A National Problem

Teachers are schools’ most valuable resource. Studies consistently find that, of all school-related factors, teachers have the largest impact on students’ academic and social-emotional development (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rockoff, 2004). Developing and retaining an effective teaching staff is among the most important avenues through which administrators can directly support school improvement efforts. However, teacher turnover remains a significant problem in U.S. public schools. Richard Ingersoll famously termed the large number of qualified teachers who leave for a reason other than retirement the “revolving door” (2001). Between 40 to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of their entry into teaching (Ingersoll, 2003). Large urban school districts often experience even higher rates of turnover (IES, 2014; Ingersoll, 2001; Papay, Taylor, Tyler, & Laski, 2015).

Schools pay a high price when they lose teachers to turnover. Teacher turnover generates substantial financial costs to replace large numbers of teachers (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Birkeland & Curtis, 2006; Milanowski & Odden, 2007). It also creates organizational instability and contributes to a cycle of poor working conditions. The school environment in which teachers work profoundly shapes their career decisions (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012; Kraft, Marinell & Yee, 2015; Ladd, 2011; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Turnover also negatively affects student achievement, particularly among students who live in low-income communities (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Teachers disproportionately leave large urban school districts for suburban, high-achieving, high-income schools (Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2002). Taking steps to reduce turnover among effective teachers is of central importance for improving the quality of education in U.S. public schools.

Below we organize and describe the evidence behind 20 factors that predict and explain teacher turnover. We organize these factors into four broad categories: school resources and practices, school climate, instructional leadership opportunities, and individual characteristics.

School Resources and Practices

Teachers are professionals who cannot work without the necessary resources to do their job well. Their experiences in schools are a central influence on their career decisions to stay in or leave the profession (Johnson, 2004). Teachers
are more likely to stay in schools that they perceive to have good working conditions: high-quality professional development, supportive mentors, and fair evaluation (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Teachers also need to feel as though they are a good fit in their school.

**Teacher hiring and onboarding:** Hiring teachers late in the summer and into the beginning of the school year is pervasive in urban districts and districts serving large proportions of disadvantaged students (Engel, 2012; Papay & Kraft, 2016). Teachers who are hired late are more likely to leave their schools than their peers who are hired on time (Papay & Kraft, 2016). Teachers who are hired late are more likely to go through an information-poor hiring process and to accept jobs where they are assigned to a position that does not align with their interests or expertise. Teachers who are assigned the grades and courses they will teach by an administrator are significantly less likely to plan on staying in their schools and in their districts than teachers who have some say in determining their teaching assignments (Levin, Mulhern, & Schunck, 2005). Delayed hiring prevents schools from supporting and retaining effective teachers through professional development and mentoring programs. Teachers need to be supported in their positions after they are hired. Teachers who participate in an induction program and have support from a mentor teacher in their field are less likely to leave schools and teaching in general after first year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Not surprisingly, teachers who have an information-rich hiring process are more satisfied with their jobs and more likely to stay in their positions (Liu, 2005).

**High quality professional development:** Teachers need to be prepared to teach well. High-quality professional development that is sustained over time, subject-matter-specific, and aligned with a school's instructional goals can significantly improve teaching and learning (Hill, 2007). The quality of a school's professional development is among the strongest determinates of teacher satisfaction with their working conditions and predictors of teacher turnover (Loeb et al., 2005). Novice teachers, in particular, are in need of targeted professional development (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

**Teacher evaluation:** Evaluation that seems unfair pushes teachers out of schools. Evaluation can also serve to reduce turnover if it is viewed as fair, supports ongoing professional development, and facilitates authentic recognition of teachers' accomplishments. When teachers perceive the evaluation process as fair and supportive, they not only tend to stay and be more effective in their classrooms, but they also improve at greater rates over time (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015; Kraft & Papay, 2014; Taylor & Tyler, 2012).

**Resources and facilities:** Teachers' ability to teach is shaped by school building conditions and the educational resources available. The quality of the physical environment in which teachers work has a substantial effect on teacher retention (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005). Loeb et al. (2005) found that one of the strongest predictors of teacher turnover is a lack of tangible supports for teaching in the form of physical facilities, the availability of technology, and the textbooks and instructional material provided. More recently, Johnson et al. (2012) found a similar positive relationship between how teachers perceive the quality of school resources and the likelihood that they stay at their schools.

