



PERSPECTIVES

OF IRREPLACEABLE TEACHERS

What America's Best Teachers Think About Teaching

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PERSPECTIVES

OF IRREPLACEABLE TEACHERS

What America's Best Teachers Think About Teaching

The students are above and beyond the best thing about teaching. They make every day different, provide countless learning opportunities, and challenge me on a regular basis.

I always feel that what I am doing is the most important career on earth.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers should have a greater voice in education policy. On this point, nearly everyone can agree. But what do we really mean by “teacher voice”?

Today, as schools across the country wrestle with new approaches to teacher training, evaluation, development and compensation, it is critical to consider and understand the views of teachers themselves. Beyond teachers unions and newer organizations that seek to amplify the opinions of practicing teachers, education leaders and policymakers often turn to scientific polls and surveys such as the MetLife Foundation’s annual *Survey of the American Teacher*. In sampling the opinions of *all* teachers, these surveys provide useful information—some of which we have incorporated into our own research and work—but they also cast a very wide net.

While it is important to understand the views of all teachers, we believe the perspectives of our very best teachers are especially important. Our 2012 study *The Irreplaceables* showed that improving our nation’s urban schools requires creating policies and working conditions that will attract more outstanding teachers and encourage them to stay in the classroom. We should be building the profession around its finest practitioners. Today, too little is known about the opinions and experiences of top-performing teachers, because researchers rarely focus specifically on them.

We launched the Perspectives of Irreplaceable Teachers project to help address this issue. We identified and collected detailed survey responses from 117 of America’s best teachers, representing 36 states and all 10 of the nation’s largest school districts. Collectively, they have won almost every major teaching award in the country, from National Board certification, to district and state “Teacher of the Year” honors, to the Milken Educator Awards, to national awards from a wide range of organizations including TNTP, Teach For America, the National Education Association and KIPP.

Our survey was not scientific. In fact, it was intentionally unscientific: By design, the respondents are a non-representative sample of the profession. Our goal was simply to listen carefully to a group of celebrated teachers and their insights about their work, their profession and the major policy issues facing their schools. Collectively, even at a small sample size, they raise important questions and present ideas that merit deeper exploration by policymakers.

We asked our respondents a wide range of questions—everything from their views about standardized testing to how they spend their time during a typical workday—and we will be exploring their answers throughout the next year on the TNTP Blog (www.tntp.org/blog).

Our participants had a wide range of opinions on most of the issues we asked about, sometimes offering inconclusive or even contradictory answers. Given the diversity they represent in terms of geography, experience, subject area and school type, that’s no surprise. But it’s an important reminder that excellent teachers think for themselves, and that any attempts to paint their views with a broad brush are likely inaccurate. In our analysis of their responses, we have tried to represent the complexity of their views as faithfully as we can and to share their own words as often as possible.

This paper focuses on what our respondents told us about three broad topics that have clear policy ramifications: What does effective (and ineffective) teaching look like? How do the best teachers become so effective? And what do great teachers think about their profession? Several themes emerged.

When it comes to measuring success in the classroom, they value a wide array of factors.

While there continues to be great debate about how good teaching should be defined and measured, our respondents look to many different sources of data to judge success in the classroom, from students' academic performance and future success to the perceptions and feedback of their school leaders, respected colleagues and students. They put stock in signals large and small. As school districts and states strive to develop and implement more accurate and useful teacher evaluation systems, this suggests support for the use of multiple measures to assess performance.

It also reminds us that perfection is the wrong standard in teacher evaluation, because it's impossible for any practical evaluation system to perfectly measure something as complex as teaching.

They attribute little of their success to formal preparation or professional development programs.

When asked to indicate how much each of 12 possible activities had improved the quality of their teaching, our respondents' ratings put their teacher preparation programs and formal professional development at the very bottom of the list. They also largely agreed on the kinds of preparation and development that are useful—in particular, activities that give them a chance to practice new skills and learn from their colleagues.

They have a troubling love/hate relationship with their profession.

Our respondents cherish the opportunity to make a difference in their students' lives, but they feel beaten down by many other aspects of the profession—low pay, excessive bureaucracy, poor working conditions and ineffective leaders and colleagues. Essentially, they told us that teaching is great, but being a teacher can be a drag. The consequences are profound: 60 percent indicated that they plan to stop teaching within five years. By comparison, only 43 percent of teachers surveyed by MetLife in 2011 said that they were very or fairly likely to leave the teaching profession within the same timeframe. Teaching will continue to struggle to gain status as a profession and to keep top talent as long as it makes even its most outstanding members endure such basic frustrations.

We hope the views of the great teachers we surveyed will help start a productive conversation among educators, education leaders and policymakers, and will encourage everyone to seek out the views of our best teachers more often. We believe we can retain more of our top performers and increase the number of capable young professionals who seek to make a career in teaching if we listen carefully, especially to the teachers our schools need most.

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ABOUT THE SURVEY

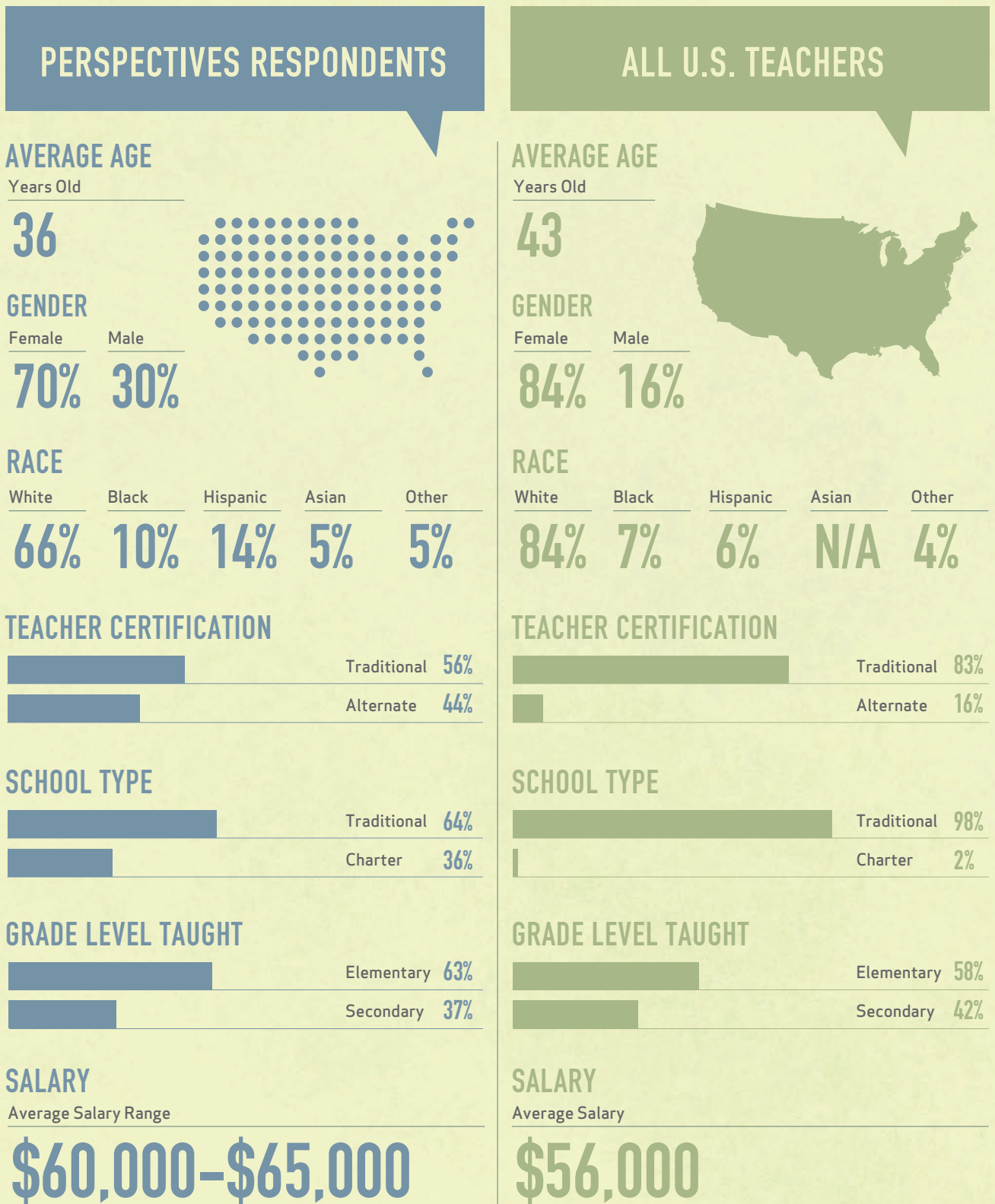
We had one goal for our survey sample: Find teachers across the country who work in high-poverty schools and are unquestionably great at their jobs.

