



# Navigating Challenges: Insights from Appalachian Teachers on Education

*Exploring the challenges and resilience of Appalachian teachers, this report by the Prichard Committee's Teacher Fellows uncovers insights from educators in Kentucky's Appalachian region, emphasizing the need for targeted support and resources.*

With funding from The Steele-Reese Foundation, a team of teachers assembled by the Prichard Committee created a survey seeking to better understand opportunities and challenges in Appalachian classrooms from the perspective of the people working most closely with students and families. Beginning in April of 2023, we began seeking responses from teachers across the 54 Kentucky counties served by the federal Appalachian Regional Commission.

1,031 teachers completed the online survey by mid-May. The group proved a representative cross-section: Almost half indicated they taught in elementary schools. About one third were high school teachers, and more than 20 percent reported teaching in middle schools or junior highs. Alternative schools, preschool centers, and K-8 programs were also represented.

Experience also varied. More than one-third of the respondents were in their first decade teaching; 31 percent reported 11-20 years of experience; 28 percent worked 21-30 years, and almost 5 percent said they had been teaching for 31 years or more.

The team sought to measure conditions after major upheavals — significant school disruption and remote learning during the COVID pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and devastating flooding in the summer of 2022 in the heart of Kentucky's Appalachian region. Their survey intended to measure perspectives on professional standing and connection as well as student and school success. In addition, they were eager to find out how teachers in Appalachia envision solutions and see wider efforts to improve education.

## *Several issues stood out from the responses:*

\* Appalachian teachers strongly feel that fellow educators or leaders in other regions do not grasp the intense challenges created by the circumstances that Appalachian communities present for teachers. That means that responses from policymakers and networking with peers often miss the mark.

\* While teachers in Appalachia feel well connected with the circumstances and struggles of their students and families, the destructive grip of drug abuse and family trauma continues to evolve in ways that often overshadow an academic focus.

\* Generational poverty, a lack of economic development, and isolated populations test schools' abilities to connect students with relevant experiences. Many educators in Appalachia feel like they lack resources and facilities to move students to level terrain with students from other regions of Kentucky.

\* The climate of a strained workforce, declining population, and uneven political support for public educators adds to teachers' sense of an uphill battle to achieve student and school success in the region.

*Survey results and follow-up interviews with several veteran Appalachian teachers depict a profession that feels deeply needed, devoted, and connected with its students, yet also stretched beyond its ability in responding to dire life circumstances and ambitious academic targets. In the end, the imposing conditions test teacher morale, yield inequitable opportunities for students, and evoke pessimism that effective support or solutions will arrive.*

**93 percent of survey respondents agreed that education in Appalachia Kentucky has unique circumstances and characteristics not seen in other parts of the state.**

Of that group, almost three out of four indicated they “completely agreed” with the statement while the rest selected “slightly agree.”

**More than 90 percent agreed that education stakeholders in other regions of Kentucky do not adequately understand the unique circumstances and characteristics of education in Appalachia Kentucky.**

The question indicated that “stakeholders” could mean legislators, school administrators, and state education department personnel. Most respondents (63 percent) said they “completely agreed” with the statement. On a related question, fewer than 14 percent responded that they felt such stakeholders are listening to or acting on Appalachian teachers’ thoughts or opinions.

“Many leaders do not truly know Eastern Kentucky. They know what they see when they travel here for a photo op or when they drive Highway 15, 23, 80, 60 or the Mountain Parkway,” said a Carter County educator. “They don’t see how the families are living in the head of the holler. They don’t see the depths of what kids are dealing with”



**Identifying circumstances and characteristics that most impact teachers’ daily activities and overall educational experiences with students that colleagues in other parts of the state may not experience, one topic stood out and two others were widely selected:**

**Almost 82 percent said generational poverty.**

**More than 41 percent selected lack of economic development.**

**Almost 39 percent chose lack of infrastructure that attracts investment and tourism.**

“In speaking with colleagues from other areas, they tell of magnet schools, fully-developed STEM labs, college activities, and career shadowing opportunities my students do not have,” a Pike County middle grades teacher said in a follow-up interview. “Now, with the advent of artificial intelligence, will my students be even more steamrolled?”

