Getting Down to FACTS

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California's Teacher Workforce: Progress and Persistent Structural Challenges

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Introduction

A diverse, high-quality teacher workforce is foundational to the state's capacity to equitably serve all students. As the student population grows increasingly linguistically, ethnically, and racially diverse, the teacher workforce must be prepared to meet the needs of all student learners. Preparing a robust teacher workforce requires strong systems of professional preparation, credentialing, and development, backed by coherent policy infrastructure. When schools face shortages of fully credentialed teachers, the state's capacity to provide all students with a quality education is compromised: class sizes grow, course offerings shrink, teachers are often hired without having been prepared, and teachers are assigned outside their fields (Podolsky & Sutcher, 2016). These consequences fall hardest on schools serving low-income students and students of color, further compounding systemic educational inequities (Lafortune et al., 2025).

This brief draws on the Getting Down to Facts III technical reports to describe the current state of California's teacher workforce and the systems and policies that support it. In particular, it draws on findings from technical reports focused on the teacher workforce, teacher certification policies, teacher education for English Learners and bilingual education, and strategic staffing models in California schools. Across these reports, the findings point to a system that has made significant progress in some areas while leaving core structural problems unresolved. How California addresses these deeper structural challenges will help determine whether all students have equitable access to high-quality teachers.

Findings

1	**Teacher production remains far below 2003 levels, even as recent state investments have contributed to rebound.**

Although state investments in teacher recruitment have helped strengthen the preparation and diversity of the workforce in recent years, the production of new teachers remains significantly below levels from two decades ago.

2	**California's teacher certification system creates barriers to recruitment, preparation, and retention.**

The state's credentialing structure limits who can enter the profession, how easily they can do so, and the quality and consistency of preparation teachers receive. High preparation costs, testing requirements, uneven access to programs, and confusing pathway information make the process especially difficult for candidates who cannot afford to stop working while earning a

credential. At the same time, California's reliance on multiple pathways and emergency-style permits helps districts fill vacancies, but can leave some teachers entering classrooms before they have received full preparation.

3 Teacher turnover is a key driver of shortages, especially in high-need schools and regions.

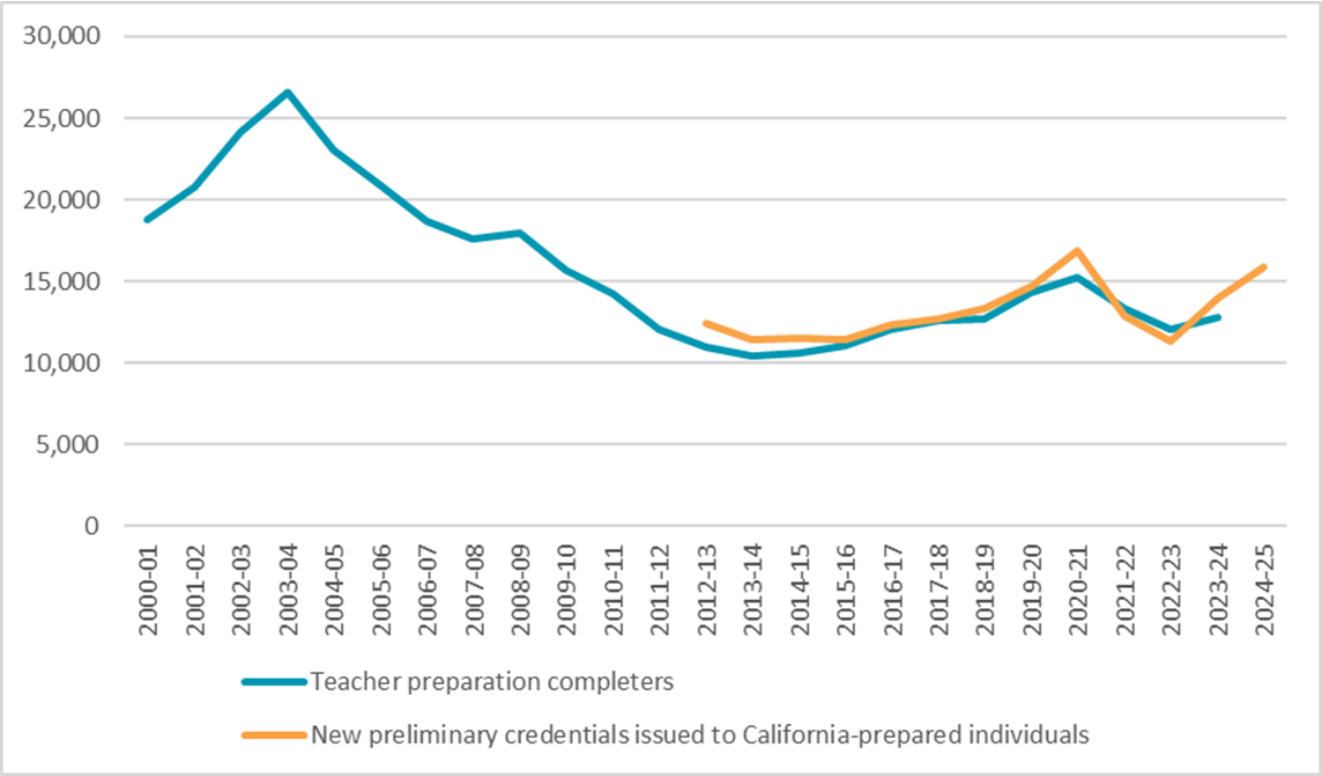
Teacher turnover has remained relatively stable over time, but it remains high on average and is most acute in rural districts and schools serving higher proportions of students of color, students from low-income families, and English Learners. These schools then often need to hire individuals without preparation who, in turn, have higher attrition rates, which undermines school stability and student achievement.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

