

Unclear and Unrealistic Expectations Threaten Teacher Retention and Wellbeing

Walton Family Foundation-Gallup survey finds most teachers receive limited guidance on AI use, and resource gaps fuel burnout and retention risks

WASHINGTON, D.C. (May 27, 2026) — A new national survey released today by the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup reveals that unrealistic job demands and a lack of role clarity are deeply impacting teacher job satisfaction, driving burnout and forcing educators to reconsider their futures in the classroom.

The report finds that fewer than half of K-12 public school teachers feel that standard expectations for teaching excellence are fully realistic. Instead, 40% view them as only somewhat realistic, while 15% say they are not too or not at all realistic.

The findings come as teachers rapidly adopt artificial intelligence tools in classrooms while school systems struggle to establish clear expectations around their use. Six in 10 teachers report using AI for work, yet in this latest survey, most say they receive little or no guidance on how to apply it responsibly for tutoring, grading or lesson development.

“When school systems give educators the tools and clear expectations they need, teachers are better equipped to help every student succeed,” said Romy Drucker, Director of the Education Program at the Walton Family Foundation.

AI Disconnect: Teachers Adopt Tools with Zero Guidance

Despite a rapid adoption of artificial intelligence in the classroom, the study reveals a widespread lack of institutional direction on how to responsibly and effectively integrate these technologies.

Among the findings, 69% of teachers report receiving absolutely no guidance on how to apply AI to one-on-one instruction or tutoring. Furthermore, 58% receive no guidance on using AI for grading and providing student feedback, and 47% report the same lack of direction when using AI to create assignments and other class materials. For the smaller proportion of teachers who do receive instruction, the vast majority note it is typically informal.

The Cost of Unrealistic Standards on Teacher Retention

The survey identified a direct link between unrealistic expectations and severe professional burnout. Among teachers facing unrealistic expectations, 77% report being frequently burned out, compared with just 21% of those who feel their job expectations are extremely realistic.

Among teachers who view expectations for excellent teaching as extremely realistic, 94% plan to continue teaching next school year, compared with 74% of those who find them unrealistic.

This gap is driven by a clash between school mandates and available resources. Forty-three percent of teachers say expectations for student achievement clash with available time and materials, while 45% say achievement expectations conflict with the actual circumstances of their students' lives. This resource gap is most prevalent in high-need schools, where half (50%) of teachers report that official expectations conflict with student realities, compared with 36% in wealthier schools.

Teachers also report uncertainty around how much flexibility they have to adapt curriculum materials and support students with varying academic needs.

Strong School Leadership Directly Linked to Teacher Satisfaction

Higher-quality communication from school leadership correlates directly with stronger teacher retention and engagement.

Teachers who receive “excellent” or “very good” communication from their leadership are 57 percentage points more likely to be satisfied with their jobs (91% vs. 34%), 51 points more likely to be engaged at work (56% vs. 5%) and 38 points less likely to face frequent burnout (27% vs. 65%) compared with those who receive poor or fair communication. Strong communication also fosters an environment of trust as 94% of teachers with supportive leadership communication feel comfortable proactively reaching out for help when an expectation is vague.

“The teaching profession has grown more complex faster than the systems supporting educators have been able to adapt,” said Stephanie Marken, Senior Partner at Gallup.

“Teachers are navigating AI implementation, evolving curriculum and achievement standards that many view as unattainable. School systems should prioritize clear expectations and strong leadership communication as we know these make a measurable difference in engagement, burnout and retention.”

Methodology

Results are based on a web survey conducted Feb. 9 – Mar. 2, 2026, with a sample of 2,069 U.S. teachers working in public K-12 schools. Teachers were recruited from the RAND American Teacher Panel, a nationally representative, probability-based panel of U.S. public school teachers. More information about the RAND American Teacher Panel is available [here](#).

The final sample was weighted to match the school- and teacher-level demographics of K-12 public school teachers in the U.S., including school level, student poverty, student race and Hispanic ethnicity, school size, school urbanicity, teacher gender, teacher race and Hispanic ethnicity and teachers' years of experience. Targets for these characteristics were retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics. Teacher-level characteristics were based on the 2020-2021 National Teacher and Principal Survey, while school-level characteristics were based on the 2024-2025 Common Core of Data.

For the total sample of 2,069 U.S. teachers, the margin of sampling error is ± 2.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher. All reported

margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit waltonfamilyfoundation.org and follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [X](#).

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.