The Appalachian Regional Commission annually analyzes 423 counties in the mountains stretching from Mississippi to New York based on economic measures compared to national averages. Three-year average unemployment, per-capita market income, and poverty rates are combined into an economic status designation. Counties are tagged as distressed, at-risk, transitional, competitive, or attaining at the national average.

Kentucky’s Appalachian region stands out on the ARC map for Fiscal 2024, yielding a clump of distressed counties flanked by some in the at-risk category. Only three of Kentucky’s ARC counties are rated outside those lowest economic levels.<sup>1</sup>

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau showed that between 2017-2021, the poverty rate in the Appalachian region of Kentucky was highest for children under 18, with almost 29.8 percent of children below the poverty line, compared to 18.6 percent in non-Appalachian Kentucky counties. The national rate was 17 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Most of Kentucky’s Appalachian counties were identified as experiencing “persistent poverty” — maintaining poverty rates over 20 percent for the past 30 years — in a May 2023 Census Bureau report. A separate measure of

smaller census tracts based on the same poverty calculation also showed a large presence of persistent poverty in Kentucky concentrated in Appalachia.<sup>3</sup>

Educators interviewed said that in classrooms, generational poverty produces a lack of motivation and basic needs not being met. For many students, the goal of college and career readiness can be meaningless, one educator said. Poverty means many students do not possess adequate supplies or even food. Support systems are often lacking.

Another teacher said that generation poverty leads to students who perform below their capabilities and creates an erosion of community support for schools.

“It’s hard to say you can be anything in the world — their world is so small,” one Floyd County educator said.

The lack of economic development is seen as a force behind decreasing enrollments, a lack of student motivation and goal-setting, and limited community partners, according to teachers who participated in follow-up interviews. Transience is also a byproduct.

“We see populations of students who are bouncing from one district to another as parents chase jobs,” one teacher said.

“How do you prepare students for jobs when they don’t exist?” asked another educator who works in district administration.

Poverty and economic issues are closely followed by drug dependency and family trauma as pervasive and evolving challenges.

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<sup>1</sup>(<https://www.arc.gov/classifying-economic-distress-in-appalachian-counties/>)

<sup>2</sup>([https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PRB\\_ARC\\_Chartbook\\_ACS\\_2017-2021\\_FINAL\\_2023-06.pdf#page=124](https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PRB_ARC_Chartbook_ACS_2017-2021_FINAL_2023-06.pdf#page=124)).

<sup>3</sup>(<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/acs/acs-51%20persistent%20poverty.pdf>)

**Over 71 percent of teachers responded that their schools lack adequate systems to address the drug epidemic in the region and minimize its impact on student learning.**

**Adequate resources and training to deal with student and family trauma were also a major concern — 73 percent said funding, personnel, and time were insufficient while 58.5 percent reported inadequate training on trauma-informed practices.**

In follow-up interviews, teachers indicated that drug abuse has shifted from prescription opioid pain medications like oxycodone to a wave of methamphetamine abuse that coincided with the beginning of the COVID pandemic in 2020 to more recent overdoses associated with illicitly manufactured fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic opioid. While fentanyl has led to a spike in drug overdose deaths nationally, its impact in Kentucky's Appalachia communities is causing death and increased strife in families.

A 2022 study for the Appalachian Regional Commission of deaths resulting from three causes — suicide; alcoholic liver disease, and overdose of alcohol, prescription drugs, or illegal drugs — examined death rates among people ages 15-64.

The report found that in 1999, mortality rates connected to the

“diseases of despair” were not significantly different between the Appalachian region and the rest of the United States. By 2009, however, mortality connected to the diseases was 24 percent higher in Appalachia than the rest of the U.S. and rose to 37 percent higher by 2015. The disparity peaked in 2017 at a 44 percent increase. The difference subsided to 33 percent by 2019, but surged again to 37 percent by 2020, fueled by a spike in overdoses and effects of the COVID pandemic.

