



INSTRUCTIONAL  
EMPOWERMENT

Research-Based Article

October 2023

# Teacher Turnover Is Not Inevitable: Evidence-Based Retention Strategies

Author: Merewyn E. Lyons, Ed.D.

**Takeaway:** Leaders can reduce teacher turnover by addressing root causes that are within their sphere of influence. This article includes research on the underlying reasons behind teacher turnover and highlights from a case study about a school that reduced teacher turnover by 78% in one year.

## A Story of Teacher Turnover in a School with Low Achievement Scores

This is a real story from the field, but pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity.

During our Applied Research Center team's first visit as external manager of a school, the principal walked into the meeting room still talking on her radio. "Ms. Brown, can you please help out in Ms. Smith's room? We don't have a sub yet."

The radio crackled back, "I'm already covering in 3rd grade."

The principal stopped, staring upwards in intense thought. She turned quickly to the door then realized our research team was in the room, waiting for a meeting with her. "I'm sorry. I'll be right back ..."

Then the radio cracked again. "Sub's here. We got it covered."

The principal breathed a quick sigh – "O.K. Thanks. I'll be in a meeting for a while."

The principal smiled broadly as she sat at the table with us, turning down the volume on her radio. It continued chattering with urgent messages. "It's just crazy today. Teachers out, kids acting up – just part of being a principal!" She laughed, but her smile could not hide her fatigue and stress.

Our research team was visiting the school to begin several days of a comprehensive needs assessment that would help us understand the root causes for the school's persistently low performance. It was immediately clear that teacher turnover was causing major disruptions to school operations. In that year alone, 23 of the school's 33 teachers had been replaced. The principal told us that her teachers were burned out from serving a student population with 15% who are homeless or in foster care and 100% from low socioeconomic backgrounds. She said that she was powerless to stop the endless turnover of faculty.

This was in 2018 – long before the pandemic. Since then, COVID disrupted every school in the nation, and many schools are still feeling the effects. What became of this school? Was the principal correct

in thinking that there was nothing she could do about teacher turnover? I will keep you in suspense for a while, but this story has a happy ending. For now, let's examine the problem of teacher turnover in more detail.

## Teacher Turnover Is a Problem Nationwide

### Teacher Turnover Is Not a New Problem

Statewide teacher turnover rates have varied between 5 and 8 percent over the past 35 years (Aldeman, Goldhaber, & Theobald, 2021; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2021; Dee & Goldhaber, 2017). Nevertheless, a current RAND study (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023), indicates that teacher turnover is higher than pre-pandemic levels by 4 percentage points.

Historical trends indicate that teacher turnover increases during periods of economic growth and falling unemployment rates. As the nation recovers from the pandemic, it is likely that we will see more teacher turnover (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2021). Districts are responding by making policy changes to incentive teachers to remain as well as creating teaching induction pipelines (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023).

### Where Is Teacher Turnover Most Prevalent?

RAND (Diliberti, Schwartz, & Grant, 2021) reports the rate of teacher turnover ranges from 12 to 17 percent in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, while the turnover rate in the South is 55 percent.

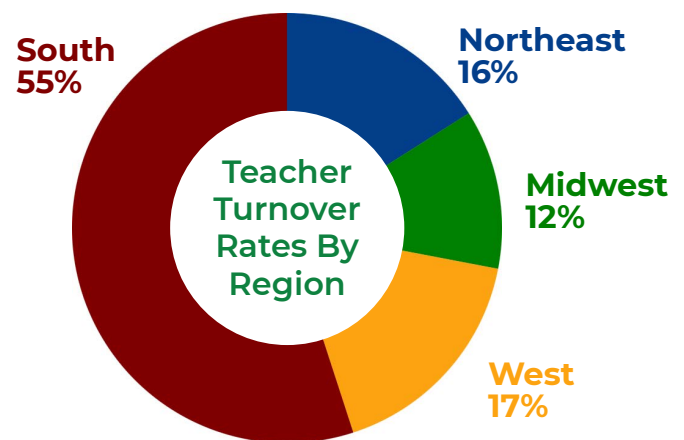


Figure 1. Source: Diliberti, Schwartz, & Grant (2021)

## Which Schools See Teachers Leaving the Profession at Higher Rates?

The greatest variation in teacher turnover is among different schools. In fact, much of the variation in teacher turnover is explained by three school characteristics (Aldeman, Goldhaber, & Theobald, 2021):

