Overwhelmed and Out:

Principals, District Policy, and Teacher Retention

Connecticut Center
for School Change
System Success = Student Success

A Research and
Policy Report from

Connecticut Center
for School Change
System Success = Student Success

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Introduction

Educational research has shown that the single most important factor in student achievement is the quality of teaching, a finding confirmed by our experience at the Center for School Change. The second most important school factor affecting student performance is the quality of educational leadership. The ability to close Connecticut's achievement gap depends upon policies and practices that ensure equity in how these two fundamental factors – teacher quality and leadership – play out in our schools and communities. Hence our motto at the Connecticut Center for School Change, "System Success = Student Success."

In 2006, we examined Connecticut school- and district-level practices in teacher recruitment, hiring, and support (Reichardt and Arnold 2006). This follow-up study reviews school and district actions that affect teacher retention. Like the 2006 report, this study finds that district actions significantly affect whether school districts can attract and retain the highest quality teachers.

If competing for and retaining the best teachers is a priority for district leadership, the district can develop proactive structures and processes for improving recruitment and retention. As this report makes clear, working conditions, principal leadership, school culture, and program coherence have a direct impact on teacher retention. Connecticut districts are not powerless by-standers in the process of recruiting, supporting, and retaining quality teachers; rather, they are key players in the development of the men and women who play such a critical role in determining whether students learn and succeed.

The Connecticut Center for School Change is committed to supporting local and state administrators and policymakers who pursue the goal of a quality educator in every classroom. We hope that this report, with its practical recommendations for action, helps schools and districts ensure that all of Connecticut's students have access to high-quality teachers. Achieving that goal is the key to closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all students succeed.

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Executive Summary

Recruiting, supporting, and retaining the highest-quality teachers are essential to ensuring that all students learn. This is an obvious conclusion—one that schools and districts have understood for years. Now, however, there is increased urgency for districts and schools to have a high-quality teacher in every classroom (e.g., Darling-Hammond 1996b).

In a new and powerful way, schools and districts are being held accountable for the learning outcomes of the children they serve. Increased expectations for district and school policymakers and practitioners are having a profound effect on our education system. For the first time, there are high-stakes pressures on policymakers and practitioners to ensure that students are taught in a cohesive and systematic way and that all students learn at or beyond grade level. In order to meet these expectations, districts and schools must take a hard look at how their own practices affect the quality of teaching in their classrooms.

This study examines factors affecting teacher retention and how they are related to policy and practice at the school and district levels. The sample consisted of twelve elementary schools in Connecticut districts that had consistently high or low rates of teacher retention compared with similar schools. High- and low-retention schools within each of four districts were chosen so that we could identify how these schools succeeded or failed to retain teachers within the same policy environment. Data were collected at the district and school levels, and from teachers, including former teachers.

Incentives

Teachers rarely leave schools for a single reason; instead, they leave because of the sum of multiple burdens. This study emphasizes yet again that principals are the most important factor in teacher retention (Johnson et al. 2005; Weiss 1999).

The primary reasons given by former teachers for leaving schools place the effects of leadership in context (see Figure 1). Reasons for leaving are clustered into three groups. The black columns represent policies and practices cited by teachers that unintentionally lead to teacher attrition. For example, a heavy workload is not intentionally assigned in order to cause a teacher to leave. The checkered columns represent policies and practices cited by teachers that intentionally lead to teacher attrition. For example, policies allowing involuntary transfer are intended to require teachers to leave a school. Finally, the dotted columns represent personal reasons cited by teachers, such as pregnancy or a spouse's job transfer, that lead to teacher attrition.

Figure 1 (see next page) shows that the unintended consequences of school and district policies are at least as important as, and maybe more important than, the other two causes of attrition. For example, the single-most important reason teachers gave for leaving schools was poor leadership. Principals play the central role in creating positive working

Figure 1: Reasons given by former teachers for attrition
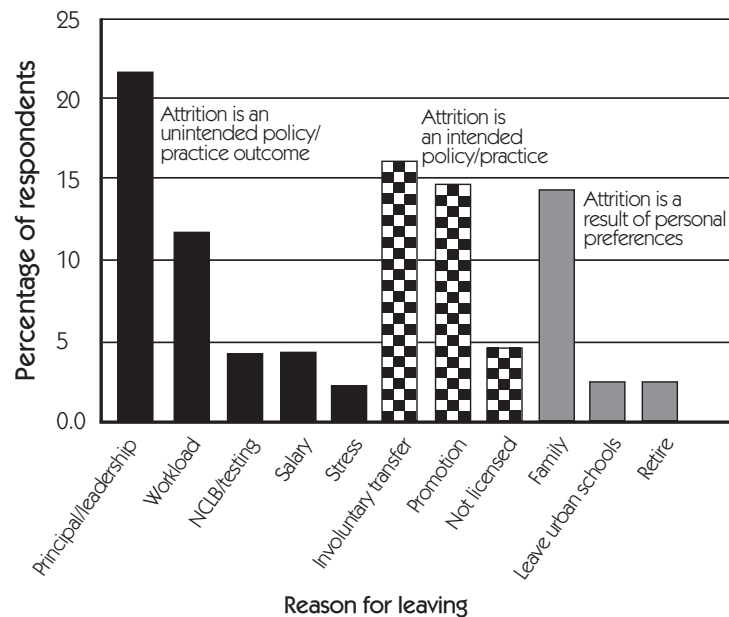
environments by creating and maintaining student discipline practices, treating teachers with respect, leading effective teams of teachers through the improvement process, and filtering and integrating reform initiatives.

This study also makes clear that district policy and practice greatly affect both principals and teachers. Two alarming examples of poor district policies and practices emerged: (1) the sheer quantity and discontinuity of reform efforts; and (2) the lack of supports for principals, particularly new principals. New tasks constantly bombard many teachers and distract them from being able to focus on teaching. This new work results from changed curricula, additional assessments, team meetings, new procedures for working with students, and other reform initiatives.

Unfortunately, the large majority of principals in this study had no formal supports in doing the necessary work to minimize the burdens on teachers. New principals faced the largest challenges in managing this filtering operation, because they received little or no help in rising to this new challenge. For these principals, it was "sink or swim" in very deep and choppy water.

Recommendations

Churning of policy initiatives and lack of support for new principals and teachers are longstanding problems in America's education system (Ingersoll 1999; Hess 1998). What has changed are the stakes that are now attached to failure to integrate and align policy initiatives and to support new educators. If the traditional education system cannot meet those challenges and poor student performance is a result, then schools run the risk of being reconstituted, and districts run the risk of losing control over their schools as they become charter schools. Connecticut's education policymakers are under increased pressure to find new sustainable solutions to seemingly persistent challenges. This report recommends several policy changes that can help guide the state, districts, and schools as they look to improve student performance through retaining quality teachers.

The first recommendation is for the state and/or districts to increase supports to principals, with a priority given to support of new principals. Potential mechanisms for this support include leadership academies for principals funded by the state or districts. The effectiveness of these supports is most likely dependent on the same factors that determine effective teacher professional development (Snow-Renner and Lauer 2005; Sparks and Hirsh 2000). Effective support for principals should be designed so that it is:

- job-embedded rather than abstract,
- ongoing and sustained rather than piecemeal,
- collegial and peer-supported,
- aligned with relevant school improvement goals and practices, and
- centered on active rather than passive learning.

The second recommendation involves the sheer number of district reform initiatives that shower down on classroom teachers. Districts need to manage the ways in which they implement reform so that these efforts do not have the unintended consequence of driving away quality teachers. This can be accomplished through the improvement and conscientious use of change management tools at the district level. While districts are learning to collect and use data on the *outcomes* of their efforts (e.g., test scores and teacher attrition), they generally are not repeating those steps to analyze the *processes* that lead to positive changes. Such processes might include new curricula, instructional changes, or school improvement efforts. Feedback loops on the implementation and efficacy

of reform processes can help ensure that reform results in changed practice, not simply frustrating busywork.

Next Steps

While this research has provided valuable insights into teacher retention in Connecticut, there are several unaddressed issues. First, while it is clear that districts need better tools for monitoring and improving reform efforts, the role of elected school boards in reform is not so clear. Traditionally, school boards select superintendents to serve as administrators of school improvement projects, yet it is clear that superintendents come and go. Superintendents frequently are unable to monitor and enhance instructional improvement efforts throughout the entire lifetime of the improvement effort. School boards, on the other hand, continue beyond the tenure of superintendents and may be able to provide more stability than superintendents to major reform efforts. Another role for boards is derived from their status as having primary decision-making authority over district operations. Through requiring periodic updates on reform implementation, school boards can help their superintendents monitor and improve their work.

