

Improving Teacher Retention through Support and Development

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Abstract

Teacher attrition is a considerable burden for students and school leaders. Therefore, it is important for administrators to develop policies which increase retention rates. The purpose of this study is to explore teacher retention policies utilized by highly effective school districts. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with three key central office figures who oversee personnel, we explore each district's strategies for increasing teacher retention. Interestingly, our findings suggest that successful schools did not have explicit teacher retention policies. Rather, they have policies which promote teacher voice, supported teacher induction and development.

Keywords: Teacher retention, school leadership, semi-structured interviews, teacher attrition, district policy

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Improving Teacher Retention through Support and Development

Teacher attrition is a persistent problem across the globe. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of teachers, up to as many as an estimated 8% of the teacher work force, leave the profession for a variety of reasons every year (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). This trend is not only being seen in North America, but also in the United Kingdom, across Europe, Hong Kong, and Australia where on average 40% to 50% of novice and beginning teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching (Gallant & Riley, 2014). This issue, combined with the finding that fewer young people are opting to enter the field of education, means that schools and their respective districts and leaders must find ways to retain both young and quality teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016). The aim of this paper is to do just that by reviewing the programs, policies, and cultures of three of the top teacher retaining districts in the state of Missouri.

This beginning exploratory analysis approach looks to offer suggestions, recommendations, and strategies, aside from raising salaries or increasing benefits packages, that schools, their leaders, and districts can implement to bolster their teacher retention based on the practices of successful districts. While low teacher pay has been cited as one of the reasons why young teachers leave the profession, a conscious decision was made to not include raising salaries or benefits as a strategy in this paper for a variety of reasons. First, raising teacher pay is not always a feasible solution to teacher attrition due to often limited school budgets and the complicated way in which schools and districts are funded. Second, school principals often do not have the power or ability to raise teacher pay, but there are other strategies that they do have the ability to implement that may have a positive impact on teacher retention. Lastly, as noted by Brill and McCartney (2008), several studies have found that moderate salary increases are only marginally effective at retaining teachers and there are more cost effective and influential strategies for improving teacher retention. This study looks to uncover such strategies and practices by interviewing personnel from three school districts in the state of Missouri that are among the very best at retaining teachers. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed both vertically and horizontally, which will be described further in the Methods section, to determine which factors were specific to each school district and what common traits, policies, or programs persist across them all. Ultimately, this information was then used to offer suggestions and recommendations that can and should be implemented by schools and their leaders that are struggling with the problem of teacher attrition.

Literature Review

While an estimated 8% of teachers in the United States leave the profession every year (Sutcher et al., 2016), the turnover rate in the state of Missouri is even higher than the national average at approximately 11.5% for the 2016-2017 school year, a large percentage of which are pre-retirement age leavers (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2017). While this is a problem in and of itself, an even darker statistic is that the majority of those that are leaving are doing so within the first five years of teaching. In fact, Ingersoll (2001; 2003) estimated that 45% of beginning teachers leave the field of education within the first five years of their career and that young teachers (under the age of 30) are 171% more likely to leave teaching than middle aged teachers

(between 30-50 years of age). This is especially true in Missouri, where only 36.3% of first-year teachers remain in the classroom after five years (DESE, 2017). In other words, 63.7% of first-year teachers that began teaching during the 2009-2010 school year were no longer teaching in the same public school district during the 2013-2014 school year. For high-poverty, urban schools, the annual rate of teacher turnover is even higher than the national average at 14.4%, meaning that teachers are more likely to leave such schools on a more frequent basis (Ingersoll, 2001). Once again, the statistics for Missouri exceed this figure where only 10% to 30% of teachers in St. Louis and Kansas City public and charter schools remain in the profession for eight years (Koedel, Ni, Podgursky, & Xiang, 2014). In other words, the rate of turnover for the two largest, urban, high-poverty districts in Missouri are as high as 70% to 90%.

High rates of attrition such as this pose numerous problems for schools, their districts, and most importantly, their students. From an economic standpoint, the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future estimated that teacher attrition costs the nation \$7.3 billion annually (Dillon, 2009). Borman and Dowling (2008) note that the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2005 estimated that each case of attrition costs a school system \$12,546. To determine this figure, the Alliance for Education used the Department of Labor's estimation that attrition costs an employer 30% of the departing employee's salary and the nationwide average teacher salary from the 1999-2000 school year of \$41,820. Currently, the average teacher salary in Missouri is \$48,618 (Missouri National Education Association, 2018), so if the same method is applied today, then each case of attrition costs the corresponding school system \$14,585. This figure is astounding, especially when compared to the 2016-2017 Missouri State Adequacy Target, the amount of money that the state believes is costs to provide one student an adequate education, of \$6,241 (Shuls, 2017). When put together, this means that every time a teacher in Missouri leaves the profession, the corresponding school district loses 2.34 times the amount of money it takes to provide an adequate education to one student.

