





Where People Want to Stay

Pat Fontana

While focusing on the need to retain teachers and staff is important, Lake George Elementary School Principal James Conway says, “Retention isn’t about keeping the people necessarily.” Conway, New York’s Elementary School Principal of the Year, emphasizes that “it’s about developing a culture where people want to stay.”

Principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders can take steps to implement best practices that encourage their staff and teachers, ensure they feel valued and appreciated, and create an environment in which longevity prevails and turnover is minimal. Developing that school culture means adhering to certain pillars throughout each day.



Building Trusting Relationships

One of the most important pillars of retention, says John Trotta, assistant principal at Polk Street School, is relationships. Selected as the 2026 New York State Elementary School Assistant Principal of the Year, Trotta values teachers and staff members as “the heartbeat of the school.” He adds that “really connecting with the staff and having those healthy relationships” involves “listening to what staff need, supporting them through challenges, and building trust with them... Everything in leadership comes back to the relationships.” Trotta further explains that “if you really want to have people dedicated to your school environment, I think you as the leader have to be all in also. I think that we as leaders need to model what we want to see.”

Saranac Lake High School Principal Joshua Dann agrees that an integral piece of the retention challenge “comes down to relationships.” Dann, New York’s High School Principal of the Year, says that his is a small school and he tries to get to know his teachers and staff “as best I can so that I can support them according to their needs, not my needs.”

Establishing those relationships that encourage retention among teachers and staff involves best practices in a number of other areas, including open communication, consistency, and creating a sense of belonging among everyone in the building.

Get out of the Office and Communicate Clearly

Dann says that retention “starts with communication. Communication has to be open at all times, whether the principal wants to hear it or not.” He adds that it’s critical to be a good listener, saying “I check in a lot with my staff just to see how things are going at school, how things are going on at life.” He says that “administrators have to be available and open to listening. And I think that’s a key part of it — people sometimes just want to make sure that you’re listening and that you’re compassionate about their concerns.”

In fact, he says, “I’m rarely in my office. I try to be present and available in my building throughout the whole day. I try to get there as early as I can and try to get all my office stuff done before school starts so I can be in the hallways during transitions. I can be in the lunchroom during lunches. I can be in the gym during their lunch and their recess time.”

He adds that it is important to be present, to be available. “I think proximity is something that I’ve learned over the years, and I just need to make myself available. I’m constantly moving and walking around just to make sure that people know that I’m watching what’s going on and I’m there if anybody needs me.”

Trotta says that one of the main pillars of teacher and staff retention for him is also communication “with clarity and care.” He cites a couple of favorite quotes that are important to him, that “guide how I’m acting with people.” One quote has been attributed to Brene Brown and to Dave Ramsey in various forms: “It is unkind to be unclear.” He adds that “we need to be direct and compassionate when we’re talking to people. If we’re not honest or we are really not kind to someone, it’s not fair to them.” The second quote is from John Maxwell: “How much you prepare shows how much you care.”

Listening is an integral piece of that communication, Trotta says. That means, “listening to what staff need, supporting them through challenges, and building trust with them.” Following up is one way to build that trust. “Being a person who follows up and checks in and follows through” lets them know, “I’m in the trenches with you,” Trotta adds.

Jennifer Miller, Avon Middle School principal and SAANYS’ 2026 Outstanding Educator, also advises, “Get out of your office.” She explains that she learned a strategy from a professional development session called Breakthrough Coaching. The idea is, she says, that “if you have a structure in place for managing your office work to get out more and do the real work of instruction and getting the beat of what’s going on in your building, you’ll have higher results. You’ll have better discipline. You’ll have better trained staff. You’ll have better morale, all that.”

Engage in Professional Development Opportunities

Growing teachers as leaders is important for retention, Miller adds. “I think the big thing is growing them as educators and recognizing people who could be leaders.” She says that the highest level of coaching is “helping someone realize their potential, creating opportunity within a district.” She refers to her walks around the school campus as “learning walks” that enable her to observe as well as to coach.

Conway also sees development opportunities as pillars of support and retention for teachers and staff. He says, “One of my most important roles is to develop leaders from within

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He explains further, “We make an investment in people when we hire them, and it's our obligation to ensure that they have the support that they need to do their job well.” He adds, “I find that the best growth generally comes when our staff is able to lead that professional development which is best for the person leading and for those that are learning from their colleagues.”

Development opportunities for new teachers can also include strategies such as providing immediate feedback, mentors, and check-ins. Trotta says that his school conducts regular support and development meetings for newer teachers. “Sometimes we will ask some veteran teachers to come there and share what their experience was like and give some resources.” On a less formal level, Trotta encourages newer teachers to check in with the veterans for guidance and insights, to take advantage of their experience and expertise.

Dann has established a leadership team within his school, explaining that it “was initiated because I wanted to bounce things off of the staff to see what was best for our school.

Activities or events or presenters, what we're doing for professional development days, how the discipline is going in the building, all those kinds of things that as an administrator you can make in isolation.” But, he adds, “It's so much more beneficial and helpful to have 10,12 other staff that are guided and geared towards those specific issues or events.”

