Getting Down to FACTS

Strategic School Staffing in California: Opportunities and Barriers

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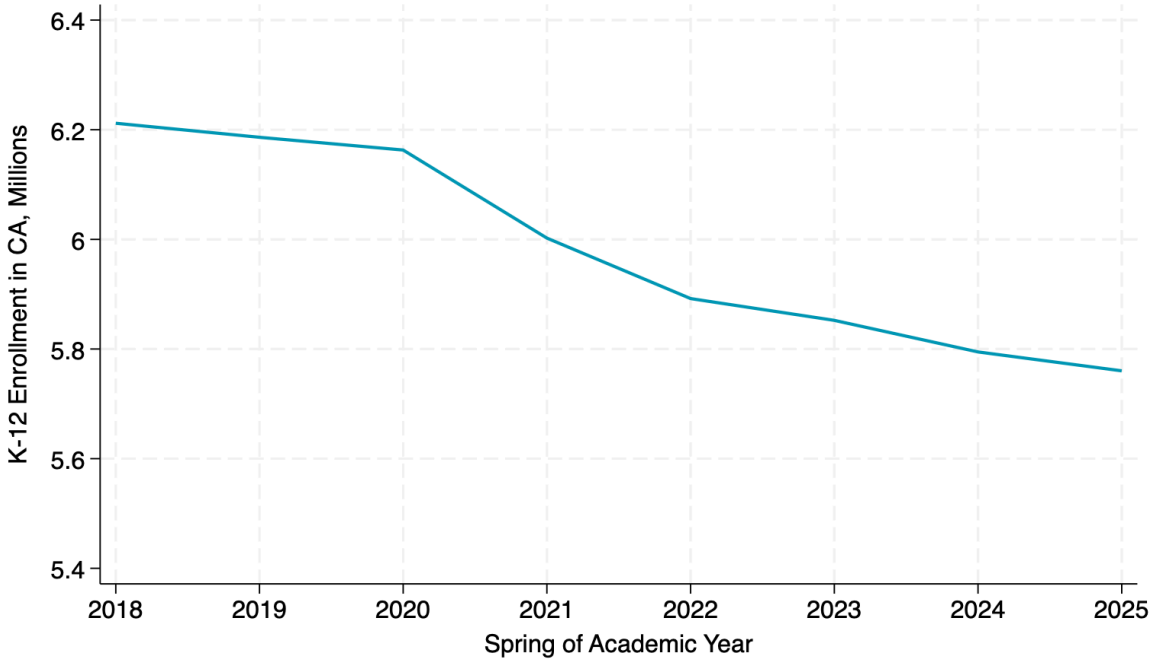
Introduction

Concerns about the state of the teacher workforce are evergreen. Attracting, developing, and retaining effective teachers in the United States is a long-standing challenge (Kraft & Lyon, 2024), and interest in teaching has dropped precipitously just in the last decade (Bartanen et al., 2025). One common interpretation of this problem is that the job of teaching itself is unsustainable. Teachers are often isolated in an "egg-crate" model, where they work alone in their classrooms with limited opportunities for interaction or collaboration with their peers (Lortie, 1975). Teachers are often asked to do too much, work in isolation, receive inadequate preparation and support, and rarely have opportunities to advance in their career without leaving the classroom. To address teacher workforce issues, then, we may need to redesign the job itself.

In response to these persistent challenges and lagging student outcomes, efforts to "reimagine teaching" and redeploy the workforce have taken off nationwide. Often called "strategic school staffing," these efforts challenge the traditional "one teacher, one classroom" model with approaches to more strategically deploy a diverse workforce. In brief, strategic staffing is a framework for rethinking how schools organize educators' roles, time, and pay to better align with teacher expertise and student needs. This might entail expert teachers extending their reach or taking on mentorship roles, assembling teams of educators with complementary expertise to share responsibility for a larger roster of students, or allowing for more career growth and differentiation opportunities than is typical for the profession. The field is broad, encompassing multiple approaches, but is built on evidence-based tenets such as collaboration, distributed leadership, and differentiation. Many schools already employ some of these aspects sporadically, such as utilizing collaborative structures like Professional Learning

Communities or deploying paraprofessionals for pull-out interventions. However, truly "strategic" staffing goes beyond periodic coordination or the delegation of supplementary tasks; it requires formal, structural shifts in the core instructional model and a reorganized approach to educator roles.

Figure 1: K-12 Student Enrollment in California, 2017-18 to 2024-25[1]



Efforts towards more strategic staffing also align with a rapidly changing educator workforce. Staffing numbers in schools have consistently grown over the last decade, even while enrollments fall. These nationwide trends are also prevalent in California schools, as demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2. Since 2017-18, California K-12 enrollment has dropped from over 6.2 million to just under 5.8 million in 2024-25, a drop of about 7% (Figure 1). The number of traditionally certified teachers, on the other hand, has grown modestly, from about 282,000 in 2019-20 to 286,000 in 2024-25, an increase of about 1.4% (Figure 2A). But classrooms often include valuable staff members that are not the official teacher of record: paraprofessionals, instructional aides, teaching assistants, and so on. This workforce is rapidly expanding in the U.S. (Bisht et al., 2021), and California is no exception. California schools

[1] Figure note: Authors' creation from California Department of Education publicly available student enrollment data. Figure combines historical Enrollment By School for 2017-18 to 2022-23 and Census Day Enrollment for 2023-24 to 2024-25. Limited to grades K-12, non-adult, primary enrollment, including charters and traditional public schools.

employed nearly 100,000 paraprofessionals in 2024-25, a whopping 30% increase from the roughly 74,000 employed in 2017-18 (Figure 2B). Certificated pupil services and other classified staff also saw large rises over the same time period, while administrators saw more modest increases of 8% since 2019-20. In brief, the last several years have seen a steady increase in the number of adults employed by California schools, even as student enrollment declines. This divergence reinforces the need to strategically deploy the existing workforce, reallocating existing human capital and resources to better serve students.

While interest in alternative staffing is expanding nationwide, empirical evidence regarding implementation and scalability is still emerging. School-level practitioners and district leaders frequently question whether these departures from traditional staffing are worth the investment and can sustainably support instructional staff and improve student outcomes. At the same time, policymakers need a clear understanding of the return on investment and the specific conditions necessary for high-fidelity implementation. Despite the promise these models hold for addressing California's workforce challenges, there is a critical need to assess how they interact with the state's specific policy landscape.

