The University of Chicago

Teaching Through Crisis: Chicagoland Educators' Motivations for Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of
BACHELOR OF ARTS in PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES
and BACHELOR OF ARTS in SOCIOLOGY
at THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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April 14, 2025

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge for teachers: maintain high-quality instruction within the constraints of virtual teaching. While the difficulty of this task led to widespread teacher turnover nationally, Chicagoland teachers were more likely to remain in their schools during and after the pandemic than before it. Prior literature on teacher retention has largely focused on why teachers leave, with few studies examining those who stay, particularly in the pandemic context. This study draws on qualitative interviews with Chicagoland public school teachers to examine the varied motivations behind their decisions to persist in the profession. This study finds that men and women varied in their reasons for retention, with women emphasizing care-based motivators and men goal-oriented or external ones. This study also reports that motivations for retention varied by age and years of experience, with older, more veteran teachers focusing on challenge-oriented motivators, while younger, newer teachers emphasized external, circumstance-related motivators. This paper concludes by advocating for policies that can help mitigate gender differences and provide greater support for younger, early career teachers, as well as offering suggestions for future research.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of the following people.

I would like to start by thanking each of my advisors across the Public Policy and Sociology Departments. Thank you to my Sociology preceptor Tessa Huttenlocher for helping me craft my research question, for guiding me through the arduous process of analyzing my interview data, and for providing me with consistent feedback throughout the seminar course. I would also like to thank my Public Policy preceptor Daniel Sonnenstuhl for your insights and advice on how to strengthen my framing and argumentation. Thank you to Milvia Rodriguez, Karlyn Gorski, Marco Garrido, and Jenny Trinitapoli for helping get this project off the ground and providing meaningful guidance throughout. Lastly, a massive thank you to my advisor and second reader Lisa Rosen, who not only helped me hone my project and secure funding for it, but inspired me to pursue a career and research in education. Your continual guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the entirety of my college career has made many of my most transformative academic experiences come to life.

There are two additional individuals who were instrumental to this project. Special thanks to Ashley Leonard at the To&Through Project for catalyzing my work with the Chicago Public Schools and for making essential introductions to Chicago principals. My year spent learning from you and the MGN team gave me the necessary knowledge and experience to engage in this research. I would also like to thank Laura Desmond for providing me with thesis funding through the Marylyn C. Grabosky Prize for Undergraduate Research Related to Education, which made this project possible and granted me the opportunity to adequately compensate the hard-working public school educator participants included in this project for their time. It is a privilege to be able to complete this project in Ms. Grabosky's honor.

Thank you to my friends, my roommates, and my family for encouraging me throughout the long and often difficult writing process and for providing me with advice whenever I found myself stuck. I would not have made it to the end without you all!

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to the Chicago Public School and Elgin Area School District U-46 public school teachers and administrators who took time out of their busy schedules to sit down and share their experiences with me. The pandemic was an unprecedented and immensely difficult time for teachers, and I greatly appreciate and admire the honesty, care, and emotion with which you all shared your stories. I am inspired by your continued efforts to persist and improve your craft in the face of increasingly difficult challenges and barriers within the school system. It has been the highlight of my last four years working alongside and learning from you, and I am grateful that you allowed me to share just a fraction of your insights here.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic placed extraordinary demands on teachers across the United States, who were tasked with familiarizing themselves with online learning technologies, adjusting to shifting instructional modes, managing students' emotional and behavioral needs, and navigating their own personal health and safety concerns (Camp et al. 2023; Gunn et al. 2023). These pressures significantly impacted teacher retention rates, contributing to an unprecedented wave of teacher exodus and nationwide staffing shortages as the pandemic progressed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As a result of these new barriers, the pandemic tested teachers in new ways that both clarified teacher motivations and exacerbated existing teaching challenges.

This period therefore offers an excellent opportunity to strengthen existing literature on teacher retention and attrition. While prior research has extensively documented why teachers leave—citing factors such as student demographics, teacher-administrator relationships, and classroom dynamics—comparatively little is known about why teachers stay, particularly during moments of intense disruption. Pandemic-specific factors that drove and continue to drive teachers out of their schools and professions have only begun to be explored. To build a complete narrative about teacher retention and attrition, we cannot simply look at the teachers who attrited; we also need to look at those who stayed in their roles, what variations exist in their retention motivations, and why.

To do so, I turn to Chicagoland public school teachers as my case study. Despite the data that points to concerning levels of teacher attrition nationally, Chicagoland educators were more likely during and after the pandemic than they were prior to the pandemic to remain in their same schools, a pattern reflected more broadly across Illinois. As such, Chicagoland serves as a

valuable opportunity to examine teacher motivations in a context where retention was most pronounced. This study aims to answer: **What do Chicagoland public school teachers describe as their reasons for staying in their positions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what explains the variations in these responses?**

Drawing on qualitative interviews with 18 Chicagoland public school teachers, this paper explores teacher experiences during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular focusing on how gender, age, and years of experience shaped educators' motivations for staying in the profession. This paper finds that teachers use five motivation types to describe their retention: care-oriented, goal-oriented, vocation-oriented, challenge-oriented, and external, circumstance-oriented. Women were more likely to describe care-oriented motivations—such as love, concern, and care for their students—as central to their decision to remain in their roles. In comparison, men were much less likely to name care and nurturance as contributing to their retention and more frequently cited goal-oriented or external reasons, discussing their teaching objectives or the benefits that teaching afforded them such as school schedule or the flexibility of work from home.

In addition to gender-based variations, motivations also varied by age and years of experience. Older, more experienced teachers often expressed a desire to rise to the challenge of the pandemic and see through to the eventual return of in-person learning. In contrast, the younger, less experienced population of teachers more often reported staying in the profession due to limited career alternatives or uncertainty about switching fields, rather than due to strong intrinsic motivations.

Based on these findings, this paper concludes with policy implications and recommendations aimed at dismantling gendered barriers in teaching and increasing institutional

support for younger, early career teachers. It also outlines directions for future research to explore diverse retention motivations across broader geographic and demographic contexts, with the goal of expanding our understanding of teacher retention and attrition during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

I. Retention and Turnover During the Pandemic

Over the last decade, districts, schools, and policymakers across the country have witnessed growing teacher turnover rates, including both mobility between schools and attrition from the profession altogether. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. national attrition rate among public school teachers averaged around 8%, with more than two-thirds of those departures driven by factors unrelated to retirement. In addition to this 8% leaving the profession, another 8% of teachers per year transferred between schools, contributing to a total annual teacher shortage of about 125,000 out of a total teacher workforce of about 3.8 million. Alarmingly, these attrition levels were nearly double of those observed in other comparably developed nations (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2019).

The effects of teacher turnover across the country became even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic period between 2020 and 2022, when schools noticed precipitous drops in teacher, staff, and school administration retention rates. Similar to other front-line professionals, teachers during the pandemic bore the unprecedented burden of trying to support students academically and socioemotionally through socially distanced and online learning environments, causing many to leave their district or even the profession as a whole. Between February 2020 and May 2022, approximately 300,000 public school teachers and staff left the education field, leading to a 3% cut in the overall national teacher workforce. By mid-2022,

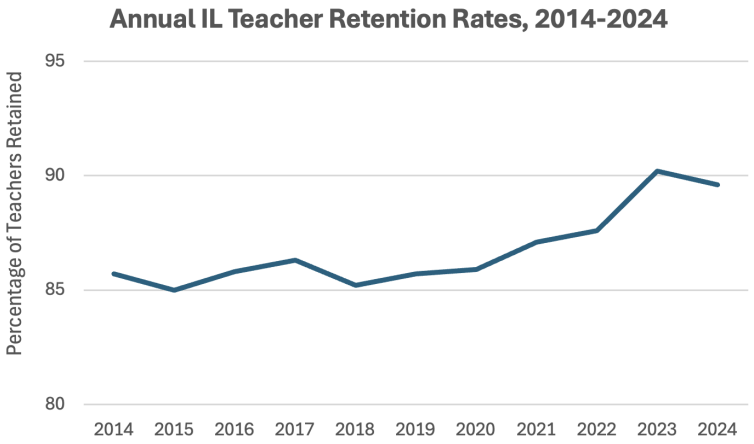
nearly half (44%) of public schools were reporting part or full-time teacher vacancies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Overall, turnover rates increased by 17% relative to pre-pandemic levels, with especially high attrition rates among Black and Hispanic educators and in schools serving high concentrations of low-income students (Bacher-Hicks et al. 2023).

High rates of teacher turnover and shortage carry significant consequences. In response to extreme teacher shortages, schools often resort to hiring inexperienced or unqualified teachers, increasing class sizes, or reducing class offerings—measures that can negatively impact student learning, achievement, emotional well-being, and graduation rates. Moreover, teacher turnover has been linked to slower instructional progress, reduced teacher collaboration, increased organizational instability, and an imposition of financial burdens for schools, which in turn affect teacher and administrator experiences (Allensworth et al., 2009; Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Doughty, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2020).

However, a sole focus on national attrition rates obscures important bright spots. Contrary to the broader narrative of widespread teacher exodus, Illinois and its largest school district, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), experienced the most significant improvements of teacher retention in the last decade during and following the pandemic years, from 2020-2024. As exhibited by **Figure 1**, data from 2021-21 and 2021-22 school years show that Illinois educators were more likely during and after the pandemic than they were prior to the pandemic to remain in their same schools.[1] By the 2022-23 school year, the statewide teacher retention rate had reached an all time high, surpassing 90%.

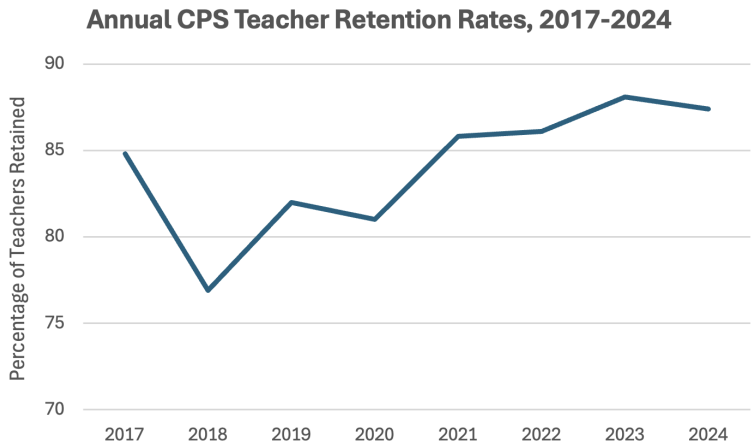
[1] The Illinois State Board of Education releases a yearly "Report Card" that includes annual teacher retention rates, defined as "the three-year average percentage of full-time teachers returning to the same entity from year to year" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2023a). The retention rates from Figures 1 and 2 are aggregated from yearly Report Card data. The years on the x-axis reflect the start of the school year (eg. "2013" represents the "2013-14 school year).

Figure 1: Annual Illinois Teacher Retention Rates, 2014-2024



As demonstrated in **Figure 2**, CPS followed a similar trend in improved teacher retention, seeing a peak retention rate of 87.4% that same year (Illinois State Board of Education, 2023b)[2]. CPS is the third-largest school district in the country, with 653 operating schools that service roughly 359,000 students.

Figure 2: Annual Chicago Public School Teacher Retention Rates, 2017-2024



Remarkably, Illinois saw improvements in retention concentrated in districts that generally experience *the lowest* retention rates, including districts that serve primarily lower-income students and students of color. In many other states, these were the geographic

[2] Data from Chicago Public Schools is not publicly available prior to 2017.

areas where teacher attrition was the most noteworthy during the pandemic (Advance Illinois 2023). Illinois and Chicago are also notable in that their strong retention rates held consistently throughout the pandemic years. States such as Arkansas, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington saw similar improvements in teacher retention entering the 2020-2021 school year compared with pre-pandemic levels, likely due to high unemployment rates and difficulties in finding alternative work. However, as the pandemic continued and the national economy became more stable, teacher retention in these states began to decrease, starting in the 2021-2022 school year (Camp, Zamarro, and McGee, 2023; Goldhaber and Theobald, 2022).

Taken together, these patterns position Chicagoland as a compelling case for examining teacher retention during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The sustained success of Chicago and Illinois to defy national trends of attrition make it an interesting context to begin exploring the underlying motivations that drove teachers to remain in their roles during a period of unprecedented disruption. By focusing on a region where retention was most pronounced, this study aims to deepen and complicate prevailing narratives about teacher experiences and responses to the pandemic.

II. Chicagoland's Covid-19 Response

During the pandemic, states and city governments across the country were granted the flexibility to dictate their own set of evolving policies that structured the transition to virtual learning, hybrid learning, and eventually a return to in-person learning. In Illinois, Governor J.B. Pritzker issued a statewide mandate that went into effect on March 17, 2020, requiring all Illinois state public schools to close their school buildings for an initial two-week period (Reisberg and Ayala, 2020). This closure was later extended through the remainder of the academic year. In

response, CPS launched a district-wide remote learning program in early April, which required schools to offer digital and non-digital learning options, maintain contact with students, and hold office hours for additional support. The district also distributed over 120,000 computing devices by the start of the remote learning program[3] (Chicago Public Schools, 2020).

