





Laying a Foundation for Teacher Retention

Kim M. Smithgall

“Building a well-prepared, stable, and diverse teacher workforce is critical to advancing student learning and development and ensuring all children, regardless of background, have access to high-quality education. Yet, in the United States, this goal remains elusive. The teaching profession faces long-standing and compounding challenges, including increasingly demanding working conditions that discourage teachers from staying in the classroom.”

Definitions

- **“Teacher turnover”** as defined by the Learning Policy Institute refers to all teacher movement out of schools or out of the profession from one school year to the next. It includes teachers who moved to a different school (movers) and teachers who left the profession (leavers) during the study period.
- **“Attrition”** as defined by UNESCO is the flow of teachers leaving the profession.

Such are the opening sentiments in “Teacher Turnover in the United States: Who Moves, Who Leaves, and Why,” a March 2026 report from the Learning Policy Institute summarizing and interpreting the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey (2020–2021) and Teacher Follow-Up Survey (2021–2022). Among the key findings were statistics showing

that teacher turnover rates remain high in the United States, with 15.1 percent of teachers either leaving the profession or moving to another school. This rate is 27 percent higher than the turnover rate in the early 1990s and is also higher than many leading international educational systems, such as Singapore, Finland, and Ontario, Canada. In those areas, teachers leave the profession at an annual rate of 3 percent to 4 percent.

Additional Key Findings

Some of the other findings cited in the Learning Policy Institute’s report include the following:

- Higher salaries are associated with lower turnover rates, with the probability of teacher turnover decreasing by 0.34 percentage points for every \$1,000 in salary increases (adjusted for cost of living). For instance, when salaries increase from \$50,000 to \$70,000 per year, the probability of turnover decreases by an average of 40 percent (from 17.6 percent to 0.9 percent).
- Teacher turnover rates were 35 percent to 37 percent higher in schools with large populations of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color compared to schools with smaller concentrations of these pupil populations.
- Higher than average turnover rates also occur among those who teach English as a second language or bilingual education, foreign languages, career or technical education, and special education. Teachers in these subject areas often have specialized expertise and extra certifications beyond the minimum certification requirements, and often need targeted training.
- The teacher turnover rates are lower for rural, suburban, and town schools (14.5 percent, 13.9 percent, and 13.7 percent respectively) compared to city schools (17.7 percent). Charter schools have higher turnover rates at 17.8 percent compared to the 14.9 percent rate at traditional public schools.
- White teachers had lower turnover rates than teachers of color (14.7 percent versus 16.6 percent), and Black teachers moved or left the profession at rates that were more than 20 percent higher than their white colleagues (18.1 percent compared to 14.7 percent).
- Years of teaching experience and certifications matter for retention, as well. The turnover rates are 17



percent for fully certified teachers with one to three years of experience and 24 percent for early career teachers without full certification.

- Nearly three-quarters of the teachers who moved to a different school or left teaching altogether did so voluntarily and for reasons other than retirement. And, not surprisingly, teachers who indicated greater job and workplace satisfaction were significantly less likely to leave than their counterparts who indicated dissatisfaction with their work (8 percent compared to 22 percent).
- Effective school leadership was cited as a significant factor in teacher turnover rates. The likelihood of turnover decreased by more than half (from 18.7 percent to 9 percent) for educators who said their schools had effective leadership and supports versus teachers who indicated otherwise.

“There are many patterns and many statistics [in the report] that are not new; we have seen them in prior examinations of the same issue,” said Emma Garcia, principal researcher at the Learning Policy Institute and one of the report’s authors. “It is a persistent problem that we have failed to address.”

In fact, similar trends were reported in the Institute’s 2016 report, “Solving the Teacher Shortage” and in other research, including studies conducted throughout the world. For example, a report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 predicts primary and secondary schools around the world will need an additional 44 million teachers by 2030 due to educator shortages (source: “UNESCO Global Report on Teachers”). While some of those needs stem from an increase in school-aged populations, 58 percent of the global shortage is caused by teacher attrition. Low salaries, difficult working conditions, heavy workloads, and a lack of respect for teachers were cited as being among the factors leading to educators opting to leave their teaching careers and also driving young people away from entering the profession.

