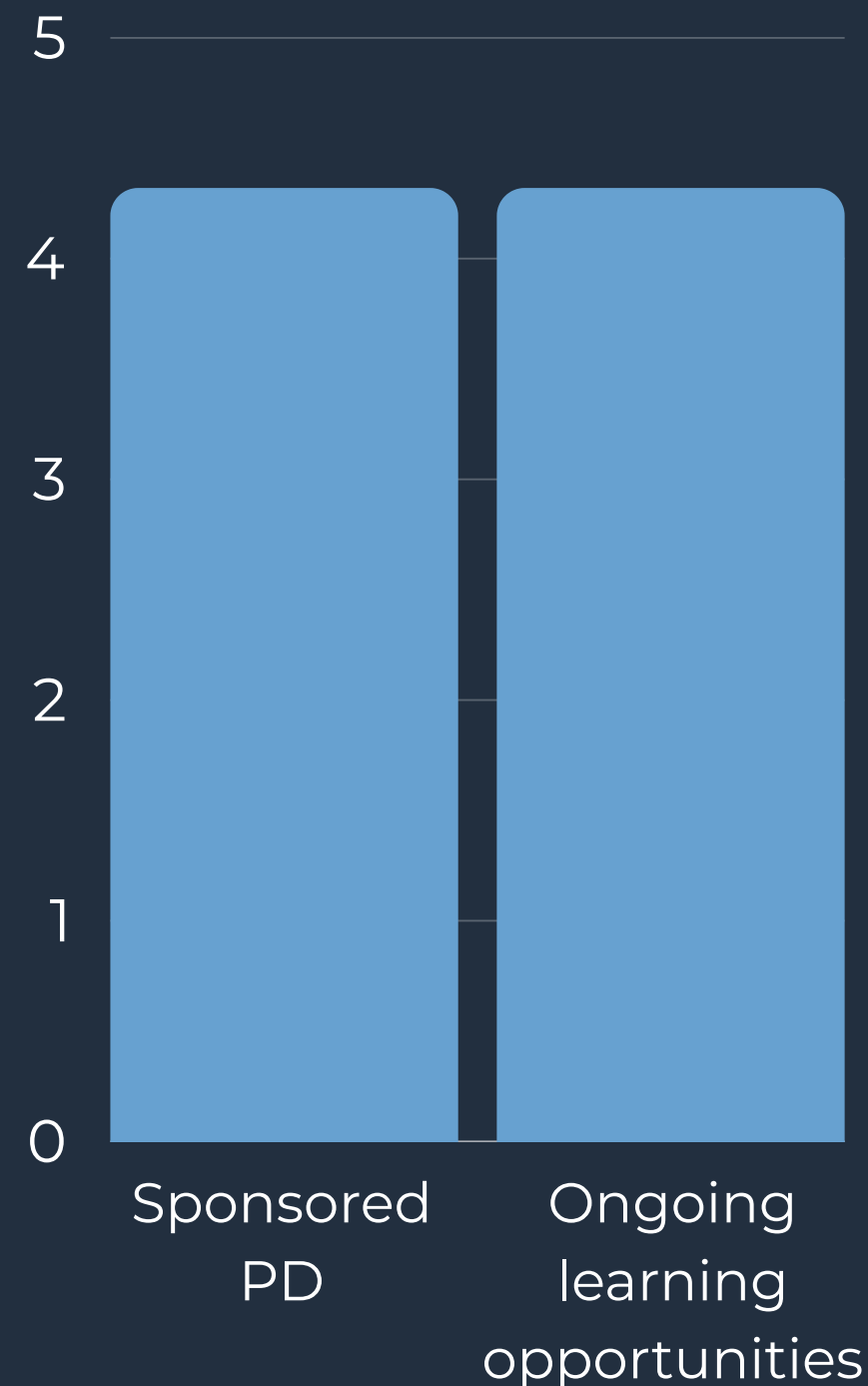
“I think coaching is huge when it comes to supportive admin.”

“Check-ins that are very casual...my Head has a way of saying things like ‘your kids are lucky to have you’ that are just sort of simple affirmations.”

