

Understanding Why Nevada Teachers Choose to Stay In and Leave Schools: Recommendations from Teach Plus Nevada Policy Fellows

INTRODUCTION

Effective teachers have a direct and lasting impact on student growth and achievement. Research supports the strong correlation between student success and a highly effective teacher.¹ As Nevada teachers and Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows, we can attest to the importance of retaining great teachers in our schools and classrooms. Nevada's ESSA plan identifies district recruitment, hiring, and retention practices as factors in the significant difference between the percentages of experienced teachers in Title 1 schools and non-Title 1 schools. Based on this data, in 2019 the Nevada Department of Education approved a recommendation that "individual schools report their teacher retention rate."²

The Clark County School District acknowledged this need within their Focus 2024 plan, which emphasizes the recruitment and retention of teachers. Priority 2 in the plan states the need to "Ensure all students have access to highly effective teachers."³ The plan also lists the objective to "improve employee morale and engagement, improve retention rates."⁴ The first, necessary step in addressing teacher retention is collecting and analyzing data to identify the root causes of turnover among Nevada's effective teachers. We propose that the district conduct a comprehensive exit survey for all teachers leaving a school. In this memo, we outline our rationale behind this recommendation.

UNDERSTANDING TEACHER ATTRITION: WHY IT MATTERS

Teacher attrition is generally defined as teachers leaving the profession, or those moving between schools. The nationwide teacher attrition rate is approximately eight percent.⁵ While student enrollment is expected to continually skyrocket into the next decade, the projected supply of qualified teachers is expected to shrink. The current projections are that roughly 300,000 teachers will be needed to address national classroom vacancies by the fall. Clearly, continuing efforts to recruit new teachers remain an important part of addressing this gap. However, 90 percent of the demand for new teachers is the result of educators exiting the profession, with more than two-thirds doing so before the age of retirement.⁶ Focusing solely on new teacher recruitment fails to capture the urgency around retaining the teachers already in the system.

Additionally, teacher shortages are more significant in high-need schools. Data from the Teacher Attrition and Mobility Report indicate that school transiency in high-poverty schools occurs at a rate twice that of moderate or low-poverty schools.⁷ Ultimately high-need schools, which have a greater need for experienced educators, feel the greatest impact of teacher attrition, including lower student achievement and increased financial costs.

NEVADA'S COSTLY ATTRITION PROBLEM

Nevada's teacher shortages are the result of a decrease in teachers entering the field combined with high rates of teacher attrition. A Las Vegas Review-Journal analysis of teacher turnover data found that 16 percent of teachers who began working in the Clark County School District in 2015-16 left within one year or less.⁸ Nevada has also experienced a 25 percent decrease in the number of teachers enrolled in education programs between 2010 and 2016, requiring state and local policymakers to address teacher workforce recruitment and retention.⁹

Annual Turnover Rates by State:

U.S.	California	Florida	Illinois	Nevada	New York
16%	10.5%	14%	9%	19.5%	11%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey, 2011-12 and Teacher Follow-up Survey, 2012-13

Nevada's teacher turnover is financially catastrophic and negatively impacts student outcomes. It is estimated that nine percent of the teaching population leaves the Clark County School District every year, with the state's total annual school transiency rate of 19.4 percent, significantly higher than the nationwide average.¹⁰ The Clark County School District reports that during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years, roughly 1,700 teachers left the District, with only about 500 of those due to regular retirement, disability retirement, or not being offered a contract for the following year. This means that schools are forced to spend limited education dollars on new teacher recruitment and induction services each year. Linda Darling-Hammond estimates the cost of recruiting and inducting a teacher in an urban school district at \$21,000.25.¹¹ This estimate would result in a projected annual cost to the Clark County School District of \$35.7 million. Though "modest turnover might positively impact schools if the departing teachers are ineffective, patterns of chronic turnover are instructionally, financially, and organizationally detrimental."¹²

IDENTIFYING THE CAUSES OF TEACHER TURNOVER AND RETENTION

In accordance with the Focus 2024 plan, Clark County has made efforts through monetary incentives to retain effective educators. Moreover, the State of Nevada made recruitment and retention a fiscal priority by appropriating funds to the New Teacher Incentive Fund in Senate Bill 511¹³ and Pay Performance and Enhanced Compensation along with Title I Incentive Pay in Assembly Bill 434.¹⁴

