



## **Could More Holistic Policy Addressing Classroom Discipline Help Mitigate Teacher Attrition?**

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Gabriela Ramos, Ed.D.  
Assistant Principal, Tavan Elementary School  
Scottsdale Unified School District  
4610 E. Osborn Rd.  
Phoenix, AZ 85018  
Email: [gramos@susd.org](mailto:gramos@susd.org)

Thomas Hughes, Ph. D.  
Associate Professor  
Northern Arizona University  
1899 S. San Francisco St.  
Flagstaff, AZ, 86011  
[Thomas.Hughes@nau.edu](mailto:Thomas.Hughes@nau.edu)

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### **Abstract**

Schools across America are losing teachers at an alarming rate. Changing workforce demographics forecasted some level of loss decades ago. More recently, however, it has been noted declines are now reaching a crisis level across parts of the United States for a variety of reasons. Today the prevailing professional literature addressing public education largely identifies financial limitations as the primary force behind these teacher shortages. Research has only recently started to include other alternative factors such as working conditions and personal satisfaction in the conversation surrounding potential reasons for the ongoing loss of teachers. This article introduces findings from a newly completed study in Arizona that confirmed classroom conditions, and most notably student discipline concerns, appear to be important considerations for teachers who are contemplating leaving their current positions. These findings contribute to the scope of the existing literature. They also advance practical implications about implementing initiatives to advance school improvement and in particular to combat teacher attrition. Finally, the article advances possible policy considerations and modifications in

professional practice that could be targeted to improve classroom climate and contribute to teacher recruitment and retention successes.

**Keywords:** teacher attrition, holistic policy, classroom climate, student discipline

## **Introduction**

Teacher shortages are not new to education. Primarily considered early on to be an outcome of anticipated demographic changes with an aging population, the demand for “highly qualified” teachers as a result of No Child Left Behind provided early added complications for schools to overcome (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Hughes, 2014). By the start of the 2015-2016 school year, severe and even crisis-level teacher shortages were being reported all across the United States. The shortages, though already common for Arizona, were suddenly being felt in places including appealing parts of California, Pennsylvania and Nevada (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Of further significance, these same authors noted that the severity of this situation was rapidly becoming so critical it was actually receiving increased mention within the general press. In fact, they reported that headlines and news articles on the topic of teacher shortages appeared 13 times more frequently at the start of the 2015 school year than they had been just the year before in 2014.

In keeping with the majority of the literature on this topic, Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) as well as Sutcher, et al., (2016) have documented the areas of critical shortage and provided dire statistics concerning shortages in special education in general and especially for students in disadvantaged circumstances. More recently, and only exacerbating the situation, it was also reported that enrollments in teacher preparation programs decreased by 35% nationally in the preceding five years. Further, Sutcher, et al., (2016) have listed common approaches to navigating through shortages including increasing class sizes, filling vacancies with underqualified staff, and eliminating classes including electives. Finally, this dilemma has also resulted in widespread adaptations of policy and legislation that have systematically softened teacher credentialing and licensing across a growing number of states (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Arizona has frequently been referenced as a hot spot for frequent departures while the ongoing staffing crisis has evolved. According to Sutcher et al., (2016) at the time of their article, 62% of Arizona school districts reported having unfilled positions three months into the school year, and over 1,000 classroom instructors were only possessing substitute credentials. Further, these authors reported the state had one of the highest turnover rates of any state at the time. These figures corroborate reports in the daily news and establish that teacher retention is a critical concern in the state of Arizona where the primary policy conversation has focused on the topic of compensation and alternative licensing.

## **Overlooked Dynamics**

Though it is common knowledge teachers are in short supply, some of the dynamics leading teachers to leave the classroom may continue to be overlooked and contribute to the narrow financially-motivated policy focus that has long been in place. The prevailing paradigm maintained by the professional literature including the recent article by Sutcher, et al., (2016) characterizes teacher attrition as being almost entirely driven by financial limitations. While there is credible evidence to strongly implicate finances in the emerging crisis, there is also legitimate reason to question the near totality of the prevailing financial “position.”