A second unaddressed issue is the method by which districts integrate their improvement efforts into an overall system for developing the knowledge and skills of the men and women who teach children: the development of the adult human capital within a district. Ideally, this system would include a well-aligned curriculum, cohesive efforts to improve instruction, and integrated student support services, all supported by a comprehensive set of human resources policies and practices (Baker 2004; Resnick and Glennan 2002). These human resources policies include recruitment, hiring, evaluation, and compensation, as well as tools to remove ineffective educators (Henneman and Milanowski 2003). An important unaddressed issue is the optimal way to develop and support this integration at the district level.

This research has made it clear that teacher attrition is often the result of factors directly under the control of school and district leaders. Retention of teachers can be improved through minimizing the burdens on teachers that do not directly help improve educational outcomes. Instructional reform is the hard and important work on which teachers must be focused if they are to meet Connecticut's educational goals. Those who shape policy, from principals through state policymakers, need to minimize distractions from this focus and support teachers as they work to educate all of Connecticut's children.

The Study and Its Context

The goals of this study are simple: (1) to provide information to school, district, and state policymakers in Connecticut about factors affecting teacher retention; and (2) to describe how these factors are related to policy and practice. There are well-known factors that affect attrition, such as a teacher's family-related responsibilities to raise children or move when a spouse is transferred (Marvel 2007; Luekens 2004). The ways in which district and school policy activities lead to teacher attrition are less clear. This is the primary issue investigated in this study.

Previous research on school- and district-related factors affecting a public school teacher's decision to change schools or districts or to leave teaching altogether has shown that significant numbers of teachers leave as a result of what Ingersoll terms "negative organizational conditions." They leave for better teaching assignments, better administrative support, and/ or better working conditions (Marvel 2007; Luekens 2004; Johnson 2005; Hirsch 2004; Ingersoll 2001). Other factors previously cited by teachers include issues of student behavior, lack of ability to collaborate with colleagues, and problems with professional growth opportunities (Johnson 2005). This earlier research was the foundation for the questions and instruments used in this study.

Research Design

The study was designed to allow us to integrate and relate Connecticut district and school policy and practice with teacher attrition. Data were collected by telephone in structured interviews with former teachers. Site visits were conducted at schools and included interviews with current teachers, instructional coaches, assistant principals, and principals. Site visits were also conducted at district offices and consisted of interviews with the superintendent or his/her designee, those responsible for instructional improvement, and human resources directors.

The study compared pairs of similar elementary schools. Within each pair, we identified one school with a high rate of teacher retention and one with a low rate of teacher retention. This allowed us to isolate the factors most directly related to teacher retention. Schools within each pair were similar in the following respects: location in the same district, grade levels served (elementary or, in a few cases, K-8), student demographics, and size. We visited a total of 12 schools in four districts. Three of the districts are in DRG I and one is in DRG D. To encourage honest and insightful responses, we have not identified participating schools and districts in this report.

For the purposes of this study, teacher attrition is defined as resulting from when a teacher who works in a school one year no longer works in the same school the following year. Retention is the inverse of attrition—when a teacher works in a school for two consecutive years. Schools were identified as having high and low rates of attrition using a statistical technique to identify whether a school had an attrition rate different from what would be predicted, given its student and teacher characteristics. High-retention schools consistently had higher rates of teacher retention than would be predicted by the statistical model according to student demographics, teacher demographics, and size. Low-retention schools consistently had lower rates of teacher retention than predicted by the statistical model. Attrition data were used for teachers who worked between 2000 and 2005. (See Appendix 1 for additional details on the schools selected and the method.)

The schools were selected using data from 2000-2001 through 2005-2006. The data for this study were collected in 2006-2007. At the point when the schools were visited and data were collected, some of the conditions used to select the schools had changed. Most importantly, two of the low-retention schools (each in a different district) had been reorganized due to school construction and consolidation. This meant that in these two schools, it was very difficult to identify factors associated with past low retention. Therefore, we used only limited data from these two schools in this analysis.

Another important factor was new leadership. Six of the 12 schools had new leadership, and four of these new leaders were first-year principals. Principals in three other schools in the sample had been on the job for three or fewer years. This could be viewed as a design limitation, since principals are identified as the central factor in teacher retention. However, this situation provided us with opportunities to gather comparative information about what did and did not work well between prior and current administrations and the challenges faced by new leadership teams.

We conducted telephone interviews with 46 former teachers. These teachers had left the 12 schools visited for data collection as well as three other low- or high-retention schools (identified using the method described above) in three other districts. Of these, four teachers came from reorganized schools; we excluded their data from the analysis. The remaining 42 teachers constituted a 25 percent response rate from the population of teachers identified for this study. We contacted these teachers by telephone and offered them a $10 Amazon. com gift certificate for their participation.

The research design allowed a multilevel investigation of factors affecting teacher retention. Teacher- and school-level factors associated with high and low retention rates could be related to the practices of the leadership team at the school and district levels. This allows inferences about how policies and practices of district and school leaders can affect teacher retention.

This report presents both sides of an important issue: what keeps teachers in schools and why teachers leave schools. The report examines the school building and district leadership practices and policies that impact attrition and retention.

Research Context

This study must be understood in the context of a new environment of high-stakes accountability for education. In a national poll conducted in 2003, teachers ranked "unreasonable pressures to improve student achievement" as the most difficult thing about being a teacher (Farkas et al. 2003). The standards and accountability movement in school reform, capped by the federal No Child Left Behind law (NCLB), has greatly increased the pressure on schools and districts to improve student learning, particularly in language arts and mathematics. Under NCLB, states are now required to define what students should learn and to identify whether schools are successful at helping students achieve those learning goals.

Even more importantly for the purposes of this study, adults at both the district and school levels face sanctions and consequences if students do not meet these goals. At the most extreme, adults working in a school that is not meeting learning goals can lose their jobs, and adults at the district level who are in charge of such schools can have their authority to manage a school revoked. It is also clear that at least some teachers are feeling pressure to improve learning. A teacher in a high-retention school said (only half-jokingly), "I am waiting for the CMT [state assessment scores] and I will get fired."

As a result, all of the schools and districts in this study have been focused on improving student learning as measured by achievement tests. We observed similar responses to this pressure across the districts in this sample. First, each district has a centralized curriculum, particularly in reading and mathematics. This centralized curriculum took the form of pacing charts, which describe the topics teachers should be teaching, and/or structured reading programs, such as Success for All, which dictate not only what should be taught, but also how. Second, many districts prescribed the amount of teaching time, and often the schedule, appropriate for certain subjects. This often took the form of required 90-minute literacy blocks. We found mathematics and literacy coaches in almost all of the schools we visited. While their roles varied, many coaches reported spending most of their time administering assessments and managing the resulting data, rather than modeling effective instruction. Finally, districts were implementing their own assessments to monitor student achievement and to identify students and schools that were falling behind.

The focus on achievement was new to some of the districts we visited. When asked about challenges facing teachers, a top district official said, "Many kids can't read; there has been lots of social promotion." At the school level, teachers varied in how they defined success. Many teachers did not indicate that improving student achievement was their primary measure of success. Instead, they tended to focus on improving students' social and emotional health and increasing student excitement about education. In the words of one teacher, this entailed "setting their dreams on fire." At the same time, it was not clear that teachers felt they had the support or skills needed to improve student learning. A teacher explained, "We go to workshops and they tell us what is wrong, but nobody has the answer on how to catch the kids up." The end result is that throughout the system people feel pressured and stressed to improve student learning, but many do not feel they have the tools to do so.

What Keeps Teachers in Schools

Two main themes about what helps keep teachers in schools, particularly high-retention schools, emerged from this study. First, retention and attrition trends are often simply reflections of how difficult it is to work in a given place. The things that ease teachers' burdens increase retention, and those that add to teachers' burdens increase attrition. Well-managed expectations for changed practice, satisfying work, and good personal relations ease the burdens of work. A second theme is the importance of school leadership in easing or adding to the burdens that teachers feel. Principals play a primary role and district leadership a secondary role in making a teacher's job easier or more difficult.

Four specific factors emerged as important to making a teacher's job easier:

- Effective school leadership and management
- Supportive relationships
- Feeling competent and/or successful
- Opportunities to grow

As will become clear, what makes a teacher's job easier is not limited to things that reduce the workload, although that is important. Teachers also find their jobs easier when they feel good about the work they do.

