



STATE OF THE STATES: INVESTING IN TEACHERS AND FAMILIES  
THROUGH PAID PARENTAL LEAVE

# National Overview and Findings

January 2026

Paid parental leave<sup>1</sup> provides job-protected time off from work, allowing parents to care for and bond with a newborn, newly adopted child, or child in a foster placement. Unlike the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)—which guarantees up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave<sup>2</sup>—paid parental leave ensures parents receive income during their time away from work.

**The United States is the only high-income country without guaranteed paid leave for new parents<sup>3</sup>—leaving many teachers, nearly 80% of whom are women,<sup>4</sup> without the support they need to care for their growing families.**

Without access to meaningful paid leave, teachers often resort to hoarding sick days or even timing pregnancies around summer break to avoid unpaid time away from their classrooms. But that's not always possible. Denying teachers paid parental leave is unsustainable for the profession, harmful to families, and costly for schools.

**Put simply, paid parental leave is good policy.**

This report outlines three policy levers states can pull to strengthen and stabilize their teacher workforces:

- 1. Require districts to offer at least 12 weeks of paid parental leave for teachers, beyond sick days.**
- 2. Guarantee that teachers on paid parental leave receive their full salary for the entire duration of their leave.**
- 3. Extend leave eligibility and benefits to all teachers welcoming a child—including fathers, adoptive parents, and other types of non-birthing parents.**

## Policy Lever 1: Require districts to offer at least 12 weeks of paid parental leave for teachers, beyond sick days.

Access to paid leave is linked to a range of positive outcomes for families, including reduced infant mortality,<sup>5</sup> lower rates of postpartum depression,<sup>6</sup> and improved maternal health.<sup>7</sup> When fathers take paid leave, they become more engaged in parenting and are more likely to help build stable, long-lasting family relationships.<sup>8</sup>

But beyond the benefits to families, paid parental leave can also strengthen and stabilize the workforce—*yielding clear economic benefits for states*. Research shows that access to parental leave significantly increases the likelihood that employees return to their jobs rather than leaving the workforce or spending extended periods searching for new employment.<sup>9</sup> For women, who make up the overwhelming majority of the teaching workforce, paid leave is linked to stronger labor force participation and greater long-term wage growth compared to unpaid leave or none at all.<sup>10</sup>

“Before my state offered leave, I hoarded sick days for years—working through sickness and exhaustion—just so I could one day afford to become a mother. I even went to work the day my water broke, teaching until my prep period before heading to the hospital.”

- Katie, High School Teacher, Arkansas

Given that teacher turnover is a significant cost driver for districts—with some estimates showing that replacing a single teacher can cost districts between \$11,000 and \$25,000<sup>11</sup>—states have a clear incentive to act.

**The good news? Nearly one-third of states (16) require districts to offer some type of paid parental leave, beyond sick days, for teachers.** Among the states that require paid parental leave, just two, **Arkansas and Delaware**, offer full pay up to 12 weeks.



To avoid these negative outcomes, the American Public Health Association, the Society of Maternal-Fetal Medicine, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Pediatric Policy Council recommend [a minimum of 12 weeks of paid parental leave](#).

An **additional seven states offer paid leave programs that are optional** for districts to join. While these optional programs represent a positive step toward expanding access, they can also create uncertainty about long-term sustainability—particularly as district leadership changes over time. Optional participation may also exacerbate inequities across districts, as teachers in resource-strapped systems may leave for neighboring districts with more robust benefit packages, further deepening existing staffing shortages in under-resourced districts.

**The “Natural State” Leads the Way: How Arkansas Turned a Quiet Provision into a Landmark Paid Leave Policy**

Learn how Arkansas expanded its existing paid parental leave policy through pragmatic leadership and bipartisan collaboration.