Fully trained and credentialed teachers have made a tremendous investment in their education and often also in terms of their personal collection of classroom resources as well. In Arizona teachers typically already know up front that in comparison to other states their compensation will be limited when they accept jobs and sign their contracts. Still, the news media in Arizona frequently reports on teachers leaving their classrooms mid-year and even mid-week without any warning. According to Ramos and Hughes (2019) these sudden departures typically also take place without there being a different job to head to. They have further suggested that it is highly unlikely these departing teachers suddenly realized they were underpaid compared to teachers in other states. Quite likely, instead, there are factors besides compensation and living expenses that may have contributed to their decisions.

Still, the financial-challenge paradigm that dominates this topic contends that lagging compensation is the dominant reason for teacher shortages (Lasagna, 2009). This paradigm is so widely embraced in the literature that it has left little room to consider other contributing causes for teacher attrition. Recently De Stercke, Goyette and Robertson (2015) as well as Schaffhouser (2014) advanced the possibility of more personal motivators for teachers leaving their classrooms. Ingersoll (2003), reported that discipline challenges in the classroom, and the effect they have on classroom climate and teacher morale should be viewed as evidence of said personal motivators. Though often overlooked within the literature, stresses placed on teachers also present a challenge to classroom stability (Educator Arizona Retention and Recruitment Report, 2015). These overlooked dynamics serve as the foundation of this study and resulting article which ultimately advocates for an expansion of policy to include some of the overlooked dynamics just referenced.

### **Review of Literature**

As already written, the urgency surrounding the topic of teacher attrition is only increasing. As offered earlier, Arizona, which is the setting for the study, has been reported as having the highest turnover rate of any state in the nation, with as much as a reported 24% gap resulting each year (Sutcher, et al., 2016). Ahead of exploring potential non-financial considerations contributing to the classroom staffing in Arizona, a review of the prevailing thought on the subject is warranted. Said review will first examine the financial costs associated with teacher attrition, then consider impacts upon student learning. Next, it will draw upon the prevailing paradigm upon which the topic is addressed. And finally, it introduces alternate considerations that hopefully positively contribute to teacher attrition challenges in ways not currently considered because of the dominant financial deficit paradigm already in place.

### **Financial Costs**

Teacher attrition is a high stakes issue and as such estimated financial costs associated with teacher losses have long been studied. Almost 20 years ago, Breaux and Wong (2003) estimated the potential local costs in excess of \$50,000 per teacher departure. Five years ago, cost estimates to replace teachers across the United States ranged between \$1 billion to \$2.2 billion per year (Haynes, 2014) and even to as much as \$7.3 billion according to some calculations (New York University, 2015). In 2016, Sutcher, et al., estimated the annual financial costs with problematic teacher attrition to be up to at least an estimated \$8 billion nationally.

## **Student Learning**

Ongoing teacher attrition not only stands to initiate a spiraling jumble of increasing hiring costs, but often also results in decreased student achievement as well. The Arizona Department of Education (2015) reported that it takes from three to five years for teachers to become effective, and cited the high rate of teacher departures for contributing to student discipline issues and ultimately to diminished academic performance in schools across the state. Schools that keep hiring and replacing novice teachers on a regular basis are not providing their students with the level of effectiveness their parents are likely hoping for. Further, Ramos and Hughes (2019) indicated that underqualified personnel in the classroom actually often increased the stress placed on certified teachers who often had to take on responsibilities outside their own classroom as result of teacher shortages.

Furthermore, instead of being able to invest in professional development and continuity for a high-quality staff, dollars have to be allocated instead to starting over with teacher searches, again and again according to Lasagna (2009). This negative cycle stands to become self-perpetuating as teacher replacement efforts continue to eat away at financial and staff resources that could better be directed toward addressing other needs including professional development to deal with other challenges (Sutcher, et al., 2016).

## **Financial Motivations**

Traditionally scholars, practitioners, and policy makers have collectively held a very narrow financially-centered view concerning motivations responsible for teacher attrition in the United States (Ramos & Hughes, 2019). Even in the recent article by Sutcher, et al., financial considerations continued to stand out as the primary, secondary and even tertiary factors considered for future remediation of the attrition challenge. Financial considerations are important factors. In the school district where the study was conducted they were the third most important area staff identified for improvement behind time constraints (first) and local culture (second) according to the locally commissioned study.

