

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Teacher Retention in Religious Schools as Primer for Teacher Retention in Public Schools

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**The cost of teacher turnover is soon to become the next “crisis” in education. In some respects this “crisis” has already started, as many districts are facing a severe shortage of math and science teachers.**



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The cost of teacher turnover is soon to become the next “crisis” in education. In some respects this “crisis” has already started, as many districts are facing a severe shortage of math and science teachers. Added to the challenge of finding the right teachers to replace those leaving the profession or seeking employment elsewhere are the academic setbacks caused by new teachers, either to the profession or the curriculum, for they immediately become an unavoidable part of the slow progress toward academic achievement in their new schools. By some estimates, as more and more baby boomers retire, the need for new teachers could exceed half a million.

Private schools, most of which are religious, teach 11 percent of all American students, and yet the costly teacher turnover rates there are nearly twice as high as they are in public schools. An in-depth study of a sample of teachers working in religious schools revealed why some plan to leave while others stay. The study focused on key elements that may be related to the reasons for staying, including faith and perceptions of the school's climate. Although these elements of school culture are subtle, they nevertheless have implications for how administrators can use the school's limited resources to retain their best teachers.

A group of religious school administrators from ten Orange County schools representing Judaism, Catholicism, Episcopalianism, and Islam formed the “Inter-Faith Council of Religious Schools” (ICRS) to share problems

and solutions common to religious schools. The ICRS, which served as a steering committee for this research, also formed the pool from which the participating teachers were drawn.

This study was conducted in two phases: First, nearly 200 teachers were asked questions that were designed to uncover basic data about attitudes and perceptions. Second, follow-up interviews were conducted to examine their motivations for working in religious schools.

Although most people would think that teachers in religious schools are primarily motivated by their religious commitment, the findings show that these teachers are highly committed to teaching and less committed to teaching in faith-based schools. Furthermore, they are not leaving because of a declining level of commitment to teaching or low pay. Rather, they remain highly committed to teaching, and most of them are committed to faith-based education. However, they want more respect from administrators, a greater connection to the schools' missions to develop meaning, and stronger collegial relations. Teachers appear to place the highest value on working in a school that has a clear vision, effective administrative leadership, and a good camaraderie among colleagues. Although the study's initial purpose was to help religious schools retain their best teachers, the implications may also benefit those public schools that are interested in improving their teacher retention rate.

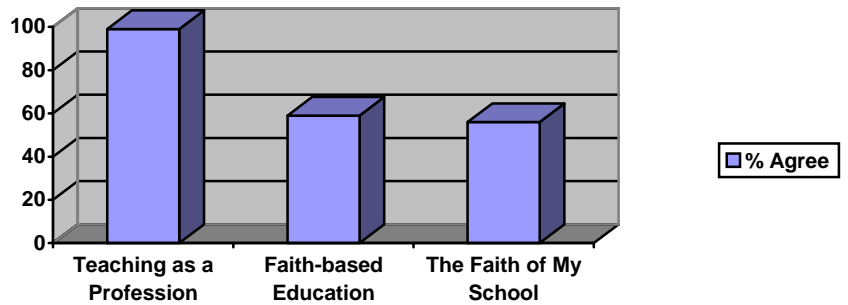
**Teachers “Love” Teaching**

To improve teacher retention rates, administrators must first understand what lies beneath the teachers’ commitment to their schools, in particular their attitudes about teaching as a profession. Religious school teachers seem to be caught in the following stereotype: They have chosen to work in religious schools because of their faith and not so much because of their commitment to teaching as a profession. On the contrary, this study demonstrates that while their commitment to faith is high, it is not as high as their commitment to teaching as a profession. Ninety-nine (99) percent of the respondents report that they “love teaching as a profession,” which suggests that even those who are planning to leave are doing so despite their love of teaching. Some may believe that teachers who choose to teach in private religious schools lack the commitment to teaching found among public school teachers. However, as this study shows, teachers in these religious schools are highly committed to teaching. Additionally, most of them report that they have a “spiritual calling” to teach, another important factor that leads to commitment. Finally, the vast majority of them report being satisfied with their jobs. What is clear from this study is that the teachers’ commitment to teaching is primary and their commitment to faith is secondary.

