

The **Research Alliance** for  
**New York City Schools**

---

# *Who Stays and Who Leaves?*

## Findings from a Three-Part Study of Teacher Turnover in NYC Middle Schools



**William H. Marinell**  
**Vanessa M. Coca**  
WITH THE MIDDLE SCHOOL  
TEACHER TURNOVER PROJECT

March 2013

**NYUSteinhardt**

Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

The **Research Alliance** for  
**New York City Schools**

# *Who Stays and Who Leaves?*

## Findings from a Three-Part Study of Teacher Turnover in NYC Middle Schools

Executive Summary

**William H. Marinell**

**Vanessa M. Coca**

**With the Middle School Teacher Turnover Project**

**Richard Arum**

**Jennifer Goldstein**

**James Kemple**

**Aaron Pallas**

**Travis Bristol**

**Clare Buckley**

**Amy Scallon**

**Barbara Tanner**

**March 2013**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals contributed to this synthesis report and to the sets of analyses on which it is based. First, we thank James Kemple, the Executive Director of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, for providing invaluable guidance about the design and execution of the analyses for the three studies, as well as thoughtful and thorough critiques of drafts of this synthesis report. We offer special thanks to the members of our larger research team—Richard Arum (NYU), Aaron Pallas (Teachers College, Columbia), Jennifer Goldstein (Baruch College, CUNY), and doctoral students Clare Buckley, Amy Scallon, Travis Bristol, and Barbara Tanner—who contributed constructive feedback throughout the writing process. Our current and former colleagues at the Research Alliance, Janet Brand, Micha Segeritz, and Jessica Lent, provided critical analytical and data management support at various points of the data analyses.

We are also indebted to the communications staff at the Research Alliance, Chelsea Farley, who provided critical feedback on final drafts of this report, and Shifra Goldenberg, who helped us edit and produce this report.

Most importantly, we are thankful to New York City teachers and administrators who volunteered their time to take our surveys and participate in interviews. Their willingness to share their experiences and expertise made this work possible.

The Middle School Teacher Turnover Project and this report were funded by a generous grant from the Ford Foundation. Co-author Vanessa Coca's time on the project was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education (Grant R305B080019 to New York University). The Research Alliance receives core funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Robertson Foundation.

This paper reflects the interpretations and opinions of the authors. Readers should not infer any endorsement of the findings or interpretations on the part of the New York City Department of Education, or any of the funders of our work, or on the part of those who kindly reviewed earlier drafts and provided guidance to the authors.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is growing evidence that the middle school years are critical to students' long-term success.<sup>i</sup> In New York City, middle schools have been the target of several high-profile improvement initiatives. One factor that has the potential to facilitate or complicate these efforts is the stability of the middle school teaching force. Yet there have been few studies of the rates and patterns of teacher turnover in the City's middle schools.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools has recently completed a three-year investigation of teacher turnover that addresses this gap. The study represents the most current, comprehensive look at middle school teacher turnover to date, illuminating how long middle school teachers have historically remained in their schools, how long they intend to stay, what predicts whether or not they leave their school, where they go when they leave, and how their perceptions of their work environment influence these decisions. This summary presents highlights from the report, *Who Stays and Who Leaves? Findings from a Three-Part Study of Teacher Turnover in NYC Middle Schools*. It focuses on aspects of the study's results that are likely to be most useful for policymakers and school leaders as they strive to maintain and manage an effective teacher workforce.

### Data Sources

This study draws on:

1. An analysis of the NYC Department of Education's human resource records from the past decade;
2. Surveys of more than 4,000 full-time middle school teachers; and
3. In-depth case studies in four NYC public middle schools.

### What Are the Rates and Patterns of Teacher Turnover Across NYC Middle Schools?

While some amount of teacher turnover is generally thought to be constructive (as it brings new ideas, energy, and skills to schools), too much turnover may have a host of instructional, financial, and organizational costs.<sup>ii</sup> Our analyses of New York City Department of Education human resource records revealed that:

**Among middle school teachers who entered their school during the past decade, more than half left that school within three years.**

As shown in Figure ES-1 on page vi, 27 percent of middle school teachers left their school within one year of having entered; 55 percent left within three years; and 66

percent left within five years. On average, teachers remained in their school for slightly less than three years.

