

BEYOND THE PULSE

Next-Level Data Analysis

Stability and Strain: Insights from the 2025 Heads Survey

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The **October Pulse Perspectives** for heads captured engagement throughout the SAIS association, representing a 52% response rate. Beyond the pulse, the survey reveals both progress and emerging challenges in independent school staffing.

- **Attrition Drivers** – Retirement is the leading cause of departures across all school sizes, reaching as high as 75% in extra-large schools, while smaller schools (<50 FTEs) report higher attrition from personal/family reasons (48%) and compensation (27%).
- **School Setting Variations** – Urban schools face more performance-related attrition (46%), suburban schools see retirement as the dominant driver (54%), and rural schools experience concentrated retirement-driven exits (80%).
- **Unfilled Positions** – Hiring gaps grow with school size, with 25% of extra-large schools (1200+ students) reporting unfilled administrative positions, compared to 9% of small schools (0–400 students).
- **Applicant Quality by Size** – Smaller schools (<50 FTEs) face the most variability, with higher shares of both very strong and weak candidates, while extra-large schools report the highest proportion of strong and very strong applicants.
- **Applicant Quality by Setting** – Urban schools benefit from stronger applicant pools (59% rated strong or very strong), suburban schools lean toward average and strong applicants, and rural schools face greater inconsistency, with 26% of candidates rated weak.

The key findings reveal a complex landscape where schools are navigating challenges while experiencing shifts in employee attrition, unfilled positions, and quality of applicant pool.



01 Key Finding: Employee Attrition

>Attrition by Employee Count

Smaller schools with less than 50 employees face higher attrition, driven by personal/family reasons, retirement, and compensation or performance concerns, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining stability with limited staff. Mid-sized schools (51–200 employees) show more balanced but still significant attrition, with retirement and performance issues leading. Larger schools with 200+ employees report the lowest attrition overall, suggesting stronger systems for retention and workforce management, though retirement remains a key factor.

<50 Employees

- Personal/Family reasons: 48%
- Retirement: 40%
- Compensation concerns: 27%
- Career change outside of education: 25%
- Performance issues: 25%
- Relocation: 25%

101-200 Employees

- Retirement: 57%
- Performance issues: 46%
- Personal/family: 42%
- Relocation: 31%
- Career change outside of education: 28%
- Career advancement elsewhere: 20%