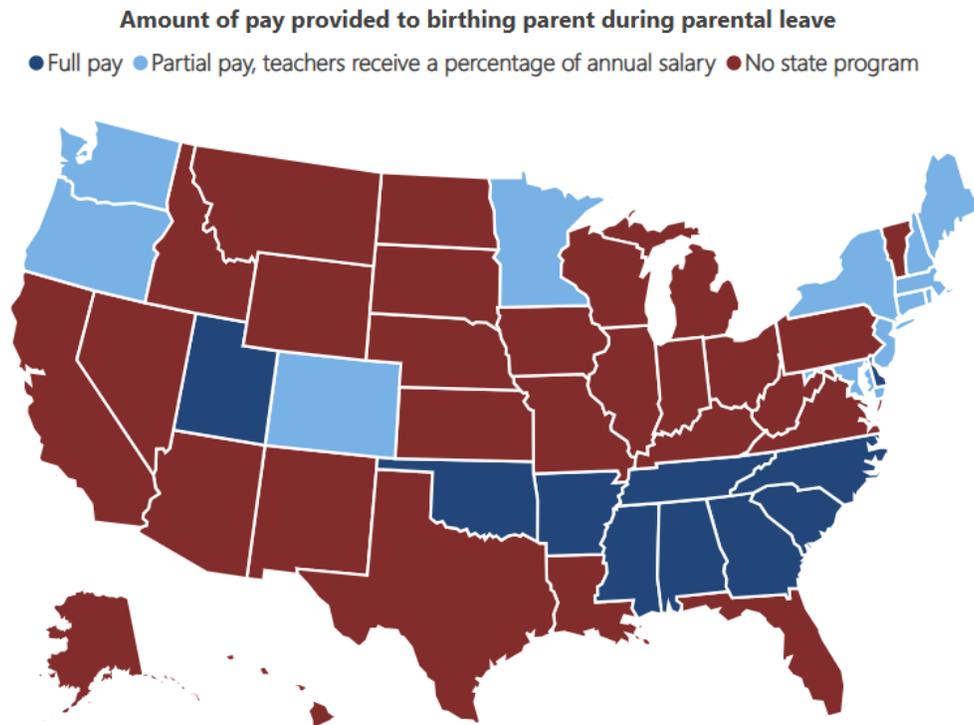
[View Arkansas’s Case Study](#)

## Policy Lever 2: Guarantee that teachers on paid parental leave receive their full salary for the entire duration of their leave.

When teachers welcome new additions to their families, paid leave helps ensure they can focus on bonding with their children rather than worrying about household finances. Even in states that require or offer optional paid leave programs, teachers often face financial challenges when that leave is only partially compensated. Twelve states currently have programs—either required or optional—that provide birthing parents with only a portion of their salary. For example, **New Jersey’s** program covers 85% of a teacher’s average weekly wage, while **Minnesota’s** program covers between 55% and 90%, depending on a teacher’s income level. Other states, such as **Maryland**, set a dollar cap rather than a percentage, offering up to \$1,000 per week as of 2025.

**Figure 2.**

**Teachers in half of states receive only partial pay during their parental leave**



**Paid parental leave is affordable.**

There are several ways states can ensure that teachers receive their full salary during parental leave without placing a significant strain on the state budget. One effective approach is for the state to cover the cost of long-term substitutes for districts, while the district pays the teacher's salary.

[Calculate the cost for your state](#)

When teachers only receive a portion of their salary, the chances that they will use their available leave decrease. This is particularly true for those with lower incomes, such as early career teachers or teachers in single-income households. As detailed above, when teachers don't have access to a good paid parental leave policy, it opens the door to harmful outcomes for teachers, students, and districts. Yet extending this benefit is not as burdensome as one may believe. For example, imagine just 3% of Virginia's 94,000 teachers took paid leave this year (about 2,820 teachers). If the state were to cover the

cost of long-term substitutes, providing 12 weeks of paid parental leave to those teachers would amount to just **\$5.35 per taxpayer**.<sup>14</sup>

Ensuring teachers receive as much of their salary as possible while on leave can help close racial wage gaps and ensure that all teachers have equitable access to paid leave. Fully paid leave is the ideal, but if that's not possible, states should aim to cover as much of a teacher's salary as they can so more educators can afford to take it. Even a modest increase can make a meaningful difference.