Teacher production remains far below 2003 levels, even as recent state investments have contributed to rebound

Although the production of new teachers has increased in recent years, it remains far below the levels seen two decades ago. Leung-Gagné and colleagues find that the rate of teacher preparation program completion is still about 50 percent lower today than it was in 2003-04 (Figure 1). Between 2022-23 and 2024-25, Leung-Gagné and colleagues document a jump in new preliminary teacher credentials of nearly 40 percent, suggesting that the supply of new teachers is picking up. And yet, even as student enrollment in the state has declined, there is growing demand for new teachers associated with efforts to reduce high student-teacher ratios, increasing student needs (e.g., to support special education), and persistent turnover. In 2023–24, teacher attrition accounted for 86 percent of new hires, underscoring that workforce challenges are driven not only by weak preparation pipelines but also by persistent difficulty retaining teachers. Additionally, policy changes such as the introduction of universal transitional kindergarten, as well as new investments in literacy, CTE, and student support services, further increase teacher demand.

Figure 1. ***Number of California Teacher Preparation Completers and Preliminary Credentials Issued to Individuals Prepared in the State, 2001–02 to 2024–25***



Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Department of Education Higher Education Act Title II State Report Card System Data; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. *Annual Report Cards (Title II).* https://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/title2. (accessed 2/1/26); Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2026). *Teacher Supply in California, 2024–25: A Report to the Legislature.*

