



ATTRITION STARTS AT THE TOP

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Teacher attrition preceded the pandemic. For as long as I can remember, except for several years during the great recession when staff reductions were common, there has been concern about a teacher shortage. You would think comprehensive national data would be available, especially when you consider the importance of the concern and the amount of data school districts are required to gather and submit to the government.

In any case, there are enough surveys and reports that make clear that turnover, especially in our most challenging schools, is a problem. The usual response to the problem is to focus on just about everything except making schools and the job more attractive to the high-ability people we want to recruit and retain.

In 1983, five years before he founded the Schlechty Center, [Phillip Schlechty and his colleague Victor Vance wrote](#), “To concern oneself with recruiting and selecting high-ability people for schools without first making schools attractive to these people is likely to be dysfunctional and disruptive (e.g., produce a teacher shortage).”

In the last year, because of the pandemic as well as political and cultural debates, there has been an increase in surveys and reports on attrition among teachers, principals, and superintendents. When you look for patterns between and among the role groups, you get a broader view than when you simply look at one of the roles. What data from these surveys suggest is that it is not just teachers who are leaving or considering leaving their jobs. It is also principals and superintendents.

The [EdWeek Research Center](#), commissioned by the Winston School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College, surveyed teachers in January and February of 2022 and found that teachers’ job satisfaction levels hit an all-time low this year because of COVID-19. Teachers also found themselves at the center of divisive political and cultural debates: “Forty-four percent of teachers say they are very or fairly likely to leave the profession in the next two years, up from 29 percent in the 2011 MetLife survey.”

In December 2021, a national survey of K–12 principals was conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). The survey explored retention risks due to lingering effects of the coronavirus outbreak, a tense politically charged environment, and limited guidance and resources. Based on the [results from the survey](#), NASSP cautions, “If we continue on this same course, there will be a mass exodus of principals from our preK–12 schools. Job satisfaction is at an ultimate low, with almost four out of ten principals (38%) expecting to leave the profession in the next three years.”

In his February 2022 EducationWeek article, [Superintendent Turnover Is a Real Thing. How Bad Is It?](#), Stephen Sawchuck credits those who have been creative in their efforts to gather data on superintendents. He also renews a [concern he expressed a year earlier](#) about the “notorious lack of good superintendent data.” The RAND Corporation found that half of the superintendents surveyed, “when asked about future career plans, said they’d planned to stay. The other half was split neatly into a quarter that was undecided and a quarter that intended to leave.”

[The Quitting Report](#), from the National Superintendents Roundtable (NSR), a program of the Schlechty Center, released in September 2021, was based on responses from 400 superintendents. “Asked if they had considered leaving the superintendency at any time during or at the end of the 2020–21 school year, 63% of these respondents answered ‘Yes.’” The report underscored the impact of racist and misogynistic assaults on superintendents of color and women, “especially as a manufactured controversy around critical race theory (CRT) developed.”

The results of these surveys are consistent with others not mentioned here. They suggest a pattern. Over 40% of teachers surveyed are leaving or considering it, four out of ten K–12 principals are expected to leave the profession in the next three years, and 50% of superintendents are either intending to leave or are still undecided.

These surveys are asking questions about job satisfaction, not engagement. The respondents were not asked if they loved their work (which is what Schlechty and Vance intended back in 1983). They are being asked if they are sufficiently satisfied to stick with it.

At the Schlechty Center, we believe increasing student and staff engagement and making schools attractive is the most effective way to increase learning, reduce attrition, and increase the supply of teachers. We are supportive of policies that reduce attrition, but policies alone will not solve the problem. Indeed, policies that are punitive or that increase bureaucracy contribute to the problem. What is required is leadership at all levels, from the boardroom to the classroom.

Positive and supportive relationships between teachers and principals and between principals and superintendents have a huge impact on staff sustainability. According to the [Learning Policy Institute](#), “When teachers strongly disagree that their administration is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching than when they strongly agree that their administration is supportive.” They describe administrative support as “a construct that measures how teachers rate an administrators’ ability to encourage and acknowledge staff, communicate a clear vision, and generally run a school well.”

