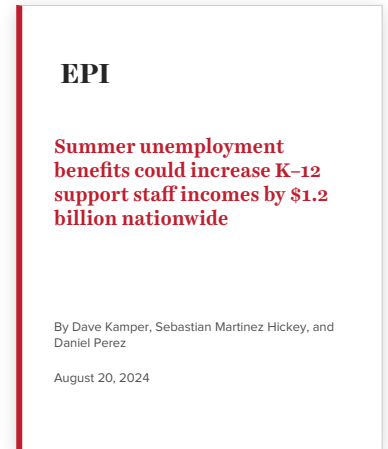


# Summer unemployment benefits could increase K–12 support staff incomes by \$1.2 billion nationwide

**Report** • By Dave Kamper, Sebastian Martinez Hickey, and Daniel Perez • August 20, 2024

## Summer unemployment benefits could increase K–12 support staff incomes by \$1.2 billion nationwide

**Summary:** Instead of punishing workers for wanting to serve in public schools, states should follow Minnesota’s lead by providing school support staff—who are disproportionately Black and brown, women, and older workers—with unemployment insurance benefits during the summer.



**Read the full report**  
[epi.org/281866](https://epi.org/281866)

### Key findings

- Adding to woefully low compensation and inadequate hours, school support staff must forgo months of income in the summer but are ineligible for unemployment insurance (UI) benefits.
- Minnesota extended summer UI eligibility to school support staff in 2023, which led to these workers receiving nearly \$40 million in unemployment benefits.
- If all 50 states enacted policies like Minnesota’s, school support staff incomes would increase by \$1.2 billion per year; this would prevent the significant drop off in income that occurs for many school support staff during the summer.
- Providing support staff with UI through the summer reduces incentives for these workers to find a different job, which can help with staff retention.

### Why this matters

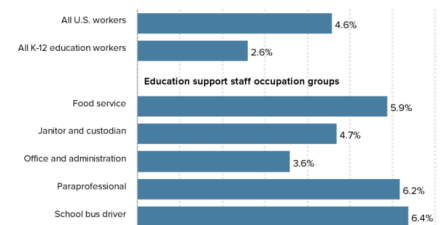
Extending summer unemployment benefits to school support staff is an easy way to help stabilize K–12 school staffing, improve learning environments for students, and provide economic security for this essential group of workers.

### How to fix it

States should enact the same policy enacted by Minnesota in 2023, making school support staff eligible for unemployment insurance benefits in the summer. This policy would provide a meaningful supplement to these vital workers’ earnings, at a relatively trivial cost to the public.

### Low wages mean most education support workers experience greater rates of poverty than other workers

Share of all workers, K–12 education workers, and education support staff workers who are in poverty



Source: EPI analysis of 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data.

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**T**he Economic Policy Institute has long documented the expanding pay penalty faced by teachers in our K–12 system thanks to decades of underinvestment in public education (Allegretto 2023). But teachers are not the only ones who have been undervalued: Many other school staff—who are essential for providing high-quality, safe, and nurturing learning environments—face considerable financial challenges as a result of their decision to serve in public schools.

This report outlines the working conditions of K–12 school support staff across the country.

Typically, paraprofessionals, classroom assistants, administrative assistants, custodians, food service workers, bus drivers, and other nonlicensed staff in schools already receive low pay and inadequate hours during the school year. These jobs are disproportionately held by women, Black and brown workers, and older workers.

In addition to low wages, support staff often do not work for school districts over the summer months—which translates to a potential loss of 10 or 11 weeks of paid employment. The precarity of these workers is compounded by policies (in all but two states) which make school support staff ineligible to collect unemployment insurance (UI) during the summer.

This report discusses the historical reasons for this exclusion and emphasizes that state policies could and should change to help support school staff in the summer.

In 2023, Minnesota passed a law to make school support staff eligible for unemployment insurance during their summer breaks, becoming the first state in the nation to enact this as a permanent measure for all school support staff. EPI originally estimated that the law would provide \$28 million in benefits to workers in 2021 (Wolfe and Kamper 2021), just over \$32 million in 2023 dollars.<sup>1</sup> The data collected by the state of Minnesota show that, during the summer of 2023, this law provided \$38.6 million in much-needed wage replacement for school support staff (MDE 2024).

If the other 49 states and D.C. enacted such legislation with a benefit utilization similar to Minnesota’s, the total wages paid to school support staff nationwide would be

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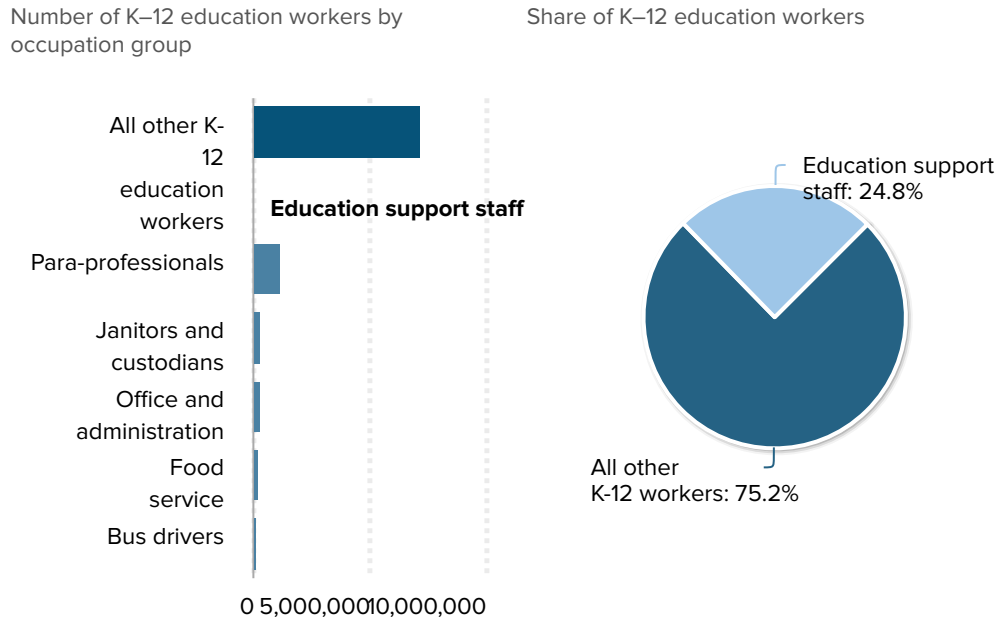
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Figure A

## K–12 education support staff are a quarter of the education workforce



Source: EPI analysis of 2022 American Community Survey data.

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roughly \$1.2 billion—a meaningful supplement to these vital workers’ earnings, yet a relatively trivial cost to the public. Such a policy would help school districts recruit and retain these essential staff and provide critical support to these low-paid workers and their families.

