SAME SCHOOL, DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE?

A Comparative Analysis of Compensation Perceptions Between Teachers and Other K-12 Employees

2026 Local Government Workforce Survey
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Executive Summary

School districts are not monolithic employers. Within a single district, teachers and classroom educators share a building, and often a pay schedule, with administrators, IT staff, operations personnel, counselors, paraprofessionals, and support workers whose experiences of the compensation system may differ substantially. This white paper examines those differences directly, using data from 174 school district employees in the Evergreen Solutions, LLC *2026 Local Government Workforce Survey* of 80 teachers and teaching-related staff and 94 other K-12 employees.

The headline finding is one of convergence more than divergence: teachers and other K-12 employees share nearly identical compensation dissatisfaction profiles. On pay satisfaction, benefits satisfaction, overall employment satisfaction, pay rate satisfaction, work engagement, market perception, and composite importance-performance gaps, the two groups are statistically indistinguishable. Both are dissatisfied. Both feel below market. Both remain highly engaged despite it all. The compensation challenge in school districts is a whole-district challenge, not a teacher-specific one.

Where teachers and their non-teaching colleagues **do** differ, meaningfully and significantly, is in three specific areas:

- **Work-Life Balance:** Teachers rate their work-life balance satisfaction significantly lower than other K-12 employees (3.31 vs. 3.79/5, $p = 0.003$). This is the sharpest and most consistent divide in the dataset.

- **Compensation as a Driver of Job Search:** Teachers report that compensation has a significantly stronger impact on their likelihood of seeking employment elsewhere (3.78 vs. 3.34/5, $p = 0.022$), signaling a more acute retention risk tied to pay concerns.

- **Certification and Credential Pay:** Teachers rate credential pay as significantly more important to them (4.29 vs. 3.90/5, $p = 0.002$) and simultaneously rate their employer's performance on it as somewhat better (2.99 vs. 2.55/5, $p = 0.030$), likely reflecting the credential-based pay schedule structures common in public education.

The strategic implication is direct: school district HR leaders who frame the compensation problem as a "teacher problem" are misidentifying both the scope of the challenge and its solutions. A whole-district lens is required. The exception, where teacher-specific strategy is warranted, is credential pay structure and work-life balance, where teacher experiences and expectations genuinely diverge from the rest of the K-12 workforce.

Background and Methodology

This analysis focuses on the 174 school district respondents within the broader *2026 Local Government Workforce Survey*. Respondents were classified as teachers (n = 80) if their self-reported job function included any of the following: classroom teachers, special educators, substitute teachers, teaching assistants, or classroom coordinators. All remaining school district respondents (n = 94) are classified as other K-12 employees, a group that includes administrators and managers (n=28), public works and utilities staff (n=11), IT professionals (n=9), community services staff (n=6), planners (n=5), finance and HR staff (n=3), paraprofessionals and aides, counselors, school psychologists, support staff, and others.

The survey measured multiple compensation-related dimensions, including satisfaction with pay, benefits, work-life balance, advancement opportunities, and overall employment; work engagement; numeric pay rate satisfaction; perceived market position; pay system understanding; importance ratings for eight compensation factors; employer performance ratings on the same eight factors; and the perceived impact of compensation on eight workforce outcomes.

All comparisons use Mann-Whitney U tests (non-parametric and appropriate for ordinal data), with exact p-values reported. Significance thresholds: ★★★ $p < 0.001$, ★★ $p < 0.01$, ★ $p < 0.05$. Results not reaching significance at $p < 0.05$ are reported as not significant (ns). Given the sample sizes (n=80 and n=94), the analysis is adequately powered to detect medium-to-large effects; smaller true differences may not reach significance in this subsample.

Exhibit 1
Sample Profile: Teachers vs. Other K-12 employees

Characteristic	Teachers (n=80)	Other K-12 (n=94)
% Union / Collective Bargaining	61.3%	54.3%
% Non-Union	31.3%	38.3%
Most common tenure band	4–7 years (25.0%)	1–3 years (37.2%)
% with 1–3 years tenure	18.8%	37.2%
% with 13+ years tenure	25.0%	18.1%

As shown in the demographic summary of Exhibit 1, a compositional difference is worth noting: teachers in this sample skew toward longer tenure (25% with 13+ years) while other K-12 employees are more heavily concentrated in early career stages (37% with 1–3 years). This tenure difference is not controlled in the primary analysis; where it may be relevant to interpretation, it is noted in the discussion.