Central Appalachia, a subregion that includes all of Kentucky's Appalachian counties plus several counties along the state's borders with Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia, led the surge between 2019 and 2020.

The 2020 data showed mortality rate disparities were particularly high among people ages 25-54, prime working and child-rearing years,

according to the report. Within that group, mortality rates were higher for men than women, but the gap between Appalachian populations and the rest of the nation was especially high among women.

“Like the rest of the United States, the Appalachian Region experienced economic and other challenges as a result of the pandemic—including the increased isolation of its populace, and limitations on access to in-person treatment and recovery support—but shouldered a greater burden when it came to diseases of despair,” says the report presented by a rural health and research center at the University of Chicago and a center at East Tennessee State University.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(<https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Appalachian-Diseases-of-Despair-Update-November-2022.pdf>)

In follow-up interviews, surveyed Appalachian teachers said that the drug epidemic has caused students to often miss school because of the need to care for adult family members. In addition to lethal drugs, some teachers also noted alarm about what the growing popularity of vaping devices means for health prospects of today's students.

"A majority of my students come from homes that are completely affected by drugs," one educator said. Several educators spoke of students being used by family members to sell drugs or families that support students' own substance abuse. Connections with families and support for schools have also declined as a result of the drug epidemic, teachers said.

With frayed parental bonds, educators said that many students are being cared for by not only grandparents, but cousins, foster families, or even loose groups of friends "watching out for each other."

"There is a lot going on for our students outside of the classroom," a Hazard teacher said.

"Flooding, fires, drugs — they are overwhelmed. School is the last thing they are worried about."

"The variables that are in a classroom now are nothing like what they were even five years ago," said a Knott County high school teacher. "All of the responsibility falls on the teacher, and the resources just aren't there."

***"Flooding, fires, drugs — they are overwhelmed. School is the last thing they are worried about."***

The difficult conditions facing students, in turn, test schools' ability to provide reinforcement and keep time focused on learning. When asked whether available resources are sufficient to deal with challenges in their classrooms, teachers reported an imbalance and inequities that makes their work highly challenging.


**Almost 75 percent of respondents said that physical resources such as funding, facilities, and curriculum are not appropriate to help deal with inequities that are present.**

Teachers indicated that one difficult struggle is helping students understand and access real-life examples of concepts that are covered in academic standards.

While online resources can help, teachers in follow-up conversations said that as students get older, first-hand connections to adult opportunities are essential. Being able to see examples of high-tech skills, in-demand occupations, or collaboration and networking are important for students to understand expectations and routines beyond isolated rural communities.

Teachers also pointed to the need to expand vocational and career pathways that connect with economic growth and employment opportunities that could exist in Appalachia.

"Students have no idea of job opportunities or anything extra they could be except what this area offers," a Floyd County teacher noted.



Teachers taking the survey highlighted the need for more resources for student experiences, more funding for learning materials, and more adequate instructional planning time.

In follow-up conversations, teachers mentioned the need to emphasize pathways connected to in-demand skills, expanded job fairs, and greater awareness of opportunities for economic growth. In addition, schools need help to expand technology and home internet availability.

**When the same question was asked about personnel, 62 percent responded that staffing was not appropriate to help deal with inequities.**

In both the survey and follow-up conversations, teachers indicated that a lack of substitute teachers is the latest personnel emergency in the post-COVID workforce. In addition, they pointed to alternative certification processes meaning that more new teachers must learn on the job, that support staff like bus drivers and in-school staff are hard to find and keep, and that counselors are swamped by the needs of students and families. Certified counselors are in short supply.

In the survey, most teachers said more access to mental health professionals or training in trauma-informed practices is a top need.


