



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF
PHILADELPHIA

Key Takeaways

Listening and Learning: Teacher Attendance and Retention

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Impact of Teacher Absences

- **Student achievement:** A teacher missing 10 days has been shown to lower student achievement in math by an amount equivalent to students being taught by a beginner teacher versus a teacher with 3 to 5 years of experience. These effects are especially pronounced for elementary school students.
- **District Finances:** By one estimate, the nation's school districts spend approximately \$4 billion annually to find and hire substitute teachers. On average, teacher absences cost districts an additional \$1800 per teacher per year, based on data from a 2017 study.

Source: [National Council on Teacher Quality Report, 2020](#)



National Trends in Teacher Attendance Data

A [2020 study](#) looking at attendance data from 30 of some of the nation's largest districts found that:

- Over the last five years (2015-20), teachers' attendance rates show a **modest but meaningful improvement**.
- On average, teachers had a **95% attendance rate**.
- **18% of all teachers had excellent attendance** (equal or less than 3 days of absence), with an average of 2 days of absence.
- The **average teacher was absent 9.4 of 187 days** in the average contract year.
- **10% of all teachers in the study were chronically absent**; these 10% of teachers are responsible for a quarter of all absences.
- Teachers are most often absent **due to sick leave**.



The Why and Who Across the Nation

Why teachers are absent:

- Personal or family illness
- Burnout
- Culture of poor attendance
- Contractually-guaranteed paid time off

Who has more absences:

- Teachers with tenure were absent on average 1 day more than teachers without tenure.
- Teachers with more than 10 years of experience were absent on average 4 days more than first year teachers.
- Teachers in middle school or high school were on average absent for 1 day more than teachers in elementary school or preschool.

Source: [National Council on Teacher Quality Report, 2020](#)



National Teacher Shortage

A national teacher shortage has aggravated attendance challenges.

- As of [October 2022](#), 45% of all public schools, 57% of public schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, and 60% of public schools with a high-minority student body had at least one vacant teaching position.
- Teachers, particularly those in schools that serve the most systematically marginalized students, may be more likely to experience burnout due to the additional workload and coverages required to fill needs that result from vacancies.





Who did we talk to?

An overview of the sample and the questions that we asked

This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with School-Based Teacher Leaders, school leaders, and Central Office staff held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at:
<https://www.philasd.org/research/2024/01/09/listening-and-learning-teacher-attendance-and-retention/>.

Sample: Between February and May we talked to school leaders, School-Based Teacher Leaders and Central Office staff who support talent retention activities.



49 school leaders representing 50 schools/programs



19 School-Based Teacher Leaders representing 17 schools



3 staff members from the Office of Talent

This slide deck combines the key findings related to teacher hiring, attendance, and retention from these three groups.

Who we talked to:

What we asked:



School-Based Teacher Leaders (SBTLs)

- What factors most impact teacher retention at your school? Why do teachers leave? What makes them stay?
- What do you think contributes to the high/low teacher attendance rates at your school?
- What makes teaching at your school enjoyable?



School Leaders

- What do you think are the most common barriers or challenges to regular teacher attendance?
- What resources or supports do you think teachers at your school need to be able to attend more frequently?
- Is there anything that you are doing that you have found to be successful?
- How can we better support you in supporting your teachers?