Section 1: Where Teachers and Other K-12 Employees Are the Same

The most important finding in this analysis is what does not differ between teachers and other K-12 employees (**see Exhibit 2**). Across the core dimensions of compensation experience, pay satisfaction, benefits satisfaction, overall satisfaction, market perception, engagement, and compensation importance-performance gaps, the two groups are statistically indistinguishable. This convergence is not a result of insufficient sample size masking real differences; the gaps in means are genuinely small across these dimensions.

Exhibit 2
Core Satisfaction and Engagement Measures: Teachers vs. Other K-12 Employees

Measure	Teachers	Other K-12	Difference	p-value	Sig
Overall Employment Satisfaction (1–5)	3.71	3.71	0.00	0.959	ns
Pay Satisfaction (1–5)	2.89	2.93	–0.04	0.889	ns
Benefits Satisfaction (1–5)	3.50	3.36	+0.14	0.592	ns
Advancement Satisfaction (1–5)	2.80	2.86	–0.06	0.679	ns
Pay Rate Satisfaction (1–10)	5.35	5.49	–0.14	0.790	ns
Work Engagement (1–10)	8.36	8.15	+0.21	0.477	ns
Market Perception (1–5)	2.71	2.55	+0.16	0.328	ns
Pay System Understanding (1–5)	3.21	2.96	+0.25	0.112	ns

Pay satisfaction is essentially identical: 2.89 for teachers, 2.93 for other K-12 employees. Both are squarely in the Dissatisfied range on the five-point scale. Benefits satisfaction shows a small numerical advantage for teachers (3.50 vs. 3.36), but this is not statistically meaningful. Work engagement, often assumed to be a distinctive characteristic of teaching, is high for both groups (8.36 and 8.15/10), and again, not significantly different. Perhaps most strikingly, both groups rate their overall employment satisfaction at exactly 3.71/5, a precision of agreement that underscores the shared experience of working in K-12 local government regardless of role.

On market perception, teachers perceive themselves as slightly better positioned relative to the market (mean 2.71 vs. 2.55), a directional but non-significant difference. Among teachers, 43.0% feel their pay is below market; among other K-12 employees, that figure is 47.9%. Both groups are predominantly below-market in self-assessment, and neither stands apart in a statistically meaningful way.

Compensation Importance and Employer Performance

For the eight compensation factors assessed for importance and employer performance, scores are also nearly identical across groups (**see Exhibit 3**). The only two factors with a significant difference in importance would be market-responsive starting salary and certification and credential pay. In each of these cases, teachers place greater importance on this type of compensation than non-teaching staff. When considering perceived performance, only certification and credential pay show a slight but significant difference, with a p-value of .030. Both groups are experiencing roughly the same magnitude of unmet compensation expectations.

Exhibit 3
Importance and Performance Ratings by Factor: Teachers vs. Other K-12 Employees

Factor	Teach Imp	Other Imp	p	Teach Perf	Other Perf	p
Market-Resp. Starting Salary	4.25	3.98	0.008 ★★	2.81	2.76	ns
Annual Increases > Inflation	4.43	4.26	ns	2.19	2.49	ns
Competitive Market Position	3.81	3.76	ns	2.68	2.61	ns
Avoidance of Range Compression	3.54	3.71	ns	2.50	2.66	ns
Avoidance of Rank Compression	3.06	3.22	ns	3.03	2.95	ns
Pay Supplements	3.74	3.67	ns	2.13	2.12	ns
Certification / Credential Pay	4.29	3.90	0.002 ★★	2.99	2.55	0.030 ★
Bonuses / Incentive Pay	4.06	3.79	ns	1.84	1.99	ns

Section 2: Where Teachers and Other K-12 Employees Differ

Three statistically significant differences emerge from the full comparative analysis. Each is meaningful, and together they paint a coherent picture of the distinctive dimensions of the teaching experience within K-12 employment.

