

The schools teachers choose

Jeremy Glazer
October 26, 2020



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One way to identify good schools is to look for the schools where teachers want to work.

If you're lost in the desert and in need of fresh water, you should look for animal tracks. That's the expert consensus — follow the tracks, and they'll lead you to a water source. Similar advice might apply to the search for good schools: Perhaps we just need to follow the tracks, specifically those of teachers who've left one school to work in another. Wherever they're going, that may be where we'll find what we're after.

Across the United States, plenty of teachers are on the move. As a nation, we have relatively high rates of teacher mobility, which creates significant staffing challenges for many schools and districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In and of itself, the movement of teachers isn't necessarily a bad thing. It only becomes a problem when teachers come and go in uneven numbers — which is, in fact, what tends to happen. In any given year, just one-quarter of the nation's public schools account for half of the departing teachers. Moreover, the schools that lose the most teachers tend to be “high-poverty, high-minority, urban, and rural public schools” (Ingersoll et al., 2018, p. 18), which tend to do poorly on many common measures of school quality. At the same time, the schools that attract the most job applicants tend to be relatively affluent. In other words, teacher mobility usually means that the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer.

The question is, what we can learn from this skewed pattern of teacher movement? If we follow teachers' tracks — from the places they choose to leave (the *hard-to-staff* schools) to the places they want to go (the *easy-to-staff* schools) — perhaps that will give us a better sense of what teachers themselves experience as satisfying places to work, and what they consider to be good schools.

Large-scale quantitative research studies have revealed some general trends: Teachers tend to leave schools with low-achieving students and unsupportive administrators (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009), and they tend to move to schools with wealthier students and higher salaries (Imazeki, 2005; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2007). However, such findings don't lead to any concrete suggestions for how to make schools more attractive to teachers (other than to fill every school with wealthier, higher-scoring students). Nor do they tell us what teachers consider to be a *good* school, one where they would want to work, all else being equal.

In my own research, I've tried to set aside district-level differences (e.g., salaries, policies, and school funding levels) to find out from teachers what *school-level* qualities have influenced their choices. More specifically, I've interviewed a dozen teachers who moved from hard-to-staff schools to easy-to-staff schools *within the same large urban district*. That is, they chose to move to a new school even though it paid the same salary as their old one, had virtually the same student demographic composition, received the same funding, and was subject to the same rules and policies.

I talked with each teacher for several hours about their training and their career experiences and their choices to transfer. What is it, I wanted to know, that made their new schools more appealing than the others? From the interviews, I was able to identify three key ways in which teachers determined whether a school would be a desirable place to work — and their insights can also teach us a lot about how to improve the schools they left behind.

Lesson 1: High test scores set you free

Data correlations can make us jump to conclusions about what teachers prefer, and these conclusions may actually get in the way of meaningful change. For example, because the data indicate that teachers tend to move to schools with higher test scores, many assume that teachers would rather work with higher-performing students. If true, that offers little hope that lower-performing students will ever be served by a stable teaching force — their teachers will always have one foot out of the door.

However, the teachers I spoke to offered a different account of their motivations. They migrated toward schools with higher test scores not because they didn't like working with the students at their old schools, but because of what the test scores afforded them as teachers: more autonomy. While these schools are all in the same district, and ostensibly subject to the same policies, the teachers told me they experienced the more rigid aspects of the district-mandated curriculum only when they worked at lower-performing schools.

For example, a teacher named Jim told me that in his hard-to-staff school, the district mandated “10-question quizzes that they printed out and gave to everyone” each Friday for the whole year. These assessments were disconnected from what he was doing in his classes, but he was required to give them. Thomas told me similar stories about the rigid curricular requirements at the school he left, saying “the testing pressure was on fire.” Margaret told me that at her hard-to-staff school she felt “micromanaged” by an administration that put “a lot of focus on things that I thought weren't very important.” She remembered one particular administrator giving her a hard time because her “data notebook” didn't follow the proper format. These teachers all reported experiencing more academic freedom at their easy-to-staff schools.

Salina also described disparate implementation of district mandates at the different schools where she had taught. She told me that her easy-to-staff school granted her “teacher agency. . . . I'm allowed to order whatever book [I want] because our test scores are at a certain place.” Similarly, Dwight said there were “absolutely no curriculum requirements” at his easy-to-staff school.

If correlational trends lead us to believe that teachers prefer to work with students who have higher test scores, we may be misinterpreting the data. In this case, the schools took a firmer hand if their students performed poorly, leaving teachers with little autonomy. The correlation is real, but the cause may not be what we assume.

Lesson 2: Adults drive teacher transfers more than the students.

Many teachers told me about the day-to-day chaos at the schools they left, which jibes with a general perception that teachers leave schools because of out-of-control students who are not academically motivated. And indeed, these teachers told me that the students in the schools they left did present challenges. I heard stories about fights, about students throwing books, and about students refusing to do anything but play cards during class. But the teachers usually attributed that chaos to the decisions and behaviors of the *adults* in the building, not the kids.

Dwight, a social studies teacher, told me about the unpredictable days at his hard-to-staff school:

It was not uncommon that I'd have 15 kids and [the administration would] say, "Hey, by the way, sorry, gym is cancelled today so you have these same kids for another 90 minutes." I would get 10 minutes notice. And they would say, and by the way, so-and-so is out. Here's 35 more kids.

Susan linked chaos at her hard-to-staff school to administrative churn. She told me that within a few years the "vice principal leaves, principal leaves, new ones come in . . . It was pretty wildly out of control." Marie echoed this, attributing much of the turmoil to the fact that her school had seven different principals in 16 years, and she attributed the high teacher turnover to this instability. Margaret, likewise, had three principals in four years at her school and ultimately left because of the chaos caused by the ever-shifting administration.

Schools that are constantly in flux become places where no one is expected to stay. Not only do faculty perceive this, but the students do as well. Linda told me that when she first began teaching at a hard-to-staff school, one of her 9th graders said to her "You're going to leave. You're going to get a better job and you're going to leave and you're not going to see me graduate." Everyone assumed that none of the adults would be there for long.

Within such disarray, administrators weren't the only adults who contributed to the chaos. Susan recalled that at her hard-to-staff school, students would seek her out because their own teachers "left after lunch and never returned."

Another dynamic that influenced their choices to leave was the feeling that teachers were accorded a higher status by other adults in the district once they moved to easy-to-staff schools. As Dwight told me, his transfer began to feel like a professional credential that made people want to consult with him. People seemed to think that, if you're a teacher at an easy-to-staff school, "there's a sense of 'wow, you must be really good!'"

The other side of such a hierarchy is that teachers who stay too long at hard-to-staff schools are seen as inferior. Samuel told me that his colleagues advised him not to remain at a hard-to-staff school for too long if he didn't "want to be seen as damaged goods." He came to feel that the administrators within the district were under the impression that teachers who have been at a hard-to-staff school for a long time are "probably good at classroom management, but . . . they can't teach."

If we consider the less teacher-friendly policies at hard-to-staff schools, the chaos from administrative churn, and the social pressure to leave such schools, we see that many of the factors teachers mention as motivating their decisions to leave are driven by the adults around them, not the students. Districts have the power to change this, though, which should give us some hope, especially in light of the final lesson.

Lesson 3: Many teachers who left hard-to-staff schools would have preferred to stay.

When I asked these teachers how they felt about their careers, none was seriously contemplating a departure from the easy-to-staff schools. As Susan said of her easy-to-staff school, "People retire from here. They don't leave and go somewhere else." Still, despite their current job satisfaction, again and again I heard feelings of heartbreak as these teachers talked about their decision to leave their previous schools.


Marie told me that it was hard to think back to her old students and she "felt like I deserted them." Tamyka echoed this, telling me that she felt "I was abandoning them . . . I did feel that guilt." Susan talked about trying to continue to work in the neighborhood of her old school with a community she felt real attachments to. Their decisions to leave hard-to-staff schools weren't easy.

Dwight had a slightly different take:

I did not create the school system and my politics don't allow me to take personal responsibility for how shitty of a job it can be to try and be a good teacher in these schools . . . I feel angry about what a devil's bargain it is to try and be a good teacher these days.

Dwight's anger came from his feeling that it wasn't until he got to his easy-to-staff school that he was "able to really develop the kind of skills and experiences that resemble why I set out to be a teacher, which is [to] teach a lot of low-income students [and] very much get to demonstrate the power of public schools when they're well-resourced." One reason Dwight didn't want to stay at his

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hard-to-staff school is that he “was just really afraid about learning bad habits . . . I was worried about becoming a teacher I didn’t want to be.”

And this was another prominent theme that ran through the stories I heard. Laura described a similar feeling when she said, “I wasn’t doing any teaching” at the hard-to-staff school. The easy-to-staff school allows her to be “more what a teacher is.” Tamyka also described her easy-to-staff school as a place where “teachers get a chance to teach.” She told me when teachers from hard-to-staff schools get there, “you have to learn, or re-learn, how to teach.” At her old job, “it was controlling the students, you know. It wasn’t necessarily achieving anything academically.”

These teachers are displaying what Doris Santoro (2017) has called a craft conscience, a desire to “uphold the integrity” of their profession by doing what good teachers do (p. 752). In other words, they wanted to do their jobs well. They wanted to serve their students in the ways they believed that their profession calls for. When they were in situations where such good teaching seemed impossible, they felt compelled to leave. They wanted to be good teachers for their former students as much as their current ones, but they found it impossible to practice their craft in a way that felt right in their hard-to-staff schools. Such attitudes indicate that many more teachers would remain in traditionally hard-to-staff schools if changes were made.

Listen to teachers

Good schools attract teachers, and if we listen to teachers’ descriptions of the schools they move toward and the schools they move away from, we can take away some concrete suggestions about school improvement. To make good schools, we need to maintain stability in administrative staffs who can effectively manage school environments, we need to give teachers more professional autonomy, and we need to value and respect the skills of teachers who work with lower-performing students. We need to create and maintain environments where teachers feel they can do their best work — where they can do the job of teaching the way they envision it.

More than any particular reform, though, we need to learn to listen to teachers. When, for instance, we’re planning school “turnarounds,” hoping to transform bad schools into good ones, we should call upon teachers who have seen both, and whose tracks reveal the journey they’ve chosen to make. By hearing the stories of teachers who have followed the well-worn road from bad schools to good ones, maybe we can ensure that future teachers won’t need to follow that same path.

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[Jeremy Glazer](#)

JEREMY GLAZER (glazer@rowan.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education at the College of Education, Rowan University, Glassboro, N.J.