While not as impressive, a substantial 59 percent of all respondents indicate a commitment to faith-based education. Slightly fewer (56 percent) report being committed to the school’s actual faith. This finding suggests that while a commitment to teaching as a profession is the nearly unanimous sentiment of all respondents, teaching in a faith-based school is also important. This was best described by one respondent:

*“...it’s not so much a calling to a [religious] school ... It’s more a calling to teach... regardless of the faith.”*

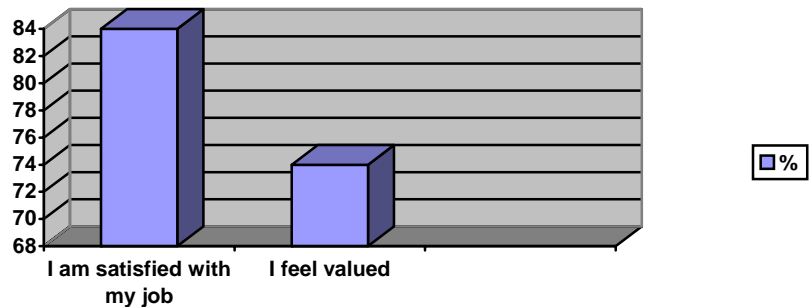
Percentage of respondents who expressed a strong commitment to:



**Pay versus Job Satisfaction and Sense of Value**

While a popular view holds that low pay is a cause of turnover, results show that pay alone appears to be unrelated to a teacher’s level of satisfaction. Respondents are split with regard to their perceptions about being paid fairly; however, the majority of them (84 percent) report feeling satisfied, and nearly three-quarters (74 percent) report feeling valued at their schools. While one could assume that the dissatisfied teachers are the ones who are not being paid enough, it is more likely that pay only becomes an issue in the presence of other factors. Clearly, some teachers believe that they are not being paid fairly and yet continue to stay with their schools. Thus, the challenge for administrators is to understand what motivates those teachers who are satisfied and planning to stay in order to prevent their best teachers from becoming those who decide to leave.

Sentiments regarding their employment:



According to the data collected, only 15 percent indicate a lack of commitment to their school and only 3.5 percent indicate that they “definitely plan to leave as soon as possible.” Overall, this suggests that although only half of the teachers surveyed feel that they are paid fairly, many more are satisfied and feel valued; only 3.5 percent have a strong desire to leave. While we can be certain that the overall turnover rate at these schools may be more than 3.5 percent,<sup>1</sup> comparing the sentiments of teachers who choose to stay with those who plan to leave may help administrators improve teacher retention rates as well.

**Callings and Spirituality**

Is it possible that teachers in religious schools possess a deeper spiritual calling to teach in a religious school? More importantly, how does this possibility relate to the teachers’ plans to stay or leave? As stated above, nearly every respondent (99 percent) is committed to teaching as a

profession and to teaching as a life-long choice, whereas two-thirds (66 percent) are committed to the school because of its faith. This sentiment is best described by the following quote:

*What originally brought me to teach there is I attended the church there, and they were going through a rough time. And at the time, I thought, what can I do for my church? So that's kind of how I ended up starting to teach there.*

Teachers in religious schools value the fact that the school has some religious affiliation, even if they do not share its faith:

*And one of the things that we've been looking at is having a unique value proposition. Every school has to have that to go forward... The good thing I find is that when you have a strong central religious component, that can be sort of used as a unifying technique for the school.*

*...You can retain teachers ... if you've got a faculty member that is incredibly driven by the faith of the institution where he or she is working, for ... then maybe they are going to be willing to work at that school despite the shortfalls and shortcomings they see, because they feel like they're working for their faith.*

This commitment to one's faith may be a factor in a teacher's decision to stay. However, it can often be a source of great frustration as well.

*The schools are no longer rich in faith, but are pretending to be so... I am starting to think that it would be better now to be at a school that is openly secular.... But in prayer and journaling, I have understood that the Lord wants me to be here next year. Every year I start over and ask these questions again.*

### School Climate

School climate is defined as the relations among the individuals working in the school. The teachers in this study report having positive climates at their schools. Eighty percent of all respondents report feeling positive about almost every aspect of their school community, and more than 80 percent report positive feelings about their school's climate. However, somewhat fewer (68 percent) report being satisfied with the level of teamwork between teachers and administrators.

Teachers value a positive school climate. A teacher's need to feel that he or she fits into the school's climate is very important, for it affects teacher retention rates. It is not necessary for a school to have a faith-based mission that corresponds to a teacher's own faith, suggesting implications beyond religious schools. Whatever faith the mission reflects, that mission must be clear and consistent and the teachers must feel comfortable with it. Teachers expect their schools to protect the mission's integrity and feel that it is alive and resolute, impervious to the pressures of increasing enrollment or community politics. Even teachers who choose to stay, despite reporting dissatisfaction, seem to cling to this one source of meaning – the school's mission, which, if lost, becomes yearned for until finally abandoned along with the commitment to the school.

