Reviewing the Evidence Base: Attraction, Pathways and Retention

A Focus on Teacher Retention

Growing and Nurturing Educators

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Key points for orienting readers

1. Induction and mentor programs are beneficial for early career teachers.
    - Teacher retention is stronger when teachers enter schools that are ready to support their professional development and transition into the profession.
    - Sustainable and effective mentorship programs require multi-pronged approaches that prioritise capacity-building at multiple levels.
    - Capacity-building requires support, training and adequate compensation for mentors.
    - Mentorship must be systematic and institutionalised.

2. Close alignment between academic training and practice is crucial for preparing teachers to be effective and satisfied.
    - While early career teachers report an understanding that teaching will be hard, there is still disconnect between what they learn in their preparation programs and what they experience in schools.

3. Positive and supportive school culture is one of the main factors associated with retention.
    - One of the most significant factors that contributes to teachers leaving the profession (or a particular school) is their dissatisfaction or misalignment with the school's culture.
    - Even in schools where teachers face more challenging circumstances, positive school culture is likely to improve retention numbers.
    - Positive culture can be supported through communities of practice, support through career transitions and resources for building collegial relationships.

4. Supportive leadership is crucial for retention.
    - Like culture, teachers' satisfaction with their environment is significantly dependent on their school's leadership structure and team.
    - Teachers need to feel supported by their school leaders, but they also need to have a voice in the decision-making processes at their school.

5. Equity: Schools with higher equity needs are more likely to face higher teacher turnover.
    - Historically under-resourced schools, including those that serve higher need students, are far more likely to experience high turnover rates. This has a negative, compounding effect on equity. This is particularly challenging when it comes to the financial burden caused by frequent turnover (e.g., costs for recruitment, mentorship, etc.).
    - It is crucial that any retention and recruitment strategies emphasise equity as a core priority.

INTRODUCTION: TEACHER RETENTION AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

In this part of the report, we attend to the following questions:

1. What evidence-based strategies are being implemented across Australia and internationally to increase teacher retention at the school level?

2. How are the identified strategies being implemented in other countries with similar or different contexts to Australia, and that of the NSW independent school sector?

To address these questions, we have organised this section in the following ways. We begin by setting the scene and situating Australia within the global landscape regarding teacher retention trends, as well as looking at possible remedies for high attrition rates. As will become clear, Australia is not alone in its endeavours to attract and retain teachers, which provides opportunities to learn from other, similar contexts. We also use this subsection to provide the latest statistics on teacher retention and attrition in Australia, as well as the major factors that teachers have stated for their motivations to leave the profession. Then we break down the different types of leavers – movers, leavers, and returners (cf. Gray & Taie, 2015). We do this to show protentional entry points for thinking about retention in new ways.

This is followed by a thorough review of the Australian and international literature on why teachers leave. In this section, we start by reviewing the major factors that are associated with teacher turnover. We then complement this overview by providing a review of the smaller scale, qualitative studies that provide a more in-depth view of teachers' experiences and how the aforementioned factors contribute to their reasons for staying, moving or leaving. Within this section, we provide illustrative evidence to show how different school structures, characteristics and factors lead to teachers leaving their school or the profession. In our view, this provides a strong case for focusing on an identifiable set of factors that can improve teacher retention numbers. Thus, we then review a group of models that schools have developed for increasing teacher support and retention. As we will show, such models are challenging to get right, but some schools have demonstrated success that is worth considering for the Australian context.

We conclude by identifying potential gaps in the literature, as well as a commentary on current conditions that are likely to impact the broader state of the teaching profession. These include, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has yet to be fully accounted for in the literature to date. This also includes the evolution of the digital disruption in schools, which can create positive and negative opportunities when it comes to teacher attrition and retention.

SETTING THE SCENE AND SITUATING AUSTRALIA GLOBALLY

In this section we provide the most recently available statistics regarding teacher retention and attrition numbers in Australia. We also compare these numbers with those from other countries to provide a broader understanding for interpreting the Australian context.

