

# **A Case Study of Teacher Turnover and Retention in an Urban Elementary School**

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Teacher turnover has been an issue in many urban schools for years (Sachs 2004). Contributing to the teacher turnover problem, a record numbers of beginning teachers are leaving the profession shortly after starting their careers. Studies present varying percentages – between 7 and 33% – of teachers who leave the profession within their first three years of teaching (Goldring, Taie, and Riddles 2014, Wiebke and Bardin 2009, Donaldson 2009). However, within urban schools, as many as 70% of new teachers may leave their position within their first five years (Papay et al. 2015).

Exacerbating teacher turnover concerns in urban schools are challenges recruiting high quality educators, which increases the likelihood that exiting teachers are replaced with inexperienced educators (Chester and Beaudin 1996, Donaldson 2009). Unfortunately, many times as beginning teachers gain experience and begin to show improvement, they move on to less challenging schools or decide to leave the profession, thus contributing to the perpetual cycle of hiring inexperienced, and often ineffective, educators in urban schools. Yet, despite challenges faced within high poverty urban settings, some teachers remain in the same school for many years (Hong 2012). Which leads to several questions, including, “Why is it that some teachers stay long-term, and others leave within a short time?” and, “What contributes to a teacher’s decision to stay, or leave the school?” This case study, by considering both “leavers and stayers,” sought to provide insight into these questions. The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics, factors, and perceptions that contributed to both teacher turnover and teacher retention at one high poverty urban elementary school.

## **Literature Review**

Before examining the literature on the topic of teacher turnover, it is first important that we define teacher turnover. Although some researchers describe turnover in more detailed terms, for example, Kukla (2009) outlined three groups of teachers: leavers (those who decide to quit teaching), movers (those who decide to leave their current work location and go to another school), and stayers (those who decide to stay at their current work location), for the purposes of this study, a more simplistic definition was broadly derived from a definition of Boe, Cook, and Sunderland (2009) who described turnover as a major change in a teacher’s assignment from one school year to the next. For the purposes of this study, turnover will be defined as a teacher leaving the position to which they were assigned, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, regardless of the reason, and regardless of where they move to (e.g., retirement, school migration). This study focused on the phenomenon of turnover in one urban elementary school.

Quality teachers are underrepresented in urban areas because new teachers leave the profession before gaining years of experience and learning (Andrews and Donaldson 2009). Additionally, urban schools are faced with an inadequate supply of highly qualified teachers (Murphy and De Armond 2003, Andrews and Donaldson 2009), as teacher turnover leaves administrators struggling to recruit and retain their replacements (American Federation of Teachers 2007).

Teachers often choose to leave urban schools and schools with a high poverty or minority rate (Kukla 2009); and, in many circumstances, teachers who are better trained, more experienced, and fully licensed in the subjects they teach are more likely to be working in affluent schools, teaching more academically advantaged students (Berry 2008).

Even though pre-service teachers are often well prepared through their university educator preparation programs, it is expected that much of their learning occurs “on the job,” after they actually begin teaching; thus, some years of experience are required to reach their most effective level (Andrews, Gilbert, and Martin 2012, Rice 2003). Unfortunately, in many high-poverty urban schools, teachers leave before they are able to adequately hone their teaching skills (Andrews and Donaldson 2009).

Prior to considering the broad aspects of the negative impact teacher turnover can have on schools, it is worth pointing out that, in some circumstances, teacher turnover could have a positive result on student achievement (Adnot, Dee, and Katz 2016). For example, teacher turnover could result in better person-job matches and the selection of teachers who have new and innovative ideas (Abelson and Basysinger 1984, Jackson, Schuler, and Werner 2012). However, the bulk of research on teacher turnover suggests that it can lead to several problems for urban schools, their teachers, administrators, and most importantly, their students. Problems associated with teacher attrition include: high monetary costs of recruiting and training new teachers, inconsistent improvement efforts in curriculum and instruction, and lower student achievement scores. Most teacher turnover is costly and has negative effects at the school level (Brown and Wynn 2007). These topics, as well as contributing factors leading to why teachers leave their positions, and examples of what some schools have done to combat their teacher turnover problems, are considered next.

**Monetary Costs.** Teacher turnover carries a costly financial obligation when recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers (Brill and McCartney 2008). The National Center for Teaching and America’s Future (Future 2007) noted the estimated national cost of recruiting and hiring teachers is over seven billion dollars per year. Schools and districts are plagued with costly expenses during high levels of teacher turnover including advertising, reviewing applications, conducting criminal background checks, and funding teacher induction and orientation programs (Moir 2003). One Texas study conducted in 2000 estimated that it cost schools over \$8,000 per new teacher recruit (Bennar 2000); adjusted for inflation, that equates to about \$12,000 in 2019, which is below a more recent estimate of \$20,000 per hire by the Learning Policy Institute (Darling-Hammond 2017). When schools spend substantial money on recruitment and initial training of teachers who often leave within their first years, funds are restricted from more effective use.

