

From Hiring to Thriving:

Leadership Practices That Keep Teachers in the Profession

by Heather-Lee Riley Kamit, EdD

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to present to a hiring team led by a highly intentional school leader. She had previously attended my dissertation defense and, even then, recognized the potential impact of this work. She fervently stated: “When the time is right, I want to use your research to strengthen how we hire — and more importantly, how we keep our teachers.”

That moment underscores a growing reality in education: while retention is complex, effective leadership practices can empower school leaders to address this challenge and retain talented teachers.

Research from the Learning Policy Institute reinforces what many school leaders are experiencing firsthand: administra-

tive support is among the most significant factors influencing whether teachers stay or leave — often outweighing salary considerations — and underscores the vital role of leadership in retention. Recognizing common barriers, such as limited time or resources, can help leaders develop realistic strategies to enhance support systems.

The Research Is Clear: Leadership Drives Retention

Across my research examining leadership practices that contribute to the development and retention of highly skilled novice teachers, one finding emerged consistently: teachers stay in environments where they feel supported, developed, and heard. Implementing regular feedback surveys and classroom observations can help leaders assess whether their practices are effectively fostering these conditions.

Cells et al. (2023) argue that heightened demands and time pressures lead to teacher burnout, which is a major factor in teacher attrition. These are common realities in underfunded and hard-to-staff school communities. Teachers feel supported when leaders foster an environment grounded in trust and open communication, creating a safe space where they can thrive and feel confident in their roles.

Three Leadership Practices That Retain Teachers

1. Supportive and Human-Centered Leadership



Teachers thrive in environments where leadership is visible, conversations are honest, and listening is intentional. When leaders actively listen to and address teachers' concerns, they build trust — the foundation of strong relationships and long-term retention.

Psychological safety emerges when novice teachers feel seen, heard, and met with both empathy and action. In these spaces, teachers are more willing to take risks, grow in their practice, and feel empowered through autonomy and consistent leadership support. Ultimately, a positive and supportive work culture is not an added benefit — it is a driving force behind teacher morale and their commitment to the organization.

We often assume that teachers leave because the work is too hard or that they are simply not in it for the right reasons; however, more often, they leave because they feel unsupported. Leadership grounded in empathy requires a willingness to go beyond instructional support — to truly understand teachers' lived experiences and respond to their needs in meaningful and intentional ways.

2. Intentional Development Through Mentorship and Growth Opportunities

Retention is rooted in growth. When teachers are provided with professional development aligned to their goals, it leads to greater job satisfaction and the motivation to stay. Leaders must move beyond one-size-fits-all professional development and provide differentiated supports based on their teachers' needs.

Great schools create effective mentoring structures that support teachers beyond the onboarding process. Teachers need ongoing coaching, mentoring, and targeted training to feel well supported, especially in their early careers.

Leaders need to be intentional and methodical with their systems of support. In my work, I have begun to see the impact of a multiyear

mentoring system that gradually releases responsibility while maintaining support. Teachers who are supported and provided opportunities to grow within the organization are more likely to stay. One year is not enough, and research shows that providing multiyear support, along with structured professional development, strengthens teacher practice.

Retention does not happen in a vacuum; it is a deliberate investment in teachers.

3. A Culture of Trust, Voice, and Collaboration

Creative slogans or pep rallies do not define school culture; it is shaped by daily interactions with school leaders who intentionally foster safe, nurturing environments. In these environments, teacher agency and voice are prioritized, and educators feel valued, emotionally secure, and connected to their colleagues — elements essential to sustaining morale and promoting long-term retention.

Leaders must be deliberate in fostering a collaborative and empowering school culture, both by developing strong leadership teams and by creating meaningful opportunities for teacher growth. Establishing professional learning communities is one such approach, as it not only builds collective capacity but also strengthens teachers' professional identity. When novice teachers feel trusted and supported in taking initiative, their motivation to grow — and to remain in the profession — increases significantly.

Furthermore, when school leaders implement structures that enable early-career educators to make decisions about instruction, lesson planning, and professional growth, they cultivate a sense of ownership and self-efficacy. These conditions reinforce a culture where teachers are not only supported but also empowered to thrive.

What This Looks Like in Practice

In my work as an assistant principal in a high-needs school district predominantly serving students classified with various disabilities, intentional leadership practices must be interwoven into the systems we build.

We have designed and structured our mentoring systems to provide sustained support over multiple years. As a multisited school, we intentionally facilitate cross-site collaboration to mitigate the effects of working in isolation. These opportunities for shared learning are especially critical for novice teachers. Through data team cycles, we engage teachers in meaningful discussions that establish shared expectations for student outcomes and ensure that instructional decisions are collaborative.

In addition, we create opportunities for collaboration among teachers, related service providers, ENL/MLL providers, and administrators to collectively examine and respond to student needs. When leaders intentionally integrate systems that create shared forums for discussing critical aspects of the instructional day, staff begin to see themselves as integral contributors to the decision-making process. As a result, collective responsibility and shared purpose become embedded in the very fabric of the organization.

Ultimately, systems — not ideas — are what keep teachers. When leaders design and implement intentional systems that position teachers to thrive, retention becomes not an outcome, but a defining feature of the school's culture.

A Call to Action for School Leaders

If we want to see a change in our retention, we must understand that this is not a staffing issue; it is a leadership responsibility.

Leaders should evaluate current practices in these areas:

- **Examine their current systems of support:** Are you providing effective supports that are aligned with teachers' needs? Are they differentiated and targeted?
- **Strengthen their structures that allow for teacher voice:** Are there opportunities for teachers to be included in the decision-making process?
- **Increase leadership visibility and presence:** Do teachers experience daily interactions with you and responsive feedback?

When leaders engage in deep reflection and consider these

questions, they uncover the root of retention challenges. Immediate changes can begin.

Leaders have the power to change the trajectory of their school organization. Leading with intention can reshape the school culture into

one that is invested in supporting teacher growth and retaining those very teachers.

Ultimately, teachers stay where they feel supported, seen, and heard. They stay not because of the work, but because the work feels good. ■

REFERENCES

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Heather-Lee Riley Kamit, EdD is an assistant principal in New York City's District 75, serving students with significant disabilities. Her research focuses on leadership practices that develop and retain highly skilled novice teachers, with an emphasis on mentorship, inclusive systems, and school culture in high-need settings.