

Comparing Turnover Intentions and Actual Turnover in the Public Sector Workforce

Evidence from Public School Teachers

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POLICY ISSUE

When teachers choose to leave their jobs, it can be disruptive and costly for their school and district, affecting everything from student learning to the experiences of other teachers and staff. For this reason, policymakers have been worried by indications that many teachers are thinking about leaving the profession. But just how reliable are these warning signs that teachers are thinking of leaving? In this study, a group of researchers aimed to understand the relationship between teachers' self-reported intentions to leave the profession or transfer schools and their actual turnover.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

The authors examined data from two nationally representative surveys of teachers from three different points in time (2003-04, 2007-08, and 2011-12), linked to subsequent data on their actual turnover. They found:

- Teachers who indicate strong intentions to leave teaching or transfer schools are substantially more likely to do so than those who do not have these intentions.
 - About 33% of teachers who intended to leave teaching as soon as possible ended up leaving by the next school year, compared to about 7% of teachers who did not intend to leave as soon as possible (Figure 1).
 - About 19% of teachers who strongly agreed that they think about transferring schools actually did so by the next school year, compared to about 4% of teachers who strongly disagreed (Figure 2).
 - These general patterns remain true even after controlling for various teacher and school characteristics that are known predictors of teacher turnover, such as being a novice teacher, being a special education teacher, school type, and the demographics of students in the school.
- Yet, most teachers who have strong intentions to leave or transfer end up staying, while many teachers who do not report wanting to exit do turn over.
 - About 2/3 of teachers who intended to leave teaching as soon as possible remained teaching in the next school year.

KEY FINDINGS

- Teachers' intentions to leave or transfer schools are **somewhat predictive** of actual turnover, particularly for those who say they plan to leave teaching as soon as possible.
- However, most teachers who say they plan to leave their school don't end up leaving, while many who don't intend to leave do.
- Teacher intentions can be a useful signal that teachers are dissatisfied with their jobs and that they may be more likely to turnover—but they are not a proxy for actual attrition.

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- About 7% of teachers who did not intend to leave teaching as soon as possible ended up leaving by the next year; the same is true for teachers who were not thinking about transferring schools but did. This is comparable to the national teacher turnover rate of about 7%.

Figure 1: Plan to Leave Teaching as Soon as Possible

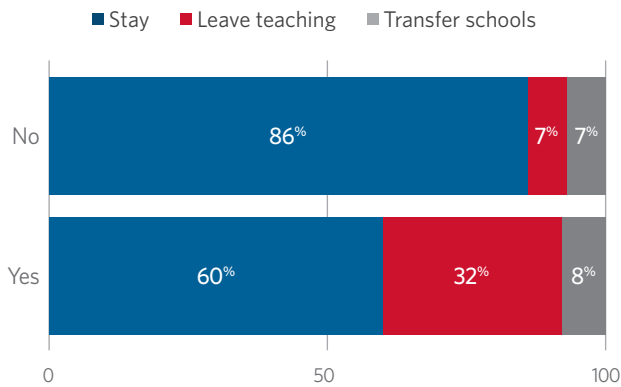
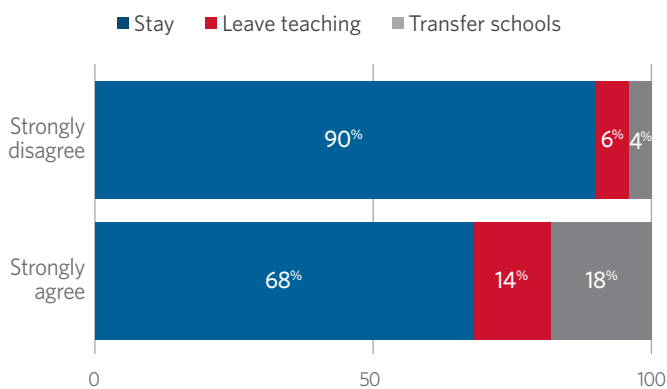


Figure 2: Think About Transferring Schools



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings demonstrate that teachers who have strong intentions to leave or transfer schools are much more likely to do so. This suggests that if states or districts were to gather information about teachers' career intentions, it could help them identify which districts or schools might be likely to experience higher turnover rates the next year and make changes accordingly. Further, tracking teachers' career intentions on a regular basis, at an aggregate level, could help policymakers understand trends and begin to anticipate impending changes to overall teacher turnover. Even if many teachers who intend to leave end up staying, their desire to leave likely has implications for how well they serve their students. Thus, school and district leaders should still consider taking steps to improve working conditions and teacher satisfaction in settings where many teachers indicate a strong intent to leave.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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