**Inconsistent Improvement Efforts in Curriculum and Instruction.** Urban schools experiencing high rates of teacher turnover often struggle to build and maintain meaningful instructional improvement efforts (Andrews and Donaldson 2009). Consistent professional development, year-to-year teacher collaboration, and curriculum development are in jeopardy when the staff is in a continual state of flux (Andrews, Gilbert, and Martin 2012, Brill and McCartney 2008). If large numbers of teachers are leaving and new teachers are joining the school community year after year, the effectiveness of the school can be negatively impacted as

trust and community have to be rebuilt (Ingersoll 2002). When new teachers are replaced, time is spent acclimating the new faculty member to the school environment, thus interrupting the collaboration and planning that can occur vertically in curricular departments and horizontally within grade levels. A school that loses a good teacher also loses that teacher's familiarity with school practices, the curriculum, and the students, parents, and colleagues (Brown and Wynn 2007).

**Lower Student Achievement.** Not only does turnover cause challenges for the administration and the staff, but also, teacher turnover can have a serious impact on student achievement. The most important factor in educational reform is having a highly qualified teacher for every classroom (Darling-Hammond 2003). Yet, teacher turnover often results in the placement of less experienced teachers, in particularly in high-poverty settings, which can adversely impact student learning (Darling-Hammond 2003). Teachers who leave the urban school classrooms are often replaced with beginning teachers. These teachers, despite their lack of experience, are often assigned more challenging classes of students who are already struggling academically (Alliance for Excellent Education 2004). Further contributing to the novice teachers' struggles, they are often not provided the professional support necessary, which decreases the likelihood of their (and their students') success (Danielson 2002).

**Why Teachers Leave.** Reasons why teachers leave a position are varied, and often contextually binding; however, contributing factors are often within the control of building administration (Ingersoll 2002, Darling-Hammond 1997). In a study published in by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Darling-Hammond 2003), four major influencing factors surfaced associated with teacher turnover: (a) salary, (b) working conditions, (c) preparation, and (d) initial mentoring support. According to the study, "salaries and working conditions such as poor administrative support run neck and neck as [primary] reasons for leaving" (p. 5). Interestingly, the importance of these factors varied somewhat depending on the conditions the teachers experienced. Teachers in low-income schools mentioned lacking administrative support more often than did their counterparts from more affluent schools, who were more likely to cite salary as a contributing factor (Darling-Hammond 2003). Darling-Hammond (1997) reported that, of teachers who left their position, factors were generally associated with either student concerns centered on motivation and discipline, or administrator concerns centered on lack of recognition and support by their building administrators.

Although there are distinct factors driving teachers away from urban settings, there are also factors that influence teachers to remain. Teacher leadership and involvement has an impact on teacher turnover. Teachers who are given a sense of autonomy tend to have greater satisfaction within their school. When teachers are given the opportunity to make decisions regarding school-wide policies and procedures, scheduling, usage of classroom materials, and professional development experiences, a level of fulfillment is achieved, reflected in teacher retention (Boyd et al. 2011).

Staff relations also have an impact on teacher retention. A school that possesses a strong collective and collaborative teaching community, exhibited by positive, trusting and working relationships, tends to retain its teachers (Boyd et al. 2011). Teachers who feel comfortable

seeking out colleagues to share in their struggles are among those teachers who remain in urban settings (Boyd et al. 2011).

Teacher resilience can also be a determining factor in the length of time teaching in urban settings. For decades, resilience has been used to determine the “bounce back” from individuals living in high-risk populations, especially children. However, researchers have also used resilience to better understand teacher identity, job satisfaction, teacher burnout and stress, and teacher effectiveness (Hong 2012). Teachers who are highly resilient tend to “respond positively in the stressful classroom or school environment, demonstrate effective strategies for working with challenging students, and derive deeper satisfaction in their work” (Hong, 2012, p. 419). Resilient teachers view difficulties in the classroom as challenges that can be overcome rather than threats against them personally, increasing the likelihood of resilient teachers remaining in high stress schools (Hong 2012).

**Addressing the Problem.** Solving the teacher turnover problem in urban schools is a complex issue, with no single solution. However, literature suggests steps that can be taken to improve the likelihood of teachers remaining beyond a few years. First, schools should hire the best teachers available and invest in them through a comprehensive induction program (Future 2007, Education 2004). Induction programs that provide initial support and include incentives for good teachers to share their expertise can reduce teacher turnover by more than 50% (Future 2007).