Effective School Leadership and Management

School leadership and management are central to teacher retention. Data from teacher surveys have shown that teachers report "administrative support" as a top factor related to retention (Ingersoll 2001). The interviews with current and former teachers in this study clarified two different dimensions of positive administrative support:

- Support when working with challenging students and parents
- Filtering and aligning district reform initiatives

Support When Working With Challenging Students

Working with challenging students and parents is a primary stressor for teachers. Prior research has shown that challenging student behavior is a primary reason why teachers leave or consider leaving teaching (Coggshall 2006).

Administrators have a profound effect on student behavior through their actions in setting behavior expectations for students and creating effective discipline systems for working with students who do not meet those expectations. All of the adults in the building need to have common expectations for student behavior. A teacher in a high-retention school explained, "The kids are generally well-behaved. We have a strong behavior management system, and we are all on the same page." Compare this statement to the response of a former teacher when she was asked what made her feel overwhelmed: "The behavior of the students was extreme [and] the administration did not know what to do." School leaders play the primary role in establishing expectations of acceptable student behavior. The principal both establishes these expectations and creates and sustains the necessary systems for enforcing them.

If a system for enforcing behavior expectations is not in place, schools, particularly those with high concentrations of low-income students, can become chaotic. A teacher from a high-retention school reflected, "You can't be successful in an urban environment unless you have an administration that knows how to handle these children." A teacher in a low-retention school described the prior year in the following way: "It was a school of chaos, falling apart at the seams with high levels of discipline issues. The kids were running wild."

When students do not meet expectations for behavior, teachers want to understand and generally agree with the consequences established by school administrators. Since discipline is a schoolwide issue, what happens to one teacher affects all the teachers. One former teacher reported that a teacher in her school had been struck in the face with a chain, and that "the administration did not want to do anything about it." This left that teacher "tired or frustrated—due to [student] behavior and lack of support." Teachers reported valuing clear guidelines about the consequences facing a student for a given misbehavior and the importance of having those guidelines applied to all students in the school. This emphasis on consistent application of behavior guidelines was demonstrated in a positive description of a new administrator in a low-retention school: "She follows through. … [It] doesn't matter if you're usually the favorite student; consequences are for everyone."

The expectation of the consistent application of behavior guidelines raises particular challenges for a principal who is trying to institute a differentiated student behavior system, where consequences are structured to fit both the child and the behavior. Teachers worry that, if consequences vary by student, some students will feel emboldened to misbehave. In a school where a new principal was implementing such a system, a teacher worried that "when the kids see one person not get disciplined, they will all go crazy." This does not mean a differentiated student behavior system is better or worse in the long term for meeting educational goals. It simply means that the implementation of a differentiated student behavior system can be more stressful to teachers than implementation of a system with predictable consequences of misbehavior, regardless of who misbehaves.

Filtering and Aligning District Initiatives

Ensuring that staff is not overwhelmed by district initiatives is very important for retaining teachers. Over two-thirds of former teachers reported being overwhelmed by their jobs. Given the pressure to reform, states and districts are producing multiple initiatives to improve student learning. Principals in all high-retention schools filtered these initiatives and helped teachers integrate them into their ongoing practices. One principal in a high-retention school specifically described her role as "trying to phase in district requirements strategically, so the staff would not be overwhelmed."

Filtering and aligning initiatives require two skills that often develop over time with experience. Principals must be able to identify which initiatives to implement, and they must also be able to manage implementation so that the change minimally stresses teachers. For example, a veteran principal in a high-retention school described her prioritization efforts by saying, "As you get older, you know what to take seriously." This can be compared to the perspective of a new principal in a low-retention school, who said, "If it's a [district] directive, you do it." Managing the alignment of multiple reform initiatives into ongoing efforts within the school requires principals to be, as one teacher described, "careful in delivery of new tasks, gauging how much is on teachers' plates."

When a principal is skilled at this alignment work, she/he can considerably ease the burdens on teachers. The end result is that teachers' jobs are more manageable and have a higher potential for being satisfying. As discussed below, the number of initiatives and their lack of alignment are significant burdens on teachers.

Supportive Relationships

Teachers in both high- and low-retention schools almost unanimously reported that their relationships with each other, students, and school leadership were the main factors that made schools a good place to work. This finding is consistent with previous national research (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Coggshall 2006).

Teachers' Peer Relationships

Teachers first mention peer relationships as they discussed what made schools a good place to work. This was the case at both high- and low-retention schools. Simple feelings of friendship between teachers were valued. "One good thing [about this school] is the strong friendships," reported a teacher from a high-retention school. Having friends at a school simply makes it easier for teachers to go to work each day.

This does not mean that all the teachers at a school have to be "best friends." Many of the high-retention schools we visited had fissures among the staff. Often these divisions were between grade levels. A principal in a high-retention school reported divisions between the upper-grade-level teachers and lower-grade-level teachers. A teacher in the same school said, "The school is very divided." Teachers appear to value a core group of people with whom they feel comfortable working, but this does not need to encompass the entire school.

Teachers also help each other with their work. Examples from this study include sharing of instructional materials, orienting new teachers and helping them with classroom techniques, and covering classrooms when a teacher was delayed by outside activities. Interestingly, very few teachers reported observing and providing their colleagues with feedback, which is a core component of professional learning communities (Hord 1997).

However, good relations with colleagues are not enough to keep teachers in schools. Teachers in low-retention schools cited positive peer relations as often as did teachers in high-retention schools. Of the former teachers who voluntarily left their schools, 70 percent said that the collegiality in their former school met their expectations. Thus, improving collegiality at schools may not be the most effective retention strategy.

Relationships With Students

Nationally, the main reason teachers give for choosing to teach is the desire to help young people learn and develop (Feistritzer and Shankar 2005). In this study, while students were cited as a source of stress, many teachers also said that students were a source of joy. Often the same teacher would report both opinions. This was particularly true of schools that served high-poverty student populations. Many teachers reported good attitudes among students. A teacher in a high-retention, high-poverty school commented, "The kids never don't want to do things; they are not jaded or spoiled." Teachers also reported that students seemed appreciative of the teachers' work. A teacher from another high-retention school said the students "have a lot of appreciation on their part for anything you do. … The love you give out comes back ten-fold." Interactions between teachers and students clearly add to teachers' positive experiences working in schools and can be a factor in retention. A teacher who stayed in a low-retention, high-poverty school related, "The reason I stay is because of the kids—I'm passionate about working with them. I've worked with other kids with more resources, but I prefer to be with these kinds of kids."

Relationships With School Administrators

While friendship is an important part of the relationships between teachers, it does not appear to be the primary component of positive relationships between administrators and the teachers who work for them. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that the most important components of positive relationships between principals and teachers are trust and respect (e.g., Hirsch and Emerick 2007; Sebring and Bryk 2000).

In this study, respect appears to be the most important factor in teacher-administrator relationships. Respect in this context appears to have two components: personal and professional. On the personal level, teachers appreciate being treated with courtesy and working with a principal who sees them as human beings. On the professional level, teachers want to feel that leadership takes their ideas, when voiced, into consideration. A teacher in a low-retention school with a new, well-received administrative team captured these two components, saying, "We feel more respect, get a smile, and are acknowledged in the hall. Now they are open to our concerns, and we are taken more seriously as teachers."

Creating feelings of respect does not seem to be a product of any single leadership style. Teachers reported feeling respected by principals described as "authoritarian" as well as by principals seen as "consensus builders." The feeling that principals will ask for and are open to hearing teachers' ideas was important. According to one teacher, "I feel valued, and they [the administrators] value your answer."

Conclusions About Relationships

Activities that disrupt these personal relationships can be stressful to teachers. This was very apparent in the reorganized schools we visited in this study. When asked about challenges to working in a reorganized school, one teacher lamented, "We have lost that community feeling. … I don't know at least half the kids." The schools visited in this study were reorganized for important policy reasons, such as responding to changes in student enrollment and the need to update facilities. However, teachers needed time and support to adjust to these changes.

Feeling Successful

Not surprisingly, teachers like to feel successful. They want to believe that their hard work is worth the time and effort (Bandura 1982; Tschannen-Moran et al. 1998). Across the sample, teachers defined being successful in various ways, from seeing kids' eyes light up at new knowledge to watching students improve their social and academic skills. When teachers felt successful, this appeared to contribute to making the job feel easier. Asked about why she did not leave her school, a teacher at a high-retention school said that when the kids do get it, "it can be very rewarding."

