Abstract

Teacher retention is a vexing problem. Each year schools across the country—serving a variety of student populations—lose much of their workforce and must scramble to replace them by the following fall. Instead of teachers gaining experience and sharpening their skills, they leave in search of other employment. This study sought to understand teacher retention at a public charter school in Memphis, Tennessee. By examining several factors and their effects on teacher-reported beliefs about retention, this study provides insight about teacher retention factors at this school site. The report combines teacher responses to a survey instrument with selected teacher interviews to provide a picture of teacher retention for the 2013-2014 school year and beyond. Teachers reported divergent factors affecting their personal beliefs about retention, although taking steps to address teachers’ emotional stability and revisiting the school’s applicant pool should have an immediate, positive effect on the school’s retention rate.

Keywords: teacher retention; teacher burnout; structural efficacy; beginning teachers; school holding power; teacher attrition
Under-resourced and Overburdened: An Analysis of Teacher Retention Practices at a Middle School

Each year urban schools across the country struggle to increase student achievement. Under-resourced and overburdened, these schools confront a host of issues. Perhaps most critical to these schools’ success is keeping quality teachers in the classroom. Although many schools struggle with staffing problems, the dearth of capable teachers is not due to a teacher shortage (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Instead, droves of capable teachers leave the classroom within the first years of their career (Durham-Barnes, 2011; Luekens, Lyter & Fox, 2004). Once these teachers leave, schools must confront the rising cost of hiring and supervising their replacements while facing the high probability of lower student achievement. New teachers may well be successful, but they stand a much smaller chance of making an immediate impact. The New Teacher Project (2012) alleges only one in six new teachers will have the same effect as a departing high quality teacher at an average school, while only one in twelve will push student success at a similar rate at a low-performing school. This mixed method study considers various factors affecting teacher retention at a single school site and seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors most affect teacher retention at the school site?

2. What changes could increase teacher retention at the school site?

The school site is a Title I, public charter school located in Memphis, TN. Founded in 2005, the school currently serves 480 students from grades six to twelve. Although the school pulls students from around the Memphis area, 90% of students are eligible for free or reduced programs. Like any school, many factors affect teacher retention at the site. Among the variables affecting teacher retention, structural efficacy, emotional stability and the growing trend of beginner teachers served as a primer for research.

An employee’s belief in the mission and efficacy of their workplace is imperative to both morale and overall effectiveness. Creating a positive climate is essential to an institution’s overall health (Keiser & Shulte, 2009; Kroth, Boverie & Zondlo, 2007). There are many factors implicit in a positive work environment including establishing worker autonomy, equipping staff with necessary resources for their job and being accessible for worker input (Kroth, Boverie & Zondlo, 2007). With these factors in place, a school is more likely to have excellent morale and organizational confidence.

Beyond the emotional health of a school, creating and maintaining organizational confidence is important because of its relationship to burnout. However, it also is difficult to create, occurs over time and changes gradually (Caglar, 2011). Fostering organizational confidence must include teacher opinion. Although teachers may have clear ideas about possible changes to a school’s structure, unlike other professions, educators typically have little say in important decisions regarding their workplace, creating an “occupation beset by tension and imbalance between responsibilities and power” (Ingersoll, p. 22, 2007).
The emotional stability of a teacher has lasting implications for their time and effectiveness in the classroom. Any occupation has inherent stressors, but Travers and Cooper (1993) affirm teachers experience stress at disproportionately higher rates than other professions. When a teacher experiences chronic stress, there is a negative correlation between their stress level and several distinct variables. Borg and Riding (1991) emphasize negative ties between teacher stress and variables such as job satisfaction, frequency of absences and total absences. Likewise, Berryhill, Linney and Fromewick (2009) assert that as teachers’ stress level increases, their motivation and drive to take responsibility for student success decreases.

If teachers are to work at the school site for longer amounts of time, the school must prioritize strategies to help teachers cope with daily stressors. For schools to develop this mindset, each level of the school’s structure must commit to authentic effort. Jepson and Forrest (2006) believe “developing an individualistic working ideology could be extremely conducive to encouraging greater occupational commitment, which [has] a significant impact on reducing perceived stress in…teachers” (p. 193). Reducing stress is key to maintaining teachers for the long term. Caglar (2011) finds that as levels of emotional burnout fall, feelings of personal achievement and organizational confidence increase.