Second, school administration should be aware that teacher support and recognition matter. Administrative support, defined as the administrator’s ability to make a teacher’s job more feasible, and the ability to help teachers improve their teaching (Boyd et al. 2011) has been a topic among researchers as a factor in retaining teachers or losing them to alternative jobs. Teachers rate effective administrative support high among factors related to remaining at a school (Robinson 2015). Ladd (2009) found that teachers’ perceptions of school leadership was a greater predictor than any other factor of whether or not teachers stayed.

Therefore, given the body of literature that addresses the problems inherent with teacher turnover in urban schools, why teachers choose to leave or stay in a school, and the impact of the school culture, and more specifically, the school administration, on teacher turnover, this study was designed to more closely examine a turnover problem in one urban elementary school that consistently reports high rates of teacher turnover and low rates of student achievement. The intent was both to inform practices at the case school (and hopefully other schools experiencing similar turnover issues), and to contribute to the literature on teacher turnover by adding additional information, and/or affirming the results of other similar studies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study, shown in Figure 1, is an operational model developed by Getzels, Lipham, and Campbell (1968) of the two major dimensions of social behavior – the individual dimension and the institutional dimension. The model, closely linked to social systems theory in education (Getzels and Guba 1957), facilitates a study of teacher turnover, as the phenomenon exists within the structure of a social system – schools. There are often competing priorities, expectations, and values between teachers who work in high poverty urban

schools, and the administrators who are often required to hire teachers who might not have been their first choice, just to fill vacancies on their faculty. Further, administrative support is a key consideration when teachers make decisions to leave or stay in a school. This study considered personal (individual) factors of teachers, in relation to, and often in conflict with, organizational (institutional) factors. Personal factors include a teacher’s personality, background, values, needs, beliefs, and aspirations; whereas, organizational factors include the school culture, school and community values, administrator support and expectations, collegial support and collaboration, and student and parent expectations and dispositions.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.

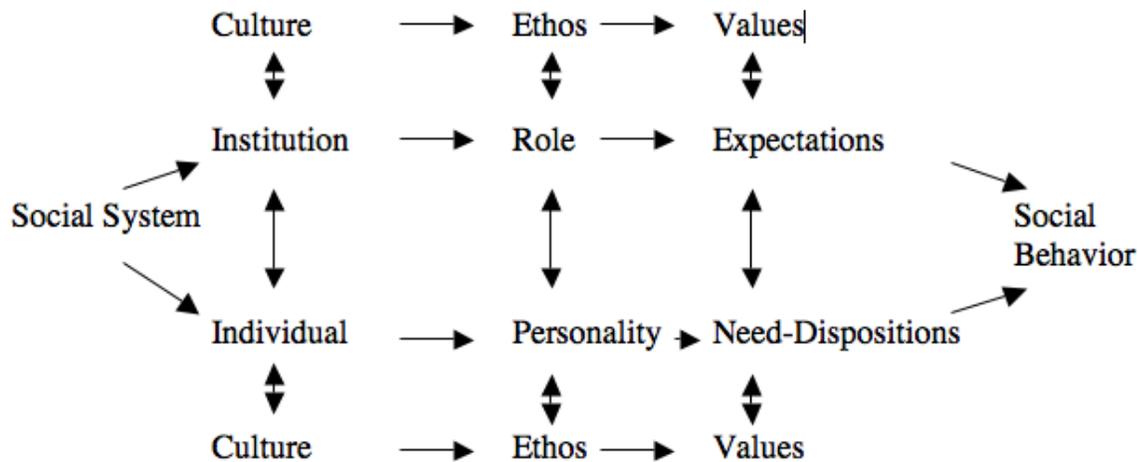


Figure 1. Operational model of major dimensions of social behavior (Getzels et al., 1968).

## Method

To address the purpose of this study, four questions guided the research: (1) What commonalities exist among teachers who choose to stay in the case school? (2) What commonalities exist among teachers who choose to leave the case school? (3) What factors influence teachers’ decisions to stay in the case school? (4) What factors influence teachers’ decisions to leave the case school? To best answer the research questions, a mixed-methods case study was designed to gather data from both long-term, and short-term educators.

As a leading method regarding issues in education, case study research allows investigation of complex issues within a specific context (Gulsecen and Kubat 2006, Yin 2009). This single case study utilized mixed methods research, which provided an opportunity to learn more about the topic by combining the strengths of two research methods (Punch and Oancea 2014, Miles and Huberman 1994). Strengths of qualitative methods selected for this study are providing meaning and context to the study; whereas, quantitative methods provided both a triangulation opportunity for the qualitative data and the tracing of trends and formalizing of comparisons between the two teacher groups (Punch and Oancea 2014).