At the school level, teachers discussed how school leadership was able to help teachers —particularly new teachers— feel successful and want to remain in teaching. This support centered on identifying teachers' challenges and providing supports to help them meet those challenges. As described by teachers, these supports included moving a teacher to a new class that better fit his/her skills; allowing a teacher to integrate a personal interest in computers into his/her professional duties; providing professional support, such as additional professional development; creating opportunities to observe other teachers; and providing coaching.

District efforts to support teachers professionally were less "visible" to teachers, in that teachers rarely described such

efforts as helping them feel successful. A few teachers did mention district supports, such as pacing charts or professional-development opportunities. Some district-provided supports had both negative and positive implications for teachers. For example, some teachers characterized pacing charts as making planning easier, but teachers more often described them as a burden, since they did not allow teachers to re-teach material when students needed additional help with the material.

Finally, while it is clear that feeling successful does make teachers feel better about their work, it is not enough to keep a teacher in a job. The large majority of the former teachers interviewed (from both high- and low-retention schools) said they felt successful in the year prior to leaving their job.

Opportunities to Grow

Some teachers interviewed for this study said they valued opportunities to grow, and they identified two different types of opportunities for growth: opportunities within their current positions and opportunities to change positions within a district. Within-position opportunities included both growth as instructors of academic subjects and opportunities to apply creativity to their work. One teacher from a high-retention school addressed the creativity issue by saying, "I think [the school] is a creative place, which lets it be fun." Outlets for creativity include teaching topics or subjects that teachers find interesting and being involved in stimulating projects or activities, such as conducting a school play.

Opportunities to grow through different positions within a district allow teachers to try different jobs or responsibilities, such as working on a special assignment in the district office, working as a coach or resource teacher, and teaching at different grade levels. Several senior teachers we interviewed discussed how satisfying and interesting their careers and the various positions they had held within a district had been. These teachers more often worked in the larger districts that had more varied roles and positions for teachers than the smaller districts in our sample.

Conclusions About Why Teachers Remain in Schools

An important finding of this research is that making a job satisfying and interesting eases the burdens of hard work and challenging circumstances. In the area of relationships, respectful personal and professional relationships between principals and their teachers are very important. In terms of feeling successful, the principal has the primary responsibility for allocating the resources and supports that can be very helpful in supporting a teachers' sense of success. Finally, within a school it is the principal who creates the opportunities for teachers to pursue work that allows them to grow and/or feel creative. While none of these factors is completely under a principal's control, he/she has a significant role to play regarding each one.

Why Teachers Leave Schools

In the interviews and discussions with current and former teachers, particularly those at low-retention schools, it became clear that leaving a school was often not the product of any single factor. Instead, it was a combination of burdens that pushed a teacher out of a school. For example, one teacher gave three reasons for leaving the district: the money was insufficient, the urban students were too challenging, and "the district was poorly organized, in that there were too many people in the main office who were not working."

The sample for this research included teachers who left high- and low-retention elementary schools, so our findings cannot be generalized to all teachers in Connecticut. However, the study does provide a sense of the relative importance of the reasons given by teachers for leaving. The primary reasons given by teachers for leaving have been organized into three categories, as shown in Figure 1. The first category contains reasons for attrition which were the unintended consequences of district policies or practices. The second category contains reasons for attrition that were the intended consequences of district policies or practices, for example, personnel decisions made in connection with reorganizing school or district resources. The third represents personal reasons cited by teachers, such as a decision not to work with challenging urban students any longer or to retire.

Figure 1: Reasons given by former teachers for attrition
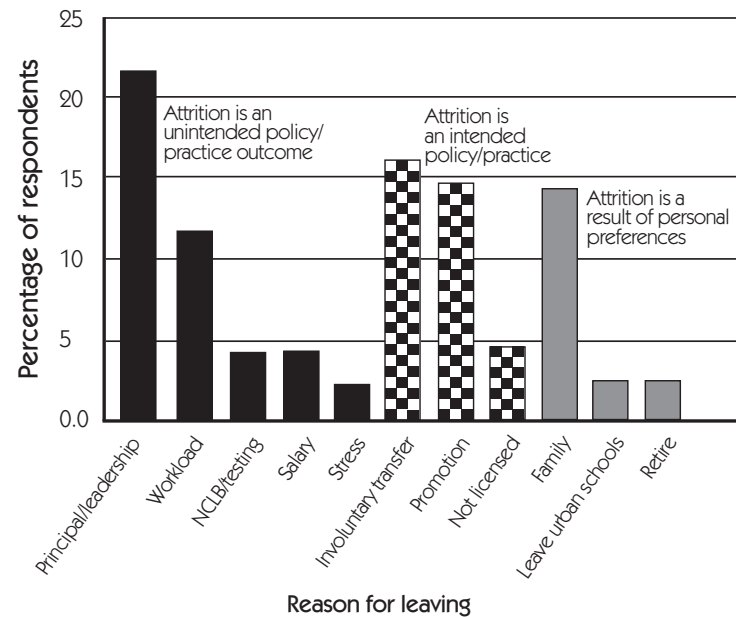
As Figure 1 shows, attrition as the unintended consequence of policies or practices is at least as important as, and maybe more important than, either the intended consequences of policies and practices that intentionally lead to attrition or the reasons that are personal to individual teachers. Teachers in the sample most

often cited unsatisfactory principal leadership as the primary reason they left schools. Other reasons important to the teachers in our sample included involuntary transfers and family obligations, such as children- and marriage-related factors.

This section examines why teachers leave schools, focusing on policies and practices that have the unintended outcome of attrition. Because the reasons for teacher attrition are often the inverse of those for teacher retention, the structure of this section parallels that of the previous section, with additional detail on the burdens that drive teachers out of schools. In summary, the reasons teachers leave schools can be categorized as follows:

- Breakdowns in management
- Challenging relationships
- Loss of creativity and control
- Poor operations
- Salary issues

School leadership plays a role in most of these issues. It is the principal who manages school initiatives in ways that do or do not lead to teachers feeling overwhelmed. Principals manage relationships within schools and between the school and external forces. Principals are able to create working conditions in which teachers can be creative, or not. However, the district's role in selecting and overseeing its principal workforce is also critical to the retention of teachers. In addition, districts play an overriding role in general operations that affect teachers, including the allocation of human and financial resources to schools, building maintenance, and textbook distribution, as well as managing reform and human capital development.

Management

A primary role of leadership is to focus the organization on what is important. Numerous studies of business organizations reveal that a lack of focus, or a focus on too many issues simultaneously, leads to poor employee morale and poor performance (e.g., Wagner 2006).

Under pressure to improve student outcomes, districts are creating an often overwhelming number of new programs and practices for teachers to implement. The teachers we interviewed discussed several different types of new initiatives: additional testing and accountability requirements, curricular/instruction reforms (e.g., Writer's Workshop and Success for All), and organizational reforms (e.g., teaming). In some schools, the practice of inclusion of special education students also presented a significant challenge.

School and district leaders have the responsibility of managing this workload. Unfortunately, effective efforts at workload management were often not apparent, particularly in low-retention schools. Breakdowns in the management of new initiatives led teachers to be frustrated and overwhelmed as a result of multiple, poorly implemented programs. The end result was that many teachers felt that, in the words of one teacher, "every new initiative is a problem." Sadly, these breakdowns were often apparent to at least some mid-level managers at the district level. For example, when we asked a district manager when the rate of new initiatives would slow down, the reply was, "Not anytime soon. That is scary and puts teachers on edge for whether to stay or go." However, while there were pockets of awareness about the challenges brought on by these new initiatives, district managers did not seem to have mechanisms either to slow the onslaught of new initiatives or to improve their implementation.

Multiple, Poorly Implemented Programs

Multiple initiatives created several challenges for teachers. First, poor implementation of programs means that teachers do not get the support they need. Teachers were frustrated by being asked to change practice without the necessary supports and without even understanding the anticipated new practice or outcome sought. In particular, teachers often received insufficient professional development to implement specific initiatives. A teacher from a low-retention school reflected, "Because there are so many initiatives, the PD [professional development] gets stretched." Similarly, an administrator described a problem with one initiative as follows: "We're doing rubrics now, but no formal training or even exemplar work is being shown [to the teachers]." This made time spent in professional development seem like a waste to teachers. Also, regardless of the quality of the ideas behind a particular initiative, teachers (and administrators) may consider its implementation a failure if they do not have or are not given the necessary time for reflection, feedback, and continuous improvement.

