2019-2020 WTU Teacher Leaders Program

**What Got You Over the Hump? A Study of Major Factors Relating to Teacher Retention in Public Schools**

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**Rationale**

The purpose of this research is to examine teacher retention as a result of several determinants that influence teachers to stay in the profession. Our local district, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), has seen dramatic numbers relating to teacher retention and attrition. A major 2018 DCPS and Washington, DC public charter school study found that attrition “over the last ten years has ranged from 15-22%, with an overall average of 18%. Over six years it has ranged from 15 to 20%, with the overall average still at 18%. The average has been likewise 18% over the last three years” (Levy, 2018, p.15).Likewise, alarming retention rates across the country pose significant threats to the broader education system in America. “The reasons cited for why this matters are reduced student achievement, particularly for low income students, rising teacher shortages, high costs of teacher recruitment and induction, and negative effects on coherent program implementation, particularly with on-going reform initiatives” (Levy, 2018, p.10). The impact of declining teacher retention is undeniable, and it is for these reasons that this research was conducted.

Nine issues known to affect teacher retention were studied while conducting this research. The hypothesis developed from this list stated: There exists a ladder of issues, or needs, that teachers or schools must be able to meet in order for teachers to be retained in the profession over the long term. In essence, there is a hierarchy of needs similar to that of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs that must be met in order to retain teachers, and to have them “get over the hump.” Juxtaposing those factors would be their absence, resulting in teacher attrition. The hypothesized nine steps, from required to preferred conditions were: 1. Teacher pay, 2. Restorative practices and behavior consequences, 3. Evaluation methods, 4. Whether professional development was personally sought and implemented by the teacher or not, 5. Implementation of instructional aides and co-teachers, 6. Opportunities for SLC/PLC (small learning community/professional learning community) and departmental co-planning, 7. Professional development directly applicable to classroom practices, 8. Opportunities for personally or professionally fulfilling extra responsibility, 9. Sources of teacher wellness or opportunities for self-care.

**Literature Review**

Dahlkamp, Peters, and Schumaker (2017) discussthe relationship between principal self-efficacy, workplace climate, and retention among teachers. The climate issue is said to have multiple facets, as there are many factors that develop a school’s climate. These factors are in line with the hypothesis for this research. The authors make connection to the fact that a school’s climate has a significant effect on teacher retention within that school.

Mary Levy (2018) presents an in depth analysis of teacher and principal retention information made available by DCPS and DC public charter schools. There is a breakdown by several analytical categories including retention and attrition percentages over three, six, and ten year rates, delineation among levels of poverty affecting retention, and so on. There are recommendations to address these issues for Washington DC public schools, specifically.

Schaefer, Long, and Clandinin (2012) review previous research on variables such as individual factors, burnout, resilience, personal demographic features, person factors (family), teacher support, salary, professional development, collaboration, environmental context, student issues, and teacher education. Based on their review, the authors suggested that though the focus on teacher attrition is important, it should also encompass a deeper foundation in sustaining teachers.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) had a survey sample size of 2569 teachers. They analyzed six areas: (1) value (2) support (3) relationship with colleagues (4) relationships with parents (5) time pressure (6) student discipline. The authors found that each of these areas influences teacher job satisfaction, and job satisfaction affects job retention. Additionally, the authors also saw that feelings of belonging affected the six areas positively, while emotional exhaustion was an issue that affected the areas negatively.

**Methodology**

Factors influencing teacher retention within schools across the globe were studied. While the study initiated with a closer look at DCPS teachers, it became apparent that some issues were pandemic across the profession. The research was completed using a Likert scale, a continuum of agreeance to disagreeance survey, with short answer questions, and interview questions with willing participants. Fifty-three currently employed teachers responded from multiple countries, with the highest percentage of teachers responding from the DC, Maryland, and Virginia areas. Following the Likert scale question regarding whether or not an issue was likely to keep the teacher in or push them out of the teaching profession, the participant would complete a follow up question. Responses explained how the issue affected their retention as a teacher, were typically thorough, and were wide-ranging in scope.

**Data and Analysis**

Included in the narrative to follow is each question posed in the survey, superficial disaggregation of data, and a brief summation of the long form responses to each question. The questions progress “up the ladder” from the hypothesized basic needs to the preferred conditions for large scale teacher retention.

**1)** Has the salary scale at your school influenced you to stay in the profession? 66% said this was at least somewhat yes, or definitely yes, but most believed the salary would lead them to exit the profession. One comment was: “We no longer have a salary schedule, and we never know if our pay will increase or not.”

