

# Voices of the Shortage:

2022 MISSISSIPPI TEACHER SURVEY

TOREN BALLARD AND RACHEL CANTER



# Acknowledgments

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## About Mississippi First

Mississippi First, a 501c3, was founded in 2008 by Rachel Canter. Driven to change the fact that Mississippi has historically been last, our founders set a bold vision: a Mississippi first in education nationally. Now in our second decade, Mississippi First is ready to dramatically accelerate our impact. The mission of Mississippi First is to champion transformative policy solutions ensuring educational excellence for every Mississippi child.



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Almost 2 in 3 Mississippi school districts are now classified as critical shortage areas. We asked 6,496 Mississippi public school teachers why.

## HERE IS WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY:



**Over half** (53.6%) report being “somewhat” or “very likely” **to leave the classroom within the next year.**



In making career plans, 91.4% report that **compensation** has “some” or “a great deal” of an impact—**higher than any other factor.**



With lowest-in-the-nation pay, **1 in 3 (36.2%) work second jobs**—and over 25% still remain food or housing insecure.



Across all nine measures of financial well-being, those who are struggling are much **more likely to leave the classroom** within the next year.

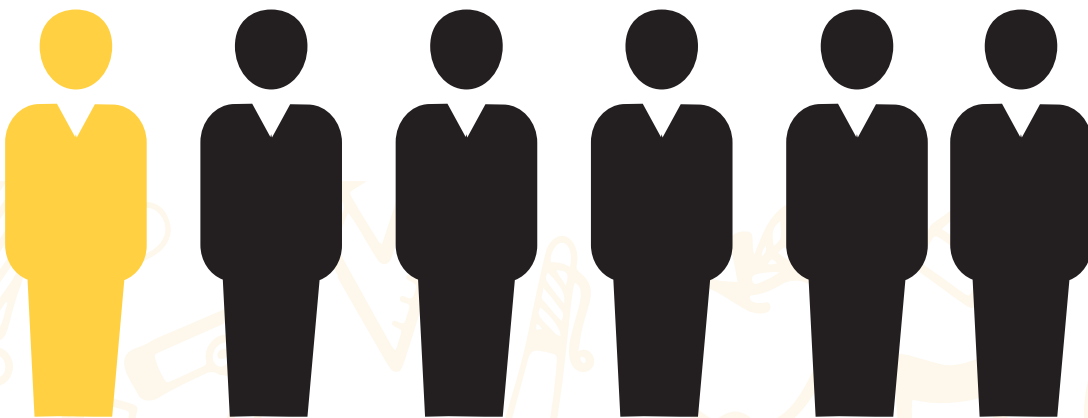


To address the critical teacher shortage, **88.4%** believe that a **\$3,000** raise would have “some” or “a great deal” of an impact—**higher than any other policy option.**

# Introduction

What do Mississippi teachers think about issues affecting the educator pipeline?

In our 2020 report, *Nothing in the Pipes: Educator Crisis in Mississippi*, we highlighted an alarming decline in the number of new teachers entering the profession and made the case that the rising cost of college attendance and the declining value of teacher salaries may be to blame. We offered a series of ambitious policy recommendations—namely a \$3,000 across-the-board raise—but warned that these would only be sufficient to reverse the recent downturn in new teachers, not comprehensively “solve” the critical teacher shortage.



To understand teachers’ perspectives on the educator pipeline and Mississippi’s teachers shortage, **we surveyed 6,496 current Mississippi public school teachers—about 1 in 6 statewide—**in November 2021 about their pathway into the profession, financial well-being, career plans, and policy preferences. We performed this survey in conjunction with the Survey Research Lab (SRL) at Mississippi State University and with the support of State Superintendent of Education Dr. Carey Wright.

# About This Brief

This brief will give **an overview of urgent, top-level findings** that have emerged from our initial reading of the survey results and answer the following questions:



How large is potential teacher turnover within the next year?



What is behind this potential exodus of Mississippi teachers?



What standard of living do Mississippi teachers face?



Are teachers who are struggling financially at a greater risk of attrition?



