

Musical Chairs: Teacher churn and its impact on Indianapolis Public Schools

Introduction

The constant churn of teachers significantly damages the learning chances of children, especially children who have unstable home environments.¹ It is no secret that teacher retention is a struggle in urban education. Roughly half of new teachers leave urban classrooms within three years, just as they are beginning to have their strongest impact on student learning.² And those who leave are often those having the greatest success with students. It is estimated that the nation's 50 largest districts (Indianapolis included) lose approximately 10,000 top-performing teachers each year.³

Once I actually get to know the teacher, they get moved to a different school or into a new position. The teacher-student relationship ends there.

—Laken, 11th grade IPS student

But what about the teachers who stay? The image most of us have from our own school experience is that teachers who return year after year ensure the stability of our public schools, building long-term relationships with students and a solid school culture with a continuity of expectations. The picture presented by current data on teacher churn could not be more different from this idealized notion. The churn between schools in Indianapolis has reached a crisis point that requires the attention of leaders, parents, and educators across the city.

This report aims to accomplish three things:

1. Define the scope of the problem of teacher churn. What teachers are caught in the churn? What is the frequency of their movement? Are they moving voluntarily or involuntarily?
2. Describe and draw attention to the negative effects of teacher churn. How does it impact students, school culture, and the profession?
3. Offer a set of recommendations for how to address the problem of teacher churn in Indianapolis. How can the district be more strategic? What would slow the churn and lead to increased stability?

Why the churn?

High student mobility is often cited as the main reason teachers need to be moved around so much in the district. Through conversations with district-level officials, however, it is clear that teacher churn is made worse by inaccurate enrollment projections and poor timing. We recognize that students in IPS will continue to be mobile, but we believe our recommendations will slow the churn and make unavoidable teacher movement more strategic.

¹ Ronfeldt, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2011) *How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement* (working paper 17176). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

² Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2009) *Who Leaves? Teacher Attrition and Student Achievement*. Washington, DC: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.

³ TNTP. (2012) *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools*. Washington, DC: TNTP.

The Scope of the Problem

To better understand the scale of teacher churn in Indianapolis, an electronic survey was sent out to current and former Indianapolis Public School educators across Indianapolis. The predominant way teachers were reached was through an email sent by district administration. We received 512 responses from teachers who have worked in Indianapolis Public Schools at some point in their careers, 399 of whom currently teach in IPS. This represents a sample size of approximately one-fifth of the total teaching force of the district. Teachers were asked for the following information:

1. What type of school did you transition from?⁴
2. What type of school did you transition to?⁵
3. Why did you transition?⁶
4. If you transitioned voluntarily, what factors contributed to your decision to leave?
5. At what point in your years of experience did this transition take place?

Teachers were able to list up to ten transitions, including leaving the profession entirely.

Findings from the survey suggest that the teaching force in Indianapolis is highly unstable, especially for “New Majority” teachers (teachers with fewer than 10 years’ experience).

More than half of second year teachers had transitioned between their first and second year. That is, 53.3 percent of second year teachers reported changing schools after their first year. That number grows significantly in the third year of teaching. 71.1 percent of third year teachers had made at least one transition. For those in their fourth year in the classroom, the number climbs even higher. 84.6 percent of these teachers had made at least one transition.

Figure I: Teachers who have made at least one transition

53%

of 2nd year teachers have already made one transition (i.e. more than half of teachers who completed their first year of teaching left the school)

71%

of 3rd year teachers have already made one transition

85%

of 4th year teachers have already made one transition

More than a quarter of teachers with between two and four years’ experience had transitioned two or more times.

It appears that rates of churn have accelerated in recent years. For example, when looking at the overall experience of teachers in Indianapolis, both New Majority teachers and veteran teachers, we see that approximately half of New Majority teachers today transferred after their first year. This is in contrast to teachers with more than 10 years’ experience, who were only half as likely to leave their first school. Approximately a quarter of veteran teachers reported that they left their first teaching assignment after just one year.

