

DECLINE OF THE NC EYE-LEVEL TEACHER

*How the compounding burden of doing more with less
is putting our community's teachers and students at risk*

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*Research and paper is presented by the Volunteer Research Collaborative,
commissioned by Classroom Central.*



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May 5, 2026

Introduction

At the heart of every thriving classroom is an eye-level teacher: an educator with the time, attention, and presence to meet students where they are and help them grow. It is the gold standard of educational impact, but across North Carolina, the capacity to teach at eye level is being eroded. Chronic underfunding, staffing shortages, rising administrative burdens, and increasing financial strain are placing more in teachers' way and pulling them away from the student connection that drives learning. When teachers lose the space to teach, students lose critical support, opportunity, and the chance to reach their full potential.

This paper explores what is driving the decline of the eye-level teacher in North Carolina and the opportunities to restore the conditions for our state's educators and students to thrive.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EYE-LEVEL TEACHER





North Carolina has a proud legacy of being a leader in public education during the latter portion of the 20th century. Between 1960 and 2000, NC championed a number of educational reforms that drove national recognition for NC as a leading state and a model for educational policy and approach. Some of the systemic changes introduced in NC that shaped the national education landscape include early childhood education, standardized testing for benchmarking, and improved teacher training.

While NC situated itself as a leader on the national stage of public education, inside the classroom, the mark of a great teacher was found at eye level with students. You can picture an “eye-level teacher”:

Crouched beside a student helping them sound out a new word.

Standing beside a child at the board as they work out a problem.

Providing guidance as a stable and trusting adult, with an understanding hand on their shoulder during a personal conversation.

The eye-level teacher represents the gold standard of educational impact and is defined by a specific physical and emotive posture: the crouch beside a low desk, the focused stillness at the whiteboard, and the unwavering patience required to address individual student needs. RAND, a nonprofit and nonpartisan research organization, reports **that teachers are the #1 school-related factor impacting student outcomes**, far outweighing any other institutional variable¹.

¹RAND, *Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement*, Isaac M. Opper, 2019

There is also a wide variety of academic research that strongly links teacher-student relationships to academic outcomes. John Hattie's book *Visible Learning*, an expansive meta-analysis of over 50,000 education related studies, ranked 138 factors that influence student achievement and found that **a top driver contributing to student progress is the nature of the teacher–student relationship**, with lower level effects from other aspects like teacher training or professional development². Additional research shows that strong relational teaching increases student motivation and in one specific study, was linked explicitly to reading outcomes for elementary students³. When a teacher meets a student at eye level, they provide the responsiveness and individual attention that transforms the chaos of a buzzing classroom into a space of deep connection and growth potential.

However, this foundational element of our education system is disappearing from North Carolina classrooms. While the professional desire to teach relationally remains unchanged, our educators' ability to teach at eye-level is experiencing systemic erosion from a rising tide of job burdens, including what teachers describe as increasing logistical friction and administrative tasks. The very capacity for teacher and student connection is fractured, and the 1.5 million students⁴ in our NC schools are at risk of suffering the consequences.

***“I work 12 hour days a lot.
Sometimes I don’t have much left
to give the children.”***

— Elementary school teacher in Gaston County Schools

NORTH CAROLINA FUNDING ISSUES DRIVE A WEDGE IN CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

North Carolina educators are currently operating within a macro-economic and legislative environment that has created a profound capacity fracture and is a key driving force creating a wedge between teacher and individual student. For years, our state's schools have suffered continued funding challenges, and the Education Law Center has given North Carolina a sobering “F” grade on our funding⁵.