Difference 1: Work-Life Balance — The Clearest Divide

Work-life balance satisfaction is the single most significant difference between teachers and other K-12 employees, and it is not close. As illustrated in **Exhibit 4,** teachers rate their work-life balance satisfaction at 3.31/5, compared to 3.79/5 for other K-12 employees, a gap of nearly half a point ($p = 0.003$, ★★). This is the only satisfaction dimension that reaches high significance, and it represents a meaningful practical difference: teachers are trending toward Neutral-to-Dissatisfied on work-life balance while their colleagues trend toward Neutral-to-Satisfied.

The source of this gap is not difficult to identify. Teaching is structurally unlike most other K-12 roles in its demands on time outside formal work hours. Lesson planning, grading, parent communication, individualized education program (IEP) meetings, professional development, and extracurricular responsibilities routinely extend beyond the contracted school day, often without additional compensation. Administrative staff leave when the building closes; teachers carry the work home. IT professionals, finance staff, and operations employees in the same district are unlikely to experience the same pattern of unpaid after-hours demand.

The tenure data is also relevant here. Teachers in this sample are more likely to have longer tenure (25% with 13+ years vs. 18% for other K-12 employees), which may reflect either that teachers who have managed work-life demands over the long term persist in the profession or that dissatisfaction accumulates over time. In either case, the work-life balance gap is a structural feature of the teaching role, not a cohort artifact.

Exhibit 4
Employment Satisfaction Dimensions: Teachers vs. Other K-12 Employees

Satisfaction Dimension	Teachers	Other K-12	Gap	p-value	Sig
Work-Life Balance (1–5)	3.31	3.79	–0.48	0.003	★★
Pay Satisfaction (1–5)	2.89	2.93	–0.04	0.889	ns
Benefits (1–5)	3.50	3.36	+0.14	0.592	ns
Advancement (1–5)	2.80	2.86	–0.06	0.679	ns
Overall (1–5)	3.71	3.71	0.00	0.959	ns

Difference 2: Compensation's Impact on Seeking Other Employment

Among eight items measuring the impact of compensation on workforce outcomes, only one shows a statistically significant difference between teachers and other K-12 employees: the likelihood of seeking employment elsewhere ($p = 0.022$, ★) (**see Exhibit 5**). Teachers rate the impact of compensation on this outcome at 3.78/5, compared to 3.34/5 for other K-12 employees, a gap indicating that teachers feel more strongly that their compensation situation is actively pushing them to explore external opportunities.

This finding is notable precisely because it is isolated. On every other impact dimension, engagement, productivity, morale, organizational commitment, trust in leadership, intent to remain, and mental and emotional well-being, teachers and other K-12 employees report compensation's influence at statistically identical levels. The impact of compensation on teachers' job search behavior is amplified relative to peers, but the impact on their day-to-day commitment and engagement is not.

This pattern is consistent with the broader mission-commitment dynamic documented across the school district sample in companion research. Teachers may be engaged, committed, and emotionally invested in their students and school communities even while recognizing, and acting on, the financial pressure to consider alternatives. The elevated job-search impact score does not mean teachers are disengaged; it means they are more alert to the external market as a financial recourse, even as their internal commitment to the work remains high.

Exhibit 5
Impact of Compensation on Workforce Outcomes: Teachers vs. Other K-12 Employees

Compensation Impact Dimension (1–5)	Teachers	Other K-12	p-value	Sig
Engagement & Motivation	2.79	2.96	0.207	ns
Individual Productivity	2.64	2.86	0.190	ns
Organizational Commitment	3.45	3.18	0.147	ns
Morale	3.16	3.15	0.933	ns
Trust in Leadership	3.13	3.27	0.447	ns
Intent to Remain	3.63	3.38	0.185	ns
Likelihood of Seeking Elsewhere	3.78	3.34	0.022	★
Mental / Emotional Wellbeing	3.46	3.26	0.238	ns

Difference 3: Certification and Credential Pay — Higher Stakes, Marginally Better Delivery

As shown in **Exhibit 6**, certification and credential pay is the only compensation factor in which both the importance and performance ratings differ significantly between teachers and other K-12 employees. Teachers rate credential pay as significantly more important (4.29 vs. 3.90/5, $p = 0.002$, ★★) and rate their employer's performance on it as significantly better (2.99 vs. 2.55/5, $p = 0.030$, ★) than other K-12 employees do.