1. Urbanicity
2. Percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches
3. Percentage of students of color

Other researchers agree that teacher attrition rates vary depending on schools and who they serve:

- **Student race and ethnicity:** Schools with the largest populations of students of color have a teacher turnover rate that is 70 percent higher than schools with few students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).
- **Student socioeconomic status:** The teacher turnover rate is greater in schools with more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, schools where most students are from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, and rural schools (Aldeman, Goldhaber, & Theobald, 2021; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023). Historically, Title I schools experience 50 percent more teacher turnover than non-Title I schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

## Why Is High Teacher Turnover a Problem?

**Disruption of education** – The disruptions caused by teacher turnover have a negative effect on the quality of instruction, particularly in schools with low achievement scores (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Shiman, 2016).

### **Disproportionate impact on Black and Hispanic students, English Learners, and students with disabilities**

– Teacher turnover also has a disproportionate impact on Black and Hispanic students, English Learners, and Students with Disabilities, all of whom have been historically subjected to more frequent changes of teachers. The rate of teacher turnover in schools with high concentrations of students of color is 70 percent higher than in schools with fewer students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### **Disproportionate impact on schools serving students from low socioeconomic backgrounds**

– School poverty rates are highly correlated to achievement gaps, and students of color are disproportionately represented in schools serving students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Reardon, Weathers, Jang, & Kalogrides, 2021). It is these schools that struggle most to attract and retain skilled teachers (Reardon, 2015). Rates of turnover in schools serving more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds equate to yearly replacement and onboarding of 400 more teachers than in schools serving less students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Alderman, Goldhaber, & Theobald, 2021).

## What Causes Teacher Turnover?

Teachers cite three main reasons for leaving schools or completely leaving the profession: working conditions (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), the lack of respect shown to them as professionals (Streeter, 2021), and stagnant or decreasing academic achievement (Lakewood Elementary: How This Florida School Raised Student Academic Proficiency from the Lowest to One of the Highest in the State, 2021; Hanushek, Rivkin, & Shiman, 2016).

### 1. Working conditions

Working conditions include such factors as stress and health concerns, safety, and work/life imbalance (Streeter, 2021; Diliberti, Schwartz, & Grant, 2021), as well as student behavior (Becoming a School Where All Students Thrive, 2019). One of the most frequently cited problems with working conditions is a lack of administrative support. Teachers who feel their administration is unsupportive are twice as likely to leave than teachers who feel supported (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### 2. Lack of respect as a professional

Teachers want to be respected as professionals and accorded opportunities to exercise agency in their instructional decisions (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). All too often, however, teachers in schools with low achievement scores must use scripted curricula within highly controlled and compliance-driven classrooms, depriving them of professional agency over their own practice.

### 3. Stagnant or decreasing academic achievement

Persistently low student achievement may induce teachers to leave, especially those in schools with low performance. This sets up a vicious cycle of disruptions that further degrades the quality of teaching and learning (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Shiman, 2016).

## Other factors

There are many other causes of teacher turnover, such as low pay, testing and accountability mandates, family concerns, financial needs, and general dissatisfaction with teaching as a profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). But these factors are generally beyond the control of principals.

## What Can Leaders Do to Fix the Problem of Teacher Turnover?

Teacher turnover is not inevitable, nor is it beyond a school leader's ability to fix. According to our Applied Research Center's work partnering with schools across the country, the best places to start are developing your school leadership team's capacity and determining the root causes you'll need to tackle together.

### Build your leadership team

Results from a survey by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2021) indicate that one-third of principals are thinking of leaving the profession, with most identifying the teacher shortage and increased workload as issues of extreme concern. Recent studies also show that principal turnover is high, especially in districts in high poverty and rural areas (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023).

You cannot fix the problem of teacher turnover by yourself through hero leadership – you will only burn yourself out. Your first order of business is to surround yourself with a strong school leadership team who can share the load with you. A strong leadership team is as essential to your well-being as it is to the school.

Distribute leadership to your team so everyone owns improvement in the three areas of concern:

1. Schoolwide conditions
2. Teacher professionalism and autonomy
3. Academic rigor

## Analyze 3 Common Root Causes of Teacher Turnover

Next, recognize and deal with the root causes of teacher turnover in your school. The following three root causes are some of the most common. Be honest with yourself when reflecting on the questions below. You may want to assign a rating to each question on a 1-5 point scale and seek evidence to support your thinking (such as classroom observations, teacher surveys, etc.).