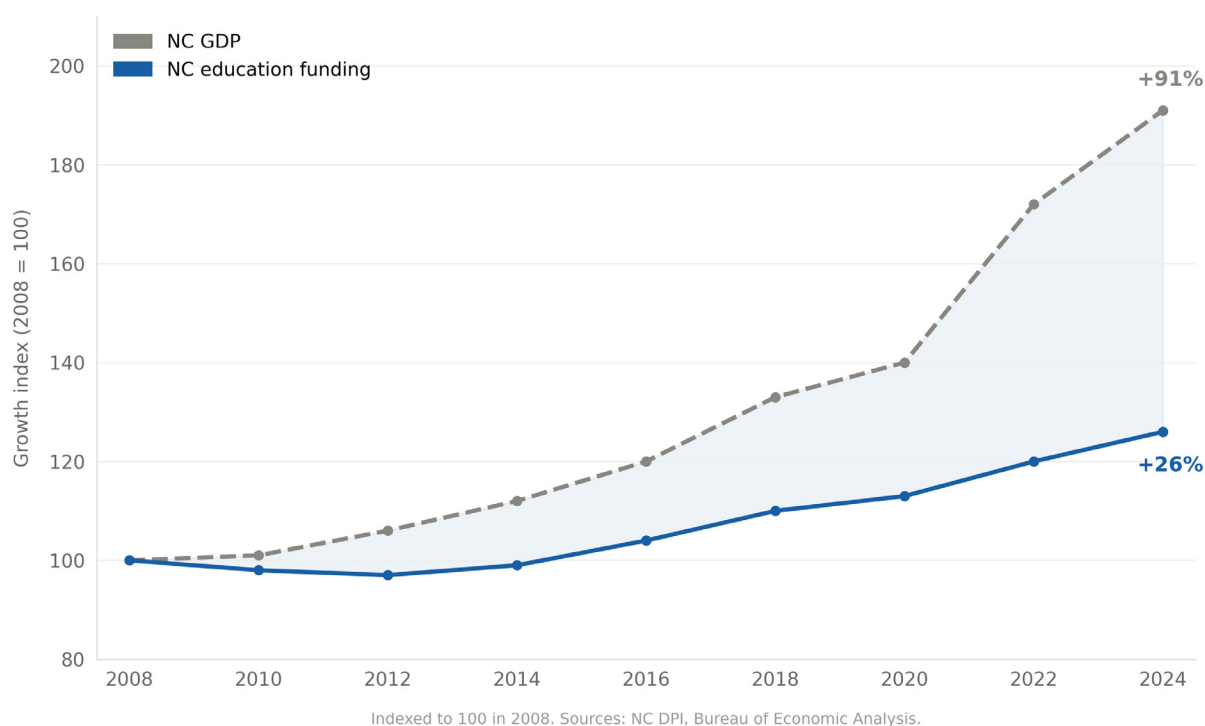
NC ranks at the bottom of the nation for both funding effort and funding per student. Funding effort, a measure of state and local funding for education as a proportion of the state's GDP, ranks dead last in the US and 36% lower than the national average. Since 2008 in NC, GDP has increased 91%, while funding has only increased 26%. This effectively means that **we are disproportionately underfunding our public schools relative to NC's economic output**.

² *Visible Learning*, John Hattie, 2009

³ American Psychological Association, *Applications of Psychological Science to Teaching and Learning Modules*, Sara Rimm-Kaufman, PhD & Lia Sandilos, PhD, University of Virginia, 2010

⁴ Public School Forum of North Carolina, *Education Policy in North Carolina, 2026*, NC Department of Public Instruction

⁵ Education Law Center, *Making the Grade*, 2025



The national average funding per student is nearly \$18,000, but North Carolina ranks 50th and only allocates \$12,193 per student, **a gap of more than \$5,000 per child**. Imagine a school near your home, with 500 students — in North Carolina, that school would have \$2.5 million less funding than the average school elsewhere in the US.

The cumulative effects of funding limitations manifest with fewer resources in schools, and our local teachers are carrying the burdens of keeping them operational. Fewer support staff, larger class sizes, and limited access to the resources needed to facilitate student learning are all direct impacts that NC teachers are navigating day after day. And recent federal funding cuts for education place additional strain on an already tenuous system.

The funding challenges in NC also impact teacher pay, which currently ranks 43rd in the nation and is projected to drop to 46th for the 2025-2026 period, a decline of nearly 10 spots over the last two years⁶. It's also expected that NC will be the only state with a decrease in average teacher pay. At an average salary of about \$60,000 per year, **our local educators earn \$14,495 less than the national average** of \$74,495⁷. Also, with no approved state budget allowing for increases since 2023, yet rising healthcare benefits costs, many teachers are effectively making less than in prior years, while also navigating approximately 6% in higher cost of living for our region⁸.

