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The Costs of Teacher Attrition

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### The Costs of Teacher Attrition

Every school day, nearly a thousand teachers leave the field of teaching and another thousand teachers change schools, many in pursuit of better working conditions (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). While many assume that retirements are the primary cause of this excessive turnover, in actuality job dissatisfaction or the pursuit of another job are primary reasons for teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2003). When the next school year begins who will be teaching our children? How will they be trained?

The problem of teacher attrition is even more concern when the impact on poor schools and minority students are considered, because the attrition rate is roughly 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier ones (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). Teachers initially entering the profession are far more likely to leave than are their more experience counterparts (Ingersoll, 2003). For many years a number of research studies have found that between 40-50 % of new teacher leave within the first five years of entry into the occupation (Grissmer and Kirby, 1987, 1992, 1997; Hafner and Owings, 1991; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll and Smith, 2003; Murnane et al., 1991; Veenman, 1985).

A longitudinal study conducted in Florida (Shockley et al., 2005) documented that new hire retention rates varies greatly by school district. In some school districts the teacher retention rates were as low as 45% after four years and in another school district the retention rate was approximately 73% after four years. Ironically, the district with the highest teacher retention rate was a school district that had a very strong and supported teacher induction and mentoring program.

Research is now documenting what many educators have suspected for some time – that there is a strong link between the high rates of teacher attrition and teacher shortages and that the shortages are not the result of too few teachers being recruited and trained but are the result to a significant extent of a revolving door, where large numbers of teachers are departing teaching long before their retirement (Ingersoll, 2001).

A recent analysis of research studies documenting the impact of mentoring on teacher retention by the Education Commission of the States (Ingersoll and Kralik, 2004) concluded that there is empirical support for the claim that assistance for new teachers and, in particular, mentoring programs for new teachers, have a positive impact on teachers and their retention.

So the good news is that there are many proven methods to help school districts do a better job of keeping good teachers. The bad news is well known to every principal or school district superintendent who has ever suggested increasing teacher training, development, implementing stringent exit interviews for departing teachers or establishing strong and supportive teacher induction programs. They all cost money!

#### *Costs Associated with Teacher Attrition*

Teacher turnover (replacing teachers) also cost money. These costs are not as readily apparent and are not including in a single line item in a school district's annual budget. These costs are embedded in expenditures in many areas, including teacher recruitment, separation processing, training, and orientation/training requirements for new teachers. A research study prepared for the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) by the Texas Center for Educational Research (2000) examined the costs to the State of Texas to replace teachers. The study cited "excessive teacher turnover as a cost to public education beyond the expense of operating schools and is a wasted expense that does not contribute to the education of Texas children."

The Texas study utilized basic industry models for estimating turnover cost. The study proposed a model for predicting costs based upon industry model formulas. The models that were reviewed were varied in their cost projections. One model estimated the cost per employee is equal to roughly 25% of the leaver's annual salary plus the cost of benefits. Another formula used to estimate costs was based solely on the leaver's annual salary. One of the formulas used for calculating the estimated cost was from the U.S. Department of Labor. It should be noted that all of these methods are best guesses, and none of these approaches make the effort to calculate actual costs to school districts.

Using the U.S. Department of Labor formula, The Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) released a national analysis of cost estimates where it was estimated that the national cost of replacing teachers that leave the profession is \$2.2 billion per year and that when the cost of replacing public school teachers who transfer schools is added the total costs is approximately \$4.9 billion.

There are many problems with using industry models to estimate the costs of teacher attrition. First, as the Texas study demonstrated the various models can yield very different results. Which model should be used? They also imply that the costs are similar across school districts. These approaches all imply that basic industry models are applicable to public education. Are they? What really are the costs associated with replacing a teacher? This question was the basis upon which the researchers began this study.