This local reality, which advances other causes as reasons for attrition, agrees with findings reported by Haynes (2014) and Ingersol (2003) who both related how teachers regularly leave challenging locations once they secure enough experience to make their move regardless of financial realities. Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2011) further contributed that these departures from stressful surroundings typically take place despite districts incentivizing decisions to stay put by paying upwards of \$7,500 more per year in salary. Local conditions and the literature both suggest there are alternate considerations worth exploring when it comes to motivations teachers might have for leaving their current positions - especially in struggling high poverty schools like those in the host district for this study.

## **Alternate Considerations**

Multiple recent research efforts have been undertaken in order to identify a broader spectrum of possible reasons for increases in teacher attrition (De Stercke, Goyette & Robertson, 2015). The focus of these studies has included attempts to increase understanding of the role played by personal motivations (Prather-Jones, 2011; Schaffhouser, 2014; Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee, & Labat, 2015). Ingersoll, Merrill and May (2016) have even examined teacher attrition from a management perspective and discovered that bureaucratic approaches to implementing

accountability-focused measures actually impeded staff effectiveness, diminished job satisfaction, and ultimately negatively impacted staff morale.

While undesirable working conditions have gained standing as potential motivation for teacher departures (De Stercke, et al., 2015; Prather-Jones, 2011; Schaffhouser, 2014; Thibodeaux, et al., 2015), issues with student discipline and classroom management in particular have begun to stand out as significant sources of conflict and internal career dissonance for educators. Schools with greater discipline issues reported higher teacher turnover rates (Ingersoll, 2003), while Tsouloupas, Carson, Mathews, Grawitch, and Barber (2010) tied this phenomenon directly to the burnout teachers experienced daily in challenging classrooms.

Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, Burke and Louviere (2013) identified these behavior challenges as a top cause of concern particularly for beginning teachers. Further, they noted that apprehension and inconsistencies in approaches to dealing with discipline only contributed to generalized anxiety and ineffectiveness among teachers. Finally, according to Thibodeaux, et al. (2015) teachers indicated that student discipline is a top reason for their leaving. Again, similar sentiment about classroom stresses was advanced in locally collected information sought from first year teachers as part of a district-wide effort to better understand the motivations for teacher attrition.

Every day tremendous effort is directed toward improving discipline in classrooms all across America. Sometimes the more bureaucratic approaches often utilized have actually been known to negatively impact a healthy school climate (Ingersoll, Merrill & May, 2016). Instead of speculating on the impacts these efforts make on classroom climate, this research sought direct input from the Arizona educators who are already experiencing the growing feelings of burnout, disillusionment and internal dissonance that threaten the longevity of their careers (Ramos & Hughes, 2019).

Teachers across America leave their positions every year. Many leave for family or other assorted personal reasons not addressed in this review or this study. There is nothing new about this reality, though there is also no indication that these types of reasons have helped to create the sharp increase in teacher departures either. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the general understanding of ways classroom discipline challenges may directly fuel the struggle to retain quality teachers by creating hostile working conditions that ultimately drive them away.

### **Focus of the Case Study**

Teacher attrition is a challenging issue in high-poverty settings. It has also been reported to be especially challenging across the state of Arizona (Sutcher, et al., 2016). The setting for this case study was a low-income inner-city public school district in Arizona. To its credit, the cooperating district was not taking its many challenges lightly leading up to this study. It had already undertaken steps to enhance its comprehensive school improvement efforts by teaming with noted consulting organization WestEd to transform leadership and instructional delivery across the district (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018). It had also already commissioned a private agency to conduct a local study to document attrition levels and investigate possible reasons for them. At the point of this study, however, the district had not yet established any policy to address its findings and their impacts on teacher attrition challenges.

Local investigative efforts documented that 19.5% of the certified staff resigned in 2015. The district then saw departures climb to 26.5% of the local teaching staff the following year despite the noted organizational improvements already introduced earlier (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018). Of further note, two-thirds of the decisions to leave were made by teachers in their first three years of classroom experience. And, compensation was not the primary concern identified by the staff. Instead, as already referenced, it came in third behind being over-burdened with work which was followed by school culture concerns that included classroom climate.

A locally administered survey of new teachers from 2015-2016 school year also uncovered that 35% of those responding identified classroom management as their greatest challenge. This concern continued up to the time of this study despite district efforts to implement Positive Behavior and Instructional Supports (PBIS), restorative justice practices, and social emotional learning programming across the district following the partnership with WestEd. Despite the many efforts already underway with the guidance, cooperation, and support of noted outside resources, the local setting provided the researcher with an active source for studying the dynamics associated with teachers' decisions to leave their positions.