⁶ North Carolina Association of Educators, North Carolina Falls Again in Educator Pay Rankings, 2026

⁷ National Education Association, Educator Pay Data 2026

⁸ US Bureau of Labor Statistics

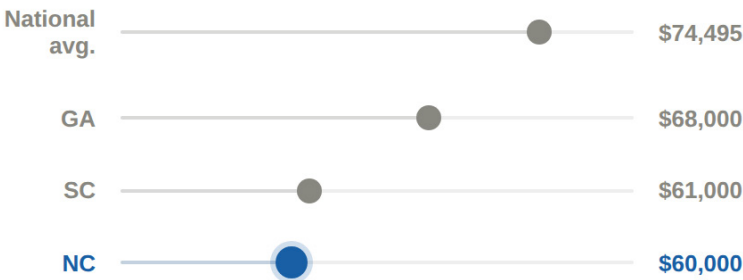
Using estimates from MIT’s Living Wage calculations for the Charlotte metro region, \$58,000 is a livable wage for a single adult with no children, but if that teacher had one child to support, they are about \$25,000 short of a livable wage⁹. Imagine a family with two North Carolina educators and three children of their own — with a combined income of almost \$117,000, they are approximately \$15,000 short of a livable wage for our area. **We are asking our teachers to take care of our children, while the wages we offer them puts them at risk of adequately taking care of their own.**

“I find it incredibly stressful at the end of every month when I have maybe \$12 to get me through the week. I am also accruing credit card debt like I have never experienced.”

— Middle school teacher in Iredell-Statesville Schools

Neighboring states in our region offer higher pay and are drawing some teachers to consider crossing state lines to continue teaching at a more liveable wage¹⁰. On average, South Carolina offers a nearly \$4,000 higher salary and Georgia pays over \$11,000 more. Beginner teacher pay also ranks low compared to the rest of the US — at nearly \$45,000 starting salary, **our new teachers are compensated \$3,000 less than their peers the rest of the country.** Similar to average teacher pay, beginning teachers are also paid more in nearby states, with Virginia offering about \$5,500 more and South Carolina paying nearly \$3,500 more.

NC TEACHER SALARIES TRAIL THE NATION
Average teacher salary comparison



Source: National Education Association, Educator Pay Data 2026

Many teachers in North Carolina have to find additional ways to earn income in order to make ends meet — nationally, one in three teachers has a second job, and the numbers for NC could be even higher¹¹. The compensation and financial strain on teachers makes it clear to see why our state is struggling with retention, attrition, and securing new educators to lead our North Carolina classrooms.

⁹ MIT Living Wage Calculation for Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC
¹⁰ National Education Association, Educator Pay Data 2026
¹¹ Gallup & Walton Family Foundation, *TEACHING FOR TOMORROW*, 2025



