

Understanding Teacher Retention at Teacher-Powered Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Annual teacher departure rates in the United States have held steady at about 16% for most of the 21st century.

This high turnover has serious consequences at both the school and student levels (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2004; NCES, 2014; Ronfeldt et al., 2012). Moreover, as we emerge from the pandemic, teachers are reporting levels of burnout and intention to leave the profession at the highest rates in recent history (Kurtz, 2022; NEA, 2022; Steiner et al., 2022).

Polling from the EdWeek Research Center, the National Education Association, and others has found that about 50% of teachers now plan to soon leave the field, a jump of about 50% relative to historical levels (Ibid; see Figure 1). Early data confirms that these intentions are translating to actual departures: a Chalkbeat analysis of eight states found departure rates increased this year in each one, and a nationally-representative RAND survey

of district administrators revealed a four percentage point leap in teacher departures in 2021-22 (Barnum, 2023; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023).

The problems that drive teachers out of schools are not immutable. Research on teacher leaving has consistently found that the primary reasons for departure are work environments and experiences that are unbearably unpleasant (e.g. Goldring et al., 2014; Ingersoll, 2004; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Podolsky et al., 2017; Simon and Johnson, 2015; Steiner et al., 2022). This is in some ways good news because school environmental issues that impact departure decisions such as personal autonomy, safety, discipline, and administrative support can theoretically be resolved through effective school-level decision making (Viano et al., 2018).

Consistent with the evidence that leadership and leaders' decisions impact teachers' departure decisions, prior research has shown that expanded teacher leadership roles and meaningful decision-making authority are linked with greater educator enthusiasm and institutional loyalty and lesser feelings of burnout (García et al., 2022b; Ingersoll et al., 2018, Ingersoll et al., 2019; Kemper, 2020; Steiner et al., 2022).

Teacher-powered schools—that is, schools collaboratively designed and run by teams of teachers in partnership with the students, families, and communities they serve—elevate the role of teachers by design.¹ Education

Evolving's Teacher-Powered Schools (TPS) program maintains an inventory of public district and charter schools which are implementing teacher empowerment models of school leadership. Because teachers at these schools make important school-level decisions, we theorized that these schools are seeing improved teacher retention outcomes relative to other schools in the US. TPS undertook an exploratory survey- and interview-based research project in 2022 to examine this theory and explore school conditions that mediate teacher departure.

This report documents our major findings.

Key Findings:

1. Departure rates at TPS schools are lower than those in schools nationwide.
2. Factors associated with variation in teacher departure rates over the five-year dataset included school size, school setting, and proportion of white students. Notably, proportion of free- and reduced-price lunch recipients was not associated with teacher departure rate.
3. Interviewees report that retention is high because teachers feel passionately about the student-centered missions of their TPS schools.

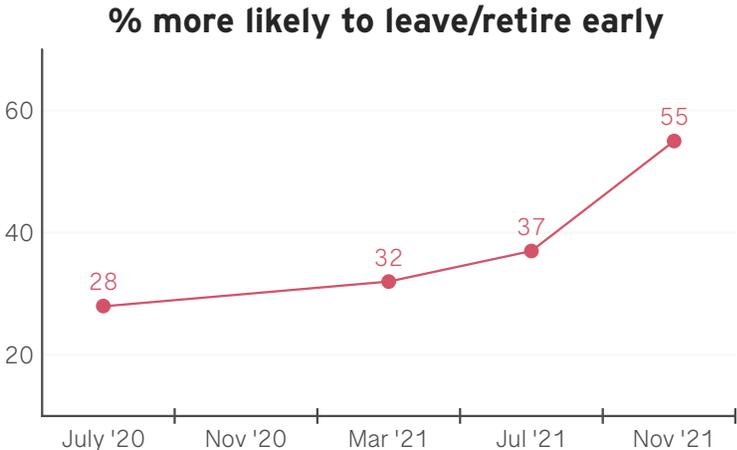


Figure 1: The percentage of teachers feeling more likely to quit teaching earlier than they had originally planned as a result of the pandemic spiked as schools returned to in-person teaching.²