How can Mississippi lawmakers ensure an acceptable standard of living for teachers, and in the process, reverse the state's critical teacher shortage?

**The data show an educator workforce that is underpaid and ready to leave Mississippi classrooms in droves.** With this introductory policy brief, we hope to communicate to parents, lawmakers, advocates, and other stakeholders just how dire the situation has become and, most importantly, what we can do about it.

# How large is potential teacher turnover within the next year?

We asked teachers about their likelihood of leaving their current position within the next year to teach out of state, to take a different role in education, or to exit the profession entirely. Teachers were asked these questions separately (e.g., “How likely are you to . . . leave your current 2021-2022 position within the next year to teach in another state?”) so that they could rate each on a scale from “not likely at all” to “very likely.” As a result, teachers may have chosen none of these options, all of these options, or some combination. The results suggest that a significant number of Mississippi teachers are looking for any way out.

Over half (53.6%) of teachers surveyed indicate that they are likely to choose at least one of the following exits:



Nearly 1 in 5 teachers report being “somewhat” or “very likely” to leave to teach out of state.



1 in 4 teachers report being “somewhat” or “very likely” to take a different role in education.



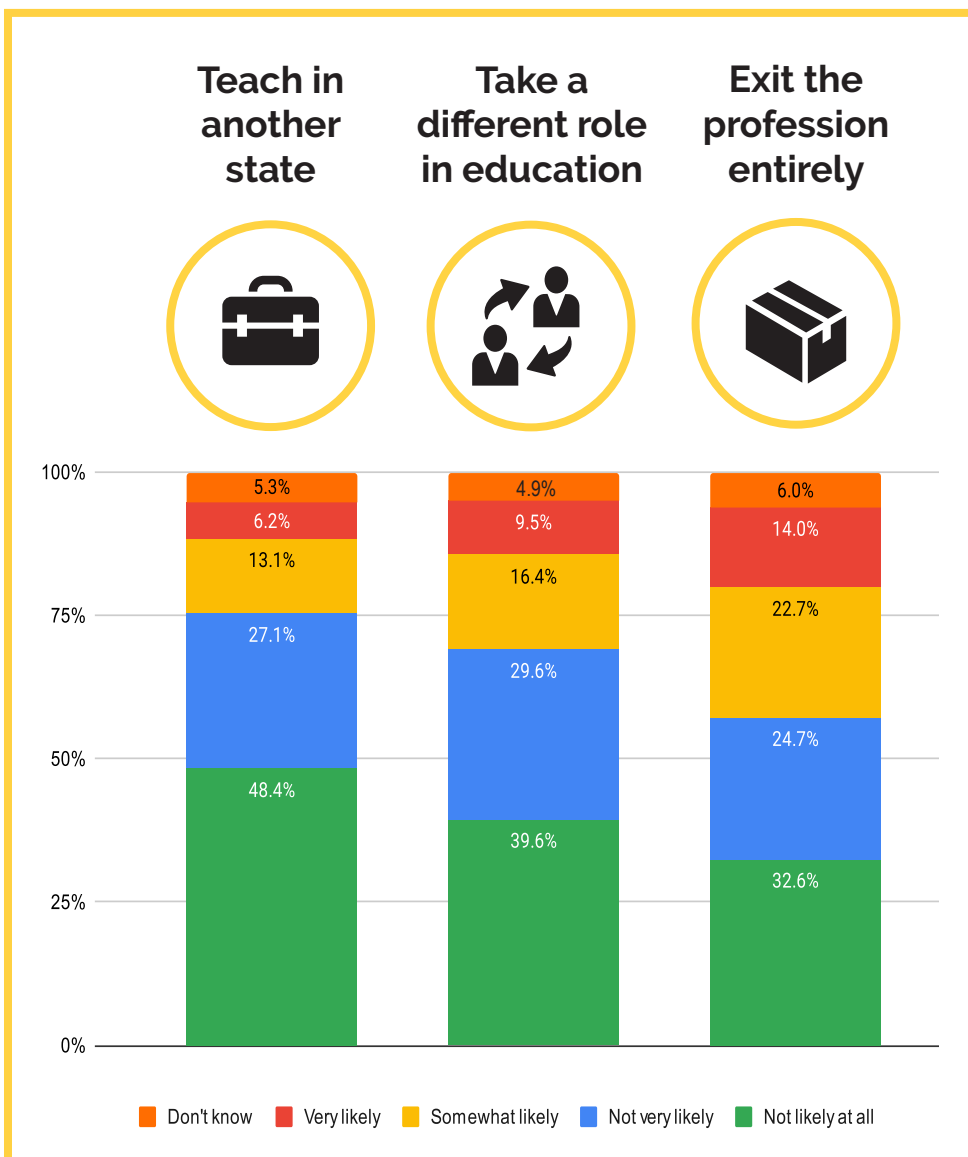
Over 1 in 3 teachers report being “somewhat” or “very likely” to exit the profession entirely.