**2)** Has the implementation of consequences for student behavior, and/or restorative justice influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 32.1% said either definitely yes or somewhat yes. 28.3% said it had no influence, and 28.3% said definitely no. The tone of the responses was more negative, with quotes like: “Kids run the schools. Parents think their kids are perfect. No consequences.”

**3)** Has the teacher evaluation process at your school influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 19.4% said either definitely yes, or somewhat yes. 73.5% said it had no influence, somewhat no, or definitely no. Comments ran the gamut of opinions. One, more neutral commentary was: “My school now has been fine. It's also my third school because the other two were inconsistent and even used the evaluation process to go after me.”

**4)** Have you personally chosen to implement any significant professional development in order to improve your practice? 75.5% of respondents said yes, while 24.5% said no. Showing dedication to their craft, many respondents accomplished graduate classes, additional degrees, or National Board Certification. One comment was: “Attending conferences and taking classes at additional personal cost.”

**5)** Has in class support (via instructional aides/co-teachers, etc.) for students with special needs or educational plans of some kind influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 35.8% said definitely yes or somewhat yes. 28.3% said somewhat or definitely no. 35.8% said it had no influence. Written responses were mixed, with most stating support was helpful for retention purposes when executed appropriately by the para-professional. One comment was: “Over enrollment in my self-contained classroom, without additional staff, could be what makes me leave.”

**6)** Has the use of co-planning time and/or the use of small learning communities, or professional learning communities, influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 34% said somewhat yes or definitely yes. 35.8% said somewhat no or definitely. 30.2% said it had no influence on them to keep teaching. This is interesting considering a typical comment was: “Time with colleagues to do the work is absolutely necessary. Without it, more time outside of the day is needed, and burnout would be inevitable.”

**7)** Has the presence, or lack of, professional development directly related to your content area influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 32.1% said either somewhat yes, or definitely yes. 26.4% said no or definitely no, while 41.5% said this had no influence on retention. Written responses ranged from very negative, to highly positive. One, more neutral comment was: “The PDs we attend are relevant to our teaching but almost none of the information is new.”

**8)** Has your school provided ways you can take on extra responsibility for something that you may find professionally or personally fulfilling? 62.3% said yes, and 26.4% said no. This was open to more types of responses, and there were all kinds. Brief comments were: “I earned my NBCT.” “It allowed me to “spread my wings” and afford an opportunity for new challenges.” “The lack of such opportunities has caused me to consider leaving my position.”

**9)** Have school wellness and/or self-care opportunities influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 26.4% of teachers said somewhat yes, or definitely yes. 39.6% of teachers said somewhat or definitely no. While 34% said this had no influence on retainment. This rather even spread was represented in the long form responses, however those who were provided with wellness opportunities were positive about their experiences. One comment that seemed to typify many other comments to the contrary was: “There are no school wellness opportunities, so I take care of myself.”

**Recommendations**

“There is a growing consensus among researchers and educators that the single most important factor in determining a student’s performance is the quality of his or her teachers” (Schaefer et al., 2012, p.106-107)*.* Given this statement, perhaps retaining teachers should be less of the focus. Rather, “shift the conversation from one focused only on retaining teachers, toward a conversation about sustaining teachers” (Schaefer et al., 2012, p.1). This shift makes each teacher a more personal issue to the school system, rather than a percentage point for retention numbers. Considering current attention to the efficacy of personalized learning- as it offers need-based, learning style focused, skill driven acknowledgements in order to drive engagement- this is a viable recommendation. The variety of issues affecting retention presented in this research have proven to be important for some, not for others, while others still were ambivalent to the issue. This further exhibits the need for a personalized approach. Substantively, and perhaps not surprisingly, this study found that the “climate” of a school is what will likely retain a teacher more than anything. If each person feels contextual consonance, encouraged, and a high measurable sense of belonging and purpose (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011, p.1036), they will likely be retained. Beyond these issues, teacher pay raises, directed professional development (virtual or in person), and affordable housing for teachers in high cost of living areas are more tangible recommendations that have been, and clearly continue to be, recommendations for retention.

Research outcomes have determined that teachers have different needs, which are largely based on personal circumstances. Personal circumstances are determined in part by what happens outside of the school setting, but also by what occurs within it. Given the necessity of quality teachers within the fabric of society, it is important to gain more understanding regarding why some teachers are able to get over the hump, and some are not. To this end, more research is required on this topic in order to improve the status of education in America today.

**References**

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