

Running head: RETAINING PERSONNEL

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RETAINING PERSONNEL IN RPS

According to data found in the Schoolzilla database regarding Richmond Public Schools' goals, the teacher retention rate, goal 4, for RPS at the end of the 2017-2018 school year was 79.3% (Schoolzilla for RPS, n.d.; Richmond Public Schools & Lee, 2021, 2). As of 2018-2019, it was 81.9% pre-pandemic and increased to 94.3% at the end of the 2019-2020 school year (Mickens DeMena, 2021; Richmond Public Schools & Lee, 2021, 2). The RPS Talent Office Director Helen Mickens-Demena stated that many people put retirement on hold during the pandemic school closure period at the end of the 19-20 school year. She said they might have decided to stay another year because RPS was entirely virtual. Mickens-Demena stated that at the end of FY20, 80% of those who left RPS, rendered as terminations, were resignations, and 18% were retirees. Before this year, RPS was not tracking reasons for "terminations" other than retirement or firing, as exit interviews are voluntary. When asked for reasons given for personnel leaving the district, Mickens-Demena could only provide anecdotal evidence. She said the reasons she knew were 1) taking a job in another division, 2) promotion within RPS, 3) better salary elsewhere, 4) lack of administrative support, 4) family health - adult care, medical condition, etc. during the COVID timeframe, 5) retirement, and family resources - one parent need to stay home to monitor children in virtual school.

In FY20, 56% of teachers who left RPS had fewer than five years of teaching experience. Although RPS had not collected numbers for FY21 at the time of the interview, Mickens-Demena stated that as of June 12th, 2021, teachers with less than five years leaving RPS were 56% (Mickens DeMena, 2021). RPS conducted the Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions and reported the results in a school board meeting on June 28, 2021 that

demonstrated that, on average, employees believe that working conditions (Richmond Public Schools & Lee, 2021, 4-6)

Neither Mickens-Demena nor Hudacsko had numbers on the average time in which teachers stay in RPS. Hudacsko said that RPS had not collected that data and relied on the state for general retention information through a joint program with the University of Virginia. Hudacsko indicated that there were no efforts in place to retain teachers until three years ago and that the new administration has made it a goal to increase job satisfaction and retention (Hudacsko, 2021). She also stated that they are using multiple tools to promote from within, provide support for teachers who wish to grow in RPS, and create a responsive human resources department.

Currently, RPS does not offer incentives but works with the city to provide information to new teachers. These incentives would include possible waived rental deposits or fees for apartments and utilities and signing bonuses. In addition, RPS is the highest paying district in the area, making this division more attractive to new hires than its surrounding counterparts. According to RPS Chief of Staff Michelle Hudacsko, to retain teachers, RPS is working on new teacher induction where supports, such as a database with information for new teachers, are available (Hudacsko, 2021). RPS has also revamped its mentorship program to make it consistent across the district, including mentors' training, follow-through, and support. In addition, Hudacsko said they are encouraging school principals to have "stay interviews" with teachers who indicate they are not returning. The purpose of these interviews is to understand what will keep teachers/employees in place. For example, administrators ask 'what are we providing and what can RPS do,' providing opportunities for administrative leadership, growth

opportunities for teachers to move up in RPS, and removing repercussions that may have been cause for leaving the school or district.

As to which group of employees is the hardest to retain, Ms. Hudacsko states that RPS has trouble *obtaining* and *retaining* bus drivers but could not “guarantee” they were the hardest (Hudacsko, 2021). She felt that addressing the payscale for bus drivers is one means of addressing the issue, and upon review of the job posting website for RPS, I see they are now offering a five hundred dollar signing bonus (Richmond Public Schools, 2021). However, I do not believe the steps have been successful at this time due to COVID-19 concerns, lack of desire to work among the unskilled workforce that would typically apply due to state and federal benefits providing them with a similar income without working. Currently, bus drivers in RPS earn \$16.58 per hour, which is not much of an incentive when people earn the same or more elsewhere (Richmond Public Schools, 2021).