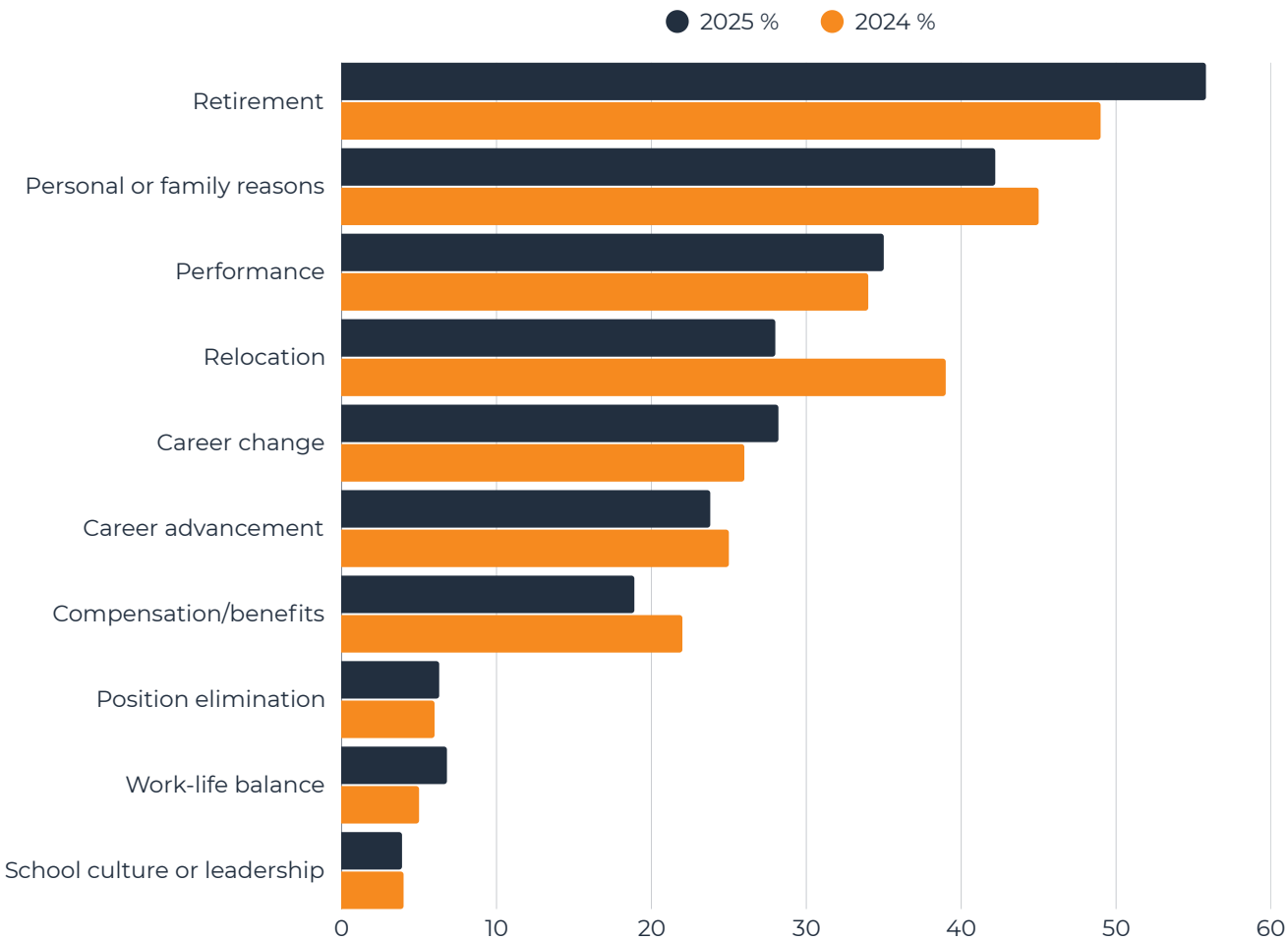
51-100 Employees

- Retirement: 60%
- PersonalFamily reasons: 43%
- Performance issues: 33%
- Career change outside education: 30%
- Career advance elsewhere: 25%

200+ Employees

- Retirement: 74%
- Relocation: 35%
- Performance issues: 35%
- Career advancement elsewhere: 30%
- Career change outside of education: 30%

What were the primary reasons for any faculty or staff departures over the past two years?
Select up to three.



>Attrition by School Setting

Urban schools experience elevated faculty/staff attrition driven by performance issues, retirement, and personal or family demands, reflecting the pressures of competitive urban job markets and frequent mobility. Suburban schools show more balanced patterns, with retirement and family considerations leading while performance and relocation remain moderate. Rural schools face the most concentrated attrition from retirement, with fewer departures tied to relocation but steady challenges around family demands and performance.

Urban Schools

- Performance issues: 46%
- Retirement: 46%
- Personal/Family 38%
- Relocation: 30%

