



Teacher Satisfaction and Turnover in WCPSS

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Introduction

Over the past decade, researchers have been looking closely at teacher turnover and why it is occurring. Turnover among teachers is often described as unacceptably high, with annual turnover rates per school around 15% in terms of national averages (Keigher, 2010). This year-to-year turnover is about evenly split between teachers who leave teaching (i.e., attrition) as well as those who simply change schools (i.e., migration). Over time, this turbulence leads to 40-50% of all teachers leaving the teaching field entirely within their first five years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

While there is substantial research showing that teacher turnover is higher in high-poverty, high-minority, urban, and low-performing schools (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2010; Ingersoll, 2001), studies have also shown that teachers' working conditions play a significant role above and beyond those factors (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Thomas Smith and Richard Ingersoll used data from the national Schools and Staffing Survey to focus on teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 1999, 2001, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Ingersoll and Smith (2003) found that about two-thirds of beginning teachers who leave teaching entirely cited dissatisfaction with their jobs and/or the desire for a better career elsewhere. While salary clearly plays a role in these decisions, working conditions also play a significant role, and improving them may be a more cost-effective way to help retain teachers (Ingersoll, 2003; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Keigher, 2010).

Abstract

During the spring of 2010, over 9,000 educators across Wake County Public Schools (WCPSS) took the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) survey. Survey responses were then compared to turnover data to see if there is any relationship between the two. Results indicated that teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions were positively associated with the percentage of teachers who stayed at their school the following year. These findings are discussed in terms of implications for improving staff retention rates at schools.

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For WCPSS teachers who turn over by moving from one school to another – which represents about half of annual turnover – salary is rarely (if ever) a factor since North Carolina has a statewide teacher pay scale based on education level and years of experience. To that end, monitoring teacher perceptions regarding working conditions is a critical step in retaining teachers. North Carolina Public School’s monitoring tool for this purpose is the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) Survey.

Measuring Teacher Satisfaction in NC

During the spring of 2010, over 105,000 educators across the state took the TWC survey. The 2010 version of the TWC survey consists of statements covering various characteristics of the school environment. Teachers rated the extent to which those things were true in their school. The survey items cover eight domains related to work environment: Time; Facilities/Resources; Community Support/Involvement; Student Conduct; Teacher Leadership; School Leadership; Professional Development; and Instructional Practices and Support. Copies of the survey, as well as results for schools and districts throughout the state, can be found at <http://www.ncteachingconditions.org/>

In 2010, 91% of teachers (n=9,690) in WCPSS responded to the survey. Survey items were: 7 Time, 9 Facilities and Resources; 8 Community Support/Involvement; 7 Managing Student Conduct; 8 Teacher Leadership; 12 School Leadership; 13 Professional Development; and 8 Instructional Practices and Support. The percent agreement for each TWC survey domain is shown in Table 1, broken out by WCPSS regions and the district as a whole.

Table 1
WCPSS Teachers – Percent Agreement for TWC Domains

Area	Time	Facilities/Resources	Community Support/Involvement	Student Conduct	Teacher Leadership	School Leadership	Professional Development	Instructional Practices and Support	Overall
WCPSS	65.7%	88.2%	85.7%	81.8%	73.2%	82.2%	76.8%	80.3%	84.3%
Western	65.2%	92.2%	92.2%	76.5%	76.5%	83.0%	77.4%	80.9%	90.0%
Southwestern	67.5%	89.6%	90.0%	84.2%	72.9%	81.3%	77.5%	82.5%	85.4%
Southern	68.3%	87.5%	86.3%	86.3%	75.0%	83.3%	74.2%	80.0%	84.6%
Northern	67.1%	89.2%	88.8%	84.6%	75.0%	84.2%	81.7%	81.7%	85.0%
Northeastern	65.0%	89.0%	85.0%	83.0%	75.5%	83.5%	78.0%	81.0%	83.5%
Eastern	60.0%	86.5%	72.5%	72.5%	64.5%	76.0%	74.0%	77.0%	78.0%
Central	65.8%	85.8%	87.1%	75.4%	72.1%	81.3%	75.8%	82.1%	82.9%

WCPSS Teacher Turnover

The WCPSS Human Resources Department provided teacher turnover data corresponding to the time frame of the TWC survey. Turnover in this case was measured by taking a snapshot of the teachers teaching at each school in March 2010, and then again in March 2011 (Table 2). If a teacher was at the same school at both time points, then they were considered to have “stayed” for the 2010-11 school year. Teachers who were teaching in a different WCPSS school in March 2011 were classified as such, and teachers who had left the system to teach in another school system were also documented.