1 For more on the Teacher-Powered Schools model of school governance, leadership, and decision-making (and the many varied forms it takes in each unique school community) see teacherpowered.org

2 From NEA, 2022.

DATA AND METHODS

Our research design included both a survey to gather departure data from schools and an interview component. We surveyed representatives of our member schools, recruiting respondents directly by email, through social media posts, and at a professional conference. In total, we received responses from 45 of the 119 schools in our database. The survey included questions about school and student characteristics, the size of the faculty, and the number of teachers who left each school for any reason (including transfer and retirement) each school year from 2017-18 through 2021-22. We merged this survey data with TPS’s internal records of schools’ leadership structures and teacher autonomies to examine any relationships between these factors and teacher retention outcomes.

Our respondent schools’ student populations, depicted in Figure 2 modestly over-represent special education and white students and under-represent free- and reduced-price lunch recipients relative to national averages. Respondent schools were small, averaging 17.2 teachers per school and serving an average of 188.5 students per school, far less than half the national average of 529 students per public school.³ Prior research on teacher departure would suggest that the TPS sample might see elevated departure rates compared to a national sample based on their elevated

special education populations and small school sizes but decreased departure rates based on having fewer lower free- and reduced-price lunch recipients and a smaller proportion of minoritized students (Borman and Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2004; Ingersoll and May, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Nguyen et al., 2020).

To supplement our survey data, we conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with educators from respondent schools. Most of the interviewees were engaged in both classroom teaching and leadership work at their schools and many acted as their school’s primary contact for TPS. Our questions focused on these staff members’ perceptions of school culture, teacher wellbeing, and conditions or processes perceived to be associated with teacher dissatisfaction at their school.

TPS retention survey sample and national average student characteristics

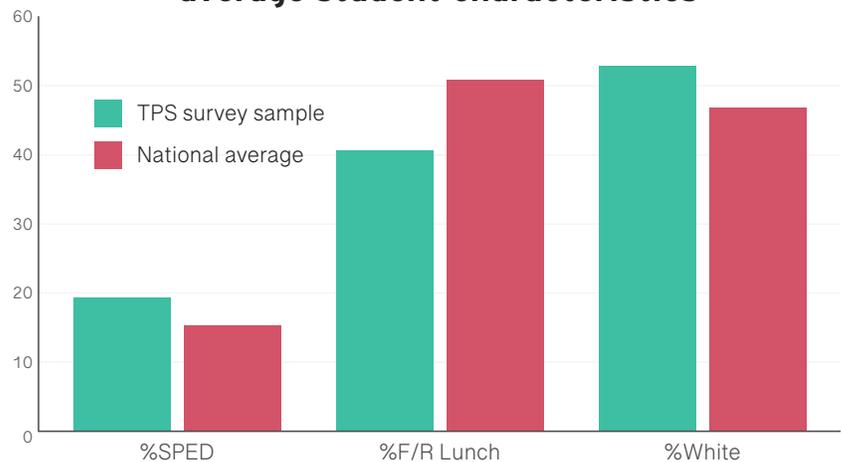


Figure 2: The survey sample was drawn from schools with student bodies generally similar to national demographic averages.

3 National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_214.40.asp

KEY FINDINGS

1 Departure rates at TPS schools are lower than those in schools nationwide

Over the past five years, the average annual teacher departure rate across TPS schools was 9.2%. Excluding school years 2020-21 and 2021-22—years of peak Covid pandemic disruption—the rate was 8.2%. These figures were calculated by dividing the sum of all teachers employed at respondent schools over the survey period by the total number of departures in that time.

We recognize that concerns about cross-type comparisons and self-selection of teachers into TPS schools impact our ability to accurately compare TPS retention numbers to national averages. Still, as shown in Figure 3, the departure rate from TPS schools dramatically undercuts national attrition numbers from the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), which yielded an average departure

rate of 15.9% from American public schools since 2000 (Goldring et al., 2014).

