

# Linking Teacher Preparation to Longevity: PETE Programs as a Mechanism for Burnout Reduction

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## Abstract

While teacher retention remains a global concern, this article focuses specifically on the United States, offering insights that have cross-national transferability. With over half of new teachers entering the field leaving the profession within the first five years, professionals in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs must examine how they are preparing pre-service teachers for long-term career viability. This practice-focused conceptual article provides PETE professionals with actionable curricular frameworks designed to mitigate early career burnout and empower future physical educators to remain in the field. When PETE programs intentionally integrate curriculum aimed at reducing burnout, pre-service teachers develop a realistic understanding of occupational stressors alongside targeted coping mechanisms. Specifically, this article outlines strategies that help future physical educators build supportive professional networks, evaluate school culture during job placement, and prioritize holistic wellness. Furthermore, embedding hands-on experiential learning into PETE programs builds teaching self-efficacy and classroom management readiness—two critical psychological buffers against occupational stress. Ultimately, PETE programs serve as a vital mechanism for building resilience and improving long-term teacher retention, embedding sustainable professional practices in higher education while recognizing the necessity of broader structural reform.

## Keywords

Burnout, Teacher Retention, PETE, Teacher Preparation, Self-Efficacy

## 1. Introduction

Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs aim to develop competent teachers through strong foundational content knowledge, effective standards-

based curriculum design, high-quality assessment practices, managerial concepts, and hands-on learning. Program professionals aim to include current, best-practice approaches through effective use of technology, most notably ethical use of Artificial Intelligence, along with culturally appropriate practice, social justice education, and social-emotional learning concepts. However, as teacher retention rates continue to be a national concern (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025), PETE programs must examine how they are preparing future educators to overcome adversity and combat burnout in their future roles.

This article is a practice-focused conceptual paper designed to translate contemporary teacher retention and burnout literature into actionable PETE curricular strategies. Literature supporting these recommendations was selected by synthesizing findings from national workforce reports (e.g., RAND Corporation, Learning Policy Institute), systemic reviews on physical education stress, and empirical studies on teacher motivation and self-determination theory.

A frequently cited statistic across educational literature indicates that “over half” or “up to 50%” of new teachers leave within their first five years; however, national longitudinal analysis demonstrate that national public school attrition generally ranged between 17% and 44% in the first five years, depending heavily on regional contexts, school characteristics, and teacher certification pathways (Ingersoll et al., 2021). Regardless of the exact baseline statistic, early career turnover remains critically high, and the inability of school districts to retain teachers has a direct negative impact on student achievement (Reinke et al., 2025). This article explores the benefits of teacher retention, potential causes of teacher burnout, and how PETE programs can better prepare students for sustainable, prosperous careers as physical educators.

## 2. Teachers Matter

“Studies indicate that students who have access to highly qualified teachers tend to achieve at a higher rate, regardless of other factors” (Engida et al., 2024). The powerful impact and influence teachers have on students is undeniable.

Danielson’s Framework for Teaching (FFT) is one philosophical approach adopted by over 31 states to assess high-quality teaching (The Danielson Group, n.d.). Educators trained and evaluated using FFT understand the importance of knowing both their discipline and their students. Developmental appropriateness, cultural competence, and equity are embedded in the framework to enhance teachers’ ability to provide an optimal learning environment for all students (Danielson et al., 2024). Educator preparation programs use frameworks such as FFT, along with state certification requirements, to ensure graduates have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be highly qualified.

With teacher shortages at an all-time high, many districts have resorted to hiring non-certified individuals through alternative pathways to fill teacher vacancies. According to recent workforce reports, about 1 in 8 teaching positions are filled by an underqualified individual or go unfilled (Espinoza & Cardichon,

2025). While this eases staffing challenges, it is detrimental to teacher retention and student success (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Underprepared and underqualified teachers are more likely to leave the profession (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2025). When students are taught by uncertified individuals, learning gaps widen, subject proficiency and graduation rates decline (Elevate K-12, 2025).

When districts are unable to fill positions, teachers suffer. Larger class sizes mean higher student-to-teacher ratios. Teachers spend less time providing one-on-one instruction and more time managing behaviors. This disrupts the ability to build strong teacher-student relationships. Fostering connections allows teachers to meet individual needs and helps students feel supported.

Teachers are consistently identified as the number one school-related factor that impacts student achievement (Oppen, 2019). When teachers experience burnout, students' social, emotional, and academic outcomes are negatively impacted (Reinke et al., 2025). Stress and burnout predict intentions to leave the profession. Teacher attrition rates continue to rise, with 16% of teachers reporting intent to leave the profession, increasing the likelihood of resignation (Grant & Brantlinger, 2023; Steiner et al., 2025a). Educators with higher levels of workplace satisfaction are less likely to leave (Elevate K-12, 2025).