"If paid leave hadn't been available, losing my income would have been a huge stress. We have a big mortgage, daycare is over \$400 a week, and I don't know how we would have managed without this support."

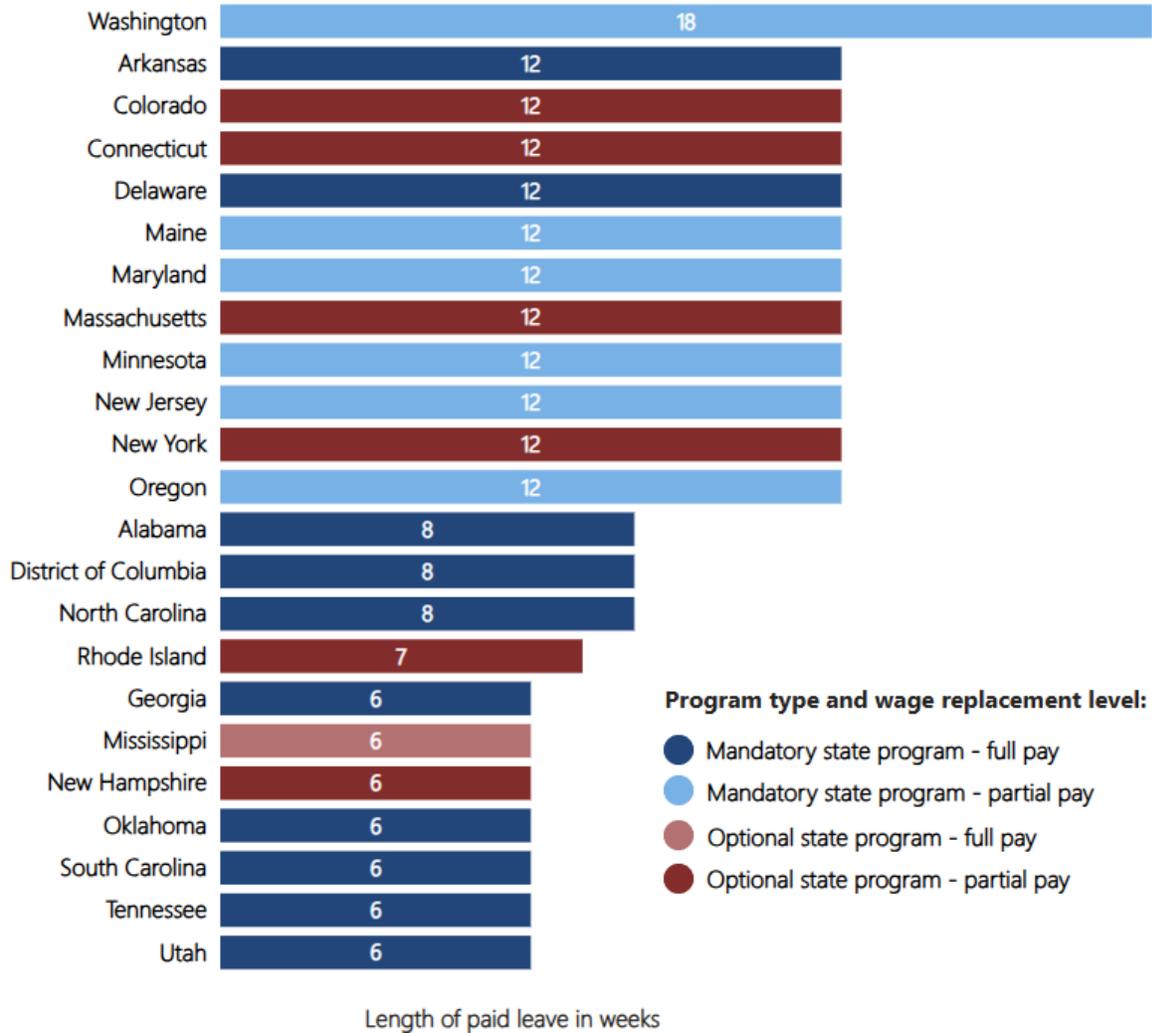
- Megan, Fifth Grade Teacher, Delaware

For example, New Jersey increased its paid leave benefit for eligible workers from 66% to 85% of their average wage. That move resulted in a dramatic rise in uptake, with 70% more residents using the program.<sup>15</sup> More teachers using the program will likely lead to fewer leaving the workforce and a greater return on investment.

A closer look at states that provide paid parental leave shows wide variation in how long teachers can take leave—and how much of their salary they receive while doing so.

Figure 3.