The importance gap is straightforward to explain. Teaching credentials, such as state licensure, endorsements, National Board Certification, and advanced degrees, are professionally and economically central to teachers in ways they are not for most support or administrative staff. Among teachers in this sample, a rating of 4.29/5 on importance (between Important and Very Important) indicates that credential recognition is a near-universal expectation of the teacher workforce. For other K-12 employees, many of whom work in roles where credentials are less formalized or less explicitly tied to compensation, the importance is real but lower.

The performance gap, teachers' rating credential pay performance at 2.99 vs. other K-12 employees at 2.55, likely reflects the structural reality of teacher salary schedules in most public-school systems. Traditional teacher pay schedules are explicitly organized around education level (BA, MA, MA+30, PhD) and years of experience, making the link between credentials and pay at least formally visible to teachers in a way it may not be to classified staff. A custodian or bus driver may hold a credential relevant to their work but see no corresponding pay recognition; a teacher moving from a BA to an MA lane sees an automatic salary bump. The system is imperfect. The performance rating of 2.99 is barely above Average, but it is more visible to teachers than to other staff.

Critically, even teachers' relatively better credential pay performance rating of 2.99 is still well below adequate. Among teachers, 42.0% rate their credential pay performance as Poor or Fair. The finding is not that teachers are well-served by credential pay; it is that they are less poorly served than their non-teaching colleagues, and that both groups have legitimate unmet expectations on this dimension.

Exhibit 6
Certification/Credential Pay: Teachers vs. Other K-12 Employees

	Teachers	Other K-12	p-value
Importance (1–5)	4.29	3.90	0.002 ★★
% Important / Very Imp.	82.5%	62.8%	—
Performance (1–5)	2.99	2.55	0.030 ★
% Good / Excellent	32.5%	20.2%	—
% Poor / Fair	42.0%	56.4%	—
Expectation Gap	–1.30	–1.35	ns

The expectation gap of performance minus importance is nearly identical for teachers (–1.30) and other K-12 employees (–1.35), despite the significant differences in raw importance and performance scores. Both groups are frustrated by the gap between what they need and what they receive on credential pay; the frustration simply operates at a higher absolute level for teachers because the stakes are higher. A targeted credential pay improvement strategy would serve both groups, though teacher-specific mechanisms (lane advancement, degree supplements, certification stipends) are particularly warranted given how central credentialing is to the teaching profession's compensation architecture.

Section 3: Discussion and Implications

The Whole-District Compensation Problem

The dominant finding of this analysis is that school district employees, regardless of whether they stand at the front of a classroom or manage the building's IT infrastructure, share a compensation experience that is broadly, statistically identically dissatisfying. The temptation in school district compensation discussions is to focus exclusively on teacher pay: teacher salaries attract media attention, collective bargaining centers on classroom staff, and legislative interventions typically target educator compensation. But the data presented here argues for a broader frame.

When other K-12 employees, such as the administrators, technology specialists, operations workers, counselors, and support staff who make schools function, experience the same pay dissatisfaction, the same below-market perceptions, and the same compensation expectation gaps as teachers, the problem cannot be solved through teacher-focused interventions alone. A school district that achieves pay equity for teachers while leaving its classified and administrative workforce behind will find that the same dissatisfaction and retention risk simply migrates across role categories. Comprehensive compensation reform requires whole-district attention.

Work-Life Balance as a Compensation-Adjacent Issue

The significant work-life balance gap between teachers and other K-12 employees is not, strictly speaking, a compensation finding. Compensation is not the primary driver of work-life balance dissatisfaction. But it is a critical workforce finding with compensation implications: if teachers cannot be compensated with competitive pay, the combination of low pay satisfaction *and* low work-life balance satisfaction creates compounding pressure that exceeds what mission-driven engagement can sustain indefinitely.

School districts that wish to address teacher retention should treat work-life balance as a parallel lever alongside compensation. Structured planning time, reasonable grading and administrative loads, and clear boundaries around after-hours communication are not substitutes for competitive pay, but they may be the difference between a teacher who stays with adequate pay and one who leaves despite it. The asymmetry documented here, where other K-12 staff report meaningfully better work-life balance in the same organization, suggests that the problem is structural to teaching rather than organizational. Addressing it requires deliberate policy intervention at the level of role design.