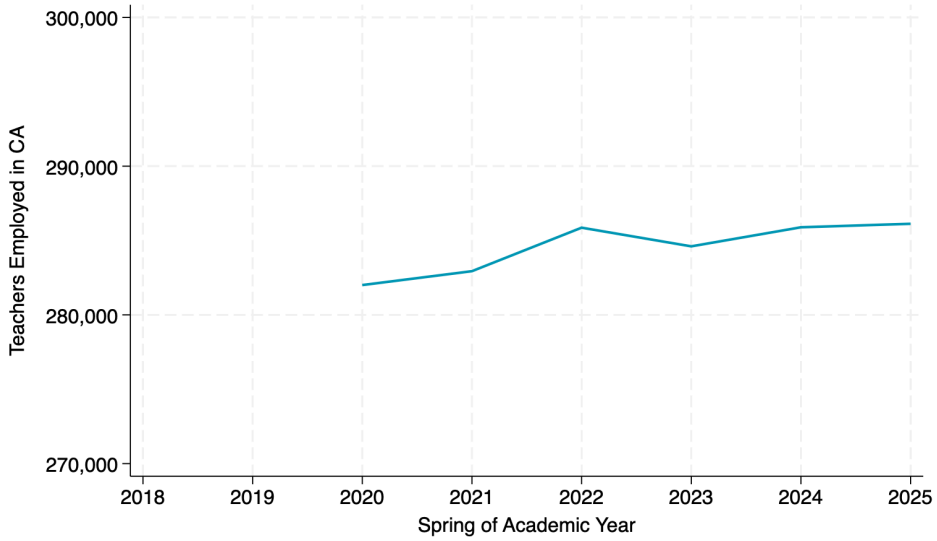
This report addresses this gap by investigating the viability of strategic staffing in California through four primary research questions:

1. What is the existing evidence on strategic school staffing?
2. What is the current state of school staffing in California, and how might we consider re-deploying the current slate of staff members in schools more effectively?
3. What is the level of interest and "appetite" for alternative staffing models among California school leaders?
4. What systemic barriers limit the adoption and expansion of strategic staffing in California?

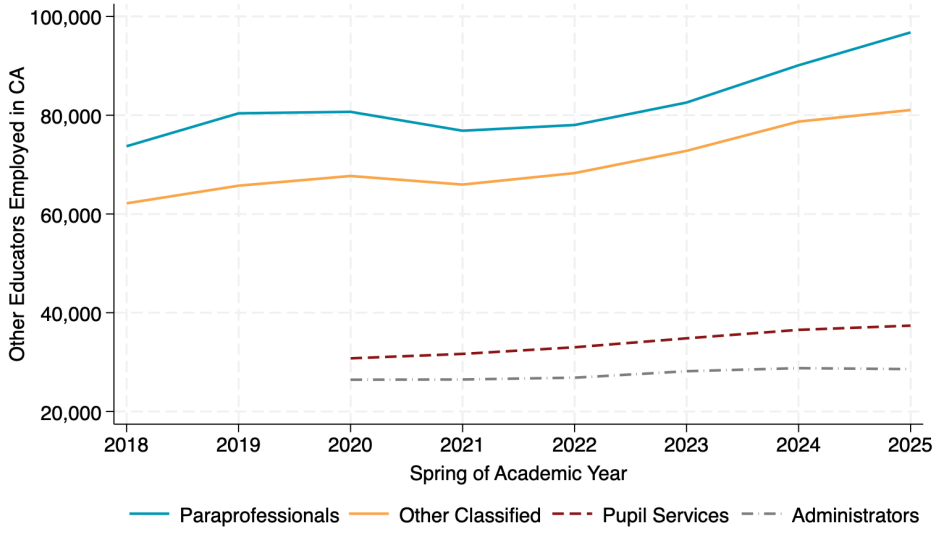
To answer these questions, we conduct a broad literature review of both "name-brand" models (e.g., Next Education Workforce, Opportunity Culture, TAP) and their underlying tenets, such as teaming and differentiation. We pair this review with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with nearly eighty principals in schools throughout California.

Figure 2: Educators Employed in California Schools, 2017-18 to 2024-25[2]

Panel A: Certificated Teachers



Panel B: Additional Staff (Selected)



[2] Figure note: Authors' creations from California Department of Education publicly available staff data files. Figures combine CBEDS data by race/ethnicity and gender for full-time equivalent classified staff from 2017-18 to 2024-25 and staff race/ethnicity files for certificated staff from 2019-20 to 2024-25. CBEDS data limits to paraprofessionals and non-clerical other classified staff employed by schools (rather than districts). Staff data plots state-level aggregates, including charters and traditional public schools and all schools regardless of DASS status.

We present a growing body of evidence that strategic staffing models work for both teachers and students. The research is clear that the individual tenets of strategic staffing models—collaboration, differentiated roles, and differentiated compensation—are associated with improvements in both teacher and student outcomes, and that "name-brand" models that combine these different tenets are also building a consistent evidence base of positive effects. We also find that, despite a strong appetite for flexibility and the demonstrated impact of these models, California principals rarely feel they have the professional discretion they need to enact more innovative staffing approaches. Interviews confirm that many schools in California already are pursuing flexible staffing models, but they are often forced to innovate *despite* current policies rather than because of state support. We identify several key barriers—based on both existing policies and principals' perceived obstacles—and conclude with policy implications and suggestions to foster a more supportive policy environment for reimagining the teaching role.

Evidence on Strategic Staffing

Defining Strategic Staffing

Federal Context

On February 9, 2026, the U.S. Department of Education released a "Dear Colleague" letter to state and local education agencies urging them to leverage Title II and Title I, Part A funds to "implement innovative teacher workforce strategies, like strategic staffing" (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). The letter goes on to define strategic staffing as:

> *"a team-based approach to school staffing that replaces the traditional one-teacher, one-classroom model. Through this model, at least two professional educators share responsibility for a common roster of students during the same blocks of time in the school day. Teamed educators have differentiated roles and distributed expertise, allowing for flexible student grouping, more effective use of instructional time, and expanded career entry and advancement opportunities."*

This federal guidance signals a pivotal shift, moving strategic staffing from a fringe innovation—often practiced as a workaround to existing policy—to a formally recognized strategy for school improvement. The importance of this federal nod lies primarily in greater funding flexibility: by explicitly naming these models as allowable uses of Title II funds, the Department has provided districts with the permission to invest formula dollars into role redesign rather than just traditional professional development workshops (Audrain, 2026).

That said, this recognition does not (yet) represent a new mandate or a new funding stream. Instead, it places the burden of design squarely on state and local agencies. While the federal government has cleared a path for the use of funds, the structural work of redefining job descriptions, adjusting compensation schedules, and navigating collective bargaining remains an exercise in local and state-level policy. For a state like California, the federal guidance provides the financial green light, but the actual implementation of these models requires a more intentional effort to turn this federal recognition into a coherent statewide design. Understanding how these models can be successfully adapted within California's specific regulatory environment is therefore essential for moving from federal permission to statewide flexibility.

Frameworks and Core Tenets

While the federal definition provides a broad umbrella, the field of "strategic school staffing" does not have one clear definition. Across the field, there are at least four different conceptual frameworks that vary in both scope and perspective. Appendix Figure 1 presents visuals of the two most thorough frameworks.

In 2023, Education First released a conceptual framework which identified six features of effective strategic school staffing: teaming, extended teacher reach, distributed leadership, differentiated compensation, supportive technology, and intentional pipelines. They also identified four enabling conditions—sustainable funding, technical assistance, strong leadership, and flexible state and district policies—that they deemed necessary for these models to survive beyond a pilot phase (Education First, 2023). This framework provided a landscape understanding of the field at large as it was still developing.

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) followed Education First's landscape scan with a review focusing on the role of state policy in supporting or hindering reimagined teaching roles. Rather than defining strategic staffing, NCTQ put forth four key examples of "strategic staffing in action:" teams of educators sharing a larger roster of students, highly effective teachers extending their reach through coaching and co-teaching, teacher residents, and differentiated pay (NCTQ, 2024a).