Suburban Schools

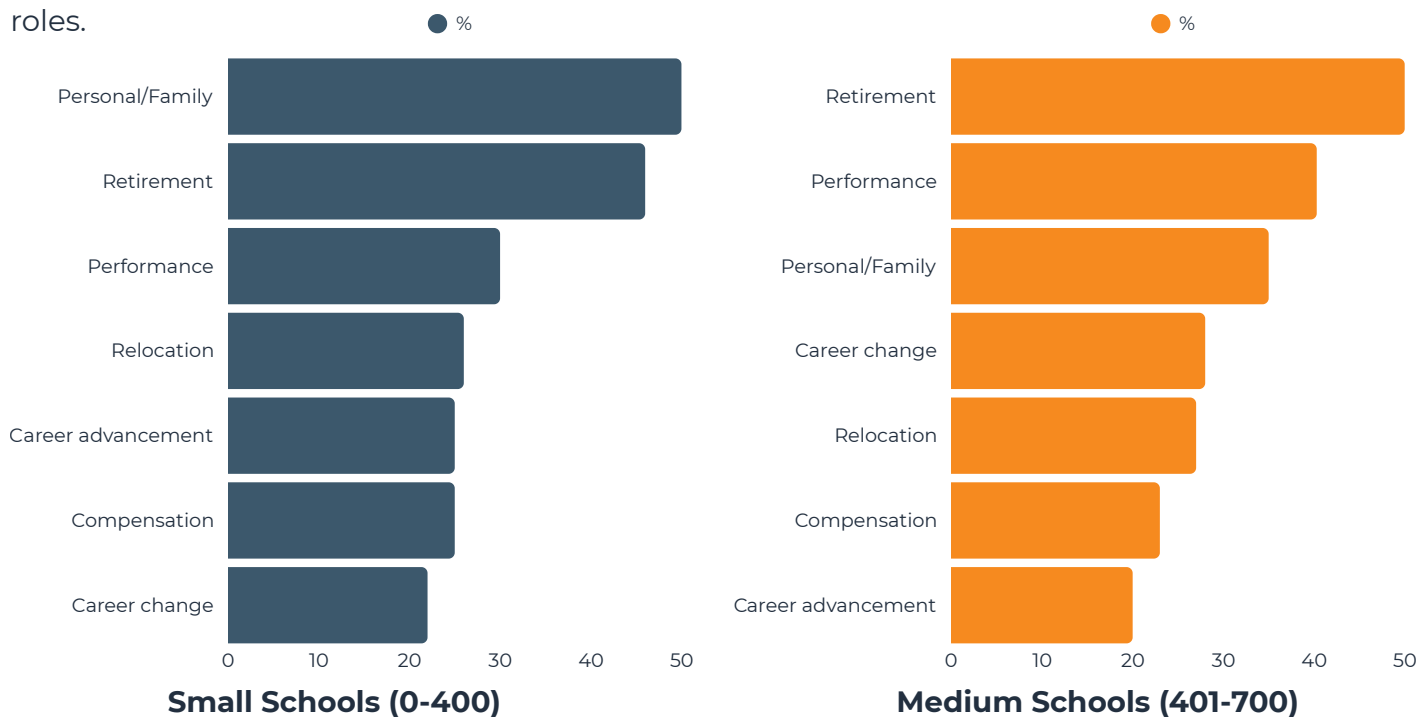
- Retirement: 54%
- Personal/family: 44%
- Performance issues: 31%
- Relocation: 31%

Rural Schools

- Retirement: 81%
- Personal/Family: 45%
- Performance: 32%
- Career change outside of education: 29%

>Attrition by Enrollment Size

Faculty/staff attrition patterns shift as enrollment grows. Small schools (0–400) see departures most often tied to personal and family reasons alongside retirement, while medium schools (401–700) face rising exits from retirement and performance concerns. Large and extra-large schools (701–1200+), though more stable overall, report retirement as the overwhelming driver of attrition, with performance issues, career changes, and relocation also playing consistent roles.