Another challenge for teachers is that initiatives often are not clearly articulated or smoothly integrated into the existing work of the school. A district administrator said pointedly, "The teachers cannot connect between the different 'things' that are quality but unfocused. … So we do not see evidence that the PD is implemented." In one example of disconnected initiatives, a district-required schedule for literacy blocks and

a school-required discipline system necessitated simultaneous meetings. Teachers simply could not do both things at once.

District central offices often failed to coordinate their own activities, which in turn affected teachers. One central office scheduled multiple conflicting meetings for the same day. In the words of one teacher: "We have whole departments of people where it's their job to develop curriculum but none of the departments have ever communicated. And they'll schedule meetings on the same day, so it's obvious they're not communicating. You just don't get the sense that the whole thing downtown is a well-oiled machine."

This not only frustrates teachers; it is dispiriting. Many teachers do not want to work to their utmost in a dysfunctional organization. They understandably fear that their best efforts will be lost in the chaos of the central office.

Multiple, uncoordinated reform initiatives also burdened teachers by requiring repeated requests for the same information. Teachers reported the same data to the district office, but on different forms. One teacher complained, "There is lots of repetition, four different forms for everything. I have to copy down the class lists multiple times." Teachers particularly noted the burdens of paperwork that required recording (and recording again) student assessment results, and paperwork associated with students' special education needs. These repeated requests for information added to teachers' duties, but teachers did not perceive any links to either instructional improvement or student achievement.

The most challenging burden teachers described was the time spent on assessments. Teachers in both high- and low-retention schools were very frustrated by the amount of time spent preparing materials for, administering, and reporting the results of assessments.

These findings should not be interpreted to mean that teachers are not interested in changing their practice. Instead, teachers are frustrated and overwhelmed by too many disconnected change initiatives occurring at once. As a teacher in a high-retention school pointed out, "The problem is the new curriculum and instruction. Both are good, but it is too much at once." The resulting negative feelings lead to teachers wanting to move to other districts where initiatives are perceived to be more limited and better-implemented.

Sadly, the fact that district central offices are sometimes part of the challenge faced by principals and teachers was not lost on many of the district officials with whom we spoke. An administrator commented, "Teachers give up hope—there are so many initiatives. I am just one more 'grim reaper' when I show up to help—teachers feel overwhelmed and I am part of the problem." Throughout this study, teachers, principals, and administrators perceived that while district- and school-level systems to manage change initiatives are sorely needed, they are clearly lacking.

Inclusion

In some, but not all, of the schools visited for this study, the implementation of inclusion was particularly challenging for teachers. In 2002, the P.J. Settlement mandated inclusion in Connecticut, requiring an increase in the number of students with intellectual disabilities who are placed in traditional education classes with appropriate supports and services. The challenges of inclusion to some teachers were twofold.

Teachers felt they had to work with students whose disabilities presented issues that were beyond their knowledge and expertise. These teachers felt at a loss in how to best meet the needs of these students and wanted more services for these students. In a few cases, the teachers felt that "there was no training [for inclusion]." More often, some teachers simply believed they had neither the ability to serve the disabled students in their classroom nor the help they needed. "I can see things coming; when you can't get the help you need, it is a ticking time bomb." Several former teachers cited lack of or inappropriate services for students as the reason they left their positions.

A second challenge, for at least some teachers, was that working with special-needs children took time from other tasks, including working with other children in the classroom. As one teacher observed, "Inclusion can be good; it works most of the time, but it takes time away from other work." The end result is that inclusion left some teachers very frustrated: "It [inclusion] is not good for behavior in school or for academic excellence. It has been harmful for school morale and behavior."

It is beyond the scope of this study to verify whether teachers had the appropriate supports to serve students with intellectual disabilities. It is clear that in some schools, for

some teachers, implementation of inclusion policies added to teachers' responsibilities, and teachers' feelings of being burdened stemmed from a lack of training and access to service providers.

Instability in School Leadership

A final management breakdown in many of the low-retention schools was instability in principal leadership. Many of the low-retention schools had high rates of principal turnover, and most of the high-retention schools had stable principal leadership. A teacher in a low-retention school commented: "It's been difficult because we have had four different principals. Some treat us like real pros and it's glorious. Others haven't given us that recognition and the change is difficult. You'll have one principal where morale is super-high and then there's a change. It's hard getting used to different expectations."

This lack of stability is very important. High principal turnover is a barrier to effective school management and to the creation of good relationships between teachers and their school leadership. As discussed previously, principals are key to reducing teacher attrition through establishing respectful relationships with teachers, moderating relationships with students and parents, filtering and aligning initiatives, and creating opportunities and supports for teachers to feel successful and creative. Principal turnover creates uncertainty among teachers, in that different principals have different expectations.

Challenging Relationships

Former and current teachers discussed two different types of challenging relationships: those they had with school leadership and those they had with children (and sometimes with their parents). Obviously, relationships with the principal are a function of the principal's interpersonal skills, and challenging students and parents cannot be mandated away through policy. However, policies and practices that make teachers feel supported when faced with challenging relationships are important tools for easing teacher burdens.

Challenging Relationships With Leadership

Former and current teachers agreed with the district administrator who said, "Relationships with principals are where things break down." The critical issue in relationships between teachers and principals is one of respect and trust. Teachers want to feel that the principal is there to support and help them with their work. A teacher in a low-retention school described the relationship with his principal in the following terms: "It is not even clear if we are on the same team. I am not sure whose side the principal is on." This lack of trust makes the job harder. Former teachers who left because of problems with leadership described principals who "went through my desk drawers" or "did not listen." These teachers attributed their decision to leave their schools to such actions.

Challenging Relationships With Students

Teachers had conflicting perspectives on their students. Teachers greatly valued some students' appreciation of the teacher's efforts and enthusiasm for learning. At the same time, teachers often described challenging students as having "a lack of respect," "little motivation," and of "acting out," and characterized them as considerable burdens.

Obviously, schools must teach the students they have, and they must reach out to all the children they serve, regardless of how challenging they may be. School and district management can help mediate these demanding relationships. As discussed earlier, effective discipline policies are a must. If a teacher has challenges with students that are not resolved, teacher attrition can be the result. Teachers also reported needing help identifying strategies that work with children who are not motivated by a particular curriculum or instructional pedagogy; for example, what to do with children who did not respond well to Success for All. Here again, school leadership plays a key role in identifying and assisting both teachers and students who are not succeeding. Districts play a role in making sure that the principal has access to new tools beyond what is available in a given school that may be helpful with particularly challenging students.

Challenging Relationships With Parents

Parents, like their children, were a source of both joy and stress for teachers. Teachers appreciated parents who participated in their children's schooling, particularly if they encouraged their children's academic pursuits and supported the completion of homework. Ironically, in some cases teachers also valued parents who were not engaged in schooling, because these parents put few pressures on the teachers to meet the children's needs.

However, parents who were hostile or angry toward teachers were clearly a source of stress. Teachers described demanding parents whose first reaction to a problem was confrontational: "What did you do to my child?" These teachers felt that they did not get to explain a given situation before being accused of doing something wrong. In these cases especially, teachers appreciated school and district leadership support of their classroom or instructional decisions.

Loss of Creativity and Control

Just as the ability to be creative eases the burden of work for teachers, teachers described how loss of control over projects, curriculum, and methods used in classes reduced their opportunities to be creative. One teacher described a district-mandated reading program as "zap[ping] your creativity away." Some teachers experienced this loss of creativity as both emotionally and professionally draining.

Other teachers felt that they lost control over their curriculum and subsequently lost their ability to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. When one group of teachers in a low-retention school was asked why teachers leave, they responded: "Most of the curriculums are prescripted. We have to follow [them] and there is no time to be creative. This leaves no space to address students' needs; we have difficult kids and sometimes need to be creative to meet their needs."

Curricula that did not allow time to work with students who had fallen behind frustrated teachers in both high- and low-retention schools. The centralization of curricula is described in The Study and Its Context section of this report (see page 5) as a common response across districts to increased pressure for student achievement. Lack of time for remediation for those students who do not keep pace with the curriculum seems to be a problem in implementing these types of new reforms.

Poor Operations

Breakdowns in school operations add to teachers' burdens. These include shortages of substitute teachers, insufficient or nonexistent instructional materials, poor physical infrastructure, and salary issues (e.g., Learning Point Associates 2007; Buckley et al. 2004). Some operational burdens simply make day-to-day teaching harder, but several directly hinder reform.

Substitutes

Teachers reported that a shortage of substitutes made day-to-day operations harder. A teacher from a low-retention school said, "If there's no coverage in regular classes, that teacher's class would be split and different teachers will take in the extra kids. It means you have to shift your planning and you've often got kids at different levels." The lack of substitutes affected teachers in several classrooms and seemed to be a regular occurrence in some districts.