Are these New Majority teachers leaving by choice? Our survey indicates that more than three quarters (78 percent) of teachers who started their teaching careers in IPS and have transitioned in their first two years

⁴ Choices included IPS, charter, township, private, and out of Marion County.

⁵ Choices included IPS, charter, township, private, out of Marion County, or left teaching.

⁶ Choices included mandate (removed for performance), Reduction in Force (RIF), Displaced (to another IPS school), and Voluntary/Choice.

have done so involuntarily [Figure 2]. These involuntary transfers include displacements due to declining enrollment within a school or reductions in force, which is a reduction of the entire teaching force in the district due to declining enrollment.⁷ Involuntary transitions, or displacements, happen when the district’s enrollment projections at a specific school are lower than the current staffing numbers. Public Law 90, the state law that eliminated the use of seniority in teacher hiring and firing decisions, should dramatically decrease these transitions for New Majority teachers; however these results indicate that New Majority teachers continue to be negatively impacted in the early stages of their careers—a time, many teachers argued, when they were most in need of support and consistency.

Figure 2: For New Majority teachers who moved in their first two years...



When teachers make a voluntary choice to leave a school, there are a number of factors that contribute to their decision to leave. More than half of all the teachers who responded had made at least one voluntary transition at some point during their careers. These transitions took place both within and outside of IPS.

For teachers who voluntarily left a school at some point in their career, 49 percent cited school leadership and 40 percent cited school culture as reasons for leaving [Figure 3]. These data points support the findings of many studies on teacher retention—most notably TNTP’s *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools*. Many strategies for retaining great teachers are within the control of the principal. If half of the teachers leaving IPS are doing so because of school leadership, the district must address how leadership is hired and developed. Additional teacher surveys are required to determine the exact aspects of school leadership that impact teachers’ decisions to stay or go in a particular school.

Figure 3: Reasons Cited For Voluntary Transfers



⁷ Choices included mandate (removed for performance), Reduction in Force (RIF), Displaced (to another IPS school), and Voluntary/Choice.

School culture, another reason teachers cited for leaving a school, is determined—in large part—by who works in the school. While we cannot determine causation through this survey, the number of involuntary transitions experienced by New Majority teachers appears to correlate with a shift in school culture. For the teachers left behind, this shift in culture may be a contributing factor in their voluntary decision to leave the school.

Negative Impacts of Teacher Churn

Both the empirical and anecdotal data collected through our survey, as well as data from additional bodies of research, indicate three areas that are negatively impacted by teacher churn. Student outcomes, school culture, and the perception of teaching as a profession are all damaged when teachers are shuffled from school to school.

Student Outcomes

Though our survey only captured the experiences of teachers, recent studies indicate that teacher churn also has a negative impact on student achievement. A study estimating the effects of teacher turnover on 850,000 New York City students indicates that “students in grade levels with higher [teacher] turnover score lower in both English language arts (ELA) and math and that these effects are particularly strong in schools with more low-performing and Black students.”⁸ As indicated in the recommendations of this brief, the district should monitor the churn of teachers, which would allow them to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of churn on the students of IPS.

School Culture

High teacher churn in IPS makes it difficult to forge trust, be invested in a school community, and build relationships with students, parents, and colleagues. Relationships, trust, and investment are three things that naturally deepen with time. School culture is negatively impacted by teacher churn in several ways:

Student-Teacher Relationships

Building strong relationships with students and families is central to effective teaching. Naturally, those relationships take time to grow and nurture. When teachers, involuntarily or by choice, transition between schools, those relationships are fractured and new ones must be developed—often in completely different environments serving students with entirely different needs.

One teacher stated:

“Transitioning from one school to another has left me very discouraged. I was happy in my previous position. [...] I live in the community and had been there my entire career. I had great family relationships and had a demonstrable impact on the kids there...I am unhappy in my current position, forced to build those relationships and earn my respect all over again.”

⁸ Ronfeldt et al (2011).