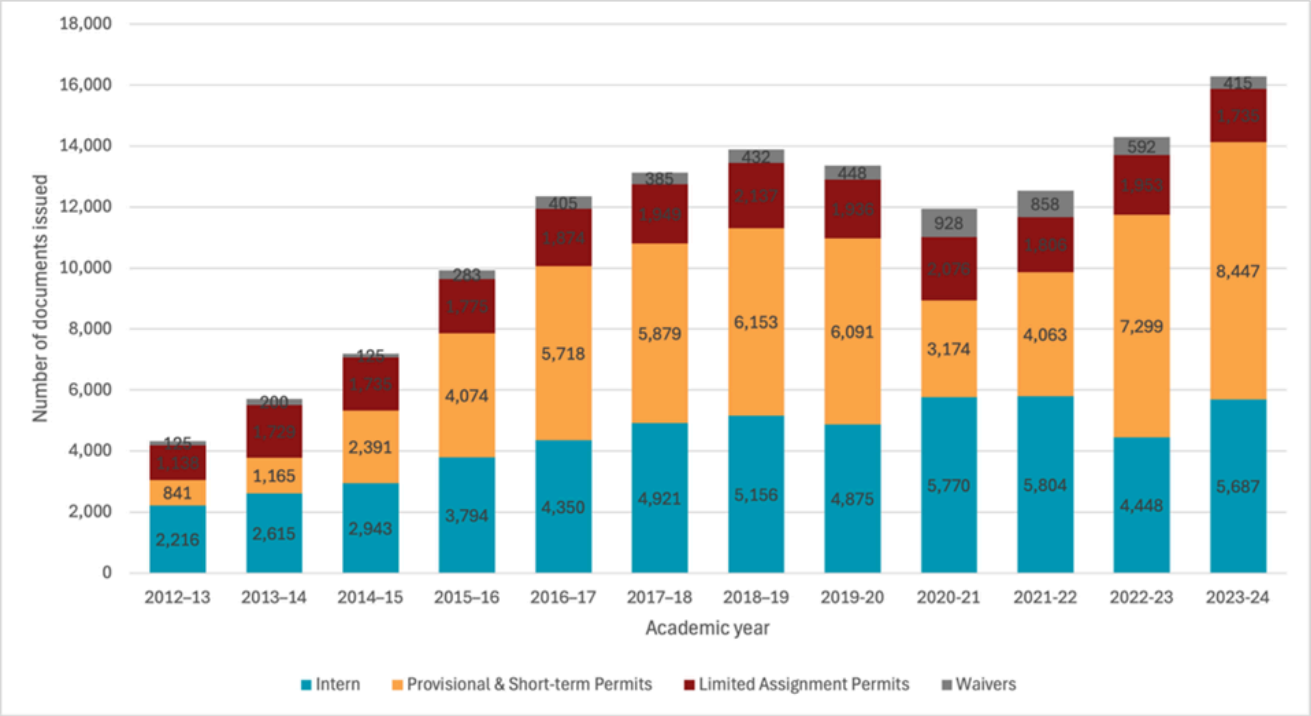
California's teacher certification system creates barriers to recruitment, preparation, and retention

California's teacher credentialing system creates structural barriers that limit access to the profession. At the same time, the system includes a wide range of credentials, pathways, and providers intended to balance quality and access, though that breadth also makes coherence and consistency harder to achieve statewide. Grossman and Kaul show that California remains a national outlier because of its longstanding fifth-year requirement for teacher education enacted as part of the Ryan Act in 1970. Although the ban on undergraduate teacher education majors was lifted in 2017, the state still lacks the capacity to support undergraduate preparation at scale, limiting its ability to expand the supply of new teachers. Prospective teachers also face substantial financial barriers, including the high cost of preparation in a high cost of living state and licensure testing requirements, which further narrow pathways into teaching. These barriers are compounded by a communication problem: pathway options, certification requirements, and available financial supports are not always easy for prospective

teachers to find or interpret. Together, these features make earning a credential more difficult and expensive. Despite the large number of CTC-approved preparation programs in the state, the system is also not well designed to meet dynamic regional needs. Santibañez, for example, documents that bilingual teacher preparation programs are geographically concentrated, leaving large preparation deserts without access to teacher preparation for bilingual education.

