

The State of California's Public Schools

A SURVEY OF TK-12 EDUCATORS



SECTION 1

Stretched Thin: The Far Reaching Effects of Underfunding Education

California schools are facing large class sizes, an educator recruitment and retention crisis, inadequate student support services, and instability due to layoffs, school closures, and cuts to school programs. These symptoms of underfunding our public schools are widespread across California.

Despite recent investments, **California public schools remain chronically underfunded, and educators face increasing economic precarity.** To surface trends and shared experiences of educators across the state, California Teachers Association commissioned a survey of nearly 2,000 educators - all members of CTA. **This report presents our findings and captures key economic issues that educators and students across the state are facing in their school communities.**

Top Issues for CA Educators

More than three-quarters of surveyed educators report the following as serious problems facing their school:



Schools are **underfunded**



Classrooms are **overcrowded**



Educator **pay is too low**



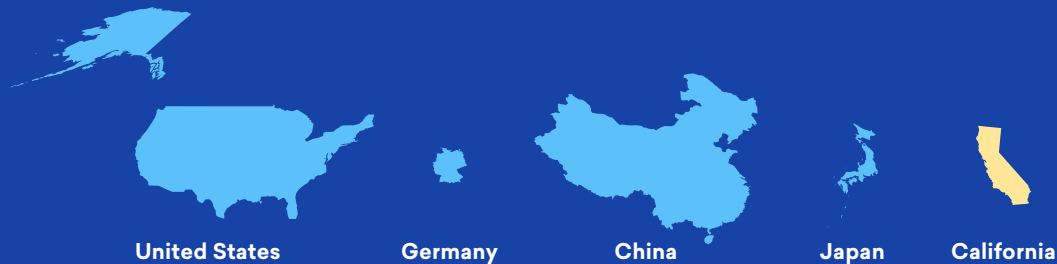
Educators **can't afford housing near their workplace**



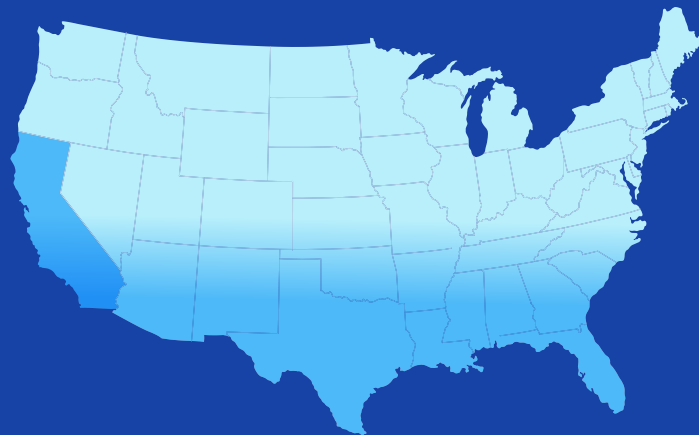
There is a **shortage of resources, staff, and training to support students**, including students with disabilities

California is a state with tremendous wealth. We can and must do better to support public education and educators, students and communities -- especially as the institution of public education comes under extreme attack at the federal level.

California has the fifth largest economy in the world¹...



...but we're not even close to being in the top ten states for per-student funding.²



As the Trump administration threatens to defund education and other critical services that our students and families rely on, California must lead with a vision for investing in public education that can serve generations to come.

California schools should be a place of stability and safety for our students and their families in this moment more than ever.

SECTION 2

The Economic Reality for California's Educators

Teaching in an underfunded system, and living in one of the country's most expensive states: what does California's education spending gap mean for our educators and their families?

For the vast majority **(81%) of California educators, salaries are not keeping up** with the cost of everyday goods and services that we all need to survive, like groceries, gas, and childcare. **60%** of educators consider financial insecurity to be a major or moderate concern.

