

Briefing note: How to Attract and Retain Teachers

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Summary

- Teacher attrition and turnover are more prevalent in disadvantaged schools as they have a harder time both recruiting and retaining teachers
- High rates of teacher turnover create a vicious cycle leading to lower quality teaching and lower student achievement. The unequal exposure to this issue further contributes to persistent educational inequalities
- Teacher recruitment and retention is sensitive to economic conditions: regional unemployment increases retention and attract higher quality applicants into teaching
- Financial incentives, such as bonus payments, are, overall, an effective policy to attract and teachers in hard-to-staff schools. However, their impact on retention depends on the context: bonus payments have no impact on retention when they coincide with major economic downturns, that make teachers reluctant to leave their jobs
- Non-financial aspects, including supportive school leadership, seem also to be associated with teacher retention, but more evidence is needed

Recommendations

- Policymakers should continue to focus on teacher retention in disadvantaged schools as it has important implications for educational inequalities.
- Policymakers should consider the local economic context when designing and implementing financial incentive schemes in hard-to-staff schools.
- School leaders should foster a supportive working environment and collegial relationships between teachers as these can have a role in teacher retention.

The Issue

Teacher retention is a major issue in many developed countries. According to the 2018 edition of the OECD TALIS survey (OECD, 2018), on average, almost 15% of teachers aged 50 or less want to leave teaching within the next five years. In England, this figure is above the OECD average, at 22%. This survey also shows that England's teachers are the second most stressed among OECD countries (Carr, 2020). Sorensen and Ladd (2020) show that high rates of teacher turnover create a vicious cycle leading to lower quality teaching and lower student achievement.

Teacher attrition and turnover are especially problematic in disadvantaged schools as they have a harder time both recruiting and retaining teachers. Allen et al. (2018) show that there is a positive raw association between the level of school disadvantage and the turnover rate of its teachers in England. Evidence shows that high staff attrition rates are disruptive for schools and have negative impacts on pupils' achievement. The unequal exposure to this issue further contributes to persistent educational inequalities (Gershenson, 2021).

I. Teacher recruitment and retention is sensitive to economic conditions

There is a large economic literature on the determinants of teacher retention. A main strand of this literature establishes that teacher retention is responsive to wages and the general local economic context. The local labour market conditions have an impact on teacher shortages as well as teacher quality (see Benhenda, 2020 for a discussion of this literature). Evidence shows that higher regional unemployment decreases the probability of leaving teaching. Furthermore, during recessions, higher quality applicants apply to teaching positions, which results in higher teacher quality.

II. Financial incentives are a good way to attract and retain teachers, but their effect depends on the context

There are many papers looking at the impact of financial schemes designed to attract and retain teachers. Financial incentives are a widespread policy tool, which can take many forms.

In England, following the publication of its Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy in 2019 (Department for Education, 2019), the Government began awarding early-career payments for teachers (known as retention pay) as well as a student loan reimbursement scheme for science and language teachers working in certain local authorities. To our best knowledge, there is no quantitative evidence on these two schemes, although Benhenda and Sims (forthcoming) are currently working on a research project assessing the impact of these schemes on teacher retention.

In the US, policymakers have experimented by giving annual bonuses to teachers working in public secondary schools with high poverty rates. Clotfelter et al. (2008) study a three-year incentive scheme in North Carolina awarding \$1800 to certified maths, science and special education teachers working in public secondary schools with either high-poverty rates or low test scores. Results suggest that this bonus payment was sufficient to reduce mean turnover rates of the targeted teachers by 17%. Experienced teachers exhibited the strongest response to the program.

The effect of such incentives seems however to depend on the local economic context. In 2008, the San Francisco Unified School District introduced an overall salary increase of \$500-\$6,300, varying by placement on the salary schedule; a \$2,000 bonus for teaching in a hard-to-staff school; and retention bonuses of \$2,500 after the 4th year of teaching and \$3,000 after the 8th year of teaching. Hough and Loeb (2013) show that this intervention improved the school district's attractiveness within their local teacher labour market and increased both the size and quality of the teacher applicant pool. Interestingly, these significant salary increases did not affect teacher retention, perhaps because they coincided with a major economic downturn that made many workers, including teachers, reluctant to

leave their jobs.

III. Non-financial aspects, including school leadership and behavioural policies, also matter for teacher retention

There is also a body of evidence on the non-financial dimensions of teacher retention. In their seminal papers, Hanushek et al. (2004) and Boyd et al. (2013) show that teacher mobility is much more strongly related to pupils' characteristics, particularly race and achievement, than to salary. However, evidence on the impact of non-financial dimensions of teaching on retention is less well developed than the financial incentive literature (See et al., 2020).

The most established non-financial literature considers the role of professional development, although most studies focus on its impact on teacher performance (effort and skills) rather than retention. An exception to this is Allen and Sims (2017), who analyse the National STEM Learning Network professional development courses in England and show there is a positive correlation between participating in this scheme and staying in the profession after two years.

There is also a growing literature on the role of the working environment, and in particular, the role of school leadership in teacher retention. A recent TALIS report (2020) used linked survey and administrative data to consider various aspects of the working environment and their association with teacher retention. This study found that supportive leadership and behavioural policies were the two factors most strongly associated with teacher retention. The importance of supportive leadership is consistent with earlier findings from the literature. Kraft et al. (2016) show that schools with improvements to school leadership, academic expectations, teacher relationships, and school safety, all have reduced teacher turnover. Improvements in academic expectations and school safety also correspond with student achievement gains (Jerrim and Sims, 2020). Another study by Jacob et al. (2015) used a randomised control experiment to show that enrolling head teachers on leadership

courses significantly reduced staff turnover in treatment schools.

According to the Teacher Follow-Up Survey ran by the US census bureau, teachers identify the quality of administrative support as a key factor in decisions to leave a school. In addition, teachers point to the importance of school culture and collegial relationships, time for collaboration, and decision-making input—also areas in which the principal plays a central role (Learning Policy Institute, 2017). A further study from the US, Kraft et al. (2012), use teacher surveys to show that it is the social conditions—the school's culture, the principal's leadership, and relationships among colleagues—that predominate in predicting teachers' job satisfaction and career plans.

Finally, there is a growing policy interest towards induction programs. In England, policy-makers are investing in induction/mentoring programs through the Early Career Framework. From September 2021, the government is funding an entitlement for all early career teachers in England to access high quality professional development at the start of their career. New teachers will now receive development support and training over 2 years instead of one. There are a few papers assessing similar inductions programs in other countries (the US and the Netherlands), with inconclusive results (US Department for Education, 2010).

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Teacher recruitment and retention is sensitive to economic conditions: regional unemployment increases retention and attract higher quality applicants into teaching. Financial incentives, such as bonus payments, are, overall, an effective policy to attract and retain

teachers in hard-to-staff schools. However, their impact on retention depends on the context: bonus payments have no impact on retention when they coincide with major economic downturns, that make teachers reluctant to leave their jobs. Non-financial aspects, including supportive school leadership, seem also to be associated with teacher retention, but more evidence is needed.

Policymakers should continue to focus on teacher retention in disadvantaged schools as it has important implications for educational inequalities. Policymakers should also consider the local economic context when designing and implementing financial incentive schemes in hard-to-staff schools. School leaders should foster a supportive working environment and collegial relationships between teachers as these can have a role in teacher retention.

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