RPS offers a competitive salary; a comprehensive health package with medical, vision, dental; access to the Virginia Retirement Services and a supplemental retirement plan; a fair leave package for personal and family events. In compliance with the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), RPS offers additional paid leave for employees who contract the coronavirus (Richmond Public Schools, 2021). I believe the salary provided by RPS has been the main draw to the system and has kept many employees here. If the surrounding districts paid a similar amount, teachers would flock in their direction. The closer a person gets to retirement, the more they are looking to plump up their retirement package, and salary plays a big role in that process.

When Jason Kamras became superintendent for RPS, he initiated a district-wide program to change the way the district is viewed by outsiders and by all stakeholders. In a district-wide update, he reiterated the district motto, *Teach with Love, Lead with Love, Serve with Love* (Richmond Public Schools & Kamras, 2021). Part of the 'Love' movement is propaganda that is not necessarily harmful, and it is something RPS has been missing for a while. By pushing out the message that we are a great place to work and that the district cares about one another, the administration builds buy-in from the employees. They are backing it up with the Teach With Love campaign and numerous outings into the community.

Staff morale has been the hardest to maintain, according to Hudacsko (Hudacsko, 2021). Employee satisfaction is goal 6 in the Dreams4RPS mission, and Hudacsko said that RPS identifies a set of questions to determine employees' satisfaction when Kamras came on board. She indicated that morale was at about 35% positive at that time and has since risen to 45%. The goal is to have 75% positive morale across the district. She also stated that the increased salary had increased overall morale. RPS plans to increase salaries after the third and final pay study, including bus drivers, is completed. She indicated that improved human resources customer service will also improve staff morale as a whole (Hudacsko, 2021).

Teachers will receive a pay increase for the 2021-2022 school year, which is the fourth increase since I began in 2017. RPS under Jason Kamras has advocated for teacher increases each year (Channel 12 News, 2021). According to Hudacsko, RPS has completed two of three pay studies. Teachers were included in the first study, assistant principals and instructional assistants were included in the second, and bus drivers will be included in the third (Hudacsko, 2021). The studies revealed that RPS paid employees under scale for many positions and