California educators face economic instability due to low pay, inadequate and expensive healthcare coverage, and the high cost of housing, where buying a home is twice as expensive as it is in other states³. Educators report the following as serious issues:



86%

Low pay for educators



84%

Housing affordability near their schools



69%

High out-of-pocket healthcare costs

4-in-10

surveyed California educators are considering leaving education in the next few years, and **77%** say financial strain is influencing their decision. More than half of all educators know of coworkers who have left education due to financial strain.



More than **1-in-3** younger educators are considering leaving (35%), and **92%** cite financial reasons.



Meanwhile, California is facing a historic educator shortage, with over 10,000 educator vacancies in our public schools.⁴



Struggling to Save

Over
80%

of educators **have concerns** about their ability to save, cover unexpected costs, and put away money for retirement.



3-in-10
are living **paycheck to paycheck**

Over half of surveyed educators also have the following financial concerns:



Covering
healthcare costs



Affording the cost
of **living expenses**



Paying the **rent**
or mortgage



Saving for their
child to attend college

When asked about their ability to save money on their current salary, educators say they are:

56%

Able to save a little but
not enough to feel secure for the future

31%

Living paycheck to paycheck with little to no ability to save

12%

Able to save a comfortable amount for the future

The majority of educators

54%

(54%) don't have the savings or emergency funds to **cover three months of living expenses.**



91%

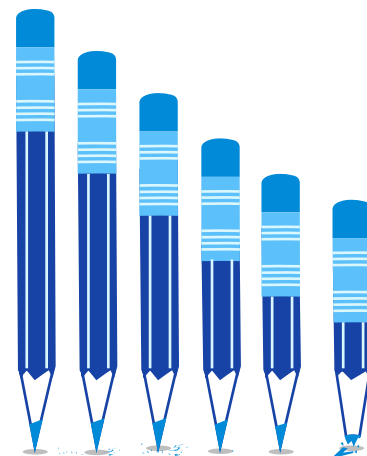
of educators who **rent would like to buy a home, but can't afford to.**

Educators in urban areas have lower rates of homeownership, report being more concerned about paying for housing, and were more likely than suburban and rural respondents to say that affording housing near their workplace was a serious issue for themselves & their coworkers.

Making It Work - At What Cost?

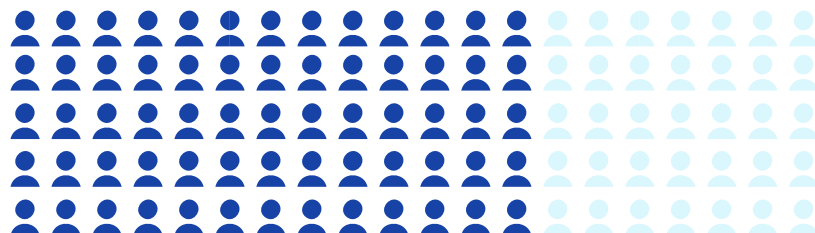
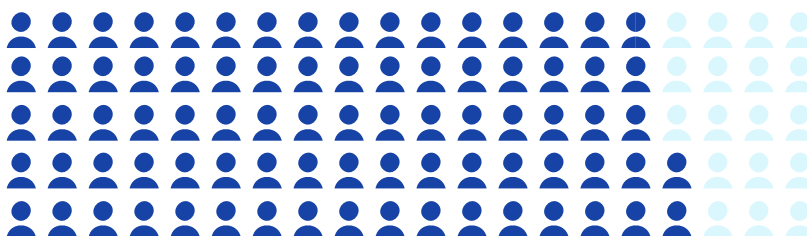
Educators are making ends meet through difficult sacrifices.

In the last year, **educators have taken the following measures:**



82%

have **adjusted or cutback** their family's budget



65%

have **skipped** vacations or family events



1-in-2

incurred personal debt



2 out of 3

delayed home or car repairs



30%

Have **taken on a second job or gig work** to make ends meet.