Teachers also perceived the lack of substitutes as an obstacle to reform. If teachers needed to leave the school for training or to observe other teachers and no substitutes were available, teachers often decided to forego training opportunities because they did not want to disrupt their own classroom or other classrooms.

Instructional Materials and Training

Inadequate instructional materials and training on the use of the materials also stalled reforms, particularly when the materials were needed to implement a reform initiative. A teacher in a low-retention school discussed her frustration with being trained to use mathematics manipulatives but being unable to get the materials to implement the program. Ironically, in another low-retention school, a teacher described the opposite problem. She received the box of supplies without any instructions for their use.

Lack of basic supplies, such as pencils, paper, and functioning copy machines, was a frustration and a personal expense in both high- and low-retention schools. Teachers described spending hundreds of dollars on materials and having copies made outside of the school. One teacher described her school's copy machine as her "biggest nemesis." In one school, teachers from three grades pooled their personal money to rent their own copy machine.

Inadequate Physical Plant

Many teachers reported poor physical infrastructure. Problems included lack of space, poor heating and cooling, mold, and a shortage of bathrooms. While former teachers did not identify any of these operational issues as the primary reason for leaving, they were mentioned often as challenging conditions they faced in their former schools.

Salary

Economic studies make clear that compensation is an important issue in teacher attrition, and professional staff in both high- and low-retention schools mentioned it as an issue (Guarino et al. 2006). A small number of the former teachers interviewed described salary as the primary reason for leaving schools. However, the relationship of salary to teacher attrition is surprisingly complex.

Teachers often described salary considerations in a very sophisticated way. Several teachers explained that there are really two salary differentials to take into consideration when looking at opportunities in other districts: immediate and lifetime. Teachers can experience an immediate increase in salary when they change jobs. Teachers in both high- and low-retention schools described annual salary differences of up to $10,000 in neighboring districts. A 2006 Connecticut Center for School Change report showed that Connecticut teachers who changed districts between 2002 and 2003 received, on average, a higher immediate salary (Reichardt and Arnold 2006). However, several teachers understood that immediate differences in salary might not reflect lifetime benefits; i.e., whereas a salary in a different district might be higher now, in the future a teacher might make more money in his or her current position. One teacher described it this way: "In the suburbs, teachers see a faster pay scale, but you bottom out quicker. Then you do a tossup on what you have."

While salary is a complex issue, it is clear that teacher salary is a prominent consideration in district competition for teachers. In the long run, districts must have competitive salary schedules or they will run the risk of losing the competition for talent.

Overwhelmed and Out

When asked about the challenges of their former positions, those teachers who had left their jobs often had lists of reasons. While Figure 1 (see page 14) above illustrates the primary burdens for teachers, it masks the reality that individual challenges can have an additive effect and that there is not necessarily a single smoking gun that causes a teacher to leave a school. Over two-thirds of former teachers reported feeling overwhelmed. While the decision to leave a school might be triggered by a defining event (e.g., a conflict with leadership, nonfunctioning student discipline systems, too many initiatives or curricular changes), the majority of former teachers felt overwhelmed by a host of issues.

Policy and Practice at the Leadership Level

In previous sections, we have discussed the factors that made teachers want to stay in their jobs and those that made them want to leave. In general, factors that decreased the perceived burdens of teaching made teachers more likely to stay, and factors that increased this burden led to decisions to leave. This section highlights how the actions by both school- and district-level leaders can increase burdens for teachers and lead to higher rates of attrition.

Principals' Skills

Principals need certain skills to moderate the burdens of teaching. The principals in our study were the key to establishing a stable team of teachers and to leading that team's efforts to meet the learning needs of the students in the school. The skills possessed by principals who successfully led stable school teams included the ability to:

- filter and align multiple district initiatives,
- establish and maintain effective and consistent behavior management systems for students (and, sometimes, parents), and
- establish and maintain respectful relationships with staff.

In short, principals require a particular skill set to retain teachers in their schools; however, not all principals possess these skills. This study found very few formal district- or school-level structures that supported principals in working to gain and improve these skills.

Principals' Skills and Teacher Retention

The clearest difference between the low- and high-retention schools visited in this study was the role played by principals in managing teacher workloads. The principal sets the direction for instructional reform in the school. Principals at high-retention schools were able to filter out district initiatives that were not important and to align high-priority initiatives with ongoing reforms and processes in the school. As one district official commented, "It is up to a principal to focus on literacy—and do what he/she wants to do. Each school must pick [its] focus." In order to effectively do this, principals need the ability to both identify and implement correctly those initiatives that meet the learning needs of both the students and the teachers.

The functionality of the school's behavior management system was a second difference between the high- and low-retention schools. Principals need the ability to create and implement systems to meet the behavioral needs of students, while also buffering teachers from the challenging behavior of students and, in some cases, parents.

In several of the low-retention schools with new leadership, it was clear that these new principals had to establish an effective discipline system first before moving on to supporting teachers and improving instruction. A teacher in a low-retention school with a new principal described the difference after the implementation of a discipline system that enhanced teachers' abilities to focus on instruction: "Past years were chaos with no support for new teachers. They always needed help; now they have other supports and experienced teachers can help." The end result of a new discipline system was new teachers needed less help and experienced teachers had more time to provide help.

A third essential skill for principals is the establishment of positive, respectful relationships with teachers. A poor relationship with a school principal is a driving factor in teacher attrition. A teacher in a high-retention school characterized a positive relationship as follows: "Teachers know that the principal has respect for and supports the teachers. They're not always going to be nice conversations, but teachers know when a situation's over, it's over." Teachers apparently understood not only that the principal would accept teacher input while still holding ultimate decision-making authority, but also that grudges would not be held over past disagreements. Managing personnel in this way allows for ongoing cordial professional relationships and requires the principal to possess high levels of interpersonal skills.

Skills of New Administrators

In the course of this study we visited schools with new principals (and often new administrative teams) who were working to change the course of their schools. Several were first-year principals in low-retention schools, but we also visited high-retention schools where new principals were working to improve instruction or make other changes in operations. We found that new administrators in both low- and high-retention schools struggled in three areas.

Principals who were new to the district were learning basic district operational processes, and the learning curve was often steep. For example, with respect to requesting building repairs, one frustrated administrator said, "To get things fixed we have to say the right thing to the right person. … It takes too long." New administrators can benefit from an induction and orientation process to clarify district procedures and processes.

New principals struggled to establish school schedules. Principals had to be skillful in maximizing student learning time and teacher collaboration time, while reducing opportunities for disruptions during transitions. This balancing act was clearly

clearly difficult for new administrators, and even a few experienced administrators found it challenging.

Finally, while these new principals were all attempting to make substantial changes to school culture and processes, they often had no clear understanding of how to manage the change process itself (Fullan 1991). Leading substantial change within a school is an extremely challenging and dynamic job that requires an understanding of both the change to be accomplished and the processes that help and hinder change. These new principals appeared to have little grounding in or knowledge of change management, which undoubtedly affected their teachers' views of the desirability of change and their own ability to be successful in the new environment.

Conclusions About Principals' Skills

The positive or negative role played by principals in retaining teachers is at least partially a product of principals' knowledge and skills. Important skills for principals interested in retaining teachers include the following:

- Creating effective student discipline systems
- Managing and supporting effective parental involvement
- Building trust and respect with teachers
- Managing change effectively
- Filtering district initiatives
- Aligning the implementation of initiatives
- Scheduling at the school level
- Recognizing and understanding district processes and procedures

In the Batting Cage: Supporting Principals

A central office administrator commented, "Everything is put on the shoulders of the principals." A principal in a high-retention school said, "I've equated it to being in a batting cage, and the balls are coming a little faster than I can swing and they're coming from all directions."

The issues of support, training, and knowledge for principals are critical to improving teacher retention rates. However, when we asked the principals in this study about the assistance they received to help them be successful, they could identify few formal supports. Furthermore, while it is clear that principals need skills and knowledge to enhance teacher retention, the systems to build those skills rarely exist, and the systems that were observed were temporary. In short, this study found that districts have failed to establish systems to support principals and to provide them with the skills they need to improve retention.

It is important to note that supporting principals, particularly those working in challenging schools, is not an easy task. A principal noted, "They [district administrators] have a hard time developing a system to support principals. They may say they want to help, but they don't know what to do with a school like this." Many experienced principals, most often in high-retention schools, identified their own informal support networks, which they had built up over time. The new principals had very few supports, with only one able to identify formal supports provided by the district, and that was a temporary program.