This article delved into this situation and setting by examining the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and parents as they reflected on the impact classroom conflict and interpersonal dissonance have had on teacher stability in their school. Further, it examined attitudes toward local efforts to address classroom discipline concerns, and considered how approaches and efforts spearheaded by district leadership were perceived by different stakeholders. Ultimately, the study sought to contribute to the overall understanding of motivating forces that impact teachers' decisions to remain or leave their current work setting and generate recommendations for future success with this topic.

### **Research Methods**

A descriptive case study approach using mixed methods was utilized to investigate the following questions:

RQ 1: How do local disciplinary practices contribute to promoting a positive classroom climate?

RQ 2: How does the current climate affect teacher satisfaction and motivation to remain in their existing assignment?

RQ 3: How does leadership directly address teacher retention through managing students' discipline, and what impact does this effort have on retention success?

RQ 4: When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of school employees?

RQ 5: When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of parents?

This approach was utilized as it has been proven to effectively investigate real-life situations impacting social relationships (Yin, 2014), while involving a wide variety of resources (Creswell, 2013). Open sampling was employed to survey all available classroom participants



and parents, whereas purposeful sampling was employed in the selection of principals to interview. The population for this study came from an urban Arizona school district where students with a very low socioeconomic background are enrolled in eight of nine buildings. In recent years the district has struggled with increasing teacher departures and has even commissioned a local study in an attempt to learn more about the underlying problem.

The outcome of the locally commissioned study revealed that the cooperating district faced increasingly common challenges for a low-income urban district in its geographic area. It was not unheard of for as much if not more than 20% of the district's professional teaching staff to turn over in a given year, which is consistent with reported state-wide trends (Sutcher, et al., 2016). In as much as the district was just initiating its efforts to better understand the underlying mechanisms to the staffing challenges it faced, no working hypothesis or policies concerning attrition had been developed as of the time of this study.

Given the fact that Arizona has been identified by Sutcher et al. (2016) as being a leading state for struggle with the topic of teacher attrition, there are recognized limits to the applicability of the findings provided here to other settings and other circumstances. The intent of this study and subsequently this article was not to establish classroom discipline and classroom climate as the primary considerations behind teacher attrition challenges. Rather, the study and findings have always been intended to lend credence to the argument that there are in fact non-financial considerations that need to be factored into the research, literature and discussion surrounding this topic.

### **Instrument Development**

In all a total of 206 teachers from all grade levels within the district and 35 parents from across the district were surveyed. As the researcher was not able to find existing data collection instruments that directly examined the research questions, a more grounded approach was employed wherein the researcher took steps to develop and refine a protocol for the study. Based on the literature and input from professional contacts outside of the cooperating organization, initial questions were developed for consideration in the survey instrument. These were then reviewed by an expert panel including three cooperating college professors with expertise in research methods, survey development, program evaluation, and school improvement. The refined instrumentation was then piloted with eight volunteer teachers and five volunteer parents not affiliated with the cooperating district, with feedback again being shared with the expert panel and final revisions being approved. Finally, the survey provided to parents was made available in both English and Spanish to better meet the communication needs of those agreeing to participate in the study.

The surveyed teachers and parents were joined by five principals who agreed to be interviewed in person by means of a structured one-hour session in order to provide additional insights into the approach the district was utilizing to address classroom discipline issues and how administration viewed any potential links between classroom climate and teacher staffing patterns. Principals were asked to respond to the following questions which were similarly developed with the assistance of the expert panel and three volunteers from outside the district who served as a pilot group:

1. How do you support and motivate teachers at your site in order to avoid teacher turnover?
2. What is your opinion about the importance of student discipline and the impact this has on classroom climate and teacher turnover rate?
3. What is the impact that student discipline has on the MHSD measures to reduce teacher turnover rate?
4. According to you, what are the main factors that produce high teacher turnover rate within the district?
5. What would be a solution to improve the district's teacher turnover rate in regards to teacher motivation and student discipline?