These structural barriers exacerbate disparities in teachers' access to high-quality preparation. Leung-Gagné and colleagues find that enrollment in online teacher education programs in California has grown from 10 percent in 2019-20 to 34 percent in 2024-25. Prior research in Texas documents that students of teachers prepared through online pathways perform worse academically than their peers (Kirksey & Gottlieb, 2026), but California has not yet examined whether these pathways in the state adequately prepare new teachers. Additionally, the share of underqualified teachers has increased in recent years: Leung-Gagné and colleagues find that the number of teachers working on substandard credentials or permits has more than tripled since 2013 (Figure 2). Notably, these patterns vary by credential area. In 2025, over 50 percent of education specialist teachers were on emergency-style permits, as compared to only 32 percent of multiple subject teachers and 27 percent of single subject teachers (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2026). These trends are not distributed equally across the workforce. Smith and Li document that Black teachers are more likely to enter through emergency permits than their peers; in 2024-25, over 50 percent of Black teachers entered through an emergency permit, whereas only 36.5 percent of Hispanic/Latino teachers, 30.9 percent of white teachers, and 24.9 percent of Asian American teachers entered through emergency permits. Importantly, Smith and Li show that emergency permits do not always represent a dead end: 62 percent of teachers who begin on emergency permits are still teaching five years later, and more than one-third progress to clear credentials, suggesting the importance of supporting on-ramps into fuller preparation.

Figure 2. California Substandard Credentials and Permits Issued, 2012-13 to 2023-24



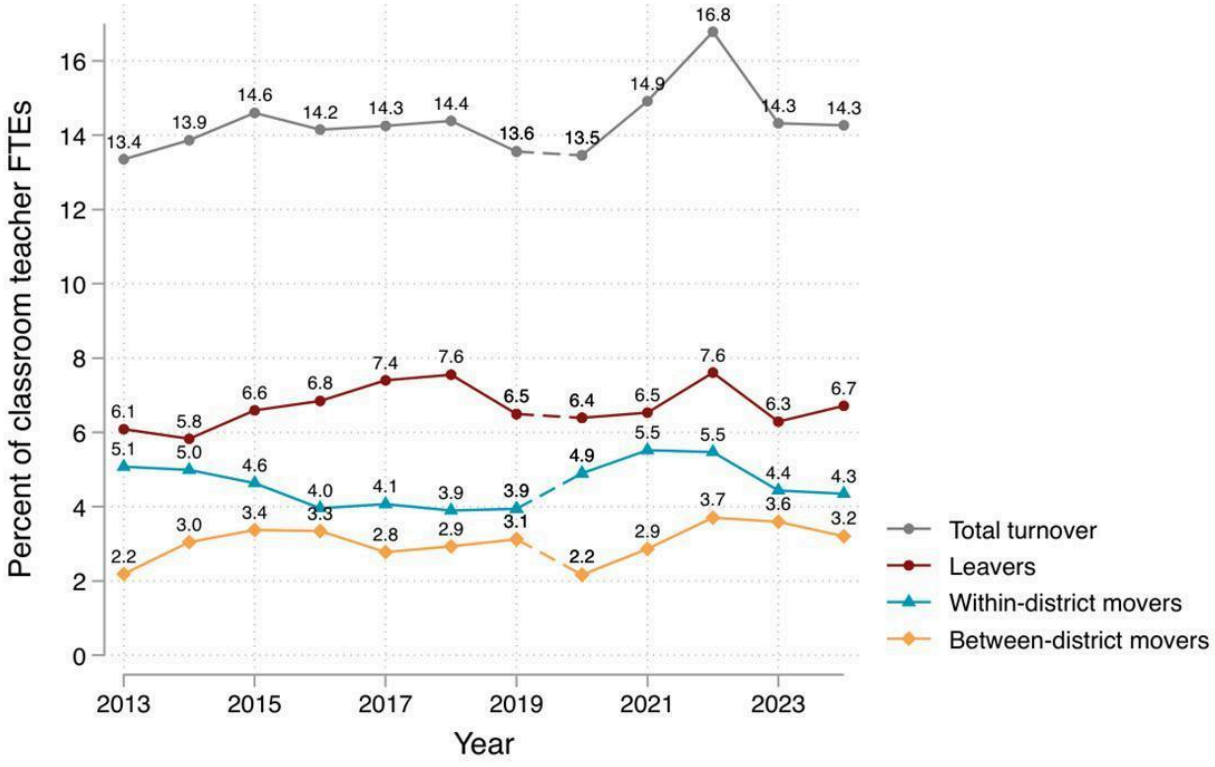
Source: California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. *Teacher supply: Interns, permits, and waivers* [Data dashboard] (accessed 12/16/2020; 4/23/2024, 7/20/2025).