“My school has one counselor who visits once a week,” one elementary teacher said. “Please do not have a meltdown if it isn’t Monday.”

Learning materials, classroom furniture, and extra supplies to meet students’ needs were also examples of resources that are lacking and hamper student achievement.

Without federal relief funds approved during the COVID pandemic, “our districts have gone 10-plus years without a budget for professional development or instructional resources,” one administrator said. Educators expressed concern about resource struggles likely to spike as pandemic funding dries up.

“Teachers are spread too thin,” another teacher said. Resources should focus on assuring qualified, skilled teachers and trained adults who meet students’ needs, educators said. In many schools, teachers are seeing larger classes or frequently covering multiple classes because of teacher shortages or absences. Declining numbers of interventionists to help struggling students is also a concern.

“We don’t have enough people to meet the needs of all kids,” explained a Montgomery County teacher. “It’s exhausting, and eventually we figure out how to deal with issues, but we’re a school with three administrators and two counselors and 1,100 kids. We’re swamped with trauma and students’ needs. I’m not trained for that — I’m a history teacher.”



“Something is messed up when we are asking teachers to be first responders, medical providers, mental health experts, law enforcement, and more — that’s more than 25 percent of what we do,” another teacher agreed.

Funding and pay levels need to be more widely discussed and all solutions should be more flexible to meet local needs, teachers said. Making the teaching profession more appealing and rewarding should be a priority.

While teachers interviewed said that their job has shifted markedly since their own days as students and even in the past decade, they see themselves as a dedicated and well-connected resource. While they said they spend much of their time striving to hold together schools and students’ own ambitions, they see schools as a bedrock local institution providing respite, structure, and hope.

Teachers interviewed portray themselves and their peers as sources of stability and professionalism — social infrastructure and role models often serving as beacons for children and teenagers in trying times.

“Teachers are stepping in where we can,” one elementary teacher said.

**Almost 95 percent of teachers surveyed agreed with the statement: “I am very aware of my students’ and community’s unique needs and circumstances and how they impact my classroom, teaching, and student success.”**

**More than 64 percent said they agreed that their school is “successful at connecting with students, understanding their unique conditions and needs, and preparing them to be college and career ready.”**

Responses to the second question also included 16 percent of teachers who neither agreed nor disagreed, and another 16 percent who slightly disagreed. In follow-up interviews, teachers indicated that achievement levels have significant room for improvement, that even students on track to be certified college- or career-ready may not have a realistic path to work or higher education success.

Teachers said they worry deeply about the prospects for many of their pupils.

Their connection and effort, however, mean that they are keenly aware of issues and needs in their community and region.

“Kids only know the life they live. Education, particularly in high school, needs to make the path to success in a variety of fields much more evident,” said a Pike County teacher. “We critically need more infrastructure — roads, transportation, etc. — and more partnerships between schools and businesses. Kids need to see and shadow working folks.”

“There’s too much focus on sports instead of jobs, and so much push on college and not enough on career/tech options,” said a Magoffin County high school teacher. COVID amplified pressures not only in schools, but in communities and families, he added.



Teachers surveyed said they would welcome expanded opportunities to share their experience with policymakers, fellow teachers, and others working to help Kentucky students flourish as adults.

**To build understanding among policymakers, ‘Teacher for a Day’ programs involving legislators or participation from Appalachian teachers in legislative hearings were recommended by a majority of respondents (53 percent and 51 percent, respectively). 66 percent of those surveyed disagreed that legislators and state officials “are listening to and acting on our thoughts and opinions” about education in Appalachia Kentucky.**

Effective change and support for schools and students in Appalachia is only likely to occur with a united effort where leaders and participants possess a strong understanding of the complicated challenges involved, the Appalachian teachers said.

“The level of rural poverty we see is a real thing that most people don’t understand,” one teacher said. “You literally have to see it and live it to get it.”

“We need to be listened to more and fix this from the inside out,” another veteran teacher added.



### **The Prichard Committee Teacher Fellows, 2023**

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