This study sought to contribute to the body of literature on teacher turnover by examining internal characteristics and external factors that contribute to a teacher’s decision to stay or leave a high poverty urban school. Teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers, particularly

in urban settings, yet some teachers choose to stay long-term. This study examined the phenomenon by utilizing structured interviews with teachers who have stayed long-term at the same school (more than five years) and surveys of teachers who were short-term at the school (fewer than six years).

Trustworthiness and validity are achieved through member checking and triangulation. Through member checking, participants were able to establish validity of their accounts given during the first-round of interviews and correct any errors or challenge incorrect interpretation of data. Through consideration and comparison, interview data were triangulated with responses from the survey, providing support and understanding of interview data. Additionally, because one of the researchers was a long-term teacher in the case school and had experienced prolonged engagement in the environment, an added layer of trustworthiness and credibility was attained.

**Site and Participant Selection.** The site for this study was a high poverty elementary school in a southern state. The case school was chosen because it experienced the highest rate of teacher turnover in a district educating over 40,000 students in 80 schools. Additionally, the case school employed the highest number of ineffective teachers in the district (as identified through the district's comprehensive educator appraisal system). The school enrolls over 600 students, with a demographic composite of about 90% African American / Black students, 7% Hispanic, and 3% other. Nearly 100% of the students live in poverty, and nearly all students qualify for free or reduced lunch through the National School Lunch Program. The case study school is also one of the lowest performing schools in the state, perennially ranked in the bottom 10%. Of interest was the high rate at which teachers leave the school, often being replaced by new teachers. Since the five years prior to this study, nearly 80% of the faculty had been replaced with different teachers.

**Data Collection.** Data were collected from two sources, namely long-term and short-term teachers from the case school. Study participants included current teachers who had taught in the case school at least five years, or "long-term" teachers ( $n=8$ ), as well as teachers who had left within their first five years at the case school, or "short-term teachers" ( $n=18$ ).

Informed by phenomenology, the qualitative section of this study is descriptive in nature because it sought to explain the complexities and characteristics of the high poverty urban school setting as well as the lived experiences of the teacher participants. To gather qualitative data, interviews were conducted with long-term teachers at the school. Interview participants were asked 11 questions beginning with demographic information (race, age, gender), continuing with professional questions (years of experience, degrees held), and concluding with open-ended questions. During open-ended questions, participants were asked to describe and prioritize factors that have contributed to their decision to remain in their current position, and express any other concerns or thoughts relative to the position. All interviews were recorded, and later transcribed. Interview transcriptions were then coded using constant comparative analysis (Glazer and Strauss 1967) to determine major emergent themes.

Survey research was used to gather data from short-term teachers, in part, because interviews may have been cumbersome and time consuming, given that the teachers were no longer easily accessible at the site. Survey research provided "quantitative or numeric description of trends,

attitudes, or opinions” (Creswell 2014, 155). These teachers were asked to complete an online survey (Google Forms) consisting of 12 questions. Questions began with demographic information (gender, age, and race), and continued with professional questions (educational background, years of experience in the teaching field, and reasons for leaving the case school). The final survey questions asked respondents to identify the extent to which certain factors contributed to their decision to leave the school, and the extent to which other factors may have contributed to a decision to remain in the case school.

## **Analysis**

This section includes analysis of data from both the interviews and the surveys. By including both qualitative and quantitative data sources, we hope to provide a broad understanding of the teacher turnover problem, while addressing the identified research questions.

**Interviews.** Interview participants shared insights into their lived experiences teaching in the case school. Participants identified and defined factors impacting their choice to remain in the school. Based on recurring comments made throughout all interviews, a total of 60 thematic codes emerged in this study. The codes most often applied to survey responses are shown in Table 1.

After an analysis of coded data, several patterns or themes developed (based on the codes that were used most often). Emergent themes can be characterized as either external or internal. External themes are related to factors associated with the organization itself. Whereas, internal themes are tied to the characteristics or attributes directly associated with the participants.

**External themes.** The theme that surfaced most often (17 times) was that it was the students who cause the teachers to stay, or that the teachers have made lasting connections with the students. All teacher participants offered comments coded with this theme. This theme is somewhat difficult to categorize as personal or organizational, because the genesis and continuation of the connection could be more closely linked to the characteristics of the teachers, the students, or both. For the purposes of this study, connections with students will be considered as an external theme, in part because the teachers themselves indicated it was the students who caused them to stay, and in part because the next most-identified theme (utilized 14 times across six participant interviews) was directly linked to the teachers, namely that they show love and affection towards their students.