Consistent with the trends identified in national surveys of intended and actual post-pandemic teacher leaving rates, departure rates in TPS schools hovered steadily between 7.1% and 9.6% from 2017 to 2021 but rose during the 2021-22 school year that saw a return to classrooms to a high of 12.3%. We eagerly await publication of the 2021-22 TFS results for co-temporal comparison. Based on the high and stable historical departure figures from past TFS reports and the broadly-reported difficulties of post-pandemic teaching, we predict that TPS schools' teacher departure rates, even in 2021-22, will end up falling well below the recent national average.

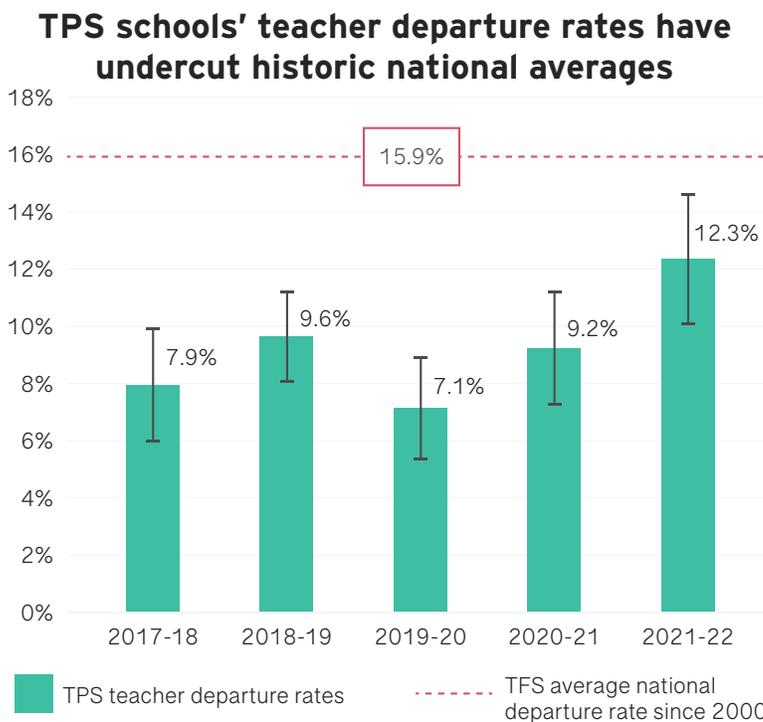


Figure 3: Teacher departure from TPS schools from 2017-2022 (green bars, with 95% confidence interval depicted) compared to national average of 15.9%.

2 Factors associated with variation in teacher departure rates over the five-year dataset included school size, school setting, and proportion of white students. Notably, proportion of free- and reduced-price lunch recipients was not associated with teacher departure rate.

We conducted regression analysis⁴ of school-level departure rates over the five-year study period using the following regressors: percentage of students receiving free- or reduced-price lunch, percentage of white students, percentage of students classified as special education recipients, school setting, student body size, number of teachers, and teacher compensation relative to other schools in the area. This analysis revealed that urbanicity, student population, and student body racial makeup were significantly associated with departure rates.

We discuss each of these items below.⁵

Free and reduced-price lunch recipients

Perhaps the most notable finding from our regression analysis was that the percentage of students receiving free- or reduced-price lunch in a given school was not associated with the teacher departure rate of that school ($p = 0.41$). This is a surprising and encouraging finding for TPS schools, as family income is considered to be a major determinant of teacher turnover in most schools. Prior studies of teacher departure have consistently found a strong positive relationship between free- or reduced-price lunch percentage and teacher

departure (Ingersoll and May, 2012; Simon and Johnson, 2015). However, it appears that this rule does not hold for TPS schools.

School size

Small schools within our sample had much higher teacher turnover rates than large schools, as can be seen in Figure 4. The TPS school sites with the most troubling retention situations appear to be those with very few teachers, and no school in our sample with more than 150 students had a teacher departure rate above 15%. This negative relationship between school size and teacher departure rate is consistent with past studies of teacher attrition (Bryk et al., 1999; Ingersoll, 2001).

