



Shaping Teacher Motivation and Professional Experience: The Critical Role of Government Policy in Southeast Asia

Sherlyne A. Almonte Acosta*, Ph.D.,
Katherine P. Torralba**,
May Flor Pagasa A. Quinones***

* Senior Specialist, SEAMEO INNOTECH

** Officer, SEAMEO INNOTECH

*** Lecturer, Ateneo de Manila University

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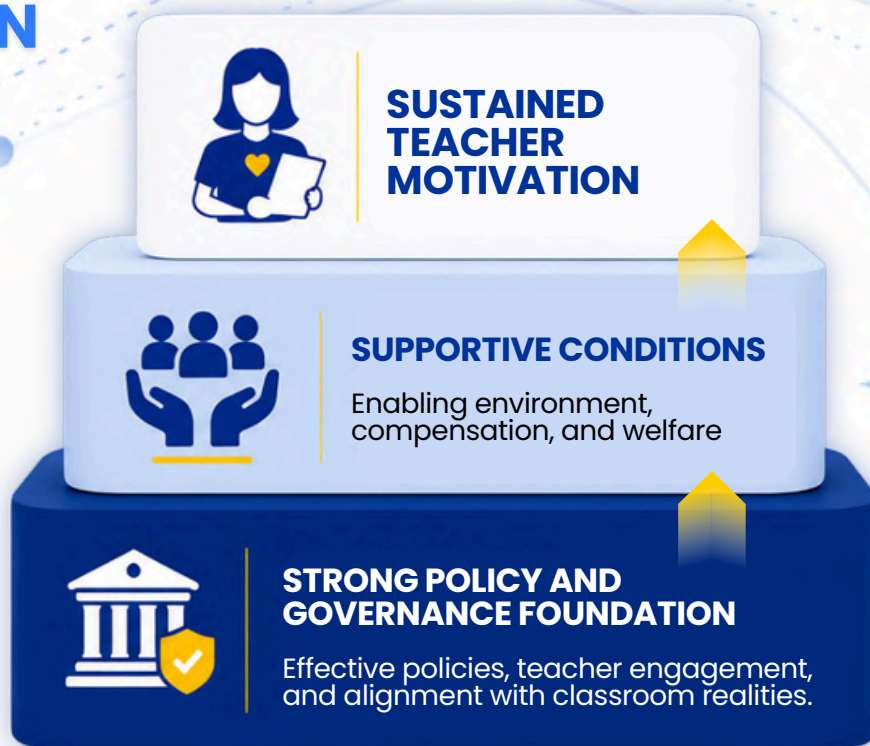
Salient Points

- Southeast Asian teachers' decisions to continue teaching are influenced by three core factors—sense of purpose and fulfillment, interest and passion, and sense of growth and development—and sustained by contributing factors such as feeling respected and valued, well-being, school environment, salary and benefits, and government laws and policies.
- Although teachers rate government policy lower than other motivational factors, evidence shows that perceptions of government policies are consistently linked to teacher motivation across all countries examined, highlighting the critical role of policy environments in sustaining teacher engagement.
- Ministries of Education can strengthen teacher motivation through two complementary policy areas: (1) improving teacher-level conditions—including working conditions, professional development, career progression, and compensation—and (2) enhancing governance and policy design by strengthening teacher engagement, aligning policies with classroom realities, and clearly communicating policy expectations and impacts.

POLICIES BUILD THE CONDITIONS. TEACHERS SUSTAIN THE IMPACT.



Perceptions of government policies are consistently linked to **teacher motivation** across Southeast Asia.



Overview

Government policies play a critical role in shaping conditions that influence teachers' motivation and professional experiences. These policies govern key aspects of the teaching profession – recruitment, compensation, working conditions, professional development opportunities, and the degree of autonomy teachers have in their classrooms. As such, policy environments help shape institutional conditions that allow teachers to effectively teach and sustain their commitment to the profession. For instance, teachers reported greater satisfaction in countries that support more stable non-salary terms such as employment arrangements. These teachers also had lower intention to leave the profession in the next five years (OECD, 2024). Understanding how teachers perceive these policies is therefore crucial for designing reforms that support teacher motivation and retention.

What makes teachers stay?

The Southeast Asian teachers' motivation (SEA-TM) framework recognizes core and contributory factors that influence teachers' decisions to remain in the profession (Umali et al., 2024). Core factors, or those crucial for ensuring teacher retention are having a

sense of purpose and fulfillment, teaching as interest and passion, and a sense of growth and development. Contributing factors, identified to also help sustain teacher motivation, include a *sense of being respected and valued; teacher well-being; school environment; salary, incentives, and benefits; and perceptions of government laws and policies* (Umali et al., 2024).

