

# ***Exploring and Comparing Teacher Resignation Factors in China and the United States***

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**Abstract:** Education determines the future of a country and a race, and its development is a top priority for society. Teachers, as the foundation of the education profession, their development has an inescapable impact on the cultivation of talents and the quality of teaching. In recent years, the resignation rate of teachers is growing with an undeniable trend. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the factors that have led to the increase in teacher resignation rates in the United States and China and to make suggestions to improve the situation. The research uses the literature review method to discuss the reasons for teacher resignation and make improvements by categorizing them into internal and external factors. Internal factors include low teacher professional well-being and excessive stress. External factors include unsatisfactory salary levels, challenging work environments, and lack of support. Based on these factors, the article makes three proposals that reduce teachers' work stress, improve their happiness, increase teachers' salary levels and treatment, and provide more support, which can enhance teachers' long-term professional development and reduce the turnover rate.

**Keywords:** teacher resignation, teacher pressure, well-being, teacher salaries, teacher turnover

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the teacher resignation rate has been a concern to all. Teachers are the foundation of the education industry, and their long-term professional development is critical to schools, students, and society. According to research, U.S. teachers are currently at a fifty-year low, with low morale among the teaching force, declining professional prestige, a lack of student enthusiasm in pursuing a teaching profession, and an increasing percentage of teachers considering leaving the profession [1]. According to a report released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 44% of public school teaching positions are vacant [2]. In addition, LinkedIn data shows that in June, the number of teachers leaving the profession increased by 41% over last year [2]. Additionally, the phenomenon of teachers quitting in China is also getting attention. Many schools in China have a shortage of teacher faculty and a high turnover rate, which seriously affects the sustainable development of Chinese teachers, the overall quality of teachers and the quality of teaching [3]. Long-term professional development of teachers is crucial. The increase in teacher resignation rate has led to the loss of good teachers in education, and schools need to recruit new teachers to fill the vacant teaching positions. New teachers, however, need to adapt to the teaching environment and accumulate experience, which

is likely to lead to a decline in teaching quality and affect students' academic performance. In the long term, the professionalism of teachers can be easily questioned, affecting the prestige of the profession and leading to a decrease in the number of people wanting to enter the teaching profession.

There are many factors that lead teachers to want to leave their jobs. Many teachers enter the profession with great expectations, full of enthusiasm and eager to help make a difference in their schools and communities, but when they enter the job they find many obstacles, including unreasonable expectations, shifting agendas, restricted professional development opportunities, and an absence of appropriateness [4]. This paper compares the reasons why teachers leave their jobs in the United States and China in terms of both internal and external factors. Internal factors contain low teacher professional well-being and excessive stress. External factors include unsatisfactory salary levels, challenging work environments, and lack of support.

## **2. Resignation Factors**

### **2.1. Internal Factors**

#### **2.1.1. Low Professional Well-being**

Professional well-being refers to an emotional experience and cognitive evaluation of teachers' work and their own profession, which is specifically manifested in higher job satisfaction and lower burnout [5]. If teachers lack happiness they will lose work motivation and reduce teaching satisfaction, thus choosing to resign [6]. Based on a survey about elementary school teachers' professional happiness in Chongqing, the average score of urban elementary school teachers' overall professional happiness is 3.82, which is between average and relatively happy [7]. In addition, there is a significant positive correlation between professional happiness and work motivation. The higher the work motivation the stronger the teachers' occupational happiness. Through research, it was found that Chinese teachers generally lack direct work motivation and have strong indirect work motivation [3]. Direct work motivation refers to being interested in the meaning, content, process, and results of the work itself, while indirect work motivation is related to material and spiritual rewards, such as salary, bonus, and honor [3]. In China, teaching is one of the professions within the national work establishment, which means a very stable career. It is commonly known as the "iron bowl", which means that if one does not make a big mistake in principle after becoming a teacher, he/she usually will not lose his/her job. This has led to many people choosing to become teachers because of the benefits of the job. They lack the passion and patience for teaching and do not care about the fulfillment and satisfaction of the job itself. This lack of immediate motivation causes them to give up the job easily.

Similarly, teacher well-being in the U.S. influences their enthusiasm for their jobs. After the end of the epidemic, U.S. teachers' job happiness increased but remained lower than adults in other jobs [8]. According to the Merrimack College Teacher Survey, which lasted for 25 years, 39% of teachers said they were very satisfied with their jobs in 2012, while today only 12% think so about teachers. The main reason for the current situation is that teachers are burned out from it all [9]. Unlike China, the motivation of teachers in the U.S. is direct, they say they still love teaching but some other factors are contributing to their low happiness so they are considering quitting [9].