We did not use a rigid set of criteria to select teachers for the survey. Instead, we sought teachers who had recently received major awards or other recognition for their achievements, and solicited nominations from leading charter school networks and other organizations that lacked formal award programs but work with high-performing teachers routinely. Our intention was to use multiple measures of classroom success to build a diverse sample that spanned low-income schools in all major regions of the United States, and that reflected a range of perspectives about great teaching.

We ultimately invited 206 outstanding teachers to take our survey, and 117 (57 percent) responded. Those who responded represent 36 states and the District of Columbia, as well as the 10 biggest school districts in the country. They teach in traditional schools and charter schools (64 percent in traditional schools, 36 percent in charters), at least 80 percent of which serve predominately high-poverty students. They teach all grade levels from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, and in a wide variety of subject areas, including math, English, history, science, music and art. Some teach special education, English as a Second Language and gifted classes. *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* provide additional details about the teachers in our sample.

We administered our online survey in March 2013. It consisted of 56 multiple-choice and open-ended response questions on a wide range of topics, including basic background information about the teachers and their schools, their routine during a typical school day, their experiences with training programs and professional development, their thoughts about the teaching profession generally, and their opinions about several specific policy issues. We guaranteed anonymity for all our participants.

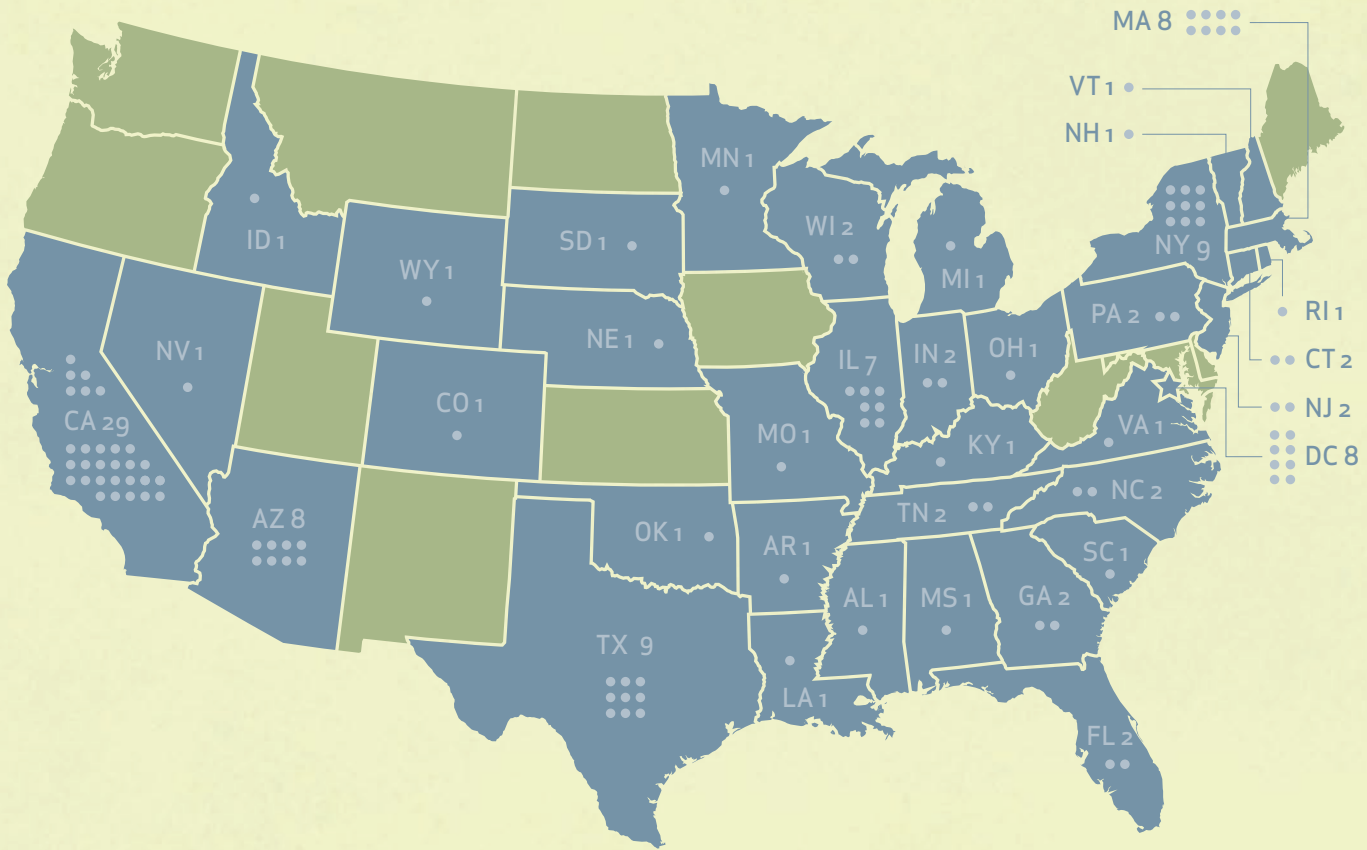
FIGURE 1 | PERSPECTIVES SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND U.S. TEACHERS



For Teacher Certification, “Alternate” for Perspectives respondents includes participation in any alternative training program during a teacher’s career. For Grade Level Taught, Elementary includes grades Pre-K-8 and Secondary includes grades 9-12. Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding. **Source:** 2013 Perspectives survey and demographics data; School Type data for U.S. teachers from the National Center for Education Statistics, Teacher Attrition and Mobility Survey, 2010; Grade Level Taught data for U.S. teachers from the National Education Association, Estimates of School Statistics Database, 2009; Salary data for U.S. teachers from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; all other data from *Profile of Teachers in the U.S. 2011*, National Center for Education Information.

FIGURE 2 | PERSPECTIVES SURVEY RESPONDENTS

117 TEACHERS FROM 36 STATES & WASHINGTON, D.C.



IDENTIFIED BASED ON DISTINGUISHED AWARDS, INCLUDING

11 District
Teachers of
the Year

10 State
Teachers of
the Year

Golden Apple Awards
for Excellence in
Teaching in Illinois

KIPP Harriett Ball
Excellence in
Teaching Award

Milken
Educator
Awards

NEA Foundation
Awards for
Teaching
Excellence

Presidential Awards
for Excellence in
Mathematics and
Science Teaching

Teach For America
Alumni Award for
Excellence in Teaching

TNTP Fishman Prize
for Superlative
Classroom Practice

AND RECOGNIZED BY LEADING ORGANIZATIONS, INCLUDING

Achievement First • America Achieves • Aspire Public Schools • Green Dot Public Schools • IDEA Public Schools
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards • National Network of State Teachers of the Year
Teach Plus • Uncommon Schools • U.S. Department of Education • YES Prep Public Schools



WHAT WE HEARD

WHAT DOES GREAT TEACHING LOOK LIKE?

Our respondents judge their success—and the success of their colleagues—in a variety of ways.

The teachers we surveyed have been recognized as some of the best in the country by other people, but we wanted to find out what effective (and ineffective) teaching looks like to them. How do they define success in their own classrooms? And what do they believe are the hallmarks of good teaching?

Measuring Their Own Success

We gave our respondents a list of 11 possible indicators of success in the classroom, and asked them to indicate the extent to which each one makes them feel successful (*Figure 3*).

It's clear that great teachers see successful teaching as multidimensional. Every accomplishment we listed made the vast majority of our teachers feel successful (drawing a rating of “agree” or “strongly agree” from more than 90 percent of teachers, in most cases, and never less than 80 percent). Teachers seem to value student academic outcomes, subjective feedback and evidence of student engagement—three very different ways to measure success—just about equally, but we found interesting wrinkles in their opinions about each of these broad measures.