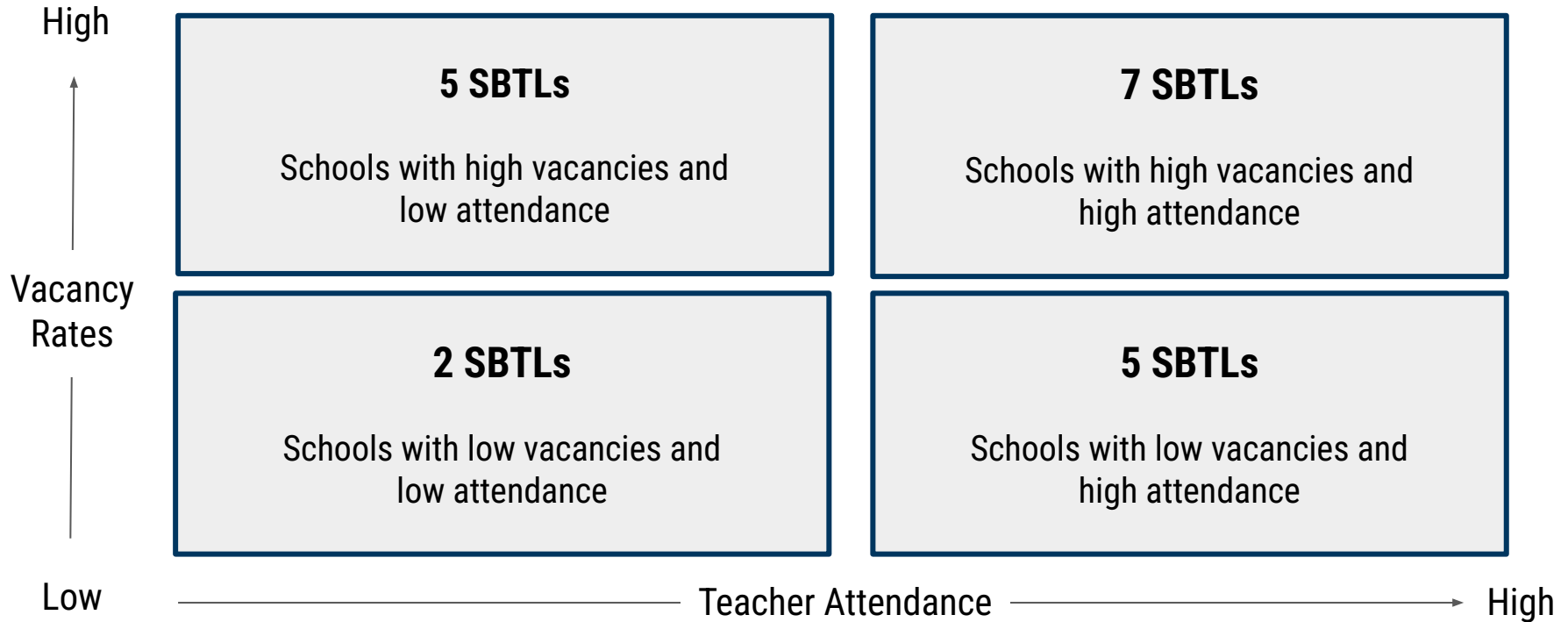


Central Office Staff Members

- Tell us about your role and responsibilities when it comes to filling school-based positions.
- What are some challenges you face in recruitment?
- What are some reasons that instructional staff leave the District? What about non-instructional staff?



We talked to School-Based Teacher Leaders (SBTLs) from schools with varying levels of teacher vacancies and attendance.





We talked to leaders of schools that serve larger populations of marginalized student groups.

	All Schools* [^]	Sample Schools* [^]
Economically Disadvantaged	71%	81%
Black/African American	45%	61%
Hispanic/Latino	26%	28%
Receiving Special Education Services	16%	21%
English Learners	17%	17%

*Based on an October 1, 2022 enrollment snapshot.

[^]Does not include Alternative schools or Charter schools.



We talked to Central Office staff from the Office of Talent, which supports key functions related to school staffing.

Example responsibilities of Talent Office staff:

- Collaborate with school leaders and departments throughout the screening and hiring process to fill vacancies across the District.
- Hold events and create communication materials to recruit teachers and staff both nationally and locally.
- Help principals be strategic about retention strategies by sharing knowledge about what works in certain contexts.
- Assists new employees with the onboarding process by helping them fill out applications and submit necessary paperwork.

What did we learn?