Both stayers and leavers need to find a connection to the school's mission, and respondents expect their administration to represent it effectively. One teacher explains the value that this holds:

*Well, our head of school ... is a great leader, embodies the school's philosophy and mission, and is always a constant reminder to the students, to the faculty, to the staff of what the school's goal is ... I think that's one of the great things, having a living example on campus for us.*

### Collegial Relations

Teachers value collegial relationships. This significant factor in retaining teachers is part of the school's climate and, moreover, was reported as one of the most significant factors in evaluating a teacher's commitment to the school. Teachers want to be connected to their colleagues, at the very least, on a professional level. Whatever else may be assumed about religious school teachers, they do not have high expectations of bonding with one another on a religious level. Spirituality may exist among them, but more so as it relates to teaching as a profession and working together in a job that holds significant meaning for them. Teachers want to be able to rely on a colleague to talk to and connect with about teaching as well as about their own personal lives and challenges.

In this study, both stayers and leavers report that they have positive relations with other teachers. But when compared more closely, the leavers reported having positive – but weaker – collegial relations. This difference is one of the largest, second only to reports about teachers' relations with the administrative leadership. One example of how much teachers value positive collegiality is given below:

*Last year we'd always had a time where a bunch of us, about six of us, could time our lunches, and we'd go have lunch together. One would have the table ready, one would come late, and they'd pick up the tab. We haven't had that opportunity. But I think that's important for teachers to get to know each other on a personal level. I think you have more commitment to the school.*

This teacher continues to express less enthusiasm about the school because the opportunities to go out to lunch together no longer existed because everyone had become too busy. Another teacher points out how

disappointed he was to lose this connection:

*The one thing that I would have to say is ... the negative area here is the collegiality between faculty. No one seems to get together. When I was at [my previous school], everybody ate in the faculty lunchroom. Faculty all sat down together at lunch and talked. Not about teaching. Just talking ... my wishes are ... we need to do stuff more together, so we kind of bond ... I think it's important to [help] make faculty feel that ... make sure that you take care of the people that make your institution go, which is normally your faculty, your teachers.*

The following quote describes the importance of friendly relations:

*The faculty came together to support the accreditation process and make it a positive thing; instead of just another reason we have to stay after school for an hour. Also there's different types of celebrations, whether marriages or baby showers. There always seems to be something that there's reason to celebrate in each other's lives.*

Some teachers even report feeling like a family. For example, when one teacher was not asked to return, it was like they "got rid of one of [her] sisters. So it's, you know, hard."

This need for strong collegial relations may be related to the teachers' desire to work with a staff of expert teachers. Teachers actually report feelings of lower morale when a strong teaching staff is not maintained or nurtured. One teacher elaborates: "I think that [my administrator] isn't necessarily great at choosing teachers. And I think that that's a really hard skill to learn." Morale, even for stayers, is strongly based on relations with other teachers. While some may suggest or even assume that the connection between teachers in religious schools is religious, none of the teachers interviewed indicate that their interactions were manifestations of their spirituality. Even teachers who feel connected to their

colleagues report that some "have what they call 'table talk,' where they sit down and talk Scriptures," but then immediately followed by saying: "That's not me."

### Administrative Leadership

Teachers value being appreciated and respected by administrators. The results of this study support what earlier research has suggested as the second most significant predictor of turnover: perceptions about administrative leadership. While one can infer that most teachers in religious schools are satisfied with their school's climate, there is a sharp decline when it comes to feeling connected with the school leadership. Part of this is due to the perception that the leadership does not facilitate clear communication, especially in regard to specific procedures for performance evaluation. However, at the core of this is a disconnect between teachers and administrators, which suggests that administrators do not do enough to foster a positive relationship with their teachers. Teachers place a tremendous burden on the administrative leadership by expecting these people to manage the school's culture and then clearly define their role within that culture. This entails making sure that the administrative leadership accurately represents the school's mission and vision.

Positive relations with the administration are critical to a teacher's desire to stay. When comparing stayers and leavers in every aspect of the school community, both groups have positive sentiments. However, there is one exception here that is, in fact, the largest difference between both groups' perceptions: issues related to administrative leadership.

Stayers and definite leavers show large differences in their perceptions about administrative leadership. Those who say that they are going to leave are far less likely to agree with the statement "Teachers feel supported by their administration" than those who are likely to stay. In addition, this pattern can be seen when comparing their responses to such statements as: "The administration at this

school is supportive of its teachers" and "At this school, teachers feel respected by their principal/school head." Those teachers who plan to leave are far less likely to agree with these statements than are the other teachers, especially those who plan to stay. Other areas of difference are found with regard to staff development, which suggests that respondents feel the need for better staff development and clear evaluation procedures.