Turnover of this magnitude presents a number of challenges. It may make it difficult for principals, and for the teachers who do not leave their school, to establish organizational norms and a shared vision for their school's teaching and learning environment. Furthermore, this turnover may compromise the continuity of the relationships between middle school teachers and administrators, students, parents, and the staff of organizations that partner with middle schools. Turnover of this magnitude likely has an instructional cost as well. Indeed, recent research on New York City schools suggests that teacher turnover has a negative impact on student achievement.<sup>iii</sup>

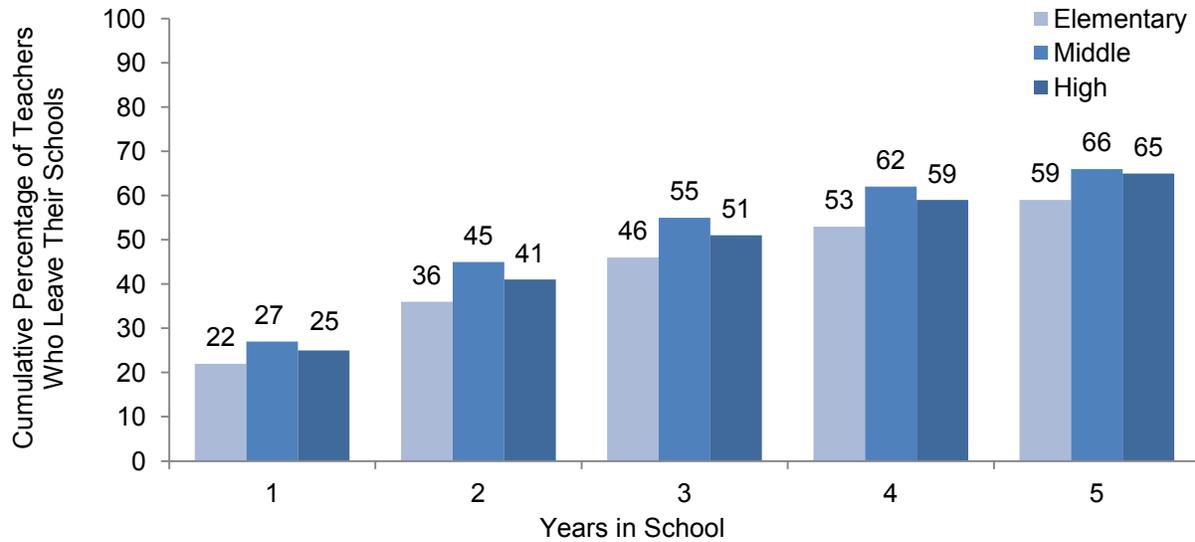
### **Middle school teachers leave their schools at higher rates than elementary and high school teachers.**

As Figure ES-1 on the next page shows, rates of turnover in middle schools were generally higher than rates of turnover in elementary and high schools. Additional research will be needed to determine whether the high rate of middle school teacher turnover is a structural issue (such that these stand-alone schools serving only grades 6 through 8 are prone to higher rates of departure in comparison to schools with other grade configurations), a grade-specific issue (such that teaching grades 6 through 8, regardless of school type, is particularly difficult), or an external issue (such that teacher training programs or licensure routes rarely focus on the middle grades). It will also be necessary to examine whether the difference between middle schools and other schools is unique to New York City or is found in other cities as well. Certainly, it is possible that there is something distinctly challenging about teaching in New York City middle schools.

### **Only about one in ten departing middle school teachers transitions to another New York City middle school. The majority exit the City's public school system, with most of the remainder moving to elementary or high schools.**

Among middle school teachers who entered and left their schools between 2002 and 2009, 59 percent left the system altogether, and 41 percent changed schools within the system. Only 12 percent transitioned to a traditional 6-8 middle school. These numbers highlight the challenge of building teaching capacity and continuity in the critical middle school years.

**Figure ES-1: More Than Half of Middle School Teachers Leave Their Schools Within Three Years**



Source: Marinell, W. (2011). *The Middle School Teacher Turnover Project—A Descriptive Analysis of Teacher Turnover in New York City's Middle Schools*. New York: Research Alliance for New York City Schools.

Note: The figure presents the cumulative percentage of teachers who left their school, among teachers who entered a NYC public school between 2002 and 2009.

Taken together, our findings suggest that teacher turnover may be creating chronic instability in many of the City's middle schools. A constant churning of teachers through schools requires administrators to direct already scarce resources toward hiring and supporting teachers who are new to the middle grades, and it makes establishing a consistent, constructive school culture more challenging. If middle schools are unstable and impersonal, students may find it even more difficult to manage the transitions into, through, and out of the critical middle grades.

While the high levels of turnover in New York City middle schools are disconcerting, it is worth noting that the City's annual rates of teacher turnover have been in decline since 2003. In 2003, 27 percent of teachers left their school within one year, compared with 17 percent in 2010. This decline may be related both to changes in working conditions and pay increases as well as the larger economy. Whatever the root causes, the observed decline presents a possible foundation on which a more stable middle school teaching core may be developed.