Fears surrounding teacher shortages are not new in Australia, nor are they new in many parts of the world. In fact, an overview of the extensive literature on the topic shows that retention has been a global issue of concern for several decades now (see Borman & Dowling, 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Borman and Dowling (2008) summarise it perfectly:

> "Throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, the prevailing policy response to these staffing problems was fairly predictable. Efforts were directed primarily toward innovative methods of increasing the supply of qualified teachers. (p. 369)"

However, over the past few years, the rate at which teachers are leaving the classroom has grown significantly. This has left departments of education and other school leaders trying to craft policies to incentivise teachers to stay. Furthermore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these problems, leaving some of the most hard-hit places asking department staff and retired teachers to cover for absent teachers. In New South Wales, government leaders are considering a form of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) model for getting relief teachers to regional schools. They have also begun offering up to $700/day for relief teachers to cover classes in hard-to-staff schools. These ideas come at a time when NSW teachers are requesting decreased workloads and increased salaries, making the quick solutions hard to accept by many teachers and experts.

While it is understandable that the immediate shortages must be allayed for safety purposes, this should not suspend any efforts to create long-term retention strategies.

Indeed, earlier this year, Heffernan and colleagues conducted a large-scale survey (Heffernan et al., 2022) that showed that only 41 percent of Australian teachers are intending to stay in the profession long-term. Of those who said they plan to leave, their anticipated time left in the classroom ranges from 1-10 years. This reinforces the fact that long-term planning is necessary, as there is the possibility the shortages will only get worse over the coming years. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses, Heffernan et al. (2022) show that workload is the main reason teachers want to leave the classroom (explained more in the section 'Why teachers leave'). These findings were published in 2022, but the survey was conducted in 2019. On one hand, this is one of the most up-to-date figures we have on the status of teachers' intentions to remain or leave the profession.

On the other hand, however, this also means that such numbers do not account for the precarity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly shifted the landscape and expectations for schools and teachers. Arguably, the many ways the pandemic has impacted society has also had a direct influence on teacher retention. On top of the increased expectations, as well as the mental and physical suffering that teachers endured over the past few years, the current situation continues to aggravate the already perilous system. Influenza, for example, has infected unprecedented numbers of Australians this year (see Australian Associated Press, 2022), causing even more teachers to be absent from the classroom.

DISTINGUISHING THE GROUPS: MOVERS, LEAVERS AND RETURNERS

When inspecting the teacher retention and attrition numbers, it is critical to understand the different types of teachers who are counted within these statistics. To get a full picture of attrition, one must distinguish between three distinct groups: movers, leavers, and returners (see also Gray & Taie, 2015). Even though all three are often presented within aggregated accounts, each group is unique and requires a different set of analytical tools and strategies to understand and address.

Movers

It is not uncommon for teachers to transfer between schools. This can happen for a number of reasons, including voluntary and involuntary reasons. For example, some teachers might transfer because of a spouse's relocation for work or other personal reasons that cannot be attributed to the school itself. While these teachers would still be counted in attrition numbers, it is the 'movers' who choose to transfer voluntarily who reflect potentially problematic trends across schools. We will focus more specifically on school factors that contribute to low retention, but it is important to flag here because this group might tell us something about the broader landscape of schools. As we will expand upon in the next section, schools that serve higher concentrations of students with high levels of disadvantage are more likely to have higher rates of teacher turnover.

One dimension to the dynamic movement between lower and higher advantaged schools is that it has the possibility to contribute to growing inequity across the schooling system (Nguyen, 2021). This does not affect all school sectors the same, but it is still important to consider the ways that teacher transfers impact on the already inequitable distribution of resources between schools. For this reason, we look carefully at how specific school-level factors affect teachers' decisions to stay or leave, as well as how such factors can be mitigated where necessary and possible.

While much of the previous research on inequities has been conducted in the US, such inequities are also present in Australia. Indeed, what has often been thought of as a foreign problem – that is, segregation based on social and economic characteristics – is also affecting Australia. Therefore, when interpreting the statistical trends of 'movers', these numbers must be considered against a backdrop of possible inequities and segregation. Therefore, as we explain in the final section on recommendations, specific strategies for retention amongst voluntary 'movers' should be considered.

