Rethinking Compensation in Innovative Learning Models

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Key Takeaways
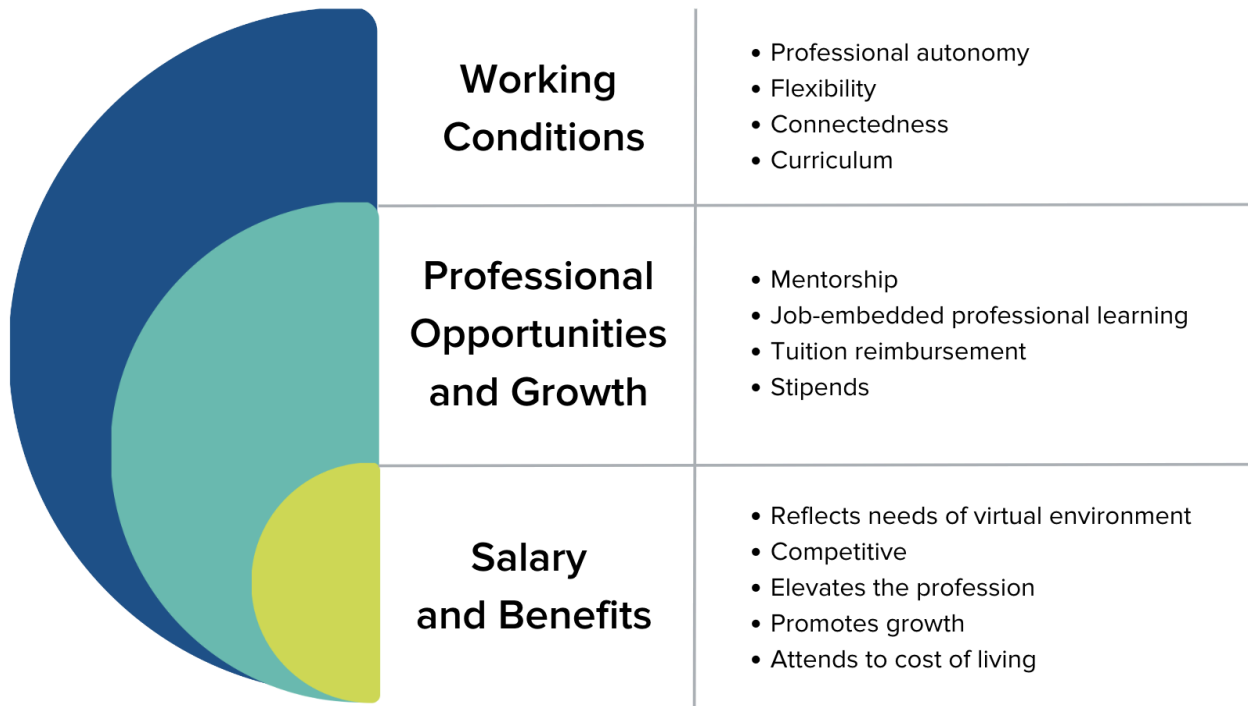
- ➔ Educators seek out virtual and hybrid teaching roles for the flexibility and autonomy that they offer, forcing leaders to carefully consider their compensation models.
- ➔ Virtual and hybrid learning contexts present a unique opportunity to reconsider compensation strategies to better recruit and retain high-quality teachers.
- ➔ Leaders can reimagine their compensation models by addressing three dimensions: **salary and benefits**, **professional opportunities and growth**, and **working conditions**.

Introduction

Fully virtual and hybrid learning contexts present an incredible opportunity to ***rethink educator compensation as a tool for recruiting and retaining effective, high-quality teachers and responding to a call for greater professionalization in the field.*** Unlike in brick-and-mortar settings, educators seek out virtual teaching opportunities for a variety of reasons, making compensation more complex than a simple focus on traditional salaries and benefits. To ensure these educators feel respected as professionals and have access to the resources they need to thrive, compensation should include three key components: **salary and benefits**, **professional opportunities and growth**, and **working conditions.**[1] Each component is associated with attracting effective educators, enhancing teacher quality, reducing attrition, and improving student outcomes as well as advancing a holistic view of educator wellbeing.

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[1] These three factors emerged as a result of research that The Learning Accelerator (TLA) conducted during Fall 2023 including interviews with virtual and hybrid leaders as well as consultation with experts.

Working Conditions	• Professional autonomy • Flexibility • Connectedness • Curriculum	
Professional Opportunities and Growth	• Mentorship • Job-embedded professional learning • Tuition reimbursement • Stipends	
Salary and Benefits	• Reflects needs of virtual environment • Competitive • Elevates the profession • Promotes growth • Attends to cost of living	

Recognizing the Opportunity

When educators shifted to virtual and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, many discovered more flexible ways of working and a greater sense of agency. Schools and systems have the opportunity to capitalize on this context, creating conditions that are valuable and responsive to educators' needs. In addition, as schools and systems continue to face educator shortages, a multifaceted approach to compensation supports the recruitment and retention of teachers and staff.

Understanding the Nuances of Virtual & Hybrid Contexts

Fully virtual and hybrid schools and systems operate in different contexts across K-12 education. Given this varied context, leaders will experience a host of opportunities — and constraints — when approaching compensation.

Within Brick-and-Mortar K-12 Schools

Likely dictated by state and district policies, as well as local union contracts.
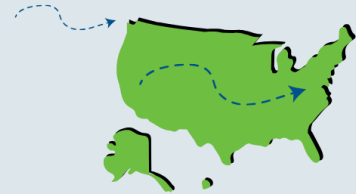
Within LEAs or SEAs

Operate under a charter with its own governance or as a state-level system serving students across district lines.