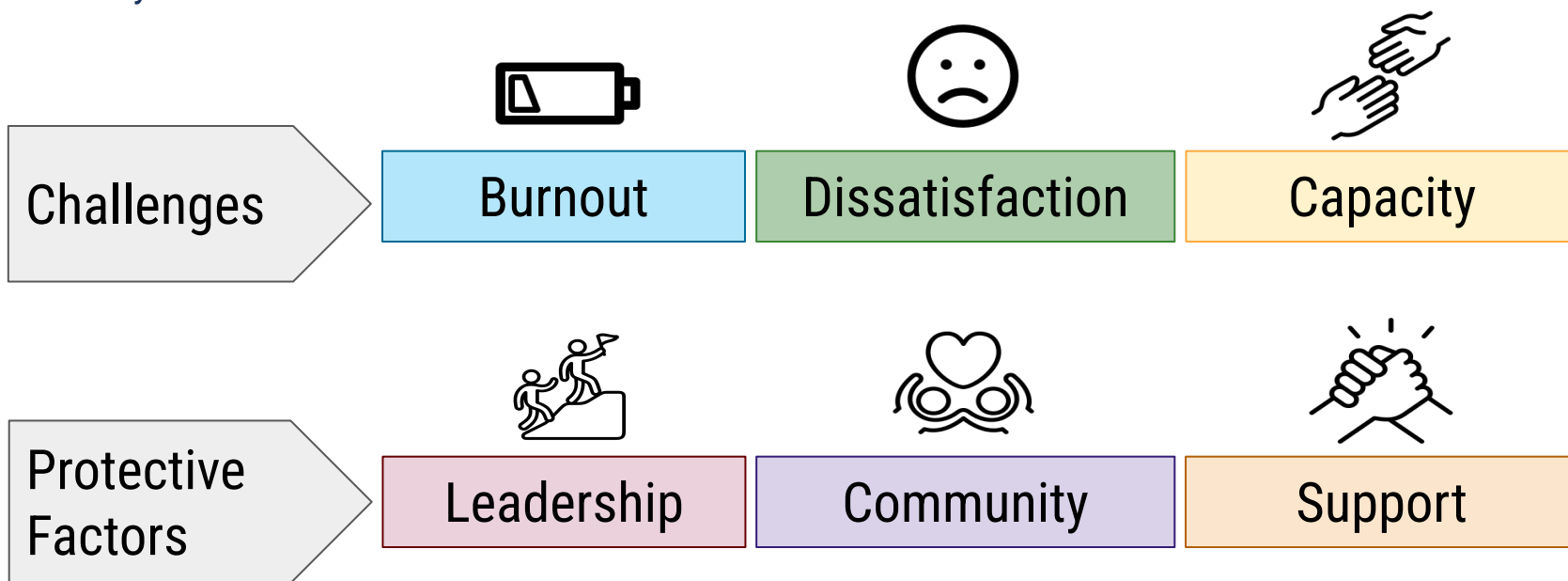
The following slides present a summary of key findings about primary challenges to teacher attendance and retention as described by school leaders (n=49), School-Based Teacher Leaders (n=19), and staff members from the Office of Talent (n=3). Themes from the respondents from all three groups are summarized together.



This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with School-Based Teacher Leaders, school leaders, and Central Office staff held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at: <https://www.philasd.org/research/2024/01/09/listening-and-learning-teacher-attendance-and-retention/>.

Key Themes

Participants described three overarching themes related to the challenges of teacher retention and attendance, and three “protective factors” that they believe combat teacher burnout and mobility.



Challenges

Participants described three overarching themes related to the challenges of teacher retention and attendance.



Burnout

Workload
Lost Preps
Climate and Safety



Dissatisfaction

Leadership
Policies
Facilities



Capacity

Preparation
Support
Time



Burnout

Workload

Excessive Paperwork
+
Competing Initiatives

Lost Preps

Substitute
Shortages
+
Long Term
Vacancies

Climate & Safety

Student Mental
Health and Behavior
+
School Safety



Burnout: Workload

“People’s heads are spinning.”

→ Excessive paperwork and non-instructional responsibilities are overly burdensome and not what educators “signed up for.”

- Teachers are asked to do significant work that they do not feel is fully in the best interest of their students, including administering multiple assessments and surveys.
- Teachers cannot accomplish their instructional planning tasks during their preparation time because they spend their time on paperwork, requiring them to work in the evenings and on weekends.

→ Required implementation of new, competing priorities is overwhelming.

- Teachers appreciate the District’s interest in implementing new initiatives. However, they find it overwhelming to build their content knowledge and learn how to implement new curricular materials, climate initiatives, and other programming at the same time, especially given the additional challenges in their contexts.



Burnout: Lost Preps

“Nobody is coming.”

→ Long term vacancies result in teachers losing their preps for extended periods of time and needing time off to recuperate and plan their own classroom instruction.