Several new principals in different districts were frustrated by the lack of control over their own school leadership teams. School leadership teams often consisted of the school's assistant principal and instructional coaches. Principals reported that districts often overruled their decisions about the composition of their leadership teams. This inability to select and retain members of their leadership team was a significant challenge to new principals who were attempting to implement changes in their schools.

A foreseeable result of this lack of support is that it makes the hard work of the principal's position even harder. A teacher in a low-retention school reflected, "No one wants the job of principal." This lack of support in a job that is very difficult is at least part of the reason that principal turnover can be very high, which in turn can lead to high teacher turnover.

Conclusions About Leadership Practice and Policy

As we have seen, an important factor in teacher retention is limiting the burdens that teachers face in their day-to-day work. These burdens – demanding students; poor relationships with principals; multiple, poorly implemented initiatives; instability in leadership; loss of creativity; breakdowns in operations; and low salaries – create a host of challenges for teachers. Significantly, district and school policy can moderate or control many of these individual and composite problems by hiring, developing, supporting, and retaining skilled principals.

Principals do not operate in a vacuum. They find themselves in extremely challenging jobs with few supports. They serve many masters (parents, teachers, district administrators), a situation one principal described as a "squeeze box." Not only do districts not provide the supports needed by new principals, but they often add to the difficulties of the job. Decisions by district leadership can increase or decrease the pressure on that squeeze box.

Recommendations

A major conclusion of this work is that schools and districts have an active role to play in teacher retention. Policy and practice at the district and school levels directly affect the burdens felt by teachers, which in turn affects the decisions teachers make about whether to stay in or leave their positions. (Hightower et al. 2002; Conley 2003).

Improved Supports for Principals

This research has emphasized the vital importance of principals to teacher retention. A related finding is that despite the importance of principals to retention, principals receive little formal support from districts or the state. Once principals are hired, they need ongoing professional development support to improve their knowledge and skills, as well as the ability to create their own leadership teams in support of reform implementation.

Academies for New Principals

One possible solution is the creation of academies to provide new skills and ongoing support to principals. The state might fund and operate an academy, or support operations by districts or universities through seed money or financial incentives. Alternatively, districts might establish their own leadership academies for principals.

The effectiveness of efforts to provide ongoing development of principal knowledge and skills is most likely dependent on the same factors that are part of effective professional development for teachers (Snow-Renner and Lauer 2005; Sparks and Hirsh 2000). Effective support for principals should be designed so that it is:

- Job-embedded rather than abstract
- Ongoing and sustained rather than piecemeal
- Collegial and peer-supported
- Aligned with relevant school improvement goals and practices
- Centered on active, rather than passive, learning

Central to the effectiveness of these support efforts is the establishment of ongoing peer networks for principals. Veteran principals in high-retention schools all had extensive networks to call upon when they encountered new challenges. Furthermore, academies for principals must address both the day-to-day and the long-term challenges that principals face.

Leadership Team Staffing Control

Districts should ensure that principals have control over the staffing of their leadership teams. If principals are held accountable for school improvements, they must be able to have confidence in the members of the teams leading the improvement effort.

Districts face constraints in giving staffing control to principals. These constraints may include union contracts, funding limitations, and challenges with replacing those members of prior leadership teams who are not valued by new principals (Resnick and Glennan 2002). However, all of these constraints can be moderated with attention by district leadership; after all, contracts get renegotiated, funding solutions can be found, and difficult personnel decisions can be made.

Creation of Systems to Manage Reform Implementation

This research did not focus on why mechanisms for managing implementation of new initiatives are not in place. The sad fact is that the churning of policy initiatives is a long-standing problem in America's education system (Hess 1999). One district manager commented, "We have a culture of crisis that does not encourage focus. The crisis culture does not focus on teaching and learning; [it is] hard to be successful when in crisis." In this culture of crisis, short-term actions may be more valued than long-term outcomes. Some school districts visited in this study appeared to be focused exclusively on actions, such as the deployment of new books, new curricula, new instructional programs, and new professional development offerings. These districts did not appear to be as concerned about the long-term outcomes of these actions, such as understanding how the deployment of these new materials is related to improved student achievement or improved instruction.

A system that effectively manages new initiatives should have at least three components: tools for aligning and managing initiatives, feedback loops, and paperwork audits. Such a system should allow districts to better implement their initiatives and get better results from their work.

Tools for Aligning and Managing Initiatives

Most of the districts in this study needed to improve their ability to filter and align initiatives effectively. In both small and large districts, the principals were responsible for integrating new initiatives into ongoing school efforts. While filtering mechanisms did exist in the four districts we visited, they did not appear to be intentional. For example, in the smaller districts, the number of district initiatives was based primarily on district capacity. That is, smaller districts created fewer initiatives because of their size. As a result, smaller districts were less likely to overwhelm principals and teachers with a variety of initiatives. In larger districts, there was plenty of capacity to initiate new reforms, and so they proliferated. The role of filter fell on the shoulders of the principals, some of whom were equipped to perform this role and some of whom were not.

Districts could ameliorate many of the burdens experienced by principals and teachers if they implemented a purposeful system for managing and aligning initiatives as those initiatives are passed from the district to the schools. One possible mechanism for integrating and managing initiatives is to establish a district position to supervise and assist principals as they align and filter district directives and building-level initiatives. Emphasis should be placed on tailoring support to the specific strengths and weaknesses of individual schools and principals. The person in this position should not have so many principals to supervise that it becomes impossible to know the needs of each (Reichardt 2002).

Feedback Loops

The second essential component of a district system for managing initiatives is a feedback system to monitor implementation, collect data, and make adjustments as needed. An effective feedback system identifies expected school-level changes, monitors the process and depth of implementation, collects information on whether the expected changes have occurred, and allows for continuous improvement based on the data collected.

In order to benefit from feedback loops, districts must have a clear understanding of the changes they expect to see as a result of a particular initiative. One method of mapping out these changes is the use of logic models, which map the assumptions that underlie the design and implementation of initiatives. Districts that wish to explore the development of logic models will find an extremely helpful resource published by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation at http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf.

A feedback loop should also include information on how well the initiative is being implemented. Initiatives that are poorly supported and shallowly implemented do not have much chance of success, regardless of the clarity of the logic model being used. In this study, district leaders did not appear to be paying much attention to the process of implementation. Senior district leaders discussed using outcomes information, such as student learning, grades, teacher grievances, and teacher turnover, to know whether initiatives were working. However, to improve the implementation of the initiatives, they also need process implementation feedback. It is often too late to improve reform implementation when assessment scores are not improving.

How process implementation data are collected depends both on the scale of the reform and the resources available to the district. For example, district officials might combine regular site visits with observations or survey data. During this study it was clear that some district managers had accurate information on initiative implementation. When asked how people know what is working, one district official replied, "They don't, there is no timely and accurate data; data entry is done by hand so how can you really evaluate. … We needed a simple system to enter data." However, other managers, particularly those who had spent considerable time in schools, did appear to have good information on the effects of their change efforts.

While some district administrators did have information on implementation challenges, these districts did not use their data to improve implementation. Using data to inform decisions is the whole point of a feedback loop. Districts must establish mechanisms for analyzing the information they collect, disseminating the results of the analysis in a process that prompts discussion, and incorporating the results into district-level decision-making.

State's Role in Feedback Loops

Through data collection, the state can enable districts and schools to compare themselves with similar districts and schools on a variety of issues that affect teacher retention. For example, statewide surveys of teachers and other school staff can inform district and school leaders about the factors affecting relationships between teachers, and those between teachers and principals, effective implementation of initiatives, the perceptions of teachers about being overwhelmed, and the intentions of teachers to remain in schools. Models of this type of data collection already exist, but Connecticut could develop its own instruments as well (see Center for Teaching Quality 2007).

Paperwork Audits

A final component of reform implementation management involves regular paperwork audits. A paperwork audit is simply a centralized description of all the forms that school faculty and staff members are required to fill out, including the nature of the information on these forms. The audit serves three purposes. It creates an overall awareness of the amount of paperwork requested of teachers. It creates the opportunity to identify and reduce redundant requests for information. Finally, it can lay the groundwork for automating information requests. Given advances in information technology, some information requests to schools could be automated. If multiple districts conducted audits at the same time, a knowledge base for district cooperation or state action in creating new information systems would be available.

