

A POSSIBLE DREAM

RETAINING CALIFORNIA TEACHERS

SO ALL STUDENTS LEARN

(EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student achievement in California has ranked near the bottom among all states in the country in recent years (Carroll *et al.*, 2005), in part because of a teacher shortage that worsened in 1998 when class size reductions instituted that year dramatically increased the demand for qualified teachers. Without fully qualified teachers—and adequate numbers of them—there is no way for student achievement, statewide, to improve.

Today, California's public K-12 schools continue to face a persistent shortage of well-prepared teachers. In 2005, in schools with high concentrations of minority students, 21% of teachers lacked a teaching credential. Statewide close to 15% of high school math and English teachers were teaching out-of-field. In special education, 14% did not have an appropriate teaching credential. If the state does not take action to reduce the qualified teacher shortage, experts have shown that it will only worsen. This is because while student enrollments are on the rise, an unusually high number of teachers will retire in the next few years, and the number of new teachers entering the field is expected to decline. According to researchers at SRI International, unless policies are implemented to alter the present course, the shortfall of fully prepared teachers will increase from 20,000, its level in 2004-05, to 33,000 in 2015 (Esch *et al.*, 2005).

Attrition of teachers *before they retire* is also a principle cause of California's teacher shortage. In fact, 22% of teachers in California leave after their first four years in the classroom (Reed *et al.*, 2006). According to national statistics, each year 6% of all public school teachers leave the profession before they have reached retirement age (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). The large numbers of teachers moving in and out of schools make matters worse, especially in schools with high numbers of poor students. Each year, 10% of the teachers working in high-poverty schools—the ones whose students pose the greatest

educational challenges—transfer away to other schools. Often the only replacement teachers these schools can find are ones with minimal training and classroom experience.

Researchers estimate that California spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually to recruit, screen, and prepare individuals who replace pre-retirement teachers who leave the profession and teachers who transfer to other schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). The less tangible costs of teacher turnover are nearly incalculable in terms of the negative impact that the churning of teachers and the loss of teacher experience has on the instructional continuity of a school. The very fact that so many teachers flee certain types of schools should serve as an unambiguous signal that something about these schools' work environment is wrong and needs to be fixed.

If California hopes to close the achievement gap between poor students and those from more resource-rich schools and families, it will need to solve its teacher shortage and reduce the high rates of teacher turnover, especially in high-poverty schools. The state will need to increase its production of new teachers, but it will also have to retain more of the teachers in which it has already invested. Solving the retention problem is possible only if policy makers and education leaders fully appreciate the reasons why so many of California's teachers leave well before reaching retirement age.

As part of our analysis of teacher retention in California, we at the Center for Teacher Quality at the California State University conducted a study to better understand the factors that contribute to teacher attrition and turnover. Close to 2,000 current and former California public school teachers participated in an online survey. Data from that survey allowed us to examine the professional and personal reasons offered by

those who leave teaching and those who remain in the classroom—“leavers” and “stayers” in the language of this study—through several different educational lenses: low-poverty and high-poverty schools, elementary and high schools, and general education classrooms and special education classrooms. Our analysis provides a detailed description of the different strategies that will be required to retain teachers in these different types of schools.

The most basic findings from our study tell us that teachers are less concerned with compensation (though they are not unconcerned with it) than they are with a whole range of particulars about their work environment. Work environment, or perhaps more specifically described, the *teaching and learning environment*, refers not just to leaks in the ceilings or toilets that do not flush, though poorly maintained classrooms and school facilities are as dispiriting to teachers as they are to students. Teaching and learning environment refers to a whole range of instructional, collegial, and systemic conditions which, for many, make teaching a highly satisfying profession. A profession that reminds those who have chosen it that they are making a positive impact on students and society.

