

**PRIORITIZING INSTRUCTIONAL
TIME TO SUPPORT TEACHER
RETENTION AND STUDENT LEARNING**

A CASE STUDY



**NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS**



PRIORITIZING INSTRUCTIONAL TIME TO SUPPORT TEACHER RETENTION AND STUDENT LEARNING

In the aftermath of the pandemic, schools across the nation are grappling with teacher and staff shortages. While a state-level analysis of data in eight states showed only slightly higher turnover rates in the 2021–22 school year compared to the previous five years,¹ school- and district-level analyses reveal that turnover is greatest in high-poverty schools and districts, urban districts, and districts serving predominately students of color.²

Increased turnover is problematic for multiple reasons. The first is because turnover is associated with lower levels of academic achievement.³ During a time when students experienced considerable learning loss,⁴ there is greater urgency for schools to accelerate learning. Second, there are real difficulties in finding quality replacements. Teacher vacancy rates increased in 2021 to 2-3% empty teaching positions, resulting in thousands of students not receiving a full-time teacher or extra staff support to help address the impacts of the pandemic.⁵ In the 2021-22 school year, “45% of public schools reported having one or more vacant teaching positions in October” and “53% of public schools reported in August feeling understaffed entering the 2022-23 school year.”⁶ In a fall 2022 survey of charter school leaders, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools found that 73% were majorly or moderately concerned about staffing.⁷

Through our research, we focused on schools that implemented innovative strategies to address teacher turnover and retention challenges, recognizing that a stable and supported teaching workforce is crucial for student success and recovery from pandemic learning loss.⁸ This case study delves into the strategy of protecting instructional time and asks the question: How might we prioritize instructional time to support teacher retention and student learning?

Methodology

From January through June 2023, we visited 10 schools to learn more about their efforts to retain teachers. We also conducted interviews with charter associations and authorizers as well as members of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition. In addition, we surveyed nearly 150 public charter school leaders and 100 public charter school teachers and support staff across the country.





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Strategies to Address Teacher Turnover and Retention Challenges

Through these efforts, we identified a variety of strategies to address teacher turnover and retention challenges:

Strategy	Examples
Changing the school day and week to make teaching more attractive	School adopted a four-day school week. School designates days where teachers can leave at the same time as students.
Prioritizing instructional time	Schools adopt practices to allow teachers to focus on instruction instead of noninstructional activities like administrative duties or supervising students in noninstructional contexts.
Offering teacher training and professional development	School provides professional development in response to teacher-identified needs. School provides professional development in response to schoolwide needs.
Expanding access to mental health supports to teachers	Social workers train teachers on responding and dealing with their own traumas related to the pandemic. School reimburses teachers for purchases related to their own mental health needs. School staff, such as administrators or instructional coaches, check on teachers' mental health. School offers opt-in monthly wellness programming.
Changing benefits packages	School provides additional PTO. School provides transportation funding. School adjusted salaries for increased cost of living. School offers access to telehealth.
Implementing teacher appreciation efforts	Administrators tell teachers they are valued. School provides care packages and flowers. Schoolwide team building. School offers shout-out boards.
Implementing Grow Your Own initiatives	Schools develop programs to encourage those in the school or local community to become teachers.



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Prioritizing Instructional Time

This case study focuses on one of the strategies we saw often in the site visit schools — prioritizing instructional time and limiting teachers' noninstructional tasks so they can focus on helping students recover from pandemic learning loss.

National surveys of teachers indicate that teachers spend a meaningful amount of time doing non-teaching-related tasks. A 2023 Harris Poll found that three out of four teachers (75%) feel they are often asked or required to do things outside of their teaching purview. They estimate they spend, on average, about 17% of their workday supporting their students' mental or physical well-being and 23% on classroom management — for a total of 40% of time spent on non-academic instruction.⁹ In 2022, teachers reported spending 18% of their time each week on non-teaching-related tasks and approximately half of their time on directly teaching students.¹⁰ The teachers surveyed wished they could spend more time teaching instead of doing administrative or other nonteaching activities. Of the public charter school teachers we surveyed, 53% identified restructuring roles to reduce administrative duties as an extremely or very effective practice to retain teachers.

To help reduce the amount of time teachers spend on noninstructional activities, schools have implemented practices such as hiring specialized staff, making intentional efforts to reduce or reassign noninstructional activities, and adjusting schedules to allow teachers to focus on instruction. Protected instructional time not only helps with teacher retention but also is necessary to help students recover from missed learning due to the pandemic.

Hiring additional staff focused on student mental health and behaviors

One tactic charter schools used was to hire additional staff who focused on student mental health and behaviors so that teachers could focus on academic content.