**Finding #1:** Over half of teachers surveyed report being likely to leave their Mississippi classroom within the next year.

## Figure 1.

**ALL RESPONSES:** As of now, how likely are you to take the following actions?



## INSIGHT:

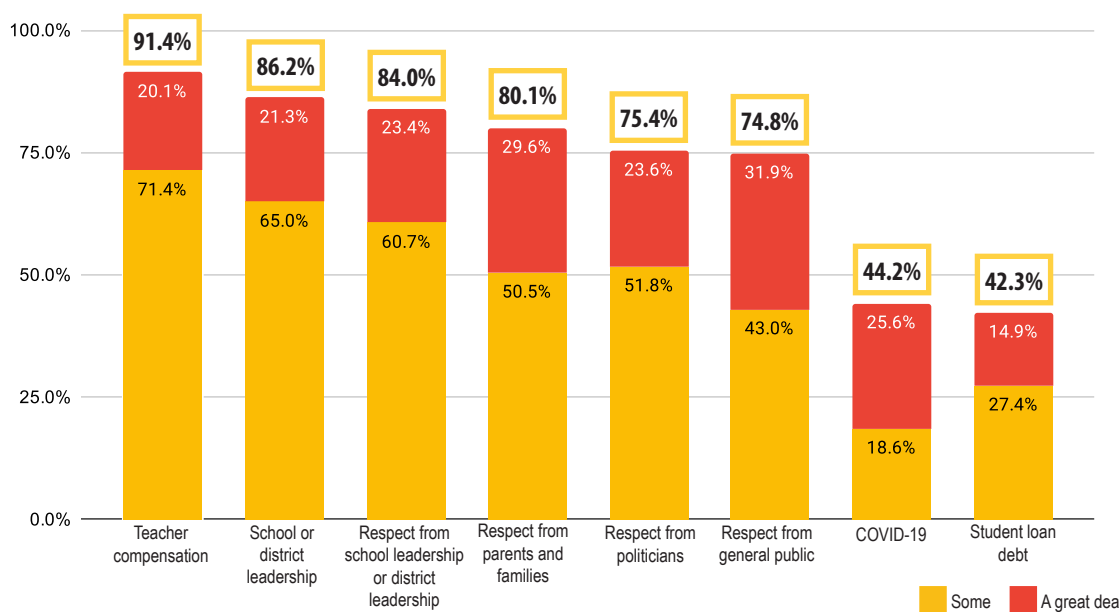
Efforts to strengthen Mississippi's educator pipeline and combat the critical teacher shortage have in recent years focused on reversing the decline of prospective teachers completing educator preparation programs, earning an educator license, and entering Mississippi classrooms—what we refer to as the “pre-service” educator pipeline. While recruiting and licensing new teachers remains a critical part of this equation, these efforts are all for naught if we are unable to retain current teachers in classrooms where they are desperately needed.

# What is behind this potential exodus of Mississippi teachers?

Whether they plan to remain in a Mississippi classroom, we asked teachers about what factors influence their career plans. Again, teachers were able to respond to these options separately, so they could have rated none, all, or some combination as having little or a great deal of importance. When looking at all of the responses, **teachers clearly indicate that compensation is the most important factor in their career plans** with 91.4% reporting that it has “some” or “a great deal” of an impact.

