

A National Crisis in Teacher Education: What Are the Costs?

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Every school day, nearly a thousand teachers leave the field of teaching, and another thousand change schools, many in pursuit of better working conditions (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future 2003). While many assume that retirement is the primary reason for this excessive turnover, in actuality, job dissatisfaction or the pursuit of another job are the primary culprits for teacher turnover (Ingersoll 2003).

The problem of teacher retention is even worse when considering the impact on poor schools and minority students, as the rate of attrition is roughly 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier ones (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future 2003). Teachers new to the profession are far more likely to leave than are their more experienced counterparts (Ingersoll 2003). A number of research studies conducted over the past two decades have found that between 40 and 50 percent of new teachers leave within their first five years of teaching (Grissmer and Kirby 1987, 1992, 1997; Hafner and Owings 1991; Huling-Austin 1990; Ingersoll and Smith 2003; Murnane et al. 1991; Veenman 1985).

A longitudinal study conducted in Florida (Shockley et al. 2005) documented that new-hire retention rates varied greatly by school district. In some school districts, the teacher retention rates were as low as 45 percent after four years, while in one school district, the retention rate was approximately 73 percent after four years. Interestingly, the district with the highest teacher retention rate was one that had a very strong and supported teacher induction and mentoring program.

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Recent research is now documenting what many educators have suspected for some time—that there is a strong link between the high rates of teacher attrition and teacher shortages, and that the shortages are not the result of too few teachers being recruited and trained but the result, to a significant extent, of a revolving door, through which large numbers of teachers are departing the profession long before their retirement (Ingersoll 2001).

A recent Education Commission of the States analysis of research studies documenting the impact of mentoring on teacher retention (Ingersoll and Kralik 2004) concluded that there is empirical support for the claim that assistance for new teachers and, in particular, mentoring programs for new teachers have a positive impact on teachers and their retention.

So the good news is that there are many proven methods to help school districts do a better job of keeping good teachers. The bad news is well known to every principal or school district superintendent who has ever suggested increasing teacher training and development, implementing stringent exit interviews for departing teachers, or establishing strong and supportive teacher induction programs: they all cost money.

Costs Associated with Teacher Attrition

Teacher turnover also costs money. The costs of replacing teachers are not as readily apparent and are not included in a single line item of the superintendent's annual budget. These costs are embedded in a school district's expenditures in many areas, including teacher recruitment, separation processing, training, and orientation requirements for new teachers. A research study prepared for the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) by the Texas Center for Educational Research (2000) examined the costs to the state of Texas to replace teachers. The study cited "excessive teacher turnover as a cost to public education beyond the expense of operating schools and is a wasted expense that does not contribute to the education of Texas children."

The Texas study proposed a model for predicting turnover costs based on industry model formulas, which varied significantly in their cost projections. One model estimated that the cost per employee is equal to roughly 25 percent of the departing teacher's annual salary plus the cost of benefits; another formula was based solely on the departing teacher's annual salary. It should be noted that all of these methods are best guesses, and none make the effort to calculate actual costs to school districts.

Using a U.S. Department of Labor formula, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) released a national analysis of teacher attrition costs, which estimated the cost of replacing public school teachers who leave the profession at \$2.2 billion per year, and when the cost of replacing teachers who transfer schools is added, that number rises to approximately \$4.9 billion per year.

These approaches seem to imply that basic industry models are applicable to public education, but are they? What are the real costs associated with replacing a teacher? This question was the basis on which the researchers began their study.

Designing an Instrument to Determine a School District's Costs to Replace a Teacher: A Validation Study

The goal of researchers was to design an instrument to determine a school district's actual costs for replacing a teacher. Following a thorough analysis of school district budgets, the instrument they devised requires a school district to do individual analysis around the categories of separation costs, new hiring costs, and training costs. To test the instrument, researchers designed a validation study to collect data on two school districts in South Florida: Broward County and St. Lucie County.

The Broward County School District is on the southeastern coast of Florida encompassing greater Fort Lauderdale. It is the fifth-largest school district in the nation, and is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. The school district serves the educational needs of approximately 270,000 students. Approximately 6,000–10,000 new K–12 students are enrolled in the school district every year. The district has a diverse multicultural/multiethnic population, with students from 155 countries speaking 57 different languages. Approximately 60 percent of the student body are minorities, and approximately 11 percent have a primary language other than English. The district has a total of 238 schools systemwide.

St. Lucie County School District, located on the Treasure Coast of Florida along the southeastern coast, serves approximately 30,000 students in 40 public schools. The district includes large agricultural areas, growing suburban communities, and urban Fort Pierce. This district is one of the fastest growing areas in the state. Six percent of the student population have a primary language other than English, and approximately 40 percent of the students are minorities.

The validation study consisted of data collection in each of the school districts around the questions articulated in the instrument. The 2004–05 school year budgets were used as a basis for calculating costs. Each school district superintendent identified an individual from the district to take the lead in collecting the information required from various departments. This contact person worked closely with the research team, which provided guidance, direction, and clarification in the data-collection process.

During the process of data collection, key individuals in the school district met with the research team to provide input and determine questions of instrument validity as well as potential gaps or cost areas that may have been missed in instrument development, supporting the intent of the research team to make the instrument available to other school districts in the country following the initial validation process.

Findings from the Study

In the St. Lucie County School District, the costs associated with replacing a teacher were \$4,631 per teacher. The district had a turnover of 320 teachers out of a total of 1,952 teachers in the school system, for a turnover percentage of 16.4 percent. In the study of teacher retention conducted by Shockley et al. (2005), in which all teachers new to the school district in the 2000–01 school year were tracked over a period of four years, the school district had a retention rate of 45 percent.

In the Broward County School District, the costs associated with replacing a teacher were \$12,652 per teacher. The district had a turnover of 1,206 teachers out of a total of 16,648 teachers in the school system, for a turnover percentage of 7.25 percent. In the Shockley et al. study (2005), the school district had a retention rate of 73 percent after four years.

Of special note are the differences in these two school districts. One district has a very high turnover rate but a relatively low cost of replacing a teacher. The other district has an extremely low turnover rate but a much higher cost of replacing a teacher. A possible explanation for these differences is the infrastructure investment that the Broward County School System is making in its teacher induction/support program. This program is called the New Educator Support System (NESS), and it represents a significant investment and commitment by the school district to support and retain teachers. Given these expenditures, the costs associated with replacing a

teacher were significantly higher in Broward than in St. Lucie. It should also be mentioned that due to the smaller turnover rate, the Broward district is reducing expenditures as well.

Summary

Large numbers of teachers leaving our schools are sapping the ability of our educational institutions to provide quality educational opportunities for students. Excessive turnover in public education is systemic to many of our school districts. As is true in any field, excessive turnover is a symptom of serious problems within an organization, institution, or profession. The intent of this study was to create a tool for documenting the fiscal costs associated with teacher attrition to school districts. When the costs of teacher attrition are known to school district personnel, the cost-effectiveness of teacher induction and mentoring programs—designed to keep teachers in the classroom and improve classroom instruction—can be determined.

Due to the enormous costs associated with teacher attrition, combined with massive projected teacher shortages, it is imperative that school districts design and fund teacher induction and mentorship programs targeted to support and keep effective teachers in the classroom. Empirical support provides documentation that these programs are effective in the retention of teachers, cost-effective, and educationally sound.

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