**States differ widely in both the length of leave teachers can take and the amount of pay they receive while on it**



Nearly all states that offer workers partial salary replacement provide up to 12 weeks of paid leave. **Washington** stands out with the nation’s longest policy: While the state offers 12–16 weeks of partially paid leave for most workers, benefits can extend to 18 weeks in cases where complications arise during pregnancy or birth, with workers receiving up to 90% of their salary up to a weekly maximum.

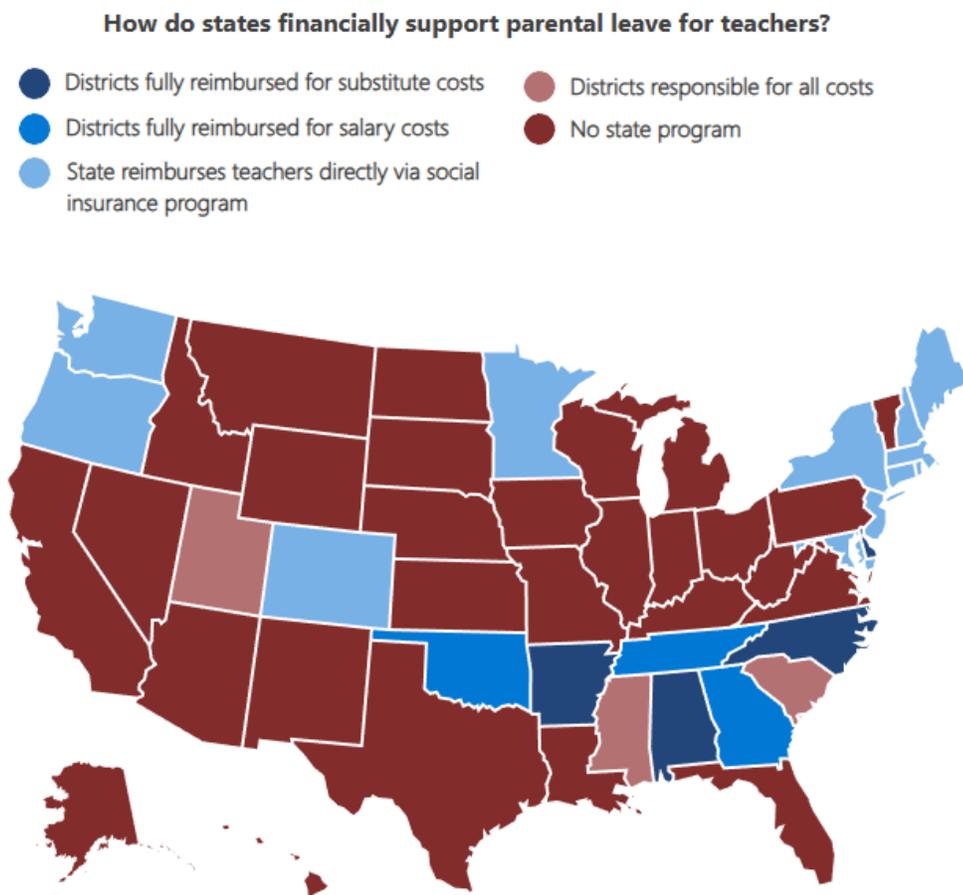
Of the **10 states that provide full pay during parental leave, five limit compensation to only six weeks**—just half the length recommended by experts. While this represents meaningful progress, especially compared to the 28 states that offer no paid leave at all, states must go further. They should expand benefits to ensure teachers have access to a full 12 weeks of paid leave to care for and bond with their growing families.