### 1. Establish Healthful, Safe, and Respectful Schoolwide Conditions

- Does your school protect the safety and health of teachers and students?
- Are there procedures and routines that all staff and students know, understand, and follow?
- Are you supporting your teachers in creating and reinforcing classroom management practices that foster student self-regulation and mutual respect?
- Are you providing resources for self-care of teachers – and for yourself?

### 2. Build Teacher Professionalism and Autonomy

Effective teachers are more likely to remain in schools than less effective teachers (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012); and regular, supportive communication from school leadership encourages teacher professional growth and retention (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

- Are you and your leadership team in classrooms observing the quality of instruction and supporting teachers with non-evaluative coaching and feedback to grow their practice?
- Are you providing and protecting collaborative time for teacher planning and mutual support?
- Are your teacher leaders providing coaching and peer support to teachers and professional learning communities?

Research indicates that mentoring and feedback are essential aspect of professional development that fosters teacher retention (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Shiman, 2016); it is also critical to the development and retention of early career teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

### 3. Ensure Academic Rigor

Quality instruction is critical to ensuring that all students perform at high academic levels. As student performance improves, teacher efficacy and commitment grow.

- Are all students in your school receiving rich and rigorous core instruction?
- Are you and your leadership team collecting and examining daily evidence of student learning?
- Do you use student evidence of learning to inform your leadership team's goals and actions to improve instruction each day?

Asking these questions will direct your team's attention to the key systems within your school that directly impact teacher turnover.

## Example From the Field: How a School Reduced its Teacher Turnover Rate by 78% in One Year

Returning to the story from the beginning of this article, you will be happy to learn that Lakewood Elementary School in St. Petersburg, Florida overcame the problems besetting them. By attending diligently to systems over which they had control, they transformed their school from having the lowest to one of the highest state accountability results in the state.

Lakewood partnered with a team of external consultants for three years. In one year, Lakewood reduced their teacher turnover from 23 to 5 teachers. In 2021 – despite the pandemic – they replaced only 1 teacher. This [case study](#) explains how the school attained such high levels of performance and teacher retention.

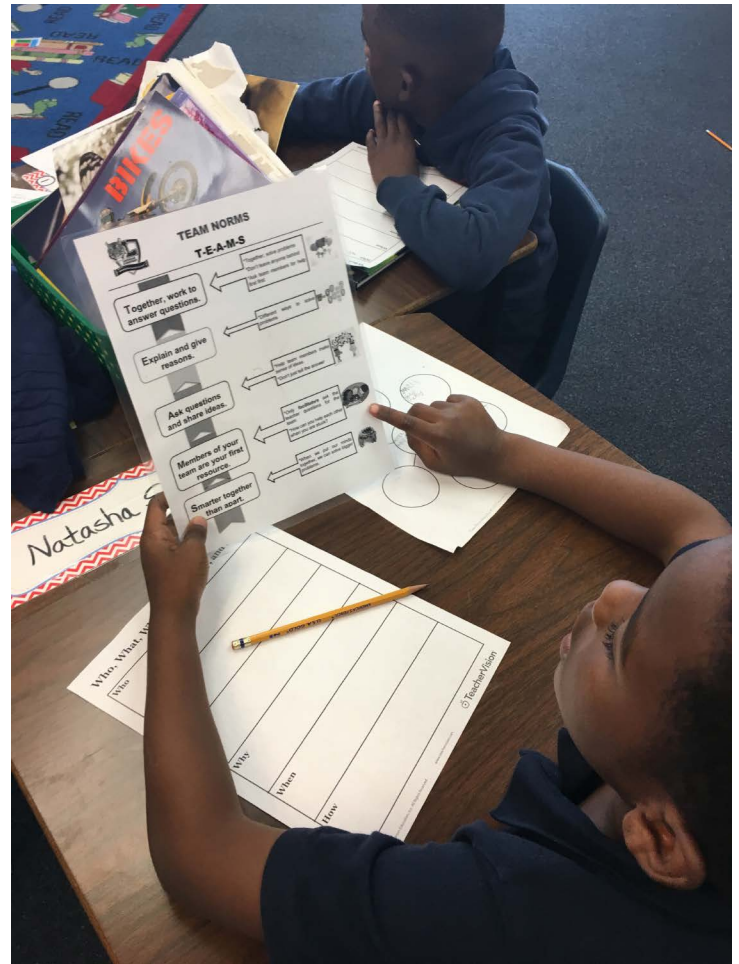


A summary of the case study results and its connection to teacher turnover follows:

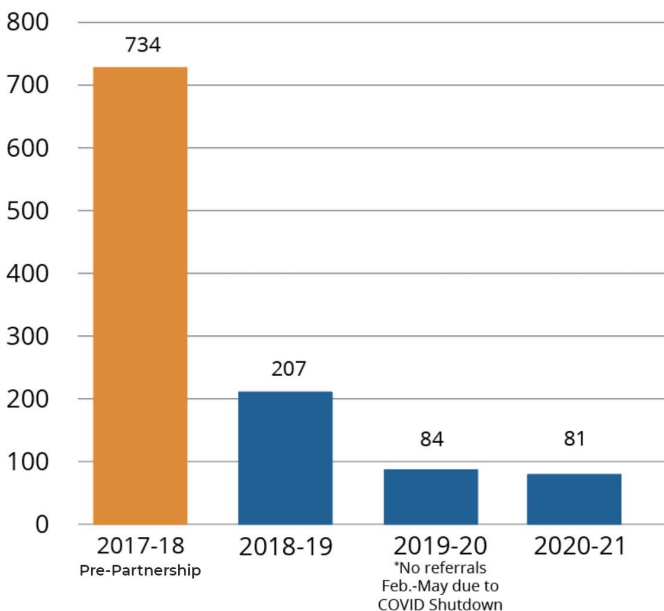
### Elevating Schoolwide Conditions

The environment at Lakewood was not conducive to student learning nor teacher satisfaction, and students often responded to their environment by expressing challenging behaviors. In interviews about the school’s conditions before their partnership with the consulting team members, one teacher said, “It felt like working in a war zone.” Students fought with one another and walked out of class in the middle of instructional time. The vast majority of students were more than two grade levels behind, according to initial diagnostic testing. Many teachers resigned or transferred out, citing the difficult conditions.

The consulting team members partnered with the school leadership team and teachers to build students’ ownership of their own behavior and self-regulation with student-led teaming structures. Instead of focusing on controlling student behavior, Lakewood focused on academics and empowering students to engage in their learning by self-tracking their own progress and cheering one another to academic success. Behavior referrals decreased by 160%. See figure 2.



### Referrals for Challenging Behaviors at Lakewood Elementary School, 2018-2021



A Lakewood Elementary School student reviews the student-led teaming structures that empower students to track their own learning. As Lakewood students engaged in deeper learning and took ownership of their own behavior, schoolwide conditions improved for both students and teachers.

Figure 2. Referrals are used when students express challenging behavior that is too severe for the teacher to handle through classroom management, which necessitates the school’s behavior team to intervene. Lakewood students had 734 referrals in 2018, before Lakewood and the external consulting team started their partnership. Referrals dropped to 207 in 2019, 84 in 2020, and 81 in 2021 (see Lakewood Elementary: How This Florida School Raised Student Academic Proficiency from the Lowest to One of the Highest in the State, 2021).



Lakewood’s coaches and leadership team worked together with teachers to create a visible wall to track progress based on data from Instructional Empowerment’s Rigor Classroom Walk. It is part of a non-evaluative tool that is the only known classroom walkthrough tool that deeply measures academic rigor and can predict student achievement on state assessments.

## Elevating Teacher Professionalism and Autonomy

Lakewood teachers did not have as much autonomy as they wanted before the partnership began. According to one Lakewood teacher, “Everything was scripted: how the lesson went, what moment everything was supposed to happen.” What was missing from the PLCs was team collaboration, productive struggle, accountability to student data, and teacher agency. Through side-by-side coaching support in the classroom and during PLCs, in conjunction with the Lakewood leadership team’s coaching support, the school culture shifted, and more teachers decided to stay. Teacher retention increased by 78% in one year. See figure 3.