Regardless of whether one considers a connection to the students, and them “causing the teacher to stay” as an external or internal theme, it is clear that the students were the main factor in teachers’ decisions to remain in the school long-term. As one teacher put it, “I keep coming back to see the kids. I know the life they are living. I just want to be there for them. I want to be an avenue to help them succeed.” While another commented, “The children have kept me here. The fact that they need support and the encouragement, that they can succeed, and [that they] are important, has been a big factor for staying.”

**Table 1**  
*Most Coded Responses of Long-Term Teachers (n=8)*

Code	Number of Long-Term Teachers Making Coded Responses	Number of Coded Responses from all Long-Term Teachers
External:		
Student(s) cause teacher to stay / connection	8	17
Positive relationship with students	5	7
Positive relationship with teachers	5	6
Poor relationship with administration	5	6
Behavior difficulties in school	5	6
Tough environment	4	7
Connection to the community	4	5
Internal:		
Showing love / affection toward students	6	14
No intention of leaving	6	7
Focused on the child	5	7

Also considered as external factors are the relationships between the teachers and their colleagues, students, and community. The roles others play in the organization are meaningful components of the institutional dimension, and the importance of relationships surfaced often. Five teachers commented on the importance of relationships with their colleagues or students. One teacher compared her current position with a former student teaching experience:

I enjoy the interaction with teachers more at [present school] than the other schools I've been in. I know when I was a student teacher at [former school], we never went into the break room, she [cooperating teacher] said that's where gossip spreads. That's where problems start . . . whereas at [present school] you are encouraged to hang out and converse and build relationships.

Another teacher commented that an "effective teacher is someone who has a relationship with, and knows his or her students." Continuing, "We must meet their needs and teach them whatever they need, not just academically."

Regarding a connection to the community, four of the eight teachers offered comments on the importance of feeling connected to their community. Several teachers made statements about how they had become an active member in the community, often including local church affiliations and relationships with parents. A few teachers commented on the history of the neighborhood, and the significance of the neighborhood to the broader community. Worthy of noting is that the neighborhood and school both go by the same name, associated with a historically significant site within the surrounding community.

Additional external themes that surfaced in the study were related to negative aspects of the school, its students, and administrator. Teachers were open in sharing that the school experienced “behavior difficulties” with the students (coded seven times across five teachers’ responses) and that it was a “tough environment” (coded 7 times across four teachers’ response). One teacher pointed out that student behavior can impact the decision to stay or not, stating, “I have one [student] now that I’ve taken out of another teacher’s room because he was really causing this teacher to just want to quit.” Another teacher linked the problems with behavior to a lack of administrative support, commenting, “You know, if I was in a different school, would some of the behaviors I had to deal with last year been acceptable? Umm, I would think not. I think it would have been handled differently in another school.”

This leads to the final external theme, teachers having a poor relationship with the administration. Words used by teachers to characterize the administrator included, “belittling, unsupportive, and devastating.” In total, five teachers (62.5%) commented on a strained relationship with their administrator. When asked whether or not she planned on remaining long-term at the school, one teacher shared her frustration:

Well, I can’t really give you a straight answer but right now my mindset is to leave. The only reason I’m afraid to leave is after I left, my administrator may leave and I’ll be really sad because I love that school. If I was [*sic.*] sure that he would leave, then I would stay. I’m done with him [administrator]. I can’t take any more of him.

**Internal themes.** Two internal themes (those more directly associated with the teachers themselves) surfaced in the interview analysis: (a) teachers focus on the students and express love towards them, and (b) they generally do not plan on leaving the school. Codes most commonly utilized were “showing love and affection towards students” (coded 14 times across six teachers’ responses), “focused on the child” (coded seven times across five responses), and “no intention of leaving” (coded seven times across six responses).

Clearly, most of the long-term teachers interviewed care about their students. Keeping in mind that these teachers had all been teaching at the school for at least five years, they knew some of the challenges they would face, yet the teachers were investing their time and effort into the lives of their students. One teacher summed up her feelings this way: “I love them and I show them how much I love them. And they love me. They tell me . . . They are wonderful and I love them to death.” Another shared:

These kids are looking for love and needing attention. All of the kids I work with just want to know someone cares. You see, I grew up in the inner city, so I know how kids felt. I knew what I wanted in a teacher and I just want to give that to these kids. I just want the kids to know I care for them and I want them to know they can be whatever they want to be in life.

Six of the eight participants shared views that they planned to continue their careers at the school. One teacher expressed she had no intention of leaving:

The same things always roll through my head. I know these teachers, these students, these parents. I know what is expected of me and I know how to interact with these kids, and I’m learning more each day of what to do and what not to do. So how could I be at

another school? Sometimes I don't want to be at another school because I don't know what it would be like teaching with other teachers. What if they are these snotty teachers and I'm alone all the time?