Why should we expect high job satisfaction among teachers and principals when their superintendents are wanting to leave? What does this say about governance, and what are the implications for school boards? After all, the pandemic and political debates have also put tremendous pressure on boards. If superintendents are unhappy, what does that say about the relationship between boards and superintendents?

I wish superintendents had been asked how political debates have impacted their relationship with the board. I would like for board members to respond to a similar question. Here again, there is no central clearinghouse of data on board turnover or on how many sitting board members will not stand for re-election when their term expires. What type of person will replace them if they leave their school boards? Does the answer to this question have an impact on superintendent turnover and as a result, principal and teacher turnover?

What has become obvious to me is that it is not just divisive political and cultural debates that are contributing to turnover. It is the way school boards respond to these issues.

Recently, I observed a school board meeting. The superintendent, whom I admire, is like thousands of others. He has been dealing with staff shortages, teen suicides, the death of staff members, criticism about pandemic mitigation measures, and, of course, fear associated with school shootings. This superintendent can retire. He hasn't, however, because he is committed to having his students and staff experience something like that attractive school envisioned by Schlechty and Vance almost 40 years ago.

In the meeting, a board member offered a policy that he said had been authored by the "community." Deflecting questions from other board members, he made it clear that he represented and responded to those in the community who had voted for him. I assume he does not see his role as representing those community members who did not vote for him.

I am not looking to place blame or fix people. We have a system problem. And the system we have is designed to produce attrition. It begins at the top. It is the reason aspiring superintendents are advised to keep their bags packed. In the community where I live, the school board just terminated the superintendent and is in the process of searching for what will be the seventh superintendent in ten years.

Except in very few cases, superintendents are appointed by elected school boards. Since board elections are held every two years, there is a high likelihood that between one and three board seats will turn over. While there will be carryover members, and while it is possible sitting members may be re-elected, even one new board member means a new board. This inhibits continuity and leads to the degradation of roles among talented leaders.

I apologize for the simple civics lesson. I offer it to make the point that superintendents are not just considering the calculus of their current board when they make decisions and recommendations; they are weighing the impact the decision will have on a board they do not yet know.

That calculation must now consider the impact of political action committees that are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars supporting single-issue school board candidates. This [Texas Tribune article](#) details how broader political interests are shaping local school boards, in turn producing turmoil in school leadership.

Superintendents must also consider the impact of a movement toward partisan school board elections, as evidenced in this [Politico article](#).

Also, consider that 19 state school board associations have withdrawn membership in the National School Boards Association and are establishing their own organization. This means that the organizations that set standards for board governance and that train boards how to operate by those standards are [having their own governance crises](#).

To be clear, I am not opposed to politics in education. Indeed, I think superintendents and school boards should use their political capital to ensure that students have the support needed to succeed, and that schools can attract and retain high-ability people. A healthy political system supports a healthy culture, and a healthy culture is a requirement if we are serious about recruiting and retaining high-ability teachers, principals, and superintendents. My concern is with efforts that confuse factionalism and democracy.

Partisanship and the prejudice and bias associated with it, not politics, should be of concern. Just because communities are divided, doesn't mean people want divided communities. People want a sense of belonging, and schools are in a better position to respond to that need than any other entity in the community. Parents want their children to go to a school that is so special that they celebrate it with bumper stickers on their cars—school bumper stickers, not political bumper stickers.

I am not suggesting a different governance structure, although one may be needed. I support school boards, especially boards that see their role as leaders and community builders. Indeed, we need to recognize and celebrate school boards that see their role as leaders working as part of a collective team with their superintendent. These boards establish operating principles that result in higher levels of trust. They see themselves as leading advocates for youth in the community, ensuring that children and families have the support needed to succeed.

What we need are school boards that are standard-bearers of good governance, boards that ensure the district is responsive to the needs of parents and students and accountable to all the taxpayers in the community—not just those who voted for them.

I understand this is a utopian vision of schools. Schools don't operate in isolation from the turmoil that surrounds them. We are constantly reminded that schools serve as microcosms of broader disputes and social problems. Why make it more complicated? The high-ability people we want to recruit and retain want to work in organizations whose leaders are passionate about addressing these issues, not contributing to them.