THE IMPACTS ON OUR NC TEACHERS ARE PROFOUND

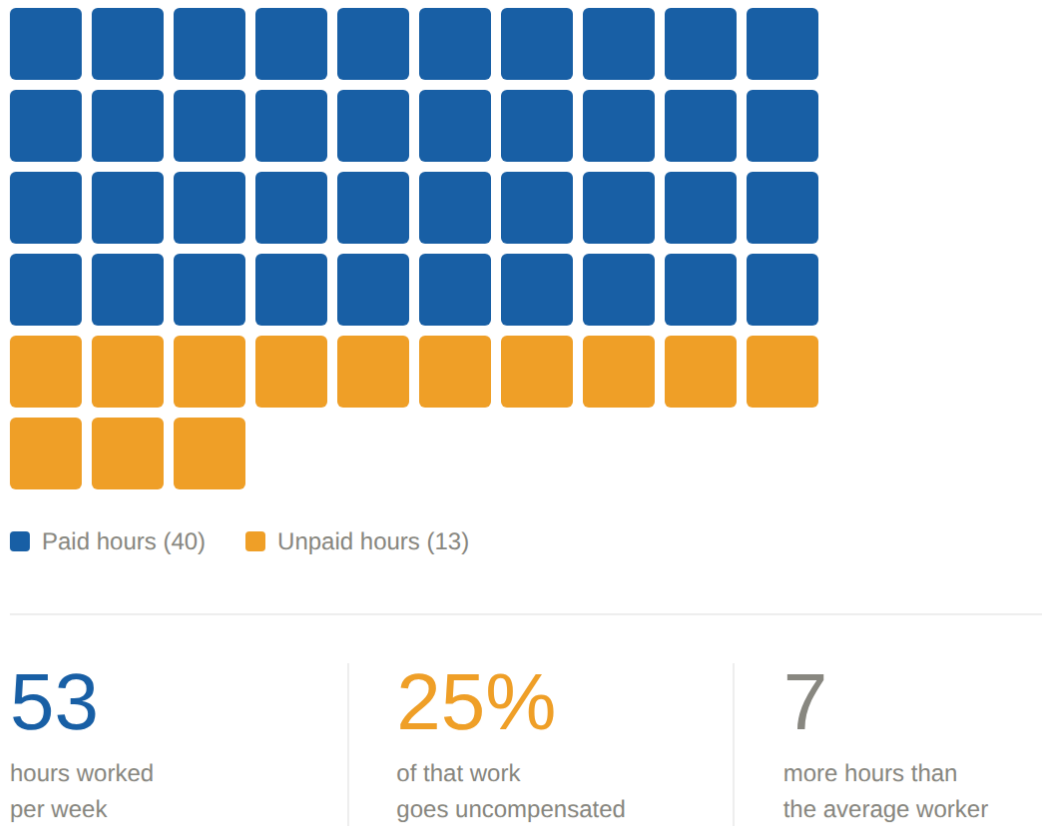
Funding impacts and their downstream effects manifest in the classroom as a compounding burden on teachers, especially those in schools with higher proportions of students living in poverty. One key impact is fewer teachers and support staff in schools, leading to larger class sizes and coverage ratios; in addition to intentional staff cuts, vacancy rates remain elevated, above 7% for the past two school years¹².

“Each employee is handling the responsibilities of 2-3 other vacant positions. My caseload should be 250 students at most, and I am working for over 500 students currently.”

— Elementary school counselor in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

¹² North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Teachers also increasingly perform unpaid labor supporting our local education system. In a 2023 study conducted by RAND, they found that teachers **work an estimated 53 hours a week — seven more hours than the average working adult, and 25% of their work is uncompensated**¹³. Unsurprisingly, satisfaction was much lower for teachers compared to the general adult working population. In addition to covering more students, teachers are also increasingly assuming additional responsibilities beyond their classroom, like carpool, afterschool, or covering other classes and activities that were previously managed by other staff.



Source: RAND Corporation, 2023

***“I’m working 60+ hours a week
and I still feel behind. ”***
— *Elementary school teacher in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools*

¹³ RAND, *All Work and No Pay — Teachers’ Perceptions of Their Pay and Hours Worked*, Elizabeth D. Steiner, Ashley Woo, Sy Doan; 2023

Many teachers describe days where they don't have the opportunity to eat lunch or take bathroom breaks, much less find time to dedicate to lesson planning and classroom prep. Often these planning activities end up being evening and weekend catch up, eating into the limited free time educators have to care for their own families and refresh their energy for the next day of teaching. **58% of teachers in our survey said that their workload and related stress levels are the top challenge they face.**

“I am overwhelmed by the task I am responsible for. I leave work almost every day of the week mentally and physically exhausted.”

— *Middle school teacher in Iredell-Statesville Schools*

Teachers also say that in addition to added responsibilities for more students and more school support roles, they feel additionally burdened and distracted by the increasing degree of administrative tasks they are required to handle. Every spreadsheet, report submission, and new system to learn continues to pull them away from their time spent on students and learning. **The most precious resource teachers continue to ask for is time — 57% of teachers in our study expressed a need for additional time to plan and prepare and 42% want reduced administrative tasks.**

“My biggest challenge is having enough time to do everything. I’m really good at masking the burnout. I’m tired. I’m doing hours and hours and hours of work, and it just feels like I can’t catch up.”

—*High school math teacher in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools*

North Carolina's chronic underfunding and rising job demands have created a compounding burden for educators. As expectations mount and resources dwindle, teachers are being pulled away from the vital student-teacher connection, the essential “eye-level” teaching. With morale at a tipping point and attrition rising, our state's education system faces a critical crisis.

“My stress and anxiety levels are at an all time high.”