## The school support staff workforce

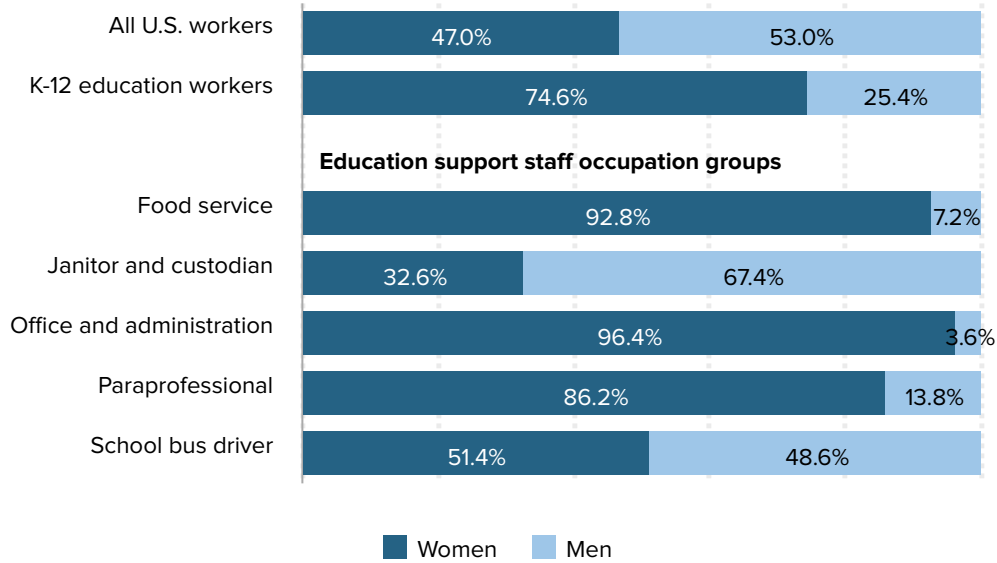
Support staff work across the school system and are vital to every aspect of its work. The first school employee many students see in the morning and last one they see at the end of the day is their school bus driver. Their classrooms, bathrooms, locker rooms, hallways, and gymnasiums are cleaned by custodians—who often also maintain boilers and HVAC systems. In the classroom, teachers are assisted by a panoply of support staff—some specialize in helping students with disabilities or English-language learners, though today’s teacher assistants perform myriad roles, including providing child care before and after school. At lunchtime, support staff are the food service workers who make sure students get a nutritious meal. And when students go to the office, the clerical and administrative personnel they see are most likely school support staff.

Our analysis of this workforce includes five occupation groups that make up the K–12 education support workforce: food service workers; janitors and custodians; paraprofessionals (teacher assistants and child care workers); school bus drivers; and non-supervisory office and administration workers.<sup>2</sup> It also includes both public and private

Figure B

## Women are highly concentrated in many education support staff occupations

Gender composition of total workforce, all K–12 education workers, and education support staff



Source: EPI analysis of 2022 American Community Survey data.

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school employees. **Figure A** shows that in 2022, there were more than 2.3 million K–12 education support workers in the United States. Roughly a quarter (24.8%) of all K–12 education workers are support staff, with the largest occupational group being paraprofessionals, which in turn is mostly composed of teacher assistants.

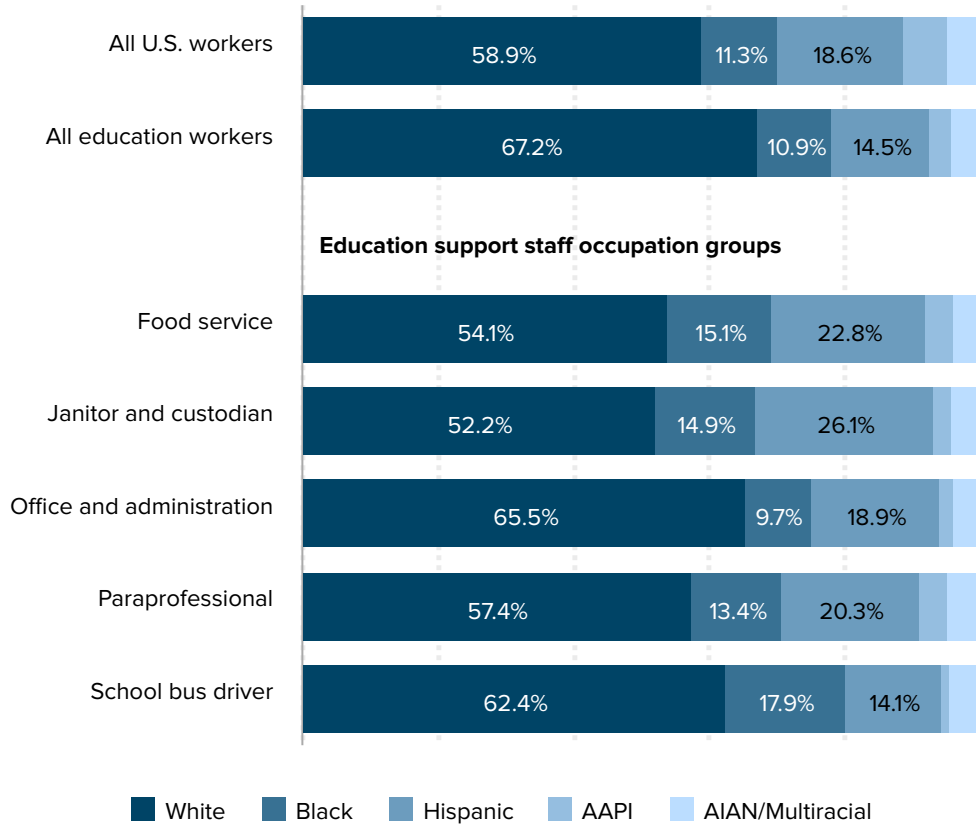
As is common in education and the public sector, the school support workforce is dominated by women workers. **Figure B** shows that, while women constitute 47% of the overall workforce, they represent the largest share of all education support occupation groups if we exclude janitors and custodians. Women make up very large shares of education food service (92.8%), office and administration (96.4%), and paraprofessional (86.2%) workers.

**Figure C** shows that school support staff are disproportionately Black and brown workers. While Black workers make up 11.3% of the nation’s workforce as a whole and represent 10.9% of the overall K–12 education workforce (including teachers and administrators), they constitute 15.1% of food service workers; 14.9% of custodial employees; and 17.9% of school bus drivers. Hispanic workers represent 18.6% of the U.S. workforce, but they make up 20.3% of paraprofessional and 26.1% of custodial employees. Like Black workers, Hispanic workers in K–12 education are more likely to be support staff than teachers or administrators.