Teacher turnover is a key driver of shortages, especially in high-need schools and regions

Between 2023-24 and 2024-25, Leung-Gagné and colleagues document an overall teacher turnover rate of 14 percent (Figure 3). Importantly, there is wide variation in turnover across teachers and schools.

How teachers enter the profession is one of the strongest predictors of whether they stay—and the pathways California relies on most are the ones with the highest attrition. Leung-Gagné and colleagues find that teachers who hold emergency permits are almost five times more likely than fully prepared teachers to leave the profession. On the other hand, Smith and Li find that teachers who enter through student-teaching and teacher residency pathways have the lowest turnover rates. These pathway differences are especially consequential for Black teachers: Smith and Li find that Black beginning teachers are disproportionately likely to enter on emergency permits and in highest-need schools, and they experience the highest one-year and five-year leaving rates. In this way, structural barriers to high-quality preparation have downstream effects on teacher retention that further exacerbate racial/ethnic inequities in the teacher workforce.

Figure 3. Teacher Turnover Over Time, 2012–13 to 2023–24



Note: Data collection procedures changed between 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, as signified by the dashes. Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of restricted California Staff Assignment Data, 2012–13 to 2024–25, from California Department of Education.

Beyond entry pathways, turnover is also significantly shaped by the conditions and contexts in which teachers work. Importantly, teacher labor markets are highly localized, and these patterns are not distributed equitably across the state's education system. Leung-Gagné and colleagues find that turnover rates are highest in charter schools, rural schools, and schools serving higher proportions of unduplicated pupils (i.e., English Learners, students from low-income backgrounds, and foster youth). Additionally, turnover rates vary by teachers' demographics and subject areas. Their analysis finds that turnover rates are higher for beginning teachers, teachers under the age of 30, Black teachers, and special education teachers. Aligned with decades of prior research (e.g., Ingersoll, 2001; Simon & Johnson, 2015), Leung-Gagné and colleagues also find that, controlling for other teacher, school, and student variables, teachers are more likely to leave when they experience high course loads, lower salaries, lower per-pupil spending, preparation pathways that do not offer preservice training, and principal turnover.

Implications for California

The research points to four areas where California could strengthen the teacher workforce.

Continued investments to strengthen teacher pipelines

The state has made substantial investments to support teacher recruitment and retention, including the Golden State Teacher Grant Program (GSTG) and Teacher Residency Grant Program, and these investments show promise. However, most of these investments rely on one-time funds that will be discontinued, absent renewed state investments. Bruno documents that, while teacher salaries have grown substantially from lows following the Great Recession, real teacher salary schedules are no higher today than they were two decades ago, which is a barrier to recruitment and retention. The evidence points to the importance of competitive salaries for educators, as well as targeted investments to support recruitment and retention in shortage areas, including through service scholarships like the GSTG, loan forgiveness and housing supports for teachers, as well as investments in affordable and high-quality preparation routes, such as teacher residencies.

Expanding infrastructure for undergraduate teacher education

In order to make pathways into the teaching profession more accessible, California can build upon the Integrated Teacher Education Program (ITEP) grants to expand models of undergraduate teacher education in the state, especially for teachers seeking PK-3 and multiple subject credentials. Additionally, there is an opportunity to focus on undergraduate education for dual certification programs in special education and bilingual education to better support the supply of new teachers in both areas. Recent trends suggest these investments may already be shifting the pipeline: the share of new candidates enrolled in ITEP programs increased from 6 percent in 2018–19 to 9 percent in 2024–25, while the share enrolled in residency programs increased from 2 percent to 10 percent over the same period. One key takeaway from existing models is that the success of undergraduate pathways will depend on strong partnerships, such as between community colleges and four-year institutions, especially the California State University (CSU) system, to ensure that students are supported to meet the requirements for a four-year degree if they enter through community college pathways without incurring additional time or costs. At a system level, the state must work to align coursework, particularly for teachers pursuing the PK-3 credential, given that many early childhood educators begin in the community college system. San Francisco State University presents one strong model of a program that has worked closely with local community colleges in order to create an integrated four-year program, with ITEP support; however, the state would also need to sustain this alignment at a system level to support programs.