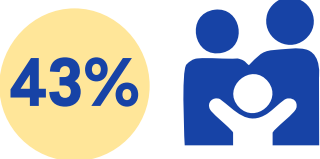
37%

of educators have **delayed or skipped medical care** due to financial strain.

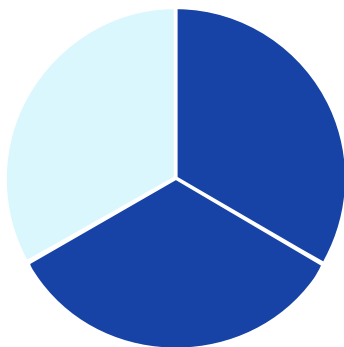


Among **young educators**, this figure is even higher—**nearly half** have gone without medical care in order to save money.

Compounded Struggles: Educators *and* Parents



of all respondents **have children at home.**



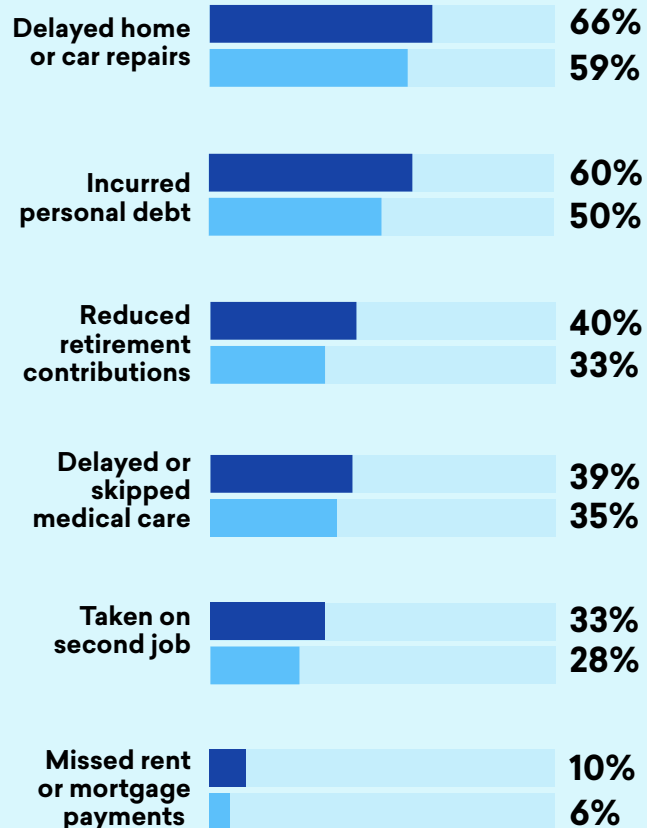
Over two-thirds

of parents say their ability to **save money for their child or childrens' higher education** is a major concern.



Parents were more likely than non-parents to have resorted to these cost-saving measures in the last year:

■ Parents ■ Non-Parents



Parents were more likely than non-parents to say that **financial strain influences their decision to consider leaving education**



SECTION 3

California Schools and Students: A Snapshot of Key Issues

California continues to lag on per-student funding and rank well below national averages for staff ratios. The persistent threat of layoffs and school closures disrupts thousands of students and educators each year, but fails to fix the underlying issues that hamstringing our educational system.

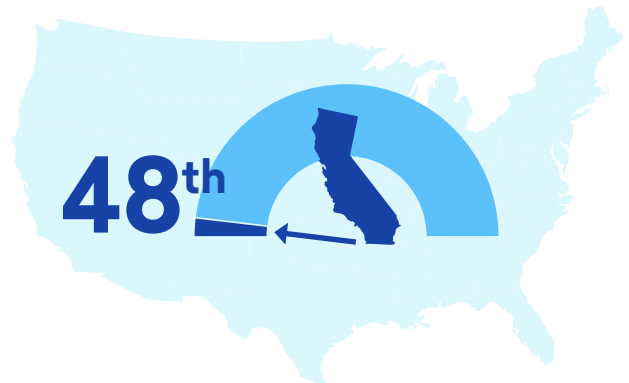
Key Issues

1. Student Support Ratios

California is 48th in the nation for student access to school counselors⁵.