Figure C

## Food service workers, bus drivers, janitors, and paraprofessionals are more likely to be Black and Hispanic than other education workers

Share of all workers, K–12 education workers, and education support staff by race/ethnicity



**Notes:** AAPI stands for Asian American and Pacific Islander. AIAN stands for American Indian and Alaska Native.

**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022 American Community Survey data.

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One reason that Black and women workers are concentrated in these education support occupations can be traced to the public sector’s history of leading the private sector in the fight against sex- and race-based discrimination. Most K–12 education jobs are in public education, and although discrimination in the public sector still exists, equal opportunity and affirmative action programs in the public sector have historically created greater employment opportunities for Black workers and women (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012).

# Support staff positions are not well paid

Despite being critical positions to the success of the country's education system, K–12 support staff jobs tend to not be paid well. None of these jobs pays near the U.S. median wage of \$23.93 per hour.<sup>3</sup> Paraprofessionals—by far the largest group of school support staff—have a median wage of \$17.73 per hour, and food service workers make just \$15.36 per hour. The median hourly wage for the highest-paid school support staff workers—clerical and administrative staff—is just 84% of the national median wage (**Figure D**).

Low wages mean that many support staff workers do not have economic security. EPI's Family Budget Calculator (FBC) describes the income needed, in any county in the country, for families of different sizes to cover basic living expenses and have a modest standard of living. Even in a scenario where a worker has no children or other dependents to provide for, there is no county in the U.S. where a person could reach the family budget calculator's modest, but secure income threshold with the median wages of an education food service worker. While the median wages for clerical and administrative staff are higher, these workers still cannot access economic security in more than half (52%) of the 3,143 counties in the FBC database (Gould, Mokhiber, and deCourcy).

These cost-of-living estimates assume that a worker is working full time and year-round, which is not the case for most education support workers. Many of these workers do not have employment from their school during the summer months and work fewer weeks than the typical worker. **Figure E** shows that janitors are the only support occupation to work more weeks than the U.S. average. Food service workers, paraprofessionals, and school bus drivers all typically work 44 weeks or less a year, around a month less than the average U.S. worker.

Even during the school year many tend to work less than 40 hours per week. Bus drivers and food service workers, for example, average less than 33 hours per week. So it isn't surprising that while just 4.5% of all U.S. workers have more than one job, 11.4% of public school bus drivers, 10.6% of teaching assistants, 7.1% of school custodians, and 6.1% of food service staff hold multiple jobs (Cooper and Martinez Hickey 2022).

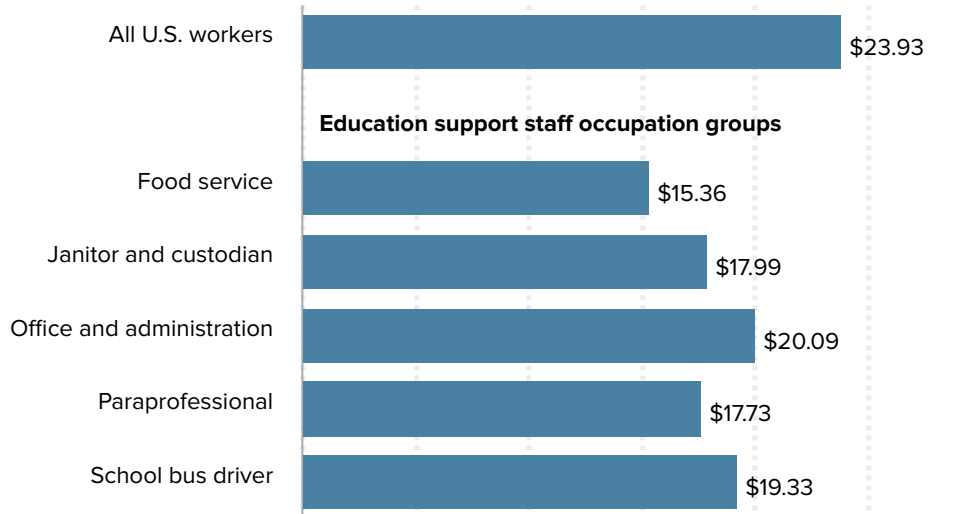
Since many education support workers work fewer than 40 hours per week at their primary job, their weekly earnings are lower than their hourly rates suggest. **Figure F** shows that the weekly wages of school clerical and administrative staff are just 76% the weekly wages of the median U.S. worker. School bus drivers and food service workers, meanwhile, earn less than 61% of the median U.S. worker's weekly wages.

Due to their low wages and limited annual work time, support staff workers earn much less in annual wages and salary income than the typical U.S. worker and other education workers.<sup>4</sup> **Figure G** shows that the median annual earnings of food service workers

Figure D

## Even the highest-paid education support workers earn just 84% of the wages of the typical U.S. worker

Median hourly wages for K–12 education support workers and for all U.S. workers (\$2023)



**Note:** Values in 2023 dollars.

**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group data.

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(\$21,337) and paraprofessionals (\$24,496) are less than half of the earnings of the typical U.S. worker. School bus drivers earn just slightly more than half (55.1%) of what the median worker does. While janitors and office staff work more weeks per year and earn more annually, they still earn just 70% of the median worker’s earnings.

Low earnings for these professionals bars them from achieving economic security. **Figure H** shows that food service workers (5.9%), paraprofessionals (6.2%), and bus drivers (6.4%) are more likely to be poor than the typical U.S. worker (4.6%).

Given these low wages, it is small wonder that since the pandemic, school districts have had a difficult time recruiting and retaining school support staff. **Figure I** shows that all categories of school support staff jobs have seen slower job growth than the country’s labor force as a whole. Some of the most poorly compensated positions—such as food service workers, janitors, and school bus drivers—have seen the largest percentage declines in employment since before the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

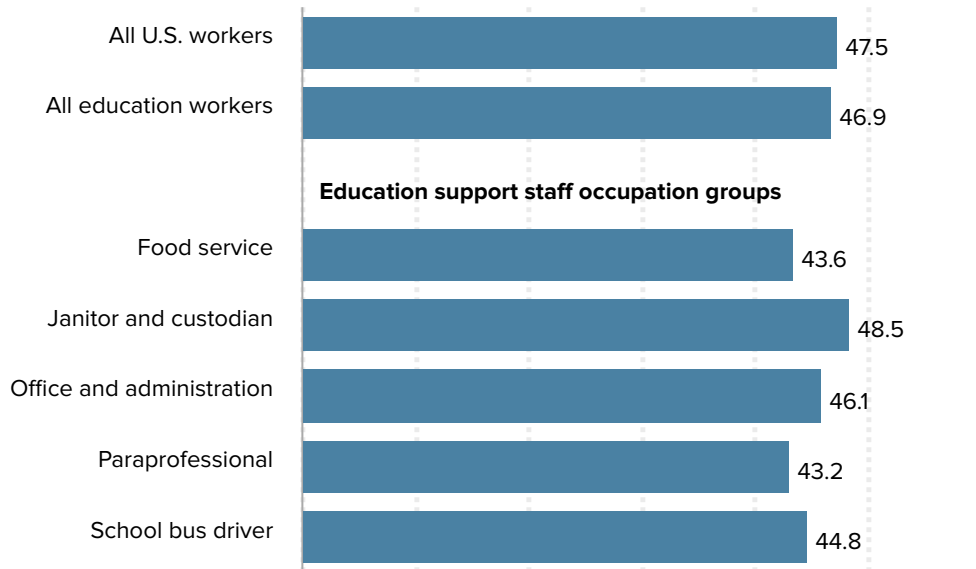
Recruiting more workers to these critical education roles will require increasing compensation. In addition to increasing pay for these workers, another policy that could help attract and retain school support staff is providing them a source of income in the summer, by making them eligible for unemployment benefits during their summer breaks. By extending unemployment benefits to these workers and treating them like seasonal employees in other industries, school districts can help retain existing workers and recruit