- When teachers take long term leave there may not be anyone to replace them. Other teachers fill in daily and may lose their preps for extended periods of time, sometimes for 2-3 weeks or longer, causing significant burnout.
- Teachers may be asked to cover classrooms for extended periods where they do not have the background or training to properly support students, such as autism support, leading to a feeling of ineffectiveness and burnout.

→ Substitute shortages compound the challenges of teacher vacancies and absenteeism.

- Schools with challenges may have a harder time getting substitutes. This results in teachers who are at schools with the most significant challenges needing to repeatedly sacrifice their prep time and lunches.



Burnout: Climate & Safety

"I want to teach."

- School staff often take on a primary role in managing student mental health and behavioral challenges that are the result of complex and chronic trauma.
 - Teachers need additional training and support in processing secondary trauma. This, combined with climate staff vacancies, results in burnout.
 - Climate staff members may also need additional training or support to deal with the levels of trauma that students are experiencing, and/or these positions may be vacant altogether.

- At times, teachers may feel unsafe in their school or their school's neighborhood.
 - Although not a frequently cited challenge, it is worth noting that at some schools, some focus group participants said that teachers feel unsafe when there are significant episodes of fighting and violence within the school and in the neighborhood surrounding the school, accounting for additional burnout.



Dissatisfaction

Leadership

Lack of Appreciation
+
Lack of
Communication &
Collaboration

Policies

Occurrence Process
+
Leveling & Forced
Transfers

Facilities

Cleanliness
+
Basic Resources



Dissatisfaction: Leadership

"I think school leaders are a big lever [to teacher satisfaction]."

→ Focus group participants expressed that when leadership does not communicate to staff that they are valued and appreciated, it can further deflate morale.

- Part of job fulfillment comes from positive reinforcement from leaders; when this is lacking, school staff are at a greater risk of needing to take time off or moving to another school or profession.

→ When school leaders do not communicate clearly and consistently, it can cause confusion about mission and vision and contribute to a lack of trust between leaders and their staff.

- When communication from leadership to school staff is lacking, expectations are unclear, which makes teachers' jobs more difficult.
- A lack of communication also means a lack of transparency, which can cause staff to mistrust the rationale or motivations of leaders' decision making.



Dissatisfaction: Policies

"[Occurrences] are ridiculous."

→ The [occurrence policy](#) may encourage staff to take more absences than necessary.

- By considering multiple days as one occurrence, staff may be incentivized to maximize the number of days per occurrence.
- Focus group participants said that having a blanket policy that penalizes teachers for absences regardless of context and circumstance makes teachers feel unappreciated and disrespected.

→ The leveling process is disruptive for staff and students.*

- Teachers explained how the recruitment and retention benefits of the site selection process can be undermined if those hired through the process end up being moved during the leveling process.

*Leveling is the process whereby teacher and special education classroom assistant allocations are recalculated ("leveled") based on actual student enrollment after the start of the school year, resulting in teachers being sent to work at schools where they did not originally accept employment.



Dissatisfaction: Facilities

“Things are clean when there is a photo op.”

→ Concerns about building cleanliness contribute to low teacher morale.

- Teachers do not feel respected as professionals when their school building is not meeting basic standards of cleanliness.
- Teachers report that the schools are dirty, including chipping paint, sticky floors, graffiti on the walls, and unpleasant and smelly bathrooms that lack basic items such as toilet paper.
- Custodial vacancies cause challenges with trash and rodent management, and requests from the District regarding support go unanswered.
- Broken, outdated facilities go unrepaired for lengthy periods of time.
- Lack of parking and air conditioning can act as a tipping point in particularly challenging schools where teachers already face a myriad of barriers to teaching.
- Teachers believe that facilities may be causing illness.



Capacity

Preparation

New Teachers and
Emergency
Certifications
+
Behavior Management

Time

Not Enough Staff
+
Unreasonable
Expectations for
Implementing Initiatives

Support

Focus on
Coverage
+
No “Community”



Capacity: Preparation

“There’s no actual training plan or program.”

- Teachers may feel like they are not prepared to meet the needs of their students efficiently and effectively, which causes additional stress, frustration, and burnout.
 - New teachers and staff and those with emergency certifications are particularly subject to feeling they have not been adequately prepared for all the facets of their role.