Leavers

The 'leavers' group is that which is traditionally seen as the most worrisome. This group consists of those teachers who leave the profession entirely. It must be noted that these numbers include all types of 'leavers', including those who have retired and, sometimes, been terminated (this varies depending on the national context, school sector, etc.).

What this number also includes, though, are the teachers who leave the profession to pursue a different career altogether. This group is the most concerning for a few reasons. Not only is the instability of the teacher workforce damaging to overall learning outcomes, but it is also a substantial drain on resources. This affects the education system at multiple levels, from the investment to prepare the teachers, to ongoing professional development and other required supports. The additional responsibilities that mentor teachers and practicum teachers carry is another resource that cannot be ignored. When teachers leave within their first few

years of teaching, all the resources that were allocated for their initial preparation and development are lost. This, of course, is most problematic for schools that are already at an economic disadvantage, especially since these are the schools that consistently face the highest attrition numbers (across sectors and countries). For these purposes, this will be the group that gets the most attention in this review.

Returners

The 'returners' are an interesting group that make up those teachers who leave for a period of time before returning later. Many of these teachers are women who leave when they have children and then who come back to teaching after their children are older. We bring attention to this group because it is a difficult population to track, but one that no less impacts the overall retention and attrition calculation.

WHY DO TEACHERS STAY OR LEAVE?

In this part of the report, we have created two categories:

1. A synthesis of major findings from quantitative studies of the most significant factors that contribute to teacher attrition and retention; and
2. A review of small-scale studies that provide illustrative evidence for understanding the experiences of teachers who have either already left the profession or who are considering leaving before retirement.

In both subsets of studies, we have focused on literature from recent years (i.e., 2018 to present) to capture the most up-to-date conditions affecting teachers' decisions.

Quantitative review

Historically, researchers and school leaders have assumed that student and school demographics are the leading factors in high attrition rates. However, more recent studies have shown that schools can mitigate such challenges by creating cultures of support, trust, and collegiality (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; see also Grillo & Kier, 2021).

Indeed, most recent studies show that teacher satisfaction with their working conditions is the most significant determining factor when it comes to teachers remaining in or leaving the profession (Gimbert & Kapa, 2022; Harrell et al., 2019).

Support systems, school-wide discipline approaches, and cultures of collegiality are shown to be the most effective in retaining teachers.

Support systems, including, but not limited to, mentorship by more senior colleagues, school-wide discipline approaches, and cultures of collegiality are shown to be the most effective in retaining teachers.

Looking at retention and teacher supply challenges from a different angle, See and Gorard (2020) found that in England, the problem was more than just school-level factors. After analysing government reports and expert studies, they found that teacher supply demands fluctuated due to various government initiatives that had unexpectedly increased teacher vacancies or decreased teacher supply (e.g., increased funding led to principals wanting to fill more

vacancies; raised requirements for entry into ITE). They conclude with recommendations for governments, ITE providers and schools to work more closely with one another to determine future teacher supply demands, as well as to develop a more coordinated approach to assessing future needs and meeting such demands accordingly.

Research recommends schools implement comprehensive induction and mentorship programs that help first-year teachers feel they fit within the school culture.

Another study, conducted by Miller and Youngs (2021), also points to a need for more intentional coordination between schools and ITE programs. They found that close alignment between individual teacher and school environment (i.e., person-organization [P-O] fit) is crucial for increasing first-year teacher (FYT) retention. They found that 'perceived P-O fit had a stronger association with FYT retention than school characteristics, teacher characteristics, principal observation, or mentoring support' (p. 3).

They conclude by recommending that schools implement comprehensive induction and mentorship programs that help first-year teachers feel they fit within the school culture. They also recommend that ITE programs consider how they can help prepare prospective teachers for the types of environments where they will likely end up teaching. The evidence indicates an opportunity for schools and ITE programs to develop collaborative partnerships that help bridge the cultural and material divide between theory and practice. Nguyen (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 120 research studies on teacher retention and attrition in the United States. They found that, once again, student body characteristics do not have much influence over teachers' intentions to stay or leave a school. Rather, they argued that:

> "...[V]arious measures of school characteristics as an organization, namely student disciplinary problems, administrative support, and professional development, strongly influence whether teachers stay or leave teaching. In terms of school resources, we find that providing teaching materials reduces odds of attrition. (p. 32-33)"

These findings are consistent with most of the studies reviewed for this report, regardless of geographic location. That is, teachers are more likely to remain in the profession (and a particular school) when they feel supported by their leadership team and colleagues. This requires intentional focus on school culture, professional development, and mentorship. Table 1 below summarises the major factors that impact teachers' decisions to remain or leave.

