The Secret Weapon for Fighting Teacher Attrition

It's been a tough two years for teachers, even tougher than usual due to the whiplash-inducing switches back and forth between in-person and remote learning, support personnel staffing shortages, and state-level efforts to restrict instruction about race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Not surprisingly, recent survey results suggest that (already low) teacher morale declined even further during the pandemic. Nearly half of teachers say they are considering leaving the profession in the next two years, survey results suggest.

While it seems unlikely that upwards of 40 percent of educators will actually resign by 2024, teacher attrition in the United States is rising and already high relative to rates in other nations and in other professions. That's according to a recent study by Emma García of the Economic Policy Institute, NEPC Fellow Eunice Han of the University of Utah, and Elaine Weiss of the National Academy of Social Insurance.

For administrators, policymakers, and educators, the study, published in March in the peer-reviewed journal *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (EPAA), suggests several potential solutions to the K-12 version of the Great Resignation. Although teacher attrition is a well-studied phenomenon, the new study adds to the existing literature through a deep dive into the impact of teacher voice, using a nationally representative data set that allowed the researchers to account for the effects of multiple influences related to work environments and the characteristics of teachers and the districts where they work.

Drawing upon National Center for Education Statistics surveys of current and former teachers collected in 2011 through 2013, the study finds that higher levels of "teacher voice"—defined as the level of teacher influence over classrooms and schools—are associated with

lower levels of attrition, even after accounting for factors also know to impact attrition, such as salary.

On average, the effect size "of teacher voice is about 0.3 standard deviations of teacher attrition," the study's authors find.

This comports with cautions raised in a 2013 NEPC policy brief by Vanderbilt University Professor and NEPC Fellow Rich Milner. In the brief, Milner, who is the current President of the American Educational Research Association, warned that popular reform policies like scripted and narrowed curriculum could be de-professionalizing teaching. Other teacher-professionalism elements are also important; the EPAA study finds that a supportive working environment provided by administrators helps reduce attrition, as do higher rates of teacher morale.

According to García, Han, and Weiss, all these factors impact novice teachers more than their more experienced peers—especially teacher voice. Salary, by contrast, impacts mid-career teachers more than educators closer to the beginnings or endings of their careers.

Their findings are instructive in that they add to the toolbox of policymakers and practitioners charged with reducing teacher attrition. They may be especially relevant right now given that the federal COVID relief funding that has helped keep K-12 schools afloat in the past two years is about to dry up at the same time that many districts are losing enrollment and the associated per-pupil funding. Increasing the degree to which teachers influence their classrooms and schools can potentially be accomplished with little or no additional funding, as can the degree to which teachers feel supported by administrators. Of course, teacher attrition itself is costly, in terms of its impact on students and schools and in terms of the resources required to hire replacements for those who depart; a 2007 study quoted by the EPAA authors estimates this latter price tag as $7.3 billion per year.

The EPAA authors add the final note that "schools' staffing problems are expected to worsen in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economy." Teacher supply will therefore continue to be undermined by teaching's COVID-19-related challenges concerning safety and stress. "Both the known trends and the current context make it essential to identify all factors to which teacher attrition is sensitive, in an attempt to find new ways to build a stable and strong teaching workforce."

NEPC Resources on Teacher Employment and Retention