**School Climate**

Teaching is a social career, and the relationships that teachers have with those who support their work in the classroom—administrators and colleagues—heavily influences teachers' job satisfaction. Johnson et al. (2012) found that teachers are three times as likely to transfer from schools with particularly poor social working conditions than from schools with an average quality working environment. Teachers are best supported when they work in an environment characterized by trust, respect, and commitment to student learning. Working conditions that support teachers are also supportive learning conditions for students (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, Luppescu, 2010; Johnson et al., 2012). Moreover, teachers working in more supportive environments improve their effectiveness over time, contributing to a teacher's sense of self-efficacy (Kraft & Papay, 2014).
**High academic expectations:** The seminal evidence of the importance of teacher expectations for student achievement dates back to Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968) study of the Pygmalion effect. Many replication studies have since confirmed that teachers’ beliefs about their students’ abilities affects student learning (Raudenbush, 1984). As Kraft et al. (2016) showed, schools where teachers raised expectations for all students experienced lower rates of teacher turnover and corresponding increases in student achievement. Furthermore, studies examining variation in charter school effects have found that a culture of high expectations is likely a key element in the success of high-performing charters (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013).

**Teacher care and commitment:** Teachers are more likely to stay in a school where they have positive relationships with other teachers. Johnson et al. (2012) found that teachers prefer to work in a supportive school culture where their colleagues are committed to their students’ academic success. Teachers are also more likely to stay in a school where their colleagues are committed to, and have a sense of collective responsibility for, improving their school (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009).

**Principal/teacher trust:** Trust between principals and teachers keeps teachers in schools. Teachers succeed in a school culture characterized by high expectations, trust, and mutual respect among administrators and teachers (Kraft & Papay, 2014). Relational trust within a school community, especially between principals and teachers, creates a stable and supportive professional environment (Bryk et al., 2010).

(Principal) **Instructional leadership:** Teachers are more successful when their principals are involved in supporting instructional improvement. Teachers cite support from administrators as the most important aspect of their job that influences their career decisions (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011; Ingersoll, 2001). Teachers who have less positive perceptions of their school administrators are more likely to transfer to another school and to leave teaching (Ingersoll, 2001; Ladd, 2011; Luekens, Lyter, Fox, & Chander, 2004). The effectiveness of school principals is a particularly important predictor of turnover in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students (Grissom, 2011).

**School safety & order:** Teachers are more likely to leave schools if they or their students do not feel safe. Schools with high rates of student misbehavior, crime, violence, and bullying have higher rates of turnover (Allensworth et al., 2009; Kraft et al., 2016). It is especially important that students and teachers have administrative and parental support to address student misbehavior.

**Teacher appreciation:** Teaching is a demanding and difficult profession, making it important for teachers to know that their work is valued. In their survey of public school teachers in New York City, Farkas, Johnson, and Foleno (2000) found that only about 30 percent of teachers surveyed felt that they were respected and appreciated. Furthermore, more than 75 percent of teachers felt that they were made the “scapegoats for all the problems facing education” (Farkas et al, 2000, p. 16). Teachers’ successes in the classroom often go unacknowledged. In a recent survey of teachers across four school districts, less than half of the teachers identified as high-performing reported that their school leader told them they were high-performing, and less than a third said they had received public recognition (TNTP, 2012). Research in organizational psychology and management suggests that recognizing employees for their individual contributions can help to improve employee retention (Brun & Dugas, 2008). Gonzalez (1995) found that appreciation from students, parents, and administrators improves job satisfaction and increases a teacher’s likelihood of remaining in their classroom.

**Instructional Leadership Opportunities**

Teachers need to be viewed and treated as the experts they are. When administrators collaborate with teachers, grant them autonomy, and create teacher leadership positions, schools have positive work environments and teachers are more likely to stay in their positions (Johnson et al., 2014). Johnson et al. (2012) found that supportive work environments are strong predictors of teacher retention. Teachers succeed when they have the opportunity to collaborate with their peers, parents, and school leadership (Allensworth et al., 2009; Kraft et al., 2015).
**Teacher collaboration:** Teachers succeed when they have opportunities to work together. Teachers stay in schools with supportive work environments where they regularly have time to collaborate and learn from their colleagues (Allensworth et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Kraft & Papay, 2014; Kraft, Marinell & Yee, 2016). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found that first year teachers who were given time to collaborate with other teachers were less likely to leave after their first year of teaching. Meaningful peer collaboration can be self-reinforcing. It promotes teacher retention and can develop teachers’ skills, which further reduces the likelihood of turnover (Kraft & Papay, 2014). Indeed, new teachers have a higher degree of professional satisfaction when they work with a mix of novice and experienced teachers (Johnson, Kardos, Kuaffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004).

**Parent/teacher communication:** Regular and effective teacher-parent communication builds trust and encourages teachers to stay in schools. The degree of parent involvement in a school is an important component of teachers’ job satisfaction (Loeb et al., 2005). Communication between teachers and parents also increases relational trust (Bryk et al., 2010). Teachers are more likely to stay in schools where parents are involved in the child’s education and supportive of teachers (Allensworth et al., 2009).

**Teacher influence in school administration:** Being involved in making decisions about school governance is an important part of working conditions that improve teacher satisfaction and their desire to stay at a school. (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012). Teachers value open communication with their administration (Kraft et al., 2016). Staffing stability is higher in schools where teachers report having good relationships with their school principal and having influence over decision making (Allensworth et al., 2009).