Another teacher felt that her teaching was almost more of a ministry than a job:

I love where I am. I think it is more like a ministry. That is the mindset that I come from. This is where I feel God has called me and placed me, here at [school name]. Personally, I feel that's where God has placed me and called me to be. I have not been led to go anywhere else, but [school name].

**Surveys.** Survey respondents were teachers who had decided to leave the case school within their first five years. In total, 18 individuals responded to the online survey. Questions varied, but were primarily aimed at discerning what factors contributed to their decision to leave the school.

When asked to select factors that contributed to their decision to leave their former position, responses can be broken down into two categories: external and internal. A summary of all factors can be found in Table 2. External factors are those job-related factors that are directly associated to the teachers' experiences in the case school setting, whereas, internal factors are generally non-job-related factors that are not directly associated with the experiences in the school (such as a change in careers, retirement, or a long commute). Job dissatisfaction is considered an internal factor, because it is subjective and individualized. Job dissatisfaction can result from a number of contributing causes and circumstances, and it is often rooted in the attitudes and dispositions of the individuals. Internal factors, though important considerations when making decisions about leaving a job, because they are very individualized and cannot be systematically addressed and generalized, will not be examined further.

Survey respondents were presented with a series of factors (grounded in literature) that could contribute to a decision to leave a position. They were then asked to rank the factors on a scale from one to four, with one equating to "not a factor," and four equating to a "major factor." The external factor selected most often as a major factor contributing to the decision to leave the school was, "Administrator's actions did not back teachers." The mean rating of all teachers with regards to this factor was 3.44, and the most common response (mode) was a four. In fact, a total of 15 respondents out of 18 (83%) ranked this as a major factor. This factor is directly related to the actions of the building principal, and refers to the actions of the administrator in several situations, including, but not limited to teacher and student disagreement (including discipline issues), teacher and parent disagreement, and inter-staff conflict (conflict among staff members). Several other factors are closely related to this highest ranked factor, including the second highest ranked factor, "Inadequate assistance / support from administration," which had a mean rating of 3.22, with the most common response also being a four. Inadequate assistance and support could include administrative support with discipline issues, but extends beyond the conflict issues of the first factor, to include a lack of assistance and support in instructional design and delivery, classroom management, and even school-specific procedures and expectations.

**Table 2***Survey Responses of Teachers Who Left Within First Five Years (n=18)*

How much of a factor was the following in your decision to leave your teaching position?	Mean	Mode
External:		
Administrator's actions did not back teachers	3.44	4
Inadequate assistance / support from administration	3.22	4
Insufficient teacher recognition	2.61	4
Unclear approach to student discipline	2.44	4
Culture of the school	2.39	4
Lack of shared leadership	2.28	1
Unbearable workload	2.28	1
Lack of parental support	2.22	1
Too many mandates	2.22	1
Safety of community / neighborhood	2.06	1
Lack of technology	1.94	1
Lack of resources	1.89	1
Low salary	1.67	1
Inadequate / lack of professional development	1.67	1
Inadequate collaboration with colleagues	1.56	1
High teacher / student ratio	1.56	1
Inadequate mentoring	1.50	1
Internal:		
Little to no enjoyment in position	2.78	1
Job dissatisfaction	2.67	1
Lack of autonomy	2.56	1
Personal / family issues	1.83	1
Relocation / moving	1.72	1
Inadequate behavior management training	1.56	1
Inadequate preparation / training	1.33	1

*Note.* 1 = not a factor, 2 = a minor factor, 3 = a moderate factor, and 4 = a major factor. Only factors that received at least one rating higher than a 1 are included.

The two highest-ranking factors are directly associated with the school administration, and even included the administration in the wording; however, other factors that received consistently high are also tied to the administration of the school. In fact, there is a substantial drop-off in the mode of factors after the first five administrator-related factors. The top five factors were all ranked most often with a four (a major factor), and also included, "Insufficient teacher recognition" (mean rating of 2.61), "Unclear approach to student discipline" (mean rating of 2.44), and "Culture of the school" (mean rating of 2.39). All of the other external factors had a

mode of one, indicating that, though possibly important to some of the respondents, they were not consistently considered as having a major contribution to the decision to leave the school.

The next survey question asked respondents to select (from a provided list) any factors that, if things were to change, might have contributed to a decision to remain in the school. A list of factors, and the number of times each was selected can be found in Table 3. Not surprisingly, the top responses in this section are related to the top factors from the first section, and are also related to the administration. Eleven respondents (61%) selected “Increased teacher recognition” as something that might have changed their mind about leaving the school. “Increased administrator support,” was selected by 10 respondents (56%), and “A school-wide discipline plan” was selected by 9 respondents (50%). Rounding out the top six responses to this section, “Increased parental involvement” was selected by six respondents (33%), and “Increased time to collaborate with colleagues” and “Increased salary” were selected by 5 respondents (28%).

