

RESEARCH BRIEF

Understanding and Reducing Teacher Resignations

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National studies have shown that 17% of all teachers leave their current positions in one year. Of these, half move to other schools (“movers”) while the other half leave the profession (“leavers”). This turnover of teachers has been called a crisis because it leads to instability in schools and reduces student learning. Leavers are of special concern because most must be replaced by new entrants. A majority of these new entrants come from other professions, have no prior teaching experience, and are therefore initially less effective. National surveys of randomized samples of resigned teachers have identified the frequency with which they list a variety of reasons, but frequency does not indicate how important each reason was in the decision-making process. Frequencies alone are therefore not very helpful in guiding intervention strategies to reduce resignations.

This study of teacher turnover was conducted by the Coalition for Science Literacy at the University of South Florida in collaboration with two large Florida school districts. It was supported by the Multi-University Initiative funded by the U. S. Department of Education. Conclusions are based on surveys of all 901 reachable leavers in the two districts and a demographically matched sample of 898 stayers. Surveys and methodology were based on Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior. Leavers identified 18 beliefs that contributed to their decision to resign. Statistical factor analysis was able to reduce the eighteen beliefs to six principal factors.

Family Responsibilities Are Most Important to All Teachers

Family responsibilities include (involuntary) obligations to parents, other relatives, and children. This was the most important concern for both stayers and leavers. Compared to the other factors, this factor was statistically significant at a confidence level of more than 99%. However, there was no statistically significant difference between stayers and leavers. The similar factor “time with family” refers to voluntary aspects of life with families such as leisure time with relatives and children. Time with family was much more important (confidence level >99.99%) to leavers than to stayers. The importance of time with family ranked barely below that of family responsibilities for leavers but ranked substantially lower for stayers. It is very clear that family-related concerns are a primary, essential factor enhancing the probability of teacher resignation. Action items. School boards and administrators can reduce resignations by establishing avenues that allow teachers flexibility, such as job sharing, employing teachers part-time with access to partial fringe benefits, and contracts to teach specific courses. These are low-cost or no-cost options.

Factors that Differentiate Between Stayers and Leavers

“Time with family” was discussed above. In addition, “financial benefits” and “administrative support” are significantly more important for leavers than for stayers (confidence level > 99.99%). Leavers who attach substantial significance to family responsibilities also attach considerable greater significance to administrative support than those for whom family responsibilities are not important. Financial benefits include salaries and fringe benefits. Addressing financial benefits, a high cost factor, is generally outside the discretionary power of school administrators. However, administrative support includes general support and typically modest resources if any.

Action items: Administrators can reduce resignations by a number of no-cost steps which include: reducing discipline problems by adopting and enforcing disciplinary rules that are consistent within a school and among district schools, providing structured programs to increase parental involvement, assigning as few different preparations to a single teacher as possible, especially to new teachers, not assigning new teachers to “low-end” classes with probable discipline problems, providing useful and job-embedded induction programs for new teachers, and creating an encouraging and supportive school climate. Other steps may include ongoing professional development opportunities, mentors for new teachers and those with special needs, assuring that classroom supplies and working equipment are adequate, and eliminating or minimizing unnecessary daily annoyances

Assessment and Paperwork

This factor, which includes concerns about high stakes assessment such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was of the same concern for both stayers and leavers and third in overall importance. While it may thus be a contributing factor, it is not a differentiating factor.

Action items: Principals should display a positive attitude and support teachers in using all assessment data for improving instruction.

Teachers Resignation Patterns Are Not Unique

Teacher turnover is detrimental to students’ school experience; it is often correctly referred to as a crisis. However, there is nothing unique about teacher resignation patterns when compared to other professions. Turnover of teachers is less than that of most other professionals whose average time in a job is less than three years, compared to four years for teachers. Similarly, the higher turnover in the first few years is not untypical for young professionals. Our study confirms that resignation patterns are heavily influenced by extraneous life stages.

Action items: Because teacher turnover has more severe consequences than turnover in most other professions, it is especially important that education administrators pursue every opportunity to find accommodations to personal circumstances that will allow and encourage teachers, especially new entrants, to continue in the profession. To this end, superintendents should devote a part of every district-wide meeting with principals to sharing specific steps that will enhance teacher retention, and offer workshops solely dedicated to this issue.