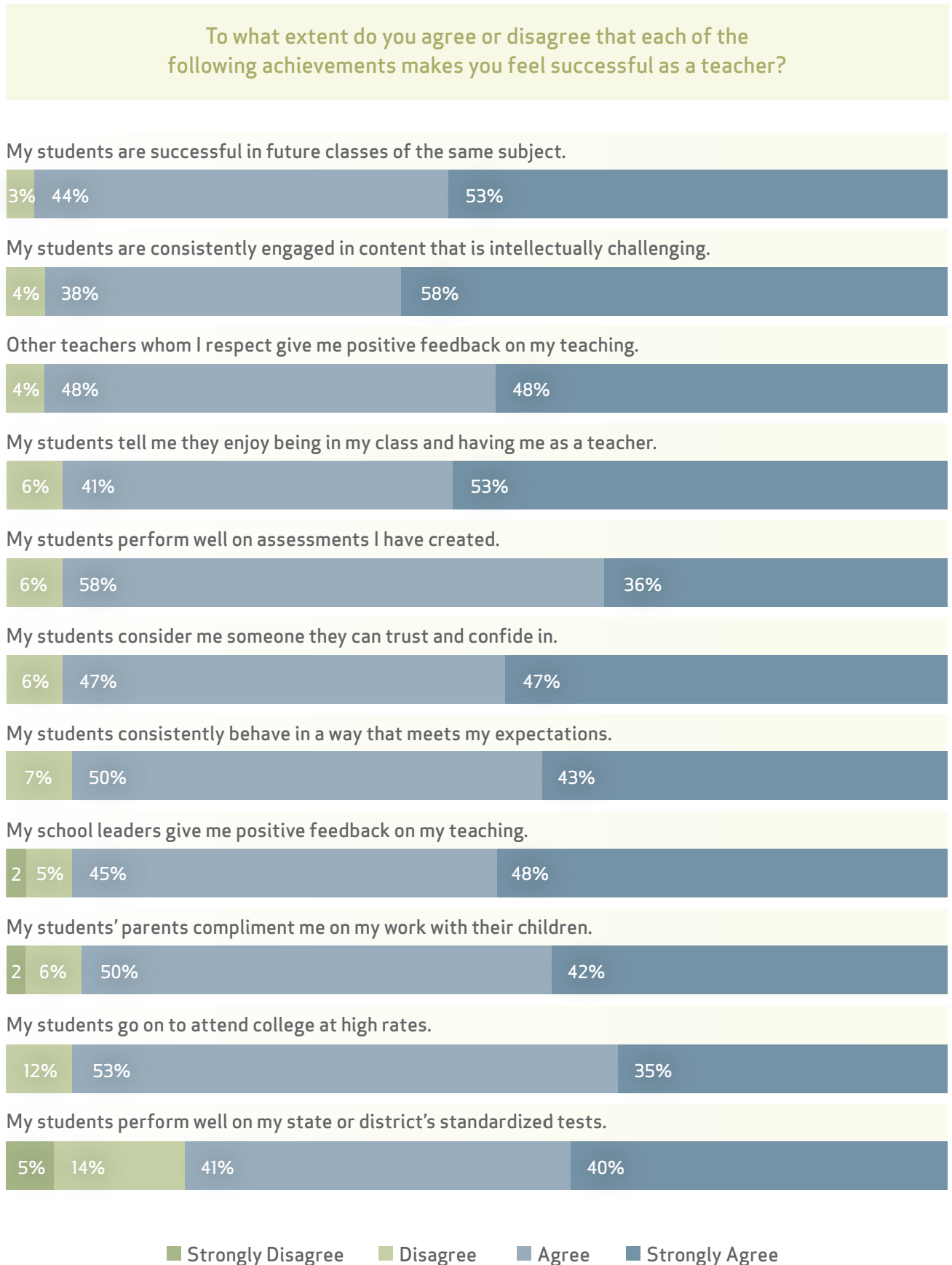
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Student academic outcomes: Virtually all (97 percent) of our respondents measure their success based on whether their students go on to succeed in future classes of the same subject, making this the indicator that drew the most agreement. Ninety-four percent value their students' performance on teacher-created assessments, and four out of five (81 percent) judge themselves successful based on the results of standardized tests. However, “my students perform well on my state or district's standardized tests” drew the highest levels of disagreement as an indicator of successful teaching (21 percent disagree or strongly disagree), which speaks to teachers' mixed feelings on the issue of testing (see sidebar, *Perspectives on Standardized Tests*, p. 9).

Subjective feedback: Ninety-six percent of our respondents said they valued positive feedback from colleagues they respect, tied for the second most popular option, with nearly 60 percent strongly agreeing—the strongest positive response of any option. Our respondents also valued positive feedback from their school leaders (93 percent strongly agreed or agreed) and their students' parents (92 percent).

Student engagement: Ninety-six percent of our respondents said they feel successful when they see students engaged in challenging content, tied for the second most popular option. Ninety-four percent said they feel successful if they earn the trust of their students. The same percentage said it's important that students tell them they enjoy being in their class—although only 36 percent strongly agreed with this option, suggesting that many of our respondents value students' academic results or feedback from colleagues slightly more than students' personal enjoyment of their class.

FIGURE 3 | MEASURING SUCCESS



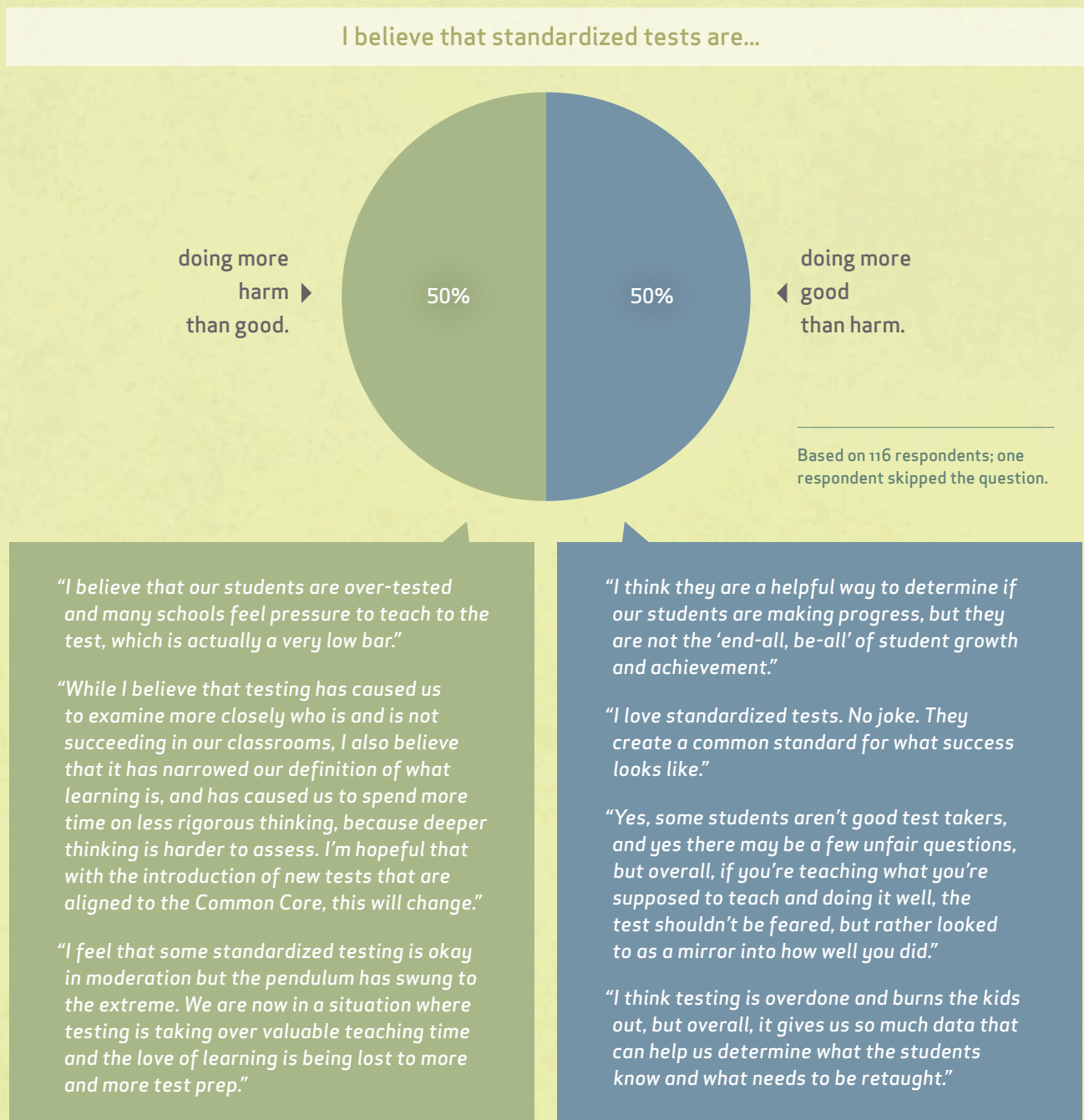
PERSPECTIVES ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

Standardized tests have never been popular, but in recent years they have drawn criticism from all sides. We wanted to know how America's best teachers thought about testing, so we asked them—and found that they hold more complex views than you might expect.

