



5 Ways to Boost Teacher Retention Through Better PD

Nearly 8 percent of teachers **leave the field** every year, most of them before reaching the age of retirement. Many factors are responsible for this attrition, but **research** suggests a lack of teacher preparation, mentoring, and support are key contributors.

“It’s incredibly draining and demoralizing when you are trying to do something you’re deeply committed to, and you don’t feel like you can do it well,” says Elena Aguilar, founder and president of **Bright Morning**, which offers professional development coaching for schools.

This high turnover rate can be costly for schools, which must invest in hiring new teachers to take their place. Making matters worse, fewer new teachers are even entering the profession. But professional development that makes teachers feel more effective and appreciated can help stem this tide.

Here are five ways that K-12 leaders can retain teachers by helping them master their craft.

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1

Make professional development relevant to teachers’ needs.

A “one size fits all” approach to instruction doesn’t work well for students, and it’s the same for teachers. Professional learning should be tailored to a teacher’s specific grade level and subject matter needs, and it should take into account a teacher’s level of experience.

“Everyone is at a different stage in their learning,” says Aguilar, author of *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators*. “We have to allow teachers to find the learning that will be most useful and relevant to them.”

All learning builds upon prior knowledge. The best professional development is connected to what teachers already know and have done. “We have to give teachers an opportunity to surface what they know and build new learning onto that,” she says.

2

Give teachers *practical* knowledge they can apply right away.

Professional development should be actionable. It should offer practical, hands-on strategies that can be implemented immediately. Teachers don’t have the time to sit through a lot of theoretical information.

“Think about a teacher’s mindset,” Aguilar says. “There might be a part of her brain that can absorb that. But a big part of her brain is antsy. She’s thinking: ‘I’ve got all this grading to do, I’ve got to make some calls to parents tonight, I’ve got to get my lessons ready for tomorrow—so give me something useful!’”

3

Make the training *convenient* for teachers.

One thing that often gets overlooked when planning professional development is the role that a teacher's emotional and cognitive state plays in how effective the learning is.

Teachers need opportunities to learn when they are most receptive to taking in new information, such as in-service days when they are not teaching or online training they can experience as their schedule allows. Professional learning that is shoehorned into a teacher's busy day is not likely to result in high-quality learning that changes his or her practice.

"If a teacher has to rush into Wednesday afternoon PD after a full day of teaching, her mind is not primed for learning," Aguilar says. "Her emotional state might not be where it needs to be to take in learning. We need to remember that we're asking teachers to take risks. They have to ask questions and show vulnerability in not knowing something. That's not our brain's default state. Our cerebral cortex is not optimized for taking in new information after a typical day of teaching."

4

Give teachers opportunities to *practice* what they have learned.

If teachers can't practice what they are learning, "it's very unlikely the PD is going to result in a change in what the teacher does in the classroom," Aguilar says. "And ultimately, that's what we want PD to do. We want there to be something different that we can observe when we go into that teacher's classroom."

Say an instructional coach has just led a training session on language acquisition strategies. Ideally, he or she would meet with teachers individually as well, following up on the training with small group or one-on-one sessions in which the participants can dive deeper into those practices. Teachers would try out those techniques for themselves, seeing what works and learning how best to apply the strategies in their own classroom. The coach would observe each teacher's practice and provide feedback.

5

Make professional learning a *social* experience.

Teachers should have an opportunity to discuss new knowledge together, talking about how they plan to put this information into practice and sharing their experiences with one another. This also creates accountability, as it ensures follow-through on the learning.

Having teachers learn from each other doesn't just make the learning more effective. It also satisfies the need for teachers to feel connected, to feel part of a larger community. When teachers feel connected to each other and to the school community as a whole, they are more likely to be happy—which is another key factor in retention.

"Human beings are social creatures. We learn best when we learn with each other and from each other," Aguilar concludes.

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