## Figure 2.

**RESPONSES OF “SOME” OR “A GREAT DEAL”:** Whether or not you plan to remain a Mississippi public school teacher, how much of an impact do the following factors have on your career plans?





## Finding #2: Compensation is by far the most important factor in career plans for surveyed teachers—especially those likely to leave.

To better understand which factors are specifically pushing teachers to consider leaving the classroom, we divided the sample into “likely leavers” (those who are “somewhat” or “very” likely to leave their Mississippi classroom within the next year) and “non-leavers” (those who are “not likely at all” or “not very likely” to leave).



**Teacher compensation** remains the most influential factor for likely leavers: 94.2% indicate it has “some” or “a great deal” of an impact.



Compensation is also far more likely to matter “a great deal” to likely leavers (78.4%) than non-leavers (63.3%), by far the biggest difference in perspective between the two groups.

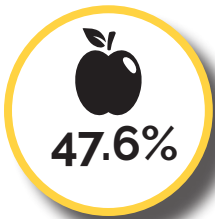
### INSIGHT:

Although compensation is important to both likely leavers and non-leavers, it is the primary factor driving likely leavers out of Mississippi classrooms. To better understand why compensation is more important to likely leavers, we examined the impact of lowest-in-the-nation average pay on an individual level.<sup>1</sup>

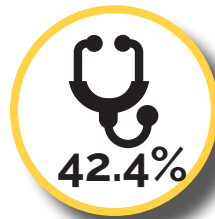
<sup>1</sup>National Education Association. “Teacher Pay and Student Spending: How Does Your State Rank?” Accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/teacher-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank>.

# What standard of living do Mississippi teachers face?

We asked teachers about their ability to afford basic necessities—food, housing, healthcare, etc.—as well as if they have second jobs and/or rely on various forms of government assistance. What we discovered is that **a sizable portion of Mississippi teachers live on the brink of poverty.**



Almost half of teachers cannot afford safe and reliable child care.



4 in 10 teachers are unable to afford deductibles or healthcare costs not covered by insurance.



1 in 7 teachers would not be able to afford an emergency expense of \$400.




More than 1 in 4 teachers are food insecure (**27.3%**), housing insecure (**29.6%**), and/or unable to afford reliable transportation (**28.0%**).



## Finding #3: Low pay is forcing many teachers to forgo basic necessities, take second jobs, and/or rely on government assistance.


With their meager paychecks, **too many teachers are relying on second jobs and government assistance.**

In total, half of teachers work additional jobs inside or outside of education.


  
50.4%

  
27.6%

Over 1 in 4 teachers have taken on additional responsibilities within their school district (teaching night classes, coaching, mentoring, etc.) to earn money.

  
36.2%

Over 1 in 3 teachers work second jobs outside of education.

  
4.6%

4.6% of teachers rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps.

## INSIGHT:

Many teachers are clearly in dire economic straits. On one hand, this is a moral crisis, as teachers are forced to endure a low standard of living as a prerequisite to a career in education. But we must also consider the implications for Mississippi children, particularly if a relationship exists between the standard of living faced by teachers and their likelihood of leaving the classroom.

# Are teachers who are struggling financially at a greater risk of attrition?

Splitting our sample again into likely leavers and non-leavers highlights an unsurprising truth: **likely leavers are more likely to suffer from a low standard of living than non-leavers**. Across the board, likely leavers are less likely to be able to afford basic necessities than non-leavers. Likely leavers are also more likely than non-leavers to



Have a second job outside their school system (42.3% vs. 29.2%).



Not have an emergency or rainy day fund to cover expenses for 3 months (75.2% vs. 69.0%).

