

Sounding Board

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Staff Retention

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Staff retention is a topic most charter school leaders and school boards monitor as part of their regular oversight, governance, and management responsibilities. Excessive turnover can cause lack of continuity in the important initiatives and regular school operations that form the culture of the school and result in positive student outcomes. Turnover here refers to staff members who leave either in large numbers over a short period of time or a persistent number of staff members leaving the school on an annual basis. Onboarding, consistency, and adapting to the norms of the school are difficult to accomplish for staff members when there is a constant stream and/or a large number of new staff members annually.

In addition, we know retaining teachers is a crucial part of addressing the teacher shortage facing Minnesota schools. In 2021, the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) released its Biennial Report, "[Supply and Demand of Teachers in Minnesota](#)." This report included some astonishing data related to retention.

In its research and review of the current landscape of teachers in Minnesota, PELSB found:

- More than half of Minnesota's teachers who hold a Tier 3 or Tier 4 License are currently not teaching in a public school classroom or charter school classroom.
- Nearly a third of new teachers leave teaching within the first five years in the profession.
- Minnesota continues to lag significantly in the ability to hire and retain racially and ethnically diverse teachers even close to the proportion of students of color and indigenous students in the state.
- During the 2019-20 school year, 51.32% of teachers who hold a professional license were not active classroom teachers. An analysis of positions filled by teachers holding a Tier 1 or Tier 2 License reveals that if 15% of teachers with an active license (and not in the classroom) returned, there would be enough to fill all assignments currently filled by a teacher not holding a professional license for their assignment.

School boards and school leaders search for ways they can retain effective staff members while letting go of less effective staff members without upsetting school culture and impacting student outcomes. Often, plans to retain staff members involve financial considerations such as paying for longevity, thereby rewarding stability within the staff. While this type of approach is not without merit, the subject of staff retention is much larger and more complicated than one might initially think. Thinking about staff retention in isolation from other employment activities runs the risk of being overly simplified with the solution being to pay staff members more and they will stay. However, such an approach discounts considerable research indicating employees (in most, if not all fields) do not list money as the most significant variable in their happiness as an employee and thus an increase in money alone may not increase the likelihood of their remaining with their current organization. (See Drive: [The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us](#) by Daniel H. Pink for more research on what motivates employees.) It is more complicated than that.

A staff retention program should be part of a larger board approved policy that includes recruitment, hiring, support, professional evaluation, and recognition and reward for staff members. With a comprehensive approach including these components, it is more likely overall staff turnover will be minimal and limited to the following:

- Staff whom the school evaluates to be ineffective
- Staff whose spouse/significant other changes work location
- Staff whose family size changes
- Staff who retire
- Staff who experience significant, unanticipated emergencies or tragedies

Notice the above list is likely to include a rather small number of staff members each year and the circumstance of each cannot realistically be affected by the school (except for making it easy for staff members whose family size changes to return to work at the school). It also does not include staff who are successful in their roles but who leave because they are professionally dissatisfied with their assignments, lack of adequate professional support, the quality and adequacy of the pay scale for staff members, etc. It is this latter group for which a comprehensive policy for staff recruitment, hiring, support, professional evaluation, and reward and recognition for positive performance is important to minimizing unwanted staff turnover.

What do Minnesota Statutes say about charter school staff turnover?

Minnesota statutes are silent on this topic. However, see previous issue of The Sounding Board, "[Use of Public Funds](#)" for guidance about appropriate and inappropriate use of public funds for potential staff retention activities.

Components of an Effective Staff Retention Plan

As indicated above, a staff retention plan should be part of a larger board approved policy on staff recruitment, hiring, support, evaluation, and recognition and reward, rather than being simply a stand-alone plan for retention. Below are some approaches the school board and leadership may consider including in a retention policy and plan.

Staff Recruitment

Schools should be very intentional in their staff recruitment planning and efforts. Those efforts should be ongoing rather than episodic or just when an opening arises, especially when an unanticipated opening occurs. Continuous outreach to local colleges and universities, membership in professional organizations, and the creation of an accurate and current employment packet of materials will allow the school to be relevant and known in the community. Many charter schools have found that their best recruitment engine is word of mouth from current employees. It is essential the school has available information that puts the school's "best foot forward" so to speak to let potential employees know of the mission, principles, values, and operational successes of the school.