### 3. Teacher Burnout

Teachers' job satisfaction ratings have reached historic lows (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). In recent national surveys, over 50% of general K-12 educators reported feelings of burnout (Steiner et al., 2025a). The World Health Organization (2019) identifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon characterized by exhaustion, energy depletion, reduced professional efficacy, and feelings of job-related negativity or cynicism. Female educators are consistently reported as experiencing higher rates of burnout than male colleagues (Steiner et al., 2025a). Education is currently the top occupation associated with burnout (Bouchrika, 2026).

While occupational burnout affects educators across all disciplines, physical educators encounter distinct structural and environmental conditions that moderate burnout risk. Systematic reviews indicate that physical education teachers face unique stressors, including teaching in large physical spaces (e.g., gymnasiums, outdoor fields), managing high noise levels, handling equipment logistics, navigating marginalized or subject prestige relative to "core" academic content, and dealing with inadequate facility access (Alsalhe et al., 2021; von Haaren-Mack et al., 2020). Distinguishing general K-12 teacher evidence from PETE-specific literature is essential: while general educator attrition is driven heavily by standardized testing pressure and administrative paperwork, physical educator burnout is frequently linked to marginalization, role isolation, and discipline-specific classroom management challenges (Alsalhe et al., 2021; Prusak et al., 2025).

### 4. Stress

Job-related stress is consistently identified as a contributor to burnout (Alsalhe et

al., 2021). Across general education, managing student behavior is a major stressor (Reinke et al., 2025; Steiner et al., 2025a), worsened by post-pandemic classroom disruptions (Baker & Koedel, 2025). For physical educators specifically, student discipline issues in unstructured environments represent a primary source of chronic stress (von Haaren-Mack et al., 2020). Physical educators also experience stress related to unattainable expectations, working hours outside contracted time, lack of administrative buy-in for physical literacy, and limited equipment budgets (Prusak et al., 2025; von Haaren-Mack et al., 2020). Broadly, teacher compensation and administrative support strongly predict turnover; educators with higher salaries and supportive leadership show slower attrition rates across all fields (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2025).

## 5. Well-Being

Self-Determination Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding teacher motivation and well-being. Individuals who experience conditions supporting autonomy (perceived control over decisions), competence (feeling capable) and relatedness (feeling connected and understood) exhibit higher motivation and resilience (Center for Self-Determination Theory, n.d.). Conversely, when these psychological needs are obstructed by restrictive working conditions, wellness declines (Center for Self-Determination Theory, n.d.; Steiner et al., 2025b). In physical education setting specifically, higher levels of self-determination and autonomous motivation correlate directly with higher self-efficacy and reduced burnout (Prusak et al., 2025).

Teaching is mentally, physically, and emotionally draining. Educators with high work demands and minimal schedule flexibility experience heightened strain. Reduced flexibility stems from limited preparation time, duty assignments, rigid leave policies and administrative constraints. General K-12 teachers report significantly less personal leisure time than professionals in other sectors (Steiner et al., 2025b). Work-life conflict directly correlates with increased turnover and burnout, ultimately impairing student learning environments (Steiner et al., 2025a; Steiner et al., 2025b).

## 6. Preparing Future Physical Educators for Longevity 101

High-quality preservice preparation helps mitigate early-career turnover by equipping candidates with strategies to navigate classroom realities (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2025). PETE programs must translate these concepts into concrete, actionable coursework. The following practical approaches link retention literature directly to PETE learning activities.

## 7. Build Your Hive

It is imperative for PETE candidates to understand the value of professional networks. Teachers are more likely to remain in the field when they feel empowered and connected (Larkin & Patzelt, 2026). Cultivating a supportive professional net-

work reduces feelings of isolation (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2025).

- **Curricular Activity—Structured Mentorship & Networking Plan:** Within a senior methods course, candidates complete an experiential networking assignment. Candidates must (a) register with a professional organization (e.g., SHAPE America or state affiliate), (b) conduct an informational interview with a veteran physical education, and (c) draft a plan identifying at least three professional contacts (e.g., PE colleague, grade-level peer, interdisciplinary colleague) to serve as a support network during their first year.

## 8. Vibe Check

Many PETE candidates accept initial employment offers without evaluating organizational culture. Teachers who feel supported by administration report lower burnout (Marcedula, 2026). In national surveys, nearly 70% of early-career teachers cite poor working conditions and lack of leadership support as primary reasons for considering departure (James & DeMio, 2025). Positive school culture consistently promotes retention (Larkin & Patzelt, 2026).