When leavers described the features of their working environment that were most problematic, they pointed to a broad spectrum of problems we call **inadequate system supports**: over half of the teachers who have left the classroom said they lacked such things as adequate time for planning and professional development, textbooks for their students, and reliable assistance from the district office. But the factor cited most frequently as a reason for leaving was **bureaucratic impediments**. Whether teachers spoke about excessive paperwork, too many unnecessary classroom interruptions, or too many restrictions

on teaching itself, these impediments actually prevented teachers from doing their job. These problematic “facts of school life,” assumed by many to be unavoidable, do not just drive teachers crazy; they drive many of them right out of the classroom.

In addition to inadequate system supports and bureaucratic impediments, leavers also pointed frequently to the lack of collegial supports. They lacked a strong sense of team at their school—i.e., a sense that all or nearly all individuals working at the school are focused on creating an environment that fosters student learning; trusting, respectful professional relationships among teachers and other staff; and a collaborative, mutually supportive approach to leadership between teachers and principal.

Not surprising, when we asked “stayers” why they chose to remain in the classroom, they frequently cited the flipside of inadequate system supports and pointed to the presence of *effective* system supports such as adequate resources, adequate time for planning, and effective support from the district office. What did surprise us was that collegial supports—the quality of relationships among staff—mattered even more. And the one factor that mattered the most to stayers was the opportunity they had to participate in decision-making at the school.

So important is the quality of the teaching and learning environment that it colors the way many teachers view their compensation, another key variable thought by many to affect teachers’ “stay or leave” decisions. When teaching and learning conditions are poor, we discovered that many teachers see their compensation as inadequate. When these teaching and learning conditions are good, not only do teachers tend to stay, they actually view their compensation as a reason for staying.

CENTRAL FINDINGS

Unless California understands and addresses the problem of teacher attrition and turnover, thousands of additional students in the coming years will continue to enter classrooms without qualified and experienced teachers to instruct them. If this happens, the state will continue

failing to meet its obligation to provide high-quality education to all of its public school students. We hope the central findings from this study will help policy makers and educators understand what it will take for the state to retain more of the teachers it needs so that all students receive the quality of education they deserve.

The central findings were:

- ❖ 81% of teachers who participated in our survey said they entered the profession because they wanted to make a difference for children and society. This overwhelming number indicates that teachers want above all to be effective teachers.
- ❖ Many teachers leave schools long before retirement because of inadequate system supports such as too little time for planning, too few textbooks, and unreliable assistance from the district office.
- ❖ Bureaucratic impediments (e.g., excessive paperwork, too many unnecessary meetings) were cited frequently by leavers. The data also showed that teachers were not asking to be left alone but instead wanted efficient and responsive bureaucracy that *supported* their teaching.
- ❖ Better compensation matters to teachers, but unless their classroom and school environment is conducive to good teaching, better compensation is not likely to improve teacher retention rates.
- ❖ Teachers willingly stay because of strong collegial supports and because they have an important say in the operation of the school; they also seek strong input in what and how they are allowed to teach.
- ❖ Special education teachers are most likely to leave special education because of inadequate system supports as well as an all-too-often hostile teaching environment created by parents and student advocates. In addition, they leave because of too little time for the complex and constantly changing IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) they are required to write. Many leave because of dysfunctional professional relationships with their colleagues in general education.
- ❖ Many teachers (28%) who have left teaching before retirement would come back if improvements were made to teaching and learning conditions. Monetary incentives alone would be less effective in luring them back.

MISGUIDED SOLUTIONS TO THE TEACHER SHORTAGE

Some policy makers and educators believe the teacher shortage can be solved primarily by increasing the supply of new teachers coming into the field. Yes, we must do all we can to encourage the entry of talented new teachers into the classroom; new teachers are a pipeline of vitality and up-to-date knowledge about academic content and teaching practices. And the teacher shortage cannot be solved solely through increased retention. But there are limitations to an approach that depends largely on new teachers. When experienced teachers leave the profession, they take with them invaluable expertise they have acquired through classroom experience and often advanced professional training.

Those who recognize the added value of veteran teachers have suggested that monetary incentives such as “combat pay” or the more palatable term, “recognition pay,” be used to lure veteran teachers to hard-to-staff schools. Implicit in these broad-brush solutions is a downbeat assumption that certain schools will always be unattractive places to work, and that the only way to get teachers to accept unpleasant assignments is to pay them more. But the data from our survey show clearly that monetary incentives alone would do little to create staffing stability in

these schools. We found considerable evidence—particularly the responses from many stayers who enjoy their work in high-poverty settings—that even schools with the most challenging students are not hopelessly bad places to work.