**Teacher autonomy:** Teachers expect to be able to use their own professional expertise to inform their curriculum design and pedagogical practice. They are more likely to remain teaching in schools where they feel that their colleagues have a “can do” attitude and work together on improving the school (Allensworth et al., 2009). Johnson and The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (2004) reported from their interviews with teachers that turnover rates are higher when teachers feel they do not have autonomy over their instruction choices. Teachers are also more likely to stay in schools with a supportive work environment where teachers are recognized as experts (Johnson et al., 2012).

**Individual Characteristics**

Teachers’ individual characteristics and preferences play a key role in shaping their career decisions. If they feel as if they are overworked, underappreciated or ineffective, they often do not stay in the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). Teachers with positive experiences in their schools are more likely to continue teaching (Johnson, 2004). Teachers prefer to stay in schools where the work is meaningful, the commute is short, and they have opportunities that align with their career plans. Teachers’ personalities and attitudes are also related to retention. Teachers with higher self-confidence and perseverance are more likely to stay in schools (Rockoff, Jacob, Kane, & Staiger, 2011).

**Work/life balance:** Teachers are more satisfied with their jobs when they have a reasonable teaching load (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Luekens et al., 2004). Too often, teachers leave high-poverty and under-performing schools when they are assigned large classes, classes that are outside their expertise, or classes that span multiple subjects or grade levels. It is common for novice teachers in such schools to cope with several aspects of mis-assignment simultaneously, which also bears heavily on their ability to teach effectively.

**Meaningful work:** Many teachers enter the profession because they see it as a calling. Over 50 percent of teachers say that teaching is something that they have wanted to do for a long time, and more than 80 percent believe that only those with a “true sense of calling” should pursue teaching (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000, p. 10). Kraft et al. (2015) conducted interviews with teachers in high-poverty, urban schools and concluded that teachers who stay in this demanding profession are seriously committed to serving their students. Research has also shown that meaningful work is a significant predictor of workers’ intentions to stay at their jobs (Scroggins, 2008).
Distance: The community setting of a teacher’s school and its location relative to where a teacher grew up, went to college, and lives are strong predictors of future turnover. Teachers are more likely than college graduates in other occupations to live near where they grew up and to prefer areas with similar characteristics to where they grew up (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Reininger, 2012). This creates a two-fold problem for urban districts: low-achieving districts produce fewer qualified teachers in the local area, and urban districts have a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers from rural and suburban districts (Boyd et al., 2005; Reininger, 2012).

Career path: Teachers’ long-term career plans influence their decisions to stay in or leave schools. Ingersoll (2001) found that 25 percent of all teacher departures can be explained by a desire to pursue a better job, another career, or to improve career opportunities in education. Teachers are sensitive to opportunities for career development. A survey of New York City teachers found that about seven in ten think that public school teachers do not have good opportunities for advancement and that the lack of upward mobility is a key obstacle to making the profession attractive (Farkas et al., 2000). Teachers also often report dissatisfaction with low salaries—teachers working in school districts that paid comparatively high salaries stayed comparatively longer than teachers working in districts offering low salaries (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999; Murnane, Singer, & Willet, 1991).

Conscientiousness: Studies show that teachers’ personalities and attitudes are related to teacher effectiveness and retention. Teachers that are hardworking, or conscientious, are likely to persist longer in the profession when faced with the challenges of teaching (Rockoff et al., 2011). Grittier teachers have a disposition towards perseverance and a passion for long-term goals. Grit predicts effectiveness among novice teachers in low-income public schools (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009). Moreover, grittier teachers work harder than their peers and remain committed to teaching for a longer period of time (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014).

Self-efficacy: Teachers that feel more self-efficacious about their work are more likely to stay in teaching. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) define teacher self-efficacy as a teacher’s belief in his or her capabilities to execute actions that will produce desired student outcomes. Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, and Hogan (2008) found that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of a teacher’s commitment to remain in teaching. Indeed, teachers are more likely to leave when they do not feel effective in the classroom (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). A school’s working environment shapes self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy is influenced by their peers’ and administration’s efficacy beliefs (Ebmeir, 2003) and can be improved with high-quality professional development (Kraft & Papay, 2014). Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy have higher rates of retention (Chan et al., 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Conclusion

A wide range of factors contribute to the persistent challenge of retaining effective teachers. These factors include institutional features of the teaching profession, school-based reasons, and individual preferences. Factors at the institutional, school, and individual level can all contribute directly to teacher dissatisfaction. Research has documented the strong predictive relationship between the diverse set of factors reviewed above and teachers’ turnover patterns. Central office and school-based administrators have the potential to better anticipate and plan for turnover by understanding the settings, experiences, and personal qualities of the teachers they employ. Data on these predictors of turnover can also be used to inform efforts to reduce turnover through targeted interventions. The better that administrators understand the factors that influence teacher retention, the better they can work to create conditions that support and retain teachers.
Reference