Staff Hiring

The school must develop a consistent process to hire staff members. This includes communication channels and responsibilities, timely responses to inquiries about potential employment, and prompt processing of applications and notifications. Absent these processes, potential candidates can get an unfavorable impression of the school, one that suggests disorganization and haphazard operations. Such impression could impact whether potential candidates accept or reject an employment offer.

Robust Onboarding Practices and Ongoing Support

Once hired, it is crucial that the school implement a well thought out and comprehensive plan of new staff member support. This could include a current staff mentor or resource person, a comprehensive employee handbook of useful and timely information, frequent contact with school administrators who check in with new hires to get a feel for and to respond any needs and concerns they may have before they become major distractions, as well as other structured and ad hoc opportunities for new staff to learn about and shape the culture of the school. Ensure your school has a well-defined culture, mission, and vision, and that it is documented. Put it in a welcome email you send on a new employee's first day so they can reference it when they have questions.

Have a plan for the first 30, 60, and 90 days. Your staff might be talented at their jobs (e.g. teacher, paraprofessional, operations, etc.) but they are new to your building and thereby new to the way that your school does things! Help them out and create a plan. Identify priorities, where to find key information, set goals and make sure the evaluation process and indicators of success are clear, and check in on how aligned people feel to the mission, vision, goals, and culture, of the school.

Check in at the 30, 60, and 90 day mark. Even if it's just a short conversation, these milestones can help new employees feel more connected to the school as well as identify misalignment, misunderstandings, open questions, and areas for support. You can also find out if they are building connections with other staff, students, and families. It is way more work to hire a new person than it is to keep a good one, so making these investments early in the relationship can pay big dividends in the long run.

Staff Evaluation

Although teacher evaluation is required by statute, some schools have an unstructured or inconsistent approach to it. However, feedback from teachers year after year indicates that educators want their school leaders to be familiar with their curriculum and the challenges and successes of teaching. Teachers are not only required to be evaluated by law, they need to participate in high quality professional evaluations to ensure students are getting high quality instruction and classroom management. Reports of teachers not having been professionally evaluated for several years are not unusual, but should not be the norm. Teachers need and deserve to have continuous feedback for improvement and reinforcement of the quality work they do, and students deserve to have teachers who are continuously improving.

Foster an Environment that Supports a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset encourages self-improvement and constant learning. It doesn't view intelligence as fixed but rather as a function of learning. Teachers and staff who embrace a growth mindset will seek out feedback as an opportunity to learn and improve. Employees with a growth mindset will seek out feedback because they want to improve, even if it is critical. Schools are places of learning, and should be modeling this learning stance at all levels from the board to the students. There is also evidence that shows organizations that foster employees to develop a growth mindset see increased employee engagement and empowered staff who seek out solutions to problems.

Career Development

One of the most common sources of frustration among employees is a lack of growth opportunities. This is an easy fix in a school! There are opportunities for learning and growth around every corner.

Career development doesn't always have to look like moving through levels within an organization or earning degrees, but that can help. Ensure pathways for advancement are clear within the organization. Upward mobility within a school may include a new position or title, but it might also include expanded work responsibilities, a raise, a promotion, new knowledge, or the chance to lead an exciting project internally.

Consider creating a leadership development program or a mentorship program. Ensure there is both appropriate structure and adequate resources to make a program like this a success. It's one thing to tell an employee they have a mentor; it's another thing to ensure they have the time, energy, and bandwidth to access all the knowledge and benefits that mentor can offer.

Finally, and as noted above, ensure your teachers and staff are receiving meaningful feedback. This also means that school leaders, instructional leaders, lead teachers, and anybody else tasked with observing and evaluating is confident in their ability to give high quality feedback. This requires practice! You cannot expect someone to grow professionally, or their career to flourish, if they are not receiving high quality feedback on their performance and assistance in gaining the tools and skills to act on that feedback.