In 2026, Bellwether published "Realizing Reimagined Teaching," which shifts the focus to implementation and the process of transformation. They highlight seven key strategies of strategic staffing: team structures, extended teacher reach, distributed leadership, compensation structures, teacher pipelines, sustainability, and professional development. They also provide a multi-part roadmap for system leaders, emphasizing stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and continuous improvement (Bellwether, 2026).

Finally, the Center for Inspired Teaching and Exceptional Learning (CITEL) put forth a framework in 2026 that places the educator experience at the center, combining high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) with redesigned teaching roles. Their framework emphasizes teacher-leaders, teams, differentiated compensation, aligned professional development, collaborative culture, co-design, and the incorporation of HQIM (Laski et al., 2026).

Despite differences in emphasis and scope, three core tenets are consistent across all four frameworks. As such, we focus our research review on the following:

1. **Collaborative Teaching and Teaming**: This involves moving from individual autonomy to collective responsibility, breaking the "egg-crate." Collaborative teaching can include models such as co-teaching in the same classroom, team-based teaching where multiple educators share responsibility for a larger group of students, and structured grade-level or subject teams that jointly plan instruction, analyze data, and provide targeted student support.
2. **Differentiated Roles**: Rather than requiring every teacher to fulfill multiple competing roles, educators in strategic staffing models can specialize and distribute tasks. Differentiated roles involve assigning educators specialized responsibilities based on their strengths (e.g., instruction, mentoring, curriculum design) as well as creating career pathways that expand leadership opportunities without leaving the classroom.

3. **Differentiated Compensation**: Differentiated compensation means paying educators differently based on roles, responsibilities, expertise, or performance, rather than using a uniform salary schedule based only on experience and credentials.

In practice, we view strategic staffing as requiring meaningful structural shifts in instructional delivery, distinct from more conventional forms of educator collaboration like Professional Learning Communities, peer observations, or interventionist pull-outs. However, because the empirical literature on comprehensive strategic staffing models remains nascent, the following literature review draws on evidence from these more conventional practices. We view these approaches as the evidence-based building blocks upon which broader structural shifts in the educational delivery model are constructed.

Evidence on Core Tenets of Strategic Staffing[3]

To assess the effectiveness of each of these core tenets, we conducted a literature review of the empirical research related to both the implementation and impact of these strategies. Most of the pieces we reviewed were peer-reviewed studies, but given the nascent state of the literature on many of these strategies, we also included gray literature such as reports and white papers. We privileged pieces written in the past two decades, studies that involved larger sample sizes, and studies that cleared a modest measure of rigor. We reviewed theoretical literature only when empirical work on a strategy was lacking or the piece was seminal.

We conducted targeted searches on Google Scholar and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) using specific search terms related to the tenets above. We identified additional research from these pieces' bibliographies. In total we reviewed over 80 reports, papers, briefs or other pieces of research. Note that because work on each of the key tenets is somewhat limited, we cast a wide net in terms of the literature we considered relevant. As such, much of the literature we cite in this report does not explicitly connect findings to "strategic staffing" per se, at least as defined above. Instead, we reviewed this literature while keeping in mind its often implicit relevance to strategic staffing.

[3] This section draws heavily from two existing reports authored by us reviewing the literature on strategic school staffing: a literature review commissioned by the Coalition to Reimagine the Teaching Role and amended for the Center for Inspired Teaching & Exceptional Learning (Laski et al., 2026) and a forthcoming EdResearch for Action Brief on strategic staffing (Laski et al., forthcoming).

When reviewing this literature, we focused on findings related to the outcomes of strategic staffing models and strategies, including student learning gains as well as "leading indicators" like teacher retention and satisfaction. We also focused on how the models were implemented to shed light on what conditions and level of "fidelity" it might take to be successful.

We focus specifically on research on staffing and educator roles, despite the fact that other contextualizing factors often relate to outcomes of interest. Specifically, while the quality and implementation of curricular materials within any staffing model can have a significant impact on student learning, we did not examine the literature in this area.

Finding 1: There is strong evidence that collaborative teaching models improve both student outcomes and teacher satisfaction—when teams get the tailored support they need to thrive.

The existing research on teaming and collaborative teaching focuses on educators planning and teaching together, tasks that tend to fall under the broad umbrella of "collaboration" and signal various team structures, such as co-teaching, team teaching, or having a teaching assistant.[4] Vangrieken et al. (2015) argue that this broad umbrella leads to "conceptual confusion" within the field, finding in their review that different terms for collaboration types "were often used interchangeably and different researchers tended to allot different interpretations to the same term" (p. 23). What "counts" as collaboration has important implications for what we can learn from research. In particular, the lack of clarity makes it difficult to compare findings across studies or summarize the general takeaways from the field.

Multiple studies have directly shown that teacher collaboration has a positive influence on student learning. In a recent meta-analysis reviewing over seventy studies, Vembye et al. (2024) conclude that they illustrate "unambiguous evidence for the effectiveness of collaborative models of instruction on student achievement" (p. 409), across subjects, grade levels, and collaboration types (co-teaching, team teaching, or having a teaching assistant). As one example, Goddard et al. (2007) study 452 teachers from 47 urban elementary schools in the midwestern U.S. and find a positive relationship between a school's level of teacher collaboration and fourth-grade academic achievement.

[4] We found no research on how teachers share other non-instructional tasks, such as jointly managing relationships with students or families.

Additionally, Ronfeldt et al. (2015) use longitudinal data from over 9,000 teachers in 336 public schools in Florida and also find a positive relationship between collaboration and student achievement. The authors also show that collaboration quality has a positive relationship with the rate at which teachers' value-added to student achievement improves.

In addition, several studies find positive associations between teacher collaboration and leading indicators of student success, including teacher satisfaction. Dee et al. (2006) use structural equation modeling to study 210 teachers in eight randomly sampled urban elementary schools from the southwestern U.S., finding that working in teacher teams positively influenced teachers' commitment to their school. Moolenaar et al. (2012) also use structural equation modeling to study 775 educators from 53 Dutch elementary schools; they show that teachers with stronger colleague advice networks report having higher perceptions of collective efficacy (e.g., feeling able to reach and motivate students, and deal with challenging students), which was positively associated with student achievement.

Importantly, how systems implement teacher collaboration matters—simply creating teacher teams and granting teachers time to collaborate does not on its own always lead to successful collaboration or improved student outcomes. Successful collaboration requires that conditions are in place for teachers to truly work together, plan, and improve their instruction, rather than assuming that these actions will flow organically without support (Supovitz, 2002; Saunders et. al, 2009; Lockton, 2019). Saunders et al. (2009) evaluate a five-year initiative that deployed grade-level teams with the explicit goal of instructional improvement. Like the studies noted above, the researchers found positive impacts on achievement, though only after the study team intervened to provide more direct support to teachers, leading the authors to warn that "time for collaboration by itself, even when administratively supported, is unlikely to improve achievement unless additional conditions are in place that structure its use" (p. 1028).

Some studies speak to the characteristics of collaborative teaching structures. Using data from a four-year team-based schooling initiative, Supovitz (2002) finds that teams that are successful at improving instruction engage in collaborative preparation, co-teaching and peer observation, and flexibly arranging student groups to take advantage of both teachers' instructional strengths and small group settings. The study also notes the need for institutional support, a culture of "instructional

exploration" (p. 1591), and continuous professional development. Another case study followed five high school teaching teams over the course of a year and illustrates how successful teams work on both individual and shared problems of practice, and then actively experiment with solutions to these problems (Meirink et al., 2010). Finally, Patrick (2022) demonstrates that collaboration is perceived as more beneficial in schools with strong professional climate and less administrative oversight.