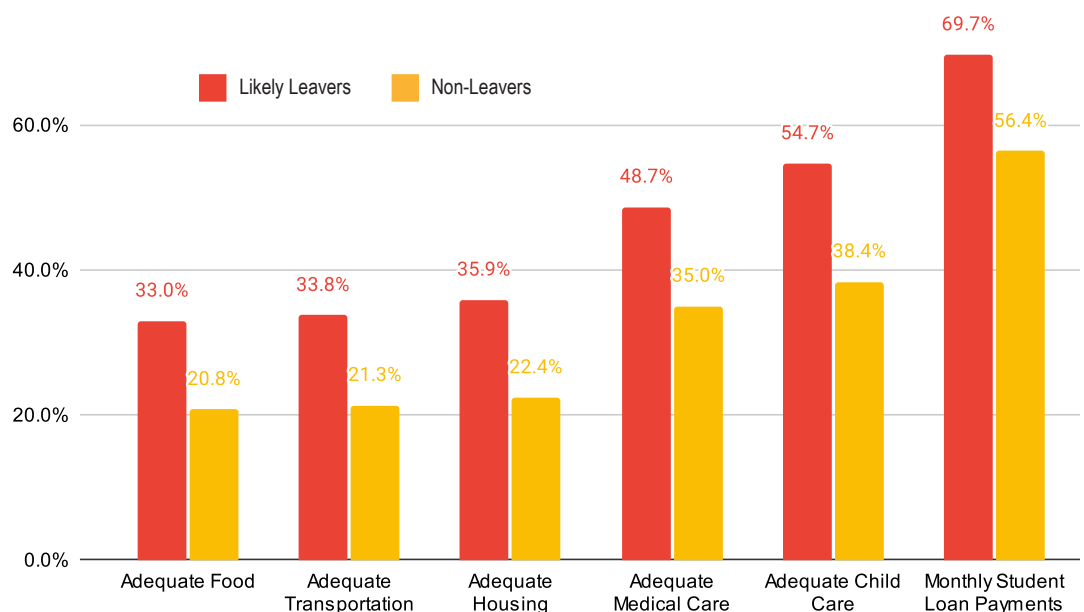


Be unable to cover a \$400 emergency expense (17.4% vs. 12.5%).

## Figure 3.

### RESPONSES OF "DISAGREE" OR "STRONGLY DISAGREE":

My household income is sufficient to afford...



**Finding #4:** Teachers who are struggling financially are much more likely to leave the classroom within the next year.