FACTOR	IMPACT	REFERENCE STUDIES
School culture	• School culture is one of the leading factors that affects teachers' decisions to remain or leave. • School culture comprises matters related to levels of support, trust, and collegiality between teachers and between teachers and the leadership team.	Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) Nguyen (2021) Perryman and Calvert (2020)
Teacher satisfaction	• Teachers are more likely to feel satisfied and willing to remain if they feel supported by their colleagues and leadership team. • Teachers are more satisfied when they feel they have a voice in decision-making processes at their school. • Teachers are more likely to feel satisfied when they have more time to collaborate and plan.	Gimbert and Kapa (2022) Harrell et al. (2019) Heffernan et al. (2022) Perryman and Calvert (2020)
Coordination between ITE and schools	• Coordination between ITE and schools can help mitigate problems with misalignment between the two institutions, as well as helping early career teachers transition from their preparation programs. • Coordination can also help with planning for fluctuating teacher supply and demand needs.	Miller and Youngs (2021) See and Gorard (2020)
School demographics and resources	• Student demographics have a lower impact on teachers' decisions to remain or leave than is often assumed. • When teachers feel supported by their colleagues and principals, they are more likely to be resilient to the challenges they face.	Nguyen (2021)
Resources and support	• Early career teachers need support from more senior, expert teachers (e.g., mentorship). • Meaningful and systematic support is significantly related to teachers' decisions to remain. • Workload intensification has had a significant impact on teachers' decisions to leave the profession.	Gimbert and Kapa (2022) Harrell et al. (2019) Heffernan et al. (2022) Perryman and Calvert (2020)

Table 1. Major factors impacting teachers' decisions to remain in, or leave, the profession.

The following qualitative case studies provide rich illustrative evidence of these quantitative findings.

Qualitative review

In Australia, most studies related to teacher retention are small-scale, qualitative studies (see also Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2016). In this subsection, we draw on these studies, as well as some relevant international ones, to illustrate how different factors impact on teachers' decisions to leave or remain. These studies reinforce many of the findings from the quantitative studies (described above) – specifically that school culture and workload intensification are the leading reasons that teachers decide to leave the profession.

Teachers are more likely to remain in the profession (and a particular school) when they feel supported by their leadership team and colleagues.

While there are several factors that can be attributed to particular schools or particular teachers, it seems as though a few universal factors are consistent across schooling sectors, states and even countries. By far the most common factor we identified across the literature was that of workload demands. There is consistent agreement across studies that teacher workload has progressively increased over time, and teachers are finding the intensification difficult to sustain. They also state that their main business of teaching is interrupted by what they consider non-educative demands (e.g., administrative demands and paperwork; see Heffernan et al., 2022; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). What seems to be the most common situation is that teachers see the overabundance of administrative and accountability demands pushing them way beyond what they consider bearable workloads. While we expand on the added pressures from COVID-19 in the following section, we emphasise here that workload problems have far preceded any impact from the pandemic.

For example, the increased expectations related to student testing and associated data collection and reporting requirements have left teachers feeling frustrated. There is a quotation from a teacher in the Heffernan et al. (2022) study that exemplifies this particular issue:

> "The workload and pressure to perform to standardised testing is unbearable. The pressures from management and the government in accountability [...] and all the administrative jobs that we are required to do every day take away from the core of what we are meant to do, teach children. It's getting harder every year for teachers and if I didn't feel so passionate about making a difference to young people's lives, I would have left the profession already. (p. 6)"

The Heffernan et al. (2022) study showed that teachers struggled to see how the educative value in what they considered excessive bureaucratic compliance work. Their frustrations are not unfounded, as there is another strand of literature that shows that policies around performance-based accountability and high-stakes testing have little positive impact on teacher practice or student outcomes. Collins (2014) has studied the relationship between testing data and teacher practice in the US, and she has found that most annual testing reports (like those equivalent to NAPLAN), have very limited utility for teachers. She surveyed 882 teachers in 2014 and found that most teachers had little use for the reports as teachers often received the reports too late (i.e., the students had already moved onto the next grade level), and/or the numbers were so narrow that they did little to show how the teacher could use the data to inform their practice. In the Australian context, these concerns are likely to lessen over time with the more efficient return of NAPLAN reports to schools and parents.