*An Instrument to Determine a School District's Costs to Replace a Teacher: A Validation Study*

The researchers designed an instrument to determine a school district's costs of replacing a teacher. Following a thorough analysis of school district budgets the instrument requires a school district to analyze costs around the categories of separation costs, new hiring costs and training costs.

The researchers designed a validation study to collect data on two school districts in South Florida. The districts used for the validation study were the Broward County and St. Lucie County school districts.

Broward County School District is a very large school district on the southeastern coast of Florida encompassing greater Ft. Lauderdale. It is the fifth-largest school district in the nation, and is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. The school district serves the educational needs of approximately 270,000 students. Approximately 6,000 – 10,000 new k-12 students are enrolled in the school district every year. The district has a diverse multicultural/multi-ethnic population with students from 155 countries, speaking 57 different languages. Approximately 60 % of the student

body is minority and approximately 11% has a primary language other than English. The district has a total of 238 schools system-wide.

St. Lucie County School District, located on the Treasure Coast of Florida, serves approximately 30,000 students in 40 public schools. The district includes large agricultural areas, growing suburban communities and urban Ft. Pierce, FL. This district is one of the fastest growing areas in the State. 6 % of the student population has a primary language other than English and Approximately 40 % of the students are minority.

The validation study consisted of data collection in each of the school districts around the questions articulated in the instrument. The 2004-05 school year budgets were used as a basis for calculating costs. Each school district superintendent identified an individual(s) from the district to take the lead in collecting the information required from various departments. The contact person worked closely with the research team in collecting the information. The research team provided guidance, direction and clarification in the data collection process.

During the process of data collection key individuals in the school district met with the research team to provide input and determine questions of instrument validity and potential gaps or cost areas that may have been missed in instrument development. It is the intent of the research team to make the instrument available to other school districts in the country following the initial validation process.

### *Findings from the Study*

In the St. Lucie County School District the costs associated with replacing a teacher is \$4,631 per teacher. The district had a turnover of 320 teachers out of a total of a total of 1952 teachers in the school system, for a turnover percentage of 16.4%. In a longitudinal study of teacher retention (Shockley et al., 2005) where all teachers new to the school district in the 2000-01 school year were tracked over a period of years, the school district had a retention rate of 45% after four years.

In the Broward County School District the costs associated with replacing a teacher is

\$12,652 per teacher. The district had a turnover of 1,206 teachers out of a total of 16,648 teachers in the school system, for a turnover percentage of 7.25%. In the longitudinal research study ( Shockley et al., 2005) already mentioned the school district had a retention rate of 73% after four years.

Of special interest to the researchers are the differences in these two school districts. One district has a very high turnover rate but a relatively low cost of replacing a teacher. The other district has an extremely low turnover rate but a much higher cost of replacing a teacher. A possible explanation in these differences is the infrastructure investment that the Broward County School System is making in their teacher induction/support program. This program is called the New Educator Support System (NESS) and it represents a significant investment and commitment by the school district to support and retain teachers. Given these expenditures, the costs associated of replacing a teacher were significantly higher in Broward than in St. Lucie. It should also be mentioned that due to the smaller turnover rate the Broward district is saving costs as well.

### Summary

Large numbers of teachers leaving our schools are sapping the ability of our educational institutions to provide quality educational opportunities for students. Excessive turnover in public education is systemic to many of our school districts. Excessive teacher turnover, as is true in any field, is a symptom of serious problems within an organization, institution or profession. The intent of this study is to document the fiscal costs associated with teacher attrition to school districts. When the costs of teacher attrition are available to school district personnel the cost effectiveness of teacher induction and mentoring programs, designed to keep teachers in the classroom and improve classroom instruction, can be determined.

Due to the enormous costs associated with teacher attrition, combined with massive projected teacher shortages, it is imperative that school districts design and fund teacher induction and mentorship programs, targeted to support and keep effective teachers in the classroom. Empirical support provides documentation that these programs are effective in the retention of teachers, are cost effective and educationally sound.

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