For the 2020-2021 school year, CPS unveiled its "Full Remote Learning Model" which mandated that every K-12 student would receive a full school day's worth of live instruction via Google Classroom and Google Meet. By October 2020, the district began a phased return to in-person learning by bringing back students with diverse needs in small classroom clusters. Schools were mandated to implement safety measures such as masking, daily health screenings, COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and sanitization stations. Following winter break, CPS gave every student an option to opt-in on returning to in-person learning starting in early February, 2021, a choice that remained available for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year. By August 2021, fully in-person schooling resumed[4]. It is within this policy landscape that teacher retention motivators are explored in this paper.

III. Motivation for Research

Public discourse and literature has given significant attention to the mass exodus of teachers during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic undoubtedly left an indelible impact on the teacher workforce, national conversations about teacher turnover often overlook the resilience, strength, and care exhibited by the teachers who remained. My research aims to fill that gap by examining the diverse motivations behind teacher retention, even in the

[3] By the start of the 2020-2021 school year, an additional 40,000 devices had been distributed to students.
[4] A CPS report showed that 91.2 percent of CPS students attended in-person schooling on the first day of the 2021-2022 school year, down just a few percentage points from the the first day attendance of the 2019-2020 school year (pre-pandemic) of 94.2 percent and up from the remote learning first day attendance of the 2020-2021 school year of 84.2 percent (Chicago Public Schools, 2021).

face of extraordinary challenges. I felt that my research questions were best answered by exploring the region where teacher retention was among the most salient in the country: Chicagoland. Contrary to the dominant narrative, the Chicagoland area's retention success demonstrates that teachers employed a variety of strategies to adapt, overcome challenges, and find meaning in their work.

My desire to start with Chicagoland as the subject of research also arose from my prior experience working closely with CPS teachers and administrators at the To&Through Project, conducting research in Chicago schools with the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, and analyzing statewide education policy at Advance Illinois. In these experiences, I spoke with CPS teachers, administrators, and district leaders on the changes that they witnessed and endured during and following the pandemic that shaped their identities as teachers and attitudes towards the profession at large. My time working closely with Chicagoland educators therefore provided me with what I believe to be the requisite experience, context, and knowledge to begin piecing together the diverse and varied experiences of Chicagoland educators. While my previous work with educators in the region offered initial insights into how teachers and students experienced the pandemic broadly, this research takes a more focused look at the specific factors that motivated teachers to remain in the profession during one of the most turbulent periods in public education.

Literature Review

I. Reasons for Retention

Existing literature on teacher retention and attrition report conflicting reasons why teachers stay or leave their roles. One prevailing theory centers on student composition, as

schools with high teacher turnover tend to serve low-performing, non-White, and low-income student populations. Research demonstrates that teachers, in particular highly-educated, high-performing ones, are more likely to leave schools that have the lowest-achieving students on state and national standardized tests (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, and Wycoff, 2005). For example, schools with a majority of low-income students and students of color have as high as double the teacher turnover rates as compared with schools with a majority White student population and fewer low-income students (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2019). While these patterns underscore deep inequalities that exist within the public education system, student performance alone cannot explain teacher attrition. In the first two years of the pandemic, Illinois saw improvements in retention concentrated in districts that generally experience *the lowest* retention rates, including districts that serve primarily lower-income students and students of color (Advance Illinois, 2023), demonstrating that other retention factors must also be at play within the context of the pandemic.

Another school of thought points to relationships with and perceptions of school administrators as a key driver of teacher retention or attrition. Scholars in support of this theory argue that teachers' self-reported satisfaction with their current employment and school working conditions are closely tied to the effectiveness of administration and school leadership. Factors such as principals' initiatives to motivate teachers and students, a clear articulation of school vision and goals, administrator expectations, open communication channels between teachers and principals, support for instructional practices, and teacher autonomy over curriculum and school decision-making have all been linked to teacher outcomes (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2011). However, while administrator relationships are often cited as a reason for teachers to leave or to stay, such relationships do not represent a reliable

stand-alone factor in explaining the retention rates among teacher populations. For example, retained teachers in my study differed significantly in their perceptions of their administrators before, during, and after the pandemic, ranging from very low to very high satisfaction. Therefore, understanding retention patterns through the lens of administrator relationships cannot on its own explain motivations for retention.

A third commonly cited reason in the literature focuses on teacher-student and teacher-peer relationships. For instance, prior qualitative interview studies have revealed that teachers are more likely to feel able to overcome conflict and persist within the profession when they feel comfortable sharing such conflicts with colleagues or administrators. Similarly, teachers who form meaningful emotional connections with students have been shown to remain in their schools for longer (Rinke, 2019). However, this body of literature largely focuses on in-person environments and does not fully address how these relationships and their relevant importance to teacher retention changed when schools transitioned to a virtual format. It also does not address how teachers of distinct groups (e.g., men vs women) differ in their approach to teacher-student or teacher-peer interactions.

In 2007, Helen M.G. Watt and Paul W. Richardson established the comprehensive factors that influence teacher choice (FIT-Choice) scale, which was designed to systematize the measurement of these aforementioned factors in regards to teacher entry. According to the FIT model, there are three primary categories that influence teacher recruitment: *intrinsic value*, *social utility value*, and *personal utility value*. *Intrinsic value* refers to the enjoyment of the tasks required of teaching; this may include lecturing, lesson planning, or helping students develop. *Social utility value* focuses on the desire to make a contribution to society or engage in service work in some capacity. Teachers who believe that their job allows them to better their

community or otherwise make a worthwhile contribution to society fall into this category. Finally, *personal utility value* encompasses the benefits outside of the teaching context that the profession affords teachers–examples include time for family, job security, and job transferability. The *personal utility value* category also includes a phenomenon known as "bludging", which refers to the process of selecting the easiest option available. In the context of teaching, this might look like choosing teaching because of a perception that it will permit low-effort exertion or give the individual time for extramural activities (Watt and Richardson, 2007). While the FIT model is the most common way to evaluate motivations for teacher recruitment, this framework is less often used as a paradigm through which to understand teacher motivations for retention. Given that there is no prior established categorization of understanding teacher retention motivators, I aim to expand upon the framework of the FIT model and apply it to teacher persistence.

II. The Feminization of Teaching

One of the primary ways that I explore variations in retention motivators in this paper is through the lens of gender. The feminization of teaching and the gender divisions within the education profession are well-documented (Acker, 1995; Drudy 2008; Griffiths 2006; Halper et al. 2019; Hoff et al. 2006; Kelleher 2011; Moreau 2014). The term 'feminization' is defined as "the process of women coming to numerically dominate an occupation and in doing so having a potential impact on the status of an occupation, its attractiveness to new entrants, and the roles of those employed in it" (Moreau 2014). In the context of teaching, as the field became increasingly feminized, it also became devalued, socially and economically. Female-dominated professions like teaching also tend to be stereotyped as requiring greater "feminine traits", such as warmth,

nurturance, and care, which are framed as natural extensions of women's innate childcare abilities and roles (Halper et al. 2019; Jugović 2022). This perception has pernicious implications for the profession, as it contributes to the perception of teaching as altruistic labor rather than skilled and intellectual work (Rahayani 2010).

This gendered construction of the teaching profession provides justification for the undervaluing and underpaying of female labor. For example, female teachers have been shown to be assigned additional "informal" and unpaid roles not typically assigned to their male counterparts to the same degree—roles such as teaching moral behaviors to students, demonstrating that women are able to thrive in mathematics and science, helping mentor adolescent girls after school, and providing additional emotional and mental support for students. Female teachers have also been shown to spend more non-contracted hours learning about their students' interests, getting to know their students' backgrounds and families, and using this personalized knowledge to create more tailored curricula (Demetriou 2009). The gendered perception of women as representing emotions and care and men as representing reason and practicality provide greater discretion to male teachers over whether and how much to assume caring responsibilities. For women, however, caring duties are rarely viewed as optional; rather, they are perceived as a precondition to their acceptance into and success within the teaching profession (Lahelma et al. 2014).

These stereotypes also keep women confined to the lower-paid primary levels of education, where "caring" and "motherly" traits are seen as especially valuable (Moreau 2014). Men, in contrast, typically occupy a greater percentage of the higher-paying secondary school and administrative positions, and have been shown to envisage careers in school leadership to greater degrees than women (Hoff et al. 2006). This phenomenon is often linked to the

perception of men as more competent and possessing lower warmth, both of which lend themselves to promoting men into more advanced administrative positions within caregiving fields (Halper et al. 2019).

Despite the wealth of literature that supports the difference in the experiences of teaching between men and women, it remains unclear how these differences impacted teacher experiences during the pandemic, in particular within the retention conversation. In my research, I aim to answer whether these gendered differences and perceptions influenced the distinct motivations between male and female teachers to remain in the profession.

III. The Effect of Age and Career Stage on Teaching and Retention

The second lens through which I explore variations in teacher retention is age (inextricably linked with years of experience). Early career teachers, defined as teachers with fewer than six years of teaching experience, are typically the ones that experience the highest rates of attrition and turnover. While in theory early career teachers enter the profession equipped with comprehensive teacher preparation coursework, younger teachers lack the experience and construction of "professional knowledge and practice that is acquired through professional learning and development" (McCormack et al., 2006), which makes overcoming challenges much more difficult. Scholars have asserted that "the teaching profession eats its young" (Halford, 1998) and "leaves new teachers to sink or swim" (Ingersoll and Smith, 2004). For instance, younger, less experienced teachers often find themselves with greater workloads compared to more veteran teachers as they have to create more curricula and homework from scratch and spend more time navigating classroom management. Without prior established relationships with administrators and peers, younger and less experienced teachers are also less

likely to receive support and more likely to be of lower status, often being saddled with additional responsibilities, more difficult classrooms, or unrealistic expectations of growth and progress (Schuck et al., 2018).

In comparison, older teachers, who are most often in a mid- to late stage of their careers, tend to possess a deeper reservoir of professional strategies to meet challenges. Generally speaking, these more veteran teachers demonstrate a stronger ability to lead and manage classrooms, exhibit a more relaxed demeanor, and advocate more vocally for their needs and for school policy changes (Day 2019; Veliz and Mainbridge, 2024). However, mid- to late career teachers have also been shown to feel more undervalued and overlooked for development opportunities, which at times contributes to turnover or premature retirement (Veliz and Mainsbridge, 2024).

There is conflicting literature on whether or not older teachers are more or less likely to be resilient to change. While some studies have shown that older and more veteran teachers are more resistant to change (Day 2019), other studies have shown that older education professionals respond to change more positively and are more likely to experience confidence and resilience through transition periods (Shin et al. 2023; Veliz and Mainbridge, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that the existing research is unclear on whether older or younger teachers would be more prepared to weather the COVID-19 pandemic, a question that I aim to answer in my research.

To conclude, despite the extensive body of research that attempts to explain patterns in teacher retention and attrition, there is very little literature that discusses how sub-populations of retained teachers vary in their motivations for retention. Even fewer studies explore how factors such as gender and age shaped retention decisions within the context of the COVID-19

pandemic. In my study, I build upon prior literature by examining how teachers made sense of their persistence throughout and following the pandemic through the lens of gender, age, and years of experience, in the hopes of shedding more light on the underlying patterns behind teacher retention, particularly in times of crisis.

Data and Methods

To better understand teachers' experiences during the pandemic—particularly the challenges they encountered, how their roles changed, and the motivations that pushed them to persist in their roles—I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 18 public school educators in Chicagoland. My study focuses primarily on K-12 core subject teachers, who comprise nine of the 18 participants. However, I also interviewed four K-12 dual language or special education teachers. Historically, bilingual and special education teachers have experienced the highest turnover rates nationwide and yet in Chicago, strong retention rates still held for both populations during and following the pandemic (Advance Illinois, 2023). Their inclusion within my study even more powerfully contradicts the prevailing national narrative of pandemic-driven teacher attrition, and I did not find that their responses differed substantially from that of my core teacher participants.

My study also involved interviewing five principals who lead K-12 public schools. While most educator retention studies tend to focus exclusively on teachers, speaking with principals allowed me to gain greater contextual understanding of how schools responded to the pandemic, what teacher retention looked like overall across a school, and measures that administrators enacted to retain their teachers. Initially, I had hoped that interviewing principals would give me insights into the population of teachers who left, allowing me to engage in preliminary

comparison of the retained and attrited teaching populations. However, this comparison did not end up as a central focus of my findings. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, my principal interviews served primarily to enrich my understanding and analysis of teachers' responses but were not referenced directly.

Participants were recruited via email, LinkedIn, and snowball sampling in accordance with the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. IRB24-1093). Each prospective participant was provided with information regarding the study purpose, duration, and compensation and asked to fill out a brief Google Form that collected basic information including their age, race, gender, years of experience in an Illinois public school, current employer, current role, and years of experience in their current role. Participants were then provided a link to schedule their interview (either in-person or over Zoom) and a copy of a full consent form that included the study purpose, procedure, financial information, risks and benefits, and notes on confidentiality **(Appendix B)**.