Not only does attrition place a financial burden on schools, it also has negative impacts on the staff and students that remain. Most notably, high levels of attrition negatively impact school climate, learning outcomes, and student achievement (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). This is due to the fact that the revolving door of frequent newcomers and leavers creates a non-cohesive environment where time and resources have to be spent finding and inducting replacements and rebuilding school culture (Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012; Gallant & Riley, 2014). Furthermore, because 63.7% of novice teachers in Missouri leave the career within 5 years, and it takes new teachers three to seven years to master the complex demands of teaching and learning, many students in environments of high attrition rarely get the benefit of having an experienced teacher (Dillon, 2009; Roberson & Roberson, 2009). The experience and quality of teachers has been determined to be extremely important as teacher characteristics have consistently explained greater variance in student achievement than any other school resource (Borman & Dowling, 2008). The problems and issues that stem from teacher attrition are summed up best by Sutchter et. al (2016) when they state:

Under these circumstances, everyone loses. Student achievement is undermined by high rates of teacher turnover and teachers who are inadequately prepared for the challenges they face. Schools suffer from continual churn, undermining long-

term improvement efforts. Districts pay the costs of both students' underachievement and teachers' high attrition. (62)

Every level of a school district is shaken by teacher attrition and it is even felt at the student level as noted by their lack of achievement.

Just as there are a variety of issues that are created by high rates of teacher attrition, there are also a variety of issues that create the problem of high teacher attrition, many of which are felt most by beginning and novice teachers. In his 2001 study that controlled for both teacher and school characteristics, Ingersoll found that inadequate support from school administration, student discipline issues, limited faculty input and autonomy, and to a lesser extent, low salaries, were all linked to high attrition. In fact, of the 8% of teachers that leave the profession annually, the majority of them, 55%, cite dissatisfaction with some aspect of the job that stems from poor leadership, lack of control over teaching, or too much testing pressure with too little support as the reason for exiting the profession (Sutcher et al., 2016). These challenges are felt by novice and beginning teachers as they lack the capital, or knowledge that is specific to the occupation, that more experienced teachers have which allows them to better manage the numerous roles and duties that teachers are expected to fulfill (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

Another reason why it is difficult to retain teachers is because it is considered one of the more stressful occupations. As noted by Jennings et al. (2017), a Gallup survey conducted in 2014 concluded that 46% of kindergarten through twelfth-grade teachers report high daily stress levels during the school year, one of the highest occurrences of stress among all occupational groups including nurses (46%) and physicians (45%). Furthermore, a 2013 MetLife Survey of American teachers found that the majority of those surveyed, 51%, feel great stress at least several days a week (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2013). Once again, this issue tends to effect novice and beginning teachers more as the first five years of teaching are the period of the career where teachers report the greatest occurrence of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). Other school and district problems that lead to teacher attrition include a lack of professional development and growth felt by teachers, feelings of solitude by beginning teachers, a negative work-life balance associated with the profession, and a lack of educator preparation prior to the first year of full-time teaching.

In our analysis, we view the results through a theoretical framework as outlined in Johnson's (2006) article, "The workplace matters: teacher quality, retention, and effectiveness." Johnson explains how working conditions which support teachers are the best practices for ensuring teacher retention. Johnson discusses how professional development, opportunities for growth, and appropriate supports create a positive working environment where teachers will want to stay. In short, many of the best practices articulated by Johnson are not specifically "retention policies." Rather, they are policies which promote a productive working environment. As we analyze responses from school district officials, we will attempt to determine if the policies are indeed designed for retention or if retention is simply a positive byproduct.

