

The Stay Interview: How It Can Help Schools Hold Onto Valued Staff



As the school year comes to a close, district and school leaders may be taking stock of teachers and other staff who turned in their resignations and asking: What could I have done to get them to stay?

It seems like a logical question. But some human resources experts suggest it's the wrong one.

By the time employees have decided to move on—even if they agree to offer feedback, say, in the form of an exit interview—they may not be eager to invest the time and energy into thoughtful feedback about why they're leaving. The bottom line? An exit interview won't help retain a valuable employee. But a stay interview might.

The stay interview is, in key ways, like the alter ego of the exit interview. But it's not a strategy that's widely used in school districts—a potential missed opportunity to help solve some of schools' acute challenges with staffing.

A stay interview takes place during the school year, not at year's end, and it's conducted primarily with employees that you don't want to lose—rather than those who've already decided to leave. An

effective stay interview, say [human resources experts](#), can elicit powerful information from employees considered “enthusiastic stayers.” In turn, you can use this input to ensure their continued job engagement and retention.

“The stay interview is an attempt to avoid the exit interview,” said human resources expert Emily Beck.

Moving the needle on retention

The effectiveness of the strategy is being closely watched in the Phoenix area, where the Office of the Maricopa County School Superintendent introduced a robust stay interview process as part of a grant-funded initiative aimed at improving employee retention in five school districts.

Beck, a human capital management systems administrator for the Maricopa County School Superintendent, explains that the five districts participating in the retention efforts are Title I schools serving large numbers of low-income children. Those schools generally have 50 percent higher attrition rates than higher-income, non-Title 1 schools. But among the districts in Maricopa County that implemented the stay interview process beginning in 2019, 94 percent of teachers were retained coming into the 2020-21 school year.

The Phoenix Elementary School District was one of them.

“In the first three years of implementing the stay interview process, we saw teacher retention over 90 percent,” said Victor Diaz, director of human resources in the district. “Elsewhere in Arizona, attrition rates were 20 to 30 percent.”

These retention numbers are a big deal for a district that has struggled with a teacher shortage for 15 years and in a state where [teacher attrition rates are among the worst](#)

in the country.

“With us, it’s not just about the retention numbers; it’s the people who you retain,” Diaz said. “Ninety-three percent of teachers we retained are our rock star teachers.”

It wasn’t happenstance.

“The process drives the quality that you’re going to hear,” Diaz said of the stay interview, which is

defined in a [toolkit](#) developed by the Maricopa County superintendent’s office as “a deliberate, scheduled, one-on-one conversation with your top performers, flight risks, and high potential staff members.”

Beck, an expert who has presented on the topic, and Diaz, whose district now uses the strategy regularly, shared with Education Week how stay interviews—when conducted in an intentional manner with key employees—can serve as a central element to a school culture heavily invested in teacher engagement and retention.

Selection of stay interview candidates must be strategic

In the stay interview, the staff you choose to interview is as important as how you conduct the interview.

“Irreplaceables” is how Beck describes the teachers she suggests selecting as interview subjects.

This tends to be about 20 percent of a teaching staff, she says. In addition to top-performing teachers, Beck also recommends identifying what she terms “flight risks”—valuable teachers whose departure for other opportunities would have a drastic, negative impact campuswide.

While some might question why only a select group of people are interviewed, Diaz explains that it’s necessary.

“This has to feel different, special. Being exclusionary is part of the power of it,” he said. “It’s about listening, responding, and elevating the voices of our best people.”

How stay interviews should work

“Deliberate” is a term used frequently to describe the stay interview. “They’re not on-the-fly conversations or check-ins,” Beck said. Nor are they intended to be associated with performance appraisals or an annual review, she adds.

Rather, they’re one-one-one conversations initiated and conducted by the principal or another administrator to learn about what motivates and frustrates valued employees, and what they’d like to see changed.

Ideally, the interviews last between 30 and 40 minutes and consist of around five open-ended questions designed to spur dialogue.

Examples of questions include:

- What do you look forward to when you come to work each day?
- If you were to consider leaving this position, why would that be?

- What factors may trigger a departure?

The strategic nature of the stay interview extends to when they're held.

September and October are ideal months, suggests Diaz, as employee motivation usually runs highest in the early months of the school year. But one caveat applies to first-year teachers, whom Diaz says are usually still in survival mode in the fall and probably not ready to respond to probing questions about their job.

After the interview, follow-up is essential

Conducting stay interviews in the fall allows plenty of time to address concerns raised by staff during these conversations. And the follow-up is a critical part of the process, Diaz says.

“What if you told the superintendent about these issues and nothing happened?” Diaz said. “That would feel worse than not having shared them.”

Diaz acknowledges that committing to this engagement and retention strategy—from identifying ideal interview candidates to conducting interviews to analyzing and acting on responses—takes time.

“When have you listened enough? Never,” he said. “It’s definitely a commitment.”

But when you consider the likely alternative, the stay interview sounds like an investment worth making.

As Beck points out, it takes a lot more time to recruit and hire an excellent teacher than it does to retain one.