## How are states providing financial support to districts?

States fund paid parental leave in several ways, including leaving costs to districts, reimbursing districts for substitutes or teacher salaries, and creating statewide social insurance programs to reimburse teachers directly.

Figure 4.

### States use a range of strategies to financially support paid parental leave, with twelve using some form of statewide social insurance program



**Delaware** and **Arkansas** are the only states that grant teachers full pay for 12 weeks by covering the full cost of substitutes while teachers are on leave. Two other states—**Alabama** and **North Carolina**—also provide full reimbursement to districts for substitute costs, but they only offer eight weeks of reimbursement. Another, often more costly, method some states use is to fully fund an employee’s salary during their leave. The substitute reimbursement approach of **Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, and North**

**Carolina** is far more cost-effective. If states reimburse districts the cost of long-term substitutes, districts need only maintain normal operating costs by paying teachers' salaries as usual. This policy ensures that educators receive their full pay during leave, while having minimal impact on the state's overall budget.

### **The First State Leads Again: Delaware's Trailblazing Paid Parental Leave Policy**

Discover how Delaware ensured teachers were included in its landmark paid parental leave policy through strong coalition-building and clear, compelling messaging.

[View Delaware's Case Study](#)

**Mississippi, South Carolina, and Utah** each offer six weeks of paid leave, though the cost falls solely to individual districts. While this structure can create challenges for less affluent districts—especially as [budgets tighten](#) and enrollment declines—it nonetheless represents meaningful progress toward expanding access to paid leave for teachers.

**Twelve states fund their programs through a statewide social insurance model**, in which employees, employers, or both contribute through premiums or payroll deductions. **New York's** optional program is entirely employee funded, with a 0.388% deduction from gross wages per pay period (up to an annual maximum). **Colorado's** optional program shares costs equally between employees and employers, with each contributing 0.45% of wages through payroll deductions.

“My friends in Pennsylvania, where I live, have had to take unpaid FMLA, and they were shocked when I told them I was home for months fully paid. Honestly, Delaware's benefits are the reason I keep teaching here instead of working closer to home.”

- Rebecca, Fourth Grade Teacher, Delaware

Notably, all states using this type of funding mechanism provide eligible workers only partial salary reimbursement during their leave. While this approach helps ensure the sustainability of parental leave programs and reduces the fiscal burden on employers and state budgets, it may also limit access for some workers who cannot afford to take leave at reduced pay.