**Table 3**

*Factors That May Have Contributed to a Decision to Remain in the Position – From Surveys of Teachers Who Left Within First Five Years (n=18)*

Factor	Number of Times Selected
Increased teacher recognition	11 (61%)
Increased administrator support	10 (56%)
A school-wide discipline plan	9 (50%)
Increased parental involvement	6 (33%)
Increased time to collaborate with colleagues	5 (28%)
Increased salary	5 (28%)

*Note.* Only factors that were selected at least once are included.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics, factors, and perceptions that contribute to both teacher turnover and teacher retention in a high-poverty urban elementary school. To address the study’s purpose, four questions guided the research: (1) What commonalities exist among teachers who choose to stay in the case school? (2) What commonalities exist among teachers who choose to leave the case school? (3) What factors influence teachers’ decisions to stay in the case school? (4) What factors influence teachers’ decisions to leave the case school? These questions are discussed in two sections, one that addresses commonalities and factors consistent with long-term teachers, and one that addresses commonalities and factors consistent with short-term teachers.

**Long-Term Teachers.** The rate of teacher turnover at the case school is staggering, and has manifested itself in consistently low school achievement; in fact, in the year prior to this study, the school was ranked in the bottom 2% in the state, receiving the lowest possible composite score on the state’s standardized assessments. In a school with over 40 full-time teachers, only

eight (about 20%) qualified as long-term teachers for this study. All of the long-term teachers in the school were interviewed as part of this study, and several commonalities regarding characteristics surfaced.

All of the long-term teachers in this study were female, and six of the eight (75%) were African-American. The average, and also the median, age of the eight long-term teachers in the study was 50.5, and the teachers ranged in age from 34 to 63. Additionally, seven of the eight participants held bachelors and master's degrees in education, with one of those seven also having received an Educational Specialist degree (Ed.S.). Only one of the long-term teachers held only a bachelor's degree.

It is worth noting that nearly all of the teachers in the study, regardless of long- or short-term, were female. Across all 26 teachers, data from only one male were collected. Likewise, it is noteworthy that 75% of the long-term teachers were African-American, while 75% of the short-term teachers were Caucasian. In a school where 90% of the students are African American, it would appear that race may matter when it comes to who decides to stay beyond their initial teaching appointment. When teachers do stay beyond five years, they tend to stay much longer. In this case study, the average age of the long-term teachers was about ten years older than their short-term peers. This may suggest that once teachers make the decision and commitment to stay, they make that commitment long-term, regardless of factors that might contribute to others making the decision to exit early.

Overwhelmingly, these long-term teachers believed they had made connections with their students, and in fact, they all stated that it was the students who most impacted their decisions to remain in at the school. These women expressed "love" towards their students. They believe they have a positive impact on their students' lives, which is important because they also acknowledge that the students usually come from challenging family lives.

Inasmuch as the long-term teachers feel a strong connection to the students, the school, their colleagues, and the community, they do not feel a strong connection to their administrator. In fact, six of the eight commented on their poor relationship with the administration. These resilient teachers have chosen to stay, and most commented that they have no intention of leaving in the near future, despite their frustration with behavior issues at the school, and their poor relationship with their administrator. Interestingly, one teacher even commented that she doesn't want to leave because if she later found out that the principal had left, she would regret her decision. Basically, this teacher was pointing out that everything else in the school is either positive or something that she can handle, but if the administrator were to leave, then everything would be great.

**Short-Term Teachers.** There was no shortage of teachers who had left the school within their first five years. In total, the survey link was sent to 23 potential respondents, with 18 completing the survey. The 23 potential respondents do not represent the total teachers who were eligible to participate, but only the number of respondents whose email address was known at the time of the study.

Of the 18 short-term teachers who completed the survey, 17 were female. Twelve were White / Caucasian, with the remaining six respondents being African-American. Only three of the survey respondents had completed only their bachelor's degree, leaving 15 with a master's degree, two of whom also held an Ed.S. The average age of the short-term teacher respondents was 40 years, and the median age was 35. Short-term teachers tended to be somewhat younger than their long-term counterparts; however, nearly all teachers in both categories were female. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the staff at the case school is also female (about 85%). However, the principal was male.

Based on the responses from the survey, it appeared that the most consistent factor that contributed to the decision to leave the school was closely tied to the building administrator. These teachers did not feel supported by their principal, nor did they feel that he "had their backs" during times of conflict or disagreement. Most of these teachers expressed that the lack of a school-wide approach to discipline was a major factor in their decision to leave the school, and, that in general, the school culture was exceedingly negative.

