



New Member Spotlight: Andrew Pendola On Solving the Teacher Shortage

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“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.” - Andrew Pendola, Auburn University

For this month’s new member spotlight, SSN is excited to highlight [Professor Andrew Pendola](#) of Auburn University and his research on teacher labor markets and educational policy. As school districts across the country face teacher shortages, Pendola’s work can help explain why teachers are leaving the classroom and what can be done to curb high turnover.

For his SSN membership contribution, Pendola authored a policy brief entitled [The Teacher Shortage is About Leadership, Not Just Pay](#) that details how school districts can effectively address teacher shortages by pointing their attention to the root of the issue instead of one-size-fits-all solutions. Pendola argues that a focus on salary and school resources is misplaced – instead school districts should aim to improve the conditions and roles teachers are required to work in.

“I’ve been doing research on educator labor markets for a while, and there has been a lot of work on the structural things that lead to high turnover, such as low pay or inadequate teacher preparation. Yet, in conversations with lots of teachers (and my own past experience as one), the most pressing concerns are about relationships—with students, the community, and leadership,” Pendola told SSN. “I thought that focusing on the psychological process behind teacher shortages might offer a new approach to reduce turnover, that isn’t based on the amount of money or resources a school has.”

Pendola surveyed a representative sample of over 500 teachers across Alabama asking them what changes they would need to see to stay in their positions. While teachers’ salaries were rarely brought up, teachers did voice concerns about conflicting expectations in the classroom, unprotected instruction time, and a lack of effort by leadership to encourage a positive culture 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,” he writes.

In the brief, Pendola provides a list of actions that can be taken to improve school conditions and retain valuable teachers, including:

- 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.

Closing the brief, Pendola argues that amidst the teacher shortage crisis, there is some good news: teacher turnover can be directly addressed at the local level via strong school leadership. Pendola hopes that “this research can get into the hands of district administrators and school leaders, particularly those in schools that face high turnover and do not have the resources to make big changes.” Looking towards the future, Pendola will continue studying teacher turnover, specifically the warning signs of teacher withdrawal which he feels could enable school leadership to intervene before a teacher leaves.

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Andrew Pendola is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and the founding director of the Quantitative Methods for Educational Research Lab at Auburn University. His research focuses on issues of teacher and principal labor markets, educational finance and policy, and racial and socioeconomic equity in schools. Overarching themes in Pendola's writings include issues of recruitment, retention, and mobility for educators, the psychology of organizational commitment, and decision-making in school finance.