### Recommendations

Initially, this information was sought to provide valuable information on teacher retention rates at private religious schools. However, much of what was learned suggests that the factors affecting teacher retention in all schools are empirical. All administrators interested in improving teacher retention rates and alleviating the financial and academic strains caused by high turnover rates must take the implications derived from this study and apply them in their schools. In general, administrators must re-examine the dimensions of the school's culture and its impact on teacher retention.

#### 1. Protect and Preserve Teachers Who "Love" Teaching

The first action item is based on the assumptions that schools are staffed largely by committed teachers and that they are an asset to be protected. This may include teachers who are committed to a faith-based education even though they may not follow the school's particular faith. It is very common to find administrators who assume the opposite -- that their teachers are not committed to the profession. In fact, this attitude alone may be the cause of low morale. When teachers are publicly recognized as professionals who are committed to teaching, they feel more appreciated and thus more committed to their schools. Teachers must be considered professionals and given the support that they need in terms of professional development and by being paired with mentors who can guide them toward their own professional goals.

## 2. Identify and Manage the School's Climate

Teachers value feeling connected to their school's mission and vision. As is evident from this study, they feel more committed when they feel that their school's mission and vision are clear and firm. Administrators must strive to ensure that their school's mission is clearly identified, that the teachers are well matched to it, and ensure that they see the mission's integrity being maintained when it comes to making decisions. Involving teachers at some level of school leadership or decision making, or at least informing them of why certain decisions have been taken, reinforces their sense of connection to the school as an extended family and as being something more than "just a job." Teachers also need to feel that their administrative leaders are living embodiments of their school's mission and vision. To this end, these leaders must be aware of their actions and the perceptions that they leave in the teachers' minds and hearts. Administrators must continuously, but subtly, find ways to embody the school's mission.

## 3. Appreciate and Respect Teachers

The way administrators treat their teachers has been shown to have a significant impact on a teacher's commitment to the school. Support and respect from administrators must go beyond providing such token support as classroom supplies; they must also provide tangible support, for example, appropriate professional development and leadership opportunities. In addition, administrators can provide emotional support to teachers who are going through personal or other difficulties, instead of limiting their roles to evaluating them. Finally, before evaluating their teachers, administrators must explain the

relevant evaluation procedures and expectations clearly.

## 4. Develop and Nurture Teachers' Collegial Relationships

Teachers need to feel satisfied with their collegial relations. The administration bears much of the burden for creating a collegial climate. This can include relieving teachers of break duty or giving them additional opportunities to connect with colleagues or to spend time with mentors. Since most administrators are not available to serve as mentors, they must place special care and consideration on matching new hires to the existing teacher pool and in selecting experienced teachers to guide their new colleagues through their challenges. Such mentoring can be formalized; however, administrators must also make a concerted effort to ensure that every teacher feels a connection to the school family via colleagues who can serve as informal mentors. It may be as simple as building in opportunities for teachers to come together in a staff lounge and arranging schedules to make sure that they can get together.

## Conclusion

The next decade will have some of the largest teacher turnover rates in history due to retirement and such negative factors as those mentioned in this brief. As researchers and educational leaders turn their attention to addressing this imminent crisis, new strategies will have to be developed to mitigate this development by focusing on non-retiring teachers. Although this research was conducted in private schools, teacher retention affects all schools. Furthermore, the action items clearly apply to public schools as well. Even when turnover rates are not high, most administrators can admit to having lost at least one good teacher who they did

not want to lose. While many excuses and explanations have been given, the fact remains that when a teacher truly has a connection to his or her school, the likelihood of his or her staying on increases dramatically. Paying teachers more might make them believe that it is worth their while to put up with all that they have to deal with on a daily basis; however, making their work environment more pleasant costs less and has a far greater impact on any individual – especially teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> According to this sample, it can be assumed that the turnover rate in these schools is, at most, 15 percent, which is well within the range of both percent turnover in public schools and the industry standards.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent and nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems in the United States through education, research, training, and policy analysis. ISPU provides cutting-edge analysis and policy solutions through publications, public events, media commentary, and community outreach. Major areas of focus include domestic politics, social policy, the economy, health, education, the environment, and foreign policy. Since our inception in 2002, ISPU's research has worked to increase understanding of key public policy issues and how they impact various communities in the United States.

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