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Research Summary

What Does Teacher Turnover Cost School Districts?

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Recruiting and retaining teachers is a challenge for Alaska. Between 1999 and 2012, annual teacher turnover in rural districts averaged around 20% and in the state's five largest districts just about 10%.[1] In the 2016-2017 year, individual schools in remote rural locations had over 30% teacher turnover, schools in hub communities 22%, and schools in more populated areas 14%-16%.[2] (Turnover at the school level includes district turnover, plus turnover among teachers moving between schools within a district.) Some turnover is inevitable, but research has shown that high teacher turnover hurts student achievement—as well as relationships among teachers, school-community relations, the quality of instruction, and teachers' professional development.

And high turnover not only has those harmful effects—it's also costly. When teachers leave, districts face many expenses, including expenses for separation, recruitment, hiring, and training.[3] Our study provides the first systematic calculation of the broad range of costs of turnover for Alaska school districts in four big categories. We interviewed administrators in 37 of the state's 54 districts about their turnover expenses when teachers leave a district at the end of the school year.

Findings

- On average, every teacher who leaves costs Alaska school districts nearly $20,500. About a third of that is for recruiting and hiring a replacement teacher, and half is for training the new teacher.
- Overall, teacher turnover costs the state's school districts about $20 million a year.

District-level Turnover Expenditures per Teacher, by Cost Category

	Separation	Recruitment	Hiring	Orientation and training	Performance productivity	Preparation
Per-teacher cost calculation	$2,448.95	$1,910.35*	$4,901.91	$11,169.86	(not calculated)	(not calculated)
Percent of cost	11.99%	9.35%	23.99%	54.67%	.	.
Expenses included	Administrative, maintenance, security tasks	Job fairs, advertising	Screening applicants, interviews, administrative processes	PD, onboarding, new teacher support		
Total calculated cost per teacher: **$20,431.08**						

*Excludes wages – material costs only

[1] Hill, A. and Hirshberg, D. (2013). *Alaska Teacher Turnover, Supply and Demand: 2013 Highlights.* Anchorage, AK: UAA CAEPR.

[2] Stevens, D. & Pierson, A. Alaska State Policy Research Alliance: Informing issues with data and evidence. Presentation to Alaska Legislature February 22, 2017.

[3] The state also bears indirect costs, through investments in preparing teachers and the effects of turnover on student achievement.

Implications

- *Actual costs of teacher turnover are likely higher than we estimated*. Our cost estimates are conservative. We estimated the average weighted cost of teacher turnover in four specific cost categories. We did not estimate the additional costs districts face, if teachers leave mid-year, or the costs to Alaska, related to teacher preparation and reduced student achievement. But even our conservative estimates show that the direct costs of high teacher turnover are significant. If school districts could reduce turnover, they would have more money to invest in teaching and learning.
- *Not all turnover is bad, nor are all turnover costs.* As we said at the outset, districts can't expect to eliminate all teacher turnover. Some turnover is in fact beneficial—teachers leave the profession if it is not a good fit for them; some take other jobs in education; and some retire, indicating stability. And while mentoring and induction activities for new teachers are costly up front, they promote effective teaching and help keep teachers in the classroom—reducing costs in the long-run.
- *Retention pays off***.** Retaining teachers over time not only improves the quality of instruction, but reduces direct turnover costs—allowing districts to reallocate money to teaching and learning.
- *Managing turnover costs by reducing budgets at the district level can create additional costs elsewhere***.** As districts seek to manage costs of turnover through budget revisions, they should keep in mind that reducing costs in one area may create costs at other levels of the education system.

Recommendations

- *Improve tracking of turnover costs at all levels***.** Tracking turnover costs systematically and regularly at the school, district, and state levels will more fully capture the costs associated with teacher turnover.
- *Explore conditions affecting teacher turnover and how to address them***.** Understanding how teacher turnover differs by school, position, or teacher characteristics can help administrators and policymakers develop ways to reduce turnover. These potentially include improving support for teachers, increasing the number of teachers prepared in Alaska, and recruiting on community strengths.
- *Explore how to reduce costs***.** Though the literature recommends standardizing processes for dealing with turnover costs, we found that Alaska districts use various approaches. While there may be some opportunities for efficiencies, these should not come at the expense of district autonomy.
- *Ongoing research is needed* to better describe turnover patterns, the non-monetary costs of teacher turnover, the effect of turnover on productivity, and the relationship between school characteristics and turnover.

Full Study

The full study, The Cost of Teacher Turnover in Alaska, by Dayna DeFeo, Trang Tran, Diane Hirshberg, Dale Cope, Pamela Cravez, UAA Center for Alaska Education Policy Research, March 2017, is available at http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/CAEPR/.

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