- Teachers see insufficient preparation on trauma-informed approaches to managing student behaviors to be the result of both deficits in teacher preparation programs and the District’s professional development offerings.
 - Teachers noted that many teachers and support staff could benefit from additional training and development on supporting students that have extensive behavioral and mental health needs. When these needs are unmet, the classroom and school climate suffers.



Capacity: Time

“It’s systematically set up for failure.”

→ Numbers of teachers and support staff are insufficient to support student needs.

- Teacher vacancies require existing teachers to make sure all students are getting what they need. However, teachers don’t have the time or capacity to properly support the students who are their primary responsibility, let alone additional students.
- This challenge has been compounded after the disruptions due to Covid when students demonstrated even greater social-emotional and academic needs.

→ Teachers described an environment of “initiative overload,” caused by multiple simultaneous mandates and programs being needed to be implemented at once.

- While the new initiatives and programming may be well-intentioned, staff are asked to implement too many at once.
- Being inundated with “new” requests and systems is especially difficult for new teachers that are still learning the basics.



Capacity: Support

“We are always filling in somewhere else.”

- One of the key roles of a School-Based Teacher Leader (SBTL) is to support teachers, but they may not be able to do so when they are covering classes due to absences/vacancies.
 - Since SBTLs are fully or partially released, they are often the ones to cover classes when other teachers are absent or when there are vacant positions. This system reduces the support they are able to offer teachers, especially new teachers, further compounding the challenges teachers face.
 - SBTLs often lead Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which may get cancelled if the SBTL is needed for classroom coverage.
- Community and relationship building activities may be deprioritized when school leaders and staff members are focused on managing challenges of coverage.
 - SBTLs noted that reducing or eliminating these activities due to managing coverage challenges contributes to teachers feeling unappreciated and isolated and may also have negative implications for relationships with the larger school community.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are conditions that can combat teacher burnout and mobility. Participants described three overarching themes of protective factors that were present at schools with better teacher attendance and retention.



Leadership

Grace and Empathy
Strong Vision
Recognition



Community

Professional Collaboration
Relationship Building



Support

Coverages
Coaching
Non-Instructional
Staff & Partners



Leadership: Grace and Empathy

What is it?

School leaders demonstrate understanding when teachers need to take time off for personal or family illness, which is perceived as counter to the District's "punitive" occurrence policy.

Why is it important?

Many teachers are the primary caretakers for children and other family members and are likely to feel tension between work and home responsibilities. Managing time off requests with grace and empathy makes teachers feel seen and cared for as people and promotes a caring school culture. This reduces the likelihood that a teacher will "walk," leaving additional vacancies to manage, compounding the stress felt by the remaining teachers, and leaving students without teachers.

What does it look like in action?

- Leaders develop personal relationships with teachers so they are aware of their home-life responsibilities and able to respond appropriately when needs arise.
- Leaders acknowledge when teachers return to work following a personal or family illness and/or attend work despite the work-life tension they may be facing.
- Leaders support finding coverage for mid-day health-related appointments, reducing the need for teachers to take an entire day off.



Leadership: Strong Vision

What is it?

School leaders collaboratively develop and anchor staff in clearly delineated goals, priorities, and plans to achieve them.

Why is it important?

Having a strong, shared vision promotes mutual accountability and buy-in among staff, both of which create a positive school culture where teachers want to be. Leaders can leverage the vision to encourage innovation and enable and empower staff to step into leadership roles related to key projects and initiatives aimed at achieving the school's vision.

What does it look like in action?

- Conversations about staff attendance focus on the impact that attendance has on achieving the school's vision.
- The District's initiatives and priorities are communicated in relation to the school's vision so that mandates don't feel like "just another thing" that has to get done.
- The vision of the school guides what is deprioritized, when needed.



Leadership: Recognition

What is it?

Leaders consistently acknowledge and praise staff members for their hard work.

Why is it important?

Teachers regularly go above and beyond to meet the needs of their students. When their daily efforts to do more with less and to manage competing priorities are acknowledged, teachers feel seen and appreciated. This creates a positive and professional work environment where teachers want to come to work each day.

What does it look like in action?

- Leaders regularly thank teachers for showing up even in the midst of challenging situations and circumstances.
- Leaders visit classrooms and leave kind notes for teachers.
- Leaders identify time, space, and financial resources that they can use to hold recognition events to celebrate staff members.