Many of the short-term teachers (56%) stated that they had planned on staying for 11 or more years when they initially started at the school. The intention of being long-term was there, but something changed their plans. Based on the survey results, for several of them, it was the lack of recognition and support from their administrators. When asked what would have most contributed to a decision to remain in the school, 61% responded, "Increased teacher recognition," and 56% responded "Increased administrator support" would have been factors in them changing their minds. Interestingly, only 28% of the respondents stated that a higher salary would have contributed to their decision to stay in the case school.

One final question that short-term teachers were asked pertained to where they relocated after leaving the high poverty urban elementary case school. Two of the respondents had left education altogether, five had relocated to rural schools, and the remaining 11 either stayed in an urban setting, or moved into a suburban school. However, of those 11 teachers, only three remained in high-poverty urban schools. Of the 16 who continued in education, three stayed in high poverty schools, seven described their new school's socioeconomic status (SES) as moderate to high, four described their new school's SES as high, and two described the new school's SES as very high. Consistent with findings from the literature review (Berry, 2008), overwhelmingly, when teachers left the case school, they went to something different, where there were fewer poor children and families.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Although the findings from this study are not meant to be generalizable, some conclusions and implications, primarily for high turnover schools and their administrators can be drawn. Before implications are suggested, we do want to address some limitations of this study. This study is a single-case study, where data were gathered only from one urban elementary school in one large school district. The study did not expand into other schools in the same district that might be experiencing similar concerns. Further, the sample size of the survey respondents ( $n=8$ ) and interview participants ( $n=18$ ) is relatively low in light of the total body of literature on teacher

turnover. Despite the study's limitations, based on analysis of survey and interview data, three implications from this study are suggested for the reader's consideration.

**Administrator Support.** Administrator support for new teachers is critical. This support must come from the administrator. Despite numerous studies that demonstrate the positive influence of comprehensive mentoring programs, in this study, only four survey respondents (22%) rated inadequate mentoring as a major factor in their decision to leave the school, whereas 11 respondents (61%) rated inadequate mentoring as a non-factor. Yet, nearly all short-term respondents indicated that inadequate support from the administrator contributed to their decision to leave, and over half of the respondents indicated that increased administrator support might have influenced them to change their minds. Support can take many forms, but must include encouragement, assistance, and backing of teachers, especially when it comes to student discipline. Most short-term teachers ranked "Unclear approach to student discipline" as a major factor in the decision to leave the school; and, as one might expect, half of these teachers also stated that a clear approach to school-wide discipline would have encouraged them to have stayed in their position. One comment made in several interviews with long-term teachers can be summarized as, "Why would I send a student to the office, when they are just going to be back in my classroom in a few minutes?" With some teachers adding, "And with a lolly-pop!"

**Teacher Recognition.** Teacher recognition matters, even more than money. Teachers who are giving their all to educate children in challenging environments want to be acknowledged for their hard work. The most often selected factor that might have moved short-term teachers to long-term teachers was increased teacher recognition. Eleven of the 18 respondents (61%) mentioned this factor, while only five (28%) of the respondents selected increased salary as a factor that might have reversed their decision to leave. The average salary for teachers at the case school was \$3,000 less than its state average in 2017. While it is unlikely that any of the faculty at the school would turn down a \$3,000 raise, that alone does not appear to be something that would transform this staff into a long-term commitment. Rather, by the administration, and possibly the parents, adding meaningful teacher recognition into the school, the chances of retaining teachers go up.

**Relationships.** Relationships are key. Positive relationships between students and staff must continue to be fostered. Most long-term teachers commented on the importance of their students, and the ongoing positive relationships they have with them. These teachers tend to stay because they feel a connection to their students; therefore, everything the school can do to foster this relationship could be powerful. The students need positive influences in their lives, and the teachers want to have meaningful connections with their students and families. Knowing this, attention must be given to increased opportunities for relationship building. Although certainly context-driven, by creating a focused school leadership team with the goal of increasing positive relationships, the school administrator could include the perspectives of the school staff in developing engaging activities that foster positive relationships. Likewise, establishing such a team, and relinquishing some administrator responsibility, could also contribute to teacher retention, as half of the short-term teachers ranked "Lack of shared leadership" as a moderate or major factor in their decision to leave the school. If this leadership team also focused on establishing creating a school-wide discipline plan, issues related to student discipline and a perceived lack of administrator support might also be addressed. Finally, continual improvement

in the relationship between the administrator and the faculty should be a focus. Although, it is possible that simply by addressing some of the previous ideas, some relationships will improve organically. Teachers tend to be more open to a positive relationship when they feel supported and recognized. When administrators understand that there are changes that can be made to reduce the problem of high teacher turnover, steps can be taken to transform a school from a revolving door, to an upward elevator, lifting everyone in the school.

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