Perryman and Calvert (2020) found many similarities in their study of teachers in

England. They surveyed 1200 former and current teachers, of whom 19% had already left the profession entirely, with an additional 16% planning to leave within five years and 23% within 10 years. Of those who had already left, 71% said workload was to blame. Of those planning to leave, 83% identified 'workload' as the main reason. Interestingly, the authors claimed that respondents thought they were prepared for the challenging workload. However, they felt overwhelmed by the intensity in ways they could not have predicted. Perryman and Calvert (2020) describe how their respondents spoke of workload qualitatively:

> "Workload was described as 'incredible', 'unmanageable and unsustainable', 'insane' 'unrealistic' and 'extreme'. People claimed to work 11-hour days, 60–70 hours per week and 'not having weekends or evenings free during term time to pursue personal interests' (f, 36–40, PGCE primary, 5 years, intends to leave). They argued that the work was constant – 'could never feel as if I'd finished for the day or week', 'always took work home with me', 'could never switch off'. Many detailed their workload, for example, – 'I was up at 5am every day, commuting/in school until 5pm, then working at home until at least 10pm and working at least 4 hours each weekend day' (f, 26–30, School Direct primary, 2 years, withdrew during training). (p. 15)"

Australia is different from the US and England in the sense that annual testing, inspection and teachers are not technically held directly responsible for NAPLAN results, but many studies have shown that these tests nonetheless affect their workloads, levels of pressure and overall morale about their work (see Mockler & Stacey, 2022; Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022). ABC journalists, Cornish and Vidal (2022), interviewed a teacher in Armidale about the teacher shortage crisis, and he explained that:

> "My colleagues are struggling with their mental health. They're in tears, he said.
>
> They're looking at their options regularly. More than half that I've spoken to regularly say they are actively pursuing other opportunities … you can get paid so much more in other professions. (n.p.)"

Linked to workload, but distinct in many of the surveys included in this review, is that of teacher satisfaction. Teacher satisfaction is a complex construct that researchers have tried to define in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this literature review, we are interested in teacher satisfaction insofar as it relates specifically to attrition and retention. Broadly, the level of satisfaction that teachers feel about their environment is typically made up of a combination of factors including, for example, degree of professional autonomy, work-life balance, and the supports they receive from leadership.

Teacher satisfaction has a significant impact on teachers' motivations to stay in (or leave) their current school.

As many Australian and international studies have shown, teacher satisfaction has a significant impact on teachers' motivations to stay in (or leave) their current school. In fact, some studies have shown that some factors that help teachers feel satisfied, such as supportive leadership and professional autonomy, can mitigate some of the common factors that historically correlate with high turnover (e.g., schools that serve high concentrations of low socio-economic status populations). In the following sections, these three elements feature prominently across models that have shown to positively influence teacher retention numbers.

LESSONS FROM OTHER POLICIES AND MODELS

Mentorship models from Canada (Whalen et al., 2019)

This study followed six Canadian, novice teachers during their first three years of teaching. The authors highlighted that mentorship programs are often recommended as possible ways for improving teacher retention. However, what they learned from their phenomenological study was that there is misalignment between theory and practice when it comes to providing the meaningful mentorship that leads to teachers wanting to remain in the profession. One of the important points they raise is that incentives for experienced teachers to become mentors is a real challenge. Of course, this must also be considered within the current context that already has teachers feeling overwhelmed with their workloads. Therefore, any consideration for additional responsibilities would require significant thought about how to distribute and incentivise such responsibilities in sustainable ways. As one of their participants explained:

There's no incentive for teachers to want to be mentors other than the goodness of your heart because the people who are mentors right now have been in the system for at least 10 to 20 years. They are bitter at the government. They've done three or four union strikes and they're paid the second lowest out of Canada and don't want to give up the extra time. (p. 601)

Ultimately, the authors concluded that mentorship models still have a lot of promise for helping novice teachers transition into the profession successfully. However, they caution that school leaders must think about capacity-building at multiple levels in order for this sort of program to result in increased retention.