### **Analysis**

Quantitative data obtained from survey data was analyzed utilizing tools available through the electronic survey platform. Written and qualitative information provided by the participants was analyzed manually, identifying codes, and posteriorly collapsing the codes to obtain categories. Findings will be discussed next, and will be organized according to the research questions (RQ). In instances where information from teachers is particularly noteworthy, tables have been provided to further illuminate the information obtained through that research question. The questions included within the tables are denoted as Teacher Survey Questions (TSQ). The remaining information is provided in narrative format, including the parent information when available, and insights provided by cooperating school administrators.

### **Findings**

**(RQ1) How do local disciplinary practices contribute to promoting a positive classroom climate?** The cooperating local school district was already well into efforts to address classroom climate concerns at the time of this study. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, and strong efforts in the area of social-emotional learning were already well underway for several years. Therein the ratings provided by teachers who completed the survey were not based on a speculative reaction to how things “might work.” They were based on local experiences with extensive implementation of each of the listed approaches.

Table 1 shows teachers consistently rated their own individual ability to manage student behavior as a strength. Over 70% responded as such, while almost 50% also questioned the efficacy of organizational discipline approaches and supports. Not included in the table, parents also believed teachers were able to maintain a healthy classroom climate with 77% indicating that sentiment and only 6% of parents disagreeing.

Principals' narrative comments reflected their belief that the district did a strong job of supporting disciplinary practices through research-based initiatives, and attributed success to those decisions and implemented efforts. There was also expressed concern that teachers would merely “recite” student expectations as designed by programming, doing so “without actually teaching students” how to do what was expected of them. Though they did not ultimately attribute attrition to classroom behaviors these administrators did express the belief that climate



was incredibly important. One principal even went on record noting “you can have the very best planning in place but absent rapport and positive relationships even the best lessons won’t succeed.”

Table 1  
*Teachers: How Local Disciplinary Practices Contribute to Promoting a Positive Classroom Climate (TSQ5, TSQ8, TSQ11)*

Teacher Survey Questions	SA		A		Neither A/D		D		SD	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5. I feel well prepared to manage student discipline issues in the classroom. (213)	45	21.13	107	50.23	31	14.55	24	11.27	6	2.82
8. The management of students’ discipline in my classroom is effective and I can engage my students in highly rigorous lessons. (213)	32	15.02	110	51.64	42	19.72	25	11.74	4	1.88
11. The official students’ discipline programs at my school are effective. (211)	15	7.11	35	16.59	57	27.01	64	30.33	40	18.96

Note. SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

In all, there was agreement that attempts to improve behavior were meeting with success. However, there was strong disagreement as to what the basis of that success was. In theory one would expect it to be important for a combination of effective leadership, individual strengths, program strengths, and responsive professional development to all come into play in order for success to be realized. The responses provided for RQ1 suggested that strengths appeared to exist and even realize some level of success. However, a theme that will continue to present itself indicated that cohesiveness, and a shared understanding of purpose perhaps did not exist as would be expected.

**(RQ2) How does current climate affect teacher satisfaction and motivation to remain in their existing assignment?** Information presented in Table 2 confirms student discipline negatively impacts teacher satisfaction according to 76% of responding teachers. Almost half (42%) strongly agreed. Parents also agreed that behavior is a strong motivator with 76% also indicating as such. However, 87% of parents reported that their child’s teacher appeared satisfied with their circumstances. This observation corresponds to a generally positive viewpoint about conditions at school but also suggests that teachers are used to keeping their feelings to themselves. The later possibility is supported by teacher statements citing the feelings of disapproval they experienced if they came forward with a problem and their motivation not to share their true feelings. Some teachers, in fact, indicated that the dread of coming forward to go on record might in fact “contribute to their inclinations to leave.”

Principals strongly voiced the view that discipline did not impact teacher retention, though two of the five acknowledged their district did have ongoing teacher turnover issues. The expressed administrator position was consistently along the lines that “we give them the tools they need” while referring to PBIS and restorative practice initiatives. Realizing that teachers were often facing personal challenges that could be draining despite the organized interventions, it was voiced that as classroom leaders teachers needed to remind themselves “they are the adults” and continue to persevere.

Curiously, and foreshadowing the possibility that the administrators were perhaps a bit more unsure of their position than they wanted to appear, came the comment that while student discipline was certainly not the reason for leaving “hopefully a departing teacher would share that information in an exit interview” if their assumptions were incorrect. A statement like that suggests a certain amount of internal acceptance that perhaps administration might not really have an accurate pulse on what is happening in their buildings. This lack of connection will show itself again in an upcoming research question.

