



Rethinking the K-12 Teacher Experience: A Path to Retention and Job Satisfaction

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While the intrinsic rewards of teaching, such as making a difference in students' lives, motivate many educators, a growing number of K-12 teachers are leaving the profession due to unmet expectations and burnout. Education leaders often assume that teachers will stay because of their passion for their work, but this belief overlooks critical factors that affect their daily experiences.

Recent shifts in the K-12 education landscape have led to diminished engagement among teachers, who increasingly struggle with unclear job expectations, a lack of support, and burnout. K-12 teachers face unique challenges, including inadequate resources, lack of respect, and chronic stress, all contributing to high turnover rates in the profession.

Voices from Former Educators

To gain a deeper understanding of teacher turnover, Gallup conducted interviews with 10 former educators, each with an average of 14 years of teaching experience. These teachers left the profession within the past five years for other career opportunities.

While they all expressed deep connections with their students, many also shared stories of exhaustion and feeling underappreciated. One teacher noted, "I connected with those kids and gave them the love they

needed," while another shared, "You felt like a big part of their lives because school was often the happiest part of their day." However, their reflections were not all positive. Teachers also spoke of burnout: "I'd come home and just collapse on the couch... I didn't have energy for anything else." Another educator said, "Just hearing 'you're doing a good job' would have meant a lot. I didn't always feel seen."

Beyond student interactions, these educators highlighted how toxic work environments and a lack of parental support further complicated their experience. "When you have an administrator who creates a toxic atmosphere, it's hard to enjoy the job, no matter how much you love the kids," one former teacher said. Another observed, "There's much less support from parents now, less recognition for the work teachers do."

Improving the Teacher Experience: Key Areas for Change

Education leaders must prioritize enhancing the teacher experience, but many lack the proper training or resources to address this challenge effectively. Gallup's research has identified six essential factors that can help improve teacher engagement and retention:

1. Tackling Burnout Head-On

K-12 teachers experience higher levels of burnout compared to workers in other fields. In 2023, 39% of teachers reported feeling burned out frequently, compared to 26% of employees in other professions. To combat burnout, leaders should focus on setting clear expectations, providing adequate training, and ensuring that performance goals are realistic. By addressing these issues, schools can create a more supportive environment and reduce turnover rates.

2. Prioritizing Wellbeing

While K-12 teachers generally report high life satisfaction, they also face the highest rates of workplace disrespect among all industries. In 2023, 42% of K-12 educators said they experienced disrespect at work. Moreover, only 21% of teachers strongly agreed that their opinions were valued. Leaders must listen to educators, support their wellbeing, and foster an environment where teachers feel respected and heard.

3. Leveraging Strengths

Over the past three years, the number of K-12 teachers who feel they can use their strengths daily has decreased by 17%. Education leaders should prioritize aligning tasks with teachers' strengths, asking not "Who is available to do this?" but rather, "Who is best suited for this?" Allowing teachers to focus on what they do best reduces burnout by 57% and increases job satisfaction.

4. Providing Meaningful Feedback

Many teachers feel they receive insufficient feedback on their performance. Regular, meaningful feedback helps teachers feel more engaged and supported. Research shows that educators who receive frequent feedback are twice as likely to agree that their manager removes barriers to success and 2.1 times more likely to feel their development is valued.

5. Recognizing Contributions

Only 24% of K-12 teachers feel that their work is recognized or praised regularly. Meaningful recognition—whether through verbal praise or small gestures—can make a big difference. Education leaders should cultivate a culture of appreciation and ask teachers how they prefer to be recognized. This personal approach ensures recognition is both authentic and effective.

6. Reimagining Career Growth

For many educators, career advancement traditionally means moving into administration. However, not all teachers want this path. Schools should offer opportunities for professional growth without overloading teachers with additional tasks. Teachers who feel their professional development is supported are 8.7 times more likely to have a clear career growth plan in place.

Conclusion: Creating a Sustainable and Rewarding Teacher Experience

Teachers play a vital role in shaping the future of students, but for many, the challenges of the profession have led to burnout and turnover. Education leaders must take intentional steps to improve the daily work experiences of K-12 educators. By addressing burnout, valuing teacher wellbeing, leveraging strengths, offering regular feedback, recognizing achievements, and reimagining career growth, schools can create a more supportive and fulfilling environment for educators.

Ultimately, investing in the teacher experience not only benefits the educators themselves but also has a lasting impact on the students and communities they serve.