Most teachers—81 percent—agree that it makes them feel successful when their students perform well on standardized tests, suggesting that they view the tests as a reasonable measure of academic achievement. However, only 40 percent “strongly agreed,” and when we asked our respondents whether, on balance, standardized tests do more harm than good, they were evenly split.

In their comments, many teachers referenced concerns about the quality of the tests and their impact on school and classroom culture, even while acknowledging their utility as objective, comparable measures of student learning. It's clear that many great teachers are skeptical about standardized tests—certainly compared to assessments they create themselves—but many others see them as valuable tools.

FIGURE 4 | VIEWS ON STANDARDIZED TESTS



Measuring Other Teachers' Success

We also asked our respondents how they identify other successful teachers. We gave them several possible options and asked them to rank them in order of significance. Once again, our respondents favored a mix of measures. Two options emerged as especially useful in judging other teachers: seeing them teach (ranked by 74 percent of respondents as their first or second choice), and knowing their students' outcomes (ranked by 48 percent as their first or second choice).

Students' opinions about other teachers were also important to our respondents (19 percent ranked it as their second choice, and 8 percent ranked it as their top choice). The opinions of colleagues and school leaders were much less important (they were the two lowest-ranked choices)—an interesting contrast to the value our respondents placed on feedback from colleagues when measuring their own performance.

"Not sweating the small stuff and allowing instructional time to go by wasted."

"I think unsuccessful teachers assume that since they taught the material their responsibility has been fulfilled, regardless of whether or not the child has learned it. Oftentimes that leads to just thinking the child is stupid or lazy because the teacher taught it and it is therefore the child that has the problem."

"They retreat into themselves or their classroom rather than ask for help. They worry that asking for help somehow makes them a poor teacher, yet being able to ask for help is such a strong teaching quality."

"Usually, poor classroom management is at the heart of the worst classrooms. Teachers with poor behavior-management skills end up spending too much time on behavior and not enough on teaching. The classroom becomes unfocused and disruptive for students who might otherwise learn."

"Not seeking advice. Not taking advice. Being too friendly with students. Blurring the line and then losing respect."

Ineffective Teaching

We asked our respondents about their views on ineffective teaching, too. As a group, they believe ineffective teaching is a real problem. Ninety percent of our respondents believe that ineffective teaching is negatively affecting the reputation of the teaching profession, 61 percent said it is a problem in their school district or charter network, and 41 percent said it is a problem in their school specifically (*Figure 5*).

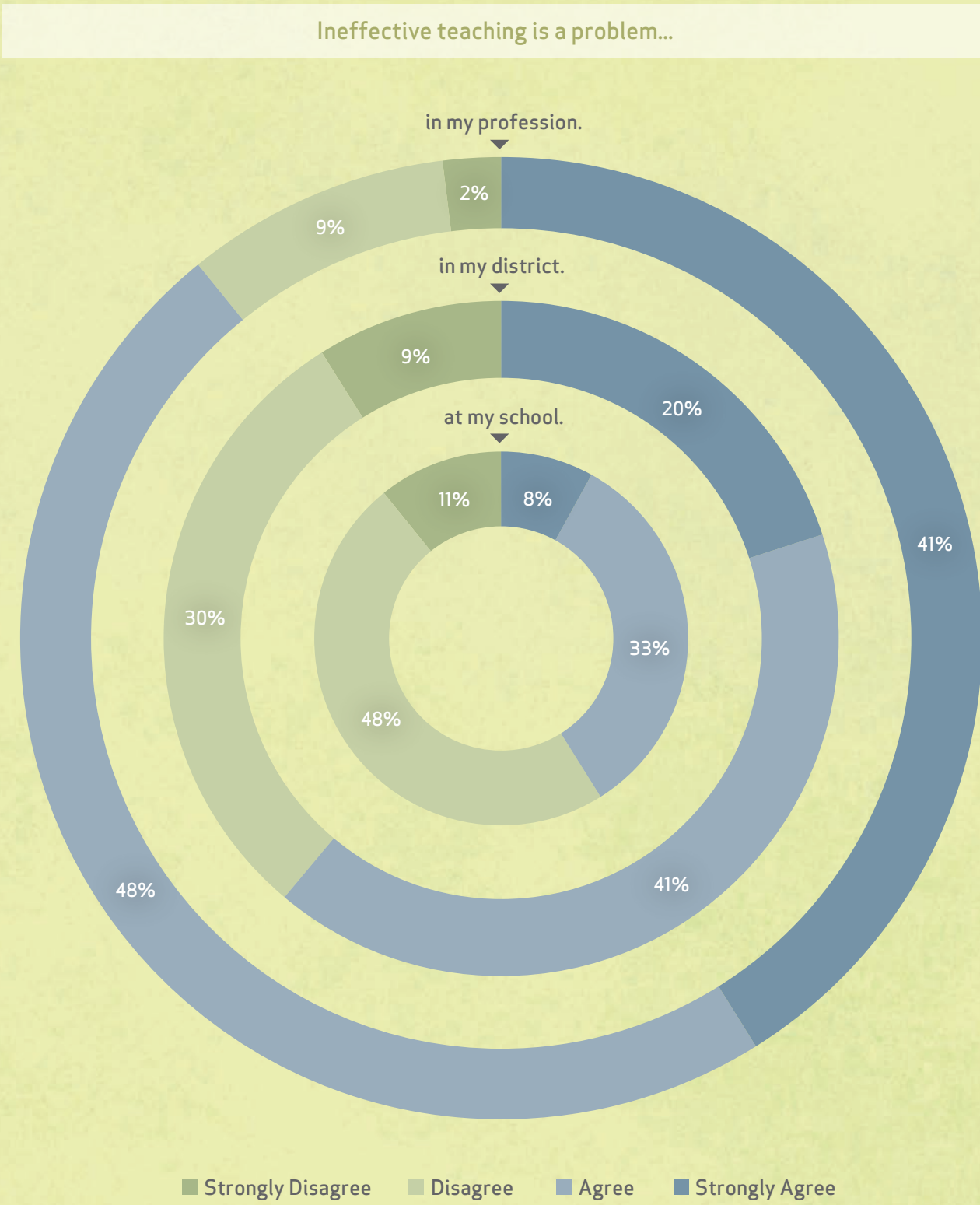
Many of our respondents clearly struggle with how to define ineffective teaching, especially when a teacher works with students who already lag far behind their peers academically or struggle with poverty and other problems at home. While we've seen that nearly all of our respondents use student outcomes to judge their and other teachers' effectiveness, 62 percent also told us they know teachers they believe are effective even though their students don't perform well. When we asked why these teachers' students might not perform well, our respondents usually pointed to out-of-school challenges or other factors beyond the teacher's control.

In fact, 40 percent of respondents ranked "having students who are behind academically or behaviorally challenging" and "having students whose out-of-school lives distract from their focus in school" among the top three barriers that have made it challenging for *them* to teach effectively. Working with ineffective colleagues ranked fourth—above concerns like poor school leadership, inadequate parent engagement and large class sizes.

But even though they acknowledge the significance of these challenges, our respondents don't seem to tolerate teachers who use them as an excuse to hold low expectations for their students. When we asked about the most common mistake unsuccessful teachers make, in addition to classroom management (the top problem they identified), low expectations, not seeking help and blaming students for refusing to take responsibility for their learning came up again and again.

IN THEIR WORDS: What's the most common mistake you see struggling or unsuccessful teachers make?