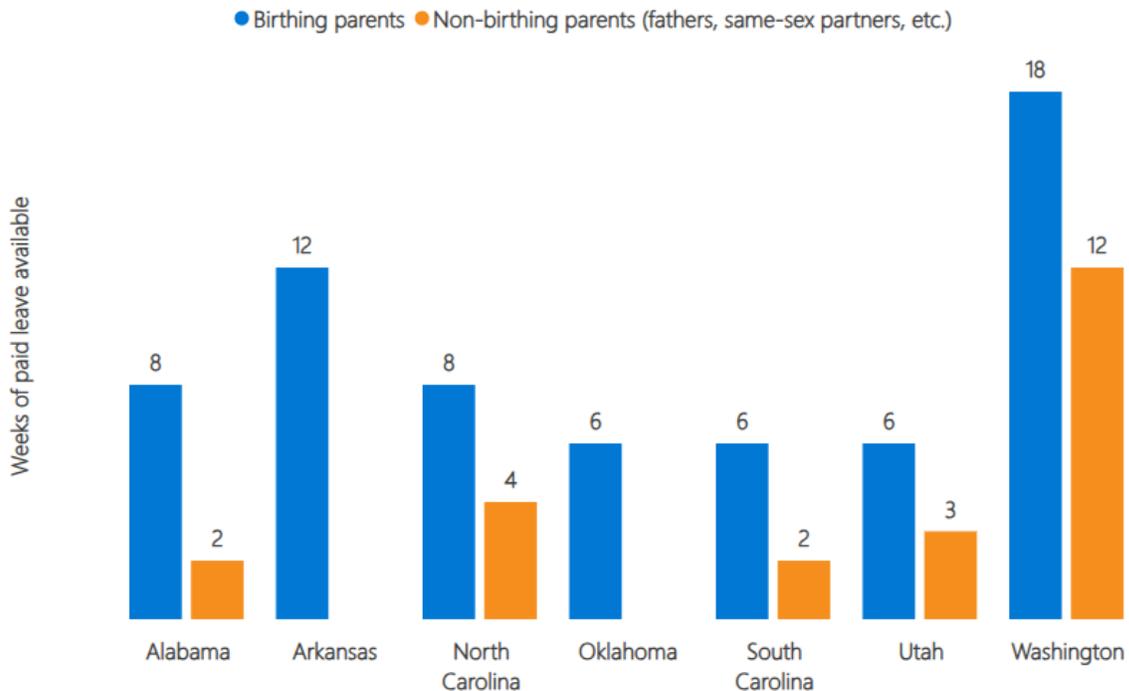
## Policy Lever 3: Extend leave eligibility and benefits to all teachers who become parents—including fathers, adoptive parents, and other types of non-birthing parents.

Research shows that paid parental leave extended to non-birthing parents like fathers results in greater parental involvement, healthier and more stable family relationships, and improved career opportunities for women.<sup>16</sup> Given these demonstrated benefits, it stands to reason that similar positive outcomes would extend to other non-birthing parents, including those who adopt or foster children.

**Despite the likely positive outcomes, nearly one-third of states that offer paid parental leave offer *reduced* benefits for non-birthing parents—or none at all.**

**Figure 5.**

### Seven states with paid parental leave provide little or no paid time off for non-birthing parents



Two states—**Arkansas** and **Oklahoma**—offer paid parental leave to birthing parents but do not extend the benefit to non-birthing parents, including fathers and same-sex partners. In **Oklahoma**, the policy is especially restrictive, covering only biological mothers following childbirth, therefore also excluding both adoptive and foster parents.<sup>17</sup> This exclusion can be especially challenging for adoptive and foster families, given the strong evidence that early bonding between caregivers and children plays a critical role in children’s emotional, social, and cognitive development.<sup>18</sup> These parents are also more likely to face additional challenges that make shortened leave especially difficult, such as last-minute or emergency child placements, complex legal and administrative processes, and the extra time required to help children adjust to new environments and routines.

“I had spent years paying into short-term disability just to have partial pay when I had my first baby. This time, with paid leave, I didn’t have to sacrifice my financial security for motherhood.”

- Katie, High School Teacher, Arkansas

Ultimately, excluding fathers and other non-birthing parents from paid leave reinforces outdated assumptions about caregiving and limits families’ abilities to share responsibilities equitably. This places a disproportionate burden on mothers and can delay or complicate their return to the workforce—a particularly important consideration given that nearly 80% of teachers are women.<sup>19</sup>

More commonly, states differentiate benefits by offering shorter leave to non-birthing parents. While birthing parents are often eligible for significantly longer leave periods, non-birthing parents typically receive far less—for example, just two weeks in **Alabama** and **South Carolina**.