Methods

This research study explores ways in which school districts and principals can increase teacher retention within their schools. To do this, we conducted semi-structured interviews

with key personnel at several of Missouri's top retaining districts. In order to narrow the focus of the study to the top district's in the state in regards to teacher retention, several parameters were put in place and each district selected had to meet all aspects of the criteria. First, the school district had to have more than one hundred full time teachers, or FTE. Second, the school district needed to boast a teacher average years of experience of over 14.5 years, well above the state average of 12.3 years of experience. Because the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) does not provide district specific teacher retention data, the average years of experience statistic was the main indicator for teacher retention. Essentially, if teachers are retained in the district for longer periods of time, then the average years of experience should be higher. Third, the school district needed to serve over 4,000 students. Finally, the last piece of criteria was that the school district needed to be located in the greater St. Louis metropolitan area, as this allowed for direct access and in-person communication to take place between the researcher and district personnel. Through the analysis of data available from DESE for the 2016-2017 school year, a total of three school districts were eligible for the study. These districts had teachers with an average of 15.2, 14.9, and 14.9 years of experience. In comparison, the state average was 12.3.

Once these districts were identified, we contacted human resources personnel (Interim Director of Human Resources, Chief Human Resources Officer, and Assistant Superintendent) at each district. The purpose, time demands, and overall research procedures were explained to each participant and they all agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews on the condition of anonymity. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of open-ended questions designed to prompt discussion with the opportunity for the researcher to explore particular themes or responses further (Adams, 2015). In this case, the purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gain a better understanding of what policies, programs, processes, and lifestyle factors each district has in place that human resource specialists feel contributes to their high level of success in retaining teachers.

Each of the interviews, which lasted approximately thirty minutes apiece, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcriptions were analyzed in two ways: vertically and horizontally. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), vertical analysis refers to analyzing each of the respondent's interviews separately to uncover the main ideas that derived from that conversation. In other words, vertical analysis allowed us to determine what policies, programs, and lifestyle factors were important to that specific district regarding their success at retaining teachers. This first phase of analysis can be found in the Results section. The second type of analysis that was conducted was horizontal analysis, or cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this phase, we looked for recurring themes, regularities, and constants that appeared across the interviews to hone in on what factors all districts attributed to their success at retaining teachers. It was this second phase of analysis that was key in creating the suggestions and recommendations to increase teacher retention that follow in the Recommendations and Conclusions section.

Results

District #1

The semi-structured interview with District 1 was held with the Interim Director of Human Resources, Susan, at her office in the District Administration Building. Here and throughout the rest of the paper, we use pseudonyms for study participants. Upon vertical analysis of the transcript, the major theme that emerged from the interview as the key to district success in retaining teachers is the atmosphere of trust, respect, and freedom that the district and individual schools foster and allow their teachers. In her words, “Very rarely do we make a decision in this District without teacher voice” which makes “teachers [sic] feel heard and feel valued” (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). One way in which they do this is by having a multitude of committees that teachers can not only join and be a part of, but also have the ability to lead. In fact, she noted that if there is a particular topic that a teacher is interested in, discipline for example, then the teacher has the ability to start and lead that committee with support from administration. This means that the teacher has the freedom to start the group, conduct research, facilitate meetings and discussions, gather the thoughts and input of others, and ultimately share their findings with building level or district level administration. This has allowed teachers and their voices to be a part of almost every decision made at the district level, from salary decisions to curriculum discussions.

In District #1, administrators regularly include teacher voice in decision-making. According to Susan, “It is really the [District #1] culture to honor the voice, thoughts, and opinion of our teachers and honor their experience and trust them to do what they need to in the classroom” (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). This can be seen in the large amount of shared leadership positions that the individual schools and district offer, in which teachers have the ability to work directly with school administration to explore and solve problems.

Lastly, this culture of trust, respect, and freedom extends into the professional development that the district provides. The district tries to have “teachers teach teachers” as often as possible (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Teachers determine and facilitate professional development topics because teachers are the ones closest to the students, have the best understanding of the classroom, know the areas in which they would like to grow, and are aware of what they would like to know more about.

Other aspects that contribute to District #1’s success in retaining teachers, according to Susan, include community support for the district and teachers, a strong work-life balance amongst staff, a policy that allows children of district employees that live outside of school boundaries to attend schools in the district, and an emphasis on professional development.

District #2

The interview with the Chief Human Resources Officer, whom we will call Janet, of District #2 took place on May 23, 2018 at her office in the Administration Building. Like District #1, teacher retention was not a specific focus of District #2 in that there have not been any specific policies or programs put in place in the last five years aimed at raising teacher retention, but it is a topic that is monitored. According to Janet, much of their

success in retaining teachers is attributed to the strong emphasis the district places on growing their teachers via a thoughtful professional development (PD) platform, major components of which include a new-hire induction program, a two-tiered mentor system, and program for aspiring administrators. In charge of this platform is a full-time Director of Adult Learning who focuses on professional development throughout the year.