Taken together, the evidence is clear that time alone is insufficient to improve instruction or outcomes. Collaboration succeeds only when teachers are equipped with the right tools and training, and then given the professional autonomy to lead. High-impact collaboration requires a balance of structured facilitation and a strong professional climate that favors shared decision-making over rigid administrative oversight.

The literature also provides insights into how successful teams should be composed. Economics research shows that placing generally lower-performing teachers in teams with higher-performers (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009; Sun et al., 2016) or matching colleagues with high and low ratings in a particular skill area (Papay et al., 2020) could improve teacher performance. Literature in the sociological tradition notes that attention to already-existing collaborative relationships among teaching staff can also support success (Little, 1990; Lockton, 2019).

Finding 2: Differentiating roles, particularly by providing leadership and mentorship opportunities, is associated with increased student achievement and teacher retention. How differentiation is enacted is key to avoid negatively affecting student-teacher relationships.

We first consider literature studying how teachers might vary their roles within a team, without necessarily involving opportunities for career advancement or leadership. Importantly, we found minimal literature exploring how teachers' roles might change over the course of their careers, perhaps underscoring the scarcity of initiatives that promote career growth. Research on differentiated roles has explored several distinct models. Most literature exploring differentiated teacher roles explores co-teaching between general education and special education teachers. We do not dive deeply into this specific strand of the co-teaching evidence base beyond noting that Jones & Winters (2024) find positive achievement impacts of this type of teaming for students both with and without disabilities.

We delve deeper into research on co-teaching between a main teacher and teaching assistant. A randomized controlled trial out of Denmark found such a co-teaching model to positively impact student achievement—both through allowing for more small-group instruction and supporting classroom management—and that this effect was concentrated on the most vulnerable students (Andersen et al., 2020). There is some evidence that simply having more educators in the room is beneficial for students: Hemelt et al. (2021) use panel data from North Carolina and find positive impacts of teaching assistants on student achievement. As with teacher collaboration more generally, initiatives to differentiate teacher roles within teams will likely have higher chances for success when schools provide supportive conditions for this work, as Underwood et al. (2016) conclude in their small study on early childhood educator and kindergarten teacher teams.

The literature on teacher specialization in elementary school—in other words, having teachers teach fewer than the typical four core academic subjects—is thin but growing. Recent quasi-experimental studies using data from three states have each shown that elementary school teachers perform less well when they are specialized, as measured by value-added to student achievement (Bastian & Fortner, 2020; Hwang & Kisida, 2022; Backes et al., 2024). In North Carolina, for example, Bastian & Fortner (2020) show that teachers' math value-added is 0.04 standard deviations lower when specialized (defined as teaching one or two core subjects) than their average value-added when generalized (teaching three or four core subjects). The mechanisms behind specialization's negative impact on teacher performance remain a puzzle, though a leading hypothesis is that specialized teachers get to know their students less well and thus struggle to adapt their pedagogy to different student needs (Fryer, 2018).

Despite the negative impact on *individual* teacher performance, studies of specialization's effects on *overall student achievement* show mixed results. A randomized control trial in Texas finds negative impacts (Fryer, 2018), whereas Bastian & Fortner (2020) and Hwang & Kisida (2022) show null effects, and Backes et al. (2024) find positive effects. Backes et al. (2025) further show that students attending specialized elementary schools perform better in the early years of middle school. These researchers reconcile their apparently-conflicting teacher performance and student achievement results by showing that schools tend to sort higher-performing teachers into specialist roles. Bastian et al. (2023) also find that specialization improves teacher retention in North Carolina, which may further

explain the discrepancy. Overall, these studies suggest that while teachers might perform less well when specialized, student achievement is unlikely to suffer if schools select teachers who are more effective at teaching certain subjects to specialize in them. Moreover, specialized teachers might benefit from support that encourages relationship-building with students.

A separate strand of literature investigates teacher leadership. Multiple studies suggest that differentiating educator responsibilities through formal teacher leadership roles can have a positive impact on teachers' job satisfaction, reported commitment to their schools or profession, and actual turnover decisions. The current evidence base for teacher leadership is somewhat disjointed. One literature review notes that, while teacher leader initiatives have existed for decades, the field has not settled on a unifying definition of teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This challenge, along with the domination of smaller-scale, case study-type literature, means that the field still has much to learn about teacher leadership, including the effects of sharing decision-making with teachers on student learning.

A mixed-methods evaluation from a New York City teacher leadership program that identified leaders to model instruction and spearhead instructional improvement initiatives found that teacher leaders felt more committed to the profession and were less likely to turn over than their peers (Furer et al., 2018). Another study focused on the program's impact found improved retention; moreover, the study provides evidence that serving as a leader benefits the leaders themselves, as teacher leaders had higher classroom observation scores than matched comparison teachers (Rodriguez et al., 2022). Landa & Donaldson (2020) also show positive results for leaders, surveying over 500 teacher leaders and finding that most perceived their role to have both increased and improved collaboration with their colleagues.

Several other studies find positive results from teacher leadership. Devos et al. (2014) study 1,495 high school teachers in 46 schools and conclude that teachers in schools where leadership is distributed successfully—i.e., where leaders collaborate effectively, where teachers have a voice in decision-making, and administrative and teacher leaders are supportive of teaching staff—are more committed to their schools. García Torres (2019) uses U.S. data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) to show a positive association between teachers' perceptions of how leadership is distributed in their schools and their job satisfaction. Teacher leadership also has been

shown to improve school culture, in part through increasing collaboration and improving teacher-administration communication (Supovitz et al., 2020).

Research demonstrating a direct relationship between teacher leadership and student achievement is only just starting to emerge. Leading Educators, a national nonprofit supporting school systems develop teacher leaders, has demonstrated plausibly causal impacts of their specific professional development on student learning (Mihaly et al. 2022; Audisio et al., 2024). The TAP model, which includes teacher leadership aspects, also has a growing evidence base on student outcomes, which we discuss further below.

Outside of these specific models, the strongest evidence on teacher leadership broadly is correlational: Shen et al. (2020) conduct a meta-analysis of 21 studies of teacher leadership and student achievement and conclude there is a small, positive correlation between the two, though we underscore the lack of a causal link in any of the analyzed studies. Within the included correlational studies, some are more convincing than others. Notably, Ingersoll et al. (2017) find a positive correlation between teacher leadership and school achievement levels, even when controlling for school demographic characteristics. Other included studies have methodological issues that limit our ability to draw clear conclusions. For example, Leithwood and Mascall (2008) also claim a positive link between teacher leadership and student outcomes, but their use of school-level academic proficiency data aggregated across years and subjects is a major methodological limitation.

Outside of the positive relationships outlined by Shen et al. (2020), evidence from other correlational studies is mixed. Supovitz & Comstock (2023) find mixed results from their evaluation of a teacher leadership program that designated leaders as either full-time instructional coaches, coaches who worked part-time as content specialists and spent their remaining time supporting small student groups, or technology coaches who did not have release time. The program had null ELA and small, negative math effects when considering the entire sample, but positive math effects for students they observed across their entire five-year panel. The authors speculate that the impact for the subgroup they observed throughout the panel could be driven by its more advantaged demographic characteristics, or by its relatively larger dosage of the teacher leader program. Finally, Miller & Rowan (2006) study “organic management”—an organizational method that involves features such as teacher

empowerment, sharing decision-making with teachers, and changing traditional school hierarchical leadership—and also find no association with student achievement.