Collegial Relationships

Additionally, the culture among colleagues is damaged when teachers leave. As colleagues work together over several years, advances can be made in curriculum, mentoring, and teaching and learning techniques. If teachers are continually shifting, it is difficult to do any of these things. Allison, an IPS teacher, expressed that although movement has been “positive because I have met many new colleagues and learned new skills for my career, [...] it has been frustrating because I found a team that works incredibly well, and I have to leave and become the new teacher somewhere else. Another teacher stated that “transitions make creating a culture of understanding, respect, and collaboration extremely difficult.”

Continuity for Staff and Students

With a large percentage of teachers shifting to different schools each year (or even within a school year), school communities and cultures are being built on thin foundations, making it difficult for staff members to develop deep connections to the communities they serve.

As one teacher put it,

“I would feel closer to my school if I was able to stay for a longer time. After four schools in three years, I am starting to feel as if I were an NFL free agent. I am not as loyal to IPS as I would be because I now know that I can be switched at any time. However, I will always be loyal to the students.”

Another teacher, after being in three different schools before October (barely two months into the school year), noted that it’s “difficult to trust the system.”

“The more a district moves you around, the less connection you feel towards the school and the less loyalty you have to the district.”
—IPS teacher

Valuing and Developing Great Teachers

Research shows that the classroom teacher is the single most important factor in determining student success. Recent findings also indicate a wide range of ability levels among teachers in the profession. If the district aims to improve educational outcomes for students, it needs to strategically develop teachers and value them as professionals. Teacher churn hampers both of these efforts.

Finding a Fit

The 50 percent of New Majority teachers transitioning schools within the first two years of their careers suggests that the district has not created an environment in which teachers are treated as valued professionals or integral members of unique school communities. Rather, survey respondents indicate that teachers are being shuffled around irrespective of their “fit” within a particular school community.

The operating assumption that any teacher can fill any vacancy at any time and achieve adequate results strengthens the perception that teachers are interchangeable parts, or merely cogs in a machine. Why would high-quality teaching candidates want to work in a district that moves teachers with such frequency? Why would high-performing teachers want to remain in a district that has shuffled them around or might shuffle them around in the future? This practice, combined with more competitive compensation in surrounding districts,⁹ will drive teachers out of the district over time.

Professional Development

In addition to negatively affecting school culture, frequent churn can also hold back a teacher's ability to develop professionally and to improve her craft. Teachers caught in the churn are often required to teach new courses or different grade levels. This requires them to spend time with each move becoming familiar with new curriculum and developing new lesson plans rather than honing their craft while teaching a familiar course or grade level. One teacher said, "I can never catch any momentum. I'm constantly teaching something different and have to re-plan every year." Another said: "I have never taught the same grade and subject two years in a row. It makes it really hard to enjoy work because I am never tweaking my skills—only developing them. This adds to stress levels and makes it hard to feel good about what I am doing."

Teachers also explained that the lack of stability and consistent feedback made it difficult to improve their performance. One teacher said, "When teachers are passed off from one administrator to another, they do not have an evaluator or mentor at their building who sees them develop over time, so it is hard for them to receive feedback that is tailored towards their needs and reflective of their growth over time."

“For a new teacher, who is questioning her ability and struggling to improve quickly, I felt like our administration and the district saw me as a commodity to move around as they deemed fit. No one had a conversation with me or seemed to care about me and my development.”

Timing is Everything

Notifications of these assignment switches often take place either days before a new school year begins or even during a school year. With such little notice, teachers are not able to plan ahead for the content they will teach that year. The inability to plan ahead decreases teachers' effectiveness and requires them to play constant catch-up. In our survey, many teachers cited the stress and burden of time and money required to move supplies from school to school and to invest in new age-appropriate materials. Once teachers got physically settled, becoming comfortable teaching in their new assignment often took much longer.

Teachers who changed buildings also found themselves spending time worrying about many concerns besides instruction. "When you transition it is a huge change," said one teacher. These adjustments again divert time and energy away from improving as a teacher.