## What Can Be Done to Address Turnover in NYC Middle Schools?

We examined the association between teacher turnover and various characteristics of teachers and schools, in hopes of providing direction for future policy and practice. Some of our findings underscore the inherent difficulty in “moving the needle” on teacher turnover in New York City’s middle schools:

### **NYC middle school teacher turnover is predominantly a system-wide phenomenon.**

Our analyses suggest that New York City middle schools are more alike than different with regard to the turnover of teachers. While we identified some school characteristics that are associated with higher turnover—middle schools that are small, located in Manhattan, or have high concentrations of underperforming students, for example—there was little variation across schools as a whole. The majority of New York City middle schools are losing similarly high numbers of teachers, on average, over time. For this reason, a strategy to identify and focus on particular schools would likely do little to curb overall rates of teacher turnover across the system; turnover appears to be largely driven by individual teachers’ characteristics and choices.

If middle schools are unstable and impersonal, students may find it even more difficult to manage the transitions into, through, and out of the critical middle grades.

Despite this, many of the individual teacher characteristics that we were able to measure were not strong predictors of turnover. For example, we found that the average length of stay was similar for teachers regardless of their racial/ethnic background, gender, or subject taught. There were some exceptions to this general pattern, however:

### **Teachers with less experience are more likely to leave their schools.**

Among the most experienced teachers, 44 percent left their school within three years, compared with 55 percent of the least experienced teachers. This finding is consistent with prior research on teacher career paths, which has shown the highest exit rates occur early in teachers’ careers. This suggests that new teachers may require additional supports in their transition into the profession. But, as noted above, even when departing middle school teachers remain in the New York City teaching corps, most of them do not continue teaching the middle grades. Thus, it

may be important to couple professional development for early-career teachers with incentives and other supports aimed at building longer-term commitments to middle grade education.

While the Department of Education's human resource records yielded only a few teacher characteristics that were associated with turnover, our survey elicited some interesting additional information about teachers who had *considered* leaving their school in the previous year:

**Teachers are more likely to consider leaving their school if they entered teaching through alternative routes or are teaching a new subject for the first time.**

Teachers from alternative certification routes like the New York City Teaching Fellows program and Teach For America were more likely to have considered leaving their school in the previous year, as were those teaching a new subject. Like the findings on early-career teachers, this highlights the importance of supporting newly minted teachers and those who are taking on new assignments and incentivizing them to continue working with this age group.

Our surveys also asked teachers about various aspects of their work environment. We were then able to assess how turnover rates correlated with teachers' perceptions of their schools. Our analysis showed that:

**Teachers are more likely to stay in schools that are perceived to have strong principal leadership and high levels of order and teacher collegiality.**

Turnover was lower in schools where teachers reported that the principal was trusting and supportive of the teaching staff, a knowledgeable instructional leader, an efficient manager, and adept at forming partnerships with external organizations. Teachers were also more likely to stay in schools that had high levels of order—that is, fewer incidents of violence, theft, disrespect toward teachers, and student absenteeism. The association between turnover and school order was quite similar to the association between turnover and principal leadership, suggesting the inter-relatedness of these two characteristics. While principals cannot maintain school order on their own, they play a critical role in establishing and reinforcing norms for student behavior. Interviews at our four case study schools also pointed to the importance of principal leadership in setting the tone for a school building and in cultivating a stable, committed core of teachers.

The level of collegiality among teachers also had a modest influence on the likelihood that teachers remained in their schools. In middle schools where teachers reported average or high levels of support, rapport, trust and respect among their colleagues, rates of turnover were lower. Likewise, our case study interviews indicated that strong relationships among teachers can promote stability (perhaps even where principals are perceived as ineffective, which was true at one of our case study sites).

Our survey asked teachers who reported that they had considered leaving their school to rate the importance of 14 different factors in influencing that decision. For the most part, their responses echo findings from our analysis of actual turnover rates. The three most important factors were: 1) lack of student discipline, 2) lack of support from administrators, and 3) wanting to have more influence over school policies. Notably, teachers in our case study schools identified these very same factors as being the frustrations that might compel them to leave.

Thus, there are several aspects of the school environment that are associated with turnover—and, importantly, that principals can influence. By exerting strong leadership, fostering high levels of order and teacher collegiality, and providing teachers with some professional control, principals may be able to retain more of their teachers over time. At the system level, these findings suggest that training and professional development focusing on the areas described above for principals may be important strategies to improve teacher retention.

## Conclusion

More than half of the teachers who entered a middle school in the last decade left within three years. Only 12 percent of those teachers transitioned to another 6-8 middle school in the system. This exodus from middle schools presents serious challenges to the system's capacity for addressing the unique academic and developmental needs of students during these critical years.

### Turnover and School Climate: A Vicious Cycle

Findings from our case study and survey analyses suggest that teacher turnover may be self-reinforcing, producing circumstances that in fact lead to more turnover. For example, high rates of turnover may contribute to a lack of effective and consistent school discipline, which may in turn make teachers less likely to stay.

The consequences of this cycle are severe. As a veteran teacher explained, "It's hard to turn around a bad school when you constantly have to improve new staff. It's very difficult."