“It’s more than just words, like, actually doing the action of helping you.”



Finding 6: Investment in Tailored Professional Development and Graduate Study Drive Motivation and Commitment



“Making a continued investment in us is motivating --continually asking the question, what do you need to feel successful?”

“I just applied for a master's program, and the school is going to help me pay for that. So at this point, I am not thinking about changing careers.”



Finding 7: Recognition, Loyalty, and Feeling Seen Are Critical to Retention

The organization cares about my opinions.

“Recognition, affirmation, and just the acknowledgement that the great things happening in the classroom are not going unnoticed—that’s being seen.”

“I’ve stayed loyal, but it feels like that loyalty isn’t rewarded or even acknowledged.”



3.74



Finding 8: Relationships and a Sense of Community Fuel Embeddedness. But some brand new ECISP struggle with social disconnection.

“The community of the faculty. I have found a lot of close friends of all ages and the people themselves that I work with day to day are reasons why I would want to stay.”

“Young professionals struggle to find community, especially if they didn’t grow up here.”

I have relationships that are useful for my career development in this organization.



4.23



Finding 9: Trust Builds Satisfaction and Commitment

Early career educators who experience a sense of trust at work report higher satisfaction and long-term commitment to their schools.

“In those moments where I am frustrated with something, and I wondered is this a job I can do for years and years and years in the future? I come back to the fact that it's just wonderful being at a place where I feel a sense of trust.”

“When I think of trust in schools. I think ‘Are you gonna have my back in a pinch?’ Are you going to support me, especially when the rubber meets the road?”