RETAIN (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018)

The RETAIN pilot program in the United Kingdom was designed to support early career teachers through targeted professional development, as well as through a combination of practices meant to support reflection, professional learning and active research (see Diagram 3.1, p. 592). Their study followed 10 ECTs and at the end of the 1-year pilot study, all 10 teachers intended to stay in the profession, and all teachers reported positive feelings and outcomes from their experience in the RETAIN program. While this is a small-scale study, it shows that meaningful change requires systematic thinking and approaches.

Support networks for early career teachers was important for retention and sustainability...

Importantly, the RETAIN program was designed to address multiple factors simultaneously, with emphases on broader cultural change and capacity-building across the school. In other words, the program designers recognised that support networks for early career teachers was important for retention and sustainability, but they also recognise that such support required capacity-building and support for those responsible for their development and mentorship. Therefore, RETAIN paid attention to what mentees and mentors required for the program to work.

With the goal to approach capacity-building and retention as a multi-pronged endeavour, their first task was to establish a set of principles that would guide their design, implementation and evaluation. These principles were identified as the following, which are directly quoted from their article (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018, p. 596):

1. A shared vision
2. Trusting relationships
3. Supportive and effective leadership
4. A genuine culture of systematic collaborative enquiry
5. The 'commitment and persistence of the educators' within the PLC (DuFour 2004, p. 11)
6. Timely collegiate responses to questions and challenges with a focus on tangible intervention
7. Cycles of professional support and enquiry that 'promote deep team learning' (DuFour, 2004, p. 8) that, in turn, led to higher achievement by children and young people
8. A focus on results, both in terms of professional learning goals and the learning of children
9. A genuine commitment to sharing knowledge outside the PLC (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007; Owen, 2016).

... broad attention to capacity-building, across career stages (e.g., mentors and mentees) is required to make mentorship and induction programs successful...

What's unique about this particular program is that it was viewed from a holistic perspective. It required multiple perspectives and buy-in from a variety of school actors, and the school leaders recognised and committed to the view that to truly increase retention, it was critical that the model needed to encompass multiple dimensions of the teachers' working conditions. This confirms what was raised by Whalen and colleagues (2019)—that broad attention to capacity-building, across career stages (e.g., mentors and mentees) is required to make mentorship and induction programs successful. That is, there has to be training, support and a cultural shift in order for such programs to reduce attrition numbers in any meaningful way. Of all the models, the RETAIN model takes the most comprehensive, multi-prong approach that seems to have helped alleviate some of the most significant factors that lead to teachers leaving. We will revisit the RETAIN model in the following section, as we see it as an important model for considering how Australian schools could address similar challenges.

IN SUMMARY

While researchers have been interested in understanding teacher attrition for many decades now, the literature is consistent regarding the major factors that influence teachers' decisions to leave or remain in the profession. The most influential factors are related to school culture, levels of support, feelings of satisfaction and workload. In many ways, the fact that there is such consistency across schools, sectors and countries means that with the proper strategies, real change is possible. Furthermore, that most of these influential factors are related to one another means that a comprehensive effort, like that developed for RETAIN (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018), is an optimistic way forward.

As the literature has shown us, the means for improving teacher retention numbers in meaningful, sustainable, and effective ways requires a whole-picture view of teacher preparation, transitions into the profession and ongoing support and development for early- and mid- career teachers. As has been shown across settings, prospective and new teachers recognise that teaching is a challenging career. However, they are nonetheless shocked by environments that value administrative over educative matters, and where support is limited and unpredictable. For these reasons, we see greater coordination between ITE and schools as a first step in rectifying some of the most egregious factors that lead to teachers feeling isolated and wanting to leave.

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