Table 2

*Teachers: How Current Climate Affect Teacher Satisfaction and Motivation to Remain in Current Assignment (TSQ6, TSQ7, TSQ9)*

Teacher Survey Questions	SA		A		Neither A/D		D		SD	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6. Student behavior issues in the classroom make me feel discouraged at the end of a teaching day. (213)	40	18.78	70	32.86	44	20.66	46	21.60	13	6.10
7. Student discipline issues affect teachers’ decision to leave the school/district. (213)	89	41.78	73	34.27	29	13.62	17	7.98	5	2.35
9. The climate I have created in my classroom motivates my students and I to teach/learn every day. (213)	61	28.64	120	56.34	27	12.68	5	2.35	0	0.00

Note. SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

**(RQ3) How does leadership directly address teacher retention through managing students’ discipline and what impact does this effort have on retention success?** This research question did not draw from parents because they were not regularly in school and able to experience the daily efforts and actions first-hand. Teachers largely viewed principals as being supportive personally (57%) but many viewed formal actions and organizational efforts with less favor. In all 44% took negative issue with school efforts while 66% took negative issue with district efforts. In contrast, administrators consistently reported that Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and restorative practice combined to form a successful theme, and that professional development was both successful and well embraced.

An interesting point raised by administration in response to RQ3 was that the students “needed to learn how to relax.” Though the questions were directed at their efforts to support teachers, it was voiced that many students had too much of a “past” to contend with to be able to learn anything without doing a better job of relaxing. They held that teachers would do well to come to terms with this need instead of robotically expecting students to learn. So instead of responding to how they manage discipline, responses like these point to the principal’s role in maintaining appropriate delivery of instruction.

Staying with instructional approach it was voiced how they “try to honor teacher individuality in their instructional delivery, and do not encourage the use of robotic responses” that might be offered in professional development opportunities. And finally, from a disciplinary standpoint it was added collectively that “we should be the ones to deal with the extreme behaviors,” especially with new students who might be unfamiliar with the process in place.

Taken together, in response to RQ3, teachers were clearly less inclined to credit leadership with making a strong contribution to managing student discipline whereas administrators commonly suggested they needed to be the ones providing perspective to the overall effort. While they acknowledged their place in dealing with extreme behavior, there was more administrative concern expressed about student stresses than challenges which motivate teachers to leave their positions.

**(RQ4) When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of school employees?** Table 3 focuses on information obtained in Teacher Survey Question 18 from RQ4, which was particularly revealing in how it underscored the importance of this topic in the eyes of teachers. In all, 59% of responding teachers viewed student behavior as interfering with their instruction. One response was very telling in how it tied these stresses to their future, stating:

I have thought about quitting more than once. The behaviors that students have are extreme and I have never felt so degraded and harassed. If it were not for the support of my admin and coach, I would have quit in the first month. I do not know how much more I can withstand, but as long as they are trying, I will try as well.

Table 3  
*Beliefs about Items that will Reduce Teacher Turnover Rate (TSQ18) (200 Answered)*

	N	%
More resources to help manage student discipline.	151	75.50
Full implementation and sustainability of the school discipline programs.	137	68.50
Improve school working environment	116	58.00
Mentoring programs for classroom management and student discipline.	110	55.00
PLC trainings focused on managing student discipline issues	105	52.50
Monetary bonus for fewer classroom management and discipline issues.	64	32.00
Teacher recognition/rewards based on student discipline.	56	28.00
Academic mentoring programs.	50	25.00

Teachers were asked to select any listed strategy they considered capable of assisting in reducing teacher turnover at their district. As shown in the Table 3, from eight choices provided, the highest option selected by 151 teachers (76%) was to have more resources to help manage student discipline. This response is consistent with teachers' stated view that classroom climate was a concern, that it contributed to low morale and potential attrition. Some 137 teachers (69%) identified having full implementation of the school discipline programs. Two of the three lowest rated options had to do with personal recognition, rewards or financial compensation for being successful with challenging students and challenging situations.