Systems Reaching Across Districts & States

Leaders may need to account for differentiated costs of living, their ability to offer full-time positions versus adjunct or contract work, and course enrollment numbers.

Salary and Benefits: The Foundation for Compensation

Salaries and benefits should reflect the needs and expertise of educators while maintaining competitiveness with local systems and other virtual or hybrid settings. Beyond district requirements and union contracts, leaders need to account for three additional components:

1. **Cost of living:** Leaders may need to offer differing salaries and benefits based on geographic location. *Because educators working in virtual settings may choose to live further from brick-and-mortar schools to take advantage of lower costs of living, how might leaders factor that into salary offerings while maintaining competitiveness, transparency, and equity?*

2. **Connections to students:** Leaders can leverage salaries and benefits to attract talent who understand the lived experiences and cultures of the student populations. *In virtual and hybrid contexts, student and staff belonging is critical to wellbeing. How can leaders approach compensation as a tool to uplift local community values?*

3. **Professionalization:** As educators demonstrate effectiveness and take on leadership roles, salary structures should be reflective of that expertise, providing transparent pathways and rewards for advancement. *Recognizing that educators want to grow professionally, how might leaders examine their salary scales to promote continued educator advancement and retention?*

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Taking Action: Analyzing Educator Salaries

Educator and staff salaries vary widely by state, district, and type of virtual or hybrid model. Leaders can use the following tools to examine their salary structures.

➔ The Teacher Salary Project national map displays average salaries by state and year dating back to 1970.
➔ Launched in 2022, the NEA Teacher Salary Benchmarks Database lists the average starting and top salaries by state and degree.
➔ The Schools and Staffing Survey and the Digest of Education Statistics present national tables that include average salaries by state and degree.
➔ The National Council on Teacher Quality has a contract database for 145 districts.
➔ The career pages on virtual school and system websites often include the starting salaries associated with open teaching positions.

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Investing in Educators: Creating Opportunities for Professional Growth

Mentorships, job-embedded professional learning, technology access, tuition reimbursement, and stipends ensure educators have the right support and tools to grow professionally. Since professional opportunities and growth directly contribute to educator success and satisfaction, leaders should explore how they might enhance their educators' experiences, feelings of connectedness, and overall effectiveness. For example, schools or systems may make strategic investments to provide student loan support, tuition reimbursement, and bonuses for additional licenses. These strategies are known to be effective in attracting new talent and also lead to greater recruitment and retention of talent, while also contributing to positive working conditions.

Leveraging intentional professional learning both ensures that every educator is equipped with the tools they need to be successful *and* communicates that systems prioritize *people* as their most valuable resource. Whether this occurs as structured opportunities for remote collaboration, weekly workshops, or in the form of virtual coaching, investing in a compensation model that values teachers and their growth can help educators feel connected to one another – as well as their students – and can foster greater levels of satisfaction.

Taking Action: Make Strategic Investments in Professional Support

➔ **Identify financial incentives** such as stipends for earning additional credentials or tuition reimbursement.
➔ **Solicit educator input** when designing professional learning opportunities to make sure these opportunities match their needs and interests.
➔ **Identify ways to incorporate mentorship and job-embedded professional learning** to support ongoing collective growth and individual advancement.

Building Community: Working Conditions that Foster Autonomy and Connection

Working conditions are critical to educator satisfaction, wellbeing, and their decision to stay in the profession. Particularly in virtual and hybrid settings, educators value professional autonomy, flexibility, and control over curriculum implementation. Attending to the wellbeing of the adults within any school community – whether virtual, hybrid, or brick-and-mortar – is a critical lever for educator success.

Often overlooked, leaders need to intentionally examine the policies, practices, and culture within their unique context, particularly when educators may be working virtually with few in-person opportunities to build strong relationships within the school community (i.e., colleagues, students, and families). This could include intentionally nurturing cross-grade professional learning communities or communities of practice based on specific topics of interest. By factoring these working conditions into their compensation model, leaders prioritize educator retention and longevity.

Taking Action: Strengthen Community Connections In Person and Online

Particularly in virtual and hybrid models where educators may feel a
sense of isolation, it is critical for leaders to build a sense of community
and belonging. Consider the following:

→ Identify what educators need to build meaningful relationships
through listening sessions and/or strategic surveys.
→ Examine the role educators play in curriculum implementation
and have strategic feedback loops to determine the effect on satisfaction.
→ Analyze schedules and structures to determine the level of autonomy afforded to
educators and explore avenues to increase flexibility based on feedback.
→ Prioritize building relationships through the use of synchronous and asynchronous
tools, intentionally designing opportunities for educators to meaningfully collaborate
and connect.

Capitalizing on the Opportunity of Compensation

Virtual and hybrid systems are in a unique position to think differently about compensation and
build a holistic model to recruit and retain quality talent. Leaders can proactively address their
compensation models by taking the following actions:

- [Build an inclusive team](#) to identify opportunities for growth and explore potential
solutions.
- Investigate whether your overall compensation package is fair and competitive with
similar schools or systems including **salary and benefits**, **professional opportunities and
growth**, and **working conditions**.
- Conduct listening sessions or disseminate a [survey](#) to determine what your faculty and
staff value with your current compensation package.
- Identify opportunities to enhance and address the [wellbeing of the adults in your
community](#).
- When recruiting new educators, include questions in your application process to
understand what enticed potential candidates to the position.
- In exit interviews, ask explicit questions about compensation to determine how it may
have factored into their decision-making.
- Finally, make sure to examine any chosen solution(s) with an [equity lens](#), capturing
feedback and adjusting as needed on an iterative basis.