

2020-2021 WTU Teacher Leaders Program

What Got You Over the Pandemic Hump? A Study of Major Factors Relating to Teacher Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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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, or leave, the profession. The issue of teacher retention has become more complex since the onset of the COVID19 pandemic. This study specifically focuses on the pandemic's effects on current teachers' perceptions of their likelihood to continue teaching. There are some preliminary predictions of retention rates across the USA, however, COVID19's effect on the actual data remains to be seen as the battle against the virus is ongoing. Therefore, this research uses similar criteria as measured in my previous study of teacher retention, but the influence of the pandemic on these issues is the nucleus from which conclusions may be drawn.

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. "Research shows that teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher's career, and that a teacher's effectiveness increases at a greater rate when they teach in a supportive and collegial working environment. (DC SBOE, 2020, p.1) The impact of declining teacher retention is undeniable, and it is for these reasons that this research was conducted.

The effect of the pandemic on nine previously studied issues affecting teacher retention were studied while conducting the research. The resulting hypothesis was: Nine major factors determined in previous research to influence teacher retention will be magnified by the novel consequences of COVID19. This magnification will result in a higher attrition rate, as caused by the pandemic. The hypothesized nine steps, from required to preferred conditions were: 1. Staff and student safety, 2. Teacher pay, 3. Time commitment required to feel confident in your role, 4. Behavior or attendance consequences, 5. Evaluation methods, 6. Whether professional development was personally implemented, 7. Utilization of instructional aides and co-teachers, 8. Professional development directly applicable to classroom practices, 9. Likelihood of leaving teaching because of these factors.

Literature Review

Dahlkamp, Peters, and Schumaker (2017) discuss the 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.

Members of the State Board of Education (2020) surveyed 2,039 former teachers via email and text message regarding their experiences teaching and subsequently leaving teaching positions in the District of Columbia. The survey was conducted over a nineteen-day period from the end of 2019, and into the start of 2020. The board was able to see significant, common themes for those who left teaching in DC, which included negative views of evaluation methods, disagreements with administration, and overall ill-feelings toward their school climates.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) had a survey sample size of 2,569 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 teachers' perceptions of their personal retention or attrition rates, as affected by COVID19, were studied. The study initiated with a broader look at teachers around the world. It became obvious that Washington, D.C. based teachers in particular had negative feelings toward continuing in the teaching 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. Sixty currently employed teachers responded from multiple countries. The highest representation of teachers were from the DC, Maryland, and Virginia areas. Following the Likert scale question regarding whether an issue was likely to keep the teacher in or push them out of the profession, the participant would complete a follow up question. The follow up question directly asked how the pandemic did or did not exacerbate the retention issue of focus.

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 COVID19's effect on the teachers' interpretation of the question. Important to note is that for each question, the COVID19 related follow-up was: "Have the challenges created by the pandemic, since March 2020, contributed to your previous answer? Please respond "No" if that is the case. If yes, please explain why."

- 1) Have your perceptions of staff and student health and safety within your teaching and learning setting influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 40% said definitely or somewhat yes. 33.3% said it had no influence. 26.6% said no or definitely no. A broad spectrum of opinions, but comments were largely negative, such as: “(School district) has shown a flagrant disregard for student & staff safety during the process of opening school buildings which has only further eroded my trust in the district.”
- 2) Has the salary scale at your school influenced you to stay in the profession? 60% said this was at least somewhat or definitely yes. 11.7% said it was of no influence. 28.3% said somewhat or definitely no. Comments revolved around feeling stuck in the position; with one being: “Only because it is a better salary than other places.”
- 3) Has the time commitment required for you to perceive yourself as confidently prepared to teach in your current setting influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 48.4% of respondents said somewhat or definitely yes. 30% said it had no influence. 21.7% said somewhat or definitely no. Nearly all comments were negative. One example was: “My children hate that I am a teacher because I am always working. I feel as if I never get ahead.”
- 4) Has the implementation of consequences for student behavior or attendance influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 41.6% said definitely yes or somewhat yes. 38.3% said it had no influence. 20.1% said definitely or somewhat no. The tone of the responses were largely negative, with quotes like: “There is no accountability for students, whatsoever. The principal says no students will be retained despite completing none of the learning goals.”
- 5) Has the teacher evaluation process at your school influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 41.7% said either definitely or somewhat yes. 33.3% said it had no influence. 25% said there was definitely or somewhat no influence. Comments were distributed rather evenly, but those who were held to the same standards as when in person learning was taking place made comments like this example: “The fact that we are being held to the same standards (Danielson) of a student-centered classroom during this challenging time has made me consider leaving.”
- 6) Have you personally chosen to implement any significant professional development in order to improve your practice? 68.4% of respondents said definitely or somewhat yes, while 25% reported the contrary. 6.6% responded this had no influence on them. Showing dedication to their craft, many respondents sought additional professional development. One comment was: “In order to be effective virtually I must adapt to the times. Which requires me to seek PD on my own.”
- 7) 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? 20.85% said definitely or somewhat yes. 30.85% said somewhat or definitely no. 48.3% said it had no influence. Written responses expressed mixed feelings, but the fact that virtual learning forced many teachers to run lessons “on their own” was a factor in the responses. One comment was: “One of my educational aides (in a self-contained classroom) was taken away due to the pandemic. This makes me want to leave the profession.”
- 8) Has the presence, or lack of, professional development directly related to your content area influenced your decision to stay in the profession? 33.3% said either somewhat yes, or definitely yes. 31.7% said somewhat or definitely no. 35% said this had no influence on their retention. Written responses were overwhelmingly negative. One comment was: “All PDs are geared toward first year teachers. There is no differentiation in district or in-school PD.”
- 9) Do you foresee yourself leaving the profession in the near future (1-3 years) due to one of the factors in a previous question? 26.2% said yes. 50.8% said no. 23% said maybe. Comments on this issue were largely negative. One comment was: “I have resigned as a teacher due to a combination of lack of support, unfair evaluation methods, and the pandemic.”

Recommendations

Throughout this year, teachers have extended their expertise, work time, and sacrifice beyond what has ever been seen in the profession. The pandemic has added untold amounts of stress to teachers because of professional requirements as well as unfamiliar personal life needs. During this, and other similarly chaotic events in the future, my primary recommendation is to shift administrative hierarchies focused on evaluative measures to one of support for online teaching methodologies and stress reduction. In a pandemic, virtual setting, micro-observations would improve teachers’ perceptions of support and shift their negative feelings of the profession. When a teacher can expect to be observed implementing a specific strategy, teachers will improve that element of practice, their willingness to attempt the unknown skill, and experience less fear of punitive evaluation scores. Throughout the course of the year, after many micro-evaluations, clear trends regarding a teacher’s skills and abilities will develop. Brief, targeted evaluations that occur as commonplace occurrence, rather than one to three times a year would also create better understanding of what the staff needs in terms of useful professional development. As we have seen year after year, this is another issue that drives teachers away from the profession. 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.

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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