One concern about comparability between TPS schools and traditional schools is that TPS schools are much smaller, on average, than are typical schools. The negative relationship between school size and teacher departure rate, however, suggests that the small size of TPS schools does not problematize the claim that TPS schools are excelling in teacher retention; if anything, the small size of TPS schools overall makes their encouraging retention numbers even more extraordinary.

4 We used Stata to run ordinary least-squares regressions of schools' teacher departure rates as a function of an array of school-level characteristics. This statistical tool allowed us to individually assess the impact of numerous variables on an outcome of interest while holding all others constant.

5 Note that the departure numbers presented here are not comparable to the figures presented in the previous section. The departure rates presented in Key Finding 1 accounted for school size by totaling staff numbers and departures across our full sample, whereas the following findings consider each school as a single, unweighted data point.

The departure rate in TPS schools is highest in small schools

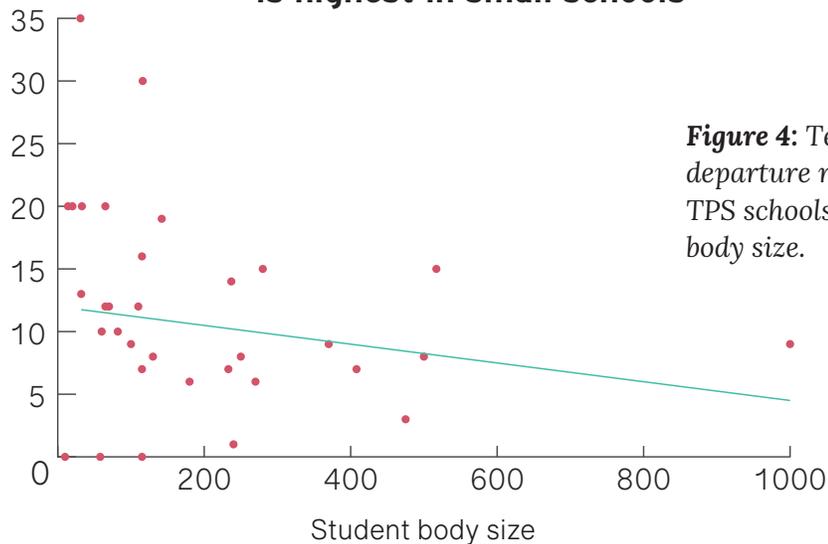


Figure 4: Teacher departure rates across TPS schools by student body size.

Setting

Teacher departure rates were lower in suburban schools (which averaged 7.4% across schools in the five-year dataset) than in both rural (11.5%) and urban (11.0%) settings. The effect of setting on teacher departure was resilient to controls for student demographics and school size, suggesting that a characteristic of suburban schools beyond their compositions was impacting teachers' departure decisions.

Student racial composition

There is a weakly significant ($p = 0.90$) relationship between the percentage of white students in a TPS school and its teacher departure rate. An increase of 1 percentage point in the population of white students in a school was associated with a 0.11% reduction in annual teacher departure rate.

In addition to the school and student characteristics discussed above, we hypothesized that departure rates might fluctuate across TPS schools in association with the level or kinds of autonomy secured by teachers. However, we observed no relationships between departure rate and either the total number of autonomies provided by a given school (out of 15) or any individual type of autonomy. Our school autonomy data was gathered informally and years ago, and many autonomies were so common in our sample that there was little variation across which we could identify differences in retention outcomes. Further research may find an association here that we were unable to detect.

3 Interviewees report that retention is high because teachers feel passionately about the student-centered missions of their TPS schools.

Our interviews with TPS staff members helped us identify important strengths and challenges of these schools with regard to staffing and teacher satisfaction. Primary themes and conclusions identified from these interviews included:

TPS teachers believe that their schools are uniquely great

This was the clear, main takeaway from nearly every interview. Respondents expressed a love of their colleagues, students, and institutions, and they credited the autonomy and empowerment of being in a TPS for enabling them to feel levels of passion, enthusiasm, and attachment that they had never experienced in other institutions. A common claim heard across interviews was that teachers at that given school simply never want to leave.