## INSIGHT:

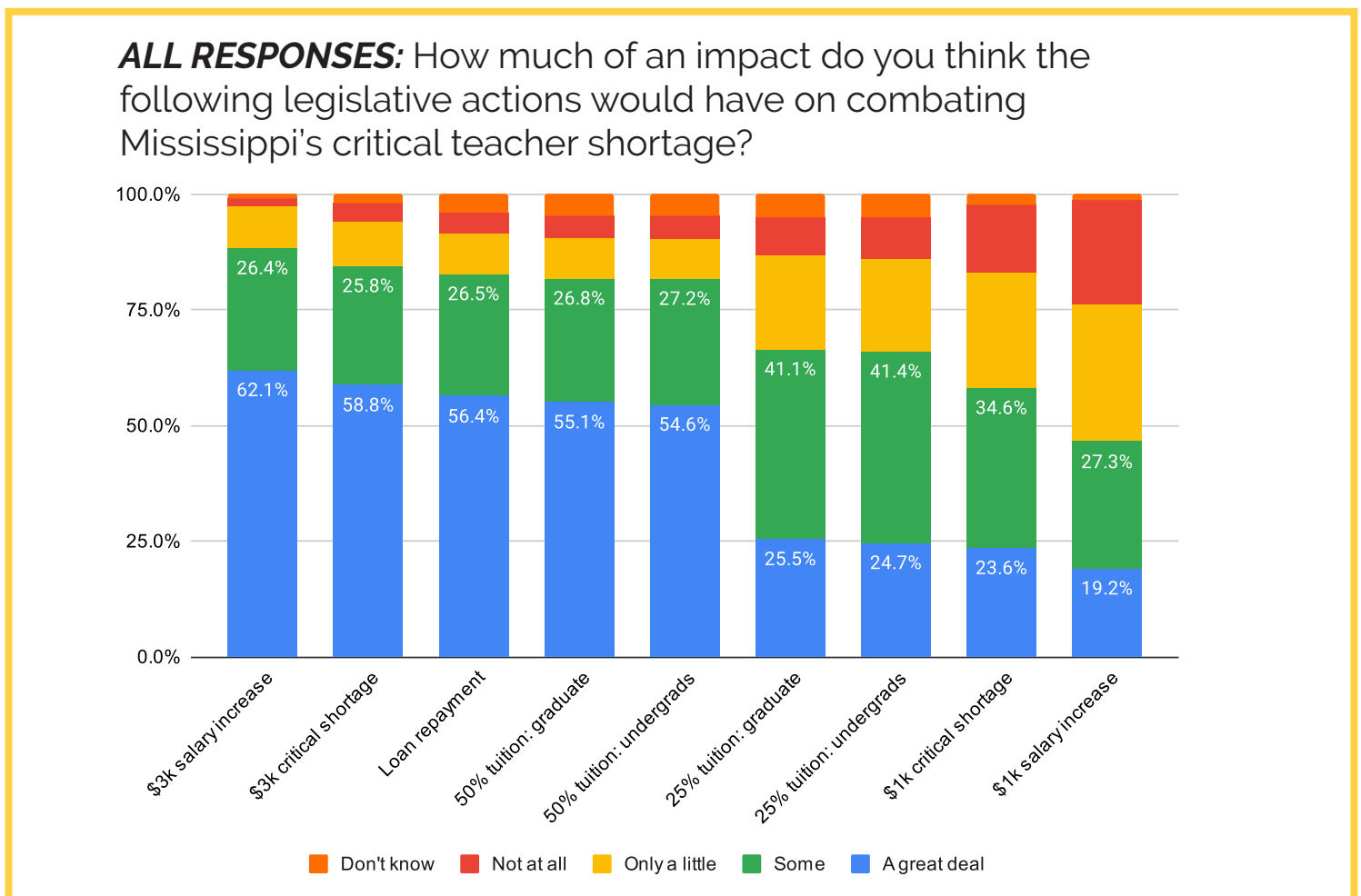
Teachers are not preparing to leave Mississippi classrooms simply because their salaries fall last on a list of nationwide rankings. Teachers are preparing to leave Mississippi classrooms because they are hungry, in debt, unable to afford healthcare, and forced to work second jobs just to get by. Lowest-in-the-nation average pay may be embarrassing for the state of Mississippi, but it is the resulting standard of living endured by teachers that is truly shameful.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>National Education Association. "Teacher Pay and Student Spending: How Does Your State Rank?" Accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/teacher-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank>.

# How can Mississippi lawmakers ensure an acceptable standard of living for teachers, and in the process, reverse the state's critical teacher shortage?

We presented teachers with a list of actions the legislature can take to address the critical teacher shortage—an across-the-board pay raise, loan repayment assistance, etc.—and asked them how much of an impact each action would have. Importantly, we presented some identical legislative actions with different levels of investment. The results indicate that **our success as a state hinges more on the level of state investment than which particular action the legislature choose.**

**Figure 4.**



## Finding #5: Teachers strongly prefer well-funded compensation strategies, rather than any particular type of strategy.

According to teachers, an across-the-board pay raise, stipends for teachers in critical shortage areas, loan repayment assistance, and grants for undergraduate education majors are all impactful tools for combating Mississippi's critical teacher shortage—but it all depends on the level of investment.



A raise of \$3,000 appears to be the **most effective option**: 88.4% of teachers report that such a raise would have “some” or “a great deal” of impact in combating Mississippi's critical teacher shortage.



A \$1,000 raise appears to be the **least effective option**: less than half (46.5%) indicate it would have “some” or “a great deal” of impact.



A similar dynamic is present with **stipends for teachers in critical shortage areas** and with **tuition grants for prospective teachers**: teachers prefer these strategies when they are well funded (\$3,000 stipend or 50% tuition) but do not prefer them when the investment is lower (\$1,000 stipend or 25% tuition).