In our view, the state’s efforts to better staff its schools should not be driven by the question: How do we coax veteran teachers to go to hard-to-staff schools? Rather the state’s efforts should be driven by the more fundamental question: How do we make hard-to-staff schools easier to staff? In other words, beyond the quick fix, how must we change the teaching and learning environment of hard-to-staff schools so they can attract and retain the teachers needed to effectively teach the students who attend these schools? The final chapter of our report offers six practical recommendations for state and local decision makers so they can begin to address this crucial issue as well as the teacher shortage in general. If these recommendations are followed, we believe that *all* of California’s public schools can be transformed into places that will attract and keep well-qualified teachers. What’s more, not only will teachers come and stay, the changes made to get them there will greatly boost the chances that their students will learn well and with enthusiasm, and that our teachers’ classroom experiences will be more effective, rewarding, and sustainable.

Tangible Benefits of Implementing Effective Teacher Retention Strategies

Why should policy makers, taxpayers, educators, parents, and even the students themselves really care about improving teacher retention rates in California? What would higher rates of teacher retention translate to in the next several years? In implementing the six recommendations for improved teacher retention that this Executive Summary highlights, the State of California:

- ❖ would reduce the attrition rate among its qualified and experienced teachers. If the teacher attrition rate were cut by 30%, California would prevent 5,400 teachers from leaving the profession each year.
- ❖ would increase the number of teachers reentering the profession. Twenty-eight percent of the dissatisfied leavers in our survey said they would consider returning

to the classroom if teaching and learning conditions were improved, even without increases in salary. If the current rate at which teachers return to the profession could be increased by 30%, this would increase the overall supply of returning teachers by approximately 530 teachers each year.

- ❖ would reduce the overall shortage of credentialed teachers. By reducing the rate of attrition by 30% and increasing the number of teachers reentering the profession by 30%, **California could reduce its projected annual teacher shortage by nearly one-third.**
- ❖ would reduce the number of teachers transferring away from high-poverty schools and would increase the number of teachers transferring into high-poverty schools. If current transfer rates out of high-poverty schools were cut from 10% to 7.5%, 2,000 fewer teachers would transfer away each year from high-poverty schools.

Twenty percent of the stayers in our survey expressed interest in transferring to a high-poverty school if teaching and learning conditions were improved and if additional compensation were offered. Given the large number of stayers working in low-poverty schools statewide, these investments in improved teaching and learning conditions, as well as in compensation, would lead to a significant increase in the number of qualified and experienced teachers willing to work in high-poverty schools.

- ❖ would reduce the number of special education teachers migrating into general education and would encourage many of these teachers to return to special education. Thirty-five percent of the special education credential holders in our survey were working in general education. Improvements in teaching and learning conditions, especially the ones specifically cited by special education teachers, would prevent many from leaving special education.

Twenty-two percent of the “inactive” special education credential holders in our survey expressed interest in returning to special education if teaching and learning conditions in the special education environment were improved. Given the large number of special education teachers working in general education, investments in improved teaching and learning conditions could lead to a significant increase in the supply of teachers working in special education.

- ❖ would improve teaching and student learning. Increased teacher retention has two important benefits for students. Not only will more students have greater access to well-prepared teachers, these teachers will be more effective in the classroom. That is because improvements to the work environment that are required to retain teachers are positively associated with improved student learning (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The second half of our report describes six recommendations for improved teacher retention in California. Practical, actionable, and occasionally counterintuitive, these recommendations are, in brief:

RECOMMENDATION 1: **Assess teaching conditions locally and continuously**

To fully understand the problems teachers face in particular schools, the teachers themselves must be asked and must be asked often. Surveys and/or focus groups should be conducted regularly and continuously with all staff, including principals, to assess the quality of the teaching conditions in the school and district.

