

## CHAPTER

# 1

# Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Rachel is a special education teacher entering her seventh year in the same suburban middle school. It was her third year in therapy, and as a veteran of personal growth work, she did a good job identifying distress that wasn't ordinary and owning those factors that were self-imposed.

When Rachel first began therapy, three years prior, she felt out of control, which was true when it came to her eating, but it was also a product of misperception. Her eating included continuous binges of unhealthy foods throughout the day, followed by periods of starvation and excessive exercise to purge herself of the calories and guilt. The more weight she gained, the more the cycle of guilt and self-annihilation intensified.

On this pivotal day, Rachel admitted a shameful regression—one she had worked so hard to overcome just two years prior. Through challenging group therapy, she described a destructive pattern of rushing to the daily display of cookies, cakes, and other sweet treats in the teacher's lounge and gobbling them down quickly before anybody knew she was there. Rachel quickly identified the escapism, a common protective mechanism, to cope with a moderately stressful class.

During this year, Rachel had three disruptive students who accounted for 95 percent of her time, a familiar ratio for teachers in all types of wealthy, poor, urban, and rural schools. One of these three boys was the ringleader who incited the other two into a frenzy of microaggressions that incited the class and devolved the lessons.

Rachel's primary concern was for the other students whom she knew were being deprived of a quality education and perhaps feeling unsafe. School is the one place she knew children were supposed to feel emotionally safe and physically secure. She took her job seriously, and when she was unable to regain control of her class, a combination of guilt and remorse flooded her body.

Rachel shared all her creative attempts to address this growing concern, but it was to no avail. When she sought help, her principal's response was this: "Send him out on an errand." Rachel resented the apathy of her school leader but also felt dismissed and discounted, much the way she did growing up in a family where alcohol and gambling took precedence over child-rearing.

What surprised Rachel more than the response from her principal was the fact that there were two other adult males in her class, assigned

there as one-on-ones for other students, whose attitudes seemed to show more blame than concern. She felt judged by them, although she could not quite identify what specifically they did or said to cause that feeling. She wondered if she projected this judgment onto them or whether she was picking up on something real.

Between the perceived judgment, feeling dismissed, her worry for the students, and her own erosion of efficacy, Rachel began to spiral downward. Losing control at work brought her to a familiar but terrifying place, on edge as she embraced the ineptness. She began consuming foods high in carbohydrates, a serotonin boost, to help with the impending depression. The elation she felt in those few moments after consuming the high fat and sugary products provided an immediate escape from stress.

She felt relieved in the moment but knew all too well about the long-term consequences of overeating. She knew intellectually that she would regret the binge, even feeling shame for losing control, but the momentary benefits of her escapism prevailed. She couldn't stop her self-sabotage as long as the intensity of her feelings remained buried.

Through a process-oriented group, she considered her options, acknowledging what she already knew from her experiences in those weekly sessions. Confronting her principal was necessary; otherwise, the resentment she pushed down would keep surfacing as anxiety, which she knew the food provided a distraction from. While she feared conflict and being seen incompetent, she knew that continuing on her current trajectory was going to further compromise her health and potentially jeopardize her work. She also knew that addressing several racially disparaging statements he was alleged to have said when angry contributed to her reluctance.

We can extrapolate what a suburban special education teacher can teach us about the growing national problem of recruitment and retention. To do this we will need to look at this situationally within the larger context, pulling from this scenario.

*We need to understand the underlying causes for microaggressions and what the actions the administration takes have on the community.* A lack of impact can land just as hard as any blatant discriminatory attitudes or behaviors perpetrated by leadership. Being proactive in appreciating diversity sends a strong message to the community that every person is valued.

*Professional learning needs to prioritize social justice, diversity, equity, equality, and the dangers of ethnocentricity and racism.* Rachel is Caucasian but feels strongly about cultural sensitivity, wanting to work in a school with greater diversity to stimulate her own learning. She learned through private coaching that contrasting differences promotes deeper learning and intimacy than the pseudo-intimacy of sameness. She never had school-sponsored professional development (PD) around equity and equality other than a boring PowerPoint two years prior.

*Our current system is guided by the principle of accountability but may be leaning away from autonomy, creativity, and personal investment.* When we hold everybody to the same standard, we limit creativity and autonomy, lessening our emphasis on the creative processes that drive organizational health. We endanger teacher empowerment and fuel the problem of engagement, to which every other issue in education can be linked. According to Gallup and Gary Gordon, the author of *Building Engaged Schools*, engagement is a critical concern for education (Hastings & Agrawal, 2015).

*Educator stress stemming from pressure, unrealistic expectations, lack of work-life balance, and diminished voice can reduce longevity for existing educators and discourage new recruits.* We want educators to feel supported inside and outside the classroom because this is the most personal of all professions, extending educators well outside the school day.