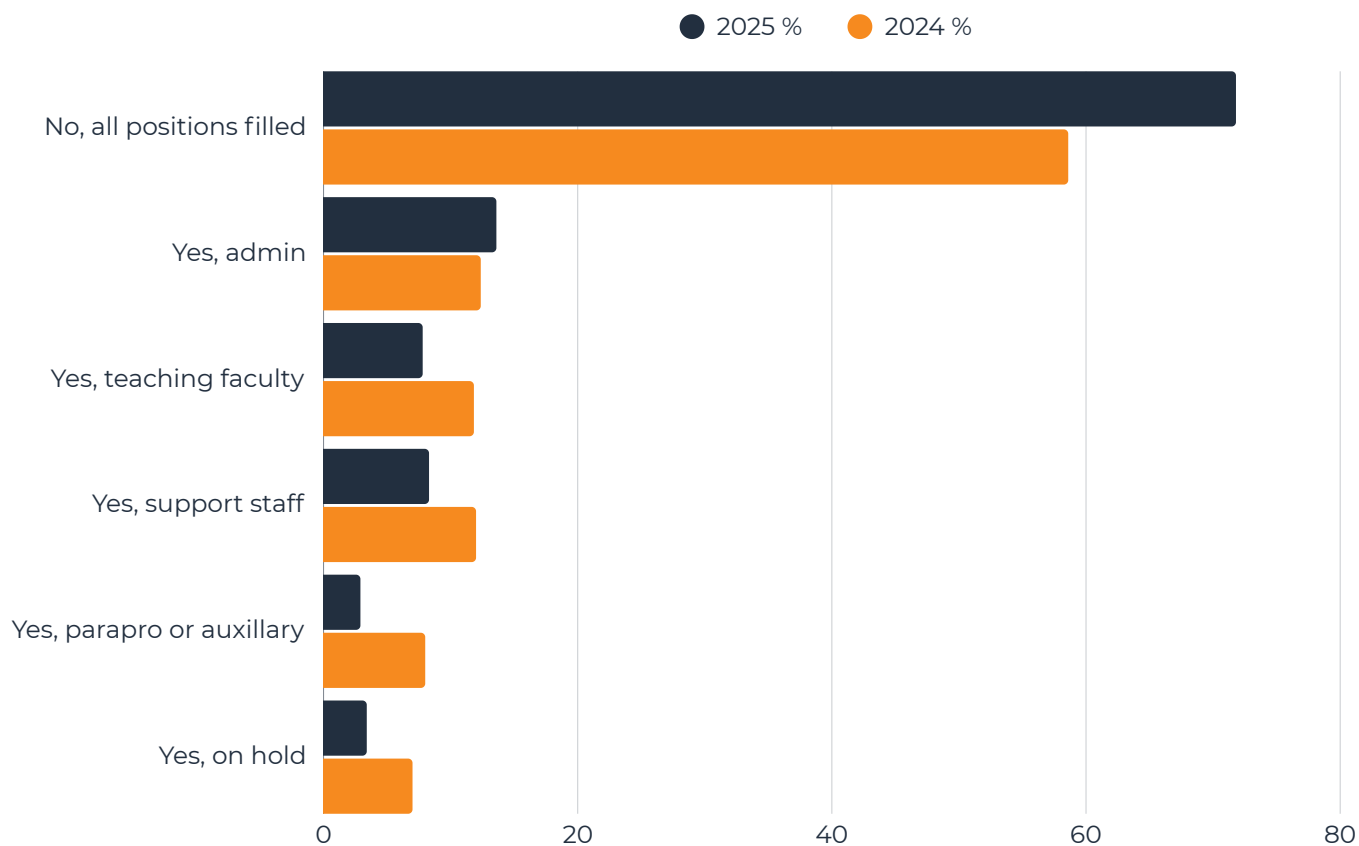
Large Schools (701-1200 students)

- Retirement: 70%
- Personal/Family: 44%
- Performance issues: 39%
- Career change outside education: 35%
- Career advancement: 22%
- Relocation: 32%
- Compensation: 7%

Extra Large Schools (1200+ students)

- Retirement: 75%
- Personal/Family Reasons: 33%
- Performance Issues: 33%
- Career Change Outside Education: 33%
- Career Advancement Elsewhere: 33%
- Relocation: 25%
- Compensation/Benefits: 13%