Amazingly, despite the high turnover rate among teachers, human resource departments in most school districts do not conduct exit interviews to find out why teachers are leaving. Neither do many district administrators or school principals ask teachers to express their opinions about the teaching conditions *before* they decide to leave. The opposite is true in most corporate environments where exit interviews and staff surveys are routinely conducted. That's because successful business owners understand the high costs associated with employee turnover, and because most businesses want to be "learning organizations" open to improving elements that are dysfunctional or simply not working as well as they should be.

If teachers have an opportunity, before they decide to leave the classroom or the profession, to construct and implement solutions in collaboration with their school and district administrators, our

study indicates that more leavers will become stayers. Of equal importance, after strategies have been implemented to address deficiencies, these assessments must be repeated to evaluate the effectiveness of these remedial actions and to make adjustments and updates when necessary.

There is an added benefit to this approach. The very process of asking teachers about their schools and soliciting their help in making these schools better places to work is not just a step toward solving a problem—it is an important part of the solution. Even before a single bureaucratic impediment is eliminated or an extra hour is found for teachers to plan, teachers will have already experienced two things they want dearly: an opportunity to exercise control over their work environment so they can teach more effectively, and the sense that their leaders take seriously their individual as well as collective concerns about the supports required to teach students more effectively. The clear message we got from our survey data and follow-up interviews is that teachers want to be treated as respected professionals.

RECOMMENDATION 2: **Elevate California's student funding to (at least) adequate levels**

California currently ranks 43rd in the nation in per-pupil expenditures and some schools are not getting a fair share of even these reduced state resources. Future state budgets should increase the per-pupil expenditure—and make sure it is spent—with improved student performance and teacher retention in mind.

In a promising development, a bi-partisan group of education and policy leaders in California recently called for an in-depth study to answer the question: How much would it cost to provide a

quality education to all children in California? We urge the experts who have undertaken this analysis to give strong consideration to school conditions that are positively associated with high teacher retention. In order to calculate how much it costs to educate a child, one must be able to calculate how much it costs (and saves!) to retain our best teachers.

The question that ultimately matters most is whether policy makers and the governor will agree to *spend* the money deemed necessary for all children in California to have an opportunity to succeed in school. Higher per-pupil spending, allocated annually in the state budget, will be needed to create the school conditions that are needed to retain teachers. In parallel, our study shows unambiguously that students will have a greater chance of succeeding as learners if the state can retain many more of its teachers, especially the good ones.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:
Resolve the bureaucratic conundrum
(not all bureaucracies are bad)**

Bureaucratic impediments can make teachers leave, but our analysis also indicates that eliminating all bureaucratic structures is not the solution teachers are seeking. They want policies and procedures they can count on—ones that support rather than impede their teaching.

Teachers want to be given appropriate authority over decisions affecting their school and at the same time want sensible policies and procedures to maintain a level of order, efficiency, and fairness. Teachers do not want to be left entirely alone in a structureless environment.

To retain teachers, both new and experienced, and to help them become more effective in the classroom, teachers and administrators should be

allowed to examine the bureaucratic structures of their schools. The goal should not simply be to reduce or eliminate bureaucracy—that is a fairly tired call to action—but to create fluid, rational bureaucracies: policies, procedures, and paperwork that support effective leadership and quality teaching, all the while making sure that these guiding structures remain relevant and useful.

That said, with increased accountability pressures and high-stakes testing, many district offices are taking a dramatically more active role in setting district-wide instructional and curricular policies. These policies often dictate the instructional methods teachers are expected to use, how much time they will spend teaching particular subjects, and what learning materials they will use. Rigid bureaucracies all-too-quickly insinuate themselves and well-prepared, experienced teachers flee when overly prescriptive bureaucracies deprive them of the decision-making authority they say they need.

Still, this presents a catch-22 for district administrators who are faced with schools that are weakly staffed. These administrators are understandably reluctant to offer more authority to teachers when they suspect teachers will not use it well. But if they don't offer them more authority, they cannot get or retain the teachers who could handle the authority or grow and develop into that authority.