—*High school teacher in Union County Schools*

Given the strain educators are under, it's no surprise that NC attrition rates remain elevated. NC reported an increase in attrition for the 2024-2025 period, going above 10%¹⁴, whereas national rates have decreased since COVID, estimated at 7% for 2023-2024¹⁵. Teachers have been vocal about their burnout — in our survey, **more than 2 in 3 teachers said they had considered leaving in the past year.**

¹⁴ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

¹⁵ RAND, *Educator Turnover Continues Decline Toward Prepandemic Levels*, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Heather L. Schwartz; 2025

“I’m considering quitting because there has got to be a place with less superfluous meetings and busywork that is not connected to students.”

—Elementary teacher in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

Teachers attribute their burnout to the factors we’ve highlighted, the cumulative effects of the competing demands that increasingly detract from their ability to focus on individualized and relational learning: increasing administrative tasks and coverage scope, unpaid labor, and the resulting emotional and financial strain.

Instead of teachers being found eye-level connecting with students, they say they are now:

Pulled away from planning meaningful instruction by growing administrative requirements

Redirected away from hands-on teaching towards tracking data and noting documentation

Stretched further from individual student support by expanded workloads and competing priorities

The result is not just added work for teachers, but also fragmented attention. Academic and workplace research showcases that multitasking and context switching can be detrimental to productivity. According to the American Psychological Association, people lose time as they shift between tasks, particularly so for more complex or unfamiliar tasks, and even brief mental blocks can diminish productivity by up to 40%¹⁶.

“Morale is at an all-time low. We’re all overwhelmed, there’s not enough time. I’m doing work at school. I’m doing work at home. And I still don’t have enough time.”

— Elementary teacher in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

Putting this all together, there are three critical ways these compounding burdens manifest for teachers and impact their ability to show up at eye-level for their students: time, mental bandwidth, and presence.

¹⁶ American Psychological Association, *Multitasking: Switching costs*, 2006

Time is consumed. Teachers' days are increasingly filled with planning, paperwork, meetings, coverage, and extracurricular expectations — many of which extend beyond working hours and come without pay. At the same time, class sizes have grown and support staff has declined, leaving fewer adults to meet more student needs.

Mental bandwidth is depleted. The nature of the work has shifted toward increased scope and context-switching. Teachers move between responsibilities with little time to reset or think deeply. Planning periods are shortened or repurposed. The cognitive load of managing competing demands leaves less space for creativity, responsiveness, and intentional instruction.

Presence is disrupted. Teachers are physically in the classroom, but their attention is divided. The need to manage logistics, track requirements, and stay on pace pulls focus away from students in real time.

“There’s too much work and not enough time to do it. There’s very little time to actually plan or think about lessons.”

— Elementary teacher in Gaston County Schools

As resources and funding decrease, teachers are increasingly expected to bridge the gap themselves, using their own time, money, and energy to meet student needs. As the lines between work and personal life blur and blend, rates of burnout ramp up.



NC STUDENTS AND THEIR FULL POTENTIAL ARE AT RISK

Eye-level teaching is about presence, responsiveness, and individual attention. It offers the ability to notice when a student is struggling, to pause and extend support, and to adjust in the moment and meet that student's needs.

When teachers are not given the space or capacity to do this, students lose more than personalized instruction, they lose a fraction of their potential.

Research shows that teachers are a critical factor in student growth and learning. **Teachers are the #1 school-related resource that impacts student outcomes**¹⁷ and developmental research shows that having one or more caring adults in a child's life increases the likelihood that they will flourish, and become productive adults themselves¹⁸. For many children, the teacher plays that role in addition to or in place of a parent. When a teacher's presence and attention is constrained, the impact is felt immediately in the classroom, and eventually, outside of it.

Students are left to navigate their education without a teacher meeting them at eye level, nudging them along toward their greatest learning experiences and fullest version of their future.

“Just because a school is open doesn’t mean it is functioning optimally. A poor diet will keep someone from being hungry, but the health issues later on will be significant.”

