

NEWSLETTER

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Improving **TEACHER RETENTION** *With* **SUPPORTIVE** *Workplace Conditions*

Teacher retention is a persistent issue in school improvement. While it is true that some degree of teacher turnover in schools is both healthy and inevitable, the exodus of large numbers of teachers over time diminishes the overall capacity of a school to serve its students. In addition, it creates new problems related to recruiting and inducting new teachers. Statistics show that small schools, urban schools, and schools serving high-minority, high-poverty populations are particularly at risk of losing teachers (Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007).

While states and districts are experimenting with programs to encourage retention, one body of research highlights the importance of supportive working conditions. Factors such as time, leadership, professional development, access to resources, and teacher empowerment all exert a significant influence on the degree of satisfaction teachers feel in their jobs. Recent research indicates that “teachers with positive perceptions about their working conditions are much more likely to stay at their current school than educators who are more negative about their conditions of work, particularly in the areas of leadership and empowerment” (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007, p. 14).

Studies of Workplace Environment **Time**

Teachers at all grade levels typically have less than an hour a day of designated planning time to prepare for multiple teaching periods. The majority of teachers surveyed in South Carolina report spending more than five hours per week outside the school day on school-related activities such as grading and parent conferences (Hirsch, 2005). Johnson (2006) writes that the lack of time to plan, teach, and assess not only creates stressful work conditions, it diminishes the quality of instruction.

By altering schedules, schools are finding creative ways to provide more instructional time for students and noninstructional time for teachers to plan and collaborate with peers. Practices that ensure productive and focused use of this time also should be implemented.

Johnson (2006) advises that administrators take care to ensure “fair and appropriate” teaching assignments. Responsibility for several different courses, split assignments between several schools, and excessive teaching loads all consume what limited time a teacher may have. These situations can contribute to diminished morale, effectiveness, and ultimately commitment.

Strategies for Time

- Lengthen the school day to generate time for early release or additional planning days.
- Employ paraprofessionals or permanent substitute teachers who can assist with administrative tasks, lead small-group activities, or cover class periods.
- Consult with teaching staff to ensure course and student loads are fair and reasonable.

Principal Leadership

Positive and supportive leadership by principals matters to teachers. Leadership in South Carolina, “identified by more than one-quarter of teachers as the most crucial working condition in making their decisions about whether to stay in a school, was significantly predictive of teacher retention” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 12). When comparing schools with high and low turnover rates, Hirsch & Emerick (2007) found the greatest variation in leadership and empowerment. More than half of those who left the teaching profession in 2004–05 indicated they receive better recognition and support from administration in their new jobs, as did 41 percent of teachers who left the classroom for a noninstructional position in the field of education (Marvel et al., 2007).

One recent survey highlighted the importance of trust between administrators and teachers and found it to be strongly correlated with teacher turnover. Among the attributes associated with trust were the communication of clear expectations to parents and students, a shared vision among faculty, consistent administrative support for teachers, and processes for group decision making and problem solving (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007). Administrative support for student discipline also is an issue of considerable importance to

teachers. Surveys indicate student behavior is a reason teachers leave or seriously consider leaving the profession (Coggshall, 2006). Principals as instructional leaders can enhance workplace conditions by attending to teachers’ professional need for clear and consistent discipline policies, instructional support, and recognition.

Strategies for Principal Leadership

- Recognize teacher accomplishments; communicate support for and belief in the role of teachers as experts in instruction and learning.
- Work with teaching staff to devise and implement clear discipline policies and procedures.
- Regularly update the school community on policies and initiatives.

Empowerment and Professional Influence

Historically, teachers have been permitted to make instructional decisions within their classrooms but have experienced much less influence in other school functions. Teachers derive greater satisfaction from their work when they are able to contribute to decisions such as scheduling, selection of materials, and professional development experiences. Studies show that of teachers leaving the classroom, more than half report greater control over their own work and the ability to exert greater influence over workplace policies and practices in their new position (Marvel et al., 2007).

One avenue to engage teachers in a collaborative decision-making process is a school improvement team. Analysis of survey results in North Carolina suggests that the effectiveness of a school improvement team at the middle and high school levels has an effect on teacher retention (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007). Another avenue for teachers to expand their influence is through varied instructional leadership roles. Johnson (2006) claims there is “growing interest today in differentiated roles, which would provide teachers a chance to extend their professional influence” (p. 14). Some schools and districts have instituted positions allowing for a reduced course load while fulfilling other obligations such as peer review and coaching.

Strategies for Empowerment and Professional Influence

- Develop differentiated instructional roles in schools, such as assistants, mentors, coaches, and supervisors.
- Establish formal and informal opportunities to garner teacher input on the design and implementation of school and district policies and procedures.
- Engage school improvement teams in substantive and collaborative decision making.

Professional Development

Ensuring that teachers have continued opportunities to develop skills to meet the diverse needs of learners contributes to a positive and supportive working environment. In the first-year phase-in of the Arizona teacher working conditions survey, 55 percent of teachers rated “effectiveness with the students” as the most important factor influencing employment decisions (Hirsch & Emerick, 2006, p. 11).

Developing teachers’ abilities to educate students is at the core of successful professional development. School communities should analyze data and collaborate to identify and implement those practices that the data suggest could improve student achievement. Johnson (2006) notes that teachers increasingly are expecting to collaborate with peers. While a degree of autonomy is appreciated by teachers, isolation from the support of colleagues can have a detrimental effect on teacher satisfaction, effectiveness, and retention.

Strategies for Professional Development

- Engage teachers in determining the structure and content of professional development by using data to examine the needs of diverse learners and struggling students.
- Promote models of professional development, such as study groups, critical friends groups, and action research.

Curricular Resources

Teachers’ perceptions of their working environment are affected by the level of instructional resources available to them. A supportive workplace provides the curricular infrastructure teachers need to teach effectively. Material resources are needed to give life to curricular standards and to support instruction.

Teachers generally support standards-based teaching and learning. However, many lack adequate material or support to successfully implement a standards-based curriculum (Johnson, 2006). A curriculum begins with standards but also includes pacing guides, outcome expectations, formative and summative assessments, rubrics, textbooks, unit and lesson plans, and supports such as instructional interventions for struggling students. Teachers new to the profession regularly spend many hours outside the school day locating or creating curricular materials—often at their own expense. These teachers operate in “survival mode,” staying just ahead of their students and scrambling to add flesh to the skeleton of standards. As instructional approaches are adopted by districts and schools, leaders must consider what new and veteran teachers will need in hand to effectively implement them and take steps to provide those resources.

Strategies for Resources

- Build a bank of locally developed standards-based lesson plans and assessments for all teachers to access.
- Engage community-based organizations, parent teacher associations, and school boards to identify how community resources can support student learning outside the school day.
- Train instructional staff on the implementation of texts and curriculum materials.

Conclusion

Teachers leave the classroom for a variety of reasons. Administrators have little control when teachers leave because of retirement, family responsibilities, or health issues, but administrators

can positively affect workplace conditions. Research supports attending to workplace conditions as a means to retain teachers. When teachers are given adequate time to prepare, are respected as professionals, and are properly supported, they are more likely to remain in the profession.

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