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TEACHERS QUIT JOBS AT HIGHEST RATE ON RECORD

Small raises, budget frustration and opportunities elsewhere persuade teachers and other public-education workers to move on

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Teachers and other public education employees, such as community-college faculty, school psychologists and janitors, are quitting their jobs at the fastest rate on record, government data shows.

A tight labor market with historically low unemployment has encouraged Americans in a variety of occupations to quit their jobs at elevated rates, with the expectation they can find something better. But quitting among public educators stands out because the field is one where stability is viewed as a key perk and longevity often rewarded.

The educators may be finding new jobs at other schools, or leaving education altogether: The departures come alongside protests this year in six states where teachers in some cases shut down schools over tight budgets, small raises and poor conditions.

In the first 10 months of 2018, public educators quit at an average rate of 83 per 10,000 a month, according to the Labor Department. While that is still well below the rate for American workers overall – 231 voluntary departures per 10,000 workers in 2018 – it is the highest rate for public educators since such records began in 2001.

Sara Jorve, 43 years old, protested alongside other Oklahoma teachers last spring for better pay and classroom conditions. But the fifth-grade math and science instructor in Oklahoma quit in May after a dozen years in the profession. Ms. Jorve, a single mother, said her pay was so meager she was forced to rely on her parents for financial assistance.

In the summer, she returned to school to become a cardiovascular ultrasound technician.

“I had to quit for my sanity,” she said.

The rising number of departures among public education workers is in contrast with 2009, when the economy was first emerging from a deep recession. Then, the rate was just 48 per 10,000 public education workers, a record low.

“During the recession, education was a safe place to be,” said Julia Pollak, labor economist at ZipRecruiter.

That year, the unemployment rate touched 10 percent, the highest since the 1980s. This year, the jobless rate fell to 3.7 percent, the lowest reading since 1969. That has created very different incentives for teachers and their public education colleagues.

“It’s a more boring place now, and they see their friends finding exciting opportunities,” Ms. Pollak said.

School districts have reported since at least 2015 having trouble finding enough qualified teachers to fill open slots, leading more states to open up temporary teaching jobs to people with no official training, according to the Learning Policy Institute, a nonpartisan education-policy research group. The rate at which qualified teachers are leaving the profession is likely to exacerbate that trend.

In the 12 months ended in October, one million workers quit public-education positions, according to the most recent Labor Department data. More than 10 million Americans work in the field.

While the private-sector labor market largely shook off the recession years ago, teachers and other school workers are still feeling the effects. Funding for public education in several states hasn't yet recovered from cuts during the downturn.

In at least 12 states, public education budgets are down at least 7 percent from 2009 levels, adjusted for inflation, according to an analysis of census data by the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Teacher pay across the country, adjusted for inflation, is now 5 percent lower than it was in 2009, according to data from the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union.

Wages and salaries for public-education workers rose 2.2 percent in the third quarter from a year earlier, not adjusting for inflation. That matched the largest annual raise in nearly a decade, but was still well below the 3.1 percent annual increase in pay private-sector workers received in the third quarter, according to the Labor Department.

Sluggish pay gains have been tougher to swallow as more states require that teachers earn master's degrees to work in the classroom, an expensive proposition that led more teachers to take out loans.

Tensions over inadequate pay and per-pupil funding levels came to a head in 2018 during statewide protests, in some cases shutting classrooms for as many as nine school days. The strikes produced modest gains in the states where they occurred – teachers in Arizona, West Virginia and Oklahoma all received raises – but they also popularized images of dilapidated textbooks and school rooms and portraits of teachers who took on odd jobs to make ends meet.

Some lawmakers pushed back against larger pay increases for teachers because it would have required raising taxes or diverting funds from other state priorities, such as roads or law enforcement.

Education-policy analysts say the pressures the protests brought to light also drove many more educators to quit.

"Part of it was compensation," said Alice Cain, executive vice president of Teach Plus, a policy organization working with a network of 26,000 teachers. "But part of this was that their students weren't valued, and that the public education system in our country isn't a priority in so many places."