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Teacher Turnover

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## Abstract

Public school districts across the nation are struggling with teacher shortages, high turnover rates, and low retention rates. There are many factors involved, including the low number of teacher candidates graduating from college into the market, low starting salaries and benefits, low morale amongst veteran teachers, and the poor public relations profile of teaching, especially in high poverty areas like Richmond Public Schools. The focus question is, *How is Richmond Public Schools handling these factors for hiring and retaining new teachers and addressing the needs of veteran teachers?*

## TEACHER TURNOVER IN RPS

According to the Metropolitan Education Research Consortium (MERC) report published in 2016, eight percent of teachers left the profession between 2011-12 and 2012-13 in seven school districts, including Richmond Public Schools (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016). The vast majority of those teachers were from high-poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In the report, a section titled *Teacher Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers* indicated that black teachers left their positions at a higher rate (10%) than either white or Hispanic teachers (8%), and ten percent of those who left were from high poverty schools while only six percent were from low poverty schools. The most significant reason for leaving at that time indicated by the report was retirement as teachers with twenty-five-plus years were leaving the profession. The next largest group to go were teachers with a year or less experience.

According to the National Center for Education, in 2016-17 school year, ten percent of principals left their positions via retirement (32%), moved from a school (32%), and nineteen percent of those moved up the ladder in the district level position (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2019). Only eight percent of those who left their jobs, not including retirement, also left education completely. Again, the most significant percentage of those who left did so from schools with higher minority rates.

The Hunt Institute report, *Virginia's Teacher Pipeline*, states that in 2016-17 RPS had a turnover rate of 28.3%, which was more than twice the state average of 11.5% (The Hunt Institute & Jupp, 2018). Why were teachers quitting at higher rates in the district? According to research, most teachers leave due to high-stress situations in their buildings caused by administration, colleagues, the condition of the building, and lack of supplies (Mulvahill, 2019).

An article in EdWeek states, “Stress, more so than low pay, is the main reason public school teachers quit” and that the pandemic has created additional pressure in their lives (EdWeek, 2021). The article also stated that forty-three percent of teachers who left voluntarily did so because of stress and disappointment in the teaching profession. Sixty-four percent of teachers who left during the pandemic stated that the pandemic combined with the low salary wasn’t worth the added stress (EdWeek, 2021).

The MERC is now conducting a study of the seven districts to determine why teachers are leaving and what school districts can do to rectify the situation. According to Michelle Hudacsko, RPS Chief of Staff, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) will be working with VCU to determine additional factors on why teachers leave, what are the most prevalent factors, and how to retain teachers (Personal communication, Hudacsko, 2021). She also stated that the state department of education will no longer be working with VCU on collecting and interpreting the data collected but that RPS has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with VCU to disaggregate the data from the past couple of year to provide additional insight.

According to Helen Mickens DeMena, Director of Talent Acquisition, it has been difficult to track this data in the past because RPS had no system to do so (Personal communication, Mickens DeMena, 2021). However, due to the growing need to track employee movement in and out of the district, she stated that they were in the process of obtaining a provider to provide that service. In 2018-2019, RPS had 2200 teachers employed and there were 345 “terminations,” which includes all personnel who left the district for various reasons including retirement. In 2019-2020 there were fewer teachers, 1987, and fewer terminations, 179. Mickens DeMena stated that many teachers had indicated they would retire in January of

2020, when employees completed the Intent to Return form requested by the district. Of the 179 terminations in FY20, 80% were resignations, and 18% were due to retirement. After RPS closed schools in March and the determination to teach virtually, many of those teachers changed their minds, which may be why the percentage of teachers leaving RPS dropped from 15.7 to 9.0 (Mickens DeMena, 2021). In the 2020-2021 school year, RPS has 1900 teachers and has had 109 resignations and retirements thus far, and 24% of those are retirements. Mickens DeMena also stated that final numbers would not be available until the Fall of 2021 cut-off date, and it takes time to disaggregate the data.

It is difficult to precisely know why teachers leave RPS as the exit survey is voluntary, so not accurate. Ms. Hudacsko also provided several reasons she believed teachers were leaving. The first reason is salary. She said that although RPS has increased teacher pay by approximately ten percent in the past three years, Virginia is still one of the lower-paying states in the nation (Personal Communication, Hudacsko, 2021). Ms. Mickens DeMena said that we are currently the highest-paying district in the area. Hudacsko said that although RPS has increased teacher pay steadily over the last three years and has completed salary studies on two other groups, Assistant Principals and Instructional Assistants, RPS needs to complete an additional study for all other personnel not included in the first two.