In total, 29 participants filled out the Google Form indicating interest in participation, and 18 of those participants ultimately completed an interview. There were a few different ways that participants became attrited between filling out the form and interviewing: some did not qualify according to study's eligibility criteria detailed below, some did not respond to my requests to schedule an interview, and some did not show up to their scheduled interview time or indefinitely postponed. For completing an interview, participants received $50 compensation via a digital Giftogram. The funding for this compensation came from a $3000 grant called the *Marylyn C. Grabosky Prize for Undergraduate Research Related to Education* which was awarded to me in May 2024 by the Committee of Education at the University of Chicago. The only requirement of the grant was that it be used toward the completion of a BA senior thesis related to education.

Each participant had to meet the three following criteria to be eligible: (1) they must have must have begun teaching no later than the 2020-2021 school year and remained an educator until the time of the interview; (2) during this duration they must have been employed by an Illinois public school in either Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Rockford School District No. 205 (Rockford), or Elgin Area School District U-46 (Elgin); and (3) they must occupy the role of a core subject teacher, a full-time bilingual (sometimes referred to as dual language) or special education educator, or school principal. Part-time substitute teachers, physical education teachers, school counselors, and other administrative educators were omitted from this study, as their roles differ significantly from the teacher or principal groups. There were no restrictions based on the participants' personal identities such as age, gender, or race. CPS, Rockford, and Elgin were selected as my target areas because they represent the three largest and most diverse urban school districts in Illinois.

I began my recruitment process through LinkedIn Recruiter, a premium LinkedIn account that allowed me to directly message educators through CPS, Rockford, and Elgin's official employment pages. This method ended up being my primary and most successful recruitment method, yielding the majority of my interviews. However, I found that LinkedIn was not effective in recruiting principals. Although I contacted principals across all three districts from LinkedIn, I was unsuccessful in obtaining any interviews with them using this method. To address this problem, I utilized my own personal contacts within CPS from my past work with the district in order to get in touch with principals who might be interested. Through these networks, I was connected to all five of the principals who ultimately participated in my study. My final method of recruitment was snowball sampling, where I asked current research participants at the end of the interview to share information regarding my study with potential

new interviewees from their personal networks. This proved to be my least successful method, although still yielded a couple final interviews.

In total, I interviewed 18 participants who varied in age, race, gender, years of experience, subject area, and geographic location. Starting with age, three participants each fell into the "40-50" and "50-60" age ranges, and six participants each identified with the "20-30" and "30-40" age ranges. In terms of racial demographics, 10 participants identified as "White", five identified as "Black/African American", two identified as "Mixed Race", and one identified as "Asian/Pacific Islander". For context, the racial composition of CPS educators is as follows: 45.7% White, 25% Hispanic, 20.5% Black/African American, 4.9% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.5% Mixed Race (Chicago Public Schools, 2024). For gender, 13 participants identified as "Female" and five identified as "Male", closely reflecting the CPS educator breakdown of 75.2% Female and 24.8% Male (Chicago Public Schools, 2024). In terms of educator type, nine participants identified themselves as "Core Subject Teachers" (Math, Science, History, English, Foreign Language), four identified as "Special Education/Bilingual/Dual Language", and five participants identified as "Principals". Among the teachers, five participants identified having 0-6 years of experience, five participants identified having 6-15 years of experience, and three participants identified having 15+ years of experience. Principals were not categorized in terms of years of experience, as they often had a mix of experience in teaching, acting in an administrative role such as Assistant Principal, and leading in the Principal role.

Geographically, one participant came from the Elgin Area School District U-46 and the rest came from CPS. In CPS, schools are organized into 17 distinct networks, determined by city planning zones (eg. Network 1 encompasses Sauganash, Reed-Dunning, Albany, and Irving city planning zones). Three participants each came from Networks 2, 12, and 14, two participants

each came from Networks 5 and 10, and one participant each came from Networks 1, 4, 7, and 11. This diversity indicates that the CPS interviewees came from all over the district, serving students and neighborhoods of different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locations.

There are a few limitations to my recruitment method worth addressing. One limitation of my recruitment method is that I relied heavily on LinkedIn recruitment, and teachers who are on LinkedIn may have certain characteristics that make their specific retention motivations distinct from the general teaching population. For example, participation in LinkedIn might indicate a prioritization of professional networking, career development, and school engagement that lend themselves to more committed and involved teachers. Participation in LinkedIn may also be representative of a specific demographic population that is younger, more urban, or more comfortable with technology, which would have implications on their ability to navigate a virtual teaching format during the pandemic and their generalizability to the entire teaching population. However, I have reason to believe that this limitation did not significantly impact my study or the validity of my findings. As I will demonstrate, my research participants varied widely in terms of age, in addition to other demographic characteristics. When I spoke with teachers about their comfort transitioning to the virtual format, there was a wide range of responses from very low familiarity with digital teaching to very high. There was also great variation in whether or not teachers considered leaving during the pandemic. Taken together, these findings suggest to me that the bias from using primarily LinkedIn as a recruitment tool was not substantially limiting to my analysis.

Another limitation of my recruitment method is that the principals I interviewed were all connected to me through personal contacts and had all self-selected into a particular program that helps strengthen professional development and socioemotional learning curricula within their

schools. Therefore, the schools and teaching populations that the principals can speak to might be limited to better organized and resourced ones. However, because the principals themselves are not the focus of the study and their own personal retention factors are not included in my analysis, this limitation is unlikely to make a significant impact on my study. In addition, the principals I interviewed came from schools across a range of geographic locations and student demographics and varied in terms of gender, age, and race. This suggests to me that despite the limitation, the principles that I interviewed could fairly speak on the broad conditions and school-level adaptations that arose from the pandemic, particularly given that their insights were used supplementarily.

Finally, my inability to obtain more than one interviewee from Elgin and no interviewees from Rockford mean that my study is heavily overrepresented by teachers from CPS. This was not the intention of my recruitment design. In the first round of recruitment, I contacted an equal number of participants via LinkedIn from CPS, from Elgin, and from Rockford. This effort proved fruitful in obtaining interviews with CPS educators, but not with those from Elgin or Rockford. In my second round of recruitment on LinkedIn, I exclusively targeted Elgin and Rockford teachers, which yielded me one interview participant but no other. I had a few Elgin and Rockford teachers express interest in my study throughout the process, but for unknown reasons faced a higher rate of attrition within these two districts. I suspect that my disclosed role as a University of Chicago student may have helped me more easily secure interviews with CPS educators, given the proximity, familiarity, and connections that many workers in CPS have with the University. For example, one participant shared with me that her husband had attended the University, which had encouraged her to express an interest in my study.

Regardless of the reason, the disproportionate representation of CPS educators suggests that the findings of this study may be most directly applicable to the CPS context. However, given that my one Elgin interview was not qualitatively distinct from my interviews with Chicago teachers, and in fact, closely reflected what I heard from CPS teachers, it has not been omitted from my study. Moreover, I do not have reason to believe that the patterns of retention motivations I observe along gender, age, and experience lines are exclusive to Chicago or even Illinois, though I later detail opportunities for future research to explore the generalizability of these findings to broader contexts.

Despite limitations, this research design allowed me to speak to educators that were diverse in role, subject area, gender, race, age, years of experience, student population, school, and geographic location. **Table 1** lists the pseudonyms for each of my research participants, along with some key identifiers.

Table 1: Research Participants

Pseudonym	**Role/Subject Area***	**Gender**	**Race**	**Age**	**Years of Experience**
Angela	Middle School Social Studies	Female	Black	50-60	15+ (Late)
Julie	Dual Language Coordinator	Female	White	30-40	6-15 (Mid)
Diane	Middle School Science	Female	Mixed	50-60	15+ (Late)
John	High School Bilingual	Male	White	20-30	0-6 (Early)
Elizabeth	High School Math	Female	White	30-40	6-15 (Mid)
Robert	Elementary School General Ed	Male	White	40-50	6-15 (Mid)
Zia	Elementary School Special Ed	Female	Asian	20-30	0-6 (Early)
Katherine**	High School Bilingual	Female	White	20-30	0-6 (Early)
Blake	Middle School English	Male	White	30-40	15+ (Late)
Tyler	Middle School Math	Male	White	30-40	6-15 (Mid)

Jada	Elementary School General Ed	Female	Black	20-30	0-6 (Early)
Amara	Elementary School General Ed	Female	Mixed	20-30	0-6 (Early)
Madison	High School Social Studies	Female	White	20-30	6-15 (Mid)
Victoria	Principal	Female	Black	40-50	N/A
Darryl	Principal	Male	Black	50-60	N/A
Sharon	Principal	Female	Black	30-40	N/A
Lisa	Principal	Female	White	40-50	N/A
Tonya	Principal	Female	White	30-40	N/A

***As of April 2025, Katherine is no longer a public school teacher in CPS, though she qualified for the study at the time of her interview.*

All research participants elected to conduct their interview virtually via Zoom, although they were given the option to meet in person. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 75 minutes and followed a semi-structured format based on an interview guide with pre-prepared questions and follow-up probes. These questions centered around the following main themes: (1) Demographic/Background Information; (2) Teaching as a Profession; (3) School Environment During and Following the Pandemic; (4) Retention; and (5) Looking Forward. All participants were asked to disclose their current age, race/ethnicity, gender, the city in which they primarily grew up, the city in which they currently live, the name of their current school, their role within that school, the grade or age group of students they serve, the average number of students in their class (or school, for principals), and the duration of time they have held their current position. Other sample questions included: (1) “How did you come to the job you work in now?”, (2) “How would you describe your school environment?”, (3) “What were the factors that motivated you to stay in your role during the pandemic?”, (4) “To what extent did you witness teacher turnover or teacher retention at your school during and following the pandemic?”, and (5) “What

could your school do to better support you or improve your workplace experience?" The full set of interview questions is listed in **Appendix A**.

All participants consented for their interviews to be recorded (the consent form is attached as **Appendix B**). Interviews were then transcribed using the secure University of Chicago AWS transcription service. All transcripts were anonymized, with personal identifiers removed, in accordance with the confidentiality terms outlined in my consent form. Interview data was analyzed using qualitative theme-coding in two parts. First, I used "thematic coding analysis", which involves organizing interview data into categories and identifying recurring patterns to develop overarching themes (Naeem 2023). For example, I started with a list of quotes from teachers in response to the question, "What were the factors that motivated you to stay in your role during the pandemic?". From these quotes, I pulled out keywords such as "care for my students", "love of teaching", and "desire to overcome the challenge". Next, these keywords were categorized into broader themes, such as "care-oriented", "vocation-oriented", or "challenge-oriented".

Once my theme coding had been completed, I used Excel Pivot Tables to map these themes against various identifiers, such as age, race, gender, role, and years of experience to visualize significant patterns. For example, the "challenge-oriented" motivator was mapped against age (older vs. younger teachers) to see if there were age-based patterns influencing this retention factor. **Table 2** demonstrates what this might look like:

Table 2: Pivot Table (Challenge x Age)

Challenge-oriented?	Older	Younger	Total
Yes	3	3	6
No	0	7	7
Total	**3**	**10**	**13**

As **Table 2** shows, 3 out of 3 older teachers (100%) discussed challenge-oriented motivators, whereas only 3 out of 10 younger teachers (30%) expressed similar sentiments. The use of Pivot Tables helps to visualize and quantify these age-based variations.

For the purposes of my study, I chose to focus on the variables of gender and age, as these categories revealed the most significant patterns. Gender was treated as a binary variable (male or female), based on participants' self-identification. Although participants were given the option to define their gender outside of these categories, none chose to do so. Age was also defined as a binary variable: older and younger teachers. The average age of public school teachers in Illinois is 40.9 and nationwide is 42.4 (National Center for Education Statistics). Therefore, "older" teachers were defined as older than 40.9 and "younger" teachers were defined as younger than 40.9. In my study, age and years of experience were inextricably linked, with older teachers having more years of experience and younger teachers having fewer years of experience. Therefore, I was unable to distinguish between an "age" or "experience" effect, although the two are often tied together in teaching literature (Berger et al. 2018; Place and Vail, 2013; Pranoto et al. 2021; Topchyan 2020). For the purposes of my study, I treat the two as synonymous except where further disaggregation by years of experience provided further insight.

For years of experience, participants were categorized as early career teachers if they had been teaching for less than 6 years, mid-career teachers if they had been teaching from 6-15 years, and late career teachers if they had been teaching for more than 15 years. These categorizations were derived from existing literature on the life stages of teaching careers (Veliz and Mainsbridge, 2024). For the purposes of categorizing years of experience, any amount of time spent student teaching, teaching as an assistant or aide, or teaching outside of the United States was not included.

