



Teacher Turnover: The Hidden Costs



Teachers choose to leave their schools for a [variety of reasons](#), many of which are linked to working conditions, limited resources, and low salary. For schools with high turnover, improvement efforts face added hurdles. A [new study](#) helps explain why, while also providing a holistic view of how this factor impacts the very fabric of life and learning within schools.

Conducted by NEPC Fellows [Jennifer Holme](#) of the University of Texas and [Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California as well as [Katelin Trautmann](#) of the University of Texas at Austin and [Janet Solis Rodriguez](#) of the University of Texas at San Antonio, the study draws upon 165 in-depth interviews and 195 hours of observations of teacher team meetings. The data were collected between 2019 and 2023 at four large comprehensive Texas high schools experiencing elevated rates of teacher turnover, ranging from 47 percent to 88 percent over the four years of the study.

All four schools enrolled high percentages of students from low-income families, reflecting a well-established finding that districts and schools serving higher-poverty populations typically experience higher rates of teacher turnover. In such schools where turnover is high, the researchers found, the teachers who do not leave their schools lose partners they can approach for advice and planning. These teachers hesitate to invest professional or emotional energy in new colleagues who might not be there next year. They also find themselves taking on additional work involved in assisting and onboarding new colleagues—often novices to the profession—who are so busy learning the ropes that they have trouble making meaningful contributions to more substantive work, such as reviewing student data or implementing

improvements.

That is, turnover makes it difficult to engage in ongoing improvement or deep reforms in precisely the schools serving the most marginalized students.

In two of the four focal schools, leadership turnover also contributed to teacher turnover challenges. Just as they hesitated to invest energy in new colleagues, teachers in these schools resisted embracing their new leaders' visions, with one remarking: "I've been through four principals here in ten years. I know I'll be here after you leave. You're just another person who I have to deal with until the next person comes."

Leaders themselves were coping with an ongoing need to train teachers new to the school. This made it difficult for teachers to take a consistent approach to instruction or student discipline, since so many of their colleagues were still getting up to speed.

Professional learning also suffers when turnover rises. Rather than focusing on core learning goals, members of professional learning communities at the focal schools often found themselves visiting and revisiting basics (such as the school schedule and the goals of tutorials) as they helped onboard new colleagues. Without carry-through from one school year to the next, institutional instructional memory declined, making it challenging to build on collective learnings about effective lesson plans and other topics.

In addition to highlighting such obstacles, the researchers identified ways to mitigate the impact of teacher turnover (beyond, of course, the much-needed policy reforms that could mitigate the turnover itself). For example, they noted the beneficial effects of creating and sustaining records, materials, goals, calendars, lessons, and other key information to maintain continuity from one year to the next. Absent these resources, teachers found themselves reinventing the wheel each fall. It also helped to assign neighboring classrooms to teachers of the same subject, so they could quickly touch base about instructional issues between or just after classes. Time devoted to meetings of professional learning communities also helped, by providing forums where teachers could develop relationships with their new colleagues and share knowledge and advice.

Based on these findings, the researchers recommended prioritizing the stability of teacher teams or professional learning communities when making teacher assignments, ensuring that these teams have time to meet during the work day, treating teacher team leads as key positions, investing in systems that create and store process documents and other material needed to maintain continuity over time, limiting curricular changes during periods of high turnover, providing additional resources to schools experiencing high turnover in order to ameliorate the effects, and considering turnover when implementing accountability measures in schools.

The study, which is currently available as a [report](#), will be published in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. The authors also hosted a webinar this past Monday, which is (or soon will be) available to [watch online](#).

Teacher Employment and Retention

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, sponsors research, produces policy briefs, and publishes expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. NEPC publications are written in accessible language and are intended for a broad audience that includes academic experts, policymakers, the media, and the general public. Our mission is to provide high-quality information in support of democratic deliberation about education policy. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence and support a multiracial society that is inclusive, kind, and just. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>