Janet believes new teachers feel supported day one because of the district's induction program. During this five day program, new hires attend sessions on topics such as instructional best practices, building relationships with students, exploring the district teacher evaluation tool, and much more. The goal is to help new staff feel comfortable, supported, and valued by the district even before setting foot in the classroom.

A second component of the overall PD package is a two-tiered mentor system in which all first and second year teachers are paired with an instructional mentor as well as a job-alike mentor. The role of the instructional mentor is to form a non-evaluative relationship and to visit the less experienced teacher several times throughout the year to provide both instructional and emotional support. In this sense, the instructional mentor, who may not be at the same school but is a master of the assigned curriculum, is there to answer any questions the new teacher may have and to provide valuable insight and expertise on topics such as best practices, lesson design, strategies to engage learners, and classroom management strategies. In order to support both new teacher and mentor and to ensure that these conversations and meetings take place, the district builds early release days into the schedule throughout the year specifically to strengthen this partnership.

The second mentor, the job-alike mentor, is someone that is housed in the younger teacher's home school that meets with him on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to acclimate him to the district and, more specifically, to their new school. Essentially, the role of this mentor is to help the new-hire build and support relationships and become more comfortable within their assigned school and community. This extra layer of support at the school level plays a key role in helping new teachers tackle the many challenges that are associated with the early years of teaching.

Not only do first and second year teachers get mentors, but those new-hires to the district that have three or more years of teaching experience are also assigned a mentor in the form of a "buddy teacher." Like the job-alike mentor for less experienced teachers, the role of the "buddy teacher" is to help the new-hire get acquainted with their new school environment and to better understand the district culture. Less support is provided for more experienced newcomers to the district because they likely do not have the same needs that beginning teachers do. Again, the district supports this relationship by providing a half-day of release for both parties to meet.

Another important facet of the PD program is for teachers who are aspiring to be administrators in the future. Participants in this program receive training and professional development specifically designed to prepare teachers for a career as an administrator. In the interview, Janet noted that this program plays an integral role in helping to retain teachers that are looking to advance their careers and grow into an administrative role in the future.

Aside from the PD program, Janet also attributed her district's success in retaining teachers to the strength of building-level leadership; the positive culture, climate, and community feel of their schools; the district's strong salary and benefits package; and a successful partnership between the schools, district, community, and local colleges and universities.

District #3

For District #3, we interviewed the Assistant Superintendent, Leslie, at her office in the Central Administration Building. As with both of the other districts that are included in this study, District #3 does not specifically focus on teacher attrition as a major problem and has not put in place any recent programs or initiatives to address this issue. Leslie attributed much of her district's success in teacher retention to the support that the district provides its teachers.

First, "support" was used to describe the atmosphere of collegiality and care that district level and building level leadership strive to create. From the very outset of the hiring process, the district shows its teachers that "We are a family and we are all here for the same mission and vision (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018)." The district does this by first having a rigorous hiring process that puts prospective teachers through multiple channels to make sure they are the best fit for children. In doing so, the district looks for people "to stretch [the district] and to break [the district's] imagination" and asks new teachers to "bring their gifts, their talent, and provide the district with something new" (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018). In short, the district upholds its caring, collegial, and positive culture by seeking out and hiring candidates that have the same values, mission, and drive as the district. Once said teachers have been hired, they are treated as professionals whose opinions and professional judgement are not only valued, but sought out. Like District #1, this can be seen in the large amount of teacher led and teacher driven committees that the district has that helps make decisions regarding everything from calendars, to finances, to curriculum. According to Leslie, "Committees have a lot of voice which helps people to see that they are not just a teacher, but they are also actually a part of the decision-making process of the district (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018)." To add to this sense of teacher voice is the fact that all committees have representatives from all schools in the district so that all buildings have a say in decisions that are being made at the district level.

District officials place a strong emphasis on seeing all members as equals, regardless of their position or standing in the district or community. To attest to this, Leslie noted that everyone is on a first name basis regardless of the titles or degrees that they have earned (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018). In her words, "It is part of the district lifestyle that when we are problem solving, everybody is on the same playing field" and that if someone has a great idea, then it is implemented without concern for who came up with it or who will get the credit (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018).