FIGURE 5 | IDENTIFYING INEFFECTIVE TEACHING



When asked to identify the barriers that have made it most challenging to teach effectively, respondents ranked having to work with ineffective colleagues fourth—above concerns about school leadership, parent engagement and class size.

HOW DO GREAT TEACHERS BECOME SO EFFECTIVE?

Our respondents express satisfaction with their training programs—yet also indicate that they were not especially rigorous or useful.

Surveying so many of the nation’s best teachers gave us an opportunity to find out how they became so successful. We were especially interested in finding out what kinds of training and professional development activities have made the biggest impact on their teaching.

Preparation and Training

A recent study from the National Council on Teacher Quality¹ showed that most teacher training programs are woefully ineffective at preparing teachers to be successful. How did the outstanding teachers we surveyed feel about their own preparation programs?

On the surface, they were generally happy with them: About 79 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the training program that brought them to the classroom. Among teachers who participated in traditional undergraduate or graduate-level training programs, 83 percent were satisfied, compared to 75 percent of teachers who participated in alternative-route training programs. This rose to almost 90 percent among teachers who completed a graduate program in addition to undergraduate or alternate-route training.

However, our respondents’ answers also suggested a troubling lack of rigor in their training programs. For example, 59 percent said that nearly all their classmates successfully completed training—even those who didn’t work very hard. About half said that their program granted certification even to teachers who had not demonstrated the ability to be successful in the classroom. Only 46 percent indicated that their program successfully identified and recognized the highest-performing candidates.

Many participants also told us that their pre-service training was not very useful over the long run. Nearly half (43 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their training had helped them improve the quality of their teaching, and few cited their pre-service training as an experience that influenced their teaching significantly. In fact, “the teacher preparation I received prior to obtaining my first full-time teaching job” was the factor that was least likely to be cited by our respondents as one that improved the quality of their teaching (*Figure 6*).

Professional Development

Our respondents have not found formal professional development at their school especially helpful, either: 40 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that it had helped them improve. Only teacher preparation programs drew higher rates of disagreement.

These teachers largely agreed on the things that have been more helpful, however: practice, in the form of trying different lessons and teaching methods over time (100 percent agreed or strongly agreed); observations of other teachers at work (93 percent); advice or feedback from their colleagues (92 percent); and advice or feedback from their students (87 percent).

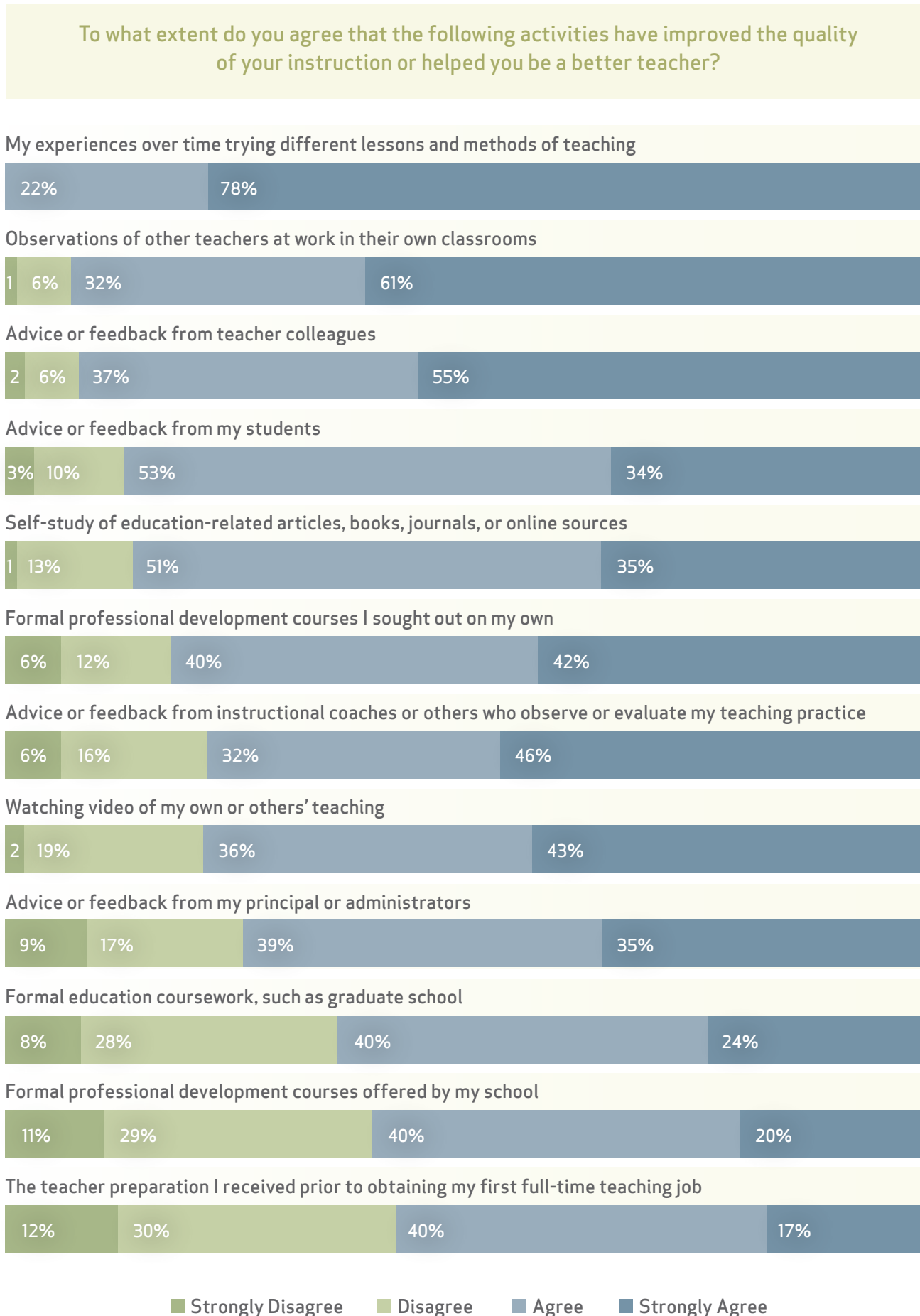
We saw similar trends when we asked respondents about how their formal performance evaluations have helped them improve. Eighty-three percent told us that the person who evaluates them has helped them improve their teaching by providing honest feedback about their strengths and weaknesses (the most popular answer). Nearly 80 percent said their evaluator helped them improve by providing opportunities to observe and be observed by other teachers.

Even so, a significant subset of respondents indicated that they are not receiving useful feedback on a regular basis. About one in four teachers (27 percent) at least somewhat disagreed that they “get regular, constructive feedback on their teaching.”

Respondents’ answers suggested a troubling lack of rigor in their training programs.

¹ National Council on Teacher Quality. *Teacher Prep Review*. 2013.

FIGURE 6 | FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY

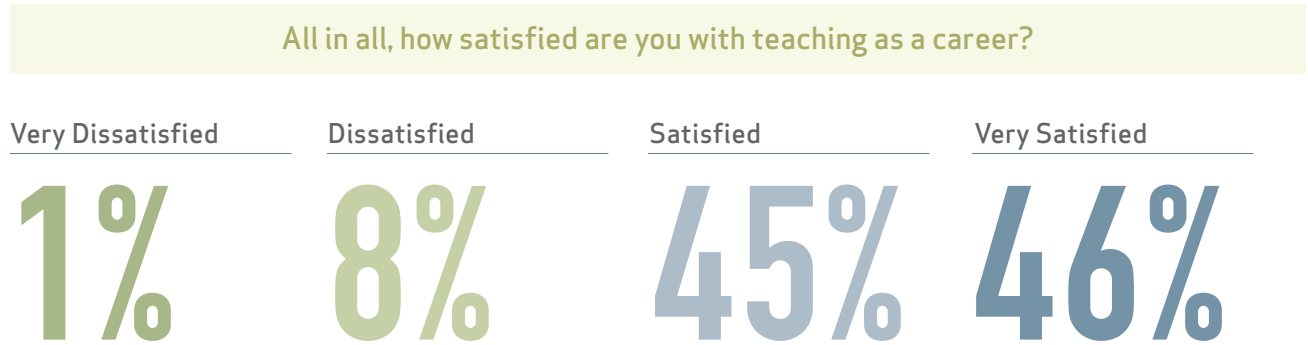


WHAT DO GREAT TEACHERS THINK ABOUT THEIR PROFESSION?