The ratio of students to social workers in California is nearly 25 times greater than is professionally recommended, and three times the national average⁶.

In our survey, educators who report that their students face a serious lack of access to mental health support at school were the same educators who said many of their students don't have reliable access to meals or stable housing.



2. Large Class Sizes

California has some of the highest educator-to-student ratios in the country.

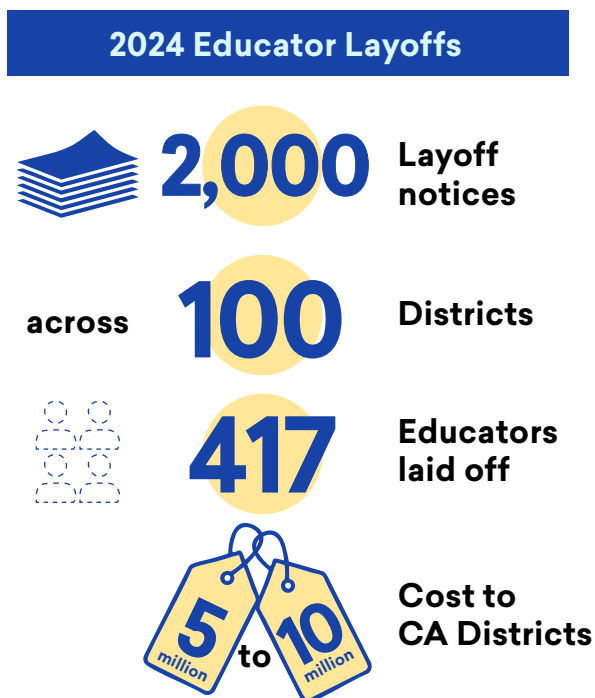
We rank in the bottom five states for ratios of students to teachers, student support service professionals, and librarians⁷. In our survey, **more than three-quarters of educators say that overcrowded classrooms are a serious issue at their school.**



3. Educator recruitment & retention crisis exacerbated by waves of layoffs

In spring 2024, **nearly 2,000 CTA educators**—including school librarians, counselors, and social workers—**received layoff notices across over 100 districts. 417 were ultimately laid off from their jobs. This was an increase from past years, and a five-fold increase from just one year prior.** Layoffs exacerbate the teacher shortage, and have a devastating impact on students and communities, leading to larger class sizes, fewer student supports, and instability in our schools.

Layoffs are also expensive: according to research conducted by the Learning Policy Institute, the combined **cost of laying off over 400 teachers is between \$5 and \$10 million**, not including the administrative costs associated with layoffs⁸.



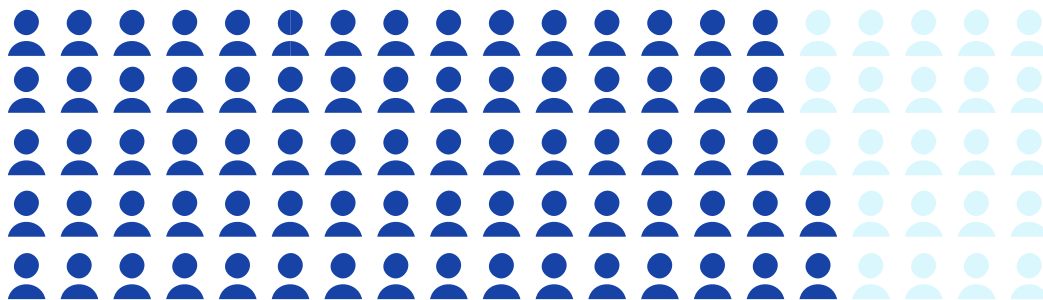
4. School Closures

Schools are the heart of the community—and closing schools means shutting down centers of learning, places where teachers and families come together, and where children grow and thrive. **For many students, schools are one of the few safe and stable environments in their lives.**

School districts present school closures as a solution to budget crises and declining enrollment—but research has shown that the savings promised often do not come to fruition⁹, and **the aftermath of these decisions makes clear that closures are destabilizing for students**, don't positively impact student learning¹⁰, disproportionately impact low-income, Black and Latino students¹¹, and are not a long-term fix for local funding shortfalls¹².