“You begin all over. You must learn the community, culture, students, staff, and rules/expectations that particular school has. In addition, [you must learn] where things are located within the school, copy, laminator, poster maker, and who to go to for help. It really reminds me of my first year teaching...learning it all again.”

⁹ Teach Plus (2010). *The Cost of Loyalty: Teachers' Stay or Leave Decision in Indianapolis Public Schools*. Indianapolis: Teach Plus.

Lacking Leadership

For teachers who chose to leave an IPS school, little was done to prevent turnover. One teacher surveyed said, “[My previous school] lacks the administrative leadership to make successful teachers feel good about staying. What’s even worse: the district does not seem to be making the administrative cuts that it needs to be to remedy this situation. I did not receive the instructional leadership I needed and wanted as a teacher.” The school culture of a building begins with school leadership and is implemented by an invested building faculty. Too many teachers are leaving by choice because of a lack of leadership, and too many teachers who invest time and energy into becoming a part of the fabric of a school are moved involuntarily. Both of these are detrimental to students and school communities.

Recommendations

1. Track, publish, and use data on teacher churn in Indianapolis Public Schools to inform future policy.

We recognize the limitations of the data presented in this brief, as it was self-reported by teachers. The scope of teacher churn cannot be fully assessed without a specific plan for data collection at the district level. The district should track and publish school level data on teacher churn and retention. This should include the percentages of teachers moved involuntarily and voluntarily. If teachers move voluntarily, they should be surveyed as to why they have chosen to move. If teachers are leaving the district or the profession, this should be noted, as well as their reason for leaving through an exit survey.

As teacher evaluation is implemented with more fidelity, IPS could use a wealth of data to determine where its most effective teachers are going and why. The district could make strategic decisions about school leadership, teacher placement, teacher retention, salary, and a host of other issues. Teachers, in turn, could make strategic decisions about where they want to work.

2. Centralize the enrollment of Indianapolis Public Schools and charter schools that reside within the district.

The ability of the district to accurately project student enrollment is hampered by the fact that a large charter sector serves the same population of students independently from the district. If a joint office managed enrollment for both district and charter schools, both district and charter schools would have more accurate, real-time information on enrollment numbers, and therefore more accurate, real-time staffing needs. This would allow the district to strategically manage the churn.

3. Decrease the mobility of school leaders and develop strategies for teacher retention.

Teachers outnumber principals nearly 20 to 1 in the district. Teachers want to follow effective school leaders and often elect to change schools under poor leadership. By moving one effective leader out of a building, the district destabilizes the building they leave behind. Those teachers left behind are faced with the choice of staying or going under the new leadership.

Principals have the power to increase teacher retention through specific, tangible strategies. The district must help principals develop these skills and an effort to decrease voluntary transfers of effective teachers.

4. Prioritize the needs of developing teachers and recognize the leadership of effective, experienced teachers.

Public Law 90 requires that teacher displacement be based on performance rather than seniority. Now that teacher churn is no longer based on seniority, the district can think strategically about how it works to develop, rather than turn over, new talent.

In cases where an early career teacher is rated as “effective” or “highly effective” on her evaluation, the district should make every effort to keep that first or second year teacher in her original school.

Understanding that student mobility will inevitably require some teacher mobility, financial incentives could be developed for effective and experienced teachers who make the choice to go to a school with staffing needs. This veteran teacher will bring a level of experience and leadership to the new environment, helping to establish a positive culture in a building with needs.

Conclusion

Too many teachers are caught in the churn. Teacher churn negatively impacts school culture and it inhibits the professional growth and respect that great teachers deserve. Involuntary moves under district policy disproportionately impact New Majority teachers—arguably the group of teachers who are most in need of stability and development in their formative years.

Urban schools experience tremendous student mobility, and we recognize that teacher churn is an unfortunate side effect as enrollment numbers shift. Nonetheless, we believe that the district can take specific steps to ensure that it retains its best teachers in the classrooms that need them most.

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The mission of Teach Plus is to improve outcomes for urban children by ensuring that a greater proportion of students have access to effective, experienced teachers.



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