- **Curricular Activity—Simulated Interview & Culture Evaluation Exercise:** PETE programs embed a workplace evaluation exercise within professional preparation courses. Candidates analyze sample physical education job postings, review district budget allocation reports for physical education, and engage in mock interview simulations. During these simulations, candidates are evaluated on their ability to ask targeted questions regarding administrative support, PE equipment budgets, assigned non-instructional duties, planning time, and school-wide discipline protocols.

## 9. Reclaiming Leisure, Retaining Joy

Metaphors such as “you cannot pour from an empty cup” highlight the necessity of self-care. Utilizing holistic models like Hettler’s Six Dimensions of Wellness (Occupational, Emotional, Physical, Social, Intellectual, Spiritual) helps candidates evaluate personal health (National Wellness Institute, n.d.). Occupational wellness emphasizes that work should enrich life rather than exhaust it. When work demands consistently interfere with personal obligations and family life, burnout increases (Steiner et al., 2025b).

- **Curricular Activity—Personal Wellness Plan:** Candidates complete a multi-week “wellness audit” based on the Six Dimensions of Wellness. Candidates track their weekly working hours, stress levels, and leisure time during early field experiences. Candidates create a self-regulation plan identifying non-negotiable personal boundaries, boundaries for professional workload management (e.g., establishing specific grading timeframes), and strategies for maintaining personal hobbies.

## 10. Real World Resilience

“Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such

a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results,” (John Dewey). Experiential learning through authentic doing is fundamental to effective physical education pedagogy. PETE programs must look beyond standard student-teaching placements to offer diverse, early, supervised field-based teaching tasks.

- **Curricular Activity—Supervised Field-based Microteaching in Diverse Settings:** Programs establish partnerships with diverse community-based organizations (e.g., individuals with disabilities, alternative behavioral schools, child-care centers). Candidates design and deliver physical education lessons to individuals under faculty supervision. Following each lesson, candidates participate in structured debriefing sessions to analyze behavioral disruptions, managerial adaptations, and emotional responses, allowing them to refine instructional decision-making in low-stakes environments.

## 11. Mechanism of Experiential Learning in Burnout Reduction

To appropriately contextualize the impact of PETE preparation, it is necessary to clarify the theoretical framework connecting experiential learning to career longevity. Experimental and direct empirical evidence explicitly linking pre-service PETE interventions directly to reduced long-term teacher turnover remains limited due to confounding longitudinal variables (e.g., district pay changes, state policy shifts).

However, experiential learning (e.g., early field microteaching, simulated conflict resolution) serves as a critical proximal mechanism by building self-efficacy and classroom management readiness (Prusak et al., 2025). According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, mastery experiences in controlled settings increase a candidate’s belief in their ability to manage disruptive behavior, adapt equipment under constraints, and organize space effectively. Heightened teaching self-efficacy directly reduces instructional anxiety and perceived job stress, which are strong psychological predictors of burnout (Marcedula, 2026; Reinke et al., 2025). Thus, while PETE experiential strategies do not directly alter systemic working conditions, they reduce burnout risk by insulating candidates with strong coping mechanisms, higher pedagogical confidence, and improved operational readiness prior to full-time employment.

## 12. Limitations of Teacher Preparation

While higher education PETE programs play a vital role in preparing candidates for professional realities, teacher preparation cannot serve as a standalone solution to the systemic retention crisis. PETE preparation can significantly strengthen an individual’s coping capacity, stress management, instructional efficacy, and proactive decision making. However, pre-service training cannot independently resolve structural, district-level, and institutional working conditions that drive teacher attrition. Factors such as uncompetitive base compensation, excessive administrative workloads, severe staffing shortages, inadequate facility maintenance,

lack of school-level leadership support, and unaddressed safety concerns remain outside the control of university preparation programs (Baker & Koedel, 2025; Espinoza & Cardichon, 2025; Steiner et al., 2025a). Sustainable teacher retention requires structural reforms alongside enhanced higher education preparation.

### 13. Advocacy for the Future

Research confirms that teachers who feel valued and supported remain in the profession (Cells et al., 2023). While structural retention solutions depend on school districts reforming policies, PETE programs can prepare graduates to serve as self-advocates within their districts. Candidates should be empowered to assert their right to work-life balance and advocate for equitable discipline-specific support.

Districts must complement pre-service preparation by establishing conditions that sustain educators: guaranteeing dedicated planning time (James & DeMio, 2025), ensuring equitable distribution of non-instructional duties, limiting off-hours communication, funding physical education equipment, and fostering supportive administrative evaluations (Steiner et al., 2025b). PETE faculty must continue to monitor workforce trends, integrate evidence-based wellness strategies, and advocate for institutional changes that protect the long-term viability of the teaching profession.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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