Thoughts of Leaving: An Exploration of Why New York City Middle School Teachers Consider Leaving Their Classrooms
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Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, thousands of public school teachers in New York City leave their teaching positions. Schools frequently lose 18 percent to 20 percent of their teachers each year. The rate of teacher turnover has captured the attention of policymakers because of the direct and indirect costs of turnover. When teachers leave, they must be replaced, which may require recruiting and providing professional support for new teachers. These new teachers may be less experienced than those they replace, and novice teachers may need several years to hone their craft. Moreover, the departure of teachers can disrupt the functioning of a school, and affect the experiences and performance of other teachers in the building.

This report is part of a three-year, mixed-methods study of teacher turnover in New York City middle schools. The study, conducted by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools (RANYCS), with the generous support of the Ford Foundation, seeks to inform policymakers and the public about the conditions under which middle-school teachers in New York City leave their schools, and the consequences of this turnover. The focus on middle schools stems from the widely-held view that the middle grades are a critical turning point in the lives of children, and that many New York City schoolchildren lose academic momentum in these grades, setting them on trajectories of failure as they move towards high school and life beyond it.

This report is based on a survey of more than 4,000 full-time middle school teachers working in 125 of the nearly 200 middle schools in New York City serving children in grades six through eight in the 2009-10 school year. The participating teachers, surveyed in May and June of 2010, reported whether they had considered leaving their current school or leaving teaching during that school year, and the reasons that they considered leaving. The report links their responses to teachers' reports about their own backgrounds and experiences, to the demographic characteristics of the schools in which they teach, and to the collective perceptions of all of the teachers in a school about that school as a workplace.

Overall, 39 percent of the participating teachers reported that they had considered leaving their current school or leaving teaching during 2009-10. Although some schools had higher concentrations of teachers thinking about leaving than did others, the variation among teachers within a school in their thoughts of leaving was far greater than the variation from one school to the next.

We find that individual teacher characteristics—factors such as teacher experience, pathway into teaching, family status, teaching a new subject, and commuting distance—are associated with teachers' thoughts about staying or leaving, as are a small number of structural features of the school, such as school size, the concentration of Black and Hispanic students, and the school’s poverty and suspension rates. Taken individually, features of the school as a workplace, such as teachers’ reports of principal leadership, their ratings of school disorder, the adequacy of resources, and the quality of induction predict whether teachers are likely to
consider leaving, even after individual teacher characteristics and school characteristics are taken into account. We also find that teachers in schools where most teachers receive encouragement from their friends and family to stay, and those in schools where most teachers think that they are effective, are less likely to consider leaving. But because desirable workplace factors tend to cluster in schools, it is difficult to isolate which ones matter most.

When asked to report the importance of different factors in their consideration of leaving their current schools, many teachers pointed to problems with student discipline and motivation and a lack of support from school administration. But a dozen other factors were rated as important or very important by at least one-quarter of the teachers considering leaving their current classroom. Teachers thinking about leaving teaching as a career reported considerable dissatisfaction with the profession, and a desire to pursue positions in education outside of the classroom. Factors such as wanting a more prestigious job, wanting to work closer to home, wanting better health or retirement benefits or other family or personal reasons were important to small subsets of teachers, but were not widely viewed as important.

Our conclusions align with those of several other studies of teacher turnover and retention. Taken together, school organizational factors do not stand out in importance, because the organizational and workplace measures derived from the teacher survey often are highly correlated with one another. But when these factors are considered one at a time, over and above the influence of individual teacher characteristics and school demographic factors, most of them did appear influential. These analyses, coupled with what teachers told us about the factors which were important to them in considering leaving their classrooms, suggest that principal leadership and school disorder are the two best candidates for school improvement strategies to reduce unwanted teacher turnover.

Our other major conclusion is that the rhythm of teachers’ lives has considerable influence on whether teachers consider leaving their current classrooms. Factors such as the pathway into teaching, a teacher’s stage in the teaching career, a teacher’s family and economic status and his or her teaching assignment all predict thoughts of leaving. These factors suggest the importance of mentoring and professional development initiatives, particularly for novice teachers, and the importance of ensuring a good match between a teacher’s pedagogical background and his or her current teaching assignment.
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.