A promising way out of this catch-22 is for districts to construct and implement comprehensive re-design plans for persistently low-performing schools. This approach would offer teachers in these schools a coherent system of supports all at once, rather than incrementally adding one or two fixes at a time and waiting to see what difference is made. We believe a *comprehensive* turnaround strategy in schools with high teacher turnover and poor academic performance would trigger a positive “tipping point” leading to dramatic improvements in student academic performance and teacher retention (Futernick, 2005).

**RECOMMENDATION 4:
Refocus school leadership on instructional
quality and high-quality teaching and
learning conditions**

School leaders will be most effective at improving student learning by focusing their attention equally on the quality of instruction and the quality of the school’s teaching and learning conditions. Managing the work environment is no less essential to the success of the school than the functions provided by an effective instructional leader. Nor are they less demanding or complex or even separate from the instructional role. The two roles are positively reinforcing, with one leading directly to the other and back.

School principals, like teachers, are acutely aware of the pressures of state and federal policies that hold them accountable for student performance. But administrators will not be effective instructional leaders, no matter how knowledgeable they are about instructional quality, if poor school work environments drive teachers, especially good teachers, away from their schools. School administrators need to create a positive work environment and strong relationships among staff so they can avoid the harmful consequences that teacher turnover has on student learning. (Much of this report describes that positive collegial environment and how to create and sustain it.)

In order for principals to create satisfying and productive work environments for their teachers, school boards and superintendents must ensure that the same positive work environment that teachers yearn for is also available for principals.

If principals lack the support they need, or if they are overly burdened by unresponsive and intrusive district or state bureaucratic structures, then they too will leave.

State education officials and district administrators must make certain that principals are not impeded by the demoralizing aspects of district and state bureaucracies, and that principals receive the support *they* need to perform their job well. Otherwise, districts will be unable to attract and retain capable school leaders. If that happens, there is no chance the district will be able to attract and retain good teachers.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:
Establish statewide standards for school
teaching and learning conditions**

California now has some of the most rigorous academic content standards for its K-12 public schools. But merely expecting a lot from students does not, by itself, guarantee they will succeed academically, especially if the schools they attend are run-down, ill-equipped, and staffed with teachers who leave soon after they are hired. Policy makers must have equally high expectations for the quality of schools that students attend. This is possible if the state establishes clear statewide standards for the teaching and learning conditions that all schools are expected to meet.

California currently has only the most rudimentary standards for school teaching and learning conditions. And there is strong evidence that teaching and learning conditions tend to be the most problematic in schools

with the highest concentrations of poor and minority students.

If California wants to create school environments that will attract and retain sufficient numbers of well-prepared teachers, we must create standards for the conditions that address the full spectrum of system and collegial supports required for teaching effectiveness. In 2001, policy makers in North Carolina did this by establishing 30 “working condition” standards for their public schools. In order to determine how well schools are meeting these standards, teachers in North Carolina regularly participate in a survey to assess the level of compliance with these standards. Armed with research demonstrating that improved working conditions are strong predictors of teacher retention and student achievement, policy makers in North Carolina have invested in several initiatives to ensure that all of their schools meet the state’s working conditions standards (Emerick & Hirsch, n.d.).

Policy makers in California should follow North Carolina’s lead in adopting a comprehensive set of “working condition” standards (in this report we prefer the less-ambiguous term, “teaching and learning condition standards”) for its public schools. These standards would identify specific features of school environments that promote teacher retention *and* student learning. When linked to an efficient data gathering process, these standards would enable policy makers and district administrators to take corrective measures, as North Carolina has been doing, when the standards are not being met. California’s students are more likely to achieve the state’s rigorous academic standards if the state establishes a parallel set of teaching and learning condition standards, and the means to ensure that schools will meet them.

Recommendation 6: Assess and address specific challenges in retention of special education teachers

Many factors responsible for special education teachers leaving or staying are the same for teachers working in general education classrooms. But there are school conditions that are uniquely problematic for special education teachers that must be addressed.