For example, Austin Achieve Public Schools, located in Austin, Texas, used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER)¹¹ funding to hire additional social workers to work with students either individually or in group sessions to address classroom behaviors. Austin Achieve identified a pressing need for a lower student to social worker ratio to help students recover from the immediate impacts of the pandemic. The organization plans to maintain the lower staffing ratios for three years and then gradually



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return to pre-COVID staffing levels. Although Austin Achieve would like to continue to have a lower ratio, it anticipates that in the long term there eventually will be less need for social work services, allowing it to return to the higher student to social worker ratio.

Similarly, Washington, D.C.-based Washington Latin has an extensive team providing mental health supports to students who need it. The mental health department is an eight-person team consisting of two staff who are assigned to an Integrated Services Unit, which helps connect families in need to governmental services,¹² as well as six clinicians of varying backgrounds, such as psychologists and social workers. The mental health department provides services to almost all students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and a large number of students without IEPs. To identify students for services, the school relies on a referral system, where staff or parents can submit information via a secure Google Form that describes why they are concerned about the student and rank the severity of the issue. The mental health department meets weekly to review referrals and assign staff when appropriate. Staff are assigned based on their areas of specialty to best meet the needs of the student. For instance, one staff member specializes in eating disorders, another in students with autism.

Providers service students on a six-week rotation, working through whatever challenges they have. The counselor meets with the student weekly. In the sixth session, the goal is for the student to have a “toolbox of coping skills” so that the counselor can discharge the student from services; however, there are cases where counselors will see students for more (or less) time, as students are evaluated case by case. The use of these services takes pressure off of teachers to be the sole support for students, allowing them to focus on instruction.

Likewise, Sage Middleton, which is located in Idaho, hired a full-time counselor specifically to handle student emotional challenges. The counselor helps students learn communication skills to navigate typical school interpersonal challenges that may be distracting them from academics and helps students to process their emotions and work through challenges to stay on task.

Although most schools focus on services for students, some are adding social supports to help families, which also helps teachers to focus on instruction. More information about those services is in the “Formal Programs to Help Families in Poverty Navigate Crises” case study.¹³



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Reducing or eliminating noninstructional tasks for teachers

Another tactic the charter schools used was to reduce or eliminate noninstructional tasks. In the Heads of Schools survey, 62% of the public charter school leaders we surveyed have restructured roles to eliminate administrative duties, with an equal percentage implementing the change before and during the pandemic.

As a principal from Texas-based Uplift Education said, “If I can give them [teachers] time back or space to breathe, I’m going to.” She was referring not only to letting teachers leave early when possible but also taking a pause on adding new, nonessential tasks.

At NYC Autism Charter School, administrators review tasks to identify which “need” to be done and which might be redundant. The administrators then try to eliminate unnecessary tasks.

At HIVE Preparatory School (HIVE Prep) in Florida, the school’s approach is an intentional effort to reallocate noninstructional tasks so that teachers can focus on instruction.

Administrators at HIVE Prep take on some of the noninstructional tasks that teachers often have to perform. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators and other staff called families to ensure attendance. Now that instruction is back in person, administrators have resumed responsibility for tasks such as the car line. HIVE Prep administrators also routinely work directly with individual teachers to plan out whatever the teacher needs, whether that’s additional resources or help with challenging parents, allowing teachers to focus on instruction. Administrators will also help with student behavior if teacher efforts haven’t been effective. One teacher explained how administrators provide behavioral support:

“I know there’s times that when we have misbehaving kids of any type, we have literally text messages with the principals. Anytime a child is sent out, they’re calling home. It’s not us. We don’t do it. All we do is send them out, tell [the principals] what happens, and they handle it. There’s no, you keep teaching them. Your job is to teach, send the kid out so that the rest of the 23 other kids can learn, and you don’t have to worry about it.”

HIVE TEACHER



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The flexibility of the charter school model gives school leaders the autonomy to quickly adapt school operations to changing needs. For example, the operations manager runs the cafeteria in such a way as to minimize cafeteria responsibilities for teachers, staffing the cafeteria so that teachers don't have regular lunch duty. Similarly, the school uses paraprofessionals and other support staff for noninstructional activities such as making copies of materials.

At HIVE Prep, school leaders always consider how decisions will impact the time teachers have to focus on instruction. For instance, when students were out due to illness or quarantine, upon return, administration would work within the course schedules to find extra time for the student to make up classwork — either with paraprofessionals reteaching or having the student miss PE for a day to attend an additional math class. They also have elementary teachers specialize in a content area (e.g., mathematics) and teach that content to multiple classrooms within the same grade, allowing for teachers to build content-area expertise and creating efficiencies in planning for classes.