Figure E

## Food service workers, paraprofessionals, and school bus drivers work one month less per year than the typical worker

Average annual weeks worked for all workers, K–12 education workers, and education support workers



**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data.

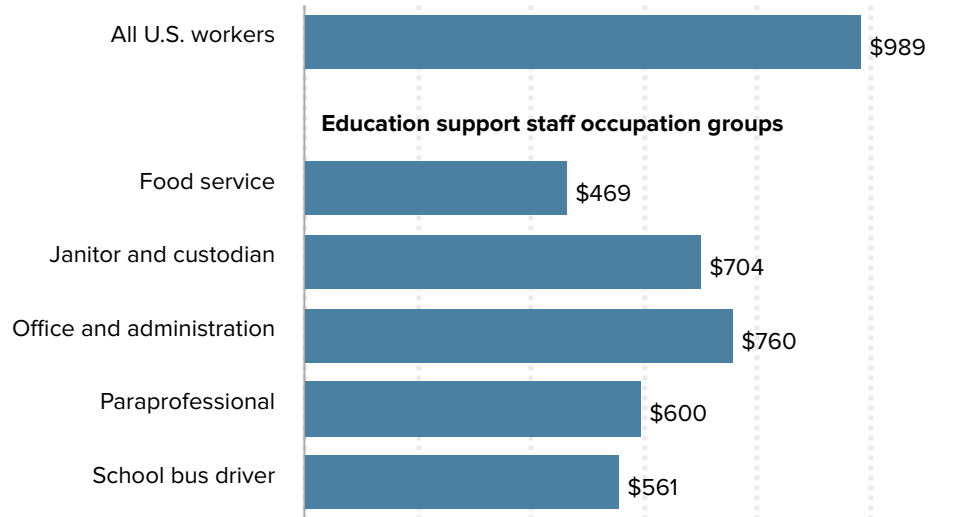
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new professionals to fill the employment gap (NELP 2015).

Figure F

## School bus drivers and food service workers earn less than 60% of a typical worker's weekly wages

Median weekly wages for all workers and K–12 education support workers



**Note:** Values in 2023 dollars.

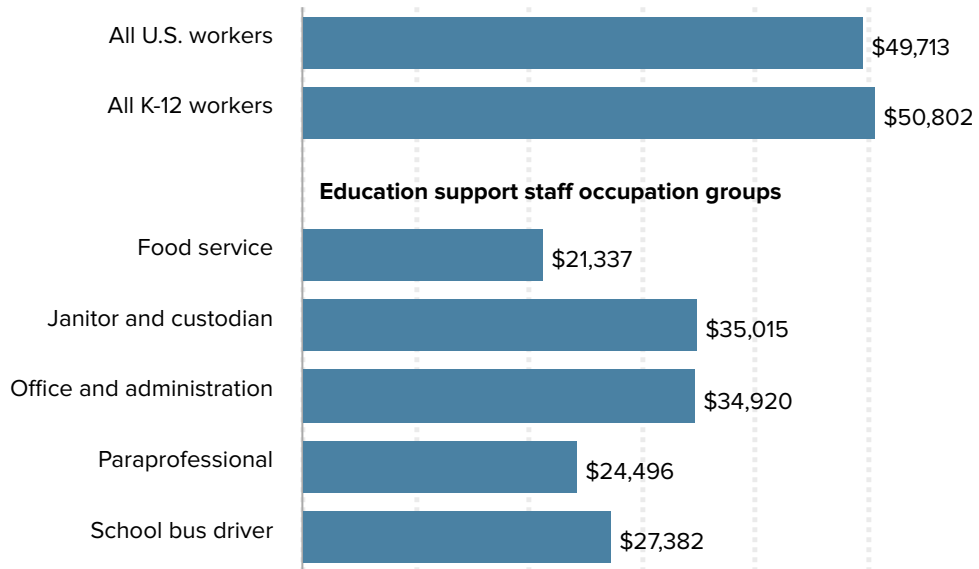
**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group data.

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Figure G

## The annual earnings for food service workers and paraprofessionals are less than half that of the median U.S. worker

Median annual wage and salary income for all workers, K–12 education workers, and education support workers



**Note:** Values in 2023 dollars.

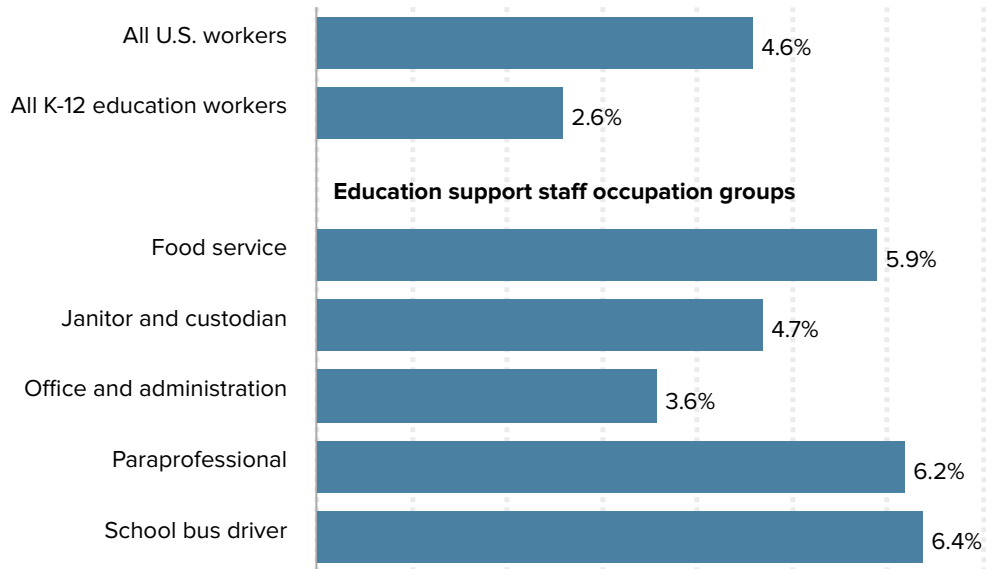
**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data.