Overall, the qualitative approach employed in my research revealed the diverse experiences and perspectives of teachers during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. By using semi-structured interviews, I was able to explore how teachers made sense of the challenges that they faced and their resilience in overcoming them. The "Findings and Analysis" section below is the result of this work.

Findings and Analysis

I. Underlying Retention Factors

On the whole, teachers expressed their primary motivations for remaining in the profession during and following the COVID-19 pandemic in terms that were not exclusive to the Chicagoland context—reasons related to their career goals, their identities, or their relationships with their students. However, there is an important contextual consideration that teachers raised that may have mitigated some of the extenuating circumstances that may have otherwise made staying in their positions more difficult: CPS and the state of Illinois at large implemented an extensive, robust, and quick response to the health and safety risks posed by the pandemic[5]. These policies may have acted as a prerequisite for other, more generalized retention motivators to emerge. Hence, I explore them briefly in this section.

Across all 13 teachers I interviewed, not a single teacher mentioned any concern related to their physical safety being compromised or at risk by being an educator during the pandemic. On the contrary, the teachers specifically highlighted the underlying security they felt in Chicago's response to the pandemic, which allowed them to safely continue their work. Katherine, 27, reflected:

[5] Refer to Background: Covid-19 Response for more context

> In Chicago, **we were very well protected as teachers**. We were remote for a lot of the time, and when we became hybrid, like, yes, there was this concern of like our buildings are old and nasty, but like kids were triaged back into the classroom. At the point that we went back to school, it was **a really small number of kids that were coming back in attendance.** I don't even think we went back **until we had the vaccine**; **Chicago's teacher union protected us very well.** (Katherine)

As Katherine's response shows, Chicago's policy of mandating remote work for the majority of the pandemic period before gradually transitioning into a hybrid format with small clusters of in-person students contributed to her sense of security and safety. Notably, she accredits the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) for protecting her and her peers. The CTU is the third largest teachers' union in the country and is well-known for its significant influence on CPS policy. During the pandemic, the CTU was influential in protecting its teachers from unsafe working conditions, negotiating with the district to implement stricter safety measures, delay reopening plans, and address teachers' concerns (Chicago Teachers Union, 2022).

Many other teachers similarly attributed their sense of protection to the CTU's work. Kennedy, 26, shared:

> I know that the **Chicago Teachers Union is one of the largest unions across the United States**. It was a big thing for us to **advocate for ourselves and to take a stand**, to say that we are not going into the building because **it is not safe,** and **it just pushed the city to back us up** because we have so many schools within Chicago Public Schools. I definitely could see that because I know my aunt had to go into the schools and she didn't want to…My aunt teaches in Georgia and **while we were teaching virtually, they were in the building,** and I think that was the trend for a lot of states. (Kennedy)

Without directly comparing the teachers that left to the teachers that stayed and without comparing districts with and without unions, it is hard to know if the CTU was, in and of itself, a reason that directly contributed to retention. However, teachers speculated that in the absence of the underlying prioritization of health and safety they saw from their district at the urging of their Union, they may not have been as willing to stay. Robert, 44, shared:

> In other states like, **you're coming back [in-person], you have zero say, you don't have a union,** you're coming back, and you make 40,000. **So it made you take a hard look at your**

> **means and your financial stances and made you kind of think it's not worth it.** I can make this kind of money doing other things and I could probably be remote. (Robert)

As Kennedy, Katherine, and Robert demonstrate, feeling that their health and safety was prioritized was a necessary precondition to continue working in their jobs. While safety during the pandemic was not necessarily a *motivator*, it is important to note that other motivators may not have been possible in the absence of health risk mitigation. Within this context, the proceeding sections detail the various motivation factors that shaped teachers' decisions to persist in their roles during and following the pandemic.

II. Primary Retention Motivators

When asked what factors motivated them to stay in their roles during the pandemic, public school teachers typically fell into one of the five following categories: (1) **care-oriented** (care, love, and/or concern for students); (2) **goal-oriented** (commitment to fulfilling teaching objectives); (3) **vocation-oriented** (passion for the teaching profession itself); (4) **challenge-oriented** (desire to overcome the challenges of the pandemic); or (5) **external**, **circumstance-oriented** (financial reasons, social reasons, family reasons, etc). These motivators are neither mutually-exclusive nor entirely independent from one another, but offer a useful framework for understanding teachers' general motivation orientations. In the sections that follow, I outline how these motivations vary by the gender, age, and years of experience of the teachers with the aim of shedding light on how retention factors differ among various subgroups of teachers.

The categorizations I use build upon the FIT model previously outlined[6]. I divided the *intrinsic value* motivator (enjoyment of teaching tasks) into the **goal-oriented** and

[6] Refer to Literature Review: Reasons for Retention

vocation-oriented motivators, since I found that teachers distinguished between a desire to accomplish teaching goals and a broader love of the teaching profession. The *personal utility* motivator (enjoyment of external benefits that come with teaching) was expanded to include a wider range of external reasons why teachers might choose to stay. For example, teachers who stayed in their profession because of a lack of suitable alternative employment options were categorized within the **external, circumstance-oriented** category alongside those who cited more traditional *personal utility* motivators, such as enjoying the schedule, proximity to family, or work from home benefits that the profession afforded them. Similarly, the *social utility* motivator (desire to engage in social work) developed into the broader **care-oriented** motivator, encompassing teachers who cited care or concern for their students as their reason for retention without directly tying that motivation to a desire to make a positive contribution to society. I found that none of the three existing FIT model categories included what I call the **challenge-oriented** motivator, which ties directly to the exceptional circumstance of the pandemic.

A. Variations by Gender

Among the 13 teachers in my study, nine identified as a woman (69%) and four identified as a man (31%), roughly reflecting the gender breakdown of CPS teachers (75.2% Female, 24.8% Male). All teachers in my study were asked the same question, “What were the factors that motivated you to stay in your role during the pandemic?”. The majority of women responded with **care-oriented** language, with six out of 10 (60%) citing care, concern, or investment in their students as a primary motivator, while men were much more likely to respond with

language that centered their own personal benefits, wishes, and goals, with only one out of four (25%) using care-based language.

Almost all participants (11 out of 13) referenced students as a reason for persisting in their roles as teachers. However, the way in which they spoke about students differed greatly. Women used care-oriented, emotional language when describing how students impacted their motivation for persisting in the profession. Zia, a young Asian special education teacher at an elementary school, exemplifies this:

> **I love my kids**. The reason why I stay is because I love my kids. In my previous experience [teaching]..., I stayed because **I believe in my students.** I love my students. I want to see them on a pedestal, raising the roof, and showing that disability is not a hindrance to success. **So I believe in them. I trust them.** When I work, **I always give my 100% to them because I see the future in them**. I believe in them. (Zia)

Zia's explanation for staying centers around her students' well-being and achievement, as indicated by her repeated declarations of love, belief, and trust in her students. Instead of speaking about her own professional goals or career satisfaction, she states that she gives "100% to *them*", positioning her role as one of total devotion and moral investment. This framing is unsurprising. Zia's response aligns closely with the cultural expectation of teaching as requiring the "natural" nurturance and care of women, which often prevents them from being viewed as trained and educated professionals in their work (Rahayani 2010). In Zia's response, she similarly positions her labor as affective and moral rather than technical or intellectual.

For many teachers, this love and care reaches far beyond the classroom. Take for instance Angela, a Black middle school social studies teacher in her 50s:

> I feel very well received and respected in the community because in the 10-year span I've been [here], **I've had generations, at least 2**. I've had siblings, I've had cousins. I mean I've even had family members transfer their children just so they can receive my instruction from middle school. **I have very high expectations, because I know the world has even higher expectations for them,** and so my goal is to make sure that when they matriculate from me, that **they are able to compete with students from other schools.** I currently right now have 3 former

> 8th grade students **that are in college and I keep up with them.** They come back to the school, **even those that have moved out of state.** I have one young man that's in California in college playing football. He came to see me before the end of the school year…It's about people knowing when someone has **genuine care and concern** for them, then that comes natural. (Angela)

Like Zia, Angela discusses the "genuine care and concern" that she displays for her students. Remarkably, this care and concern extends beyond her students' time in her classroom into their high school and their college years, with former students keeping in touch even as they grow older or move away. This effort is recognized not only by her students, but with their family members and the broader community. While Angela has a slightly more concrete goal in mind for her students (preparing them to compete with students from other schools after they leave her classroom), the high standards she sets for her students are not presented in distanced, performance-based terms. Rather, Angela's hopes for her students' future success is deeply rooted in an ethic of care—she exhibits a long-term commitment to her students, their families, and their communities that far exceeds her professional obligations.

When female teachers did discuss personal benefits derived from teaching, these benefits generally manifested from the desire to contribute positively to their students' lives, in line with the *social utility* framework. Diane, a mixed race eighth grade teacher in her 50s who teaches middle school students, explains:

> I still enjoy the interaction with the kids. I enjoy seeing that light bulb moment go off where they're like, 'Oh!'. I enjoy knowing that **I might have made a positive contribution to a kid's life.** I have a lot of kids at my school who come from really bad neighborhoods. They've been through an awful lot, and **it makes me feel good when I know that I've helped**. Look, I've had students who have just said, **'you're the only person who's ever smiled at me'.** And I think to myself, oh my God, child, you're in 8th grade and **I'm the only person who's ever smiled at you**…**I enjoy knowing that I might have made a difference.** (Diane)

Diane expresses that she enjoys teaching, not because of the teaching tasks themselves or because of external benefits that being a teacher affords her, but because of the emotional fulfillment of making a positive impact on her students. Compared with Zia and Angela, Diane

more explicitly expresses this altruistic motive for teaching. While commendable, this service-orientation has significant impacts on her perception as a professional providing skilled and intellectual work. She says:

> **I don't like not being thought of as a person who is a professional.** I don't like, especially with COVID, being **thought of as just a babysitter,** that what I do, **it doesn't really matter**, except for making sure that parents can go to work… **I don't like the fact that I'm being required to do a lot more in my job than I did in the beginning of my career.** And I don't mean that as I want to be lazy. It's just that **I'm not a professional therapist.** So I feel uneasy when they ask me to do things that could potentially harm somebody… I don't feel comfortable with them telling me that I should analyze the students in their psychological needs…**Teachers are professionals**, and **they deserve to be treated professionally**, and they deserve not to be yelled at, they deserve not to be cussed at. **They deserve to be valued for what they are doing in the classroom** and for the time that they're putting in, and for their job…I feel that the district and a lot of administrators just don't do that anymore. (Diane)

Diane's comments reflect a broader structural concern that gendered expectations in care-based professions like teaching forcibly tie nurturance and maternalism to women, painting them as caretakers and not professionals. Jugović, Maskalan, and Ivanec (2022) argue that teaching is often mistakenly viewed as an "extension of feminine nature and the continuation of women's innate abilities—those of childcare" (Jugović, Maskalan, and Ivanec, 2022). By framing teaching as a natural or moral duty, rather than a job, teachers are at greater risk of exploitation. In Diane's case, she highlights the consequence of not being viewed as a professional: she is required to take on greater responsibilities without her approval or compensation. Her identity as a woman presumes that she is equipped to address her students' psychological and emotional needs without training and will do so even when it makes her uncomfortable because it is her obligation as a caretaker. Moreover, in viewing Diane as a glorified "babysitter" rather than a professional, she is more subject to mistreatment in the form of being "yelled" or "cussed" at, an issue that Diane describes as having worsened as a result of

the pandemic. Thus, the framing of teaching as a natural extension of womanhood has left teachers like Diane at risk.

Men, on the other hand, approached their relationships with students very differently. This is not to say that they did not care about their students—on the contrary, every single male teacher in this study brought up students as a motivating factor for retention. However, the way that they described this motivation paints a dark contrast to the emotionally driven, care-oriented narratives in Zia, Angela, and Diane's accounts. Rather than expressing the ethics of care, male teachers emphasized **goal-oriented** motivators that centered around measurable impacts, daily presence, and mutual development. John, a young White bilingual teacher who works with high school students, reflects this while describing his relationships with his students:

> I have no intention of leaving the classroom anytime soon because **I enjoy getting to know students** and being with them for the year and **doing that journey of learning English together**…[Covid] has made it even more meaningful. So, that's kind of why I've stuck with it. I've had to tell myself that regardless of what I do or how much I think they're learning, or how much I think I'm teaching, that's not a good measurement of the success of the year. A better measurement of my success has been like the **rapport that I have with students** and **whether or not I'm showing up for them on a daily basis**. (John)

There are a few interesting things to note about John's response. First, John's response is noticeably missing the same care-based language that Diane and Zia used. John does not talk about the love, concern, belief, care, or trust that he has in his students—his language departs from the nurturing, emotionally invested tone of his female peers. Instead, he speaks much more abstractly about "getting to know his students" or "doing the journey of learning English". Second, when he does use more care-based language ("showing up for them"), he does so in relation to his own measurements of success as a professional. This differs from teachers like Zia and Angela, whose goals are related exclusively to their students' success and not their own development or goal fulfillment as teachers, and from Diane, who expresses her success in terms

of the positive contribution she has made on her students' lives. Third, John's description of his teaching goals do not extend beyond the classroom. Recall that Zia wanted to see her students "raise the roof" and "show that disability is not a hindrance to success", Angela wanted to prepare her students to "compete with students from other schools", and Diane felt the pressure of bearing the responsibility for her students' psychological needs. In comparison, John's aim is to "show up" for his students on a daily basis. Again, this is not meant to be a critique against John, but rather a demonstration that men are able to view their jobs as teachers as that: jobs. They do not face the same moral responsibility to act as caretaker, parent, therapist, confidant, or cheerleader that women do because of mismatched gendered expectations of men and women in education.