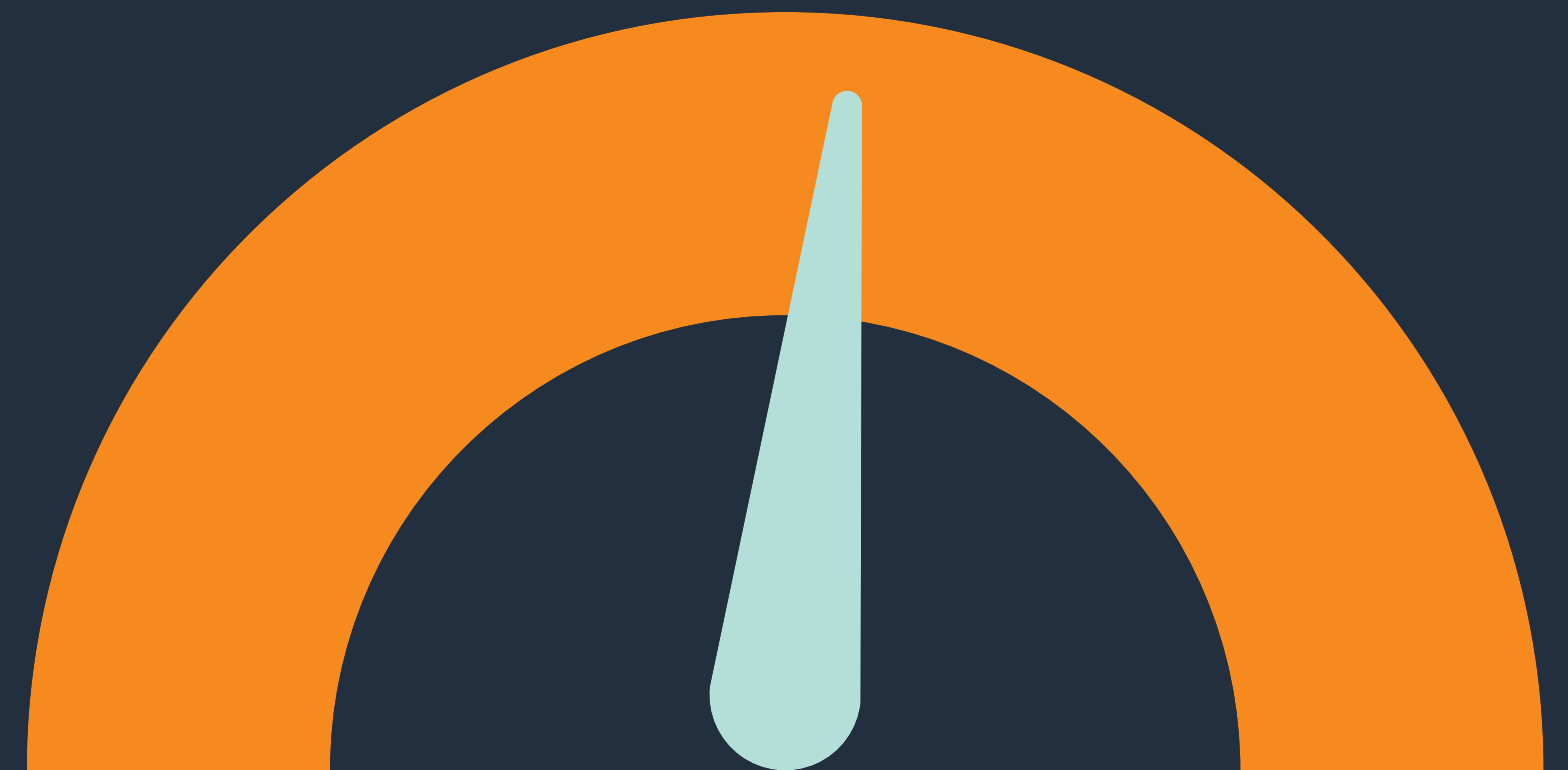


Finding 10: Flexibility and Autonomy are Strong Retention Drivers, While Lack of Planning Time is a Persistent Struggle

“My school piloted flex days—once a week, every Lower School teacher has the morning off until 10:30. They use it for meetings, grading, PD, or personal time. It’s fantastic.”

“You have enough planning time on paper, but then you’re pulled for admissions, meetings, evaluations... and before you know it, you’ve had no planning time at all.”

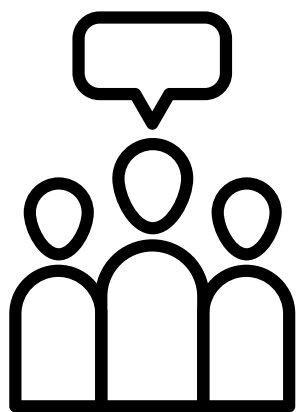
The organization offers me the possibility to flexibly arrange my work schedule, wherever possible.



3.11



Discussion of Findings



Barriers

Unsustainable Workloads

Lack of Feedback & Career Pathways

Lack of Role Clarity & Transparency

Diminished Support Over Time

Drivers

Acts of Care from Leaders

Professional Development

Recognition & Feeling Seen

Relationships & Community

Trust

Flexibility & Autonomy



Recommendations



Recommendations

Four Categories to Guide Organizational Improvement



Recommendations are all rooted in the study's theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory, Organizational Support Theory, Workplace Belongingness Theory, and Occupational Embeddedness Theory.



1

Habituate,
model, and
encourage
small acts of
care

2

Grow capacity
of mid-level
leaders

3

Integrate
formal &
informal
recognition
practices

4

Establish
multi-tiered
mentorship
programs

5

Promote
ECISP voice
via feedback
mechanisms
such as pulse
surveys

Leadership Capacity & Relational Practices



1

Conduct
workload
equity audits

2

Clarify roles
via updated
job
descriptions

3

Interrogate
contract
language to
promote
clarity &
equity

4

Protect
planning time
through
strategic
master
scheduling

5

Implement
flexible work
policies &
compensate
extra roles
through
funds or
benefits

Human Resources Policies & Practices



1

Develop
internal
growth
pathways

2

Invest in
coaching
training &
resources

3

Provide
choice and
autonomy in
professional
development

4

Establish
structured
growth-based
feedback
systems
across teams

5

Communicate
with
transparency
about PD
opportunities,
resources, and
funding
policies

Career Pathways & Professional Growth



1

Promote co-teaching models

2

Launch social cohorts for ECISP, with focus on youngest employees

3

Design targeted support for employees in years 5-8 to promote connection

4

Reimagine onboarding to prioritize community building and sustained support

Community & Connection





Pause for Questions