Leadership Makes a Difference

The data and research on teacher turnover and attrition are valuable for supporting large-scale systems change, such as raising salaries and improving teacher and leader preparation programs. Indeed, the reports from the Learning Policy Institute, UNESCO, and other organizations are designed to help drive those broad shifts. However, the information is also valuable for school leaders who want to initiate positive changes on a smaller scale — within their own schools, districts, or regions.

For the Learning Policy Institute’s report, Emma Garcia points out the fundamental and inherent value of the information sources tapped in the research — teachers themselves. “In what the teachers say, we are learning what they need and what’s important to them. We can also

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benefit from their perceptions and how satisfied they are with their work,” she commented. Digging a little deeper into the details of teachers’ experiences and observations can provide a roadmap for education leaders to create school cultures that lead to teacher retention.

Teachers indicated the following as among the characteristics associated with leader effectiveness and overall workplace satisfaction:

- School administrators show respect for and value teachers, are encouraging and supportive of staff, and recognize educators’ accomplishments.
- Those in leadership positions foster a collaborative work environment, provide opportunities for staff members to learn from each other, promote instructional flexibility, and support teachers as they try new strategies.
- Teachers are provided with opportunities to be involved with decision making and to influence school policies, curriculum, student performance standards, professional development, and employee evaluation systems.
- Leaders communicate clear expectations for the school, and their actions reflect and advance a shared commitment to the school’s mission.

The Daily Practice

What does this look like in daily practice for a principal, assistant principal, curriculum director, dean, or other school leader?

Both U.S. and global research indicates that it starts with

acknowledging teachers' skills, knowledge, and value. With effective leadership and workplace satisfaction, "there's an understanding that the teaching profession is, in fact, a profession and that teachers have expertise and important contributions to make," said Learning Policy Institute Principal Research Manager Marjorie Wechsler.

With respect to a foundational element, leaders can further support teachers by encouraging collaboration and "creating time, space, and culture for teacher collaboration," Wechsler advised. "It's not just saying, 'Go talk to your colleagues.' But, as the person who is setting the schedule, it's creating those opportunities and those expectations for teachers to learn from each other and problem-solve together."

Research shows that having professional networks is a key way to reflect on, improve, and build strong practices in schools, rather than being isolated in a classroom, Wechsler added. "Leaders can set expectations for how teachers should be spending their time together so that it's really productive and building a knowledge base of best practices. This allows them to plan and share materials together and to reflect with others on lessons that worked really

well — or for those lessons that didn't, to be able to ask for suggestions on lessons that might work better. The time and space to have those conversations among teachers is really important."

The timing of collaboration activities is also an important consideration; teachers need opportunities for this work during the regular school day. Per the UNESCO report, "Due to the important nature of collaboration for a teacher's professional growth and motivation, time for building relationships and communities needs to form part of contractual hours, alongside time for instruction to allow them to engage with others in problem solving...however, based on findings from a school and staffing survey conducted in the USA, collaborative time given to teachers is often limited, and many teachers seem to do this collaborative work outside of contracted hours (voluntarily and unpaid)."

Along the same lines, teachers also value working in an environment that has an overall "culture of professional growth," said Wechsler, which includes "providing targeted professional development or professional learning opportunities that are co-created with teachers so what they're learning is applicable to their needs."

According to the Learning Policy Institute's report, mentoring and other interactive opportunities that create ongoing feedback cycles are vital for teachers' job satisfaction, as well:

"High-quality professional development creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts. Participating in mentoring and coaching opportunities, professional learning communities, and other educator networks can strengthen teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical practices, and learner-centered approaches. These professional learning opportunities can also further equip teachers with the resources necessary to design student-centered curricula and provide authentic assessments that promote deeper learning."

For educators in their first few years of teaching, this support is even more important, as studies indicate that new teachers who receive little mentoring support are twice as likely to leave the profession as their counterparts who work closely with expert teachers. Educators also need to feel safe enough in their school environment to try different teaching strategies, with the understanding that failing with a particular approach will teach just as much — if not more — than succeeding at the outset.

"Just like children, adults need to practice things, to try things out and then get some feedback," Wechsler commented.