Other men similarly spoke about their relationships with their students with less care-based language. For example, Tyler, a White middle school math teacher, states:

> [What motivates me is]...when **I have good days with my kids, they want to learn,** and **we're having fun building relationships together**. I try to make my classroom fun, you know, talk about video games, sports, whatever kids like to talk about, that kind of stuff. That's the main reason I became a teacher, to just **get a group of kids together for the common good of everybody**, learn a little math, you know, learn how to be good people. And develop, you know, behaviorally, all that good stuff. (Tyler)

Like John, Tyler feels motivated by his students when he has good days with them, which for him means that they are engaged and willing to learn. While his terminology of "building relationships together" may at first glance might be read as care-based, his terminology reflects a more clinical, goal-oriented view of connecting with his students. He does not express a motive or pressure to care for their emotional needs or have them break long-held social expectations in the way that the women do. Rather, his goals are tied to his fulfillment of teaching tasks: to converse with them on topics that are meaningful to them, to teach them some math, and help guide them to be good people. Even when he does discuss behavior, he does so lightly, calling it

“all that good stuff”. This juxtaposes against Diane, who felt that she was being asked to manage her students’ behavior and emotions in ways that could be damaging to them.

Although much less common, men did, at times, go beyond their professional goals and obligations to support their students throughout the pandemic. For instance, Blake, a White middle school teacher in his late 30s reflects on the early stages of the pandemic when his students expressed a desire to socialize after class had ended:

> So that first quarter, I remember the 6th graders being like, we don't want to get off the call. [At this point], I'm tired of listening to myself, but **I'll stay here if that's what you wanna do.** OK, show me what Among Us is, I'll play with you, or some of them wanted to start singing karaoke….you try to latch on to the good stuff and focus on what's positive, **but for me, that was a real lifeline too**, because otherwise, you know, my wife and I, we don't have kids, I'm not out seeing my friends, we're both working from home. It was kind of isolating, so it was **fun just interacting with those kids** in that respect and **help[ed] me to kind of get through some of the darkness of the early part of the pandemic.** (Blake)

Like his female colleagues, Blake recognizes that students have distinct emotional needs within the context of the pandemic that might require additional efforts from him as a teacher beyond his assigned classroom hours. In this case, Blake recalls that his students wanted to stay on the call for more social interaction and demonstrates a willingness to put his own interests and exhaustion aside to extend his time with his students. However, while Blake aligns with the care-oriented motivator here more closely than his other male participants, his response still deviates from that of the women. While the women demonstrated an exclusive focus on the best interests and benefits of their students, Blake demonstrates here that his relationship with his students is not unilaterally about their happiness and needs, but also his own fulfillment and joy. Interacting with his students after class may be born out of care for them, but also affords him a social outlet that he calls a “lifeline” and that helped him “get through some of the darkness of the early pandemic”.

Beyond the differences between men and women within the **care-** and **goal-oriented** motivators, women rarely discussed **external**, **circumstance-oriented** reasons for staying in their jobs, but men frequently did. Three out of four men (75%) cited an external reason for staying, compared to only two out of nine women (22%). For example, John discussed many personal reasons why teaching as a profession made sense to him, closely aligned with the *personal utility* framework:

> Once I identified that this is what I wanted to do, that I wanted to be a teacher [and] in the classroom…**I had no intention of leaving the classroom** anytime soon…I've really chosen a **very simple life**. I like the **school schedule.** I don't know if we're paid as much as we should be getting paid, but **I can't say that it's not a good amount right now** for a [young teacher]. And I'm from [redacted], so being in Chicago is **not far away from family**, and I've just kind of settled down. I found a school that I tolerate, and I continue to keep going to it. (John)

John's reasons for staying in the classroom are closely linked to benefits that the job offers him outside of the work itself—he is able to maintain the schedule that he likes, gets paid a "good amount", and gets to be close to his family. In other words, being a teacher allows him to live the lifestyle that he wants, which is why he is willing to "settle down" into a school that he just "tolerates". During the pandemic, these *personal utility* motivators became even more exacerbated for some teachers. For instance, Tyler reflected on his pandemic-related external reasons for staying in the profession:

> I mean **it was awesome because I could teach at home some days.** I think we did a model where it was like Wednesdays we're at home, so we would go to school Monday, Tuesday, then I'd get a work from home day. And that was pretty cool because then **I'm working less hours in theory than if I was in person**, plus I'm working from home. I felt like **I could go do a load of laundry** in between classes. **I wouldn't have to leave my house to eat lunch,** I could just **snack while I'm teaching** and not worry about people judging me or anything like that. That aspect was pretty chill, you know what I mean? So it wasn't all bad. I kind of see why people like working from home now. Yeah, not necessarily in my field and education, but work from home jobs have severe perks like **you don't have to drive in the snow in Chicago to get to work.** You don't have to shovel off your car, you know, all that stuff. (Tyler)

Tyler demonstrates how virtual work offered a host of *personal utility* benefits that kept him motivated through the challenges of transitioning to a new teaching format. For example, working from home afforded Tyler greater personal time, more flexibility to manage his chores, and the convenience of remaining at home throughout the workday. Tyler would likely fall into the *personal utility* category of "bludging" as his external motivation can be attributed to the additional individual time he has for extramural activities and the lower-effort exertion that being at home while teaching affords him.

However, these work-from-home benefits were not always conferred to women, who much more often expressed a strong desire to return to in-person teaching. Elizabeth, a math teacher like Tyler but for high school students, demonstrates this:

> I think **coming back in person was such a relief**. We were just really excited to have that community again, like with us teachers and **to go back to normal.** So it would have been a weird time to leave… to be gone for a whole year remote and then just like not come back at all. I think there was a sense of, you know, **getting back to normalcy was important for people**. (Elizabeth)

In contrast to Tyler, Elizabeth expresses relief at returning back to normal, in-person work. This discrepancy in desire for virtual work aligns with a broader trend in which remote work often proves more challenging for women. For example, one seminal work on gender in cities points out that "employed mothers usually are expected to, and almost invariably do, spend more time in private house work and child care than employed men" (Hayden 1980). Unequal division of labor in the home might help shed light on why women were less likely to list external motivation factors and on the contrary, emphasized wanting to return back to in-person work. The blurring of paid and unpaid labor in one space likely places an increased domestic work burden on women, while men benefit from female domestic labor in the home while continuing their professional work as usual (Hochschild 1989). Thus, while work from home circumstances

might have served as a positive factor in retention for men, they acted as a neutral or negative factor in retention for women.

Overall, women felt motivated by their care, concern, and love for their students, emphasizing a desire to positively contribute to their students' lives and a long-standing commitment to their well-being beyond the classroom context. However, this emphasis on care was often coupled with gendered perceptions that placed undue professional and emotional burdens on women, especially during this time. In comparison, men more frequently discussed professional teaching goals and external benefits derived from the teaching profession, framing their motivation in terms of personal fulfillment and measurable success rather than singularly focusing on student needs. These trends reflect widely-studied gender differences in the teaching profession, but were particularly salient within the pandemic context.

B. Variation by Age and Years of Experience

Beyond the gendered variations in teaching motivations during the pandemic, participants' ages and years of experience also reflected different attitudes toward retention. Of the 13 teachers in my study, three teachers were categorized as "older" (above the age of 40.9) while the remaining 10 were categorized as "younger" (below the age of 40.9).[7] While this section primarily focuses on the contrasts between older and younger teachers, I also acknowledge that age is not necessarily a perfect proxy for years of experience. Therefore, where relevant, years of experience are used to clarify age-related patterns. Five teachers were identified as "early career teachers" (0-6 years of experience), five teachers were identified as

[7] Refer to Data and Methods for more information

"mid career teachers" (6-15 years of experience), and three teachers were identified as "late career teachers" (15+ years of experience).[8]

Older teachers universally cited the **challenge-oriented** motivator as a primary reason for staying in their profession, a pattern far less common among younger teachers. Three out of three older teachers (100%) said that the desire to overcome the challenge of teaching during the pandemic influenced their retention, whereas only three out of 10 younger teachers (30%) expressed a similar sentiment. None of the five teachers under the age of 30 described challenge as a motivating factor. This finding was exacerbated when coupled with years of experience. None of the five early career teachers (0%) discussed challenge-oriented motivators, compared with three out of five mid-career teachers (60%) and three out of three late-career teachers (100%).

Angela, a 52-year-old Black middle school social studies teacher who has taught for over 20 years, highlights this trend. When asked why she stayed in her job despite calling the first pandemic year as the "the hardest year [she'd] ever had as an educator", she responded:

> I think it was **my love for teaching.** It was like this, **this is a challenge, it won't last forever,** we will get over it. And again, I feel as though when you are able to get on the other side of a challenge, it makes you feel good that you didn't break. (Angela)

Angela describes feeling motivated by pushing through to the other side of the pandemic, which she felt would not last forever. She also linked the challenge-oriented motivator with the **vocation-oriented** one, as her love of teaching came hand-in-hand with a desire not to "break". Angela goes on to explain that her desire to push through the challenges of the pandemic was coupled with active steps to overcome them, which often meant creatively navigating the limits of distance learning. She shares:

[8] Refer to Data and Methods for more information

> I would **always call [parents] every class period if a student was absent.** I had like a little log, and I would make sure I would call the parent to make sure that the parent was aware that the child wasn't logged in. I also **started an incentive program** where I begged for donations, and for students who had good attendance for that week, I would put their name in a little wheel and I would spin it, and they would be able to have a pizza delivered to their house through Uber Eats. **So that was very successful, that helped my attendance a lot.** And I started getting so many donations that some weeks, I would pick 2 students. (Angela)

As Angela's account demonstrates, while the pandemic presented new and unpredictable barriers to teaching, she was able to come up with new ways to engage her students and handle the difficulties of repeated absences without explicit urging by her school administration. She even went so far as to solicit donations from the community in order to build her own independent incentive structure, when more traditional ways of motivating her students failed.

Returning to Diane, another older teacher who is 57 and has taught for over 30 years, her response echoes Angela's sentiments:

> **I love teaching.** And I knew the pandemic wasn't gonna last forever. I'm a type A A A A A plus personality. So when something like that, that **challenge like that happens,** it just drives me to say, OK, **what am I gonna do to get over it?** What am I gonna do to do this? (Diane)

Like Angela, the challenge of the pandemic was not defeating, as one might expect, but rather bolstered Diane's drive and commitment to teaching. Diane is also similar to Angela in that she combines this drive with her love of teaching and makes concrete efforts to overcome the challenges she faced. She reflects:

> It was difficult to try to keep [the students] energized, motivated. **I would do really stupid silly things,** and I'm an 8th grade teacher, so I was surprised how much the 8th grade kids would get into it…**I would start doing things that made them want to come into the classroom,** so to speak. So whatever topic I was planning on teaching that day, **I would look up on Spotify a song** that had to do with that topic. So when they came into my "classroom", the song would be playing. And then **they'd have to try to guess what it was** that we were gonna be learning about. So we did a lot of, you know, **games like that.** Or I would be very animated and over the top when I was teaching or when they would respond, and I would stay after for those kids who just wanted to talk for a little while… **I would leave [Google Chats] open for kids who needed help with their homework** or had questions to ask about what they were doing, but the majority of the time was just to interact with them and to talk to them about things, stuff like that. (Diane)

Comparably to Angela, Diane felt that traditional ways of keeping her students energized and motivated were not working. In response, Diane found her own ways of engaging students through the screen, whether that be her Spotify game or dedicating extra after-class hours to communicating with her students via Google Chats. These examples demonstrate that Angela and Diane not only had a desire to overcome challenges presented by the pandemic, but acted upon that motivation on a daily basis.

The impetus to push through challenges with creative solutions was not exclusive to older female teachers, but applied to older male teachers as well. Robert, a middle school elementary school teacher who is 44, experience, shared similar sentiments to Angela and Diane:

> I had no issue with staying. **I knew I was gonna stay.** I think teachers at the later part of their years felt that [the pandemic] was just too much, and some teachers [thought] I'm not risking it, and at the time you felt somewhat like you're risking your life to go there, and for a lot of people with any kind of health issues, it just wasn't worth it. **There were sacrifices,** like my wife's grandmother is older, and we were helping her…we knew once [I went] back, we couldn't do that anymore. So there were a lot of compromises that needed to be made…But, you know, I knew **eventually we're gonna go back.** I was **really excited about it. That's what kept me going.** (Robert)

While Robert's desire to overcome a challenge is mentioned less explicitly compared to the prior two examples, he demonstrates a confidence and excitement about going back, which fueled his desire to stay. Even with the sacrifices that he knew were coming once he resumed in-person instruction, like not being able to help his wife's older grandmother, he was fueled by the prospect of making it through the virtual teaching period.