District #3 also places a heavy emphasis on personalized professional development for teachers. All new hires undergo a multi-day induction process to help them better understand the district culture, mission, vision, and processes. According to Leslie, this new-hire induction program is crucial to acclimating new-hires to their new roles and helping them feel welcomed, supported, and ready to do what is best for children (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018). Likewise, the PD system is centered on

supporting the individual and helping them grow as people and professionals. To this end, the district hosts an Education Camp each year where teachers have the ability to sign up for PD sessions that they feel are the most relevant, meaningful, helpful, or interesting to them and their role in the education process. The district lists all available Education Camp courses and sessions online, and teachers can personalize their selections to meet their needs after reviewing all available options. This system and design is purposeful and ensures that the district is not providing one-size-fits-all professional development and upholds the district's emphasis on supporting the growth of all individuals.

Other factors that were discussed that contribute to teacher retention were positive school cultures, a strong partnership with the community, and learner centered environments. Like the other two districts, the main reasons that teachers leave the district are attributed to retirement, transitioning into administrative roles in other districts, and family matters related to relocation or child care.

Discussion and Conclusions

Horizontal analysis of the three interviews revealed several common programs, policies, and values that combine to boost the teacher retention of each district, each of which will be explored further. These include having a supportive administration; a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom; a personalized professional development program; an induction program which includes mentorship for new and beginning teachers; and a leadership training program.

Supportive Administration

One theme that was consistent across each school district was the idea that each school building is led by supportive leaders or administrative teams. For instance, the Interim Human Resources Director from District #1 noted that building principals have power and control over school culture and those in her district work hard to allow teacher voice and shared leadership positions to support all staff members (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Similarly, the Chief Human Resources Officer at District #2 attributed the positive culture that persists at many buildings in her district to the work that administrators put in to nurture and support their teachers (Janet, personal communication, May 23, 2018). Echoing this sentiment was the Assistant Superintendent from District #3 when she noted that principals in her district are largely responsible for upholding positive school cultures and learning environments that are shaped by collegiality and a commitment from all staff members to do what is best for children (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018).

As noted by Boyd et al. (2008), principals play a strong role in retention by providing recognition and support to teachers, working with staff members to meet curriculum standards, and encouraging professional collaboration. Furthermore, Flores and Day (2006), found that teachers who taught in schools where there was supportive, informative, and encouraging leadership were more likely to reveal positive attitudes towards teaching, something that has been proven to lead teachers to remain in the field longer. Lastly, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017), in their analysis of three separate waves of first-year teachers, found that receiving support from leadership reduced the odds of a teacher leaving their position by between 47% and 48%. This notion was particularly powerful in teachers

that received this support in their first year of teaching as it reduced the odds of them leaving over the next five years by between 51% and 58% (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).

School leaders can provide support to new and beginning teachers by first understanding the issues novice first-year teachers encounter as they assimilate into the work of the school (Roberson & Roberson, 2009). McCann and Johannesen (2004) identified that novice teachers have five major concerns in their first year of teaching that include relationships (with students, parents, colleagues, leadership), time management and workload, understanding of curriculum, proper evaluation and grading, and issues of autonomy and control. Because of this, supportive principals are those that are prepared to address these issues and that take the time, or make the time, to help new teachers navigate these challenging waters.

Second, in order to support new teachers, administrators must understand the expectations inexperienced teachers have of principals and their new colleagues (Roberson & Roberson, 2009). In their work on beginning teacher induction programs and the role of principals, Brock and Grady (1998) noted three major expectations novice teachers have for principals which include communication of the criteria for effective teaching, the importance of communication with the principal during times of need, and the importance of classroom visits, feedback, and affirmation. In other words, the school leader needs to understand that they are the main person to whom novice teachers go for support, encouragement, and assistance (Roberson & Roberson, 2008).

A third way that administrators can support novice teachers is by developing and implementing strategies that meet their needs and help them cope with the aforementioned issues that most beginning teachers have. Huling-Austin (1992) offers several suggestions for working with novice teachers which include giving said teachers one teaching assignment to allow them to learn the specific curricular content and refine lesson plans, assigning new teachers to the content they know best, placing the new teacher with a mentor teacher that is in the same department to increase team relationships and understanding of instructional strategies, providing new teachers with opportunities to be observed and to observe others, and avoiding assigning novice teachers to outside roles or extracurricular responsibilities so they can focus their attention on their classroom.