Our respondents find their work in the classroom exhilarating, but that feeling often isn't enough to make up for their frustration with other aspects of the profession.

Many surveys ask teachers whether they are satisfied with their jobs. We asked, too: Nearly all our respondents—91 percent—said they are satisfied with teaching as a career (compared to 82 percent of teachers who said the same in the 2012 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*). They also told us they feel and appreciate recognition from many of the people who matter most to them. More than 95 percent told us that their colleagues, students and parents of their students recognize them as highly effective teachers.

FIGURE 7 | CAREER SATISFACTION



Beneath their general satisfaction with their work, however, we found deep frustration with basic elements of their jobs. The closer we looked, the more it became clear that our respondents have a distinct love/hate relationship with their profession. They love their daily work with students, but hate the low pay, bureaucratic annoyances, poor working conditions and poorly performing leaders and colleagues that they often have to tolerate in order to do that work. When asked to describe their feelings during a typical day teaching, respondents gravitated toward adjectives like “engaged” and “motivated,” but words like “tired” and “frustrated” were popular, too (*Figure 8*).

The closer we looked, the more it became clear that our respondents have a distinct love/hate relationship with their profession.

FIGURE 8 | HOW TEACHERS DESCRIBE TEACHING

Please list three adjectives that describe how you feel when you are teaching on a typical day:



WHAT THEY LOVE

When we asked our respondents to explain what they love about teaching, the answer was loud and clear: They cherish the fulfillment that comes from making a difference in their students' lives.

We presented 14 different factors that might encourage teachers to remain in the classroom and asked our respondents to rank the top three that have mattered most to them in their careers. The two most popular choices were both focused on students: Fifty-five percent of respondents named “being able to help students develop intellectually and academically,” and 50 percent named “working with students who face economic or social disadvantages” among their top three (*Figure 9*). “Being able to help students develop socially and emotionally” was the fifth most popular choice, ranked by 29 percent of respondents.

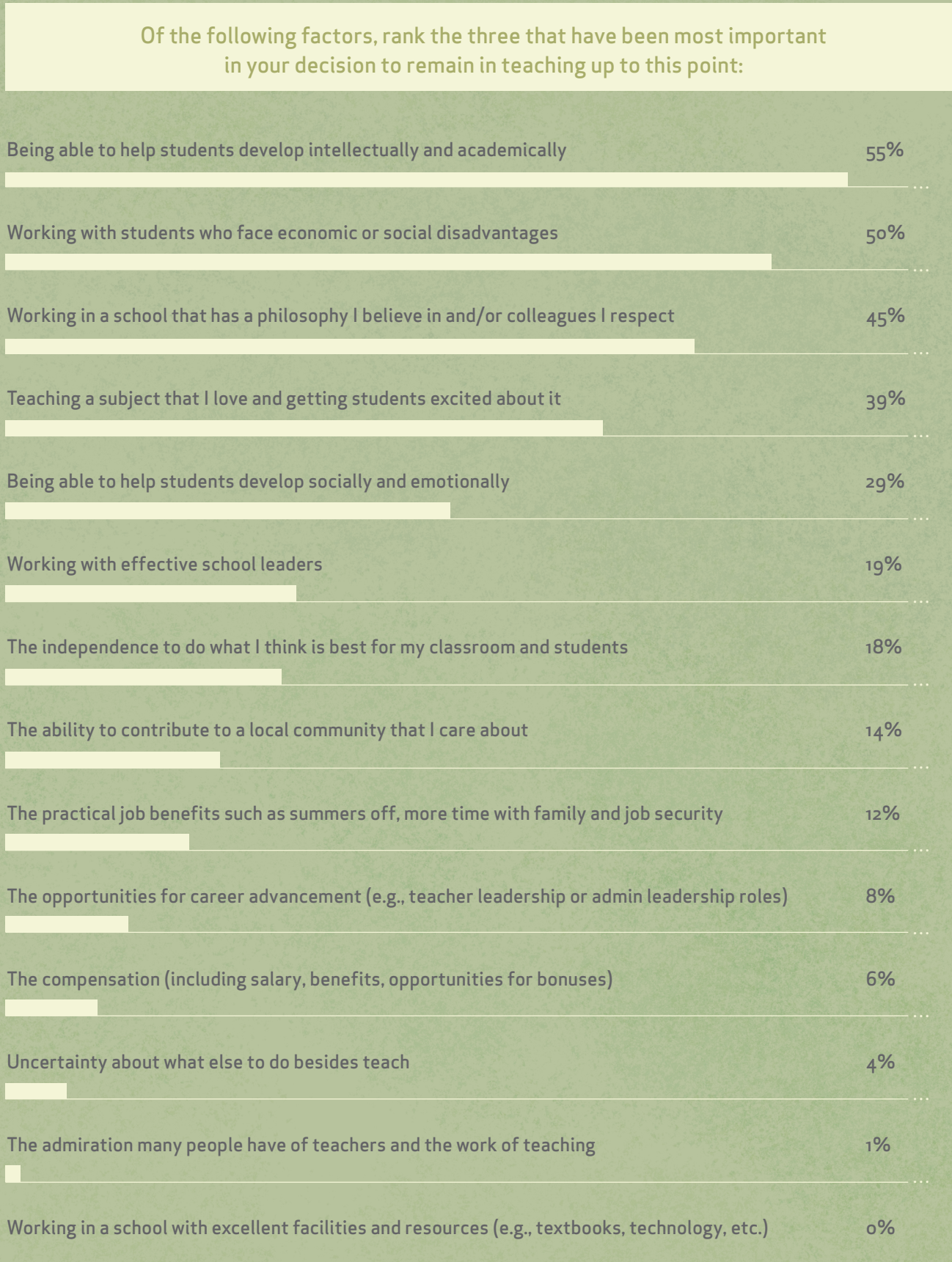
Our respondents also love “working in a school that has a philosophy I believe in and/or colleagues I respect” (ranked by 45 percent, the third most popular choice) and “teaching a subject that I love” (ranked by 39 percent).

No other factors were ranked by more than 19 percent of our respondents. Notably, only 12 percent ranked “the practical benefits such as summers off, more time with family and job security”—among the biggest perks of the profession, according to conventional wisdom—as a factor that has kept them in the classroom, and none ranked it as their most important factor. Almost none ranked “the admiration many people have of teachers and the work of teaching,” perhaps indicative of the low esteem that these teachers believe the public holds for their profession.

In short, these teachers love the work of teaching—but that seems to be the only part of their jobs they love.

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FIGURE 9 | FACTORS KEEPING TEACHERS IN TEACHING



Figures are the percentage of respondents who ranked that factor as their first, second or third choice.

WHAT THEY HATE

Poor Pay and Working Conditions

The list of factors that have kept our respondents in the classroom has some other glaring absences: compensation, career advancement opportunities and working conditions, among others. Only 6 percent ranked “compensation” as one of the top three factors keeping them in teaching. Only 8 percent ranked “opportunities for career advancement.” No teachers ranked “working in a school with excellent facilities.”

Unfortunately, these issues were more likely to show up when we asked our respondents what they dislike about their jobs (*Figure 10*). For example, when we asked respondents to tell us in their own words what they like least about teaching, 10 percent mentioned low pay, making it the third most popular response. (In a separate question, 29 percent said that a higher salary would make them feel more appreciated.) Fifteen percent said that dealing with bureaucracy and paperwork was their least favorite part of the job (the second most popular response), and 16 percent cited “insufficient classroom resources” as one of the top three factors that have made it challenging for them to teach effectively.

Workload and Time Constraints

Many respondents cited burnout as a major concern, and told us that teaching at an elite level can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Twenty-two percent talked about an excessive workload, lack of time or exhaustion in their description of what they like least about teaching (the most popular response), and about 60 percent said they can’t see themselves maintaining the amount of energy and time they devote to their job over the long run. Forty percent said they work more than 60 hours a week, and when we asked for an adjective to describe how they feel when they are teaching, one of the most popular answers was “tired.”

Our respondents were just as concerned about how they are required to use their time. Forty percent cited “insufficient time for planning or collaboration with other teachers” as one of their top three barriers to being effective—the most popular answer. Individual respondents also complained about a general lack of flexibility in their schedules. Broader challenges that often are beyond the control of their schools, such as having students who are behind academically or whose out-of-school lives distract

from their focus in school, were equally likely to be cited among the top three barriers and no doubt contribute to the fatigue and stress that these teachers experience.