Angela, Robert, and Diane can all be seen as falling into a category of teachers that stayed because of affirming draw factors that encouraged them to double down and persist through the challenges of the pandemic. They ***stayed because*** they were committed to overcoming the pandemic years and returning to normal schooling. This category sharply

contrasts that of younger teachers who more often experienced significant disincentives to changing careers and ***stayed despite*** wanting to leave, not because they felt a strong compulsion towards the teaching profession but because the circumstances of leaving were too difficult.

Job stability and a lack of alternative employment, both categorized as **external, circumstance-oriented** reasons for retention, were among the most common motivators for the younger population of teachers to stay in their position. Katherine, a 27-year-old high school bilingual education teacher in the early stage of her career, explained that she often considered leaving teaching, but found it too risky:

> But the biggest thing was just like, **what other job was I going to do at that time?** There was **no way that I was gonna be able to get credentialed in anything else** during the pandemic. There was **so much uncertainty about everything**, and it's like, I had a job, **the job was very stable.** There was never any concern of teachers being laid off or anything like that. So it was **job stability,** and at the time of the pandemic, that was my first year teaching, so I was still of the mindset of 'I wanna get this a couple more years and like **really see whether this is not the thing for me'**. I was not, I was not gone at that point. (Katherine)

Katherine remained in teaching *despite* a desire to leave because she felt that she had limited options for employment outside of teaching and feared the uncertainty of having a less stable job. She later posed the question, "if you had a job, why would you leave it during the pandemic, [when] everything was so uncertain, unless you had a for-sure opportunity to do something else?" Of course, hundreds of thousands of teachers *did* leave the teaching profession during the pandemic years, but Katherine was unable to see this as a realistic option for herself. Not once did she mention the factors that older teachers relied on: a desire to overcome the challenge of the pandemic, a motivation to get back in person, or a long-term commitment to being a teacher. While Katherine does discuss her career ("see whether [teaching] is not the thing for me"), it does not align with the vocation-oriented teachers from earlier, who discussed an affinity and

love of teaching. On the contrary, Katherine stayed because she felt an obligation to give teaching a longer try before discarding it as an option.

Katherine was not the only young teacher to express this opinion. Amara, a 26-year-old mixed race elementary school teacher who similarly is in an early stage of her teaching career strongly considered leaving several times throughout the pandemic and the years that followed. In fact, at the time of her interview, she was still unsure whether or not she would stay in the profession:

> **I still don't know if I will [stay].** I'm just taking it day by day and seeing. Since the beginning [of teaching], I was kind of just, I'll see how tomorrow is, that's just kind of how I've been going for the past few years. And **sometimes I'm like, this is my last day,** but then I go to sleep and I'm able to talk myself down… **I've looked into other things,** I kind of look for things working with kids, but yeah, **I don't know what else I would do**. I looked into being a librarian, but **I just don't want to go get another master's degree,** so yeah, that's why I'm here…I don't know, **maybe [I'll] try a private school,** I don't know. Because I really, I really believe in public school, but I don't know. I will maybe try a private school and then after that I'll just give up. (Amara)

Like Katherine, Amara does not describe her reasons for staying in terms of incentivizing factors that keep her motivated and excited to stay in the profession. Rather, she feels that her other options are limited, she is unsure what else she might prefer doing, and she is worried about having to pursue further education to switch careers. Thus, Amara and Katherine *stay despite* strong incentives to leave, as they are unable to access the resources or security needed to find another job in another profession.

On initial observation, it might seem unintuitive that younger teachers would be less likely than older teachers to be fueled by the challenge of teaching during the pandemic. Younger teachers are more likely to be adept with technology, less likely to be attached to their ways of teaching, and much less likely to retire (Schuck 2016), all traits that might suggest that teaching during the pandemic would be more appealing to a younger teaching population. However,

literature[9] on early career teachers often cite the lack of professional knowledge and experience as a basis for rendering it more difficult for them to overcome challenges and navigate the teaching profession. In addition, younger teachers have more time to switch career paths and less investment in staying in the profession to receive their retirement or pension compared with older teachers. For example, Madison, a White 28-year-old high school social studies teacher, says:

> I think that scares a lot of teachers in my boat that are tier 2. I started teaching at 22 and **I don't feel like I should have to teach until I'm 67.** I think that that's absolutely outrageous when you have people that come in mid-career, like maybe they were in the business world for about 15 years and then they want to be a teacher, and they still have to maybe, you know, teach until they're 67, but yet I taught way before them, and I think that part bugs me, why I feel like **I'm getting shortchanged.** I think that this gets **into generational issues because I talk about this with older colleagues in my building and they don't get it**. I think that a lot of people in my boat get really scared because no one wants to teach until then. (Madison)

Madison is referring to the two-tiered system of pensions in Illinois. Tier 1 applies to teachers, professors, and higher education staff who were hired before 2011, whereas Tier 2 applies to those who began teaching after January 1, 2011. Tier 1 recipients are eligible for their full pension at age 55 with at least 33.91 years of service in education, at age 60 with at least 20 years of service, or at age 62 with 5 years of service. In comparison, Tier 2 recipients are required to work until the age of 67 with at least 10 years of service to get their full pension benefits (Illinois Education Association 2024; Chicago Teachers' Pension Fund). For someone like Madison, being "Tier 2" meant that she had at least 44 more years of education service ahead of her before being eligible for retirement benefits, an overwhelming duration that compelled her to consider other long-term career options.

To summarize, older veteran teachers discussed their passion for teaching, their desire to overcome the pandemic years, and the active steps they took for combatting pandemic

[9] Refer to Literature Review: The Effect of Age and Years of Experience on Teaching on Retention

challenges. In comparison, younger and less experienced teachers struggled to find exit pathways out of teaching, particularly during the pandemic, which kept them in their roles despite strong inclinations to consider leaving. While prior literature is split on whether older or younger teachers might be predicted to better weather the pandemic, my findings suggest that older teachers were far more likely to express a deliberate commitment to persist in their roles despite challenges when juxtaposed with their younger counterparts.

C. Variations by Gender x Age

The analysis of gender and age differences would be incomplete without a brief discussion on the interaction between gender and age. In other words, how do younger female teachers differ from older female teachers, and how do each of these categories compare to younger and older male teachers? Among the 13 teachers in my study, two were categorized as older women, one as an older man, seven as younger women, and three as younger men. With such small sample sizes among these further disaggregated categories (particularly for the category of older male), it is difficult to draw particularly strong conclusions on the interaction between gender and age. However, I attempt here to explain how the compounding of gender and age effects further illuminate patterns in retention motivators that may be obscured when examining gender and age independently.

Starting with the **care-oriented** motivator, two out of two older female teachers (100%) , one out of one older male teachers (100%), four out of five younger female teachers (80%), and zero out of three younger male teachers (0%) used care-based language to describe students as a motivating factor. While the more pronounced division is by gender (and therefore the focus of my prior findings), this interaction between gender and age shows that there may additionally be

a correlation between gender and age factors combined that make older female teachers the most prominent group in the care-oriented category. Angela exemplifies this:

> A teacher is like a sales rep. And you are trying to sell the ideal and the importance of education to your students. And sometimes **you have to go a little bit beyond what [the admin] tells you to do in the classroom to get to that point with your student**... Sometimes you have to do **a little bit more, you know, then provide them with a 60-minute instructional block.** You know, you have to sit down and talk to them. You have to **get to know who they are as people**. What kind of family they come from. All of that matters, and when you know that, then you understand why they perform the way that they do in the classroom sometimes, which makes it a little bit easier for you to instruct that child…. **My new teachers, when they come in, they say that it's abusive,** the way that the children behave with them, but speaking as an old school teacher, we didn't think about it like that, **we just found the tools that we needed to make them successful.** It's like, what hat do I put on today? I may have a **teacher hat** on at 9:15, but at 9:30 I might have a **counselor hat** on. At 10 I might have a **nutritionist hat** on. At 11, I might have my **mama hat** on. You have to be interchangeable to survive in this industry. (Angela)

Angela acknowledges a few different points here that tie together elements of both the gendered and age-related dynamics discussed earlier. Like Diane, Angela speaks to the various roles and responsibilities that she takes on beyond her "60-minute instructional block", which may include acting as a counselor, nutritionist, or perhaps most tellingly, a "mama". Using similar care-based language as earlier, she discusses the connection that she builds with her students outside of the classroom in order to make her teaching more tailored and effective, going above and beyond what the profession and what her administration requires of her. As other participants previously demonstrated, these additional roles and "hats" are often gender-specific.

However, Angela's comments also explicitly express age differences. While she views accommodating her students in additional ways as an accepted and necessary part of teaching, she notes that newer teachers label their students' misbehavior as "abusive". Interestingly, none of the younger female teachers in my study echoed Angela and Diane's sentiment that teachers need to take on alternative roles beyond being a "teacher" in order to adequately address their

students' emotional and social needs, despite frequently discussing the love and care that they hold for their students. Therefore, care-orientation might manifest slightly differently between older female and younger female teachers, with older female teachers being more willing to assume additional responsibilities on behalf of their students.

These compounded gender and age effects in relation to **care-orientation** are confirmed by examining the **goal-oriented** motivator along both gender and age demographics. Only one out of two older female teachers (50%) discussed specific teaching objectives, and even when she did, she did so in care-based and not performance-based terms. The one older male teacher did not use goal-oriented language, nor did any of the younger female teachers. However, three out of three younger male teachers (100%) used goal-oriented motivators. Taken together, these gender x age differences for care- and goal-orientations suggest that older female teachers and younger male teachers were the most divergent in terms of how they approached their relationships with their students and their overall teaching objectives. Whereas older female teachers were the most likely to feel motivated by their love, care, and concern for their students, younger male teachers were the most likely to discuss their teaching purpose in terms of measurable impacts, daily presence, and mutual development with their students.

For the **vocation-oriented** motivator, both older female teachers (100%) described passion for the profession as a reason for retention, compared with two out of seven younger female teachers (29%), and one out of three younger male teachers (33%). The one older male teacher did not mention vocation-oriented reasons (0%). These findings suggest that while older teachers overall were more likely to cite passion for the profession as a reason for retention compared with younger teachers, this trend was particularly salient among older female teachers, suggesting compounded gender and age effects. This is corroborated by the fact that four female

teachers out of nine (44%) discussed a love of the profession compared with only one out of four male teachers (25%).

Julie, a 36-year-old White dual language coordinator, reinforces this pattern. While Julie was classified as a "younger" teacher (under age 40.9), she was the oldest among the younger group, indicating that her response may be more in line with the category of "older" female teachers. Like them, she shares:

> **A huge part of my personal identity is being a teacher.** It matters a lot to me. And I did start saying to my husband, like, they're gonna have to fire me because I was like, you know, failing to do X or Y directive [during the pandemic], or felt like parents were mad, but it was like, **you can't make me stop doing this. Like this is what I do.** (Julie)

In addition to the earlier observations about why older teachers might be more inclined to cite vocation-oriented reasons for staying, Julie's response might also reflect gendered dynamics. In the earlier findings on gender, men were more likely to cite external motivators for retention compared with women. This suggests that men might be more likely to choose and stay in teaching because of the practical and personal utility benefits afforded to them, whereas women are more often drawn to the profession as a result of a personal, identity-based affinity with teaching. This also harkens back to the prior analysis on the expectation that women fill caretaking roles—if women are viewed as more "naturally" suited to teaching, men might not be as compelled to view being a teacher as central to their identity.

Moving on to the (5) **external, circumstance-oriented** motivator, none of the three older female or male teachers (0%) expressed external financial, social, or family reasons for staying. However, two out of seven younger female teachers (29%) and three out of three younger male teachers (100%) expressed external reasons for staying in the profession. While the universal absence of older teachers citing external, circumstance-oriented motivators suggests that this

retention motivator was primarily driven by age effects, it is worth noting that the significantly dominant group is younger male teachers.

This is consistent with earlier findings in both gender and age. As previously discussed, men were more likely to associate job satisfaction with the school schedule, staying close to family, and the flexibility of working from home, all *personal utility* benefits derived from outside of the teaching context. Relatedly, younger teachers on the whole also expressed external considerations affecting their retention decision-making. Recall that younger teachers discussed the difficulty of being credentialed for another profession, the difficulty of finding alternative suitable employment, and concerns over retirement benefits, all financial factors that were external to whether they loved their job, their relationships with their students, their desire to overcome a challenge, or their teaching goals. While these two external motivators manifested slightly differently along age and gendered lines, younger men represented the overlap between these two patterns. Thus, it is reasonable that the most pronounced category of participants (100%) citing external motivators is the group of younger men.

