

How To Retain Great Teachers

My View: Six ways to retain great teachers

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Notes

A big part of the national conversation about education is how to attract the best and brightest teachers to the profession. It is a favorite line of many a politician. While that is well and good, it seems that many policy makers and education experts are missing the point: how to keep good teachers in our nation's classrooms once they are actually there.

With about one-third of our teachers leaving the profession in their first three years, and even higher turnover rates in some urban areas, this is a pressing issue in American education that isn't getting much attention.

We have an anti-teacher climate that has only worsened since I wrote the book "Why Great Teachers Quit and How we Might Stop the Exodus." Based on my interviews of teachers nationwide, I learned firsthand why teachers are quitting the profession in droves, and personally, I saw it happen to my friend and mentee.

The situation has only gotten worse, with layoffs, pay cuts, anti-union sentiment, program cuts and strict mandates that are part of federal education laws. If we are to make any reform or new initiative work in education, we have to create schools that are supportive, humane, dynamic and creative. For many teachers (and their students), this is far from reality.

Here are some ideas for how to stop the flow of talented teachers out of the profession, based on my interviews, experience and research:

1. Provide leadership and growth opportunities for teachers. Many teachers don't want to be principals, but they do want to stretch, learn and grow. Provide teachers with meaningful opportunities for leadership that are paid, challenging and enriching, such as curriculum planning, mentoring, academic coaching, action research, technology integration and professional development leadership. Opportunities like these have been shown to increase teacher retention and investment.

2. Cultivate collaboration in schools. Isolation breeds trouble in teaching. We know student outcomes improve when teachers are part of professional learning communities. When given time to collaborate, reflect and develop plans to improve on daily, teachers feel more respected, professional and able to adjust and improve their teaching practices. This doesn't happen by accident. It takes careful planning and coordination to work job-embedded professional development time into busy teaching schedules, but schools will see enormous student and teacher benefits as a result.

3. Create humanity in schools for students and teachers. Many teachers have trouble with the basics: finding time (and coverage) to use the bathroom, to eat lunch or to express milk to feed their babies. Other teachers have their schedules created without any thought to how they might be affected. Seek teacher feedback when creating schedules, considering that teachers need to take care of themselves, especially during standardized testing and special events. Frustrations with simple and needed tasks can lead to burnout and health problems.

4. Solicit teacher feedback and use it in decision making. Many teachers feel powerless, that their voice as an educator doesn't matter to policy makers at the local, state and national level. No reform will work unless you have the people actually responsible for implementing it at the table.

One way to begin this is for teachers to plan on sending representatives to each school board meeting. That way, they can have a voice in school governance, and report back to staff about issues, concerns and upcoming topics for meetings.

For all curricular decisions, changes and plans, seek feedback from teachers throughout the process. Teachers are an underutilized resource in policy-making; they are too busy most of the time teaching to participate. Principals and superintendents can empower teachers by calling for their involvement in policy making and providing substitute teachers when necessary so they participate.

5. Plan for a better work/life balance. A team of teachers, administrators and other school staff can improve the climate and community of the school by planning activities that support wellness. No, I don't mean more canvas bags with inspirational teaching quotes on them!

Many teachers are overwhelmed with paperwork and intense job responsibilities. School leadership can help by streamlining cumbersome paperwork processes, and providing as much clerical support as possible. Make sure the schoolwide duties are shared equally by classroom teachers and other school staff, because often the burden (and most of the pressure) sits primarily with classroom and academic subject teachers.

Wellness funds can be used to improve the school climate and facility, and improve the health of school staff. Weekly running and walking groups, lunch potlucks, and yoga classes can improve morale and promote a healthy work/life balance for busy teachers.

6. Create an environment that compensates master teachers who continue to grow, evolve and perform. Most of the focus on teacher compensation has been raising the entry-level salaries of new teachers. While that is a great step, schools and communities should also create an environment that compensates master teachers who continue to grow, evolve and perform. Many mid-career and master teachers are facing nominal salary increases. For example, a 30-year veteran in my area of Vermont retiring this year would earn around \$60,000. Many talented teachers nationwide see how they have to fight for small pay increases in a very public manner. Teaching is one of the only professions where the level of education and responsibility is not commensurate with its salary.

There is no one magic bullet for retaining teachers. But we must work to make schools comfortable, creative, refreshing and exciting learning environments if we are to keep our nation's best teachers in the classroom, providing the highest quality education possible.

This is the elephant in the room. If we keep hiring great teachers, and then forget about them for years to come, many will continue to leave for higher paying, more innovative and better respected careers.

We can't let that happen.

What are your ideas for making teaching a more sustainable career?

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