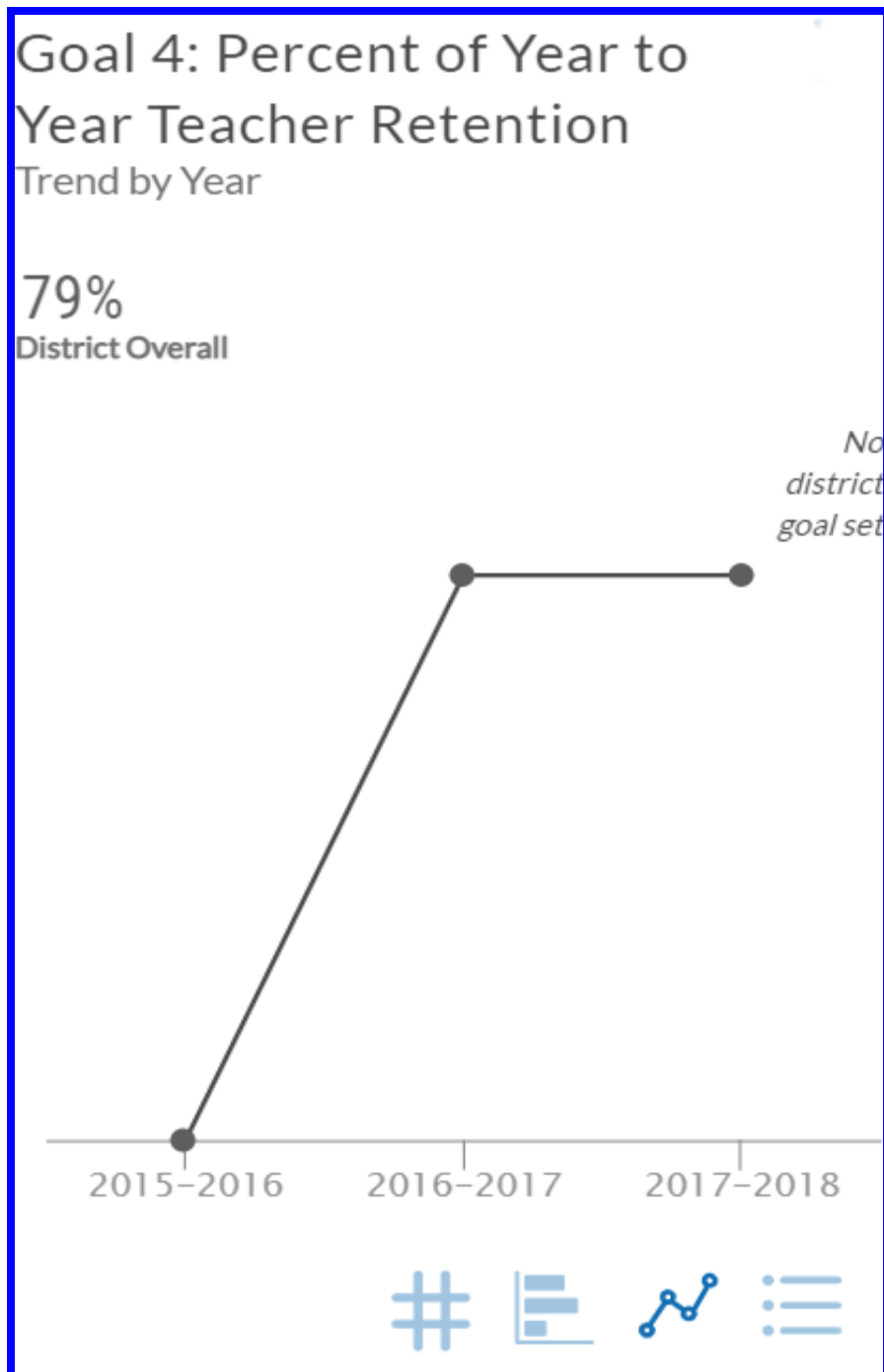
rectified salaries that had not had appropriate step increases. The most recent pay increase will include steps and a three percent increase (Channel 12 News, 2021). Even with the lower salaries RPS had, the district still paid more than Chesterfield, Henrico, and other surrounding districts. Hudacsko said that it wasn't always enough to keep good teachers from leaving (Hudacsko, 2021).

One issue that any RPS administrator did not address was the condition of school buildings. I see that as a reason for teacher and employee dissatisfaction. Although RPS has been building new schools, the current status of many schools is abhorrent (Truong, 2019). This school building issue is not a new problem, but it is a persistent problem across the United States. Many teachers struggle to provide an excellent education to their students amid broken, crumbling, mice-infested schools. As a veteran educator, I have caught mice and even a snake that crawled through my back door and then proceeded to teach my students. I have accepted positions and declined positions based on the condition of the schools where I have interviewed. This past school year, RPS has been arguing with the city, and the board members argue about the minutia of who and when George Wythe High School will be built, and nothing has been accomplished (Williams, 2021). The staff and families don't care who builds it; they just want it built as soon as possible. My observation as a recent visitor to the school is that I would not accept a position in the school without knowing exactly when the rebuild would happen.

RPS is on the right track with salaries, benefits, support from administration in the buildings, and at the district level, meaningful professional development, and replacing those administrators who did not promote the kind of culture RPS wants to see across the district. However, they are still battling issues with customer support at the HR level. When I reached out

to the HR director for assistance this semester, I heard crickets. I have heard from Michelle Hudacsko each time I have emailed. In addition, we have held email and face-to-face virtual interviews to support my endeavors. For every negative, there is a positive and the hope that one day the positive will outweigh the negatives.

Appendix A



Schoolzilla database. July 25, 2021

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“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”

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