Operational Improvements

This research identified the following operational challenges as affecting teacher retention:

- Lack of substitute teachers
- Lack of classroom materials
- Poor-quality copy machines
- Disconnect between initiatives and the materials supplied to teachers
- Poor infrastructure (i.e., building maintenance)

Many operational improvements are simply a matter of resource allocation, i.e., additional expenditures of money. At the same time, the true cost of poor operations must be acknowledged by district leaders. Money may be saved by not paying substitute teachers a competitive wage, but there is also a high cost in terms of teacher retention, reform implementation, and student learning. However, money is not the only issue. As with reform implementation, systems must be in place to monitor, evaluate, and improve operations when they are not effective.

State's Role in Operational Improvements

Since the state is an important source of revenue, particularly revenue that ensures equity across districts, it plays an important role in providing resources for operational improvements. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine if district funding levels are adequate for all school operations. What this study does make clear is that districts must compete for teachers within regional labor markets. While many factors play into those decisions, salary and other operational issues are part of teachers' decisions about where to work. The state can ensure that districts have the financial resources necessary to compete with other districts on salary and other operational issues (Conley 2003).

District's Role in Operational Improvements

Some operational issues, such as building maintenance or copy machine repair, have to do, in part, with effective implementation, similar to issues around implementation of reform initiatives discussed above. Here, part of the solution is simply identifying important processes or outcomes and creating feedback loops to ensure good maintenance implementation. However, we recognize that this maintenance implementation can be complicated by relationships in districts where the town or city has a role in building maintenance.

Resource allocation is also part of the issue. A primary responsibility of public managers is to decide how to use scarce resources. The financial benefit of money saved may be clear to district managers when salaries for substitutes are low or copy machines are not repaired. What is not clear is the unintended cost of those savings, such as increased burdens on teachers, which affects both teacher retention and the ability of schools to enact reforms. Thus, managers need to take into consideration the extended costs that result from inadequately funding operations. In this light, the costs of salaries for substitutes, lean materials budgets, or delayed copy machine repair schedules may outweigh the benefits of the dollars saved.

Operational Trade-offs

Salary is an excellent example of how operational decisions can effect attrition and the role resources play in those decisions. At the district level, policymakers must both decide on the proportion of the district's budget to devote to salary schedules and which steps in the salary schedule to reward (i.e., new teachers or experienced teachers). There are many reasonable solutions to these questions. A district's ability to pay higher salaries to its teachers is dependent upon the level of funding it receives from the local community and the state. If there are large differences in funding in adjacent districts, then lower-funded districts may find it harder to compete with neighboring districts on the basis of salaries.

Conclusions, Unaddressed Issues, and Next Steps

This report investigated a limited sample of elementary schools, mostly in high-poverty (DRG I) districts. It does not describe all teachers, schools and districts in Connecticut. However, we found a common pattern among these schools: teacher attrition is not simply the result of factors beyond schools' and district managers' control. Teacher retention can be improved through minimizing the burdens on teachers that do not directly help improve educational outcomes. These burdens include lack of systems to manage student behavior, lack of respect by school leadership, and poor implementation of school improvement efforts. Instructional reform is the hard and important work on which teachers need to focus in order to meet Connecticut's and our nation's educational goals. Principals, as well as local and state policymakers, must work to minimize those distractions from instructional reform and to support teachers as they work to educate all of Connecticut's children.

This research leaves several issues unaddressed. First, while it is clear that districts need better tools for monitoring and improving reform efforts, the role of district school boards in this task is unclear. Traditionally, school boards select superintendents to serve as managers of school projects. It is clear from this study and others that superintendent turnover is high; thus superintendents are not able to monitor and improve instructional improvement efforts throughout the entire lifetime of the improvement effort. School boards, on the other hand, endure beyond the tenure of individual superintendents and may be able to provide more stability to major reform efforts than superintendents. Another possible role for boards derives from their status as the governing authority over district operations. By requiring periodic updates, school boards can help district managers to monitor and improve district implementation efforts.

A second unaddressed issue involves the methods by which districts best align their improvement efforts into an overall system for human capital development. The final product of an integrated human capital development system would include a well-aligned curriculum, cohesive efforts to improve instruction, and integrated student support services, all supported by a comprehensive set of human resources policies and practices. These human resources policies include recruitment, hiring, evaluation, and compensation, as well as tools to remove ineffective educators (Henneman and Milanowski 2003). Still unaddressed are the optimal ways to support and develop this integration at the district level.

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Appendix 1. Sample Selection Details

The method for determining whether schools had high or low rates of teacher retention was a multiple linear regression model using five years of data to predict a school's attrition rate based on several school factors. These factors included size, grade levels served (elementary, middle, high, secondary, other), district reference group (DRG; a measure of district level poverty), percentage of minority students served, and proportion of inexperienced and veteran teachers, with year as a control variable. Average differences from predicted values were used to identify schools with consistently high or low rates of attrition. Schools with high variability in attrition (i.e., standard error) were not included, since these schools had specific characteristics that could skew teacher attrition, such as a reduction in force or reorganization.

Table 1 (see next page) shows summary information on the schools chosen for this study. Note that school names are not provided and that approximations are used for some data to maintain confidentiality of study participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

All of the data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews or focus groups. At all levels (district, school, and teacher), the interviews and focus groups were similarly structured. First, we asked participants about their background. Then we asked them what made their school a good and/or challenging place to work. Participants were asked about four factors identified in the research literature as affecting retention: relationships with students, parents, teachers, and school/district leadership; the teacher's sense of success and policies/practices that support that success; physical conditions at the school, including materials and safety; and the teacher's life plans that might affect retention, including salary, spousal transfer, retirement, and child rearing.

We reviewed data from these interviews and identified themes. Then we re-examined the data for confirming and contradictory evidence, and discarded those themes with contradictory evidence. We created meta-themes across those areas with repeated confirmatory evidence, and looked for additional confirmatory and contradictory evidence. We report only on these themes and meta-themes with

Table 1. Descriptive information on schools in study sample

School	District	DRG	Avg difference from predicted retention, 2003-2005 (%)	Avg retention, 2005	Approx enrollment, 2005	Approx % of students with free or reduced lunch, 2005	Avg % of students, grades 3-5, proficient in reading, writing, and math, 2005	Challenge to match	Leadership experience (years
Low retention	A	I	-6	70	400	70	8		1
	A	I	-1	71	500	70	33		2
	B	I	-11	73	450	95	14		1
	B	I	-9	73	800	95	16		2
	C	I	-18	84	300	90	35	Reorganized	10*
	D	D	-9	86	300	10	71	Reorganized	1
High retention	A	I	4	87	600	70	13		1
	A	I	7	86	800	70	19		25
	B	I	1	74	500	95	26		6
	B	I	2	80	900	95	30		3
	C	I	-1	90	300	65	41		14*
	D	D	1	90	300	5	71		6

*new to school

Appendix 2. Phone Interview Methods

We conducted phone interviews for this research over an eight-week period, beginning April 23, 2007, and concluding June 25, 2007. The director of the project provided a list of contacts, including a list of 201 names of teachers who had changed schools or districts in the last two years.

The list of contacts included 118 teachers with phone numbers and addresses, 43 teachers who did not provide a phone number and 40 teachers who did not provide a phone number or an address. Phoning of the 118 teachers took place either on a weekday, between the hours of 4 pm and 8 pm, or on the weekend, between noon and 7 pm (Eastern Time), unless specifically arranged otherwise. Making contact with potential interviewees was challenging. A majority of calls resulted in contact with an answering machine or voice message system. Once contact was made, (talking to the actual potential interviewee), the introduction to the interview was read and teachers had the option to accept or decline interview participation. Returned messages usually resulted in either an interview at the time of the call or scheduling a time and date for the interview. The complete survey protocol was administered in all 46 interviews. Table 2 summarizes the results of the phone interviews.

Of the 46 interviewees, four were from reorganized schools and were not included in the analysis for this report.

As an incentive to participate in the interview, teachers were offered a $10 gift certificate to Amazon.com.

A letter was sent to 107 potential former teachers who did not provide phone numbers or for whom contact had not been made inviting them to participate in an interview. Teachers were asked to contact the Connecticut Center for School Change to schedule an interview. This resulted in four interviews.

Table 2: Summary of interview results

Category	Number of Contacts
Completed interviews	46
Declined interviews	15
Phone number out of order	13
Wrong phone number	6
Wrong residence reached	5
Wrong teacher reached	2
Interviewee not in sample (principal, school psychologist, vice principal, social worker)	8
Interviewee deceased	2
Multiple contacts (8-15), but no response	21
Total	118