Administrators again had an opposing point of view and indicated belief that organization efforts to intervene in the area of student discipline were effective. They were especially locked in on the role of the behavioral coach when stating that this resource had to intervene quickly and effectively. Or "it could be too late" by the time administration realized there was a problem "months later." Though there is obvious truth to the need for effective intervention with the challenging situations a teacher could face, the fact that administration might be unaware of a struggling teacher "for months" and not until "it is too late" is an interesting admission on the part of school leadership. Just as was the case with findings from RQ2, it once again suggests their possible and unfortunate lack of connection with the climate developing within their own classrooms and across their schools.

**(RQ5) When it comes to the impact that student discipline has on classroom and ultimately teacher stability and retention, what are the perceptions of parents?** Parents were the exclusive focus of this question, and indicated awareness of a teacher retention problem, but did not link this to classroom discipline or any perceived form of discord. The positive viewpoint without critical understanding of underlying context is not unique. Gallup Corporation has documented information that parents regularly hold more positive viewpoints toward their own schools and staff than they have towards education on a whole (Lopez, 2011). In all, their responses are supportive but lacking insight as evidenced by statements of expectation that there be a completely qualified teacher on hand and already poised "and ready to go" whenever a vacancy were to take place.

## **Discussion**

Results from this study raise multiple important points. First, each stakeholder group (teachers, parents, and administrators) agreed that classroom discipline in and of itself is important. In other words, behavior matters. While teachers and even parents clearly recognized student behavior's negative impacts on a teacher's commitment to stay put, principals came across as being less willing to acknowledge it. What makes administration's response all the more surprising is that existing data from the district's own private studies affirmed that there were growing local problems with teacher retention and new teachers (who were identified as the most likely to leave) had clearly expressed concerns over classroom discipline. Principals even spoke to the damaging effects that "one single challenging student" could inflict while "taking the entire classroom" with them.

It is highly unlikely that administration would be completely unaware of the findings from local action research being carried out on a critical issue already identified by their own school district. Therein, the responses offered by principals provide cause for additional speculation. Whether

the responses offered by principals were motivated by an honest perspective, a possible position they were deliberately taking, or perhaps was prompted by a lack of genuine connection to the happenings in their own schools is difficult to discern. Perhaps they were based on a combination of these influences. Such a possibility warrants extended consideration due to the critical leadership role held by building leaders and as result of the various perplexing responses they provided in their interviews.

The point raised about overlooked information from the locally commissioned research stands out. In addition, there are multiple comments principals made suggesting a lack of general awareness concerning disciplinary struggles in their classrooms. Added to this is their expressed viewpoint that discipline was really the responsibility of the behavior specialist to monitor and respond to. Taken together this line of thinking suggests a certain level of detachment from the discipline topic in general. Further, it could explain their “not knowing for months until it was too late” when one of their teachers was struggling or even failing in their classroom management efforts. Finally, openly acknowledging that an exit interview from a departing teacher might reveal their position on the impacts of classroom climate was incorrect was further affirmation of possible disconnect. Taken together these responses create an opening for speculation that administrators were in some manner “removed” from ownership of this issue at least in comparison to the ratings, feelings, and motivations expressed by teachers.

A second important if not also somewhat surprising point has to do with teachers seeing themselves as being more capable individually than “the system” appears to be to them. Considering repeated statements from principals voicing how they needed to be the ones to consistently coach and lend perspective to their “robotic” teachers, it is highly unlikely that the response provided by teachers was the result of being “built up” in their own eyes by their administration. Following the reasoning of Rice (2014) it is instead possible that their heightened sense of self-efficacy stems from the success they are experiencing in dealing with difficult classroom behaviors. The nagging misfortune suggested by this possible point of view is that instead of coming across as a cohesive team, principals fail to recognize the impact of committed and qualified teachers and in turn teachers fail to see the benefits (resources and training) provided by “the system.” This conundrum leads directly to the final important point.

The third and final important standout point is that “the system” needs to function more holistically in order to bring about success. If channeled effectively, the apparent sense of self-efficacy growing within the teaching ranks could be a positive development. If dealt with poorly, and perhaps even dismissed by administration, it likely leads to continued acrimony and hastened teacher departures. At the time the study was completed, the cooperating district had invested tremendous time, effort, and resources into creating sustainable advances in programming, instruction and leadership (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018). Based on the insights obtained through this research, there is little to suggest that the very important topic of classroom discipline demonstrated the improvements that the joint efforts with WestEd were attempting to help bring about.