Poor School Leadership

One in four teachers ranked “poor school leadership” in the top three barriers to teaching effectively overall, and it earned more No. 1 ratings than any other barrier except “having students who are behind academically or behaviorally challenging.” In addition, nearly one in five teachers (19 percent) disagreed that “the principal/school leadership of my school is effective” in response to a separate question. School leader quality may not be a problem for every teacher—in fact, overall, it appears to be slightly less of a problem than the quality of our respondents’ teacher colleagues—but when it is an issue it appears to be an acute one that outweighs other challenges.

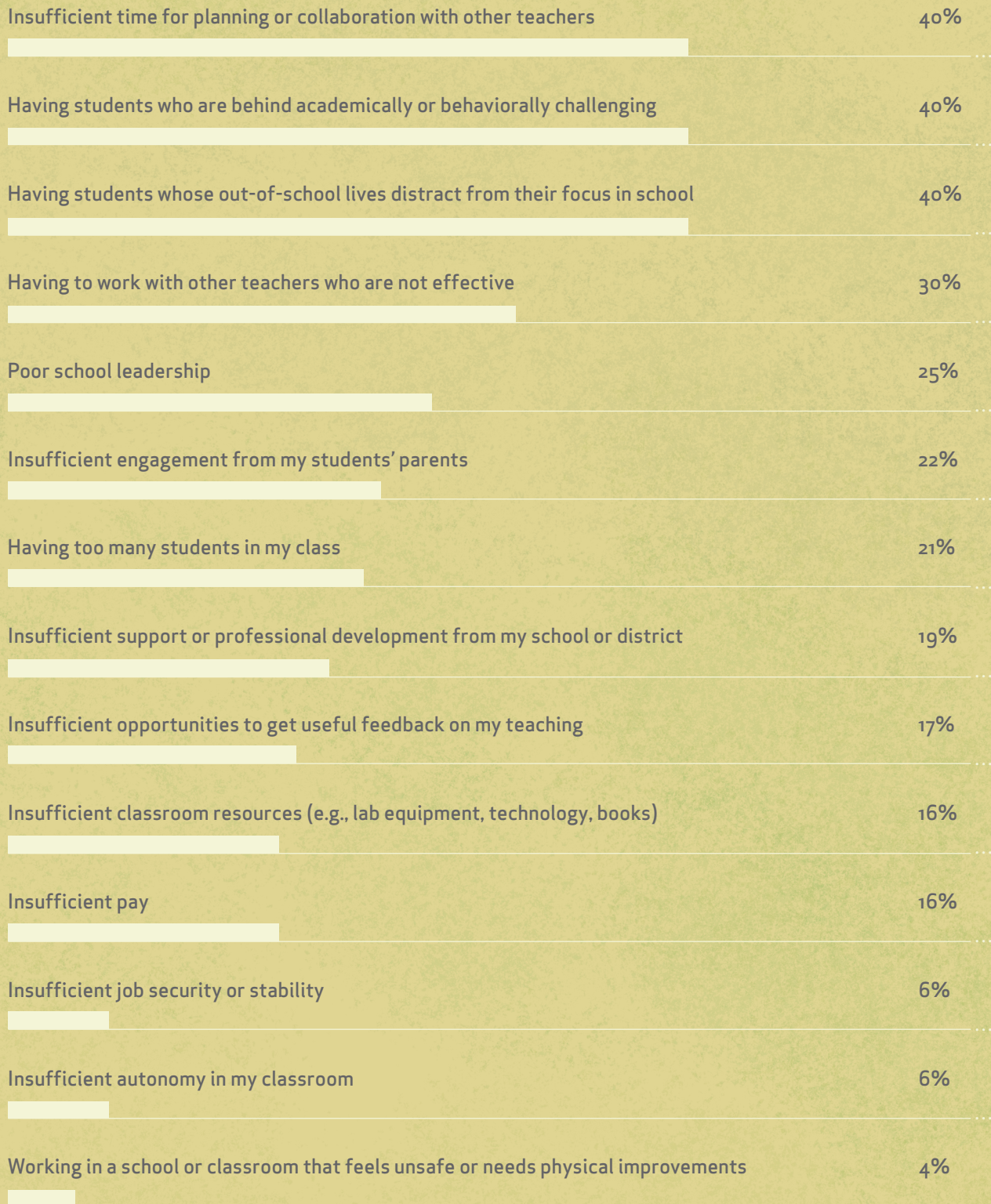
Isolation

Many of our respondents also seem to feel isolated in their classrooms, lacking enough support from school leaders, colleagues or parents. The barrier most commonly ranked among the top three by our respondents was “insufficient time for planning or collaboration with other teachers,” which speaks not only to a lack of time but to the hunger these teachers have to engage with their colleagues. In addition, 22 percent ranked low parent engagement, 19 percent ranked insufficient professional development and 17 percent ranked a lack of opportunities to get useful feedback on their teaching.

Adding to this sense of isolation is the sense that people outside their school don’t understand their views on important issues. For example, only 13 percent of our respondents believe elected officials represent their views fairly in making important decisions. Only about one-third believe local and national union leaders fairly represent their views, and only about half believe parents understand them (compared to more than 80 percent who say the same about their colleagues and their school leaders).

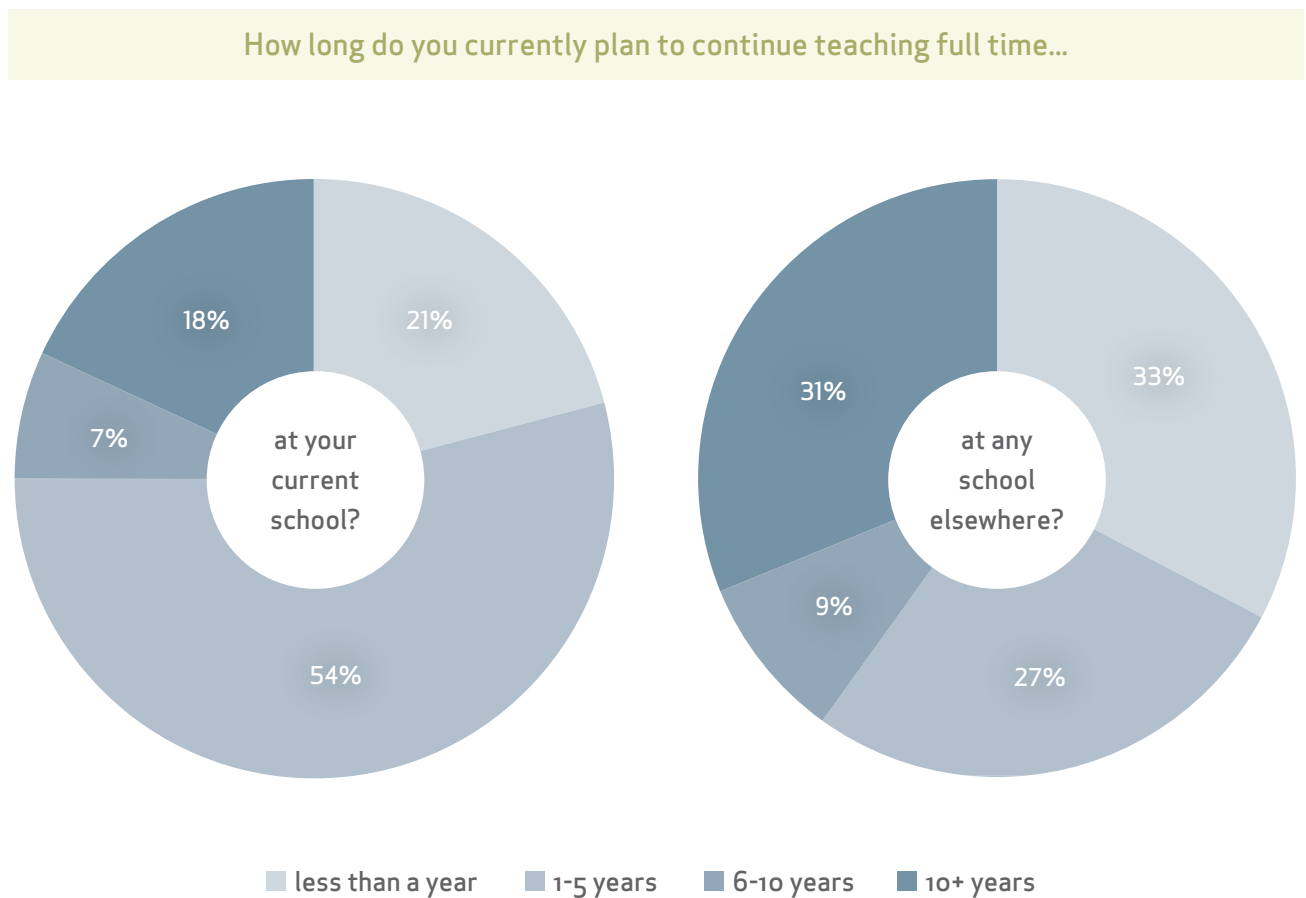
FIGURE 10 | BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Of the following potential barriers, rank the top three that have made it most challenging for you to teach effectively over the course of your career.