#### **2.1.2. Excessive Stress**

In addition to low professional well-being, excessive stress is also a major reason influencing teachers to leave their jobs. According to a survey of college teachers at East China Normal University in China, career stress was found to be significantly and positively correlated with their tendency to leave their jobs [10]. Heavy teaching load, imbalance of income and expenditure, and important family roles are all factors contributing to teachers' stress [11].

First of all, the heavy teaching load of the course. Teachers, as the person responsible for the students in school, they need to pay attention to the students' learning and physical and mental health all the time. There are 81% of teachers worry about students' listening and lecturing efficiency in their working process. Students' lack of motivation and interest in learning are problems that teachers need to worry about and solve [11]. In addition to teaching, teachers also have research responsibilities, and K-12 teachers need regular post-service training to expand their teaching knowledge. The research outcomes of higher education teachers are one of the important criteria for their performance evaluation. All of these increase the workload and pressure on teachers.

In addition, the imbalance between income and expenditure is a cause of high pressure on teachers. The majority of Chinese teachers are young or middle-aged, and they need to bear a very high level of economic pressure. Because young people are often both children and parents, they need to establish a family, support their parents and raise their children. However, teachers' salaries often do not cover all the expenses, such as house loans, car loans, and daily expenses. More than 60% of young teachers reported that they are under financial pressure and their monthly salary is not enough to cover their expenses and even incur debts [11]. These factors lead to teachers' high work pressure and tendency to leave their jobs.

Teachers in the United States suffer from the same problem. Prior to the pandemic outbreak, a study showed that 23% of teachers were consistently experiencing high levels of stress on the job, and another 38% faced stressful situations on a regular basis [4]. When the coronavirus pandemic, the situation became even more challenging, causing as many as a quarter of teachers to consider leaving their profession at the end of the 2020-2021 school year [4]. The pedagogical challenges posed by COVID, insufficient funding for schools, a lack of autonomy, and coping with challenging parents all contribute to the increased stress in the teaching profession [2].

Excessive stress, in addition to having a direct effect on separation, may eventually lead to burnout [10]. Burnout is a symptom of emotional weariness, depersonalization, and reduced personal fulfillment in individuals in occupational fields that serve people [12]. It can lead to a decrease in enthusiasm and interest in work, affecting productivity and increasing teacher turnover, and can also lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and other health problems [13].

## 2.2. External Factors

### 2.2.1. Low Salary Levels

Most teachers in China do not have a high level of income. "The Teacher Blue Book" concluded that the salary level of teachers in China is in the lower middle of the range among all professions [14]. Teaching is a job that requires a high level of education, with 71.2% of K-12 teachers having a bachelor's degree or higher [15]. Teachers are paid less than graduates with advanced degrees for other jobs. Nearly half of the young teachers earn less than 5000RMB, while one-third of the teachers said they need to spend 4,000RMB-6,000RMB a month [11]. This means that their salary does not even cover their daily expenses for a month.

66% of U.S. teachers believe they are being paid unfairly, and 55% say they would be willing to vote in favor of a strike for higher pay [16]. A quarter of teachers make less than \$45,000 a year, and the percentage of those in favor of a strike soars to 67% [16].

Salaries have not kept up with inflation, teachers' roles are undervalued, and gender differences, etc. all contribute to low teacher salaries [2]. The job of a teacher in both the United States and China is often seen as easy work. As society's access to education rises and access to knowledge becomes diverse, people often overlook the importance of teachers and even challenge their importance and authority [17]. And because teachers are mostly female, gender discrimination and the gender pay gap also lead to lower salaries for teachers [2].

### 2.2.2. Lack of Support

Another contributing factor for teachers in China and the United States is the challenging work environment and lack of support. The school work environment has a significant effect on both teachers' intention to leave and their subjective well-being [6]. Teachers often lack support at work and opportunities for advancement are rarely available. 45% of young teachers reported that they had little chance of advancement or were prepared to follow a routine; 39% of young teachers believed that there was little space for advancement in the future, and the majority of young teachers did not have confidence in their own future development [11]. Lack of support at work also leads to lower motivation and disappointment at work.

When educators find themselves immersed in a positive and nurturing atmosphere, they are more inclined to experience a sense of appreciation and motivation. This feeling of being valued serves as a potent catalyst for their ability to confront the daily challenges inherent to their profession. Conversely, the absence of such a cultural backdrop may result in a reduced sense of worth, diminished inspiration, and even a blurred sense of purpose in their roles as educators [4]. Teachers often find themselves with limited autonomy and frequently encounter inadequate support, along with instances of bullying and harassment [4]. Such mistreatment can emanate from various sources, including administrators, peers, students, and parents, among others [4]. Although educators were once regarded as experts in their respective fields, an increasing number of them are now expressing concerns about the lack of respect and support from all stakeholders, ranging from administration and school boards to parents [4].