The final remaining category, (3) **challenge-oriented**, did not have significant gender x age effects. Both older female teachers and the older male teacher (100%) combined named a desire to overcome the challenge of the pandemic as a reason for staying in their roles. In comparison, only two out of seven (29%) of younger female teachers and one out of three (33%) of younger male teachers discussed challenge-related motivators. While the age differences are strong (30% of younger teachers compared to 100% of older teachers), the gendered effects are not (44% of women compared to 50% of men). This distinction is made even clearer by the fact that the three younger teachers that expressed being motivated by overcoming the pandemic represented the three oldest teachers within the “younger” category, at ages 31, 36, and 39.

Therefore, while I categorized "younger" and "older" teachers by their age relative to the Illinois average age, within my own sample, the participants that listed challenge-oriented as their primary motivator made up the oldest six out of 13 teachers. This further suggests that the **challenge-oriented** motivator was primarily divided along age, and not gendered, lines.

Overall, the findings for variations by gender, by age and years of experience, and by gender x age suggest that teachers are not a monolithic group and therefore, applying the same retention strategies uniformly across the teaching population is unlikely to be effective. In the following section, I describe policy implications and recommendations that relate to the findings that 1) female teachers tend to utilize **care-oriented** motivators, whereas male teachers tend to utilize **goal-oriented** and **external, circumstance-oriented** motivators, 2) older teachers tend to utilize **vocational-oriented** and **challenge-oriented** motivators, while younger teachers tend to utilize **external, circumstance** motivators; and 3) gender and age effects can compound such that older females dominate the **care- and vocation-oriented** categories and younger male teachers dominate the **external, circumstance-oriented** category.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Although the teachers in my study successfully remained in their roles during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, they reported a range of barriers that contribute to the difficulty, unsustainability, and burnout associated with the teaching profession. If the teachers who stayed face these myriad of challenges, it stands to reason that the teachers who leave do so as well—in addition to other obstacles that ultimately resulted in their departure. Therefore, in the face of continued national teacher turnover and concerns over the profession's increasing difficulty in the post-pandemic landscape, policymakers must strive to reduce pressure points by

making investments in a targeted, rather than monolithic, manner that help currently employed teachers feel sustained and empowered by their work. In the following subsections, I detail a couple key, but by no means exhaustive, recommendations that would help support and uplift retained teachers and establish a healthier, more sustainable school environments.

I. Mitigating Gender Differences

While gendered expectations and experiences in teaching are well-documented[10], there is little prior literature on whether these gender differences held during the pandemic and how they manifested. This study reveals that gender differences did, in fact, hold during the pandemic, shaping the way that teachers conceived of the motivations that encouraged them to stay in their roles. Some of the primary consequences of these gendered expectations was that women shouldered greater responsibilities, dedicated more time and energy to their students' well-being beyond school hours, and were less often seen and treated as educated and trained professionals. Angela summarizes this problem:

> **My brain was never turned off** [during the pandemic], even when I was off, you know, **even when it was after school hours,** because I'm trying to make sure that I'm able to get to my students. I'm like, OK, why is this student not logging in, and **I'm calling the parents every day,** saying little Johnny didn't log in or he was logged in but he wasn't saying anything, and then hearing the parents' side…**the hardest year I've ever had as an educator.** (Angela)

Extensive prior literature demonstrates that teachers often work overtime hours that are unpaid. For example, Steiner et al. (2023) found that teachers reported working an average of 53 hours per week during the school year, although the typical teacher contract required a maximum 40-hour work week. Although nearly all teachers (93%) reported working more than their contracted hours per week, the same study found that men and women reacted to this overtime

[10] See Literature Review: The Feminization of Teaching

differently, with female teachers significantly less likely than their male counterparts to report satisfaction with their total working hours. One explanation may lie in the disparities between men and women in compensation, particularly for overtime. On average, male teachers make $700 more in base pay and $1500 more in supplemental compensation compared with female teachers of similar qualification and roles (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom et al., 2021; Quintero et al., 2023). If male teachers are better compensated generally, and more likely to be paid for additional working hours, this could explain why women—who more often contribute unpaid hours—exhibit lower satisfaction with their total number of weekly hours.

Moreover, female teachers are also significantly less likely to be promoted compared to their male counterparts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as of the 2020-2021 school year, women made up 77% of K-12 teachers in the United States, but only only 14% of superintendents (The School Superintendents Association, 2010) and 56% of principals (Taie et al., 2022). While women numerically dominate the teaching profession, they hold a minority of management positions in education at large, with the exception of schools that cater towards preschool or elementary students (Halper et al. 2019). Rahayani (2010) says of this problem: “while teaching becoming increasingly feminized (in terms of number), it is not becoming distinctly feminist (in terms of career trajectories, discourse and ethos) as long as teaching is being conceptualized as semiprofessional”.

These gender inequalities suggest a need for targeted policies to mitigate challenges faced disproportionately by female teachers. First, what we presently define to be ‘informal, care-based’ roles (e.g., calling parents after school, getting to know students’ families, spending time learning about a students’ background or cultural context, helping students through socioemotional challenges, etc.) should not be treated as a natural or innate nurturance, but rather

professional activities that directly enhance teachers' performance in their paid jobs. As such, teachers should accordingly receive professional development and training on how to execute the ethics of care in the classroom and be viewed as engaging in "care" activities with professional expertise.

A promising example of this shift is the recent introduction of formal socio-emotional learning (SEL) curricula to more than half of U.S. states. Designated SEL time and instruction is meant to support students in developing healthy personal relationships, promote the development of social and emotional competencies, and facilitate supportive classroom environments where students feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences and perspectives (Greenberg 2023). When done correctly, SEL curricula encapsulates many of the activities that female teachers in my study are already doing—for example, taking the time to know their students outside of a strictly academic context or providing support for their emotional needs—but importantly, gives them a space to do so within contracted, in-school hours. Assuming that teachers are given adequate training and professional development to successfully implement SEL curricula, this may be one example for traditionally informal, care-based roles to become more professionalized.

Second, when and where these additional responsibilities require extra training, time, and effort on the part of teachers, they should be fairly compensated for their work. The persistent gender gap in teacher pay, particularly for supplemental compensation, reinforces the belief that when women take on uncontracted duties to enhance their students' experiences, they do so out of moral responsibility or as an extension of their natural abilities, rather than as trained professionals. As they would in any other profession, teachers deserve to be paid for the time and effort they contribute beyond their contracted hours.

Finally, while the discrepancies in female leadership in education were not a central focus of this paper, my findings have important implications for female promotion in schools. If teachers are viewed as teaching because of altruistic motives, labeled as "babysitters" and "mothers", or are in any other capacity perceived as semi-professional, they will continue to face barriers to entry in administrative and leadership positions. Women should not only be encouraged to assume leadership in schools, but be given the resources, opportunities, and mentorship to succeed. The warmth and care demonstrated disproportionately by female teachers should be treated as a strength in a care-based profession such as teaching, rather than a shortcoming that inhibits their ability to make practical and effective administrative decisions.

II. Supporting Younger, Early Career Teachers

In addition to bridging inequalities between male and female teachers, school administration, district leaders, and policymakers should turn a renewed attention to providing professional guidance, infrastructure, and development opportunities for younger, early career teachers. Even among *the teachers who stayed*, younger teachers in my interviewee cohort frequently expressed a desire to leave the profession—or at the very least, a strong consideration of alternative employment, a sentiment not often shared by their older colleagues. Older teachers themselves noticed this trend at their schools and attributed it to insufficient teacher training. Diane stated in her interview:

> I have a lot of **very young teachers at the school whose training is not very great.** It's not their fault because, you know, you learn on the job for the most part… but they don't really go into specifics and **our admin doesn't really give PDs about how to manage classrooms**…**I used to mentor teachers.** I used to have a lot of **student teachers** in my classrooms. **We don't do that very much anymore.** So it's not good, you know, the teachers that are trying their best, but are **drowning** and with everything that's going on, **are not given the support that they need**…I can honestly say that myself and three of the older teachers that are at our school, we have like a

> running joke, **where we say like the first week of PD for teachers, we don't learn the the teachers' names unless they've been there for over 5 years.** (Diane)

Angela echoed this perspective, stating that "new teacher programs are not fully preparing the new teachers… for sustainability. They're preparing them for a temporary assignment." These comments are particularly concerning given that post-pandemic teaching challenges have persisted to the present day. Throughout my interviews, teachers described ongoing struggles with student attendance, behavior, work ethic, and cheating, which, in turn, have changed the ways in which they interact and teach their students. As Diane later puts it, "[after COVID] we had to reinvent ourselves as teachers." While the literature is mixed on whether we might predict older or younger teachers to be more resilient to the pandemic and its aftermath, my findings suggest that younger, early career teachers are finding it more difficult to overcome persisting pandemic-related challenges. For instance, Jada, 26, discussed at length the behavioral difficulties she experiences in her classroom and feeling a lack of administrator support:

> **I don't like how behavior is handled** [by administration]. [My students] are so little, it's usually like if they have extreme behaviors it might be an indicator of something else, but **just getting no support on that isn't helpful.** Last year I had a boy with huge behaviors and he was going through the diagnosis process, but his behavior was huge and he wasn't safe to himself and other people and so I would try to like, you know, remove him from the situation. And then **he would get sent back to me within 5 minutes,** and he would still be elevated and just not being safe and like doing all this stuff again…so [I want] **just like behavior support, I guess, support for children with different needs.**

As a newer teacher, Jada cannot rely on the same wealth of knowledge, expertise, and experience as her older colleagues to manage increasingly complex student behavioral needs, which have become exacerbated by the pandemic. This lack of preparation and administrative support contributed to her ongoing concerns about persisting in the profession long-term. Katherine, 27, similarly felt unsupported in dealing with the academic and emotional challenges that students faced coming out of the pandemic:

> As far as interacting with traumatized students every day, yes, [the administration could have helped]. **I'm dealing with these highly traumatized, mentally neglected students.** You know, 15 years old and they read at a 4th grade level, this is the type of student I'm having. There's a lot of growth that you can do with that student, but it's **not the growth that my admin is expecting,** they're expecting them to come to these benchmarks that's like 5 years down the line for this kid, like it's not happening right now. We would get these trainings that were supposed to be helping us construct our lessons and blah blah blah. I would be in these trainings and I'm like, 'who is this written for, like a kid in Hinsdale? A kid in Naperville? Not my kids.'…**I wish I had gotten the support to keep the kids healthy physically and mentally**.

Katherine's reflections underscore the need for her school administration to set more realistic expectations of progress for her students and to provide training that is actually relevant to her student population. Like Jada, she expressed throughout her interview that she felt unprepared to meet the persisting challenges of the pandemic and shortly after completing her interview, notified me that she had made the decision to take some time off from her teaching role.

Taken together, my findings suggest that while older teachers rose to the challenge of the pandemic and felt motivated to push through new hurdles, younger teachers did not feel equipped with the preparation, training, or administrative support needed to address the issues that arose from the pandemic. This lack of preparation fostered a desire to explore alternative employment, with many younger teachers staying in their roles out of necessity, rather than a deep passion for and commitment to the teaching profession. Moving forward, school administration and district leaders must critically re-examine and redesign professional development, mentorship, and skillbuilding specifically targeted towards the needs of younger, early career teachers. Doing so will be essential to helping younger teachers not only navigate ongoing post-pandemic teaching challenges, but also to feel more motivated, confident, and sustained in their work.

Future Research

There remains a dearth of research on teacher retention and attrition during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. While this study attempts to shed light on what motivated teachers to stay in their roles during and following the pandemic and explain the variations in these responses, time and resource constraints prevented me from generalizing to a population beyond the Chicagoland context. Even within the Chicagoland area, the findings that I have presented from the 18 participants that I interviewed do not encapsulate the totality of teacher experiences across the city's many schools and neighborhoods. To build on this work, I recommend that similar studies be conducted both across the broader Chicagoland area and in other districts across the country to understand if the same trends hold true in other contexts. The results of such research will offer valuable guidance for shaping more effective education policies for teachers.

Additionally, gender, age, and years of experience were among many distinguishing factors that could explain differences in teacher retention motivators. While I chose to focus on these three because they emerged as the most significant factors in this study, further research should also explore how teacher motivations vary by race, student population, school geography, relationships with administration, school policy, and more. Given the long-developing and now-worsening teacher turnover rates nationally, placing a renewed emphasis in the academic literature on how retained teachers differ and not *just* focusing on the population of attrited teachers is necessary to paint a clear picture of what schools can do for specific teacher sub-groups to better incentivize their long-term retention.

Furthermore, the logistical difficulty of reaching teachers who left the profession during and following the pandemic prevented me from conducting a comparative study that would

understand how the teachers that left differ from those who stayed. In order to maximize the efficacy of retention strategies, such comparative work is crucial to understand what school districts did well and where they could improve. Comparing the stayers to the leavers across different cities and states would also provide insight into why Chicago and Illinois saw consistently high retention rates during and following the Covid-19 pandemic as opposed to other comparable places, and how to replicate these trends moving forward.