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Figure H

## Low wages mean most education support workers experience greater rates of poverty than other workers

Share of all workers, K–12 education workers, and education support staff workers who are in poverty



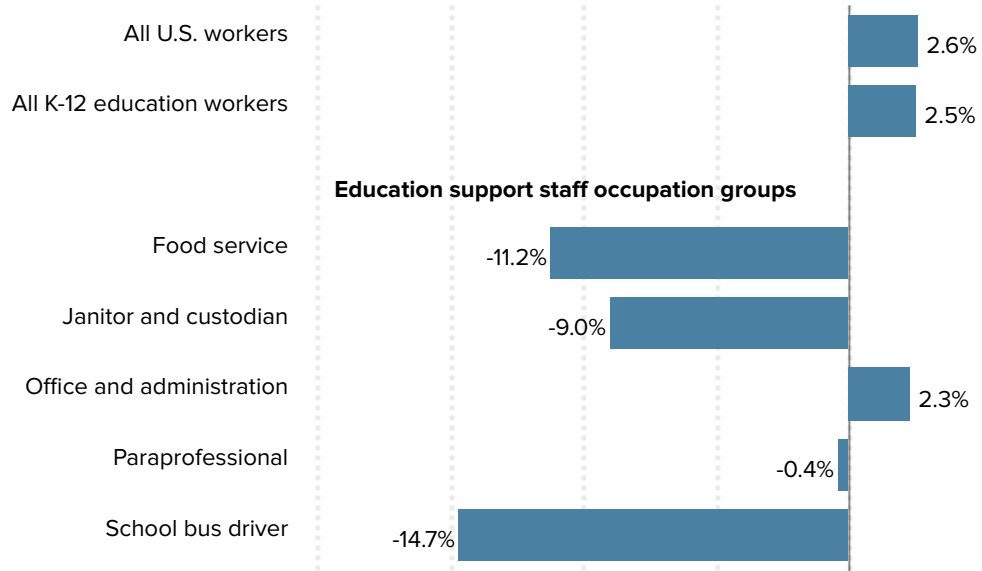
**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data.

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Figure 1

## Employment levels for educational support staff have struggled to recover from the pandemic

Percent change in employment for all workers and K–12 education support staff, 2019–2022



Source: EPI analysis of 2019–2022 American Community Survey data.

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# The exclusion of school support staff from unemployment insurance

## How workers qualify for unemployment insurance

As its name implies, unemployment insurance is a form of social insurance, mandated by the federal government but administered by states. It is designed to replace a worker's lost wages when that worker becomes unemployed for reasons other than a discharge for misconduct. In addition to supporting individual workers, UI is a macroeconomic stabilizer which protects the entire economy during economic downturns (Banerjee and Bivens 2021). To qualify for UI, a worker must have worked a sufficient number of hours and/or earned a sufficient amount in wages. The specific requirements vary greatly by state, but are low enough that most workers qualify (DOL 2023).<sup>6</sup>

To receive benefits, a worker must be able to work, available to work, and actively seeking work. There are considerable state variants, many with significantly more onerous requirements than others, but all states require workers to be seeking work to receive benefits. While opponents of such benefits frequently claim that UI allows workers to stay home and collect benefits instead of working, an individual will lose eligibility for benefits if they refuse a job offer of "suitable" work while unemployed or if they stop seeking a new job (Fields-White et al. 2020).

The value of UI benefits is decided by states, and the differences among states are quite significant. For example, the maximum weekly benefit in Mississippi is just \$235, but it can be as high as \$1,522 in Massachusetts. In general, benefits replace about 40% of a worker's pre-separation wages (Sawo and Sherer 2022). In most cases, workers cannot receive benefits for more than 26 weeks a year, but in some states it can be as little as 12 weeks (CBPP 2024). Workers are responsible for initiating the process of obtaining UI funds, and the process can be difficult for many. The share of unemployed workers who actually receive UI benefits is known as the *reciprocity rate*; nationally, this rate is 29% (DOL-ETA 2024). Historically, younger people, workers with lower educational attainment, and racial and ethnic minorities have tended to have lower reciprocity rates than other workers (Forsythe and Yang 2022).

## Workers excluded from UI benefits

When the United States' modern unemployment system was enacted as part of the Social Security Act of 1935, it was consciously "built to serve white, male, full-time workers" (Traub and Diehl 2022). Key groups of workers were excluded from unemployment insurance, including domestic and agricultural laborers. This was largely because of the political maneuvers required for President Roosevelt to win the votes of racist Southern

lawmakers in Congress, as domestic and agricultural workers in the South were disproportionately likely to be Black. Most public employees were also excluded until the 1970s.

Because the unemployment insurance system is managed at the state level, eligibility rules vary for seasonal and temporary workers in industries like construction and commercial fishing. Many seasonal workers are eligible for unemployment insurance during their off-seasons in some states, even if they expect to be hired back on in the next year.

For public educational institutions, there is an added burden that must be met to be eligible for benefits, known as “lacking reasonable assurance.” Most school districts do not have regular classes in the summer, or for one to two weeks at the end of the calendar year. As such, many school employees are not working—and not earning wages—during those times. However, if the employee has a “reasonable assurance” that they will be returning to work when those breaks are over, they are likely ineligible for UI benefits. Only if they do not have that reasonable assurance (if they were permanently laid off, for example) can they claim UI.

Instructional and administrative staff (teachers, principals, etc.) are barred by federal law from receiving unemployment insurance during those break times. This law is absolute and cannot be changed by states. Two separate federal commissions examining unemployment laws, one in 1980 and one in 1996, recommended repealing this prohibition on school employees being eligible for unemployment insurance (NCUC 1980, ADUC 1996). The 1980 report described the exclusion of school employees as “discriminatory,” and urged repeal in the belief that the additional cost to schools would be minimal. Despite these recommendations, the prohibition on instructional staff receiving unemployment between school years remains.

However, federal unemployment law does not prohibit, and has never prohibited, states from extending unemployment insurance to noninstructional school support staff in the summer, even if those staff have a reasonable assurance they will be still working for the school district in the fall. However, it is not the default; states need to make a positive choice to extend UI benefits to these workers. To date, states have not enacted these policies except in a few instances:

- Illinois allowed school support staff to claim unemployment during the summer of 2020 as part of the state’s response to the pandemic (Wolfe and Kamper 2021).
- Oregon allowed janitorial, custodial, and facilities staff to receive summer unemployment starting in 2019, and has gradually expanded this benefit so that, in the summer of 2024, all school support staff will be eligible to receive UI (OSEA 2024).
- While California does not make school support staff eligible for unemployment insurance in the summer, it does allow school districts to participate in a deferred compensation plan whereby staff can have deductions from their paychecks matched by state funding and then paid out to them over the summer (State of California n.d.).