While this is primarily a system-wide problem, our study does point to several characteristics of teachers and schools that are associated with increased turnover. Teachers who are less experienced, including those entering teaching through alternative routes and those transitioning to a new subject, are more likely to leave or consider leaving their middle school. These findings provide hints for district and school administrators about teachers who are likely to be targets for additional supports and incentives to continue teaching in the middle grades. Further investigation is needed to understand these factors more fully and develop appropriate policy responses.

By exerting strong leadership, fostering high levels of order and teacher collegiality, and providing teachers with some professional control, principals may be able to retain more of their teachers over time.

The results of our study also suggest that the working conditions at schools influence turnover. Teachers report that student behavior, school leadership, professional control, and teacher collegiality are all important to their employment decisions. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the direction of this relationship (school climate affects teacher turnover, but teacher turnover also likely affects school climate), our findings support the broader literature that points to strong and inclusive leadership, supportive and collaborative rapport among teachers, and safe and orderly student environments as factors that contribute to a positive climate and overall school improvement. Strategic initiatives that focus on these aspects of schools could potentially have a meaningful impact on reducing teacher turnover in middle schools.

This study of teacher turnover in middle schools is timely, given the Department of Education's recent reform efforts focused on the middle grades. The findings suggest that efforts to create and maintain strong middle schools in NYC may be hampered by a lack of continuity among the teachers who need to implement these reforms. Schools with high turnover face considerable instructional and organizational costs associated with losing and replacing staff. Supply-side solutions, such as recruiting and supporting new teachers, are important, but may be insufficient given the sheer number of teachers leaving the middle grades and the fact that most who leave do not continue teaching in a middle school, even if they stay in the system. Addressing middle school personnel issues will likely require a separate policy initiative to support and incentivize teachers

who specialize in working with early adolescents and commit to doing so for extended periods of time.

Although our research suggests that increasing teachers' lengths of stay in their schools is not simple or easily achievable, it is difficult to believe that stable and effective middle schools will be widely prevalent in the district without directly addressing this issue. Research shows that the transition from middle school to high school is distinctively challenging for students, especially in urban areas. Creating and maintaining strong middle schools—with stable teaching staffs—is essential to helping students navigate that transition and to supporting wider efforts to improve outcomes across the New York City system.

---

## Executive Summary Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver, 2007; Murdock, Anderman, and Hodge, 2000; Neild and Balfanz, 2006; Roderick, 1994.
- <sup>ii</sup> Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson, 2005; Milanowski and Odden, 2007; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2007.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2012.

## Executive Summary References

- Balfanz, R. (2009).** *Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association. Retrieved on December 17, 2010 from: <http://www2.kapoleiims.k12.hi.us/campuslife/depts/electives/dance/Putting%20Middle%20Grades%20Students%20on%20the%20Graduation%20Path.%20A%20Policy%20and%20Practice%20Brief.%202009.pdf>
- Balfanz, R., L. Herzog, and D.J. Mac Iver. (2007).** "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in the Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions." *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235.
- Johnson, S. M., J. H. Berg, and M. L. Donaldson. (2005).** *Who Stays in Teaching and Why: A Review of the Literature on Teacher Retention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Milanowski, A. T. and A. R. Odden. (2007).** *A New Approach to the Cost of Teacher Turnover*. Working Paper 13. School Finance Redesign Project, Center of Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved on December 21, 2010 from: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.124.2095&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Murdock, T. B., L. H. Anderman, and S. A. Hodge. (2000).** "Middle-Grade Predictors of Students' Motivation and Behavior in High School." *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15(3), 327-351.
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF]. (2007).** *The Cost of Teacher Turnover in Five School Districts: A Pilot Study*. Retrieved on December 17, 2010 from: <http://nctaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/NCTAF-Cost-of-Teacher-Turnover-2007-full-report.pdf>
- Neild, R. C. and R. Balfanz. (2006).** *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005*. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Youth Transitions Collaborative.
- Roderick, M. (1994).** "Grade Retention and School Dropout: Investigating the Association." *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 729-759.
- Ronfeldt, M., S. Loeb, and J. Wyckoff. (2012).** *How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement*. Retrieved on April 10, 2012 from: <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/TchTrnStAch%20AERJ%20R%20not%20blind.pdf>

The **Research Alliance** for  
**New York City Schools**

285 Mercer Street, 3rd Floor | New York, New York 10003-9502  
212 992 7697 | 212 995 4910 fax  
[research.alliance@nyu.edu](mailto:research.alliance@nyu.edu) | [www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance](http://www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance)

The Research Alliance for  
New York City Schools conducts  
rigorous studies on topics that  
matter to the city's public schools.  
We strive to advance equity and  
excellence in education by  
providing non-partisan evidence  
about policies and practices that  
promote students' development  
and academic success.