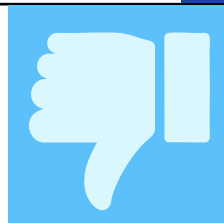
Educator Perspectives on Key Economic Issues Facing California Schools and Students

77% of educators feel that **California schools don't have the resources to meet the needs of students.**



Although educators are working in an underfunded public school system, and facing economic hardship themselves:

77% of California educators generally find **satisfaction in their jobs**



...though **over half are dissatisfied with the overall conditions facing educators** in their school districts.

62%

Educators said the following are somewhat or very serious issues at their school:

84% 

Schools **lack enough funding**.

84% 

Inadequate resources, staff and/or training to support special education students.

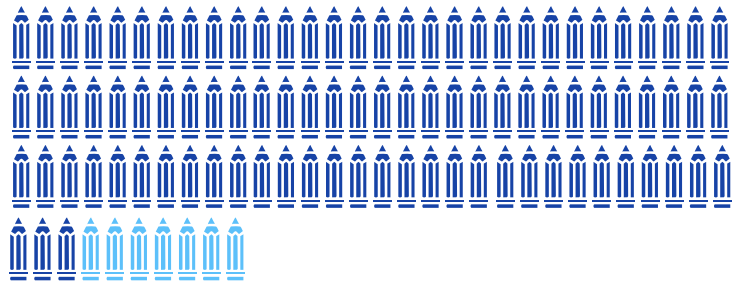
76% 

Overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of educators

68% 

Lack of student access to **mental health support at school**

Despite the financial strain educators face, nearly every educator surveyed (**93%**) **has purchased school supplies with their own funds**, to ensure that their students have what they need.



Most educators say that **some of their students have unstable housing**, and a third say this is the case for a lot of their students.



Nearly half of surveyed educators purchased food for students this year, with almost a quarter saying that a significant number of their students lack reliable access to meals.



Educators who are **living paycheck-to-paycheck** were the most likely to **spend over \$300** on school supplies, and to buy food **for their students**.

Looking to the Future:

Fully Funded Schools for a Thriving California

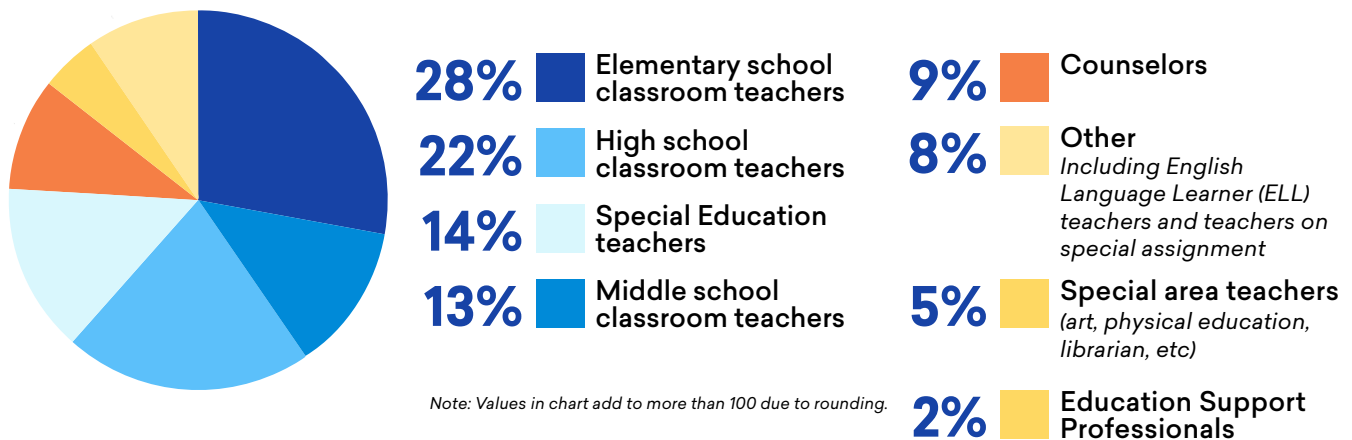
Despite California being the fifth largest economy in the world and a state with tremendous wealth, our schools remain chronically underfunded. California's students, schools, and communities deserve a more stable and robust funding system to support an equitable education system for all. This includes creative revenue-raising solutions that apply the great wealth of this state to our educational system.