# Minnesota expands eligibility to K–12 support staff

In 2023, Minnesota enacted House File 2497, which changed the law for school support staff.<sup>7</sup> It removed the “reasonable assurance” requirement for “the period between two successive academic years,” that is to say, the summer. It applied to all school employees employed in “other than instructional, research, or principal” work.<sup>8</sup>

Under the law, all nonlicensed school support staff working in any public or charter school district would be eligible to receive unemployment if they did not work over the summer or if their hours were reduced over the summer. They would still, like all other applicants for UI, be required to look for work and to accept suitable offers of employment. It put school support staff on the same footing as seasonal workers who already collect UI.

## Utilization of Minnesota’s new policy

Part of the new law required the Minnesota Department of Education to produce a report, showing how much school districts actually paid out in UI benefits to school support staff during the summer of 2023.

Paraprofessional employees were by far the most numerous of the UI recipients. While they represent just 57.6% of the school support staff Minnesota, they accounted for 68.3% of all UI expenditures by school districts (**Table 1**). On the opposite end, janitors and custodians make up 12.3% of MN school support staff, but less than 1% of the \$38.6 million was paid out to them. While school bus drivers constitute a much smaller share of the recipients overall, they were the most likely of all the job categories to receive benefits.



Table 1

## Estimating the impact of Minnesota's implementation of summer unemployment insurance for education support staff

Education occupation category	Number of workers	Occupation share of all education support workers	Expenditure per category*	Share of total expenditures	Share of full-time equivalent workers receiving benefits **
Food service	7,000	12.7%	\$4,782,469	12.4%	23.1%
Janitor and custodian	6,800	12.3%	\$57,958	0.2%	0.2%
Office and administration	8,300	15.0%	\$2,680,910	6.9%	8.8%
Paraprofessional	31,800	57.6%	\$26,354,835	68.3%	20.2%
School bus driver	1,300	2.4%	\$2,579,616	6.7%	65.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>55,200</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>\$38,604,286</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

**Notes:** \*Education expenditure categories do not add to total because "Other" expenditure is not shown. In Minnesota, the "Other" category cost \$2,148,498 (5.5% of total expenditure).

\*\*We assume each worker claiming UI does so for an 11-week summer break. Dividing total UI weeks claimed by 11 produces the full-time equivalent (FTE) number of employees who received UI. The FTE number of employees divided by the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) number of total workers produces the share of FTE workers who received UI benefits.

**Source:** Worker counts and wage data from Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics 2023 data. UI expenditure data from MDE 2024.

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# Program costs

Most private-sector employers pay for their employees' potential UI benefits via payroll taxes. An employer's UI taxes vary based on how often their workers end up utilizing the UI system; the more frequently an employer lays off workers, the higher the UI tax amount they will be required to pay. Those taxes go into the state's unemployment insurance trust fund, which pays out benefits.

Public employers—including school districts—are generally “reimbursable employers,” meaning they do not pay UI taxes. Instead, they must reimburse the state's unemployment insurance trust fund for the total costs of any benefits that employer pays out. Because public employers pay the full cost of any benefits paid out to public sector workers, they do not pay UI taxes, and the UI taxes of private sector employers are not used to pay for benefits to public employees. As such, the extension of UI benefits to school support staff does not endanger the solvency of a state's UI trust fund and will not result in increased taxes on businesses.

A key question that arose during discussions about the Minnesota bill was how much in benefits would flow to workers, and therefore how much it would cost school districts. Because this benefit had never been enacted before in Minnesota, there was great uncertainty over three interrelated questions:

1. How many school support staff do not work for their school district for some period of time over the summer?
2. How many of those workers already have other summer employment (and would thus be ineligible for UI benefits)?
3. What is known as the reciprocity rate—what share of workers who are laid off apply for and receive UI benefits?

A fiscal analysis conducted by state legislative staff was based on the presumption that all school support staff workers in the state would be eligible for, and would receive, UI benefits for the entire summer. This analysis was not a prediction for how it would be used; rather, it was an attempt to quantify the maximum feasible liability school districts could face. This analysis suggested that school districts would pay out \$137 million in benefits the first summer it was in operation (Steel 2023). A sum of \$135 million was appropriated to school districts to cover their costs for the first year of operation, in order to ensure that school districts would be held harmless even if 100% of their support staff collected UI benefits for the whole summer.

In a 2021 analysis (Wolfe and Kamper) and subsequent testimony to the Minnesota legislature (Kamper 2023), EPI drew on data from Illinois, which in the summer of 2020 extended UI benefits to school support staff and made the utilization data available to EPI. Based on the Illinois evidence, EPI estimated that the true net outlay would be closer to \$30 million.

EPI's analysis ended up being very close to the actual total of \$38.6 million. Now that further empirical data is available, states considering extending UI benefit to school support staff in the summer should not make Minnesota's assumption of 100% utilization, but should instead use Minnesota's actual experience as a guide to estimating the impact in their own state.

## Projecting costs for similar programs in other states

Data reported by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) provide real-world insight into the utilization of unemployment insurance benefits during summer months and serve as the foundation of our 50-state cost projection. We combine UI expenditures reported by the MDE with state-level data on employment and wages across the five occupational groups that make up the K–12 education support workforce.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, we incorporate unemployment insurance replacement ratios provided by state workforce agencies and the U.S. Department of Labor. Our analysis assumes that workers in other states will have similar UI benefit take-up rates as workers in Minnesota. See **Methodology** for more detail.