Notably, across 10 Southeast Asian countries¹, teachers are highly motivated to continue teaching ($M=7.90$, $SEM=0.07$)² (Bernasor, et al., 2025). Even countries that scored below the regional average (i.e., Lao PDR, the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Brunei) reported high motivation levels. Teachers also positively perceived all eight motivational factors, albeit expressing varying satisfaction levels (Table 1).

¹Except for Singapore, all Southeast Asian countries participated in the regional teacher motivation research.

²Bernasor et al. (2025) interpreted Likert scale values as having very high motivation (8.20-10.00), high motivation (6.40-8.19), moderate motivation (4.60-6.39), low motivation (2.80-4.59), and very low motivation (1.00-2.79).

Table 1.
Mean Scores across Motivational Factors among Teachers in Southeast Asia³

Dimensions	Mean	Standard Error Mean (SEM)
Sense of purpose and fulfillment	5.13	0.003
Teaching as interest and passion	5.09	0.003
Sense of growth and development	5.09	0.003
Sense of being respected and valued	5.05	0.003
Teacher well-being	4.82	0.003
School environment	4.91	0.003
Salary, incentives, and benefits	4.56	0.004
Perception of government policies	4.47	0.004

These findings suggest that teachers hold intrinsic dimensions of motivation in high regard, while also recognizing the value of external factors such as the school environment, compensation, and views about government policies relevant to them. Kumar & Hossain (2017) established that while both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations matter, extrinsic factors, or those associated with more tangible rewards (Reese & McBain, 2004, as cited in Kumar & Hossain, 2017) are more significant motivation drivers.

³Bernasor et al. (2025) interpreted Likert scale values as: Strongly agree/ strongly satisfied (5.17-6.00), agree/ satisfied (4.34 - 5.16), somewhat agree/ somewhat satisfied (3.51 - 4.33), somewhat disagree/ somewhat satisfied (2.68 - 3.50), disagree/ dissatisfied (1.84 - 2.67), strongly disagree/ strongly dissatisfied (1.00 - 1.83).

Finding the link between government policies and teacher motivation

Along these lines, it becomes important to examine a factor contributing to teacher motivation—*teachers’ perception of government policies*. While across Southeast Asia, teachers are generally satisfied with laws and policies concerning them (M=4.47, SEM=0.004), they expressed the least satisfaction with this dimension of motivation. Six countries—Thailand, Timor-Leste, Lao PDR, Brunei, Myanmar, and the Philippines—scored below regional means, hinting at moderate levels of satisfaction with their countries’ teacher-related policies (Table 2). This suggests that while teachers view these external factors as important considerations to continue teaching, there remain areas for improvement when it comes to strengthening government support and the policy landscape for teachers.

Policies on teacher standards, preparation, working conditions, and retention can influence other motivational factors such as infrastructure, salaries, and supervision, which are implemented and sustained. In Southeast Asia, regional frameworks such as the SEA Teacher Competency Framework (SEA-TCF) and the early childhood care and education (ECCE) teacher competency framework guide teacher development and competencies, though each country adapts these to its own context (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025a; Teachers’ Council of Thailand et al., 2018; UNESCO Bangkok and SEAMEO, 2018). Similarly, regional guidelines have been established in support of teacher development, training, and mobility (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025a, 2025b). A review of teacher policies in the region found that the effectiveness of the educational system depends on the ability of its teachers, and this ability is greatly influenced by the quality of the regulations that control their working conditions (Vuong et al., 2024).

While teachers may not always feel the direct impact of these policies in their daily work, policy environments shape the conditions under which they teach and in turn influence their motivation (Chiong et al., 2017). Likewise, policies established at national and school levels set parameters for many factors that affect teacher motivation. For instance, building standards and budget allocations determine the availability and quality of school facilities, classrooms, and learning resources.

National standards define teachers' compensation and career progression. Likewise, policies governing workload, supervision, and professional evaluation influence how teachers interact with their colleagues and school administration and may shape their perceptions about fairness and support within the education system.

Table 2.
Mean scores for the motivational factor "Perception of government policies" across Southeast Asia

Country	Mean	SEM
Southeast Asian Region	4.47	0.004
Indonesia	4.65	0.01
Malaysia	4.63	0.034
Cambodia	4.61	0.036
Vietnam	4.47	0.004
Thailand	4.39	0.017
Timor-Leste	4.29	0.045
Lao PDR	4.02	0.048
Brunei	3.97	0.026
Myanmar	3.86	0.065
Philippines	3.71	0.056

Effective policies require clear implementation, flexibility to adapt to local contexts, and regular review (Howlett, 2018). Policies like performance-based evaluations can both motivate and pressure teachers, depending on how fair and realistic they are (Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Mintz & Kelly, 2021). These policies must also be balanced with learner outcomes, because policies designed to improve system performance—such as promotion rules, grading policies, or accountability targets—can inadvertently undermine teacher motivation if they weaken professional autonomy or obscure meaningful learning standards (World Bank, 2018). Strengthening learning outcomes therefore requires policies that not only raise expectations for students but also reinforce teachers' sense of professional purpose and provide adequate support.