Several studies suggest that while teacher leadership might not always directly influence student outcomes, it may influence student learning through other channels like building schools' capacity to support students (Miller & Rowan, 2006; Heck & Hallinger, 2009). For example, Bellibas and colleagues (2020) use structural equation modeling to show that while distributing leadership to teachers does not directly improve teaching quality, it provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate and feel satisfied in their work, which in turn increases instructional quality.

Studies focused on implementation show that sharing leadership can be a challenge, especially as truly sharing leadership amongst administrators and teachers goes against the hierarchical norms embedded in most school cultures (Goldstein, 2004). Additionally, focus groups with teacher leaders find that initiatives that distribute leadership to teachers must be careful to match their increased expectations and responsibilities with commensurate support and compensation, as well as legitimate opportunities to influence decision-making, including the definition and expectations of their role (Holloway et al., 2017).

Finding 3: Differentiating compensation based on training or position can improve teacher retention, especially in specific areas struggling with teacher shortages.

We sought out literature investigating how teachers have been compensated for having differentiated roles and taking on additional responsibilities. However, most research we found focused on a different conceptualization of pay differentiation: compensation for possessing a desired characteristic (e.g., national board certification or a STEM degree).[5] In general, it is most common to compensate teachers for possessing proxies for teacher quality. Strunk & Zeehandelaar (2011) take stock of the differentiated compensation in California, finding that schemes targeting these proxies—such as advanced certifications or degrees—are much more common than those targeting hard-to-staff subjects, such as special education or STEM. Podgursky & Spring (2011) have similar results at the national level, with national board certification being the most commonly rewarded

[5] We also note that quite a bit of academic research on merit pay or performance pay exists, but we omit discussion of literature here, as merit pay is meaningfully different from the strategic staffing vision of differentiating pay by role or responsibility. For a recent meta-analysis of merit pay, see Pham et al. (2020).

teacher trait; they find that compensation for teaching in underserved communities or in shortage fields is less common, but growing.

Some states have experimented with offering additional compensation to teachers who have desired traits, with overall positive results. Cowan & Goldhaber (2018) investigate an incentive system in Washington that provided bonuses for teachers holding national board certification and conclude that the bonus impacted both teachers' retention decisions and human capital investments, as defined by more incumbent and applicant teachers getting the certification. Similarly, a bonus system for STEM and special education teachers in North Carolina reduced teacher turnover, and this effect was concentrated in more-experienced teachers (Clotfelter et al., 2008). Additionally, a program in Georgia that allowed STEM and special education teachers to begin their careers earning a salary at a higher step on the salary schedule notably reduced teacher attrition (Bueno & Sass, 2018). Recently, a $10,000 bonus for special education teachers in Hawaii cut special education vacancies by a third (Theobald et al., 2025). These findings suggest that compensation differentiated by teacher characteristics can lead to improvements in leading indicators like retention, but the field has yet to examine if these patterns hold when differentiating compensation by responsibility outside of specific leadership roles.

When considering using differential pay as an incentive, it is important to ensure that pay differences are large enough to matter. In their meta-analysis of teacher merit pay, Pham and co-authors (2020) unsurprisingly find that higher pay increases or awards lead to larger effects. They benchmark the median increase of all the studies they review, roughly 7.5% of a teacher's salary (or around $5,000). Pay differentiation below this benchmark is less effective overall at moving teacher or student outcomes.

Strategic Staffing Models

A small number of national "name-brand" models are leading strategic staffing efforts. Below, we outline several of these models to illustrate different approaches to strategic staffing design and the evidence of their impact.

Finding 4: Multiple strategic staffing models have demonstrated positive impacts on teacher retention and student achievement.

Public Impact's Opportunity Culture (OC) has been growing for over a decade and has been implemented in over sixty sites across the country. In OC models, high-performing teachers extend their reach by serving as Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs), leading small teams of teachers and paraprofessionals. Other team members can also take on specialized roles such as Team Reach Teacher and Reach Associate. MCLs coach, co-teach, and model instruction while continuing to teach students directly. Educators are paid more for reaching more students and leading others. The OC model weaves together multiple different tenets of strategic staffing, particularly differentiated roles and differentiated compensation.

Possibly because of its long history, the literature on OC is the strongest to date on any strategic staffing initiative, including two quasi-experimental studies that estimate causal impacts of OC on student outcomes. OC staffing models are associated with gains in math achievement, driven primarily by the multiclassroom leadership model. Students taught by coached teachers scored about 0.11 standard deviations higher in math, an effect size comparable to replacing an average teacher with one in the top quartile of effectiveness (Backes and Hansen, 2018). This suggests that intensive, job-embedded coaching from highly effective teachers can raise instructional quality, aligning with prior evidence on high-quality instructional coaching.

Arizona State University's Next Education Workforce™ (NEW) is a strategic staffing model that is expanding rapidly and currently being implemented in over thirty school systems nationwide. Teachers working in NEW models share a larger roster of students with a team of other educators with complementary skills. Distributed expertise across team members allows teachers to specialize in different aspects of instruction, student support, or curriculum design. NEW models incorporate multiple tenets of strategic staffing, particularly team teaching and differentiated roles.

NEW has a demonstrated impact on both teacher and student outcomes. Research from a large district implementing NEW shows that teachers who work in collaborative team-teaching models were half as likely to leave their schools compared with teachers working solo in traditional classrooms (Ingersoll et al., 2025). NEW teachers were also more satisfied than their peers working in traditional classrooms, were more likely to recommend teaching to a friend, and had higher evaluation ratings

(Laski, 2024). Finally, forthcoming quasi-experimental work on NEW demonstrates a significant effect on student achievement. Comparing student performance in grades that have implemented NEW to those that have not (yet) implemented NEW in a given year in a difference-in-difference framework, the authors find NEW increases student achievement by roughly 0.03 standard deviations, or about one month of learning, in grades 3-8 (Laski et al., forthcoming). The emerging findings also have meaningful equity implications, as students in teamed classrooms are more likely to identify as multilingual learners and have lower baseline proficiency, on average. Alongside evidence that NEW teachers are more likely to be retained and evaluated as effective, these patterns suggest NEW may expand equitable access to effective teaching for historically underserved groups.

National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP) is a staffing model operating in at least fifteen states. TAP models emphasize differentiated compensation for teacher leaders. Teachers can advance professionally without leaving the classroom, with career ladder roles such as Career Teacher, Mentor Teacher, and Master Teacher. Mentor and Master Teachers provide instructional leadership, coaching, and modeling for peers, and teachers can receive additional pay based on classroom instructional effectiveness and student achievement growth

Several studies demonstrate the impact of TAP on student achievement. A study in South Carolina found that TAP had notable long-run outcomes; students exposed to TAP in middle school were significantly less likely to be arrested and significantly more likely to enroll in 12th grade and graduate on time (Cohodes et al., 2026). The TAP literature often emphasizes how implementation varies across schools, underscoring that it is difficult to disentangle the impacts of performance pay from the impacts of other aspects of the TAP model, such as role differentiation. TAP studies that focus specifically on the performance pay aspect find positive impacts on math achievement and elementary test score gains (Springer et al., 2014; Eren, 2019).