For the first time in the history of our country, more than 50% of the current teacher workforce has been in the classroom for less than ten years ("Teach plus: Our goals and beliefs," 2013). In addition to the high number of new teachers, Ingersoll, Merrill and May (2012) find more than 40% of teachers entering the profession in 2012 came from non-traditional or alternative routes (p. 30). This makes the retention of teachers a priority. Studies (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Fry, 2009) indicate that between 40 – 50% of beginning teachers leave the classroom within the first five years. These departing teachers leave behind a huge gap in knowledge and experience.

Method

Participants

There are seventeen teachers in the middle school. Of the seventeen teachers in the middle school, fourteen completed the survey (Appendix Item A), while three teachers completed interviews (Appendix Item B).
Materials

Data collection came from two instruments, Teacher Survey 1 and Teacher Retention Questionnaire 1. Teacher Survey 1 sought to identify teacher demographics, teacher opinion regarding continued employment and teacher opinion about current retention practices. The survey has fifteen items, composed of eleven item response questions and four short answer questions. Teacher Retention Questionnaire 1 intended to gather more detailed anecdotes and experiences. There are four questions about the school’s retention practices and four questions about personal feelings toward retention.

Procedure

The lead researcher distributed the survey instrument to middle school teachers beginning June 1, 2013. After teachers completed the surveys, the lead researcher collected the completed surveys and cataloged teachers’ responses. Next, the lead researcher analyzed subjects’ responses and cross-referenced them for each variable. After completing this, the lead researcher conducted three interviews using the questionnaire instrument as a guide. The interviews occurred over a three-day span, between June 4, 2013 and June 6, 2013. After completing the interviews, the lead researcher changed participants’ names to ensure anonymity and coded the dialogue for predominant themes. Finally, the lead researcher condensed the data from both instruments and considered it in the results section.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 shows the collective dispersion of teachers’ ages and gender. Of the teachers surveyed, nine were female and five were male. The majority of these teachers, roughly 79%, are aged thirty or younger.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age &amp; Gender</th>
<th>21-25</th>
<th>26-30</th>
<th>31-35</th>
<th>36-40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows responses to question 5: “How long have you been teaching at the school site?” Of teachers surveyed, 64% have taught at the school for two years or less, while only two of the fourteen (14%) have taught for five years or more.
Table 2

Tenure at the School Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure Duration</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five Years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than Five Years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows responses to question 9: “What is the likelihood you will be teaching at your current school in three years?” Three years into the future, 36% of teachers believed it was very likely, or likely, that they will remain employed at the school. Fourteen percent of teachers were unsure about their likelihood and 50% believed it was not likely or very unlikely.

Table 3

Employment in Three Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likelihood</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Likely</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Likely</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Unlikely</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows responses to question 10: “What is the likelihood you will be teaching at your current school in five years?” Five years into the future, 14% of teachers believe it is very likely, or likely, that they will remain employed at the school. Twenty one percent of teachers were unsure about their likelihood and 64% believed it was not likely or very unlikely.

Table 4

Employment in Five Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likelihood</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Likely</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Likely</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Unlikely</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows responses to question 11: “What is the likelihood you will be teaching at your current school in ten years?” Ten years into the future, 0% of teachers believe it is very likely, or likely, they will remain employed at the school. Twenty nine percent of teachers were unsure about their likelihood and 71% believed it was not likely or very unlikely.
Table 5

Employment in Ten Years

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Likely</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Likely</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Unlikely</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors Affecting Retention

Questions 7 and 8 gauged teachers’ opinions regarding factors affecting their retention. Choosing from six items—increased compensation, flexibility in personal scheduling, decreased school hours, possible leadership roles, greater transparency from administration and smaller class sizes—teachers selected any items that could affect their retention at the school. Among teachers with zero years of experience at the school, all three indicated greater transparency from administration as well as flexibility in personal scheduling. Of teachers with one to two years of experience at the school, 83% cited greater transparency from administration as a factor affecting their retention. Among teachers with three to four years’ experience, each teacher selected all domains as factors affecting their retention. Of the two teachers with five years’ experience or more, one teacher selected every domain except greater transparency from administration. The other teacher did not select any domains. Overall, each teacher responding indicated that reducing school hours would positively affect his or her retention. Additionally, ten teachers believed flexibility in personal scheduling would also aid the school’s efforts in retaining them.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative portion of the study used questions 14 and 15 from the survey instrument, as well as excerpts from three teacher interviews. Staff identified multiple factors they believed aided the school’s efforts to retain teachers. However, the most prevalent and powerful theme concerned school culture. A third year teacher summed up this dynamic well: “I believe our culture is something that teachers take for granted. Having worked at other schools last summer, I appreciate the support and consistency our school has in terms of culture.” Multiple survey excerpts indicated the school’s success in building a positive, supportive environment:

“I feel a lot of support from the middle school administration”

“The culture is great”

“Better environment than most public schools”

“Great people to work with”
“Team feeling; comparisons to other schools”

These factors served as a counterpoint to those teachers identified as making teacher retention difficult. The responses ranged from pragmatic, “People don’t decide on a career until 30. [Our school] hires people at 23-25,” to forlorn: “I don’t feel like there are very many incentives for teachers to stay here. So many things are just ‘expected’ of you without any consideration of personal needs for teachers.” Teachers described a variety of reasons they believed the school has struggled to retain teachers:

“Honestly, I do not believe that [the school] has much in its favor in retaining teachers other than higher compensation than surrounding schools”

“Extensive time demands and a lack of transparency”

“Strenuous schedule, stressful nature of the job; young ambitious people move around”

“Organization and poor communication”

“Lack of respect for teachers”

“The hours are incredibly taxing and I am often frustrated with [the] lack of organization/sense of urgency in planning”

**Interview 1:**

Mrs. Hobbs is a married, 25 year old teacher. A three-year veteran of the school, she is a team leader, science fair organizer and routinely nets excellent data. Mrs. Hobbs believes she could work at the school for the near future: “Actually, if I’m staying in Memphis and these new hours work out, I could see myself staying here indefinitely. [This] is a special place.” When asked if she thought the school took teacher retention seriously, she said, “When I started [here] my answer would have been no, and I think within the last year we are starting to take teacher retention more seriously.” She continued, “In the past the idea was get in good teachers and if they leave, they leave. You replace them… everyone is replaceable. I think the administration is learning not everyone is replaceable, at least not immediately.”

Yet, Mrs. Hobbs sees much of the school’s retention trouble stemming from its hiring practices, not chiefly its calendar:

A big part was the teachers we were recruiting to our school. My first year they were very much hiring TFA [Teach for America] and while we have kept some on longer than the two year commitment, most do pursue other opportunities.

When asked why she has stayed for three years, Mrs. Hobbs highlighted what many teachers indicated in their surveys regarding the school’s culture and positive climate. Recalling her first year, she discussed grade level chemistry:
For me it was the original team I was on. It was the team leader I had and the people I worked with my first year. And we just meshed really well together. We worked hard and had the same mindset. In my opinion, over three years, not everyone has that.

**Interview 2:**

Mr. Givens is a 31 year old, fifth year teacher at the school. His tenure at the school makes him the longest continually employed teacher in the school’s history. Four of his five years have been in the middle school teaching English. He attributed his longevity at the school to his prior experience as a teacher in a nearby system: “Yeah, I taught somewhere else for two years before [here], and it really made me appreciate the culture and discipline our school has.”

Despite this positive view, Mr. Givens began looking for other employment midway through the fall semester. In fact, the 2012-2013 school year was Mr. Givens’ last year teaching at the school. He cited the shrinking definition of “good teaching” as the biggest threat to the school’s retention efforts:

I think it’s pretty normal to expect such a high turnover with a job like this, you know? The biggest problem, though, is when we bring in lots of short-term teachers. They might do well, but they leave too fast. It also changes the way our school looks at good teaching- the definition is getting narrower.

**Interview 3:**

Mrs. Cantrell is a married, twenty six year old teacher. In addition to teaching her class, she is the middle school dance coach and is completing a master’s degree from a local university. She is also a first year teacher. When asked about factors working against teacher retention, she points to the school’s extended day as a source of trouble and teacher burnout: “It’s just sheer exhaustion some days. It’s a long day and it’s a long year. There’s not much time at the end of the day for personal, quality of life activities.” She continued:

There are things that people consider when they are working at a school. They like to know if they need a doctor’s appointment, they can make a 4:00 appointment. You know if something comes up they can have the peace of mind to take care of it and a lot of people are not willing to…sacrifice it.

Mrs. Cantrell represents an excellent model for the school to study. She is young, capable and enjoys her job: “I love teaching; my kids are terrific, and I definitely plan on doing it for a career.” However, when asked about her long-term employment prospects at the school, she was less auspicious: “Umm…well…I don’t know, maybe like two years tops.” Concisely, this is the school’s task: take teachers like Mrs. Cantrell who already see the end of their career at the school and turn them into teachers like Mrs. Hobbs or Mr. Givens.