Table 2
WCPSS Teacher Turnover from March 2010-March 2011

Area	% Stayed	% Different School	% Different District	% No Response
WCPSS	82.0%	6.4%	1.2%	10.4%
Western	81.4%	8.4%	1.1%	9.1%
Southwestern	81.4%	7.1%	0.7%	10.9%
Southern	82.5%	6.1%	1.1%	10.3%
Northern	82.0%	6.3%	1.0%	10.6%
Northeastern	84.0%	5.5%	1.2%	9.4%
Eastern	80.5%	5.0%	1.8%	12.7%
Central	80.4%	7.8%	1.0%	10.8%

As shown in Table 2, WCPSS as a whole had 18% of teachers leave the school they were working at between March 2010 and March 2011, which is fairly consistent with national estimates (Keigher, 2010). The highest teacher turnover occurred in the Eastern and Central regions of Wake County and the lowest turnover occurred in the Northeastern region.

Relationship between WCPSS Teacher Turnover and Working Conditions

Correlations were run between the TWC survey domains and the teacher turnover data to see if there was any relationship between the constructs. The unit of analysis was the school. These results are shown in Table 3, (statistically significant relationships are indicated with an asterisk).

Table 3
Correlations between Teacher Turnover and Satisfaction with Working Conditions

TWC Domain	% Stayed	% Different School	% Different District
Overall	0.35*	-0.16*	-0.22*
Time	0.20*	-0.16	-0.08
Facilities/Resources	0.21*	-0.10	-0.17*
Community Support/ Involvement	0.29*	-0.06	-0.21*
Student Conduct	0.30*	-0.19*	-0.20*
Teacher Leadership	0.36*	-0.27*	-0.22*
School Leadership	0.39*	-0.25*	-0.19*
Professional Development	0.25*	-0.17*	-0.13
Instructional Practices and Support	0.24*	-0.13	-0.08

NOTES: Population is 159 schools. Correlations exist on a possible scale from +1 to -1, with a value of zero indicating that the two factors are completely unrelated. Statistically significant relationships are indicated with an asterisk (*).

“Significant” is used here to denote values that are larger or smaller than zero beyond the margin of error.

At the school level, greater levels of satisfaction with working conditions overall in Spring 2010 were associated with more teachers staying at their school the next year (2010-11). Within the separate domains of satisfaction, correlations were slightly higher for the school and teacher leadership domains, but not demonstrably. All relationships were in the expected direction, with higher levels of satisfaction in each area associated with lower turnover.

It should be noted that most of the correlations between satisfaction and turnover ranged between 0.20 and 0.39, which indicates that between 4-15% of the difference between schools in teacher turnover could be predicted by how satisfied teachers were with their working conditions. While this suggests that other factors beyond satisfaction with the working environment account for the majority of teacher turnover, the decision to leave any job is typically the result of multiple factors.

Summary

This study attempted to determine the direction and magnitude of the relationship between teacher satisfaction in WCPSS, as measured by the TWC survey, and annual teacher turnover. Correlations between TWC domains and teacher turnover are statistically significant and positive, suggesting that higher levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their work environment may play a role in teachers choosing to stay at their schools.

Other reasons beyond teacher satisfaction clearly affect turnover as well, such as the desire to earn more money, family circumstances, retirement, promotions to administrative positions, administrative decisions to dismiss staff, etc. However, many of those circumstances are not issues that schools can easily impact. Improving teacher satisfaction in areas such as those measured by the TWC survey represents one of the most cost-effective ways to help schools retain teachers.

It is also important to note that not all teacher turnover is harmful to a school. Ingersoll (2001) found that if there is too little turnover, this can lead to inefficiencies in an organization. Having at least some turnover can promote good morale by bringing in new people and new ideas. Turnover in some instances can also be a function of schools replacing less effective teachers with more effective ones. For example, Hanushek and Rivkin (2010) found teachers in an urban district in Texas who stayed in their schools tended to be higher-performing than those who left and went elsewhere. Goldhaber, Gross, and Player (2007) found similar results in a study of North Carolina teachers. Research has also suggested that principals are often effective agents in selectively counseling out lower-performing teachers and replacing them with stronger ones (Balu, Betielle, & Loeb, 2010).

However, too high of a turnover rate may negatively impact student achievement, particularly in lower-performing schools (Ronfeldt, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011). Although the mechanisms by which turnover might affect are not entirely understood, it may be more complicated than simply a reduction in the quality of teaching due to an influx of less experienced or less prepared teachers. The general social disruption and loss of collegiality and institutional knowledge that can accompany turnover are assumed to play a role. The Ronfeldt et al. (2011) study demonstrated that students in high-turnover schools had lower achievement even when their teachers were not the ones involved in the turnover, giving some credence to this idea.

Recommendations

While some teacher turnover may be inevitable and some may even be desirable, administrators need to focus on enhancing teachers' working conditions as much as possible to ensure that they can "control what they can control" when it comes to who leaves and who stays every year. Looking specifically at the TWC domains where response patterns are more and less favorable for teachers at their schools—as well as the individual factors that are driving those results—should provide important evaluative information for building-level administrators to help drive their human capital strategies.

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