Finally, an internal study from **Teacher Powered Schools**—that is, schools both designed and operated by teacher teams in collaboration with students, families, and communities— suggests that using the model is associated with increased teacher retention (Marks & Esdal, 2023), though the findings rely on self-reported survey data. Bellwether's report on implementing strategic staffing models also includes a brief case study of Mountain View School in San Diego Unified, where the

authors emphasize the school's focus on stakeholder engagement and capacity building. The policy environment also seems key to the school's success: Mountain View received a waiver from the union in order to ensure teachers were actively opting into their collective autonomy model (Bellwether, 2026).

We share these models and their evidence to demonstrate that there are multiple distinct approaches to strategic staffing, supported by a growing body of evidence regarding their impacts on both teachers and students. Across the literature, a recurring takeaway is that there is no single "right" way to organize a school; rather, state and local education agencies can pursue policies and practices that empower schools with increased staffing flexibility. While the research suggests these models can improve outcomes, their success often depends on a regulatory and fiscal environment that allows for local innovation. In the sections that follow, we explore the extent to which California's current policy landscape supports or stymies the adoption of these evidence-based practices.

The Role of State Policy

Finding 5: State policy can meaningfully support or inhibit strategic staffing.

Implementing strategic staffing at scale requires alignment across different levels of the educational system: schools, districts, and states. While school-level leaders manage on-the-ground deployment and master scheduling, and district leaders often handle human resources and contractual negotiations, there is a clear and necessary role for state policy. Specifically, the state is responsible for creating the enabling conditions—such as flexible funding structures and innovation waivers—that remove barriers to role redesign.

In this vein, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) conducted a national policy scan and found that state policy plays a critical role in either seeding innovation or acting as a barrier to reimagining the teaching role (2024a). NCTQ argues that strategic staffing models show promise, but for these models to scale, states must proactively create an environment that grants districts the autonomy to deviate from rigid, outdated workforce structures. The authors identify ten specific evidence-based policy actions that states can leverage to support this transition, divided into categories of seeding innovation and removing existing barriers. We list the key levers below, bolding ones that NCTQ has identified as particular areas of focus for California (NCTQ, 2024b).

Key levers for seeding innovation include:

1. **Providing financial support for teacher leader roles beyond mentoring**
2. **Offering grants to innovate with strategic staffing models**
3. **Providing opportunities for waivers and/or establishing "innovation zones"**
4. Contributing to differentiated pay for residents and apprentices
5. Adjusting funding formulas to allow districts more flexibility in how they allocate funds for different types of instructional positions

Key levers for removing barriers include:

1. Allowing class size or student-teacher ratio waivers
2. Permitting teachers to observe other teachers
3. Limiting restrictions on teachers' planning time
4. **Permitting paraprofessionals and aides to support instructional activities**
5. Allowing team outcomes to contribute to teacher evaluation

The state of California currently lacks several of these critical policy supports, which we have bolded above. California could further seed innovation by providing state-level financial support for teacher leader roles or grant opportunities specifically designed for strategic staffing innovation. In addition, California lacks a formal "innovation zone" provision or an opportunity for waivers of policies that inhibit flexible staffing. Finally, California is one of just 14 states that formally restrict the use of support staff such as paraprofessionals, residents, and aides, which can dramatically limit the extent to which schools can create staffing models that strategically use all the adults in the building.

The state could more actively support schools and districts in pursuing more flexible school staffing by providing waivers for districts with well-designed strategic staffing plans, which might include lifting restrictions on the scope of work for classified staff when under the supervision of a licensed teacher. There are also several existing flexibilities that the state could further spotlight to support districts and schools in innovating, such as existing waivers for class size or student-teacher ratio policies and the ability to attribute team outcomes to teachers' evaluations.

Principal Interviews

Data and Methods

To better understand the practical opportunities and barriers to strategic staffing in California, this report incorporates original qualitative data from nearly eighty semi-structured interviews with school principals across the state. These interviews were conducted between September 8 and December 22, 2025, by a dedicated team for the Getting Down to Facts III project (GDTF). To ensure a representative cross-section of the state's educational landscape, the team drew a random sample of local education agencies (LEAs) throughout California, stratified by district type: elementary, high school, and unified districts. Within each district, the team randomly selected one school at each relevant school level, yielding an initial random sample of 200 schools across 74 districts. The sample expanded over time as principals declined participation or did not respond to repeated contact attempts. In total, the team contacted 414 principals across 126 districts. Of these principals, 82 agreed to participate, representing 69 districts in 38 counties across California, yielding a district response rate of 30% and a principal response rate of 17%. The final interview sample includes 30 elementary schools, 19 middle schools, 33 high schools, 77 traditional schools, 2 charter schools, and 3 alternative schools.

The interview protocol was developed collaboratively, with six GDTF research teams contributing questions on topics including strategic staffing, special education, generative AI, high-impact tutoring, math pathways, and pensions. The questions in the strategic staffing portion of the protocol were:

1. *When you think about staffing your school for your students' instructional needs, what are the biggest challenges you face? [Additional prompts: district regulations, supply of teachers, qualifications, particular roles that are hard to fill, finance/budget]*
2. *What did you do to address those challenges this past school year? Focus specifically on instructional staff.*
3. *If you could staff your school more flexibly and move away from the standard "one teacher, one classroom" staffing model, what kind of staffing shifts would you be most interested in*

pursuing? [Additional prompts: what roles/supports would you add or expand? Examples: incorporation of support staff, collaborative teams, differentiated educator roles, differentiated compensation, regrouping students/grades]

4. *What specifically limits you from implementing your ideal staffing model or deploying your staff more flexibly? [Additional prompts: state/district policies, collective bargaining agreements, staff availability/capacity, staff buy-in, parents/families]*
5. *If you could talk to state policymakers, what would you want them to know regarding staffing your school to best meet your students' needs?*

The team used a counterbalanced design, alternating the order of the sections to ensure all subtopics had adequate response rates, given the limited 45-60 minute interview window. Ultimately, 72 of the 82 interviews covered the strategic staffing questions. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with permission, and transcribed using Otter.AI. The raw transcripts were then hand-cleaned and anonymized before being shared with researchers.

For this report, we analyzed the transcripts using an inductive approach to identify emergent trends and recurring themes. This process involved reading all provided transcripts and employing a coding framework to pull out key themes related to staffing challenges, the appetite for alternative models, barriers to implementation, and potential policy levers. By synthesizing these first-hand accounts with existing evidence and data, we can better understand how California principals are approaching staffing and how the state can support schools in pursuing innovative staffing models.

Findings

Finding 6: California principals are eager to pursue innovative staffing models, and the growing complexity of student need contributes to their urgency.

The appetite for strategic staffing is remarkably high among California school leaders. Nearly all interviewed principals expressed an interest in thinking about their staff more flexibly. When asked what staffing shifts they would be interested in pursuing if they could staff more flexibly, only five principals said they weren't interested, representing just 7% of the 71 principals that answered that question. These five principals mostly said they did not have ideas for more flexible staffing that was realistic given their current funding and staffing restrictions. Another seven principals (10%) essentially

said they were already staffing flexibly. The remaining 59 principals (83%) answered affirmatively, and this interest was consistent across different school types, sizes, and locales.

