



RESEARCH REVIEW

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LOOK TO RESEARCH FOR GUIDANCE ON RETAINING TEACHERS

Research suggests that professional learning has an important role to play in improving teacher retention. Districts and schools can leverage learning from the research to design their support accordingly.

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Teacher retention has been a chronic challenge in U.S. schools for decades. Around 10% of teachers leave each year (Sutcher et al., 2016), and that number appears to be rising as the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic take a toll on teacher morale and burnout.

According to a recent national survey, the percentage of teachers thinking about leaving the profession is 44% (Merrimack College, 2022), a number that has risen almost 15 percentage points in 10 years. Strikingly, 20% of teachers surveyed said they are “very likely” to leave. Even if many teachers don’t follow through on these plans — which previous research suggests may be the case (Barnum, 2022) — the numbers are concerning.

Teacher attrition is more than an inconvenience. It negatively affects student learning and disrupts classroom relationships, staff coherence, and school culture. It has a great financial cost — estimated in the billions of dollars nationally — due to the administrative resources required to hire and support new teachers. There is also an incalculable loss of investments such as time, coaching, professional learning, and professional expertise. Compounding the problems, teacher turnover is at its worst in already underresourced schools. (See Barnes et al., 2007, and Berry et al., 2019, for a review of the research.)

What is driving teachers’ intentions to leave? Teacher satisfaction levels were declining even before the pandemic, but a 2022 poll conducted by the National Education Association suggested that COVID-19 and its aftereffects have accelerated teachers’ low morale and plans to leave.

A 2022 survey conducted by Merrimack College found that teachers are overwhelmed and disillusioned. According to the 2022 survey, which followed the model of the now-discontinued MetLife *Survey of the American Teacher* and included a representative sample of 1,300 public school teachers, the percentage of teachers who are “very satisfied” with their jobs is just 12% — a 25-year low.

There is an equity consideration in these numbers as well. The Merrimack survey found that Black teachers are more likely than white teachers to say they plan to leave their schools or stop teaching entirely. This is perhaps because Black teachers report spending more hours working and more time on planning and administrative tasks than white and Hispanic teachers. Black teachers reported working an average of 65 hours per week, compared with 53 and 48 hours per week for white and Hispanic teachers, respectively. Black teachers also reported spending less time teaching (20 hours per week) than white and Hispanic teachers (25 hours per week).



WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Although the surveys cited here found that salaries are certainly a factor in teachers' dissatisfaction, a perceived lack of respect and support are also important factors. Less than half of teachers in the Merrimack survey believed that the general public respects and values them as professionals, a number that fell to only 30% among teachers who are very dissatisfied with their jobs. Among that same very dissatisfied group, 31% of teachers said they have no one to turn to for professional mentorship and support.

This suggests that professional learning has an important role to play in improving teacher retention. Indeed, other studies have found that professional learning makes a difference. Districts and schools can leverage learning from the research to design their support accordingly.

One study (Shuls, 2020) examined the three districts with the best retention statistics in the state of Missouri. Through interviews with key stakeholders, the researchers found that one key retention factor is a culture in which professional learning includes opportunities for educators to learn from other educators or teach other educators. (District leaders also cited the importance of coaches, mentors, job-alike mentors, and "buddy teachers.")

All three districts were committed to personalizing their professional learning to teachers' needs and areas for professional growth, rather than providing a one-size-fits-all approach. The three districts also shared a commitment to new teacher induction and mentoring and to leadership training for teachers interested in advancing to leadership positions.

In the Merrimack College survey described above, large majorities of teachers (90%+) reported that they are most likely to seek support from

fellow teachers and colleagues. Yet, they reported having only an average of two hours per week for teamwork and planning and just one hour in professional development, suggesting that schools could be more responsive to the kinds of support teachers want.

The Learning Policy Institute looked at factors predicting teacher retention in North Carolina, in a study conducted in collaboration with WestEd and the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University (Berry et al., 2021). Professional learning and collaboration was one of six working conditions (out of nine studied) that predicted higher rates of teacher retention, especially in high-poverty schools.

The findings also showed that the following characteristics of professional learning were associated with greater retention: professional learning that aligns with school improvement plans, encourages reflection on practice, and offers opportunities for follow-up efforts that relate to specific training. (Two other significant working conditions were also related to educator growth and development: teacher and school leadership and teachers' collective practice and efficacy.)

STANDARDS IN PRACTICE

For professional learning to lead to higher teacher satisfaction, retention, and effectiveness, it must be high-quality. Standards for Professional Learning describe what high-quality looks like, and the conditions that are likely to improve retention are woven throughout. For example:

- The **Culture of Collaborative Inquiry** standard highlights the value of all educators engaging in and sustaining a culture of support and collective responsibility for all students.
- The **Implementation** standard stresses the value of ongoing

and meaningful support from coaches, mentors, and colleagues.

- The **Leadership** standard emphasizes leaders' roles in responding to educators' working conditions, concerns, and specific support needs, as well as establishing opportunities for educators to grow and take on new roles.

Together, these and other standards can help professional learning leaders create a culture of sustained support that can contribute to educators' sense of belonging, shared ownership, and collective investment in the school and the work that may lead to long-term retention.

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