Is Teacher Turnover Detrimental to Implementation of Curriculum?

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Abstract.

The effect of teacher turnover on the ability of the affected teacher to follow the curriculum was investigated. Information was gathered from several sources including several texts and journal articles, and discussions with teachers who experienced layoffs resulting in movement to a new classroom. The results indicated that moving teachers from one classroom to another is detrimental to the ability of the teacher to carry out the procedures needed to effectively meet the curriculum needs. The moving of teachers from one position to the next can have an effect on standardized test scores and student performance. It also has an effect on the morale of the staff and the students affected.
Teacher Turnover

A growing body of research has indicated that when teacher turnover is present, there is an interruption of the carrying out of the curriculum. Specifically investigated were the effects of moving teachers from one classroom to another involving a change in building and/or grade level. It has been found that “high levels of teacher turnover can be shown to have detrimental effects on pupil progress and achievement.” (Dolton, Newson, 2003). When teachers are trying to learn a new curriculum and become acclimated to a new position they are not at their best. It is in the second year and beyond that a teacher can truly perform at his or her best. Research also shows that, “effective schools were characterized by ...low teacher turnover; faculty teamwork; high staff morale and accountability; teachers with high levels of education experience, and commitment; strong teacher belief that children can achieve” (Hughes, 1995).

Furthermore, at-risk students could benefit from consistency and continuity (Crosby, 1991). Students in poverty areas need to have consistency at school. They expect to see a teacher in the classroom on the first day of school that was in that classroom the year before. When it is a new teacher, there is a feeling of uncertainty and
lack of trust. Parents also feel this need for continuity of school staff. This has been my experience when cleaning out my classroom after having been moved from one school to another. The parents and students who witnessed me taking out my things expressed that they did not want me to leave. They did not want to have new teachers and did not understand why I could not stay.

In this paper, I attempted to identify research that supported my theory that teachers changing classrooms is detrimental to student performance. I considered my own experience, texts, journal articles and discussions with teachers who have experienced turnover in my district, Toledo Public Schools.

Discussions were held with teachers who had been issued a layoff notice and also with those not being laid off but being affected by their coworkers being laid off. I did not include names in this paper in the interest of privacy. The feeling was expressed over and over that it does not make sense to change people from one position to another. Those who were remaining in their position but were experiencing a change in the teachers working with them expressed that not only was it difficult to adjust to working with new people, they were concerned with whether those moving in would have more seniority (due to building
closings resulting in displaced teachers, who bring their seniority with them) which would increase their chances for displacement also. Those who received the layoff letters expressed that they could not feel comfortable with teaching a new curriculum each year, although the repetitive sentiment was “I’m used to it.” They felt that if they were left in the same classroom their teaching would improve because they had experience there. Some of these teachers have been spending five or six years moving each year to a different building and grade level.

Research suggests that many others have also felt this way. The results of a study by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy suggest that school staffing problems are not solely a result of shortfalls driven by increasing retirement levels, but also a result of low retention due to organizational conditions. (Ingersoll, 1999). In other words, the organization, or lack of organization, of school systems can lead to low retention of teachers.

Jim Grant said, “We don’t change dentists or doctors every thirty six weeks. In schools, we build trust and reliability and then sever it every thirty six weeks” (Trejos, Nancy, 1991). This statement was made regarding looping, but it can be applied to relationships between staff members, parents and students in a school where there
is a high turnover of teachers. Families rely on stability in a school and look at that as an asset. When they continue to see new teachers each year in a building, they see this as a sign that it is not a good school. In a recent conversation I had with a parent, she said one thing she likes about her school system is that many of the teachers have been there for several years. This was clearly an asset in her mind.

It has been suggested that “teachers tend to invest more of themselves in their students when they know them longer and better, and they tend to persist in finding solutions to academic and other problems because they have more time to do so” (Jackson, Davis, 2000). When we are settled in a place, we feel that it is “ours” and are more likely to invest more of ourselves in our position. Not only do we feel a responsibility to make the school a good place to be, but we feel more comfortable making decisions with school wide interest and within our own classrooms. Teacher commitment has been found to be a critical predictor of teachers’ work performance, absenteeism, retention, burnout and turnover, as well as having an important influence on students’ motivation, achievement, attitudes towards learning and being at school. (Day, et.al., 2005).
Furthermore, when a team has a change in teachers it can slow progress considerably. Results of a study of laid off employees in the general workforce indicated that perceptions of layoff unfairness were associated with lower commitment and the greater use of sick hours by surviving managers and professionals. (Grunberg, et.al., 2000). It has not been uncommon for teams to take three or more years to develop strong teams (Jackson, Davis, 2000). If schools are seeking to do team teaching, looping, clusters or any other type of teaming, turnover hinders this process. In my own experience this past year working in a seventh grade cluster, of the six teachers, four of us were new to the school and grade level. Although we worked well together, there could have been much more team teaching and interdisciplinary teaching if we had been familiar with the curriculum prior to the school year. Currently, four of those same team members are on layoff notice. It is not clear if we will return to our positions or be placed elsewhere.

The performance of a school has also been linked to teacher stability or teacher turnover. A study of low achieving elementary schools in West Virginia found that the low-achieving schools had 2.5 times more low-income students than high-achieving schools, and had teachers with
less education and experience. (Hughes, 1995). This lack of education and experience is a contributor to poor performance. The findings of a study on preparing students for college show how logistical constraints and staff turnover affected the implementation of the school’s mission, which is to prepare educationally and socially disadvantaged students for college. (Farmer-Hinton, 2006).

I believe that the disadvantaged students are the most affected by high turnover of their teaching staff. These students are less likely to have the resources or the motivation to find success on their own. Therefore, a stable educational environment is crucial.

In conclusion, my recommendation after having looked at the effects of teacher turnover in schools is that it be done only when unavoidable. Some solutions would be to seek alternatives to lay offs, to involve teachers more in the organization of the school in order to give them ownership which would create a higher level of commitment, and offer staff development regularly. The effects of teacher turnover are that it is detrimental to both teachers and their students. In schools with lower teacher turnover, students are more likely to stay in school and to achieve higher scores while feeling better about their school experience. Teachers are more likely to be
satisfied with their positions and that in turn will reduce turnover even further. Successful schools will result from reduced turnover of teachers.
REFERENCES


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