Public schools are facing an existential threat under the Trump administration. Now is the time to devise a stronger funding plan for California's schools, students and communities. We remain committed to making sure that districts focus on the issues that are important to students and educators, and use every dollar available to do so. We know what a difference it makes when our classrooms are fully staffed, and our school communities are stable, without layoffs, closures or cuts. Communities thrive when educators can live where they work and students can rely on schools to provide the educational and mental health support they need. California educators are united in this vision and ready to do what it takes to win, from the streets to the school board to the state house.



Methodology

1,995 active certificated and classified CTA members in TK-12 schools filled out the survey via email in December 2024. Of the members surveyed:



School Setting



The survey was conducted by GBAO Strategies.

¹ Public Policy Institute of California. *Fact Sheet: California's Economy*. October 2024. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-economy/>

² Education Law Center. *Making the Grade*. December 12, 2024. <https://edlawcenter.org/research/making-the-grade-2024/>

³ State of California Legislative Analyst's Office. California Housing Affordability Tracker (3rd Quarter 2024). October 23, 2024. <https://lao.ca.gov/LAOEconTax/Article/Detail/793>

⁴ EdJoin search results, as of January 6, 2025. This figure includes all non-management certificated educators plus classified positions that work directly with students and teachers, including Teaching Assistants, Substitutes, Librarians, SLP Assistants, Interpreters, Instructors and Health Service Staff. <https://www.edjoin.org/>

⁵ Whitaker, A., Lopez-Perry, C. *State of Student Mental Wellness - California, 2022*. ACLU California Action, California Association of School Counselors, and California State University Center to Close the Opportunity Gap. https://aclucalaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2022_State_of_Student_Wellness_Report_.pdf

⁶ See footnote 5.

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. 2023-2024 Common Core of Data (CCD) [Data set]. United States Department of Education. <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/>

⁸ Learning Policy Institute. *2024 Update: What's the Cost of Teacher Turnover?*. September 17, 2024. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/2024-whats-cost-teacher-turnover>. The cost of replacing educators is larger for bigger school districts. \$5 million is a conservative estimate based on the lowest replacement cost for districts with fewer than 10,000 students. Calculated at the replacement cost for medium- and large-size districts, the cost of then 2024 layoffs would range from close to \$7 million to upwards of \$10 million.

⁹ Pew Charitable Trust: Philadelphia Research Initiative. *Closing Public Schools in Philadelphia: Lessons From Six Urban Districts*. 2011. https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2011/10/19/closing_public_schools_philadelphia_report.pdf

¹⁰ Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). *Lights Off: Practice and Impact of Closing Low-Performing Schools*. 2017. Stanford University. https://credo.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/closure_final_volume_i.pdf

¹¹ See footnote 10; Letter from California Attorney General Rob Bonta to Oakland Unified School District Board President and Directors. January 29, 2024. https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/attachments/press-docs/CalDOJ.LettertoOaklandUnifedRePotentialClosures.1.29.24.final_.pdf ; *Urban Institute. Subtracting Schools from Communities*. March 23, 2017. <https://www.urban.org/features/subtracting-schools-communities>

¹² See footnote 9