02 Key Finding: Unfilled Positions

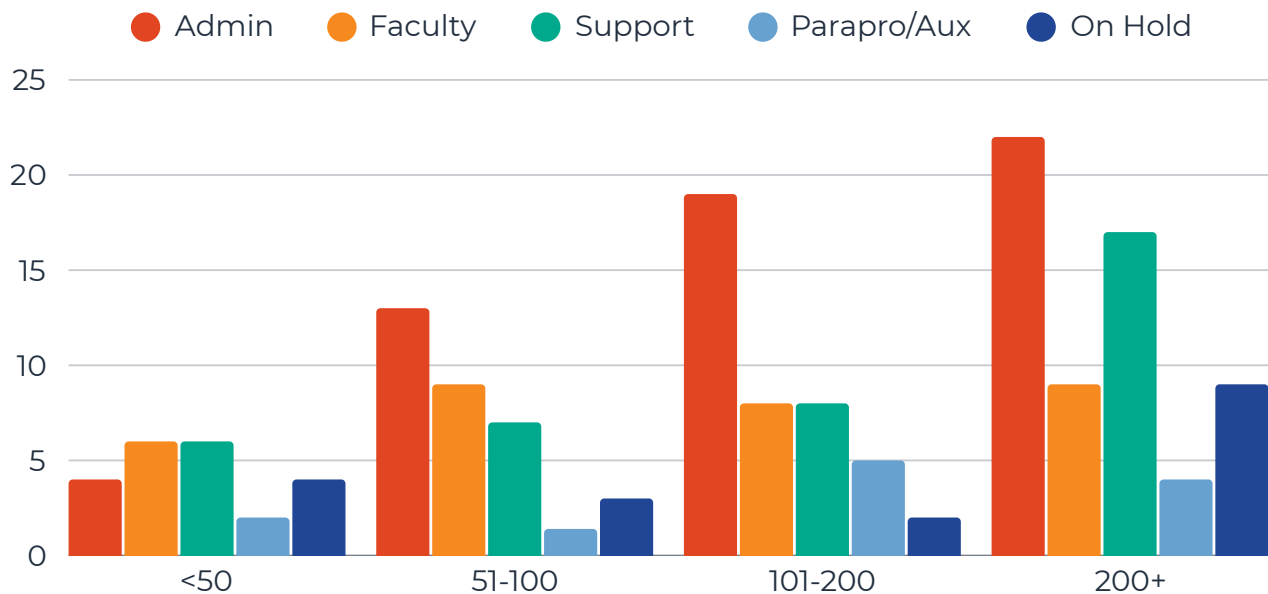


Does your school currently have any unfilled positions for the 2025-2026 school year?
Choose all that apply.



>Unfilled Positions by Employee Count

Hiring needs shift significantly as schools grow. Smaller schools (<50 FTEs) report relatively balanced gaps across admin, faculty, and support roles, while mid-sized and large schools (51–200 FTEs) show rising administrative hiring needs as the dominant challenge. The largest schools (200+ FTEs) face the greatest demand in both administration and support staff, alongside the highest share of positions placed on hold, signaling structural pressures at scale.



>Unfilled Positions by School Setting

Urban schools report the highest hiring pressures, particularly in support staff roles, with additional needs in administration and a smaller share in teaching faculty. Suburban schools show more balanced hiring demands, led by administrative and teaching positions, though support staff needs remain present. Rural schools face fewer overall gaps, with hiring concentrated in administration and teaching, and little to no need for support staff roles.

Urban Schools

- Support staff hiring needs: 16%
- Administrative hiring needs: 9%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 4%
- Positions on hold: 5%

Suburban Schools

- Administrative hiring needs: 17%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 9%
- Support staff hiring needs: 7%
- Positions on hold: 3%

Rural Schools

- Administrative hiring needs: 10%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 10%
- Positions on hold: 3%
- Support staff hiring needs: 0%



>Unfilled Positions by Enrollment Size

Unfilled positions increase with school size. Small schools (0–400) show relatively balanced hiring needs across administration, faculty, and support roles, while medium and large schools see administrative positions emerge as the primary gap. Extra-large schools (1200+), however, face the highest hiring pressures across all categories, with one in four administrative roles unfilled alongside elevated faculty and support staff needs.

Small Schools (0-400 students)

- Administrative hiring needs: 9%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 8%
- Support staff hiring needs: 8%

Medium Schools (401-700 students)

- Administrative hiring needs: 15%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 7%
- Support staff hiring needs: 5%