A final way that principals can support beginning teachers is by creating a collaborative environment where novice teachers have the ability to work with, observe, and learn from more experienced teachers. According to Roberson and Roberson (2009), the critical factor in novice first-year teacher success is the principal and the connections to master teachers and supportive colleagues that the principal develops on the part of novice teachers. Part of this environment should include a common planning time or collaboration time with other teachers in the same department as this has been shown to decrease the odds of leaving the profession by about 40% (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).

While today's administrators and school leaders are faced with countless roles, responsibilities, and duties, supporting novice and beginning teachers is something that simply cannot be overlooked if teacher attrition is to be stopped.

Culture of Trust, Openness, and Academic Freedom

Teacher retention can be bolstered by schools and their leaders developing a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom in which teachers are respected and valued both inside and outside of the classroom. A key component of this is allowing teacher voice to shine by being both heard and influential in the decision-making process. As noted by Ingersoll (2001), schools with higher levels of faculty-decision making, influence, and autonomy have reduced levels of teacher attrition, so much so that a one-unit difference on a six-unit scale is associated with a 26% difference in the odds of whether or not a teacher leaves the school. Dillon (2009) explains that the majority of teachers want input on what happens in their classroom and at the school level, but are often left out of key decisions. This is especially true in regards to issues such as student tracking, curriculum standards, discipline policies, and professional development opportunities.

One way in which all three of the districts that were studied here create these cultures is by having an abundance of building and district level committees for teachers to be a part of and even lead. More importantly, each district personnel leader mentioned that not only are there a variety of committees for teachers to join on a wide range of topics, but the committees' voice and opinions play a key role in making district-level decisions. For instance, the representative from District #1 stated that her district as a whole rarely makes a decision without teacher voice (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). She acknowledged that this occasionally slows down the decision-making process, but it is worth it because it allows the central office "to glean from the expertise of teachers what is really going on in the classroom" and "allows teachers to feel heard and valued" (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018).

Similarly, the Assistant Superintendent from District #3 explained that committees in her district have a lot of voice and that during problem-solving and the decision-making process at the district level, it is imperative that there is a representative from each school present so that voices from all buildings are heard (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018). This builds a district-wide culture of trust and collaboration because teachers know and feel as though they were a part of the decision-making process and that the district truly values their thoughts and input. Along the same vein, the Chief Human Resources Officer from District #2 noted that a major reason why teachers remain in her district so long is because of the open communication across that district and that teachers have "the ability to have a say in committees and participate in shared decision-making" (Janet, personal communication, May 23, 2018).

A second way that these top retaining districts generate a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom is by allowing teacher autonomy to shine in the classroom with the backing of a supportive, rather than authoritative, administration. This sense of academic freedom is important, because many teachers, especially early in their careers, see themselves as vehicles of change that are going to help fix the education system. According to Gallant and Riley (2014) in their study of nine beginning teachers who left the classroom within five years of entering the field, common obstacles that new teachers face include the inability to develop new pedagogies, learning environments that are underpinned by creativity and innovation, and a stifled sense of creativity or innovation. Furthermore, several of the teachers were placed in schools where they felt there was too much focus placed on raising student test scores which prevented them from having time for other

educational activities and led to a perceived over-emphasis on uniformity and conformity (Gallant and Riley, 2014). Ultimately, these challenges led the teachers that were being studied to feel obstructed and unsuccessful in their work with their students, which led them so an early exit from the career.

Conversely, each of the three districts with strong teacher retention described an opposite culture in each of their schools and districts and cited a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom as one of the main reasons why teachers stay. When asked about the number one factor that leads teachers to stay in her district, the Interim Human Resources Officer from District #1 responded with “the autonomy that teachers are allowed in the classroom” (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Furthermore, she added that her district allows teachers more flexibility to make education better for their students and to gauge their needs (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Ultimately, this creates a culture that honors the voice, thoughts, and opinions of teachers while simultaneously trusting them to do what is best for their students.