— *High school teacher in North Carolina*

A CMS high school teacher shared that at one local school, their teacher shortage has led to putting **90 seventh grade students together in the cafeteria to learn math, often being taught by a substitute** who is not adequately trained in teaching, the subject matter, nor the behavioral management techniques that would be required to navigate a room full of 90 adolescents. He also highlighted that this isn't an outlier occurrence, but part of a larger trend he's observed over his fifteen year tenure teaching in North Carolina.

“In my previous high school, I knew students who didn’t have a real math teacher for their first two years.”

— *High school teacher in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*

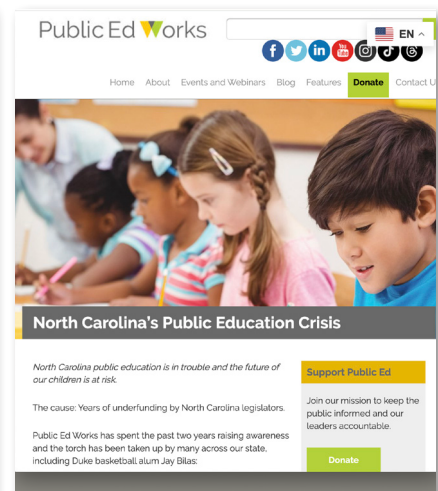
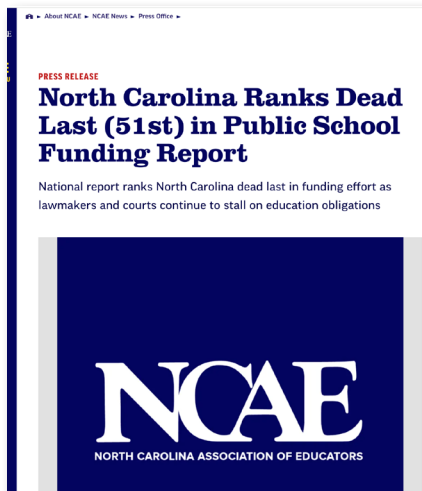
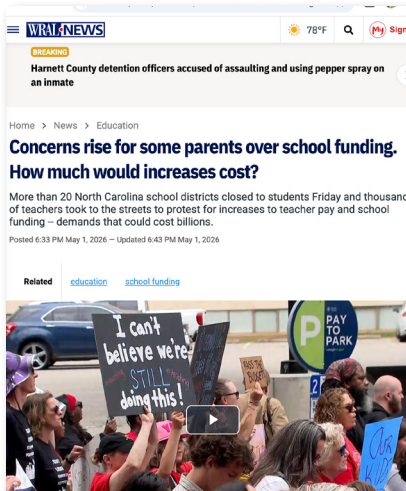
¹⁷ RAND, *Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement*, Isaac M. Opper, 2019

¹⁸ Child Trends; *Caring Adults: Important for Positive Child Well-being*, David Murphey, Ph.D., Tawana Bandy, B.S., Hannah Schmitz, B.A., and Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D., 2013

Classrooms in Crisis: The State of North Carolina's Education System

MARCH 2, 2025 by MAYA WAID

UNC Chapel Hill's reporting on *Classrooms in Crisis* by Maya Waid says that "state reports confirm that reading proficiency in North Carolina's early grades (K-3) remains below pre-pandemic levels, with economically disadvantaged students disproportionately affected. While there has been improvement in early literacy, gaps still exist, particularly for students with greater needs."¹⁹ We are witnessing a parallel to the K-economy playing out in our classrooms, with a wide variance among student outcomes, aligned to their economic circumstances. This disparity shouldn't exist in a fully equitable public education system, but our teachers don't have the capacity to give all students the support they need.



¹⁹ UNC Chapel Hill Media Hub, *Classrooms in Crisis: The State of North Carolina's Education System*, Maya Waid, 2025

CLEARING THE PATH: RESTORING THE SPACE TO TEACH STUDENTS AT EYE-LEVEL

“I’m overwhelmed. When you’re crushed so hard and then the demands just keep increasing and increasing, the ability to do what is being asked of you just diminishes. I wish they would let teachers have the time to prepare.”

—Elementary teacher in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

To truly support our educators, we must shift from piling more on their plates and instead explore how we can help them achieve an optimized workload that prioritizes their time and energy on the things that matter most and get them back to being an eye-level teacher.