## INSIGHT:

When teachers are already forgoing basic necessities, working second jobs, and/or relying on government assistance to survive, sporadic and piecemeal investments are simply not enough. A \$1,000 raise every couple of years—about a 2% raise for the average teacher—merely offsets cost of living increases from rising prices for food, housing, fuel, and insurance premiums. If legislators want to reverse—rather than simply mitigate—the critical teacher shortage, they will have to make an investment large enough to outpace expected inflation.



## Conclusion

Across every metric Mississippi's critical teacher shortage is becoming more acute. The number of critical shortage districts has almost doubled in two years. In December, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) reported over 3,000 certified teacher vacancies across the state.<sup>3</sup> The number of new teachers graduating from educator preparation programs in Mississippi is down 30% in 10 years, and the pipeline of out-of-state teachers is now practically non-existent. Meanwhile, the inflation-adjusted value of the average Mississippi teacher salary has dropped, while the cost of attending college has risen—two trends that each correlate closely with the health of Mississippi's educator pipeline.<sup>4</sup>

Lost in these statistics is the lived experience of Mississippi public school teachers. Discerning the realities that educators live every day—and what they think of them—was our motivation in conducting this survey.

The resulting data has revealed some jarring truths about teaching in Mississippi: food and housing insecurity, a need to work second jobs, and even a willingness to pack up and leave by the end of the year. But not *all* Mississippi public school

teachers appear to be suffering these indignities. *Some* teachers can afford to put food on the table, *some* teachers report they are “living comfortably,” *some* teachers plan to spend the rest of their career in a Mississippi classroom. The take-away is this: teachers who are living comfortably are the teachers who are planning to dedicate the rest of their careers to the students of Mississippi. The teachers who are hungry and working second jobs are the teachers who, a year from now, may be working a corporate job or teaching across the river in Louisiana.

We can speculate about the reasons for this divide between the haves and have-nots—a spouse with a well-paying job, generational wealth, a scholarship that negated the need for crushing student loan debt, a better-than-average district supplement—but the reality is that the divide exists, and it is holding back Mississippi from implementing a world-class educational system. Thankfully, **teachers are almost unanimous in a proposed solution: invest meaningfully in Mississippi teachers.** By providing teachers with a meaningful raise, we can send a message about our state's priorities, attract educators from across the nation, and enable Mississippi teachers to stay exactly where they are.

<sup>3</sup>James, Julia. 2021. “Teacher shortage: Mississippi lacks 3,000 certified teachers.” *Mississippi Today*, December 31. <https://mississippitoday.org/2021/12/20/mississippi-teacher-shortage-3000-teacher-vacancies/>.

<sup>4</sup>Ballard, Toren and Rachel Canter. 2020. *Nothing in the Pipes: Educator Crisis in Mississippi*. Research Report, Jackson, MS: Mississippi First. Accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.mississippifirst.org/our-work/educator-pipeline-publications/nothing-in-the-pipes/>.



# About the Survey



The Survey Research Laboratory (SRL) at Mississippi State University administered the web-based survey from November 15 to December 4, 2021.



SRL distributed the survey via email to a list of 35,463 Mississippi public school teachers using a list from Marketing Systems Group. Dr. Carey Wright also sent a survey link to a statewide teacher listserv to ensure all teachers had an opportunity to respond.



A total of 6,538 individuals completed the survey for a response rate of 18.4%. Of these, 42 were determined to be full-time administrators, counselors, or other non-instructional staff.

**The final sample is composed of 6,496 Mississippi public school teachers.**

We were unable to weight the data due to insufficient demographic information for the entire population of Mississippi public school teachers. However, on individual measures of race and gender, we were able to confirm that the demographics of our sample align closely to demographics of the entire population of Mississippi public school teachers.



# MISSISSIPPI FIRST

The mission of Mississippi First is to champion transformative policy solutions ensuring educational excellence for every Mississippi child. Mississippi First is a leading voice for pre-K-12 public education in Mississippi.

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