## 3. Suggestions

### 3.1. Reduce Stress and Increase Happiness

In order to address the issue of teachers' high stress and low well-being, schools can rationalize their workloads and pay attention to teachers' needs and physical and mental health [11]. Treadwell Elementary School in Memphis uses a cross-coverage model to address the problem of teacher overload. School administrators or other personnel will assist teachers with classroom management or substitute teaching, which reduces teachers' workloads and ensures that they don't have to take on additional responsibilities without adequate rest or planning time. Such backup support systems have led to schools with impressive 90 percent teacher retention rates [18].

In addition, schools can do this by having teachers take questionnaires on a regular basis with the aim of finding out about their current work status and work stress. The results of the questionnaires can be used to adjust teaching programs and provide support to teachers [1]. A similar model can be applied as a solution in China, the employee assistance program (EAP). EAP is a systematic program established by the organization to provide long-term social security and support to employees. The main objective of the program is to improve the working environment of the institution by providing professional counseling, guidance and training to employees and their families through professional assessment and advice. It also aims at preventing and solving various psychological and behavioral problems of employees and their families in order to enhance the performance of employees and improve the management of the organization [19].

Avoiding teachers' work interfering with their family life can also reduce the resignation rate. Work interfering with family directly affects teachers' tendency to leave [20]. Since China issued a policy on reducing the burden of schoolwork pressure on students in compulsory education in 2021, teachers' working hours at school have increased and teaching requirements have increased [21]). The increase in teachers' working hours takes away family companion time as well as rest time, which has a negative impact on teachers' work mindset [20]. Therefore, working hours that do not take away from

teachers' family time are beneficial to teacher retention.

### 3.2. Improving Salaries and Benefits

Improving teacher salaries and benefits can have a positive effect on teacher retention, professional well-being, financial stress, and physical and mental health. Both China and the United States are addressing the economic needs of teachers in many ways. First, the state needs to establish a salary system that reflects the strategic position of education and the characteristics of the teaching profession, and raise the salary level of teachers [3]. Increase investment in education research and the education industry to alleviate the lack of funding for research and low salaries for teachers.

In addition, states can ease the financial strain on teachers by enhancing their job benefits and compensation. For example, the state of Michigan (MI) recently provided a grant for scholarships and stipends for future educators and stipends for interns to support their educational aspirations [22]. The government could also provide additional financial assistance to teacher populations that are vulnerable to leave based on their family circumstances, such as teachers working for poorer districts or teachers who have more than four people to support in their families. The government could provide them with additional subsidies and bonuses [18]. In addition, many teachers in China face housing difficulties. Their meager salaries cannot afford the high mortgage payments, so the government can provide teachers with housing funds or loan forgiveness. Schools can communicate with local governments to obtain public housing or dormitories for teachers to meet their housing needs.

In addition to improving teachers' job benefits on an economic level, school amenities and support staff are also important to teaching and learning. According to a survey conducted at the end of 2020, with a 10% pay raise, teachers would prioritize schools with full-time nurses, counselors, educational support professionals, and special education assistants [18]. This suggests that administrative support is important for teachers to do their jobs and that we cannot focus only on salary. Few teachers quit because of salary when other working conditions are satisfactory [23].

### 3.3. Providing More Support

Improving the environment in which teachers schools can go a long way towards reducing resignation rates. Advocating for open and transparent teacher staffing and promotion, prohibition of discrimination against women or racial discrimination in any way, regular visits by professionals to schools for normative assessments, and more autonomy can improve the institutional environment so that teachers feel supported [24].

In addition to this, schools can incentivize their employees through non-financial incentives. For example, in Washoe County, Nevada, Superintendent Susan Enfield makes approximately six school district-wide pit stops each month in classrooms, warehouses, and offices to present "duck awards" to employees nominated by their peers for going above and beyond [25]. Although it is a simple rubber duck, it represents appreciation and recognition [25]. This will increase the motivation and interest of the employees and allow them to find meaning in their work. In addition, school leaders can give teachers more voice and decision-making power so that they can decide some things on their own.

## 4. Conclusion

To summarize, the internal factors leading to the increase in teacher resignation rate are low teacher professional well-being and excessive stress. The external factors are unsatisfactory salary levels, challenging work environments, and lack of support. In order to minimize the teacher quitting rate, the article suggests three ways to improve the situation based on these factors. Firstly, schools can

reduce teachers' work pressure and increase their happiness. In addition, schools and government departments need to provide teachers with appropriate salary increases or living benefits, such as living allowances, reduced mortgage payments, etc. Finally, schools as well as society need to give teachers more support for their work, whether it is more autonomy or non-financial incentives that can make teachers feel warm and supported in their work environment. This paper hopes that these proposals will improve the working conditions of teachers, reduce teacher turnover, and provide better assistance to education systems around the world.

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