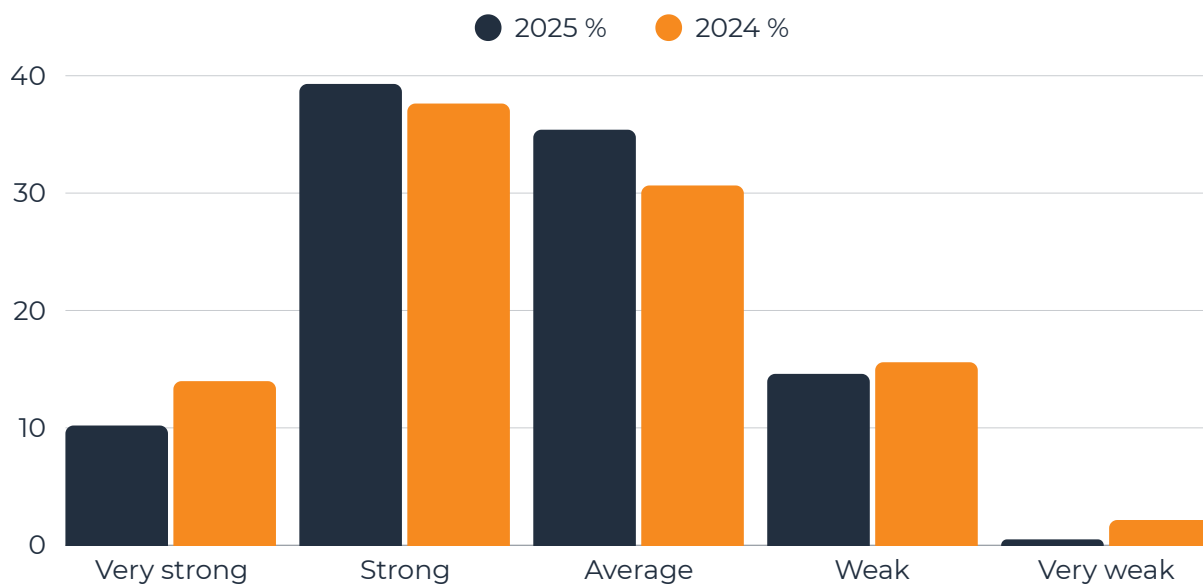
Large Schools (701-1200 students)

- Administrative hiring needs: 13%
- Support staff hiring needs: 11%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 7%

Extra Large Schools (1201+ students)

- Administrative hiring needs: 25%
- Teaching faculty hiring needs: 13%
- Support staff hiring needs: 13%

03 Key Finding: Faculty Applicant Quality



How would you compare the quality of your current faculty candidate pool to that of five years ago?



>Faculty Applicant Quality by Employee Count

Applicant quality varies notably by employee count. Smaller schools (<50 FTEs) show greater variability, with higher shares in both “very strong” and “weak” categories, reflecting uneven applicant pools. Mid-sized schools (51–200 FTEs) cluster more heavily in the “average” and “strong” ranges, while the largest schools (200+ FTEs) report the highest concentration of “strong” candidates, suggesting scale brings access to deeper and more consistent talent.



>Faculty Applicant Quality by School Setting

Urban schools report the strongest applicant pools, with nearly 60% rated strong or very strong and relatively few weak candidates. Suburban schools lean heavily on strong and average applicants but show fewer at the very strong end. Rural schools face the greatest variability, with fewer high-quality candidates and a higher share rated weak, pointing to more limited access to top-tier talent.