This means that North Carolina legislators, districts, and community members should:

- **Address funding issues** and prevent the financial strain that falls on teachers as they are asked to do more with less
- **Prioritize removing logistical and administrative barriers** in the way of planning and teaching
- **Protect teachers’ time, attention, and mental bandwidth** so that it can be prioritized toward the most meaningful efforts in the classroom and with students
- **Put more support staff or volunteers in our schools** to manage logistics and student needs that extend beyond classroom learning

It also requires a shift in how we think about teachers more broadly. Teachers are often described as heroes who produce magical outcomes: selfless, miracle workers, “doing God’s work”. While well-intentioned, this narrative can normalize unsustainable expectations and reduce urgency for structural change.

Burnout and financial strain remain two of the most commonly cited drivers of dissatisfaction in this profession. Appreciation, without meaningful change, risks reinforcing the status quo.

Teachers are not just *heroes*.

They are **skilled professionals**.

They are **a critical workforce**.

They are **the most important driver of student success in schools**.

When they are buried beneath a pile of growing expectations, students are lost in the chaos.

***“I’m always having to do administrative stuff.
I’m constantly filling out spreadsheets, forms,
and documenting everything that I do.
I just want to teach.”***

— Elementary teacher in North Carolina

OUR RECOMMENDATION FOR CLASSROOM CENTRAL

Since 2002, Classroom Central has focused on providing essential resources and supplies to teachers to help ensure classrooms are equipped for learning and alleviate the burdens of them digging into their paychecks to provide for their students.

That work remains critical. But the needs of teachers, and the challenges they face, have evolved.

Today, supporting teachers requires more than tangible classroom supplies. It requires broader commitment to reducing the barriers that limit their ability to focus on students.

Based on our research, we recommend that Classroom Central continue to provide the necessary school supplies to support learning, while also:

- Identifying and alleviating points of friction in teachers’ day-to-day work
- Exploring ways to support time, capacity, and classroom presence
- Elevating teacher experiences to inform broader conversations about education

Classroom Central has always been about equipping teachers for success and driving equity in education across the Charlotte metro area. An evolution can expand that mission, recognizing that what teachers need is not just more materials, but the ability to optimize their resources, time, and energy toward the most impactful aspect of their job — facilitating learning, growth, and development for our community’s children. Classroom Central is well positioned to support putting our local teachers back at eye-level, helping our students learn and grow to their fullest potential.

APPENDIX / SUPPLEMENTARY

About Classroom Central

Classroom Central fosters equity in education by providing teachers and students with free resources they need to succeed.

Classroom Central distributes free school supplies to thousands of teachers annually in ~250 schools across six school districts: CMS, Gaston, Lancaster, Union, Iredell-Statesville, and the City of Kannapolis.

More information can be found at their website, <https://classroomcentral.org/>.

About the Classroom Central Research

Classroom Central commissioned research from a team of local market researchers, who offered their skills in a volunteer effort, in order to better understand local teachers' needs and experiences. Research was conducted with teachers already engaged with Classroom Central. While findings should be viewed as directional rather than fully representative of all North Carolina public school teachers, the challenges and themes raised closely align with broader state and national trends.

Our approach included:

- Online survey of 137 teachers in the following districts: Charlotte Mecklenburg, Gaston County, Kannapolis City, Lancaster County (SC), Iredell Statesville, and Union County
 - 42% were CMS teachers
 - 46% were elementary school teachers
 - 56% had 16+ years of teaching experience
- In-depth interviews with 21 teachers, reflecting a variety of districts, roles, and tenure
 - Conducted one-on-one at the Classroom Central Free Store on 11/13/25
 - Anonymous and incentivized; most interviews were audio recorded
- Secondary research review
 - Incorporated existing academic and market research, publicly available data, teacher wellbeing studies, and North Carolina education policy reports to contextualize and validate findings

Special Thanks

This report would not have been possible without the generosity, partnership, and support of the individuals and organizations who shared their time, expertise, and commitment to protecting the eye-level teacher and the students they serve. We are deeply grateful to all who helped bring this work to life.

- Teachers that participated in Classroom Central's research
- NC Public School Forum, for providing data, expertise, and consultation
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- Unimrkt Research, for providing complimentary research incentives
- BioBrain Insights, for providing complimentary survey services and support
- Accelerant Research, for providing expertise and consultation
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