Expanded data systems to better address regional needs and evaluate the impact of investments

Without more robust data systems, the state lacks the ability to fully understand the state of the teacher workforce and the impact of state investments. Given the highly localized nature of teacher labor markets, expanded data systems could help the state develop more targeted policy responses that are responsive to regional capacity and workforce needs. First, California should collect data on teacher working conditions at the state level, given that working conditions are a key driver of teacher turnover. Second, the state should invest in better evaluations of state investments in the teacher workforce to understand the costs, and benefits, of different investments. Third, integrated data systems would enable policymakers to better track teachers' pathways into the profession, from community college through four-year programs, and strengthen pathways into teaching (e.g., undergraduate teacher education programs as well as postbaccalaureate programs). Finally, given the rapid proliferation of online teacher preparation programs in the state, and the limited evidence base on the effectiveness of such programs, the state should study the effects of these emerging pathways on teacher quality and retention.

Expanded data systems alone are necessary but insufficient. In order for data to drive continuous improvement, the state must also determine a path for analysis of the data. Collecting robust data without building out the technical capacity to analyze the data risks producing information that does not inform policy and practice. In order for state policymakers and practitioners to meaningfully learn from and act upon such data, the state also needs to designate clear roles—e.g., within the California Department of Education, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, at the regional level, or within some dedicated research office—for translating educator workforce data into actionable policy guidance. Additionally, to expand the state's own technical capacity to analyze data, the state can create the structures to routinely share data with outside researchers.

Reimagining the teaching profession

As the state grapples with teacher recruitment and retention, there is a deeper question about whether the structure of the K–12 teaching profession is adequate to meet the many demands California schools now face. Despite rapid advances in technology and a shifting labor market, the structure of teachers' roles remains largely unchanged. While other states have developed systems that align professional learning with the opportunity to earn advanced credentials, differentiated roles, and increased compensation, California provides no systematic state-level pathways for teachers' professional advancement of this nature. Once a teacher completes an induction program and earns a clear credential, there are few formal policy mechanisms to reward growing expertise, support differentiated roles, or enable increased compensation—unless they leave the classroom and move

into administration. This flat professional structure, combined with flat teacher salaries, may inhibit the state's ability to recruit the next generation of teachers.

One exception is the state's National Board Certification Incentive Program, which provides $5,000 annual stipends to accomplished teachers who teach in high-need schools and subsidizes certification costs for teachers currently in those schools, thereby supporting teacher expertise, professional development, increased compensation, and a more equitable distribution of teachers. This is an initiative that could be built upon to support career ladders or lattices to develop, recognize, and share expertise, as states like Maryland are seeking to do.

Beyond incremental adjustments, the state has an opportunity to ambitiously rethink how schools organize educators' roles and time. One lever is governance: stronger coordination between the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and the California Department of Education could help the state to think more holistically about teacher preparation and development across the professional life course. A second lever lies within schools. Laski describes new strategic staffing models which allow schools to leverage existing human capital within the system, such as the growing numbers of paraprofessionals and increasing numbers of teacher residents supported by the state's Teacher Residency Grant Program, to support students. As Laski documents, principals are eager to manage teacher staffing more creatively, but face barriers to doing so in the current system.

Conclusion

California's teacher workforce is central to the quality and equity of the state's education system. California has made meaningful investments in recruitment and preparation, but deeper structural barriers in credentialing, compensation, preparation pathways, and career structure continue to limit equitable access to high-quality teachers. Addressing these challenges will require converting short-term investments into stable commitments, redesigning the systems that make it harder than necessary to enter and remain in the profession, and building the data infrastructure needed to understand what is working and for whom. The choices California makes now about its teacher workforce will shape the quality and equity of its schools for a generation.

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