**Discussion**
Among factors analyzed before data collection—structural efficacy, emotional stability and the growing trend of beginner teachers—the most pertinent involve emotional stability and the emerging pool of new teachers. The challenge of retaining new teachers is complex, but finding ways to lessen the emotional burden for teachers (thereby increasing emotional stability) and revisiting hiring practices should positively affect teacher retention at the school.

Teaching is inherently stressful and the unpredictability of each day only adds to this anxiety. The school should take steps to lessen the emotional burden of teaching. Stressed teachers quickly become frustrated teachers and frustrated teachers are likely to leave. If the school is to retain teachers for longer periods of time, and at each stage of their career, the school should take a holistic approach that increases teachers’ quality of life. Such measures, such as staggered dismissal and arrival times or a shorter school day, should have a positive effect on teacher retention.

In order to bypass the trend of new teachers leaving the profession in droves, the school should prioritize the hiring of veteran teachers. Instead of single-handedly trying to solve a national problem, the school should tailor its hiring practices to attracting established teachers looking to make a move. By turning a perceived disadvantage (retaining new teachers) into a decidedly strong advantage (attracting transient veteran teachers) the school could see less teacher turnover each year and enjoy the benefits of having a faculty composed of experienced teachers.

References


Appendix

Item A

Teacher Retention Survey 1

Thank you for completing the following survey concerning teacher retention efforts at your school. Your honesty and effort will inform the efforts of the school to retain teachers.

*Read each question below and check the appropriate space.*

1) Please select your gender below:

___ Male
___ Female

2) Please select your approximate age below:

___ 21-25
___ 26-30
___ 31-35
___ 36-40
___ 40-50
___ 50+

3) Please select your marital status below:

___ Married
___ Single
___ Divorced
___ Widowed

4) Please indicate the current grade level you teach (check all that apply).

___ 6  ___ 7  ___ 8  ___ 9  ___ 10  ___ 11  ___ 12

5) How long have you taught at the school?

___ This is my first year
___ 1
___ 2
___ 3
___ 4
6) Please indicate the probability you will remain a teacher at the school for the 2013-2014 school year (assuming you will be asked back).

___Very Likely
___Likely
___Unsure
___Not Likely
___Definitely Not

7) If you are a new teacher (0-4 years experience) please select any/all of the following items and their possible effect on retaining you. If you are not a new teacher, skip this question.

___Increased Compensation
___Flexibility in Personal Scheduling
___Decreased School Hours
___Possible Leadership Roles
___Greater Transparency from Administration
___Smaller Class-Sizes

8) If you are a veteran teacher (5+ years experience) please select any/all of the following items and their possible effect on retaining you. If you are not a veteran teacher, skip this question.

___Increased Compensation
___Flexibility in Personal Scheduling
___Decreased School Hours
___Possible Leadership Roles
___Greater Transparency from Administration
___Smaller Class-Sizes

This section concerns your long-term employment at the school. Please read each question and check the space you believe to be true.

9) What is the likelihood you will be teaching at your current school in three years?

___Very Likely
___Likely
___Unsure
___Not Likely
___Very unlikely

10) What is the likelihood you will be teaching at your current school in five years?
11) What is the likelihood you will be teaching at your current school in ten years?

___Very Likely  
___Likely   
___Unsure   
___Not Likely  
___Very unlikely

For this section, please read each question and respond in complete sentences. Do your best to answer each question fully and include all details you believe are relevant.

12) What current subject(s) do you teach? Please write in any class in which you are currently the lead teacher:

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

13) If you plan to leave the school sometime in the next ten years, please briefly describe your motivation:

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

14) What factors do you consider in the school’s favor in retaining highly effective teachers?

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

15) What factors do you consider in the school’s favor in retaining highly effective teachers?

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Item B

Teacher Retention Questionnaire 1
The following interview will serve as a complement in an inquiry of the school’s teacher retention practices. The purpose of this interview is to gather individual teacher opinions to provide illustrations of data points collected by the teach retention survey.

Opinions about the School’s Retention Practices:

As a teacher here, do you believe our school has prioritized teacher retention as an important goal? Can you give an example?

What factors most affect your feelings about your long term potential to stay in the classroom?

Do you believe teaching at our school for over ten years is possible? Why?

Why do you believe the school has struggled to retain teachers since its founding?

Personal Beliefs Regarding Retention:

What actions could the school take to ensure your long-term employment?

What aspect of your job do you believe is most detrimental to retaining you long term?

If you were to forecast your future tenure at the school, how long would it be?

Has anyone from the leadership team spoken to you about your future here?