Urban Schools

- Very Strong: 20%
- Strong: 39%
- Average: 29%
- Weak: 13%
- Very Weak: 0%



Suburban Schools

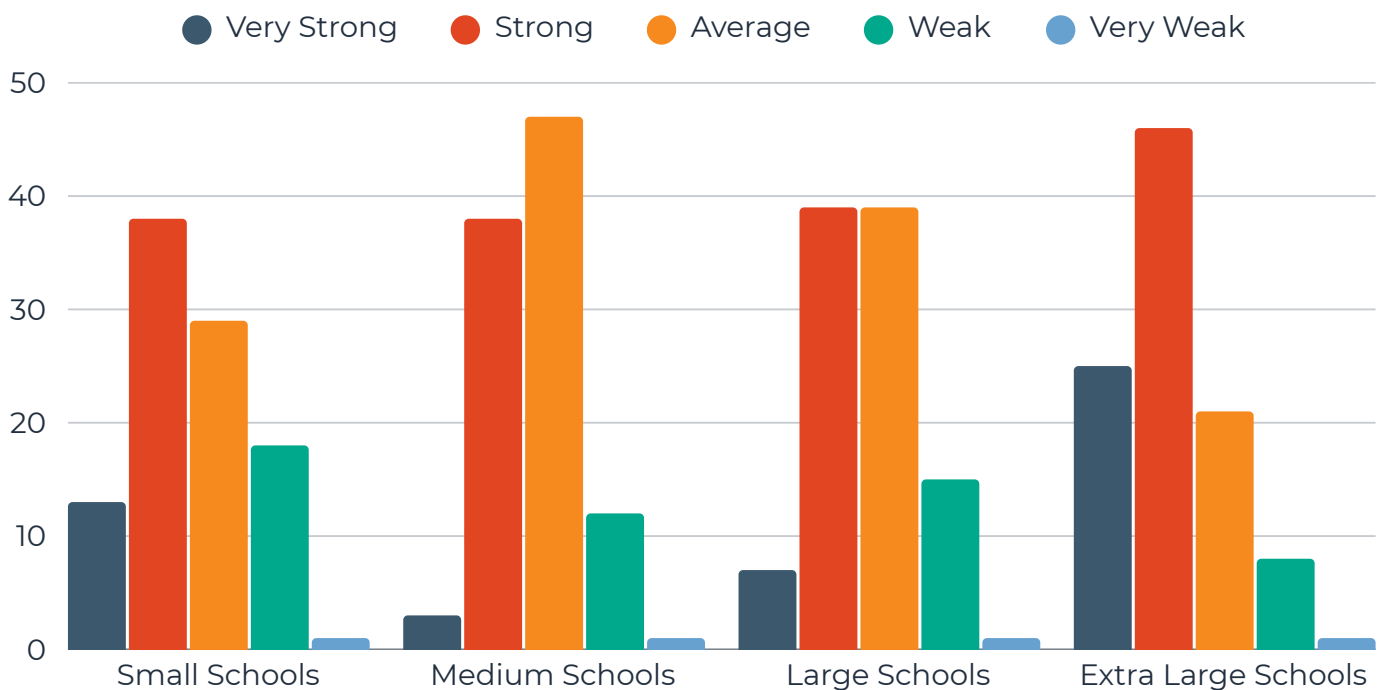
- Very Strong: 8%
- Strong: 40%
- Average: 39%
- Weak: 13%
- Very Weak: 1%

Rural Schools

- Very Strong: 3%
- Strong: 36%
- Average: 36%
- Weak: 26%
- Very Weak: 0%

>Faculty Applicant Quality by Enrollment Size

Applicant quality shifts with school size. Small and medium schools lean heavily on “average” and “strong” candidates, with fewer at the very strong end and a notable share rated weak. In contrast, extra-large schools stand out with the highest proportion of very strong applicants and fewer weak ones, suggesting that scale provides access to deeper, higher-quality talent pools.



The overall data reveals that the staffing crisis is not primarily about candidate quality. Most schools report adequate to strong applicant pools. Instead, the challenges appear to center on recruitment process effectiveness, retention, compensation competitiveness, and managing an aging workforce facing a retirement wave. The larger and more complex the organization, the more acute these challenges become.



04 Guiding Questions

As schools navigate a shifting staffing landscape, it's essential to create intentional spaces for reflection and dialogue with leadership teams, faculty, and the board. These guiding questions are designed to spark meaningful conversations about the full faculty experience. Whether used in leadership meetings, onboarding sessions with new hires, or board-level discussions about talent and sustainability, these questions provide a framework to ensure decisions are both data-informed and deeply human-centered.

1. Faculty Journey Mapping: Where are the critical moments in a faculty member's journey—recruitment, onboarding, growth, and exit—that most influence their decision to stay or leave our school?

2. Social Links & Belonging: How strong and supportive are the relationships and networks among faculty and staff, and how do they shape a sense of connection to our mission and community?

3. Suitability of Expectations & Environment: To what extent do our job expectations, culture, and environment align with faculty and staff needs, values, and aspirations?

4. Sacrifice and Commitment: What sacrifices (time, financial, emotional) are faculty making to fulfill their roles, and how do we balance these to sustain commitment?

5. Well-Being and Support Systems: How effectively are we supporting faculty well-being through resources, policies, and leadership practices that promote a sustainable workload and healthy culture?

6. Forward-Looking Retention Strategy: What early indicators can we track to anticipate turnover risks and proactively strengthen faculty recruitment and retention strategies?

Resources

- Pulse Perspectives of Heads, *SAIS*
- Timely Challenge Conference: Retention & Recruitment, November 10-11, 2025, *SAIS*
- Tools and Strategies for Faculty and Staff Recruitment, *SAIS*
- Teachers Who Collaborate, Learn at Work Are More Satisfied, *Gallup*
- The State of Teaching Survey, *RAND*
- What Do People Need Most From Their Leaders, *Gallup*