Hiring other staff to help with more individualized instructional tasks or tracking student data

A third tactic charter schools adopted was hiring instructional aides or interventionists to help with the increased need for data collection and individualized student supports.

At Mississippi's Clarksdale Collegiate, instructional aides help teachers by covering classes, testing students, preparing lessons, and pulling small groups of students to teach lessons for remediation, including as-needed intervention support. The instructional aides track student performance and intervention response.

To attract quality candidates, Clarksdale Collegiate focuses on paying the instructional aides more than what has historically been offered for the position at nearby schools. The school has found that the position is attractive to people who are looking for a career in education and who see this as a stepping stone.

Similarly, Austin Achieve increased the number of interventionists in response to COVID. The interventionists are responsible for collecting, grading, and providing daily intervention services to individual students and groups. Pre-pandemic, Austin Achieve had approximately one intervention teacher per 160 scholars; it was able to reduce the ratio using ESSER funding. Although Austin Achieve anticipates eventually returning to its pre-pandemic staffing level, the school has established two new partnerships — one with AmeriCorps and another with Teach For America's Ignite Fellowship (focused on tutoring) — to place approximately 28 tutors to serve some of the functions of the interventionists. They were also able to expand another partnership with a reading-focused nonprofit called Literacy First to help fill those gaps.



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Likewise, at HIVE Prep paraprofessionals provide 30-minute interventions based on teacher input to students needing support, as indicated by the student interim assessment scores. Other staff within the school also assist with response to intervention (RTI) services. The school's counselor tracks data. Other teachers, such as the reading coach, also assist in completing more routine aspects of RTI paperwork such as writing dates or preparing tally sheets so that teachers can focus on observing the student's behavior.

Conclusion

Because public charter schools have autonomy and flexibility in staffing and operations, they have been able to shift duties between roles as necessary. In the case of prioritizing instructional time, shifting duties and modifying schedules allows teachers to focus on what they do best — provide high-quality instruction while other staff provide support services. Prioritizing teachers' instructional time fosters a supportive learning environment for educators and students alike.

¹ Matt Barnum, "Teacher Turnover Hits New Highs across the U.S.," Chalkbeat, March 6, 2023, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/3/6/23624340/teacher-turnover-leaving-the-profession-quitting-higher-rate>.

² Melissa Kay Diliberti and Heather L. Schwartz, "Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks," Rand Corporation, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR956-14.html; "Examining School-Level Teacher Turnover Trends: A New Angle on a Pervasive Issue," Education Resource Strategies, May 11, 2023, https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/teacher_turnover_trends_analysis#data.

³ Matthew Ronfeldt, Susanna Loeb, and James Wyckoff, "How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement," *American Educational Research Journal* 50, no. 1 (2013): 4–36, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831212463813>.

⁴ "NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP Mathematics Assessment," The Nation's Report Card, 2022, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/mathematics/2022/>; "NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP Reading Assessment," The Nation's Report Card, 2022, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/reading/2022/>.

⁵ Matt Barnum, "Still Hiring: Teacher Vacancies Up as Year Begins, Limiting Recovery Plans," Chalkbeat, Sept. 23, 2021, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/9/23/22689774/teacher-vacancies-shortages-covid>.

⁶ "School Pulse Panel: Staffing," Institute of Education Sciences, <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>.

⁷ "Adapting Throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2023, https://publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023-Paper_ESSER-Policy-Brief.pdf

⁸ "Helping the School Community Recover From the Pandemic: Supporting Staff, Mental Health, and Families to Accelerate Student Learning," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2024, <https://publiccharters.org/best-practices-to-accelerate-student-learning-series/>.



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⁹ Debbie Veney, Listen to Your Teacher! An Analysis of Teacher Sentiment on the State of Public Education, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2023, <https://publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Listen-To-Your-Teacher-An-Analysis-of-Teacher-Sentiment-on-the-State-of-Public-Education.pdf>.

¹⁰ "1st Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2022 Results," Merrimack College and EdWeek Research Center, 2022, https://fs24.formsite.com/edweek/images/WP-Merrimack_College-Todays_Teachers_Are_Deeply_Disillusioned_Survey_Data_Confirms.pdf. Calculated using Figure 15 of the survey based on nonteaching student interaction, general administrative work, other work tasks, and school committee work in the numerator.

¹¹ "Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund," Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/>.

¹² "Formal Programs to Help Families in Poverty Navigate Crises," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2024, <https://publiccharters.org/best-practices-to-accelerate-student-learning-series/>.

¹³ Ibid.