## Teacher Turnover Rates at Lakewood Elementary School, 2018-2021

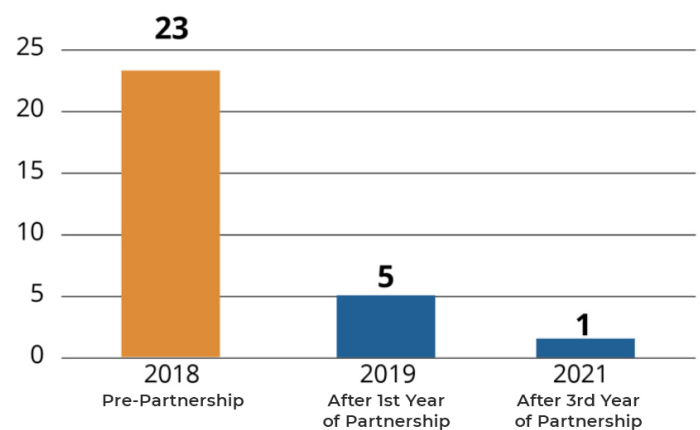


Figure 3. Teacher turnover decreased from 23 out of 33 teachers replaced before Lakewood partnered with the external consulting team, to only five teachers replaced after one year of partnership and one teacher replaced after three years of partnership (see *Lakewood Elementary: How This Florida School Raised Student Academic Proficiency from the Lowest to One of the Highest in the State, 2021*).

## Elevating Academic Rigor

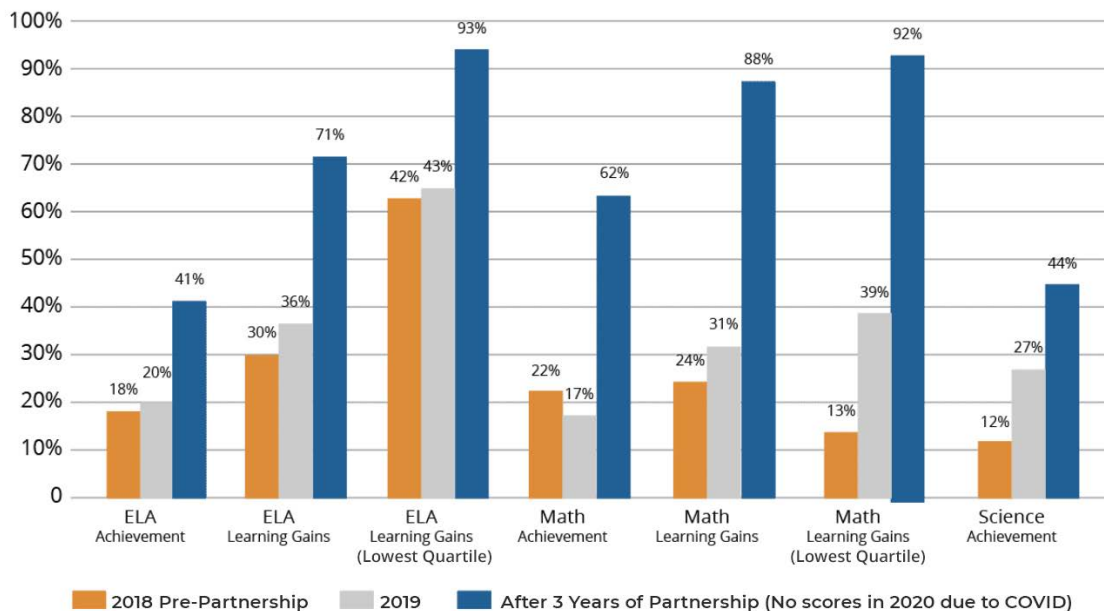
As Lakewood students experienced rigor and agency through a student-led Model of Instruction, they became more engaged and took ownership of their own learning. Teachers watched in awe as students evolved from dependent learners to independent thinkers, believed in themselves, and invested more effort into their learning. Teacher motivation increased as daily student data became the focus and teachers could see tangible improvements. Student achievement skyrocketed. See figure 4.

In three years, Lakewood went from receiving the lowest rating from the state for all traditional public schools to being rated in the top 6% of elementary schools.

*Students at Lakewood Elementary School work in teams on academically rigorous, engaging tasks as part of Instructional Empowerment’s student-led Model of Instruction.*



## Lakewood Elementary School’s Achievement and Learning Gains, 2018-2021



*Figure 4. Lakewood increased achievement (proficiency) in all subjects – ELA, math, and science. Lakewood also increased learning gains and learning gains for their lowest 25% in all subjects (learning gain data for science not provided by the state). All data publicly available from the Florida Department of Education (see also Lakewood Elementary: How This Florida School Raised Student Academic Proficiency from the Lowest to One of the Highest in the State, 2021).*



**Read the Case Study about Lakewood Elementary School**



*A proud partnership with Pinellas County Schools and Lakewood Elementary School!*

**School Leaders Have the Power to Stop Teacher Turnover**

At its core, teacher turnover is a leadership problem. To correct it, you must own those problems that you alone, as a leader, can solve:

1. Schoolwide conditions
2. Teacher professionalism and autonomy
3. Academic rigor

If you focus on these three areas, your teachers will stay – and your students will thrive.

