

Teacher Attrition in Charter Schools

Executive Summary

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Teacher Attrition in Charter Schools¹

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While several studies have examined teachers' reasons for seeking employment in charter schools, few have asked why teachers are leaving them. This study of teacher attrition takes up that question, analyzing existing data from teacher surveys administered during state evaluations. Survey results were compared and re-analyzed based on teachers' decisions to leave or to stay in their charter schools the year following the survey. This analysis yielded substantive information about the characteristics of teachers who leave charter schools and about teachers' relative satisfaction with various elements of their experience.

The study examined many factors, or predictors, related to teacher attrition. Major findings include the following:

- The single background characteristic that strongly predicted teacher attrition was age: younger teachers in charter schools are more likely to leave than older teachers. No significant attrition differences appeared between males and females or for African-American teachers.
- Another strong predictor was grade level taught, with attrition rates being highest in the upper grades, especially grades 6, 7, 10, and 11. Special education teachers were only slightly more likely to leave charter schools than regular education teachers.
- Among teacher qualification variables, the best predictors were "years of experience" and "years at current school." Teachers with limited experience were significantly more likely to leave their charter schools. (It is presumed that many of these inexperienced teachers moved to teaching jobs in other schools.)
- Certification was also significant. Attrition was higher for non-certified teachers and for teachers who were teaching outside their certification areas; this situation may be related to the No Child Left Behind act's pressure for ensuring teaching staff meet its definition of "highly qualified."

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- Teachers with higher levels of formal education were more likely to stay, although this factor wasn't strongly predictive when controls for other variables were applied.
- Other strong and significant factors included teachers' relative satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the school's: 1) mission, 2) perceived ability to attain the mission, and 3) administration and governance. Generally, teachers who left were also routinely less satisfied with: curriculum and instruction; resources and facilities; and salary and benefits. It appeared that teachers who were not satisfied were leaving or were being asked to leave.

Some would argue that a certain amount of attrition is positive in that it corrects a mismatch between teacher and school. Overall, attrition rates in charter schools are generally between 20 and 25 percent; for new teachers, however, the attrition rate is close to 40 percent annually. Such extensive attrition cannot be characterized as desirable. High attrition consumes resources of schools that must regularly provide pre- and in-service training to new teachers; it impedes schools' efforts to build professional learning communities and positive and stable school cultures; and, it is likely to undermine the legitimacy of the schools in the eyes of parents.

Therefore, it is recommended that those who support charter schools focus efforts on reducing teacher attrition, especially the excessively high turnover of new young teachers, in charter schools. Specific suggestions include the following:

- Discrepancies between teachers' expectations for charter schools and those schools' realities should be identified, and strategies for narrowing the gaps should be designed and implemented.
- Efforts should be made to strengthen teachers' sense of security as much as possible.
- Efforts should be made to increase teachers' satisfaction with working conditions, salaries, benefits, administration, and governance.

Although the responses from sampled teachers were generally positive regarding their charter school, this study revealed that research on satisfaction often excludes data collection from teachers who are leaving or who have left charter schools. The large numbers of teachers who are "voting with their feet" suggest substantive frustration with working conditions and dissatisfaction with salaries, benefits, administration, and governance. Finally, the erosion of the teaching force each year indicates that many charter schools are going to have an especially hard time building professional learning communities that can make a difference in the education of children. Therefore, the high attrition rates for teachers in charter schools constitute one of the greatest obstacles that will need to be overcome if the charter school reform is to deliver as promised.