Community: Professional Collaboration

What is it?

Leaders and school staff prioritize structured collaborative activities that are aimed at improving teacher practice and problem-solving barriers to student achievement.

Why is it important?

When teachers have consistent opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other, they feel a sense of mutual respect, shared accountability, and camaraderie that minimizes the feelings of overwhelm and isolation that may lead to burnout. Opportunities for shared decision making and learning also promote teacher effectiveness.

What does it look like in action?

- School leaders consistently hold Professional Learning Communities and use that space to promote shared learning.
- Schoolwide and student-level problem solving meetings are implemented with fidelity and promote shared decision making and equity of voice.
- Teachers are encouraged to visit each other's classrooms, learn from each other, and support each other's learning and growth.
- School leaders provide space for teachers to discuss and process secondary trauma.



Community: Relationship Building

What is it?

Prioritizing the development of positive relationships between staff members and between school staff and families/community members.

Why is it important?

When teachers have consistent opportunities to get to know each other as people, they feel a sense of belonging and camaraderie. This can mitigate feelings of burnout. When teachers have positive relationships with the neighborhood, they feel safe and welcome in the community.

What does it look like in action?

- School leaders organize the distribution of small gifts and treats for teachers, such as classroom supplies or snacks.
- “Sunshine clubs” recognize personal milestones such as birthdays.
- School staff attend happy hours or fun activities outside of school.
- School staff frequent businesses and partner with organizations in the surrounding neighborhood.



Support: Coaching and PD

What is it?

Coaching refers to job-embedded support focused on improving teacher practice through observation, targeted feedback, and modeling. Professional development is structured, continued learning aimed at improving teacher practice.

Why is it important?

When teachers are coached and/or have high quality professional learning opportunities, they are better able to meet the needs of their students and feel like they are “good at their jobs.” This contributes to job satisfaction and enables teachers to see the positive outcomes of their hard work.

What does it look like in action?

- Coaching is differentiated and takes into account the specific needs of each teacher.
- New teachers and teachers with emergency certifications are prioritized for coaching.
- New teachers are mentored by more experienced staff.
- Professional development sessions include trauma-informed classroom management approaches.



Support: Coverages

What is it?

When teachers are absent or there are teacher vacancies, other teachers must cover classrooms to ensure that students are safe and engaged in learning, particularly at schools that have challenges getting substitute teachers.

Why is it important?

According to the staff members who participated in this study, schools with higher teacher attendance have found ways to manage coverages so that teachers are able to maintain their prep periods and fully-released staff members can fulfill their coaching and teacher support responsibilities.

What does it look like in action?

- Building substitutes provide coverage at schools with ongoing challenges.
- School leaders consistently recognize and celebrate substitutes so that substitutes want to return to the school.
- Students are split among teachers so that no teacher loses their prep period.
- New teachers are not asked to provide coverages.
- Coverages rotate so that no one teacher is consistently losing prep periods.



Support: Non-Instructional Staff & Partners

What is it?

Non-instructional support staff include paraprofessionals such as climate staff members and special education assistants. Partners include staff members from external agencies that provide services in our schools.

Why is it important?

When schools are fully staffed and have community partners that provide services and resources for their students, teachers have more support for meeting students' academic needs. Climate staff members, special education assistants, and high quality mental and behavioral health partners may be particularly critical in reducing barriers to effective teaching and learning.

What does it look like in action?

- Ensure adequate pay for non-instructional support staff positions to maximize fill-rates, including Climate and Special Education staff.
- Recognize non-instructional support staff as valued members of the school community and provide them with adequate training to fulfill their role.
- Schools have community partnerships that help meet the needs of their students and students' families.
- Schools provide adequate space for community partners to operate.

Summary of Findings

During Listening & Learning sessions, participants identified burnout, dissatisfaction, and capacity issues as key challenges to teacher attendance and retention. Leadership, community, and support emerged as protective factors that contribute to higher teacher attendance and retention rates.

Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Burnout caused by workloads, lost preps, and climate & safety issuesDissatisfaction with leadership, policies, and facilitiesCapacity issues in preparation, support, and time
Protective Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Leadership that shows grace & empathy, strong vision, and recognitionCommunity built through professional collaboration and relationship buildingSupport including coverages, coaching, and non-instructional staff & partners