

Education | Update

March 2013 | Volume 55 | Number 3

Focus on Retention: How to Keep Your Best Teachers Pages 1-2,3,7

Focus on Retention: How to Keep Your Best Teachers

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In the United States, teacher turnover for most districts is close to 20 percent, with higher rates in urban districts and for new teachers. Instability poses challenges to student achievement and district budgets. Experts offer strategies to help schools retain their most effective teachers.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that the national cost of public school teacher turnover could be over \$7.3 billion a year. A high rate of teacher turnover hampers student achievement, hurts staff morale, and impedes a school's ability to move forward.

It's natural to want to throw everything at a problem so pervasive, but a growing number of experts argue that using a "kitchen sink" approach actually deepens attrition. It's time for a smarter, differentiated approach to teacher retention.

In July 2012, The New Teacher Project (TNTP), a national nonprofit focused on effective teaching, released *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools*. The report says that the retention crisis does not just reflect a national teacher shortage but also a failure to retain the most effective teachers.

The study looked at 90,000 teachers across four large, geographically diverse, urban school districts and used value-added test data from 20,000 teachers to establish the criteria for an "irreplaceable" teacher. TNTP characterizes an irreplaceable teacher as one who is so successful at advancing student learning that he is nearly impossible to replace.

"So who are the Irreplaceables? They are, by any measure, our very best teachers," the report states. "Across the districts we studied, about 20 percent of teachers fell into the category. On average, each year they help students learn two to three additional months' worth of math and reading compared with the average teacher, and five to six months more compared to low-performing teachers. Better test scores are just the beginning: Students whose teachers help them make these kinds of gains are more likely to go to college and earn higher salaries as adults, and they are less likely to become teenage parents."

TNTP approximates that 10,000 irreplaceable teachers leave the 50 largest school districts every year, while nearly 10 times that amount of low-performing teachers stay.

"It's been a mistake to measure retention in the aggregate," says Tim Daly, president of TNTP. "When you measure retention in the aggregate, you assume that it's equally beneficial to retain each teacher, and it's not. The real teacher crisis is a failure to retain the right teachers."

The TNTP report chastises current school retention efforts for failing to distinguish between low- and high-performing teachers, and proposes that schools employ smart retention strategies, which include raising overall teaching conditions and expectations and firing consistently low-performing teachers.

Invest in Induction and Provide Support

Experts say that effective induction programs can increase teacher retention rates. Cindy Brunswick, director of induction programs at the New Teacher Center (NTC), says that induction programs are often limited to two days of general onboarding (e.g., standard curriculum, human resources, dos and don'ts) and then succeeded by a series of infrequent follow-ups throughout the year. Instead, NTC advocates for intensive, ongoing mentoring.

"At the root of our work is having a really well-trained mentor or coach focused on providing the data for reflective practice and the resources for growth," says Brunswick. NTC induction programs have yielded double-digit growth in retention rates for new teachers.

"It can be challenging for districts to understand the level of investment needed to make change happen," says Brunswick, whose organization advocates for fully releasing mentors from classroom duties for three years so that they can grow their caseload of 45–60 new teachers. "We argue that induction is a good investment to make. If you can make that investment and get new teachers started on a path of inquiry and continuous development, we have a much better chance keeping them in the profession and positively impacting student achievement."

Brunswick also says that veteran teachers gain professional development when they are trained as mentors and return to the district as leaders with more options for career mobility.

Helen Ryley, an education consultant at Benchmark One, agrees that induction programs are important. She says that strong induction serves a fundamental need in rural districts, which face challenges of location and limited resources for attracting and retaining teachers. "It's nice to talk about highly effective recruits, but rural districts often end up taking what they can get and then developing [those teachers]," says Ryley.

Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) in Maryland is one of many districts that combines teacher effectiveness with retention efforts. "Our concern is, how do we retain the best teachers over time, and how do we develop teachers to become those best teachers in their first three years?" says Jarrod Bolte, director in BCPS's office of teacher support and development. In Baltimore, these questions have led the district to make changes in how they do compensation and induction.

BCPS has implemented site-based mentoring and an end-of-year institute for first-year teachers. Bolte says that the end-of-year institute provides a time to reflect on the first year and make plans for the second: "Teachers get time to really think about the impact the decisions they made had on learning and climate in their classroom, identify changes they want to make, and create an action plan to move forward."

In terms of compensation, Bolte says that the district worked with the Baltimore Teachers Union to eliminate yearly steps and lanes. Now teachers can move up in pay every time they earn 12 achievement units, which can come from evaluation scores as well as professional development. "It's a little bit different from places where pay raises are tied solely to evaluation," notes Bolte. "We felt that it was really important to reward development as well."

"Right now in education we're putting a lot of focus on teacher effectiveness—but we have to square that with systems effectiveness," says Bolte. In the past, Baltimore struggled with aligning the players in new teacher development. Site-based mentors, Teach for America mentors, principals, and other professional development leaders were just bombarding new teachers with different priorities. "We were just layering supports on top of supports, thinking that more is better," says Bolte. "It just ended up confusing the new teacher."

To counter this, Baltimore is enlisting the help of Building a Teacher Effectiveness Network (BTEN), a program developed in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers; the Institute for Healthcare Improvement; the Carnegie Foundation; and three partnering school organizations: Austin Independent School District, Baltimore City Public Schools, and New Visions for Public Schools in New York City. BTEN adapts the improvement science that the likes of Atul Gawande has pioneered to improve health care and applies it to benefit teacher effectiveness. In his presentation at ASCD's 2012 Annual Conference and Exhibit Show, Gawande noted, "Genius doesn't make you great; how you work in a system does."

BTEN allows Bolte and Baltimore City to be more diagnostic about assessing and meeting the needs of new teachers, and smarter about overall development and retention of new teachers in urban districts.

Recommended Retention Strategies

According to the TNTP report *The Irreplaceables*, "Top teachers who experience two or more of these retention strategies plan to keep teaching in their schools for nearly twice as long (2–6 more years)."

FEEDBACK & DEVELOPMENT RECOGNITION RESPONSIBILITY & ADVANCEMENT RESOURCES

1. Provided me with regular, positive feedback
2. Helped me identify areas of development
3. Gave me critical feedback about my performance informally
4. Recognized my accomplishments publicly
5. Informed me that I am high-performing
6. Identified opportunities or paths for teacher leader roles
7. Put me in charge of something important
8. Provided me with access to additional resources for my classroom

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