At least 29 unique principals (40%) brought up collaborative teaching, including co-teaching or team teaching, as a staffing model they would like to explore further. One principal noted simply, "having another adult in the classroom is an absolute game changer." Another made a strong case for the unique benefit to teachers of sharing their classroom:

> *"I feel like teaching is so incredibly lonely…you don't really have a thought partner, with the same level of experience and training, you know? …I would love to see more than one adult in every classroom, because I, as an educator, I have had multiple times when the most amazing thing might have happened with my students, and I look around and there's no one to share that with. Or I might have had, you know, conversely, I might have had something just go drastically wrong, and I don't have anybody else to go: What happened there? Like, you know, where did, where did we miss the mark? What, you know, what's going on?"*

The benefit to students was also evident to many principals. Several brought up student-teacher ratios and the ability to get more interaction with an adult; one principal explained, "students just need more surface area with adults, for clarity, for clarification, for guidance." Another argued that models like these allowed for shifting from teacher-led instruction to student-focused learning; they stated, "I think in the learning process, students should be doing the heavy lifting, and the teachers are there to guide… And I don't know that having them sit in rows quietly and just listening to someone up at the front of the room is really conducive to how we should be learning."

While collaborative teaching was the most commonly mentioned innovation, principals reported interest in pursuing several other flexible models. At least 10 principals spoke about "multi-age experiences," or grouping students by skill or ability rather than age. This model seemed appealing because it would allow schools to "meet the kids where they are, based on skill." Another explained the value for individual students:

> *"If I have a seven year old who's working at the fifth grade level in mathematics, I want them to learn from a teacher who understands fifth grade level mathematics. But they're in second grade, so they're with a second grade teacher, and my second grade teachers don't have the teacher knowledge of a fifth grade teacher… So in an ideal world, I would see taking every*

individual student based on their expertise, where they are and their zone of proximal development, and moving them faster and more efficiently through the system, and putting educators in front of them who could support them where they are cognitively, and not based on age."

Other commonly cited innovations included looping students with the same teacher(s) over multiple years, "platooning" or specializing, and thinking more creatively about credentialing requirements, scheduling, and class sizes.

Finally, principals often noted that increasing special education identification rates and the growing social-emotional needs of students have fundamentally changed their approach to staffing. Many leaders reported hiring specifically for attendance outreach, mental health support, or crisis management. However, these roles often exist in silos, disconnected from the core instructional team. Principals also reported that these growing student needs often fall on teachers too, and take away from their ability to focus on instruction and learning. One rural principal noted that "the system is imbalanced right now because there are so many demands and requirements placed on staff and teachers that it pulls them away from the core purpose or their essential function, which is to serve students." Principals indicated a need for models that better integrate support staff and paraprofessionals into the core instructional team to address these complexities more holistically.

Finding 7: Principals feel they do not have the professional discretion they need to strategically hire and deploy their staff.

While principals are eager to innovate, they frequently feel blocked by structural rigidities that limit their autonomy as site leaders. Echoing the policy landscape outlined above, principals reported that this lack of professional discretion stems from rigidities at both the state and district levels.

State-Level Barriers: Credentialing and Funding. First, principals highlighted a tension between maintaining high standards through state credentialing and allowing for the local flexibility required to create differentiated instructional roles. "I don't want unqualified people working with our kids," noted one principal, "but at the same time, a little bit of flexibility would be appreciated." Principals generally agreed that some credentialing requirements seemed necessary, but argued that current codes prevent them from elevating highly effective classified staff. One suburban high school principal argued:

"We could do better in some of our classrooms if we eliminated the person who managed to get a credential and replaced them with high quality classified people who are helping guide the learning. The idea that the credential somehow makes you a better teacher is no longer true in California, but we're still required to have a credentialed teacher in there, right? I can go into classes right now where the credentialed teacher sort of slogs their way through some information, and then it's our instructional aides that are doing the primary work of connecting kids to that learning."

Principals, particularly at the secondary level, also reported that rigid credentialing requirements prevent them from hiring industry experts or using existing staff in cross-disciplinary ways. One principal lamented that credentialing restrictions prevented a highly accomplished local scientist from teaching, noting, "we have someone who wants to work with kids, who wants to leave a profession that's been very successful for him, and we just put up these crazy roadblocks." In smaller districts, these requirements are particularly burdensome, forcing leaders to hire and deploy for compliance with a specific credential code rather than instructional fit. Principals accepted that this was a part of their role—one noted, "I'm so used to being pressured into creative solutions"—but often expressed frustration about having to play "the game" to meet credentialing requirements rather than optimizing for student needs.

Furthermore, principals felt constrained by state funding structures and often yearned for a more flexible budget that they could use to appropriately staff their school. One principal in a small, rural district put it succinctly: "we need more flexibility to make choices that best fit our district, given our own unique circumstances." When asked what they would like to tell state policymakers, another rural principal expressed frustration with money that was "pigeonholed" for specific purposes that weren't essential to the school. They went on, "I just wish the money we were given we could spend more flexibly on staff, rather than like it has to go towards this one specific thing… Let me pay them more… Let us incentivize being a good teacher."

District-Level Barriers: HR Processes and Contracts. Second, principals frequently expressed frustration with district HR processes and collective bargaining agreements that "auto-fill" vacancies based on seniority and tenure. For strategic staffing to succeed, leaders argued that they need the professional discretion to select team members who "fit" and are aligned with the school mission.

Instead, vacancies are often filled via a district transfer portal without any ability to evaluate candidates' fit at their school. One principal noted, "oftentimes what you're dealing with, with the transfers, is people are just wanting to leave one site and just go to another…You're not finding people who are really motivated to come to your site." Several principals suggested that this contractual rigidity is the main roadblock for strategic staffing; one noted, "if we are able to truly hire staff, it wouldn't be too hard to be able to do collaborative community learning."

Finding 8: Many principals are already innovating, but current policies force them to pursue flexible staffing despite the system rather than because of it.

In fact, many leaders are already pursuing alternative staffing models, but this work is often framed as being born out of necessity rather than strategy, with principals redesigning roles to fill vacancies or address urgent needs and working around existing restrictions and policies. "Everybody has multiple hats," noted one principal in a very rural school, "my aide is also our cook, and our bus driver is also our after school program director," but this was necessary because of their limited staff. One principal provided a helpful proactive/reactive frame: "rather than being proactive, I think my district is currently in a state of being reactive, and it's at the cost of students, and even at the cost of staff support and staff confidence in our system." Many principals felt unable to plan for the future or think strategically about the best way to staff their school for their students, as they were too often bogged down with handling the day-to-day urgencies of running a school.

Notably, we found that the few charter and alternative school principals that we interviewed were much more likely to report pursuing alternative staffing models. These sites reported operating under more flexible regulatory requirements and on a smaller scale, and as such they were more likely to deploy their staff in unique ways. When asked how they would staff their school more flexibly if they could, the principal of an alternative continuation high school said:

> *"That's why I love the Alt Ed world, because we do have flexible models. The continuation environment has allowed fewer minutes, and my independent study high school is able to flex more adults across a varied environment and rotate through students. And that way students who want more flexibility and can work more independently are able to and aren't inundated with, you know, a large class full of students, which is anxiety-inducing for them, but the*

students who need greater wrap-around services, we can then have this cool model where we require them to come in more frequently, and because they're not doing it independently."

