

Why do teachers leave?

A synthesis of forty years of research on teacher attrition and retention

Tuan D. Nguyen, Ph.D.

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Kansas State University
Nguyetd1@ksu.edu | Twitter: @edu_tuan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From research and experience, we know that teachers are the single most important school factor in student learning and achievement. We also know that teacher attrition is an important and salient issue for many schools, particularly in economically disadvantaged or minoritized districts. High teacher turnover is associated with decreased student learning and it is costly to replace teachers on a yearly basis. As such, teacher mobility patterns play an important role in the equitable education of all students, and there is strong evidence of inequities in access to highly effective instruction across schools and districts.

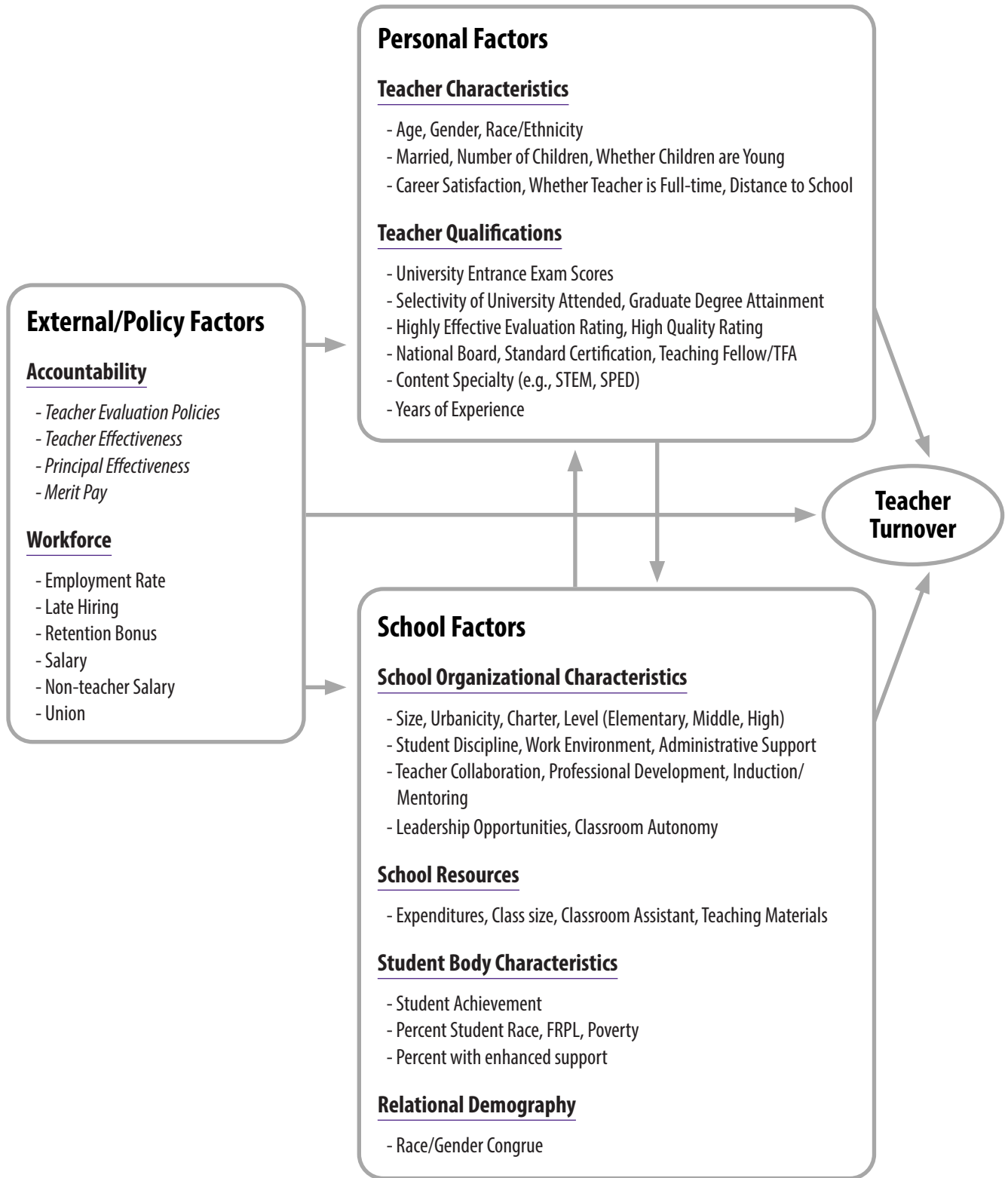
Taking advantage of the robust literature on teacher attrition and retention, my colleagues and I conducted an exhaustive search reviewing more than 25,000 scholarly records and synthesizing effects across 120 of these studies to better understand what drives teacher mobility. We provide a cohesive and comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates new insights into teacher attrition and retention, particularly in terms of policies that may be used to improve the teacher workforce. The research examining factors associated with teacher turnover can be divided into three main strands: (1) characteristics of teachers who turnover (personal factors); (2) characteristics of teachers' work environments (school factors); and (3) conditions outside the school that potentially affect teachers (external/policy factors).