Our study revealed several areas of significant concern to special education teachers. If these areas are addressed successfully, many more special education teachers will continue teaching special education students. These measures could also encourage inactive special education teachers—i.e., those with special education credentials who are working in general education classrooms—to return to special education. In terms of teacher retention, our special education recommendations are:

Specifically collect data on special education teachers and incorporate this data into retention strategies.

As discussed in the first of our six recommendations, the most effective retention strategies will be based on locally gathered data. Many special education teachers face a unique set of difficulties that include overly burdensome IEPs and related paperwork, challenging relationships with general education colleagues, and sometimes difficult interactions with parents of special education students. In order to determine the specific factors that cause excessive turnover among special education teachers, those who set out to collect data about school conditions from their teachers will want to incorporate questions that allow teachers with

special education credentials to offer feedback on these unique challenges.

Reduce the unnecessary burdens imposed by IEPs and related paperwork

Teachers called for greater standardization, even a “universal IEP,” to reduce the questions that arise when teachers encounter confusing elements of new versions of IEPs. Given the vast amounts of IEP-related paperwork teachers report having to complete by hand, the availability of teacher-tested information technology would appear to be an excellent solution. Assistance with IEPs by local special education experts would also help many teachers cope with the legal and educational complexities of this task. In particular, this assistance would enable special education teachers to learn about the full range of instructional resources that could be incorporated into an effective IEP.

Cultivate better collegial supports for special educators

Great progress has been made in integrating special education *students* into general education programs. The findings from our retention survey suggest that far less progress has been made to fully integrate special education *teachers* with their general education colleagues. Special educators often feel isolated and ignored, and many find themselves at odds with school principals and their general education colleagues when advocating for their special education students. This aspect of special education is a significant contributor to the high turnover rate among special educators.

There are several ways to strengthen the professional relationships between special and general education teachers. The most effective and immediate approach would come through school leadership that recognizes the significance of this collaboration but is also keenly aware of the deeply engrained attitudes and practices that can conspire to keep special and general education

teachers apart from one another (Cox, 2001; Smith & Leonard, 2005).

Institutions that prepare students to become special and general educators should provide numerous opportunities for these respective students to work collaboratively with each other from the outset of their preparation programs. By participating in non-segregated teacher education programs, there is a good chance that beginning general and special education teachers will approach their first job ready and eager to cultivate positive working relationships with all of their colleagues.

Expand programs that support novice special educators

Compared to the general education teacher workforce, a significant percentage of special education teachers (14% in 2004-05) are not credentialed and, therefore, are not immediately eligible for BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment). Special education novice teachers who lack access to established support programs commonly receive inadequate support and assistance in those critical first few years in the profession. This, combined with the unique challenges they encounter in the workplace, puts special education teachers at high risk for early burnout and attrition. The state should consider expanding BTSA to support all novice teachers, and should give the highest priority to novice special educators.

The state should also consider increasing the resources available for structured, well-supervised intern programs. This would allow thousands of special education teachers currently working with emergency permits, pre-intern certificates, or waivers to obtain critical professional support, especially in terms of professional training and classroom supervision, from their district and university credential programs.

REFRAMING A QUESTION

In seeking sustainable solutions to the teacher shortage, those concerned with teaching quality as well as teacher retention understandably wonder—or pointedly ask: *How do we retain effective teachers* and not the ones who are disappointing or, really, failing our students? That important question is beyond the purview of our study though our findings point to a problem with that line of inquiry. In schools where there is poor leadership, low morale, high staff turnover, no parent involvement, no sense of team; where teachers lack the basic supports that allow them to be successful, one would be hard-pressed to distinguish the good teachers from the bad. The good news from our study

is that if teachers get what they want and what they need to be truly effective in the classroom, and if these satisfied teachers stay, then we will discover that California has far more good teachers than we thought.

California's teacher shortage can be reduced significantly if policy makers and educators take the bold and promising steps outlined in this report to retain teachers. If that dream is realized, if every child gains access to a well-prepared, knowledgeable, and caring teacher—one of the most valuable assets a student has—then California's schools may once again rank among the best in the nation. This is a very possible dream.

