

Gathering Information on Teacher Departures: South Carolina School District Protocols

For a number of years the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) has been working closely with districts to better understand the reasons behind teacher departures. In May 2019, CERRA began an effort to identify the various methods districts are using to gather information about these departures. This report summarizes these findings, and outlines plans to continue exploring this topic during the 2020-21 school year.

Survey to all South Carolina District Personnel Directors

In May 2019, CERRA administered a survey to personnel directors in all South Carolina school districts (83 at the time) to gain information about the data collection methods used to determine why teachers leave their positions. Personnel directors from 70 of these districts submitted data to CERRA. Results indicated that nearly all districts engage in some type of exit process to collect information from teachers about the reasons they decide to leave.

Districts primarily use intent forms/letters of intent, resignation letters/forms, and/or exit surveys (online and paper) to collect departure information. Some districts, while not as frequent, conduct in-person interviews with teachers who resign, but these mostly occur at the request of the teacher. Few districts use all of the tools mentioned above, most use only one or two strategies, and a handful of districts do not collect information about why teachers leave their positions.

Follow-up Interviews with Personnel Directors

During the 2019-20 school year, CERRA conducted telephone interviews with 20 of the personnel directors who submitted a survey. The purpose of following up was to gather more detailed information about the exit processes utilized in districts when teachers submit a resignation. In order to create a sample of personnel directors that was representative of the state, interviewees were selected based on factors such as district size, location, teacher turnover rates, and individual survey results. Personnel directors were not selected for an interview if they indicated that their district used no tools or strategies to determine reasons for teacher departures. Most interviews lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes, and all were informal to allow for candid conversations about teacher resignations.

Districts that use exit surveys typically yield adequate, often substantial, response rates from teachers who leave. Many personnel directors feel confident that teachers provide honest reasons for leaving the district, but they are well aware that this is not always the case. A survey with no follow-up conversation can result in vague responses that offer little detail about the teacher's departure. In certain situations, in-person interviews lead to more genuine feedback, especially when held by a trusted district employee. Some smaller districts, because of their size and sense of community, are able to connect with nearly every departing teacher. Personnel directors from these districts report being able to reach a larger number of teachers and collect more authentic data through informal, face-to-face or even telephone conversations. Personnel directors in some of the larger districts indicated that they would like to collect more data from teachers before they leave, but are limited by time and resources.

Many of the personnel directors who were interviewed shared the actual exit surveys and forms used in their districts. Although each document is different, all aim to determine why teachers are leaving the district by asking them to provide or select a reason(s) for their departure.

Take-Aways from Surveys and Interviews

- ✚ Most school districts in South Carolina use some type of protocol or process to determine why teachers leave. Some processes involve multiple steps (forms/letters, surveys, and interviews), while others use only one or two methods of data collection.
- ✚ Many districts use resignation letters and exit surveys to determine reasons for departures, relying on teachers to provide this information. Some teachers are candid with their feedback, while others may feel reluctant to provide honest responses.
- ✚ Resignation reasons are sometimes unknown due to teachers not providing the information, districts not collecting it, or teachers indicating “personal/family” reasons when the departure is actually job-related (i.e., school administration, workload, etc.).
- ✚ Some districts, smaller ones in particular, are able to have face-to-face conversations with teachers, resulting in more authentic information related to their departures. In certain instances, resignations have been prevented as a result of these types of conversations.
- ✚ Many personnel directors feel that their districts’ teacher departure process is effective overall, but would like to introduce more protocols if time and resources would allow. Some are beginning to apply new strategies, and are hopeful they will be successful.
- ✚ Personnel directors indicated they would like to utilize more face-to-face conversations with teachers, stay interviews, induction teacher round tables, etc., but are limited by a variety of barriers such as time and available staff.
- ✚ Personnel directors who were interviewed are in consensus that “building relationships” is the most effective way to retain teachers. Also, the role of school-level administrators is essential in creating a culture that fosters the importance of relationships.

Focus Groups

In March 2020, CERRA staff conducted multiple in-person focus groups with teachers from one South Carolina school district. The purpose of these focus groups was to speak confidentially with teachers who were planning to leave their positions to hopefully uncover the true reasons leading to their decisions. These focus groups generated extremely valuable information that will inform CERRA’s efforts moving forward. During the 2020-21 school year, CERRA plans to conduct focus groups with teachers from several districts eligible to participate in the Rural Recruitment Initiative. Eligibility for funds through this initiative is based on a district’s teacher turnover rates and index of tax-paying ability. The hope is to gather even more relevant feedback from teachers so as to better understand why so many resignations are occurring each year and actions that can be taken to prevent them.