Mickens DeMena agrees with Hudacsko's assessment of teacher retention issues, teachers feel that they lack resources, have few challenges, and lack administrative supports. Hudacsko also stated that this is being addressed as well by promoting from within and providing opportunities for additional education through university cohorts so that employees can be provided with better opportunities. Unfortunately, according to Mickens DeMena, there is

no way to track which teachers are in programs, such as this Longwood cohort, and cannot fully support the programs or teachers.

Culture and leadership in buildings is another reason, according to Hudacsko and DeMena. To address the issue of teacher retention, RPS is using data from The New Teacher Project (TNTP) to identify “irreplaceables” and address the needs of those teachers (Hudacsko, 2021). Irreplaceables are teachers who are “so successful at advancing student learning that they are nearly impossible to replace” (The New Teacher Project, 2012). The TNTP report stated that the top three findings were that 1) “principals make far too little effort to retain” irreplaceables, 2) they “made too little effort” to remove low-performing teachers, 3) “poor school cultures and working conditions drive away great teachers,” and 4) “policies give principals and district leaders few incentives to change their ways.” Hudacsko said they are attempting to identify the top ten percent of teachers who can be considered irreplaceable and work to keep them in each school (Personal communication, Hudacsko, 2021). She believes that school leaders play a significant role in teacher retention by having “stay conversations” and providing additional leadership opportunities within the buildings. She states that principals can identify the best teachers and consciously work to retain them.

According to Mickens DeMena, in FY19, 55% of those teachers who left RPS had fewer than five years of teaching experience in the division and 56% in FY20. Support for new hires and new teachers at both the district and school levels is under construction. In 2017 new teachers were required to attend mentee meetings monthly; however, RPS did not enforce attendance. New hires are currently supposed to participate in mentee sessions online, but RPS did not enforce attendance again. As a mentor, I had a mentee who did not attend any mentee

meetings throughout the year and refused to meet with me regularly. Lack of enforced support leads to burnout more quickly for teachers new to the profession working in an urban setting.

RPS is beginning to act more quickly by starting their hiring season in October of the current year for the following year by working with colleges and universities by holding information sessions early with prospective teachers. RPS conducts recruitment fairs and places advertisements on social media, primarily LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and reaching out via local radio, running digital campaigns with Richmond Times-Dispatch, and placing banners around town for bus drivers (Mickens DeMena, 2021). During the 2020-2021 school year, Mickens DeMena stated that RPS held virtual hiring events, but they were not as successful as face-to-face events have been in the past and that the bus driver hiring event was not well attended.

Because the teacher shortage has worsened over the past five years, RPS is stepping up its game by partnering with VCU in the Richmond Teacher Residency Program (RTR) to provide cohorts for specific areas. Currently, RPS and VCU have a cohort of Exceptional Education Instructional Assistants becoming certified ExEd teachers (Mickens DeMena, 2021). RPS is also working with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) outside of the greater Richmond area to recruit male teachers of color. They are reaching out to surrounding states to create partnerships. Recently, a group of Talent Acquisition staff members traveled to Puerto Rico to recruit Spanish-speaking new teaching graduates who cannot find positions locally due to Hurricane Maria's devastation in 2017 and the subsequent hurricane seasons. Unfortunately, according to Mickens DeMena, there are no current incentives to make a move from one state to another other than the current rate of pay and benefits. She did say that she is working with the

city and local businesses to provide housing perks, such as waiving the application fees for rentals and utilities. However, nothing is in place yet.

Currently, RPS is working on supports to retain teachers. Members of the Human resources departments are working together to provide better mentorship in the schools and at the district level. RPS began conducting “stay interviews” with teachers indicating they are not returning or who have expressed interest in transferring to the virtual academy, Virtual Virginia, to discern reasons for teacher exodus. RPS wants to address the issues head-on by providing better administrative leadership and removing any fear of repercussion. RPS has approximately one hundred positions, non-sports coaching, jobs posted online this past Tuesday, June 9, 2021, for FY22 (Mickens DeMena, 2021). There were 248 positions, and 100 have already been filled. Positions such as Principal, Assistant Principal, Counselors, Secondary Literacy Coach, or Elementary Literacy Coach may have multiple jobs under one posting.

Michelle Hudacsko said they are working on “customer service” in the Talent office to address employee issues. My experience as a new hire was atrocious, as my paperwork was misplaced numerous times. When I attempted to rectify the plus-30 promised, I discovered the previous person promised something he could not give. However, when I began my recertification process, the new certification hire was very attentive, helpful, and made certain all was correct when I submitted my paperwork. When conducting interviews for this and the following papers, I found the department heads were willing to provide interviews while other staff in the Talent Office were not responsive. I believe this is an area that RPS needs to focus on to keep teachers. This type of interaction, similar to the lack of school administrator supports, makes teachers leave for other districts, in my opinion. RPS must become the best place to work



in Virginia to keep those Irriplaceables from moving to another district to accept less pay but are treated with more respect.

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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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