Mark Turner, a past president of SAANYS and the recipient of the 2026 SAANYS Irving Schwartz Distinguished Retiree Award, says that teachers should “be encouraged to develop both professionally and personally.” He adds that “the goal, in my opinion, is to build collaborative networks, shifting from isolation, because teaching can be a very lonely profession.”

Turner has been “connected to administration and education for many years,” having held roles in administration “as an assistant principal, an elementary principal, and a director of curriculum and staff development.” He has also served as an adjunct professor, supervising student teachers, and as a mentor coach. He emphasizes that as an integral part of retention strategies, school leaders “need to develop those professional learning communities. By doing that, you keep building the team and making sure

that you're cultivating that commitment to the school through teamwork.”

Focus on Consistency

Turner also emphasizes the need for consistency in leadership. He says that “culture building happens gradually, but it requires some intentional effort. And how do you do that? You have to have consistent leadership behaviors. You have to have clear expectations and accountability.”

Miller cites “initiative fatigue” as something that can be detrimental to supporting and retaining staff. She explains that teachers and staff need to know “what the mission and vision are every day. They know what they have to work on. They know what they're going to support. And they're not saying, what's the next thing? That's a morale killer.”

Dann agrees that consistency in administration and in initiatives, which is often connected, is critical. He says that “having administrators that are there for a long time also helps, so that we're not having initiatives and then stopping and changing and having new initiatives.”

Dann, who has been principal at Saranac Lake High School for the past 13 years, says that his “superintendent has also been there for 13 years, so it's also helped with consistency and the initiatives are maintained. They're not stopped and then something new. We're continuing to build on what we feel is best for our kids.”

Give Them a Voice

Trotta says, first, that he loves being at his school. He was a teacher there for nine years and has spent the last ten years there as the assistant principal. He works closely with his principal to build a culture where people want to stay, including giving teachers more of a voice and a say in how their day looks.

He explains, “We put together some surveys to better understand their specific needs when it comes to the school day. For example, I put out a prep period survey to see what the best period is to have your prep time, your lunchtime, just so they have input there.” He adds, “Another one is creating a schedule that has teaching time, teaching blocks that will limit interruptions.”

Another of his best practices, Trotta says, is “encouraging staff to share their story and be visible.” He adds that they “intentionally highlight teachers’ passions and leverage their strengths to reach a wider audience (the entire community). For example, the Polk Pod podcast celebrates staff in a fun, engaging format. Music in Our Schools videos involve both students and staff, showcasing the shared love of music each March.”

All teachers, especially those who are newer to the school and the community, are encouraged “to be visible to their classroom community, the PSS community, and the Franklin Square community by being involved in schoolwide events, inviting administrators to events, and taking pictures/videos of the students engaging in learning.”

One of the school’s initiatives is “Better, Not Bigger.” Trotta explains that the program is “a scenario-based workshop (led by our principal, assistant principal, school psychologist, and social worker) for grades K-6, but the premise of calmly approaching challenges with intention and care has become embedded in our school’s culture, and the program’s shared language is reinforced by teachers and staff alike. It has also positively impacted how our staff takes on challenges. They are helpful and caring problem-solvers who want to help children!”

Conway also conducts surveys of parents and teachers each year. He asks the teachers “how they feel as teachers

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in the building. Do they feel they’re valued members of the staff? Do they have a voice?” The surveys are “connected to our school culture and leadership, school climate, belonging, trusting relationships, and instructional efficacy.”

He explains that the surveys sometimes force school leadership to set a goal for themselves. “One of the things was our understanding of a goal-setting process, taking the information from our staff. It helped me recently ensure that we were very clear with our goals and what we were working towards in the building.”

Establish and Maintain a Meaningful Connection

Ensuring that all staff feel connected to the school community contributes significantly to a culture where people want to stay. Conway says that non-teaching staff are “viewed as critical members of our school.” He adds that he speaks regularly with each of them, letting them know that they are part of the team. “They feel valued. Our staff respects the work that they do.”

Conway adds that there are good leaders in each of the departments who support their staff as well. He says, that

“allows me to kind of just make sure that I have good connections and I’m communicating and thanking them for the work that they do.”

Including all staff in celebrations makes them valued as well, says Turner. He explains his approach is that “there is nobody who’s more important than the next person in school, whether it’s the custodian, the cafeteria workers, any aides, any secretaries. You have to value everybody’s participation.”

Turner adds, “You have a responsibility to make sure people know they’re an important member of the team. And when they do that, when they feel like they can really contribute and be recognized for their efforts, then they will also be feeling like, yes, we are making a difference. Yes, we can be celebrated. Yes, we’re part of the team.”

Conway has been in the education field for 36 years and says that his training at Springfield College “was grounded in a philosophy known as humanics, which is belief in spirit, mind, and body and their interconnectedness. So that has stuck with me.” He emphasizes, “I’m more and more convinced of it, that teachers stay or employees stay where they feel that connection. And not just a connection as a professional, but as a whole person.” ■

Pat Fontana is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction.