

What One School Is Doing to Keep Its Teachers

A human-centered approach made all the difference

By Sarah Yost — October 13, 2022 ⌚ 5 min read



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Sarah Yost is a national-board-certified teacher currently serving as a school staff developer at Byck Elementary School in Louisville, Ky. She has been a teacher and education leader since 2005.

A quick scroll through social media reveals how difficult teaching in 2022 is: [pay gaps](#), [censorship](#), bullying, threats of [violence](#), overcrowded classrooms, shortages of substitutes and support staff, perceptions that teachers are subservient, the global pandemic, and trauma. These issues are pushing many teachers out of classrooms and hindering efforts to recruit new educators.

Yet the small public school where I work as staff developer began this school year with a fully staffed faculty, laughter, camaraderie, and a lot of optimism.

This might be surprising because our school was not shielded from the effects of poverty and trauma even before the pandemic—we serve one of the lowest-income Zip codes in Kentucky. Yet, because we have put our energy into a

human-centered approach to improvement, we are finding our teacher-retention numbers are higher than those of peer schools in our district.

Byck Elementary has about 270 students in the Russell neighborhood, approximately 14 blocks west of the business district in downtown Louisville, where [a history of redlining](#) has left property values low. Externally, the school is unremarkable: a typical brick, two-story 1960s building with a grassy, block-long campus, playground, and blacktop surrounded by a chain link fence.

Inside the building, however, Byck Elementary is a standout. When you enter our school, you can immediately sense that everyone inside is happy to be there.

The overall climate in the building is calm and pleasant. Parents and caregivers enjoy coming to school for events. In classrooms, students work together and with their teachers as learning allies, and multiple teachers and support staff push in and pull students out throughout the day in a systematic effort to meet all kids' social-emotional and academic needs.

We have been able to create this culture because every adult in the school believes all children deserve to be seen as fully human—imperfect and capable of greatness.

How have we united around this shared belief in our kids? It has been a labor of love. Our administrative team (including an assistant principal; a counselor; special education, behavior, and instructional coaches; and me, a staff developer) led by Principal Carla Kolodey for the past six years believes that all teachers themselves deserve to be seen as fully human—imperfect and capable of greatness, just like students.

This means understanding that life is messy and professional learning is not always linear. Still, the school leaders expect teachers to grow and improve at all stages of their careers. And when teachers need help—supplies, an hour to run an errand, a new strategy for a particularly difficult student—our administrative team gives them what they need. When they have ideas on how to improve the implementation of a school or district policy, we listen and plan together. When they name how they want to improve as teachers, we provide opportunities for authentic, personalized, and meaningful professional learning. And if they feel it's time to move on, we support their journey by helping them transition to their next opportunity.



When leaders in a school building shift our focus from our own measurable achievements to fostering growth within the school community, the data will follow.

Our school leaders recognize how difficult it is to work with students who have suffered trauma, but we don't lower expectations for teachers (or students) because of the difficulties. We treat our teachers as professionals worthy of high expectations. Teachers know that administrators are working as hard as they are, standing by their sides in their classrooms, co-planning, modeling good teaching, and reflecting with them on how we might improve.

The result is a culture of respect among the adults for one another, both as colleagues and as people. Administrators know our teachers are more than just what they can deliver. Likewise, we all know our students are more than their standardized-test scores and we deeply believe that our work is greater than a single high-stakes measurement at the end of the year.

As a school, we understand that trauma—primary, secondary, generational—has deeply affected many of our students (and some of our teachers). Trauma alters the brain in ways that are hidden, [self-limiting](#), and sometimes self-destructive. As a trauma-informed school, we have been through many training sessions as a faculty over the past six years. Together, we have developed a shared understanding of how trauma responses sometimes underlie people's needs and behaviors.

Still, we maintain our high expectations because we know we are capable of greatness. Our teachers, administrators, and school staff have all come to better understand and accept the challenges that our students often bring to our classrooms, some of them quite extreme, and we have worked to teach appropriate behaviors.

As student behavior has improved, we have continued to raise our expectations for students academically. Our feedback for teachers has shifted from their classroom management to the depth and complexity of the academic experiences they are providing students in all subject areas.

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If a school has a weak “why,” the work is too difficult, too thankless, and too unrelenting for many teachers to withstand. So, while we can't shield our teachers from everything currently happening outside our building, our administrators shelter them from as much of the negative noise on social media as possible and then give them a powerful reason to stay.

Meanwhile, we continue to improve. Our suspensions and behavior referrals continue to diminish: By October 2017, Byck had 117 behavior referrals and 19 suspensions. In mid-October of this year, we have had 63 referrals and one suspension to date. Improvements in student behavior have helped with teacher retention and recruitment: In 2018, we had a teacher-retention rate of 63 percent, whereas in 2021, we had 100 percent of our teachers remain at Byck. This year, we were able to successfully recruit teachers to fill every teaching position and began the year fully staffed. We are now able to shift our focus from behavior management to meeting all our students' academic needs, and all members of our administrative team are currently helping teachers by providing academic interventions to close student gaps and elevate their learning.

In education leadership literature, there is much written on the importance of a school mission. What might not be fully understood by all leaders, however, is that a mission is more than a catchphrase. A true mission must be enacted by the school leadership consistently over time to take hold. Then it becomes a shared belief so deeply held by everyone in the building that it could carry a school through the darkest squalls with everyone pulling in the same direction. When leaders in a school building shift our focus from our own measurable achievements to fostering growth within the school community, the data will follow. It is this human-centered approach that has made the difference for my school and one that keeps us committed to this work for another year together.

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