These similar sentiments were echoed by the Assistant Superintendent of District #3 who described the collegial atmosphere of her district as one in which teachers want to stay because not only are their voices heard and taken into consideration, but they are also valued and treated as professionals (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018). To this end, when asked for major reasons why teachers stay in the district, her response was:

Honestly, it is the result that people get here and they appreciate how they are treated as a professional and who they are as a professional is valued. We don't give lesson plans [to teachers] and say ‘Do this, do that.’ We [the district] are not majoring in the minor. We hire you for your professional judgment, we hired you to teach kids and it is that simple. (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018)

Personalized Professional Development Program

A third theme that emerged from all three interviews was that each district offers its teachers a professional development program that focuses on personal growth and individualized areas of need rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. In other words, each district allows teacher voice to be heard when deciding what types of professional development to offer and even allows teachers to attend the sessions that best fit their needs. For instance, District #1 makes sure to include teacher input in deciding which types of professional development to offer their staff and in what ways. In doing so, the district understands that the teachers are the ones doing the teaching and are thus more aware of their needs as they relate to instruction and behavior management than central office is. Furthermore, teachers in District #1 are also encouraged to lead professional development sessions so that “teachers are learning from teachers” (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Grier and Holcombe (2008) note that teachers are more willing to engage and support the professional development and improvement process if they are tasked with helping create it. Also, the writers suggest that schools and districts offer multiple options professional development options that differentiate for age, experience level, competence, and content knowledge so that all teachers are able to better connect with the professional development process and find something that fits their needs and encouraged their own personal growth (Grier and Holcombe, 2008). Again, this is something that all districts studied make a priority in the design of their professional development programs.

Similarly, Districts #2 and #3 allow their teachers the opportunity to build their own professional development program by selecting which types and topics of professional development they would like to receive. District #3 refers to their professional development program as an Education Camp in which teachers voice their needs for the types of courses they would like to see offered and have the freedom to select the options that will allow for the most personal growth and best meet their needs. This trend was echoed by District #2 in which the Chief Human Resources Officer attributed the focus on individual and professional growth as the number one reason why teachers stay in her district. In her words, “It is the district focus on professional development and how we grow teachers and their professional careers” that keeps teachers in her district for longer than the state average (Janet, personal communication, May 23, 2018). As Grier and Holcombe (2008) note, a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development does not work, the three districts in this study certainly uphold this concept to keep teachers engaged, encouraged, growing as professionals, and most importantly, as valuable members of their district.

New or Beginning Teacher Induction Program

Each of the district officials we interviewed suggested teacher induction was critical to teacher retention. As noted by Sutcher et al. (2016), beginning teachers who participate in induction programs are better able to keep students on task and focused, design functional lesson plans, utilize effective questioning techniques, differentiate classroom activities to meet the needs of various learners, maintain a positive classroom atmosphere, and successfully manage a classroom. These factors combine to ultimately make beginning teachers feel more successful and have a higher sense of self-efficacy, which leads to greater job satisfaction, one of the key indicators of retention. In turn, this works to help beginning teachers offset the stress and fatigue that comes with being new to the job and discourages teacher from leaving the profession (Hobson, 2009). In fact, in their study of new and beginning teachers, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) found a new teacher attending a beginner’s seminar decreases the odds of them leaving at the end of the year by between 49% and 58%. In short, induction programs set new teachers up for success by bringing them into the culture of the district and school and familiarizing them with their new roles and settings.

A key component of teacher induction programs is providing a teacher mentor. In District #1, the new-teacher mentor is responsible for attending a training to better understand their role and then for completing a variety of tasks throughout each quarter of the school year with their assigned new-teacher. These tasks that are to be completed with the beginning teacher include attending a new-teacher meeting with the building principal, reviewing building procedures and policies, conferencing at least once a month, and to observe, monitor, and assist the new teacher as needs arise. A similar process is undertaken in District #2. In that district, beginning teachers are assigned an instructional mentor that is a curriculum expert and provides instructional support as well as a job-alike mentor that is based in the new teacher’s home school and provides more day-to-day support. This two-tiered system works to provide multiple levels of support to beginning teachers.

Well-designed teacher mentoring programs have been found to improve retention rates for new teachers, as well as their attitudes, feelings of efficacy, job satisfaction, classroom management, time management, problem-solving, and instructional skills (Sutcher et al.,

2016; Hobson, 2009). Also, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) found that having a mentor teacher reduced the odds of a first-year teacher leaving the classroom at the end of the year by 35% to 50% and by 32% throughout the first five years of teaching.