When asked the same question, another principal of an alternative high school for incarcerated youth said, "well, I kind of already am doing that. I kind of already at a point where I've had, I've gotten some flexibility, you know…And believe it or not, it's actually worked very well." In contrast, principals in traditional comprehensive schools reported feeling more constrained by existing requirements and structures.

Finding 9: "Seeing is believing." Principals' personal experiences seeing innovative staffing models influenced both their ability to conceptualize different approaches and their interest in implementing them.

A principal's ability to imagine and implement a different staffing model is heavily tied to their personal exposure to success stories. When asked how they would like to staff their schools differently, principals often talked about other models they had personally experienced. Those who had previously worked in or visited schools with alternative models were more likely to advocate for them. Similarly, some principals struggled with imagining alternative models if they hadn't experienced them before. One principal asked, "I'm so locked into the current paradigm that, you know, so… How would we be creative with staffing?" Another put it bluntly, stating "I don't spend a lot of time dreaming about things that I can't make happen, because there's so much to do…it would get really, really overwhelming and frustrating if I were focusing on the things that are outside of my modus of control." Principals also expressed concerns about developing teacher and family buy-in for a new way of thinking about schooling. "Tradition" was often cited as a limiting factor, especially by principals who were newer to their schools.

A perception of scarcity also acts as a mental barrier. Many principals cited lack of space, small staff sizes, or limited funding as barriers to strategic staffing. But these obstacles are not insurmountable: many schools that reported currently pursuing flexible staffing in California were small, rural schools with traditional facilities and funding. And while a larger budget is always appealing, strategically redeploying staff should not necessarily require more funding. An analysis of strategic staffing in two districts found that it was possible to pursue with "minimal additional ongoing cost," and noted that neither district had meaningfully changed their overall salary structure to

implement these models (Education Resource Strategies, 2025). Rather, pursuing strategic staffing often requires tradeoffs in non-salary considerations, such as class size and teacher assignment.

The mismatch between perceived barriers and the realities of implementation suggests a critical role for the state in providing a proof of concept. By spotlighting successful staffing models in California schools and providing clear permission to innovate, the state can help principals move past the assumption that strategic staffing requires new staff, new construction, or significant budget increases.

Discussion and Implications

We present a growing body of evidence on strategic school staffing, a framework for rethinking how schools organize educators' roles, time, and pay to better align with teacher expertise and student needs. In practice, strategic staffing entails a fundamental shift in how instruction is delivered: rethinking educators' roles and reenvisioning how staff are deployed, which we view as distinct from conventional collaborative structures already operating in many schools. We review the current research and demonstrate that alternative staffing models are tied to improved educator and student outcomes. Indeed, the three core tenets underlying these models are all based in a strong body of research. First, collaborative teaching models, including co-teaching and team teaching, have demonstrated impacts on student outcomes and teacher satisfaction. Second, differentiating roles, including developing opportunities for teacher leadership and mentorship, is also associated with improvements in student achievement and teacher retention. Third, differentiating compensation based on position can improve teacher retention, especially in hard-to-staff areas. Across these tenets, the evidence is also clear that *how* they are implemented matters: teams of teachers need tailored support to thrive, and differentiation needs to be enacted in a way that centers student-teacher relationships.

The broader policy environment is also crucial and can either support or inhibit strategic staffing. Implementing these structural shifts requires alignment across different levels of the educational system. While school leaders manage on-the-ground deployment and master schedules, and district leaders handle human resources and contract negotiations, the state can play a key role by establishing enabling conditions for success. NCTQ's analysis identified several state policy levers that can either seed innovation or act as a barrier to more flexible staffing (2024a). In California, their

recommendations focused on financial support for leadership roles, grants for innovation, more opportunities for waivers or "innovation zones," and permitting paraprofessionals and aides to support instruction. By adopting any or all of these policy levers, the state could more actively support schools and districts in pursuing more flexible school staffing.

In our interviews with California principals, we also frequently heard about how rigidities at both the state and district levels could potentially inhibit innovation. Principals across the state consistently stated that they were eager to pursue strategic staffing models, and the growing complexity of student needs only made innovation seem more urgent. But principals often felt they lacked the professional discretion required to strategically hire and deploy their staff in ways that match their students' complex needs. Consequently, strategic staffing in California currently occurs on the margins. Many principals are already finding ways to implement flexible staffing, but they are often forced to do so despite the current system rather than because of it. This gap between interest and implementation is further widened by a lack of exposure. Interviews revealed that "seeing is believing;" a principal's personal experience with successful alternative models seems directly related to their ability to conceptualize and advocate for these new approaches.

We conclude with three suggestions for removing barriers to strategic staffing and supporting staffing innovation. First, the state can **expand opportunities for (and knowledge of) staffing flexibility**, potentially via waivers or "innovation zones." In interviews, principals repeatedly requested more professional discretion to staff their schools to best meet their students' needs. The structure for this already exists, as many of the schools already reporting flexible staffing are alternative or charter schools that claim to be working under less restrictive requirements. To further support principals seeking to pursue strategic staffing, the state can expand these opportunities to traditional schools, potentially by streamlining the waiver application process and lifting restrictions on the instructional use of classified staff. The state can also play a more active role in communicating existing flexibilities that currently go unrecognized. For example, California already permits class-size waivers and allows districts to factor team outcomes into teacher evaluations. Publicizing these underutilized options can quickly equip principals with some of the autonomy they seek.

Second, because many schools are already innovating within current constraints, the state can **provide training and clear information on how to utilize existing flexibilities.** Many leaders may not

realize the extent to which they can already be more flexible with budgets, funding, and staffing, and our interviews uncovered several "perceived" barriers like small staff and facilities that need not be insurmountable. Targeted professional development can bridge this knowledge gap. Training can directly connect to the recently released letter from the U.S. Department of Education which explicitly names strategic staffing models as allowable uses of Title II funds (2026).

Finally, the state can play a critical role in supporting innovation by **spotlighting schools that are already making these models work**. Our findings show that for many leaders, "seeing is believing;" their ability to conceptualize alternative models is heavily tied to their experience working in or seeing these models. By featuring successful examples and providing clear roadmaps for replication, the state can transform these innovative approaches from isolated success stories into a viable, state-wide option for a more sustainable teaching profession.

As the complexity of California's classrooms continues to grow amidst tightening school budgets and declining student enrollment, a one-size-fits-all approach to staffing is no longer sufficient for every school community. Now more than ever, schools will need to consider how to best reallocate their existing resources, including their human capital. To manage these shifts effectively, local leaders need a broader, evidence-based toolkit. By removing the regulatory and informational barriers to strategic staffing, the state can move from a system of constraints to one of empowerment, providing principals with the flexibility they need to deploy their staff in ways that best meet their students' unique needs.

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Appendix

Appendix Figure 1: Key Strategic Staffing Frameworks[6]

Panel A: Education First's Strategic School Staffing Framework

[6] Sources: Education First (2023, https://www.education-first.com/strategic-school-staffing-solutions/), Center for Inspired Teaching and Exceptional Learning (2026, https://citel.teachplus.org/)

Panel B: The Center for Inspired Teaching & Exceptional Learning (CITEL)'s Framework