Identifying the causes of teacher turnover and retention through data collection can help assess the effectiveness of this funding as well as opportunities for future effective retention legislation and policy. Many other states have adopted a similar approach. In April 2019, “the Utah House of Representatives voted to approve HB130 to create a ‘model exit survey’ to help the state gather data on why teachers quit. ‘We need to know those things,’ said the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Carol Spackman Moss, D-Holladay. ‘Without good data, we cannot make good policy.’”¹⁵ In 2017, the State of Virginia enacted an optional Teacher Exit Questionnaire¹⁶, based upon Report to the General Assembly: SD6 - Feasibility Study on the Implementation of a Program to Track Teacher Turnover in the Commonwealth of Virginia (SJR 218, 2015) in which they state, “A survey provides a broad view of working conditions within schools and school divisions, not focusing only on teachers who leave, but also providing data on a number of topics related to conditions in schools that, if addressed, might encourage more teachers to remain in the profession.”¹⁷ “The North Carolina General Statutes require the North Carolina Board of Education to monitor and compile an annual report on the decisions of teachers who leave the teaching profession. The legislation was first passed in 1993, with amendments... made during the 2015 session,”¹⁸ And “Louisiana Revised Statute 17:7, enacted in 2008, requires the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to collect information on why teachers have left the classroom and annually report the findings to the Senate and House Education Committees.”¹⁹

RECOMMENDATION:

Establish a Formal Method to Learn Why Teachers Leave and What Would Induce Them to Stay

In order to more effectively understand the reasons for teacher attrition and turnover in Nevada, we recommend establishing a formal method for collecting data on why teachers depart and what would compel them to stay. Understanding why teachers leave their school sites and the profession and what might encourage them to stay or return is critical to improving the educational opportunities for all students, especially those attending the most high-need Nevada schools.

Once collected, this data would provide districts with valuable information for determining the causes of teacher attrition and potential solutions to retaining them. Analysis of why teachers leave individual schools, the district, and the field would provide the decision makers with information necessary to develop retention strategies at each level. Teach Plus and Teach Plus teacher leaders in other regions have previously conducted state and district research on best practices regarding the use of teacher exit surveys. Based on this research, we have developed a teacher exit survey tool that Nevada’s state and district leaders can use to learn more about why teachers choose to leave teaching positions and schools. The survey tool probes the factors that influence teachers’ decision to leave, including personal, leadership, professional, policies, and more as possible reasons. The questions will allow school districts to collect data that can be used to create policy intended to reduce teacher attrition rate.

We believe that by implementing an exit survey, Nevada could learn:

1. Reasons teachers are leaving and where they are going
2. Effective strategies for teacher retention
3. Potential predictors of teacher turnover and mobility
4. Profiles of schools likely to experience higher rates of teacher turnover

Conduct an Online Survey

We recommend conducting the survey online. An online survey is valuable because “Web surveys can help you collect responses faster and on a larger scale—and many exiting employees will provide frank comments since they’re not speaking directly to a person.”²⁰

Use a Third-Party Researcher

It is also important that the survey be issued through a third-party researcher. The use of a third party will give teachers assurance that the information they provide will be kept in confidence. The Arizona Department of Education worked with the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation at Arizona State University in 2015 to administer a survey to teachers and “AZED distributed the cover email message, but with identifying information, such as the return email address, etc., of the researcher, so as not to imply direct involvement with the survey or its specific contents on the part of AZED.”²¹ Cincinnati Children’s Medical Hospital Center implemented a strategic exit interview program and From 2009-2013 and noted: “According to several studies, employees change their responses 40 percent of the time when comparing an interview conducted by an impartial third party to an internal coworker. An objective and unbiased process allows exit interviews to address areas of importance to the organization and obtain the best information from departing employees.”²²

Include an Incentive for Participation

Mertler also noted, “Finally, it is important to note that an incentive for participation was offered to the teachers. Following completion of the actual survey, respondents were transported to a separate web site where they had the option to enter their names and email addresses in a random drawing for one of three \$50 VISA gift cards. This separate site ensured that their decision to be included in the drawing—along with the provision of their names and email addresses—was in no way connected to their substantive survey responses.”²³

CONCLUSION

Retaining excellent teachers is crucial for the growth and success of Nevada’s students. As Nevada exceeds national turnover rates, determining the factors that specifically impact teachers’ decisions to leave the profession, as well as transfer schools, is a critical first step in beginning to address the problem. Following the examples of Utah, Virginia, North Carolina, Louisiana and others, a confidential exit survey would provide insight into the factors that contribute to a teacher’s decision to leave the classroom or profession and identify opportunities for improved retention in the state of Nevada. In addition, identifying the causes of teacher turnover and retention through data collection can help assess the effectiveness of current funding initiatives, as well as opportunities for future effective retention legislation and policy. Data collected from an exit survey could begin to address Nevada’s ongoing and costly teacher turnover problem and provide a unique opportunity to take a long-term approach to a comprehensive set of solutions to build a robust teaching workforce. We look forward to working with Nevada’s education leaders to finalize and implement this survey in order to improve teacher retention in Clark County and across the state.

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ENDNOTES

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