Not all mentor programs are created equal, however, which means that not all induction or mentor programs are as successful in retaining teachers. With that in mind, Sutchter et al. (2016) offer three suggestions for designing effective mentor programs. First, mentor teachers should be in the same subject or content area as the beginning teacher. This allows novice and mentor teachers to have more frequent and meaningful interactions and allows for increased opportunities for observation and problem-solving centered around a similar set of standards and curriculum (Roberson and Roberson, 2009). Second, mentors should receive formal training, as they do in all districts studied, to better understand the needs of new teachers, learn how to engage in productive and meaningful observations and conversations, and understand how to formulate and maintain non-evaluative relationships based on support and trust. Last, districts or schools need to provide paid release time for both parties to meet, observe one another teaching, and engage in productive conversations (Sutchter et al., 2016). With all the regular duties teachers face and the large amount of work that is required outside of school hours, paid release time helps to ensure that meetings do in fact take place and support is offered.

Leadership Training Program

One final suggestion to improve teacher retention of a school or district is to create and implement a Leadership Training Program for teachers who are looking to advance their careers. All three districts cited that one downfall of teacher retention is that it also extends to building leadership, meaning that each district also exceeded the average in terms of administrator retention. For instance, District #1 boasts an average administrator retention of 22 years. As such, all three district officials mentioned one of the most common reasons teachers leave is because they are looking to advance their careers and move into an administrative role and there are rarely administrator openings in their district. As a result, teachers looking to move into administration have to leave and take a leadership position in another district. When asked, "If there were one thing that you could do that you are not currently doing to keep teachers in the district, what would that be?" both district #1 and District #3 responded with creating a progressive administrator program. As noted by the Assistant Superintendent of District #3, the district "has to figure out how to bridge the gap between the teacher who wants to be an administrator and a lack of administrative positions" (Leslie, personal communication, May 29, 2018). The Interim Director of Human Resources from District #1 added that her district needs to "find a way to satiate their [teachers looking for administrative or leadership roles] need for growth through leadership opportunities that don't necessarily mean they are going to have to leave the district or leave the classroom in order to find such opportunities" (Susan, personal communication, May 22, 2018).

Summary

It is interesting to note that the successful school districts participating in this study often do not intentionally develop policies designed to retain teachers. Rather, they develop policies designed to make the school district more effective at meeting the needs of faculty and students. By focusing on creating a positive work environment, the district essentially

kills two birds with one stone. They make the place more inviting for faculty and a better educational environment for students. This should not come as a surprise. As Brown and Wynn (2007) noted, successful school administrators “share decision making with new teachers on substantive issues, work collaboratively with others to reach shared goals, and expand teacher leadership capacity” (p. 691).

Limitations and Next Steps

The most significant limitation of this study, which was designed to be exploratory in nature, is the small sample size of participants, with only three districts participating in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The districts were chosen because they have teachers with more years of experience, on average, than other districts in Missouri. While this may help select districts that are doing an effective job at retaining teachers, it is what is known as “selecting on the dependent variable.” Since only these districts were studied, this limits the conclusions that can be drawn. For instance, it could be the case that district’s with very low levels of retention do exactly the same things as the three districts in this study, or at least say they do.

It should also be noted, that the three districts chosen for this study tend to be more affluent than the average Missouri school district. They also have fewer minority students and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches than some of their nearby counterparts. This study is not able to tease out the effect that these advantages may give the district in retaining teachers.

Another limitation of this study is that it does not take into account salary or benefits packages as factors that encourage teachers to continue teaching in a specific district or to remain in education. This was done intentionally as many districts can simply not afford to increase their pay structure and must thus find other means of retaining young and quality teachers. Furthermore, many of the recommendations and suggestions provided are aimed and possible to implement at the building level, as building level leadership often does not have the ability to make changes to pay scales or salary structures but does have the power to design and implement many of the aforementioned programs and policies. Once again, however, we cannot dismiss the possibility that salary in these districts may have played a part in helping them retain teachers.

One final limitation of this study is that only district level personnel were interviewed, and thus the actions and functions of specific schools and their leaders in each district have not been taken into account. To this end, future research could explore what each district and principal is doing at the school level to retain young and quality teachers. Furthermore, teachers in each district could also be surveyed to determine what motivates them to stay in each school and district. These data would also help to determine if the policies, programs, and supports that administrators deem are important in teacher retention are in fact important to teachers.

Despite these limitations, much can be gleaned from this study. Indeed, the results of these interviews is supported by large amounts of outside research meaning that the district policies, programs, and cultures that each has in place likely do contribute to their success in teacher retention. In short, policies and programs that support and affirm teachers are teacher retention policies.

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