One possible explanation lies in the recent improvements made by Illinois to improve its teacher pipeline. Beginning in SY17-18, Illinois has seen one of the fastest growing teacher and administrator workforces in the country, alongside one of the fastest declining student bodies, contributing to Illinois' student-to-teacher ratio decreasing more rapidly than any other state in the country (Advance Illinois 2023; Illinois State Board of Education, 2023b). Another theory points to teacher pay. The average starting teacher salary in Illinois has risen from $46,000 to $51,000 from SY19-20 to SY23-24, which may be responsible for increased recruitment and retention of public school teachers in the state (Illinois State Board of Education, 2023c). Further research aimed at explaining Illinois' comparatively high retention rates should begin by investigating these state policies.

Moreover, as demonstrated in my findings, Chicago teachers often cited health and safety protections, encouraged by the Union, as an underlying retention factor. However, without comparing the teachers who stayed versus the teachers who left, it is unclear if involvement with the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) itself prevented retained teachers from attriting. Similarly, without examining the CTU in comparison to other teacher unions across the country, it is inconclusive whether the CTU was uniquely effective compared to other teachers' unions in promoting policies that encouraged retention. Preliminary evidence suggests that districts with

strong teachers' unions were more likely to delay in-person instruction, raise health and safety concerns for its teachers, and provide other pandemic-related teacher protections (Marianno et al., 2022; Grossmann et al., 2021; Hartney and Finger 2021). These efforts may have been a necessary prerequisite for teachers to stay in their professions, suggesting that unions played at least an indirect role in retention. However, research has yet to explore 1) whether districts with strong unions fared better than those without; 2) how influential union involvement and policies were in directly influencing teacher retention or attrition; and 3) whether union protections disproportionately influenced the teacher retention of one subgroup over another. Given the number of respondents in my study who referenced unions within the retention of conversation, I predict that further investigation into the role that unions played in retention and attrition during and following the pandemic would be fruitful.

Finally, while qualitative data is useful for understanding teacher experiences, insights, and perspectives, clear quantitative data that is able to compare retention patterns across districts and across teacher subgroups is critical to help guide policymakers, schools, and educators on understanding how best to allocate resources to improve retention rates. Currently, school districts, cities, and states record retention in non-standardized ways, which makes apples-to-apples comparisons extremely challenging. In order to allow school administrators and district leaders across the country to understand where retention efforts are faltering compared with other comparable schools and districts and to share resources and best practices on how best to address shortcomings, a nationwide standard on the collection of teacher retention and attrition data may be necessary.

Conclusion

This study reveals that in the face of significant, unprecedented challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Chicagoland public school teachers demonstrate resilience and renewed commitment to educating their students. In contrast to the dominant narrative, which paints teachers across the country as fleeing the profession, the teachers in my study leveraged their care and concern for their students, their ongoing professional goals, their love and affinity for the teaching profession, and their determination to overcome pandemic challenges to bounce back from the difficulties that arose during the pandemic years. These retention motivators were supplemented by strong state, city, union, and district responsiveness to the changing pandemic landscape that allowed teachers to feel safe and protected in their roles.

Building off of prior literature on teacher retention and attrition, this paper has shown that teachers are not monolithic in the ways that they view their motivations for staying in the teaching positions; rather, gender, age, and years of experience impacted the ways that teachers conceptualized their own retention. More specifically, my qualitative interviews revealed that female teachers relied on care-oriented motivators to keep themselves sustained through the pandemic while male teachers more heavily emphasized goal-oriented and external, circumstance-oriented motivators. Additionally, older, veteran teachers found themselves fueled by a desire to overcome the challenges that the pandemic had presented, whereas younger, early career teachers felt compelled to stay in their roles as a result of job insecurity and instability during the pandemic, the difficulties of retraining into a new profession, and an impetus to more fully explore the teaching profession before a potential departure.

These findings indicate that robust policy to mitigate gendered barriers in teaching and provide greater support of young, early career teachers is needed to reinforce retention and

improve the teacher experience. In addition, while this study specifically focused on the Chicagoland context, the identified patterns are likely applicable to a wider population of teachers during and following the pandemic. Future research is needed to verify the generalizability of my findings, provide more sub-group analysis on the underlying factors influencing distinct retention motivators, and explore the role of unions in retention. Furthermore, more national studies on teacher retention and attrition patterns are needed to understand what contributed to Chicago and Illinois achieving a uniquely stronger retention rate during and following the pandemic, an effort which may require more robust quantitative data collection.

In conclusion, this paper was conceived out of a desire to highlight the voices of the educators who continued to show up for their students during one of the most difficult moments of the teaching profession. Behind every student that fought through the challenges of staying engaged in the virtual classroom, navigating social isolation from their friends and peers, and tackling increased mental health and emotional challenges was a teacher who put aside their own pandemic-related struggles to support, educate, and uplift their students. In the words of one of my participants, Robert:

> When something like COVID happens, it's a complete shift, but **how do we adapt to it?** How do we make it work? **How do we make it fit our community?** What is important for us is to **move forward**, and it's not gonna look like what you want, it's not gonna be anything you can plan. It is just something that **you just have to be willing to just kind of let go and just be there and push and guide.**

Without teachers to "be there and push and guide", each in their own unique ways, our public education system would not have been able to begin its path to recovery. In turn, we owe it to our teachers to continue investigating how to build school environments that truly sustain, support, and motivate them to continue their vital work.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Demographic/Background

1. Tell me about yourself.
    a. How old are you?
    b. What is your race/ethnicity?
    c. What is your gender?
    d. How would you describe your current marital status?
    e. Where did you grow up?
    f. Where do you currently live?
2. What do you currently do for work?
    a. What is the name of the school that you currently teach at?
    b. What is the role that you currently occupy?
    c. What grade/age group of students do you currently teach?
    d. How many students are in your class on average?
    e. How long have you been in this role?
3. What previous jobs have you held prior to this role?

Teaching as a Profession (Pre-pandemic)

4. How did you come to the job you work in now?
    a. What motivated you to teach?
5. How has your teaching experience been?
    a. What do you like about your job?
    b. What do you not like about your job?
6. Tell me about your school. How would you describe your school environment?
    a. Can you describe to me the relationship you have with your supervisor(s) and colleagues?
    b. Can you describe to me the relationship that you have with your students?
7. What does a normal school day look like for you?

School Environment During/After the Pandemic

8. Before the Covid-19 pandemic began, what did teaching look like for you?
    a. What was the greatest challenge that you faced before the pandemic?
    b. What was your biggest professional accomplishment before the pandemic?
9. When Covid-19 began, how did your school respond to the pandemic?
    a. How did your role change during the pandemic?
    b. To what extent did you feel supported at school during the pandemic?
    c. How did you address the challenges that you faced during the pandemic?
    d. What were the factors that motivated you to stay in your role during the pandemic?

    e. Any personal changes during the pandemic that influenced your job?
10. What does your job look like now?
    a. In what ways do the aftereffects of the pandemic still influence the work that you do today?

Retention

11. To what extent did you witness teacher turnover or teacher retention at your school during and following the pandemic?
    a. How did this affect your work?
12. Recent data on Illinois public schools has revealed that teacher retention in the state was stable throughout and following the pandemic, in sharp contrast to the majority of the country. What do you make of this data?

Looking Forward

13. What could your school do to better support you or improve your workplace experience?
    a. What has your school done to support you that is working well?
14. Is there anything that your district could do to better support you or improve your workplace experience?
    a. What has your district done to support you that is working well?
15. If you could share one thing about your experience in the last few years of teaching, what would be your biggest takeaway?
16. Is there anything else that I have not asked that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Consent Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Version: 1.0

Consent Form for Research Participation

Study Number: IRB24-1093
Study Title: Investigating Teacher Retention in Illinois Public Schools During the Covid-19 Pandemic
Researcher(s): Taryn Kim, Lisa Rosen

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to determine what factors led to Illinois public schools retaining and even improving their teacher rates during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the study is examining what factors motivated Illinois teachers to persist in their roles during the pandemic, how teachers' conception of their role changed through the last few years, and how Illinois teachers made sense of the challenges that they faced. Ultimately, the findings will be compiled for the completion of a BA Thesis.

Procedures and Time Required: You will be asked to participate in one interview either over Zoom or in person that will last between 45 minutes to 1 hour. With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded. If you choose to conduct the interview in person, interviews will occur in a public space, either a coffee shop or public library, of your choosing.

Financial Information: Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. For your participation in this study, you will be compensated $50 via a Giftogram in the form of either Cash disbursements or prepaid Visa cards. If you start, but do not complete the study, you will still receive a $15 compensation for your time.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation in this study does not involve any risks to you beyond those of everyday life. You are permitted to not answer a question or end the interview at any time. Taking part in this research study may not benefit you personally, but we may learn new things that could help others.

Confidentiality: All possible steps will be taken to keep information about you confidential and anonymous and protected from unauthorized disclosure, tampering, or damage.

- Information that contains your name or any other identifying information will not be viewed by anyone except authorized researchers or advisors of the project.
- Although we ask for your name, all names will be deleted from our data files after the study ends and before we prepare the data for analysis. Identifiable data will never be shared outside the research team.
- All information that we collect will be kept in password-protected files on password-protected computers that are only accessible by authorized researchers.
- The data will not be used for any other scientific inquiry other than described in this consent form. The information collected as part of this research will not be used or shared for future research studies, even if all identifiers are removed.
- All recordings, notes, and other personal or identifying information will be destroyed following the completion of the study.
- If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used in analysis.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Version: 1.0

Contacts & Questions:
If you have questions or concerns about the study, you can contact the lead researcher, Taryn Kim: phone (213) 392-1693, email tarynkim@uchicago.edu.

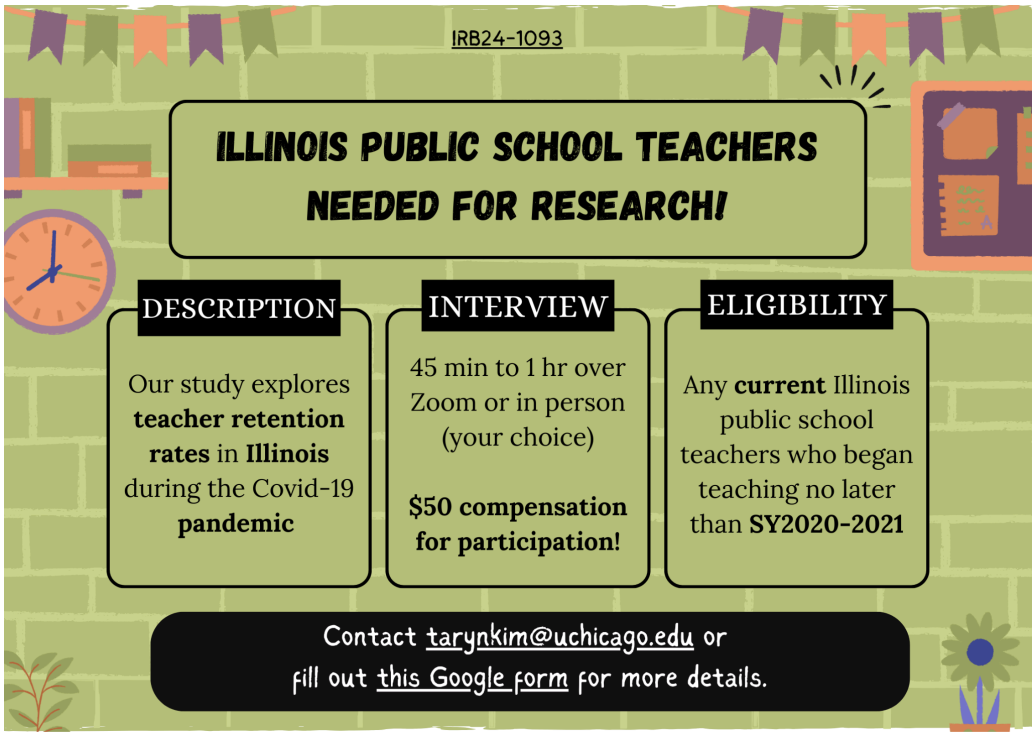
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, feel you have been harmed, or wish to discuss other study-related concerns with someone who is not part of the research team, you can contact the University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB): phone (773) 702-2915, email sbs-irb@uchicago.edu.

Consent:
Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawing from the research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You will be provided a copy of this form. By continuing to complete the interview, you agree to participate in the research. Do you agree to participate? Do you agree to be recorded?

Appendix C: Recruitment Materials

Dear _____,

My name is Taryn Kim, and I am a student at the University of Chicago. I am conducting a study on **Illinois public school teacher retention rates** and need to interview 30+ current Illinois public school teachers for **45 minutes to 1 hour** for which I will provide **$50 compensation**. Interviews can be conducted in person or over Zoom. All responses will be **entirely anonymized**. This study is conducted in accordance with IRB protocol under the study number IRB24-1093.



If you or anyone you know is interested, please fill out this Google Form.