

Policy Brief 2018-2: The Role of Principals in Reducing Teacher Turnover and the Shortage of Teachers

Edward J. Fuller¹, Andrew Pendola¹, & Michelle D. Young²

Teacher turnover has consistently been found to be the **primary driver** of teacher shortages. This is particularly true in high-need schools characterized by high proportions of students living in poverty, students of color, and students with relatively low levels of achievement. Not only does teacher turnover contribute to the shortage of teachers, teacher turnover also has negative **ripple effects** throughout a school. Specifically, teacher turnover **disrupts** curricular cohesiveness, interrupts teacher-student relationships, interferes with the adoption of a common school vision, and leads to an increase in the number of inexperienced teachers. These issues negatively affect student outcomes such as achievement, engagement, and graduation.

The **causes of high teacher turnover** are numerous and include non-competitive salaries, inadequate facilities, large class sizes, student characteristics, and student academic performance. New research, however, has identified **teacher working conditions** as having a greater effect on teacher turnover than most other factors, including student achievement and student characteristics. Importantly, **research** has debunked the conventional wisdom that teachers often leave schools because of student characteristics.

Thus, the working conditions often endemic of high-need schools such as limited budgets, inadequate instructional resources, lack of access to effective professional development, poor facilities, negative school cultures, and ineffective leadership cause teachers to leave such schools.

Fortunately, teacher working conditions provide an avenue to reduce teacher turnover and lessen the severity of teacher shortages.

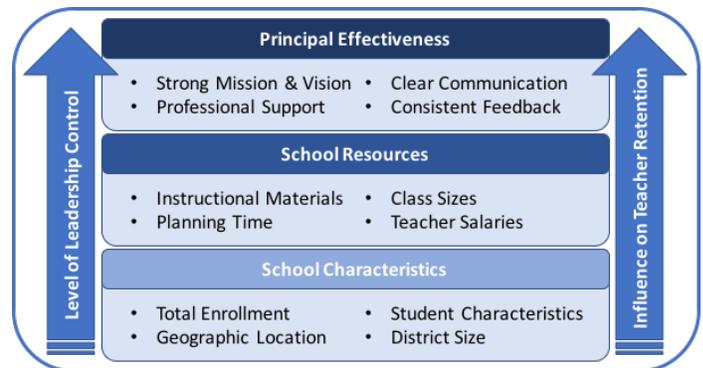
Components of Working Conditions

There are **three main components** of teacher working conditions: principal effectiveness, school resources (e.g., class sizes, instructional materials, professional development, teacher salaries), and other school characteristics (e.g., total enrollment, geographic location, student characteristics).

While each of these three components of teacher working conditions have some influence on teacher turnover, principal effectiveness has the strongest influence on teachers' decisions to stay at or leave a school.

In general, principals have nearly complete control over

teachers' perceptions of principal effectiveness, a small to moderate level of control over school resources, and little to no control over other school characteristics.



Principal Effectiveness—as perceived by teachers—includes a wide array of different school leadership behaviors that directly influence teachers and their working conditions. Each behavior, listed below, is largely under the immediate control of principals, and represents the most direct line of influence on teacher turnover at a principal's disposal.

- ### Behaviors of Effective Principals
- Creating strong school mission and vision
 - Consistent and transparent communication
 - Implementation of routines and procedures to establish predictable and stable environment
 - Supporting and encouraging teachers
 - Communicating clear expectations
 - Prioritizing trust and respect
 - Buffering teachers from outside influences that interfere with teaching
 - Involving teachers in decision making
 - Providing consistent and useful feedback

School resources are another component of teacher working conditions, but have a smaller influence on teacher turnover and are less under the control of principals than principal effectiveness. Principals can influence school resources most directly by ensuring a school is well-kept, clean, welcoming, and safe. Principals can also influence school resources by acquiring additional funding and developing relationships with central office personnel to procure needed materials and supplies that enhance the ability of teachers to do their job well.

School Characteristics are the final component of teacher working conditions and have the weakest influence on teacher turnover. School characteristics include factors such as the personal characteristics of

students, geographic location, and total school enrollment. The effects of school characteristics on turnover diminish after considering the effect of principal effectiveness—especially teacher working conditions. While principals have some control over school resources, this component of working conditions is more easily influenced by district- and state- policymakers.

Principals, then, can directly and profoundly affect teacher turnover rates in their schools by focusing on enacting research-based effective leadership behaviors. In doing so, principals create the types of working conditions that are strongly associated with the increased retention of teachers—especially in schools that traditionally suffer from relatively high teacher turnover rates.

Other Avenues to Improve Teacher Retention

While improving teacher working conditions is the most direct and influential route by which principals can influence teacher turnover rates, principals can also focus on other strategies that have been shown to reduce teacher turnover. For example, principals can ensure that both beginning teachers and teachers new to the school have access to an experienced and effective teacher to serve as a mentor. Principals can also—to the best of their ability—ensure beginning teachers have reduced teaching loads or teaching assignments that increase the odds of teacher success (e.g., decreased number of preparations, smaller class sizes, fewer struggling students). Principals can also endeavor to hire teachers as early as possible during hiring season and encourage teachers who are leaving the school to provide notification of intent to leave as early as possible.

Actions for District Policymakers

While principals can significantly influence teacher turnover rates, district policymakers play an extremely important role in reducing teacher turnover.

Actions for District Policymakers

- Ensure teacher salaries are competitive in the local labor market;
- Provide additional compensation and resources to educators choosing to work in high-need schools;
- Enact strategies targeted at placing and retaining experienced and effective principals at EVERY school in the district;
- Provide all principals—especially inexperienced principals and principals leading high-need schools—a well-trained and experienced mentor;
- Adopt and implement teacher working condition surveys and assist principals in addressing the challenge areas identified by such surveys; and,
- Adopt and implement a principal working condition survey to help address principal turnover.

Actions for State Policymakers

Principals—even with the assistance of district policymakers—cannot solve the problem of teacher turnover

by themselves. Indeed, to fully address the issue of teacher turnover, principals and district policymakers need the assistance of state policymakers. Below, we provide a few suggestions for state policymaker actions.

Actions for State Policymakers

- Guarantee school districts are equitably and adequately funded so superintendents and principals have the necessary fiscal resources to address teacher turnover;
- Invest in developing a robust data system that allows for the calculation of teacher- and principal- turnover rates so efforts can be targeted to schools most in need of assistance;
- Further, states should make such data available to researchers so they can identify policies and strategies effective in reducing teacher turnover;
- Examine how the state identifies and supports “low-performing” schools and ensure state approaches do not cause disincentives for educators to work in such schools;
- Adopt the [Professional Standards for Educational Leaders](#) to ensure principal- and superintendent- preparation programs adequately prepare education leaders;
- Fund both teacher- and principal- working condition surveys and make the results available to district- and school- leaders; and,
- Fund professional development to ensure school- and district- leaders can appropriately interpret the findings from the survey, identify root causes using the findings, and create plans to address the root causes.

Conclusions

The good news is improving the working conditions of teachers can reduce teacher turnover and the shortage of teachers. While principals can greatly influence teacher working conditions, we show above that both district- and state- policymakers need to support principals in this work.

Author Affiliations:

1 The Pennsylvania State University; 2 University of Virginia.

For those interested in the research supporting this policy brief, please read “The Every Student Succeeds Act, State Efforts to Improve Access to Effective Educators, and the Importance of School Leadership that is located at:

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0013161X17711481>

For a copy, you may contact Ed Fuller at ejf20@psu.edu



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