## Recommendations

### **1. Require districts to offer at least 12 weeks of paid parental leave, beyond sick days, for teachers.**

Providing teachers with at least 12 weeks of paid parental leave, beyond sick days, would deliver clear benefits for teachers, families, and schools. Paid leave is consistently linked to improved maternal health, reduced infant mortality, and stronger family stability—especially when both parents can take time to bond with their child. These programs also make sound economic sense: Employees with access to paid parental leave are far more likely to return to work, reducing costly turnover for districts. Establishing a uniform, statewide requirement of at least 12 weeks of paid parental leave aligns state policy with public health recommendations and will likely help stabilize the teacher workforce while promoting healthier, more equitable outcomes for families.

**2. Guarantee that teachers on paid parental leave receive their full salary for the entire duration of their leave.**

Ensuring that teachers receive their full salary during paid parental leave is essential to making it equitable, accessible, and effective. When leave is only partially paid, teachers, particularly those early in their careers or in single-income households, are more likely to shorten or forgo their leave entirely due to financial strain. Full salary coverage not only supports teachers' financial stability but also helps close racial wage gaps.<sup>20</sup> States should consider their unique political and fiscal contexts to identify sustainable mechanisms for funding paid parental leave while ensuring teachers can care for their families without financial hardship. One effective and sustainable model is for states to reimburse districts for the cost of substitutes, allowing districts to maintain business-as-usual expenses. This ensures teachers can take fully paid leave while minimizing the overall cost to the state.

**3. Extend leave eligibility and benefits to all teachers welcoming a child—including non-birthing parents, adoptive parents, and foster parents.**

Extending paid parental leave to non-birthing partners such as fathers and same-sex partners, as well as adoptive and foster parents, is essential to promoting equity, supporting all families, and strengthening the teacher workforce. Research shows that when both parents have access to paid leave, families grow stronger, children are healthier, and women experience better career outcomes. Ensuring equal leave duration and benefits for all parents recognizes the shared responsibilities of caregiving, supports early caregiver-child bonding, and helps retain talented educators in the classroom.

## Additional considerations for policymakers

**1. Require an annual report on the impact of paid parental leave.** Collecting data on teacher participation in paid parental leave programs helps states assess the impact of these policies and plan budgets accordingly. Delaware, for example, produces an [annual report](#) detailing how many teachers—by gender, race, and district—take advantage of paid parental leave.

**2. Coordinate across state agencies to develop paid parental leave programs that best meet the unique needs of education professionals.**

Paid parental leave programs are often administered by state labor or workforce departments, but teachers face unique circumstances that make implementation more complex. Unlike other state employees, districts must cover the cost of substitutes during a teacher's absence, creating an additional financial burden.

Close coordination between state education agencies and labor departments is essential to developing sustainable funding solutions, allocating resources effectively, and ensuring teachers can access leave without straining district budgets.

**3. Develop or update state paid parental leave programs to allow teachers to take leave flexibly to better meet modern childcare needs.**

It is important to design parental leave programs that offer parents flexibility regarding when they take leave—particularly to help reduce long-term childcare costs, which accounted for roughly 9–16% of families’ median income as of 2022.<sup>21</sup> Allowing two-parent households to stagger their time off enables families to delay childcare costs, reducing financial strain and saving money.

**NCTQ Paid Parental Leave Model Policy Language**

Ready to expand teachers’ access to paid parental leave in your state but not sure where to start?

NCTQ’s Model Policy Language pulls together the key pieces you need to design a strong, workable policy—one that ensures every teacher can take time to grow their family and confidently return to the classroom.

[View the Model Policy](#)

# Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> NCTQ uses the term *paid parental leave* throughout this analysis to refer broadly to leave available to individuals who welcome a child through birth, adoption, or foster placement. We intend this term to encompass other commonly used phrases—such as paid family leave, paid maternity leave, and paid paternity leave—under one umbrella.

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