Teacher Involvement

Tapping teachers for decision-making and leadership activities is also vital in teacher retention efforts. This starts at the most basic level — the classroom. The UNESCO report finds: "While teachers need a voice in larger decision-making processes and encouragement to innovate, they also require a certain level of autonomy and academic freedom in their own classrooms... The idea of autonomy inside the classroom includes teachers making decisions about teaching methods

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and materials, adaptation of curricula or student assessment measures... Granting autonomy to teachers is yet another key for professionalization and has the potential to significantly enhance job satisfaction... Teachers with autonomy can become actors who understand the needs of their students and communities, instead of merely implementers of policies designed by others... For example, a survey from the UK found that teachers experiencing the highest levels of autonomy intend to stay in the profession at a rate of 85 percent compared to only 50 percent of those teachers experiencing low levels.”

Teachers’ job satisfaction also increases with their involvement in higher-level decisions. Molly Gordon, a Learning Policy Institute senior principal researcher, suggests education leaders work with teachers to assess the teachers’ own strengths and then look for opportunities to plug those educators into distributive leadership roles that best align with the strengths.

“You have to do that assessment, build trust so people know they will be supported in a leadership role and then extend some of those opportunities for teachers to lead,” Gordon said.

For the immediate future in New York State, a natural place for this involvement in decision making could occur as districts are developing their new Standards-based Educator Evaluation and Professional Support (“STEPS”) system, along with associated changes to Professional Learning Plans that will likely result from the updated evaluation plans. The STEPS plans are required by the 2031-2032 school year.

Clear and Aligned Goals

One additional way for education leaders to create a culture that helps retain teachers is to set and communicate clear, cohesive, and well-defined goals — goals developed with staff input (of course!). And because there are so many new educational initiatives and requirements to monitor and follow, it’s also vital for leaders to clarify how goals and new activities can work together to move instructional practices forward and, in turn, increase student achievement.

“By making that cohesion clear, you can help teachers feel like they’re working intently on common goals to improve outcomes,” Gordon said. In other words, it should be clear how every decision and every action is aligned with a common set of goals.

Gordon continued, “It’s like a tree with branches where teachers understand how all of these things are connected — versus creating goals that are more like a field of flowers that are all over the place and have no cohesiveness to them.”

The tree analogy is certainly appropriate for goals...but also for the rootedness, growth, and stability that can occur when educational leaders provide the proper nourishment and support to teachers. And the content written by your colleagues and appearing in this issue of *Vanguard* will undoubtedly give you some practical ideas... ■

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The Cost of Teacher Turnover

By Kim M. Smithgall

In addition to the reasons for teacher turnover, the Learning Policy Institute’s report, “Teacher Turnover in the United States,” also covers the costs associated with teachers changing positions or leaving the profession.

When examining turnover from a purely monetary standpoint, the costs related to teacher separation, recruiting, hiring, and training are high: \$11,860 per teacher in small school districts (fewer than 10,000 pupils), \$16,450 per teacher in medium districts (10,000 to 50,000 students), and \$24,930 per teacher in large districts (more than 50,000 students). The higher costs for larger districts can be attributed to the inherent complexity of recruiting, hiring, and training in larger organizations.

However, there are even more significant effects of teacher turnover. “Overall, turnover impacts student achievement and the composition and qualifications of teachers in schools, and it further disrupts schools by undermining collegial relationships, collaboration, or the accumulation of institutional knowledge,” the Institute’s report states. For example, drawing on research cited in the report:

- Over time, students in grade levels with high teacher turnover have lower English language arts (ELA) and math achievement levels than pupils in grades without high turnover rates.
- The relationship between lower ELA and math achievement and teacher turnover rates is even stronger in schools that serve higher percentages of economically disadvantaged pupils and students of color. In turn, these schools often find it challenging to hire fully certified and experienced teachers, leading to further inequities in educational opportunities for marginalized students.
- Teacher turnover also has negative effects on the remaining educators, who may be required to take on more work or accommodate increased class sizes. Also, these educators sometimes report losing a sense of trust and workplace collegiality leading to decreased job satisfaction and even more teacher turnover.