This policy brief describes the main takeaways of our work and offers some discussions on policy and practice implications.

Note and Acknowledgement

I thank Chanh Lam for providing excellent research assistance with the policy brief. For the full paper, see Nguyen et al. (2020). The correlates of teacher turnover: An updated and expanded meta-analysis of the literature. *Educational Research Review*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1747938X19305597>

Concept Framework of Teacher Turnover



Note. TFA: Teach for America; STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Math; SPED: Special Education; PD: Professional Development; Elem.: Elementary; FRPL: Free-or-Reduced Priced Lunch; Enhanced support includes IEP/LEP: Individualized Education Plan/Limited English Proficiency

Main Findings of What May Drive Teachers to Turn Over

More likely to turn over	Less likely to turn over
Personal Factors	
Younger teachers Novice teachers (in the first two years) White teachers White teachers Dissatisfied teachers Teachers with non-standard certification (emergency cert, alt cert, etc.)	Older teachers More experienced teachers Hispanic teachers Non-White teachers Satisfied teachers Teachers with standard certification
School Factors	
Middle and high school teachers (secondary) Charter school teachers Worse working environment (school facilities, job assignments, etc.) Weak administrative support No induction or mentoring available as a novice teacher Without adequate teaching materials (textbooks, binders, resources, etc.) Worse student academic achievement	Elementary school teachers Traditional public school teachers Better working environment Better administrative support Received induction and/or mentoring as a novice teacher With adequate teaching materials Better student academic achievement
External/Policy Factors	
Teachers are not evaluated or observed Teachers with low effective scores Teachers working with less effective principals Teachers in district without merit pay or retention bonus Lower salary Teachers without union membership	Teachers are evaluated or observed More effective teachers Teachers working with more effective principals Teachers in district with merit pay or retention bonus Higher salary Teachers with union membership

We find many personal factors such as age, experience, and race/ethnicity are related to teacher turnover. We consistently find various measures of school organizational characteristics –such as student disciplinary problems, administrative support, and professional development– strongly influence teacher turnover. Lastly, many external and policy factors are associated with teacher attrition and retention.

School Organizational Characteristics and Evaluation and Accountability

Our findings have important implications for policy and practice. Not surprising to many educators, additional supports and incentives appear necessary to keep novice teachers and hard-to-staff teachers, such as STEM teachers and special educators, in their school. We see substantial evidence that improving school organizational characteristics, such as reducing student disciplinary problems, improving administrative support and teacher collaborations, may reduce the risk of turnover. It is, by no means, simple to change these organizational features, but the evidence warrants further exploration.

Despite some concerns of potential negative consequences of teacher evaluation and accountability from policymakers and educators, we do not find that performance evaluations increase teacher attrition. To the contrary, we find when teachers are evaluated and the results of their evaluations or measures of effectiveness are made available, teachers are not more likely to turn over. In fact, we find evidence that teachers may be enticed to stay as they are provided with some urgency, sense of empowerment, and evidence of areas for professional improvement. This holds true even when teacher evaluations are being used for accountability and pay raises.

To this point, we have substantial evidence that teachers in merit-based pay programs are less likely to leave teaching than those who are not. This is important as we also find evaluation and accountability policies tend to be associated with keeping the most effective teachers and removing the least effective teachers (as measured by value-added scores). In other words, evaluation and strategic compensation reforms may be leveraged to improve the composition of the teacher workforce. We note that increasing teacher salary is also associated with improving teacher retention, but this effect is smaller in comparison to merit pay and retention bonuses.

In sum, while there may be negative consequences and warranted concerns about teacher evaluation and accountability policies, they are more positively perceived by some teachers and have more beneficial effects than previously recognized, and they may be used to improve the teacher workforce and reduce turnover.