**About the Author**

Dr. Merewyn E. (“Libba”) Lyons is a retired officer of the United States Navy and a retired K-12 schoolteacher and administrator. A decorated veteran, Dr. Lyons held high level leadership positions on major Navy staffs and as a commanding officer. In her second career as an educator, she served as a classroom teacher, school administrator, and district executive director of large federally funded grant projects. She brings to IE over 40 years of deep experience in leadership, management, and education. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Languages and Linguistics from Georgetown University, a master’s degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from Regent University, and a doctorate in Educational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University.



## References

- Aldeman, C., Goldhaber, D., Theobald, R. (2021). Examining the dimensions of teacher turnover. (CALDER Flash Brief No. 24-0421). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. <https://caldercenter.org/publications/examining-dimensions-teacher-turnover>
- Becoming a School Where All Students Thrive (2019). [https://instructionalempowerment.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/IE01-141-Case-Study-Moseley-\\_04-23.pdf](https://instructionalempowerment.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/IE01-141-Case-Study-Moseley-_04-23.pdf)
- Borman, G. D., & Dowling, N. M. (2008). Teacher attrition and retention: A meta-analytic and narrative review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(3), 367-409. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308321455>
- Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover>
- Dee, T. S., & Goldhaber, D. (2017). Understanding and addressing teacher shortages in the United States. Brookings. [https://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/understanding\\_and\\_addressing\\_teacher\\_shortages\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/understanding_and_addressing_teacher_shortages_in_the_united_states)
- Diliberti, M. K., & Schwartz, H. L. (2023). Educator turnover has markedly increased, but districts have taken actions to boost teacher ranks. RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA900/RRA956-14/RAND\\_RRA956-14.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA900/RRA956-14/RAND_RRA956-14.pdf)
- Diliberti, M. K., Schwartz, H. L., & Grant, D. (2021). Stress topped the reasons why public school teachers quit, even before COVID-19. RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1121-2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1121-2.html)
- Goldhaber, D., & Theobald, R. (2021). Teacher attrition and mobility over time. *Educational Researcher*, 20(10), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211060840>
- Hanushek, E. A., Rivkin, S., & Schiman, J. C. (2016). Dynamic effects of teacher turnover on the quality of instruction. (CALDER Working Paper No. 170). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571812.pdf>
- Lakewood Elementary: How This Florida School Raised Student Academic Proficiency from the Lowest to One of the Highest in the State. (2021). <https://instructionalempowerment.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/IE01-140-01-S-Lakewood-09-23.pdf>
- McChesney, K., & Aldridge, J. M. (2019). What gets in the way? A new conceptual model for the trajectory from teacher professional development to impact. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(5), 834-852, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1667412>
- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2021, December 8). NASSP survey signals a looming mass exodus of principals from schools. <https://www.nassp.org/news/nassp-survey-signals-a-looming-mass-exodus-of-principals-from-schools/>
- Reardon, S. F. (2015). School segregation and racial academic achievement gaps. (CEPA Working Paper No.15-12). Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis. <http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp15-12>
- Reardon, S. F., Weathers, E. S., Fahle, E. M., Jang, H., & Kalogrides, D. (2021). Is separate still unequal? New evidence on school segregation and racial academic achievement gaps. (CEPA Working Paper No. 19-06). Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/wp19-06>
- Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2012). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. (CALDER Working Paper No. 70). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. <https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/Ronfeldt-et-al.pdf>
- Streeter, L. G. (2021, October 18). Why so many teachers are thinking of quitting. *The Washington Post Magazine*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/10/18/teachers-resign-pandemic/>





## **Instructional Empowerment's Social Mission**

**Our social mission is to end generational poverty  
and eliminate racial achievement gaps through  
transformed core instruction.**

**Learn more about Instructional Empowerment's  
Comprehensive School Improvement Services:  
[InstructionalEmpowerment.com](https://InstructionalEmpowerment.com)**



**INSTRUCTIONAL  
EMPOWERMENT**