The Teacher Job-Search Signal

The finding that teachers feel more strongly motivated to search for jobs due to their compensation, even as they report identical levels of engagement and organizational commitment, warrants particular attention from district HR leaders. This pattern is consistent with what compensation researchers describe as a *push-pull dynamic*: employees who are committed to their current role may still actively monitor the external market when financial pressure is acute enough, and that monitoring can rapidly convert to departure when the right opportunity appears.

The teacher labor market has specific characteristics that make this signal consequential. Teacher shortages are well-documented in many regions and subjects; the external demand for credentialed educators, particularly in STEM, special education, and early childhood, is real and growing. A teacher who feels financially pressured enough to search is entering a market that, in many cases, has open positions to offer. School districts should not interpret stable engagement scores as evidence that the job-search pressure is dormant; the data here suggests it is elevated relative to other staff, even when engagement appears strong.

Credential Pay: A Teacher-Specific Strategy Within a Whole-District Problem

Credential pay is the one area where a teacher-specific compensation strategy is clearly warranted by the data. The significantly higher importance rating teachers assign to credential pay, driven by the professional architecture of teaching, creates a distinct design requirement: the compensation system must make the connection between credentials and pay explicit, visible, and meaningful. Traditional lane-and-step salary schedules do this partially, but the performance ratings suggest the connection is insufficiently rewarded even where it exists.

Districts should evaluate whether their credential pay structures, degree supplements, lane advancement, National Board Certification stipends, and endorsement differentials are actually competitive in magnitude relative to peer districts and the value those credentials represent in the external market. A teacher who earns an additional $1,500 for a master's degree in a market where that credential adds $8,000 to private-sector compensation is receiving a token acknowledgment rather than genuine recognition. The expectation gap on credential pay, nearly identical for teachers (–1.30) and other K-12 employees (–1.35), suggests there is room to improve delivery on this dimension for the entire K-12 workforce, with particular design attention to teacher-specific credentialing pathways.

Conclusion

The comparison of teachers and other K-12 employees in the *2026 Local Government Workforce* Survey produces a finding that is, in its own way, more challenging than a finding of sharp divergence: the two groups share the same compensation problem. As summarized in **Exhibit 7,** pay dissatisfaction, below-market perceptions, unmet expectations across all eight compensation factors, and a high-engagement workforce that is absorbing financial discontent through mission commitment, these are not teacher characteristics. They are school district characteristics.

The genuine differences that exist, work-life balance, job-search sensitivity to compensation, and the importance of credential pay, are real and warrant targeted responses. Teachers are uniquely burdened by the structural demands of the classroom, attuned to the external labor market as a financial option, and invested in a compensation system that recognizes the credentials that define their profession. These dimensions require a teacher-specific strategy.

But those teacher-specific strategies cannot substitute for the whole-district compensation reform that the data demands. Every employee in a K-12 organization, from the classroom to the server room to the bus garage, is experiencing the same gap between what they need from compensation and what their employer delivers. Closing that gap is the foundational challenge for school district workforce sustainability in the years ahead.

Exhibit 7
Summary of All Key Comparisons: Teachers vs. Other K-12 Employees

Summary of Key Comparative Findings

Dimension	Teachers		Other K-12	Significant?	Implication
Pay Satisfaction	2.89/5		2.93/5	No (ns)	Shared problem requiring whole-district solution
Benefits Satisfaction	3.50/5		3.36/5	No (ns)	Both groups are similarly satisfied with the benefits
Overall Satisfaction	3.71/5		3.71/5	No (ns)	Identical — role type does not divide experience
Work Engagement	8.36/10		8.15/10	No (ns)	Both groups were highly engaged despite pay issues
Market Perception	43% below		48% below	No (ns)	Both feel below market; similar proportions
Work-Life Balance	3.31/5		3.79/5	Yes (★★)	Teacher-specific structural issue; needs role-level policy
Seek Employment Elsewhere	3.78/5		3.34/5	Yes (★)	Teachers are more compensation-driven in their job search
Credential Pay Importance	4.29/5		3.90/5	Yes (★★)	Teacher-specific design requirement for the comp system
Credential Pay Performance	2.99/5		2.55/5	Yes (★)	Teachers are marginally better served, but both are inadequate
Comp Expectation Gap (composite)	–1.38		–1.27	No (ns)	Both groups face the same magnitude of unmet expectations