Schools are mission focused

The staff of TPS schools describe their institutions as highly culture- and mission-oriented, with those missions invariably being student-oriented. Educators report this student-centered focus as a key reason that staff want to stay in a TPS school for their entire careers. Many of the staff members in these schools have been there for decades, often since the school's founding or its transition to become a TPS-style organization. Founders and other long-term veterans were seen as holding key roles in keeping the school mission at the center of the staff's work and onboarding newcomers into their school's distinct culture. This mission focus was also understood to contribute to "good turnover." That is to say, teachers who did not identify with a school's philosophy were observed to depart from a school quickly, leaving room for a more appropriate teacher to take their place.

Hiring rules impact new teacher fit

Staff of schools with the authority to design and conduct their own hiring processes felt confident that they were recruiting teachers who are emotionally and intellectually committed to their school's approach and mission. This "good fit" results in long-term teacher commitments. On the other hand, interviewees at schools that are heavily constrained by district or union hiring policies described having to take on many teachers who fit their mission poorly and felt that this diminished their ability to maintain the school culture they desired.

The work is meaningful, but hard

The majority of interviewees described finding joy in their opportunities for professional creativity and problem-solving, their unique ability to meaningfully benefit students, and their flexibility to experiment with new approaches. However, each also acknowledged that these benefits come at a time and energy cost that not all staff, especially some new hires, are willing or able to commit. Moreover, teacher enthusiasm at TPS schools can be hampered by poor relationships with school boards who are skeptical of a school's unique model or even question its existence, and these seemingly endless existential battles are reportedly draining. One respondent described how their staff, exhausted by years of this conflict, has begun working to stem off this challenge by proactively seeking out new school board members, inviting them for campus visits and providing introductory materials about their school to pave the way for positive working relationships in the future.

DISCUSSION

TPS schools seem to experience strong staff retention outcomes relative to the US as a whole. The mechanism for this improvement was not clearly identified in the survey data, but interviewees named mission-orientedness and philosophical alignment among the staff, hiring for good-fit, and ability to adapt to meet the needs of their students as key explanations for their low turnover numbers.

Many stated that teachers only ever leave their schools when they are ready to retire. While the workload and heightened responsibilities of employment in these schools is a constant challenge, many TPS teachers apparently see the reward of maximally and consequentially serving their students as worth the added effort. Interviewees at schools with strong teacher retention described strategies such as establishing distinct leadership teams for different elements of school administration; rotating leadership responsibilities across the staff over time to minimize burnout and maximize institutional knowledge; seeking out school board members to explain their processes and demonstrate their efficacy; and engaging in open-minded, full-staff discussions about the school's mission and culture to keep those concepts forefronted in teacher's minds and work.

Teachers only ever leave their schools when they are ready to retire.

There are important limitations to this study that demand further investigation. One concern is that our interviews were primarily with school representatives who have had prior working relationships with our organization. We acknowledge that their perspectives on the reasons teachers have left their schools could be different from those of departing teachers themselves. Future research could use a longitudinal panel design to follow teachers through their stay and leave decision-making processes or locate departed teachers and ask about their decisions to leave.

A second limitation is that the TPS school population and the teacher population within these schools are not representative subpopulations of American public

schools and teachers overall. TPS schools are smaller and may systematically differ in other important ways from the national average beyond being teacher-powered, and the teachers in these schools have largely opted into these organizations, so claims about the efficacy of these schools do not necessarily apply to non-TPS school settings. In this sense, our data is descriptive in nature and does not support causal inference.

Third, combining survey data with our records of variation in specific forms of teacher autonomy across school sites (as explored in Key Finding 2) was not an effective approach to opening the black box of teacher retention in TPS schools. Our interviews identified autonomies such as hiring practices as important factors in teacher retention,

but our limited and likely outdated data on hiring practice autonomy did not reveal a quantitative relationship between these two variables. We propose conducting a new, rigorous, non-binary tabulation of TPS school autonomies, as this richer dataset would have more capacity to detect relationships between specific autonomies and staffing outcomes. ■

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