Opportunities for Meaningful Input

In order for people to feel like they can contribute to a workplace, they have to feel psychologically safe. Dr. Timothy Clark, in [The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation](#), defined the four stages of psychological safety. To become comfortable with speaking up and making contributions employees need to feel:

- **Stage 1: Inclusion safety.** You feel safe and accepted for who you are. Connecting and belonging is a human basic need.
- **Stage 2: Learner safety.** At this stage, you feel safe asking questions, learning new things, experimenting, and making mistakes. Giving and receiving feedback is a crucial part of learning.
- **Stage 3: Contributor safety.** You feel comfortable and safe enough to make contributions using your skills and knowledge to make a difference.
- **Stage 4: Challenger safety.** At this stage, you feel comfortable challenging certain notions when you see an opportunity to improve or change something.

Research shows workplaces (including schools) that are psychologically safe are more innovative, collaborative, effective, and connected. People who feel they can contribute to their workplace also show higher employee engagement. Creating opportunities to offer meaningful input, a safe environment to make mistakes and take risks, and the ability to impact the people around them, including students and families, can help your staff be more engaged and connected.

Staff Recognition and Reward

Recognition has a direct impact on employee engagement. Research shows when employees are recognized correctly, [they are](#):

- Four times as likely to be actively engaged in their work
- Five times as likely to see a growth path at the organization
- Five times as likely to be connected to the culture and workplace

While those statistics are encouraging, it's also important to note that [65% of employees haven't gotten appreciation in the last year](#). Recognizing your teachers and staff can take many forms ([here are some ideas to get you started](#)), but it's important to remember four things:

1. Do it frequently. Typically once a week is recommended.
2. Find out how people like to be recognized (public vs. private) and respect that boundary.
3. Recognition can connect employees to your school's values and strengthen engagement.
4. Share the wealth! Recognition, appreciation, gratefulness, and praise shouldn't flow from one person. This is a responsibility shared by the board, school leader, and anyone else in a leadership position at the school.

Again, constructive feedback about their professional performance is another way that you can recognize and reward performance. This is part of building a feedback culture and a growth mindset at your school.

Generally we give feedback, even critical feedback, because we want people to improve—for themselves and the students they teach. This is recognizing their skills and talents and demonstrates that you believe in their ability to live up to your high expectations.

Although charter school teachers generally do not receive tenure in their positions as do their counterparts in traditional district schools, the school can celebrate their successful completion of 3, 5, or some other milestone number of years. School boards can conduct recognition activities at public school board meetings, the board can award personalized certificates of appreciation for quality teaching, or other activities that recognize professional competence and success.

Finally, staff members can be rewarded financially through the creation of a pay scale that includes “steps” at board approved points within the salary schedule, or one-time pay for performance, again in accordance with a board approved plan to reward successful teaching at the school. For example, the board could establish a pay scale with modest board approved increases salary based on years of service and at particular points, the amount could be significant rather than modest. This would be a proxy way of recognizing successful teaching since it would take quality professional performance to be retained at the school for the number of years that qualifies for the retention increase. The dollar amount of the increase would stay as part of the teacher’s pay for future years, thus affecting those budgets.

Another way to reward quality teaching is for the board to approve a one-time financial award for teachers who reach the same milestone in number of years of teaching as in the first example, except that this recognition does not carry forward for future years. This one time financial reward for successful teaching could be significant but would not affect future year’s budgets.

The takeaway for staff retention is that high quality, successful teachers are most likely to stay at a school when they have participated in well-planned hiring and onboarding activities, when they are supported in their work and receive regular constructive feedback, feel psychologically safe and are given opportunities for meaning feedback, and when they receive recognition and reward for their work.

Next steps for the board and school leadership to consider:

1. Ask your school leader to quantify your school’s staff turnover for the past five years. What does that data tell you? What other questions do you need to ask? Does your school survey staff when they leave to find out why, and where they are going?
2. Assess the degree to which staff turnover is affecting the school’s educational outcomes. What systems does the school have in place that are designed to negate negative effects of high turnover on school culture and student outcomes?
3. What do your school’s recruitment, hiring, onboarding, retention, and offboarding processes look like? Do you have them in place? If not, what kind of investment is needed to build them out? Who could do
4. At a board work session, discuss your school’s current staff retention program. How many of the above components are included in it?
5. Develop a plan and timeline for the board to create and approve a comprehensive recruitment, hiring, support, evaluation, and recognition and reward program that includes an evaluation component. How successful are your plans at retaining employees?

More resources can be found on [our website](#).