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Looking deeper into teacher conditions in sustaining teacher motivation

Bernasor et al. (2025) reinforce the importance of sound policy environments in shaping teacher motivation. While teachers across Southeast Asia reported only moderate satisfaction with government policies, the contributing factor, *perceptions of government laws and policies* was most consistently associated with motivation levels, except in Timor-Leste. This likely reflects the role of policies in shaping broader institutional conditions such as supportive school environments, fair compensation, and professional development opportunities that enable other motivating factors to take effect. Given its strong influence on teacher retention, further examination of education policies and laws could help identify policy features that strengthen teacher motivation.

For instance, their study findings that teacher *salaries, working conditions, professional development, and career progression* have significant, albeit weak relationships with motivations to continue teaching can inform policy development. *Salaries* were found to be negatively associated with teacher motivation, implying that higher earnings do not automatically mean greater motivation. The very weak link between salary and motivation suggests that alone, salary does not guarantee stronger commitment to the profession.

Working conditions also matter, although modestly. Specific related factors such as length of teaching, time spent in teaching and in handling non-teaching assignments, the number of grade levels taught, and commute time all were linked to motivation levels. Among these aspects, commute time and complex teaching loads were associated with lower motivation. Spending more time traveling to and from their residence and school can contribute to teacher fatigue, reduce time for instructional preparation, and compound existing workload pressures. These findings are also consistent with existing evidence that longer travel times may result in increased teacher absenteeism, lower performance ratings, and higher turnover (Santelli & Grissom, 2024).

Bernasor et al. (2025) likewise found that the length of teaching, time spent teaching weekly, and time spent on non-teaching tasks were also related to retention decisions. Findings that length of teaching service is linked to increased motivation offer alternative insight to the evidence that longer tenure can translate to lower performance and engagement (Solania et al., 2023). Results of Bernasor and colleagues' work also provide further evidence that the impact of workload depends not on volume, but on its nature—tasks that are perceived as meaningful can enhance teacher engagement (Wang et al., 2025), while excessive administrative and non-teaching duties are more likely to undermine motivation and retention (Stromquist, 2018). Likewise, these seem to also be consistent with research showing that teachers who exhibit high interest and commitment to their profession seemed to be unfazed by heavy workloads (Solania et al., 2023). Teachers who find their work challenging yet meaningful, and who are deeply passionate about their jobs, can still find reasons to remain teaching.

Working conditions, in particular, access to adequate instructional resources and school facilities also emerged as an important factor. Teachers who felt well-supported in terms of materials and facilities were associated with higher motivation, highlighting the importance of resource provision in fostering supportive teaching environments.

Findings on *professional development and career progression* offer a more complex picture. Bernasor et al. (2025) found that educational attainment and enrolment in graduate studies modestly connected to teacher motivation. Teachers pursuing graduate studies or holding advanced degrees reported slightly lower motivation levels. While the findings do not imply causality, they suggest that other motivational factors, for instance added workload and promotion pressure, could also influence teacher well-being (Liu et al., 2022) and in the long run, teacher motivation levels. In contrast, teachers who experienced promotions regularly were linked to higher motivation. These patterns suggest that while career development opportunities matter, their design and implementation may influence whether they motivate or burden teachers. Given the very minimal (statistical) implication of promotion history and frequency had on Southeast Asian teachers' motivation, further investigation could provide broader understanding on how career progression systems and processes truly influence teacher motivation.



Taken together, these findings about *working conditions, salaries, professional development, career progression* and teacher motivation highlight the importance of *policy environments* that not only support teachers' intrinsic commitment to teaching but also strengthen the institutional conditions. For instance, well designed and effectively implemented government policies can encourage education systems to provide favorable working conditions that can help mitigate teacher attrition and improve retention (Ackah-Jnr et al., 2022). When aligned with broader education reforms, teacher policies are also more likely to be implemented efficiently and achieve quality education outcomes (UNESCO, 2019).

Building on these insights, the succeeding section outlines key policy options that education ministries can consider in translating evidence into actionable strategies for enhancing teacher motivation and retention.

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Policy Options

Strengthening teacher motivation in Southeast Asia requires policy approaches that align system-level reforms with teachers' professional needs, working conditions, and intrinsic motivations. As they continue to implement education reforms, Ministries of Education (MOEs) across Southeast Asia should take into consideration findings from the study of Bernasor et al. (2025) that teachers' perceptions about broader policy environments play a critical role in shaping teacher motivation and retention. The following policy options are organized into two areas: (1) strengthening teacher-level conditions and incentives, and (2) improving governance and policy design to better reflect classroom realities.