Figures are the percentage of respondents who ranked that factor as their first, second or third choice.

FIGURE 11 | PLANS TO KEEP TEACHING



60 percent of our respondents said they plan to stop teaching within five years.

This long list of serious problems with the teaching profession might make it less surprising that fully 75 percent of our respondents—representing some of the most distinguished teachers in America—told us they plan to stop teaching at their school within the next five years, and 60 percent said they plan to stop teaching in any school elsewhere within five years (*Figure 11*). By comparison, only 43 percent of teachers who responded to the MetLife survey said that they were very or fairly likely to leave the teaching profession within the next five years.²

These ought to be alarming statistics for the high-poverty schools where these irreplaceable teachers work, which typically struggle to find and keep high performers and whose success often hinges on such teachers' contributions, as well as for the profession as a whole. When our very best teachers are far more likely to say they plan to leave than teachers overall, we have an urgent problem.

² From the 2011 edition of *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, the most recent year in which that question was asked.

Getting children excited about their ability to learn and explore science, especially when they do it collaboratively with little teacher support.

I love being with kids every day and hearing them say, "I get it now, miss." I enjoy figuring out and applying strategies that will help my kids think and learn, using life-changing texts. I like making daily decisions for myself.

LEAST ▾ MOST ▸

Almost every moment of the week, I feel that I am either sacrificing my students' learning or my own health and personal satisfaction. I am constantly deciding to cut corners for students in order to prioritize my own life, or to prioritize my students and put my personal life second.

Policymakers generally do not listen; teachers are not involved in the decisions that affect their everyday lives or their futures. I don't get paid these days for providing mentoring or other supports to my colleagues. We are not striving together to provide a high-quality program to our students. My leaders treat me like a disposable object.

IN THEIR WORDS:
What do you like most and least about teaching?

Time with the students. They are amazing, and the more cast out they have been, the more amazing they are.

MOST ▾ LEAST ▸

With teaching, every day is different. You are constantly in motion, engaged and working toward something that is more important than yourself. Your work is critical, life-changing, and ultimately the most empowering gift you can give to your students. It is an expression of not only the love you have for your students but the bone-deep belief that they will achieve.

I am particularly frustrated with how much of my time is demanded for things that do not help my students in any way. Bureaucracy, a lack of policy dedicated to students, and top-down governance are destroying the profession.

That there are only 24 hours in the day and that so few are dedicated to sleeping during the school year! If done right, teaching requires as much as you can give and this is a challenge that must be monitored to maintain a personal life.

There is variety in every class, every day and every year. I never stare at the clock and wish the time would move.

The inflexibility of the schedule and the very early mornings. The inability to be able to do small things like go to the doctor's or even take a phone call during a regular day is difficult. Also, knowing around what I will make for my entire career no matter how much I push myself, better myself, or put in extra hours.



CONCLUSIONS

What can education leaders and policymakers take away from the perspectives of 117 of the nation's best teachers? Our respondents hold an array of opinions on nearly every subject. However, we see three immediately relevant lessons in our survey results.

Defining good teaching isn't easy, but it is essential.

Good teaching is hard to define, even for the profession's most successful and reflective members. Our respondents believe that there are many dimensions to effective teaching and that teachers should take responsibility for all of them. Their responses suggest that they do not believe it's appropriate to assess a teacher's abilities based on either students' academic outcomes or classroom observations alone, for example; they believe both are equally important, along with many other measures.

As states and school districts strive to design and implement smarter teacher evaluation systems, policymakers should recognize that it would be impossible to include every single measure that our respondents value in a formal evaluation system without making it too unwieldy for school leaders to apply fairly and consistently and too complex to produce useful feedback for teachers. That means policymakers should not expect great teachers (or any individual group of teachers) to be entirely happy with new evaluation systems right away.

The good news is that our respondents seem to agree that states and districts are on the right track in designing evaluation systems that incorporate multiple measures, including students' academic data, results of classroom observations and results of student surveys (which can help gauge student engagement and non-cognitive skills). This approach incorporates the broad measures of teaching that great teachers seem to value, and has the potential to create the consistent standards, honest feedback and real recognition that our respondents want to see in the teaching profession.

Teacher training and development should focus on real-world practice and feedback.

The fact that so few of our respondents said their pre-service training had a positive influence on their teaching—even among those who were broadly satisfied with their training—confirms the need to improve training programs, and to hold those programs accountable for producing effective teachers.

At the moment, universities, governments and other organizations are spending billions of dollars each year on preparation programs that our sample of excellent teachers suggests are largely unhelpful or irrelevant to their actual work in classrooms. Our respondents also painted a clear picture of the kind of training teachers would value more: programs that give them an opportunity to practice important hands-on skills in a structured way, receive regular feedback and observe outstanding teachers in action.

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We'll keep losing our best teachers until we treat them like true professionals.

Many of our respondents seemed to enjoy their jobs in spite of the way the teaching profession is structured, not because of it. They find incredible fulfillment in their work with students, but they also feel beaten down by long hours, low pay and frustrating bureaucracy. In their view, the profession offers tremendous personal rewards but also exacts a great personal cost. It's a truism that nobody goes into teaching for the money, but it's also clear that, eventually, low pay and the other practical drawbacks of the job tend to overwhelm even the most accomplished teachers' passion and commitment.

Some of this personal toll is unavoidable: It's clear from these responses that being an effective teacher is time-consuming and draining, far from the misinformed caricature of a cushy nine-to-five (or four) job. The same can be true of highly talented and driven professionals in other fields. But education leaders could do much more to address concerns about planning time, compensation, working conditions and the caliber of teachers' school leaders and colleagues—and even turn these problems into reasons a great teacher would want to remain in the classroom. Leaders should also focus on creating more innovative school structures and teacher roles, so that schools can offer the best teachers more jobs that they would want to do for an entire career.

The best teachers will endure a lot for the opportunity to make a difference for their students, but they shouldn't have to, and they will leave if the frustrations of the job outweigh the intrinsic benefits. Failing to address the structural problems our respondents identified would be a dangerous bet for the profession.

We hope our survey is just the beginning of a more concerted effort across the education community to listen to the nation's best teachers. These teachers want to have a say in the policies that affect their schools and their profession, but many don't feel that their voices matter in those important conversations. This needs to change. Outstanding teachers have earned the right to have their say about the most important issues facing our schools. For the sake of the teaching profession, we all need to listen carefully.

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"I was paid more."

"The media didn't portray teachers as lazy and money-grubbing."

"There were more teacher 'thank you' functions or training opportunities for the highly effective teachers."

"I was given a thank-you note once in a while."

IN THEIR WORDS:
I would feel more appreciated as a teacher if ...

"I had pathways for teacher leadership from within the classroom and with appropriate compensation."

"I could be paid for the results I can show and for helping guide effective policy creation and implementation at my school."

"Recognition of teaching excellence meant more independence and freedom of decision-making about my own classroom and practice."

"I did not have to constantly worry about salary and benefits."

"There were more opportunities to treat this like a profession, such as putting a larger emphasis on visiting and studying other schools."

We hope our survey is just the beginning of a more concerted effort across the education community to listen to the nation's best teachers. These teachers want to have a say in the policies that affect their schools and their profession, but many don't feel that their voices matter in those important conversations. This needs to change. Outstanding teachers have earned the right to have their say about the most important issues facing our schools. For the sake of the teaching profession, we all need to listen carefully.

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