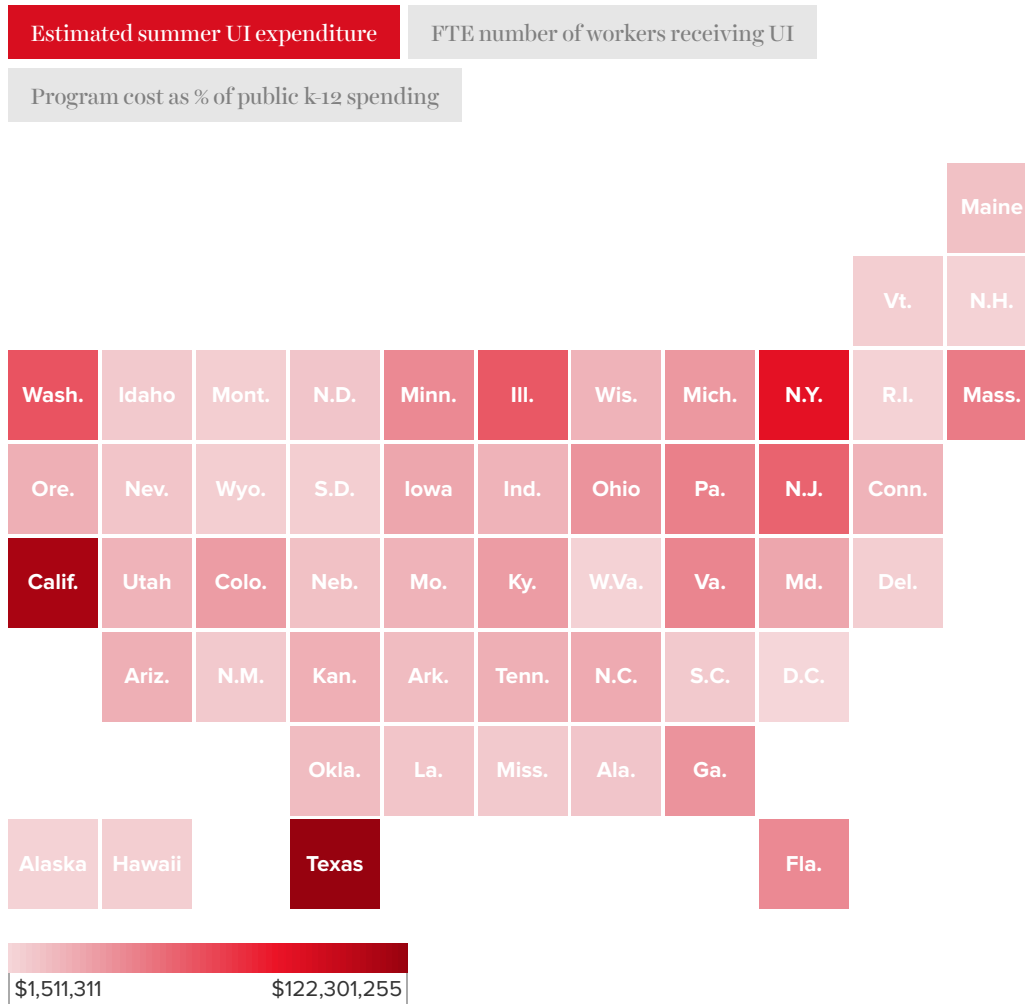
If programs were designed similarly and take-up by other states' nonlicensed school staff were the same as in Minnesota, we would expect to see what is represented in **Figure J**.

In total, if all 50 states and the District of Columbia enacted legislation giving school support staff access to unemployment benefits during the summer, these workers would receive more than \$1.2 billion each year, a substantial amount that could provide these workers with greater economic security. That amounts to just 0.15% of the total amount the U.S. as a whole spends on public K–12 education each year (NCES 2023). As shown in Figure J, the program cost as a share of public education spending across states ranges from 0.06% (D.C.) to 0.46% (North Dakota).

Figure J

## Education workers would gain \$1.2 billion if other states adopted Minnesota's summer unemployment insurance expansion

Estimated summer UI expenditure by state and full-time equivalent (FTE) number of education support workers impacted and program cost as a share of state public education spending



**Notes:** For full discussion of estimated expenditure calculation, see **Methodology**.

**Source:** Worker counts and wage data from Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics data. UI expenditure data from MDE 2024.

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# Conclusion

Staff in K–12 education provide a vital public service, helping to educate, support, and care for the country’s children. They often work in public education out of a desire to serve and though they may not be money-driven, they should not be asked to live in precarity and economic hardship because of their desire to serve the public good. Forgoing income for three months in the summer or being forced to find a second job can put considerable strain on a workforce that is already very low-income.

Moreover, some K–12 support staff may end up finding that their second jobs—originally intended as a bridge until school resumes—are more financially secure options for their year-round employment, exacerbating turnover and staffing shortages already acute in many school districts. In current labor market conditions of low unemployment, workers—especially in low-wage jobs—are finding it easier and easier to move to better jobs with higher pay and better working conditions (Gould 2024). Recent data suggest that only a handful of states have seen student achievement return to or exceed pre-pandemic levels (Fahle et al. 2024). Schools need a full complement of teachers *and* support staff to meet the needs of students.

Expanding UI access to school support staff in the summer will increase compensation for workers who already receive low pay and would relieve the hardships they face in the summer when they may not have any income. This will positively impact both recruitment and retention for these jobs, as well as raising pay for a workforce that is disproportionately composed of Black, brown, and women workers. States should enact this policy for their own good, as well as the good of their workers and students.

# Methodology

EPI uses data from the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics survey, the Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, and reported program expenditures from the Minnesota Department of Education to estimate the cost of expanding unemployment insurance to school support staff during the summer months for all 50 states.

## Data sources

Our estimates of unemployment insurance expenditures by occupation and state draw upon three primary data sources:

1. **Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) survey:** The OEWS survey, jointly conducted by BLS and state workforce agencies, provides data on employment levels and wage rates for 830 occupational categories. This survey covers around 1.1 million establishments, representing about 80 million individuals.

2. **U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (DOL-ETA) unemployment insurance data:** The 2023 unemployment insurance replacement ratios reported by state agencies to DOL-ETA.
3. **Minnesota Department of Education unemployment insurance costs report:** Unemployment insurance expenditures reported by school districts and other local educational agencies to the MDE broken down by major occupational group.

## Definitions

**Average weekly benefit amount (AWBA):** The average weekly unemployment insurance benefits paid to workers under a state program. Calculated by dividing the total benefits paid to individuals under a state program (benefits paid) by the total weeks claimed for which UI benefits are paid (weeks compensated).

**Full-time equivalent worker (FTE):** Conversion of a worker's usual job hours, based on their hourly wage, to the equivalent of a standard 40-hour work week.

**Replacement rate/ratio:** The ratio of a UI claimants' weekly benefit amount (WBA) to the claimants' average weekly wage.

## Assessing the cost of Minnesota's summer UI program

Data reported by the Minnesota Department of Education serve as the foundation of our 50-state cost projections. These expenditures give us real-world insight into the utilization of unemployment insurance benefits by school support staff. In the MDE's report on the summer unemployment insurance program, expenses are broken down by the following occupational categories:

- Paraprofessionals;
- Food services;
- Transportation;
- Clerical;
- Operations and maintenance; and
- All other expenditures.<sup>10</sup>

Wage data and occupation counts for our UI expenditure analysis come from the May 2023 OEWS estimates for North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) Sector 611000 – Elementary and Secondary schools (including private, state, and local government schools). These data provide estimates of employment counts, mean hourly wages, and mean annual wages by state and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) code. The MDE report only includes expense totals for the occupation groups listed previously, so we use the OEWS to estimate the employment counts of workers in each category. To match the OEWS data with the expenditure categories reported by the MDE,

Table 2

## K–12 education support worker occupation groups from the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics survey, 2023

Occupation category	SOC codes	Occupation titles
Paraprofessionals	25-9045	Teaching Assistants, Except Postsecondary
	39-9011	Childcare Workers
Food services	35-1011	Chefs and Head Cooks
	35-1012	First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers
	35-2012	Cooks, Institution and Cafeteria
	35-2021	Food Preparation Workers
	35-3023	Fast Food and Counter Workers
	35-3041	Food Servers, Nonrestaurant
	35-9011	Dining Room and Cafeteria Attendants and Bartender Helpers
	35-9021	Dishwashers
Bus drivers	53-3051	School bus driver
Office and administration	43-1011	First-Line Supervisors of Office and Administrative Support Workers
	43-6014	Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive
	43-9061	Office Clerks, General
	43-9199	Office and Administrative Support Workers, All Other
Janitors and custodians	37-1011	First-Line Supervisors of Housekeeping and Janitorial Workers
	37-2011	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners
	37-3011	Landscaping and Groundskeeping Workers

**Note:** All workers employed in private and public elementary and secondary schools.

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we create the SOC groups shown in **Table 2**. We chose to change the names of some of the categories in the MDE report to clearly indicate the workers in those categories. Therefore, “Transportation” becomes “Bus drivers,” “Clerical” becomes “Office and administration,” and “Operations and maintenance” becomes “Janitors and custodians.”