Despite tremendous investment into an incredibly important aspect of the educational operations in the district, there was more evidence of dissention than shared purpose. The pieces appear to remain separate instead of becoming part of a bigger and better whole. Therein, it is evident that

policy needs to be developed in house to make it impossible for the parts of the solution to remain individual pieces instead of uniting stakeholders to create a stronger and more successful whole. Though the wording of any policy is important, in this instance establishing the unmistakable expectation that all parties will become actively invested in achieving the same solution - instead of passively “buying into” conditions as they already appear to exist - would represent the master stroke of effective leadership.

## **Conclusions**

Findings from this study support recent literature linking teachers’ decisions to leave the classroom to more personal variables like disruptive student behaviors. Though the responses in this study and information from a preceding local study shared in this article suggest financial considerations came in third in terms of significance for teacher decisions to leave, it is not the position of this article to assert that classroom climate is always a more impactful issue than financial matters. However, it seems clear that personal variables including student discipline and classroom climate need to be more actively considered among the important variables that are already part of the teacher attrition conversation.

Added to the validation of personal factors offered by this study is evidence of internal dissonance being experienced by teachers who are struggling to decide whether or not to risk being open about their frustrations at work and whether or not to stay with their chosen profession as result of multiple stressors they are encountering. There were clearly delineated differences in viewpoints between teachers and administrators concerning classroom climate and its impact on teacher satisfaction. Differences demonstrated through this study likely underscore why, in this instance at least, teachers report that they like their administrators more so personally than they feel they can rely on them professionally.

As stated earlier, there is ample reason to speculate why cooperating administrators seemingly failed to draw upon district collected data that confirmed teachers’ classroom concerns. Instead principals responded that they themselves saw no connection between student discipline, classroom climate and teacher inclinations to leave their positions. In contrast to principals, parents were more sympathetic to the teachers they traditionally support. However, unless they individually opt to become candidates for the local governing board, parents typically do not prove to be a viable catalyst in efforts to improve classroom conditions or teacher retention, at least in ways that principals are expected to be.

This study focused on dynamics as they existed in an urban low-income district in a state that has been recognized as having the greatest struggle with teacher attrition (Sutcher, et al., 2016). While the information resulting from the study and advanced by this article is meaningful, it cannot be assumed the findings offered here translate uniformly to other locations and situations. That said, there is sufficient reason to advocate on behalf of developing policy that more directly and holistically addresses this broader topic and takes personally linked dynamics such as classroom climate into consideration.

## **Implications**

Though there are limits to the transferability of results from any study to the broader whole of education, at the very least this one contributes confirmation that there are more facets to the



teacher retention challenges than solely the financially linked realities that have long dominated the topic of teacher retention. Further, there were multiple instances within this study where sources of dissonance were uncovered including teacher disagreements with administration, lack of confidence in district initiatives, and finally, genuine concern about teachers being able to offer honest feedback let alone be viewed as making criticisms of existing practice.

Ingersoll, Merrill and May (2016) spoke to the discord and potential disruption that can often unintentionally result from accountability-oriented school improvement efforts. Their cautions seem reasonable on a whole. They also appear to be borne out in findings from this study where some level of discord appeared to result from long-term attempts to implement research-based interventions like PBIS or restorative programs to fidelity (Dueppen & Hughes, 2018; Ramos & Hughes, 2019). These two critical points lead to the key recommendation that needs to be made - schools need to respond to classroom and attrition challenges more holistically through policy that invites and respects teacher inputs as much as hard data on student behaviors.

The cooperating school district in this study got off to an excellent start by proactively investigating local teacher attrition issues and uncovering classroom concerns held by new teachers. That administration did not appear to realize let alone embrace the information resulting from these actions points to the type of systemic challenges that were identified by Dueppen and Hughes (2018) and need to be addressed in places attempting to undertake significant change. Instead of seeing teachers quietly leave in frustration, and only then rely on repeated exit interviews to turn things around as espoused by an administrator, schools need to develop proactive policy that more comprehensively addresses overall working conditions within the organization. Perhaps helping leaders to see the connection between classroom dissatisfactions and teacher attrition will help motivate them to take steps in this direction. Were such a policy in place in the cooperating school district at the time this study was conducted, it is more likely that the viewpoints of administration would have been more consistent with those espoused by teachers and parents and may have helped realize a decrease in teacher departures as opposed to the increase that was actually reported.

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