



The Teacher Shortage is about Leadership, Not Just Pay

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An increasingly dire teacher shortage has recently captured headlines as part of the so-called “great resignation,” with reports showing over half of teachers are planning to exit the profession in the coming years. This teacher shortage is largely driven by high turnover, costing districts millions each year nationwide and leaving schools—particularly those with greater numbers of low-income and minoritized children—with less qualified replacements, larger class sizes, reduced course offerings, and a strained learning environment.

Like so many other states, Alabama has responded with broad-based policy interventions such as salary increases and relaxed certification requirements. And while these are no doubt helpful steps, they overlook the fundamental nature of teacher turnover and shortages. Teachers do not leave the classroom because of low salary; they leave because they feel undervalued. They do not leave because of the students; they leave because of conflicting expectations that make it difficult, if not impossible, to serve them. To improve teacher retention and curb shortages, Alabama educators and policymakers must enact policies that address the root of teacher dissatisfaction.

What We Know about Shortages

Teacher turnover and shortages have been an issue for some time. Much of the research notes that shortages are more driven by poor teacher retention and high turnover rather than a lack of certified individuals available. It is also clear why teachers are leaving: They are dissatisfied with the circumstances of their work. While it is often assumed that this dissatisfaction is with their students or their schools, this is not actually the case—it is the conditions and roles they are required to work in.

In Alabama, a recent statewide survey on teacher satisfaction noted a lack of administrative support, student discipline, uninvolved parents, and low public respect as key reasons leading to burnout and the desire to leave. Although certain school conditions cannot be changed, the issues that are most meaningful to teachers are highly local and malleable—including strong leadership, collegial relationships, and positive culture. If we think about it this way, while higher salaries and loan repayment programs are certainly a step in the right direction, these one-size-fits-all solutions are not attuned to the reasons teachers are leaving.

A Relational Approach to Turnover

If modern research on turnover has shown anything, it is that leaving one’s job is not a simple decision; it unfolds over time with specific sources of dissatisfaction that add up until a more viable opportunity emerges. In reality, most teachers carry around mental “scripts” of when it is time to leave if some threshold is crossed: if their boss overlooks their hard work again, or if they see their friends moving up a career ladder that they cannot even access. The most specific sources of teacher dissatisfaction reveal that they are about relationships and day-to-day classroom concerns. So, what can be done to improve these aspects of the job?

In a recent survey given to a representative sample of over 500 teachers across the state, I asked teachers what changes they would need to see to keep them in their positions. Surprisingly, salary was hardly brought up. The large majority stated that they wanted to see an effort to acknowledge and realign the conflicting expectations they are held to, such as giving personalized instruction to thirty different students in a classroom while administering standardized tests. The next most frequently cited change was to see administrators protect their time in the classroom for instruction. The third was that teachers wanted to see honest efforts to promote a positive culture and strong professional relationships in the school. In short, the things that matter most—clear roles, time to focus, and professional respect—are about managing the school as an organization and profession well.

Addressing the Causes of Teacher Turnover

What this points to is that ensuring supportive, respectful, and relationship-driven school and district leadership is key to reducing shortages. It is well known that strong school leadership not only improves teacher retention, but also teacher effectiveness and ultimately student achievement. The research is clear on this: Leadership actions such as ensuring consistent and transparent communication of expectations, having a clear mission and vision, prioritizing professional respect, involving teachers in decisions, and providing consistent and useful feedback lead to more effective working environments, better retention, and improved learning.

While many of these activities cannot be legislated into action, some areas can be emphasized to support strong school leadership and relational improvements. Alabama's policymakers and school leaders should look to:

- Ensure that leadership preparation programs are held to clear and high standards.
- Fund both teacher and principal working condition surveys and make the results available to district leadership.
- Fund both teacher and principal professional development that centers on building school culture, professionalism, and trust.
- Guarantee that policy directives are constructed with clear role definitions that prioritize protecting classroom time and reducing administrative burden.
- Provide all school leaders—especially inexperienced leaders and those in high-needs schools—a well-trained and experienced mentor.

The good news is that causes of turnover can be addressed at the local level with strong school leadership. There is no doubt that improved salaries, benefits, and other state incentives will improve certain aspects of the teacher shortage. However, these changes alone cannot address the core cause of high attrition rates, and school leaders alongside district and state policymakers should capitalize on the opportunity to improve the working conditions for all teachers.