State workforce agencies report replacement ratios for workers who collect UI benefits. This measure is the ratio of a worker’s weekly benefit amount compared with their average weekly wage. Our analysis uses the 2023 replacement ratios by state collected

by DOL-ETA as an input to estimate the amount of UI benefits a worker might be paid.

Since the replacement ratios are based on weekly wages, we use the OEWS to estimate weekly wages for education support workers. The OEWS does not report weekly wages, so we use the estimates of hourly and annual wages. If hourly wage data are available for an individual occupation-state, we multiply the average hourly wage by the national average weekly hours worked for that occupation group. Weekly hours worked data come from analysis of 2021–2023 pooled Current Population Survey (CPS) microdata. For some occupations in the OEWS data, only annual wage data are reported. For these occupations, we divide the mean annual wage by a national estimate of the yearly weeks worked for that occupation group. Annual weeks worked data come from analysis of 2019, 2021, and 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) microdata.

After estimating the weekly wages for the individual occupations in each state, we calculate the weekly wage for each occupation group by averaging the wage data of all individual occupations within a group. This average is weighted by the employment count for each SOC occupation.

We return to the expenditure data from Minnesota’s report with more detail about the number of support staff, their wages, and the state’s unemployment insurance replacement ratio. Multiplying the weekly wage rates for each occupation group in Minnesota by the state UI replacement rate estimates the average UI benefit a nonlicensed education worker might collect. We then divide the reported expenditure for each occupational category by the estimated weekly benefit for each occupational category. This results in the total weeks of UI claimed by each occupational category in Minnesota. We assume that each worker claiming UI does so for 11 weeks during the summer break. Dividing the total weeks of UI claimed by each occupational category by 11 produces the FTE number of employees in each occupational category who received UI. The FTE number of employees is then divided by the OEWS number of total workers in each occupational category, estimating the share of workers in each occupational category who received UI benefits in Minnesota (Table 1).

## **Projecting costs for similar programs in other states**

Next, we estimate summer UI benefits for education workers for all states and D.C., using Minnesota as a model. We assume that the share of workers in each state receiving summer UI across occupational categories will reflect what was observed in Minnesota. For each state, the share of each occupational category who will receive UI is multiplied by the OEWS occupational category employment total to produce the FTE number of workers receiving UI. We use the OEWS weekly wage data and DOL UI replacement rates for each state to estimate the weekly UI benefit for an employee in each occupational category in each state. We multiply the number of FTE workers by the weekly UI benefit by 11 to calculate the total UI expenditure for each occupational category. Summing up the total of each occupational category in each state results in the total UI expenditure for each state (Figure J).



# Notes

1. Authors' calculation using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U).
2. A full list of the occupations included in each group can be found in **Table 2**.
3. Pooled 2022–2023 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2023 dollars.
4. The public education workforce is largely composed of teachers, principals, and other administrators with higher credentialing than the overall workforce. Despite this high level of educational attainment, public school teachers experience a stark pay penalty compared with their similarly educated peers in other professions (Allegretto 2023).
5. Low wages are not the only issue burdening education support workers. The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly difficult for these workers, who are older than the overall U.S. workforce. While 31.6% of all U.S. workers are over the age of 50, the percentage is higher for teaching assistants (40.5%), custodians (55.4%), and school bus drivers (66.2%). Their older age means that these workers were more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19, which contributed to significant numbers of education support staff workers leaving the industry and/or being reluctant to return. Since the return to in-person schooling, some support workers such as bus drivers have also reported increased confrontations with students and parents (Edmonds 2023).
6. Workers classified as independent contractors are also excluded from UI benefits. The abuse of the independent contractor classification is rampant and results in many workers—such as so-called “gig workers” and many platform-based workers—being denied benefits for which they would be eligible if they were correctly classified as regular employees. See Schmitt et al. (2023) for more detail.
7. The “reasonable assurance” standard also applies to staff in public higher education facilities. Illinois’ 2020 bill did include higher education, but neither Minnesota nor Oregon included higher education in their statutes.
8. House File 2497, Regular Session, Minnesota, 2023.
9. Employment and wage data come from the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics survey from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. A full list of the occupations in each occupation group can be found in **Appendix Table 1**.
10. In the Minnesota report, “All other expenditures” accounts for 5.5% of total expenses. We do not include this category in our estimate of UI costs.

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# Appendix

## K–12 education support worker occupation groups from the American Community Survey

Occupation group	BLS Industry code	Occupation titles
<b>Paraprofessionals</b>	2540	Teacher assistants
	2545	Teaching assistants
	4600	Childcare workers
<b>Food preparation and service</b>	4000	Chefs and head cooks
	4010	First-line supervisors of food preparation and serving workers
	4020	Cooks
	4030	Food preparation workers
	4050	Combined food preparation and serving workers, including fast food
	4060	Counter attendant, cafeteria, food concession, and coffee shop
	4120	Food servers, nonrestaurant
	4130	Miscellaneous food preparation and serving related workers including dining room and cafeteria attendants and bartender helpers
	4140	Dishwashers
	4055	Fast food and counter workers
<b>School bus drivers</b>	9120	Bus drivers
	9121	Bus drivers, school
	9122	Bus drivers, transit and intercity
<b>Secretaries, administrative assistants, and office clerks</b>	5000	First-line supervisors of office and administrative support worker
	5700	Secretaries and administrative assistants
	5740	Secretaries and administrative assistants, except legal, medical, and executive
	5930	Miscellaneous office and administrative support workers including desktop publishers
	5940	Miscellaneous office and administrative support workers including desktop publishers / Other office and administrative support workers
	5860	Office clerks, general

Appendix  
Table 1  
(cont.)

<b>Occupation group</b>	<b>BLS Industry code</b>	<b>Occupation titles</b>
	4200	First-line supervisors of housekeeping and janitorial workers
<b>Janitors and building cleaners</b>	4220	Janitors and building cleaners
	4250	Grounds maintenance workers
	4251	Landscaping and groundskeeping workers

**Note:** All workers employed in private and public elementary and secondary schools.

**Source:** EPI analysis of 2022 American Community Survey data.

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