Strengthening teacher-level conditions and incentives

1. Adopt approaches that extend beyond salary as a standalone motivator. While fair compensation and benefits remain important, evidence suggests that salary alone does not sustain motivation. A more holistic incentive package which combines pay with recognition, professional autonomy, and supportive working conditions may seem ideal – but will likely be more effective.

2. Improve working conditions and reduce non-teaching burdens. Policies can prioritize rationalization of teacher workloads by limiting excessive administrative tasks and redistributing non-instructional responsibilities. Streamlining reporting requirements and investing in administrative or digital support systems can help teachers focus more on what they do best – instruction. Doing so can bring back more spark in teaching, thus enhancing engagement and reducing teacher burnout.

3. Address structural challenges such as commute and teaching load.

Interventions such as transport support, housing assistance, or more strategic, location-based teacher deployment can help address negative effects of long commute times. Likewise, ensuring manageable teaching loads, including limiting the number of grade levels handled, can further support sustained motivation. In Southeast Asian contexts where multigrade teaching remains a reality, particularly in geographically remote and underserved areas, targeted interventions such as specialized training, adapted curricula, workload adjustments, and special incentives (e.g., hardship or location-based allowances) can help ensure that multigrade teaching is effectively supported.

4. Ensure adequate instructional resources and supportive school environments.

Providing sufficient teaching resources, facilities, and classroom support should be prioritized. Strengthening school leadership to better foster supportive environments can also help teachers feel that their needs are being addressed. In resource-constrained contexts, partnerships with private or philanthropic organizations could help address resource gaps.

5. Reframe professional development and career progression systems.

Professional development initiatives should be designed to help, not further burden systems. Offering flexible learning pathways, protecting training time, and ensuring that training is aligned with teachers' needs and interests are ways by which professional development interventions can be designed. Likewise, clear, fair, and transparent career progression systems can reinforce motivation and teacher retention.



1. Align teacher policies with national policies and classroom realities.

Strong policy design does not always translate into consistent school-level experiences, as these may be affected by unclear guidelines and context-specific disparities. When implemented within the existing context and realities of teachers, policies related to recruitment, compensation and benefits, promotion, accountability systems, professional development, well-being, working conditions and administrative requirements can help ensure that these truly support meaningful teaching and learning.



2. Engage teachers in policy design and review.

Valuing teachers can also be demonstrated by meaningfully involving them in policy and decision-making processes, which can help strengthen their sense of professional efficacy, recognition, and job satisfaction (Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013). Teachers, however, are often expected to implement policies they had little role in designing (Good et al., 2017). Greater teacher participation in developing and reviewing education policies can help ensure that these reforms reflect classroom realities, as they are on the frontline of the education system and interact directly with education stakeholders. Teachers are also more likely to support and successfully implement policies which they helped develop (Kumar & Scuderi, 2012). To institutionalize teachers' voices in policy design, Ministries may consider having structured consultations prior to major reforms and perception surveys to gauge teacher concerns, and establishing teacher advisory panels at national and regional levels.



3. Shift policy framing from compliance to empowerment.

Policies are sometimes perceived as regulatory, rather than as genuinely concerned with teacher well-being. Policies can be reframed or reformulated so that teachers do not see these as layers that add to their workload which reduce time for lesson preparation and student engagement. Mapping teacher paperwork requirements and consolidating reporting into fewer, standardized templates can help teachers focus more on instruction, rather than administrative compliance. Digitized routine processes could also be introduced for more systematic and efficient learner and learning process management.



4. Clarify policy expectations.

Complex or poorly communicated policies may cause confusion or uncertainty among teachers. Ministries should therefore invest in simplifying major reforms or initiatives in plain language, which include examples of how policies apply to teaching and learning situations. Clear implementation roadmaps, for instance those that clearly illustrate well-phased timelines for curriculum or assessment reforms can guide teachers about expected commitments, contributions, and benefits they could gain from these reforms. Ministries can also invest in training school leaders to translate national policies into actionable school-level plans for teachers.



Improving learning outcomes ultimately depends on strengthening conditions to allow teachers to teach well. While education reforms can focus on standards, assessments, and accountability, evidence suggests that education systems succeed when teachers are supported, motivated, and recognized as professionals. Aligning policy reforms with teachers' professional realities – rather than working against them—will be critical for sustaining teacher motivation and improving learner outcomes across Southeast Asia.

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Editorial Coordinators
Atty. Christopher Lawrence S. Arnuco
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Design and Layout
Mary Margarete M. Crisostomo