*Accountability is well intended but can be implemented with more process-oriented strategies that enhance all types of learning.* Standardized curriculums that limit creativity may increase resentment as teachers feel more like factory workers, impacting student treatment.

A familiar pattern is playing out across schools nationwide. A student misbehaves. Perhaps some unmet need, such as belonging, triggers being disruptive in class. The teacher responds, influenced by the fear that there will be no support from the administration, who is focused on bigger issues. When the teacher interacts with the disruptive student in an avoidant or hostile manner, based on the anticipation of resentment for not having backup, the parent gets involved. The backlash from the angry parent myopically focuses on how unfair the teacher treated the child, garnering support from the school leadership who doesn't want public relationship problems.

When the teacher feels let down by the school leader or anticipates the same, a move is made toward protective mode. The teacher's self-interest becomes paramount over the well-being of the students, which for most educators is ego-dystonic or not aligned with the teacher's beliefs. The intrinsic passion of the educator is slowly replaced by a more self-serving agenda. As teachers become less invested in their work, student outcomes decline. Legislators looking to save the system and advance their careers come up with pragmatic, well-branded solutions. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Every Child Succeeds Act sound important but do not address the complexity of engagement. Teachers react to dramatic policy shifts in part due to their skepticism and resistance to change but also with a sense of futility that their input matters. When those on the front line don't have a say in what's best for students, their frustration turns to futility. Their interactions with students are shaped by their attitude toward the system and the cycle begins again—only this time with greater intensity.

According to the paradoxical theory of change, before anything can be different, we first need to fully understand what already is. Why is this issue a problem now? Has it been a problem for a long while, or are we just recognizing it? Have our solutions not worked, and why? Is the problem indicative of more complex dynamics we aren't appreciating?

Most important to solving this or any other problem is recognizing our previous model wasn't working and then examining the lens through which we are viewing the issue. To accomplish this more easily, we begin with the forces for sameness and change that are serving to keep us stuck. Sameness and change are perennial influences exerting their pressure on us throughout the day although we seldom give attention to it.

When we fail to consider our reasons for holding back or rushing to action, especially when our decisions lack a deeper appreciation of the etiology of the issue, we scaffold new problems on top of old. Stopgap measures, ill-conceived quick fix solutions (a product of our prescriptive society), and general reactivity will make it harder to understand why the issue became problematic to begin with.

Using social emotional learning (SEL) as an example, we might add in a new expectation for educators to embed social skills training into a subject area as a result of increased reports for cutting, a specific form of adolescent self-harm. Teaching students how to communicate more clearly around their feelings seems at the surface to be straightforward and helpful. If we can consider that the increase in cutting originates from increased pressure students are feeling academically—holding their teachers responsible for their burden—expecting them to communicate feelings they aren't ready to share may increase pressure rather than decrease it.

With current challenges making attracting and sustaining new teachers even more complex, the macro and micro levels of system yields important data. Understanding the state or federal policy shifts and the role of the individual district as well as the dynamics created between the two is where solutions begin to form. The level of funding, consumption of resources on mandates, and priority setting will determine how the intersection of individual wellness and organizational health helps or hinders support for new educators.

While we are waiting on those decisions from policy makers, who often lack the ground level perspective to establish meaningful initiatives, we can design and test our own solutions to present for endorsement. We know the existing issues identified by educators who rank student behavior, work-life balance, and an absence of input into decision-making as important areas to address, but we don't yet know what will be added or reprioritized on that list.

To initiate bottom-up change, we will need to examine how policies and procedures balance protection with oppression, so volition

isn't compromised in the service of safety. As our focus will be physical safety, especially for students, we must ensure the psychological welfare of all levels of the system and beyond to restore teaching as the most valued profession. To do this we will need to move out of survival mode, where adverse working conditions are improved.

Without enough qualified teachers entering the profession—and depending upon the actual rate of attrition—we may be depleting our system to dangerous levels. Between 2009 and 2014, the most recent years of data available, teacher education enrollments dropped from 691,000 to 451,000, a 35 percent reduction. This amounts to a decrease of almost 240,000 professionals on their way to the classroom in the year 2014, as compared to 2009 (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

While it may be unfair to contrast the U.S. with other countries, it's difficult to ignore the discrepancy. “Compared to high-achieving jurisdictions like Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada—where only about 3 to 4% of teachers leave in a given year—U.S. attrition rates are quite high, hovering near 8% over the last decade, and are much higher for beginners and teachers in high-poverty schools and districts” (Sutcher, 2015).

Recruitment efforts are sometimes hampered by poor teacher orientation or onboarding, mismatches between candidate and district, inadequate funding (especially poorly represented minority communities), and a lack of administrator support. Schools may also lack the attention to an educator's needs for personal support, believing professionals should separate their work and home lives. With the new complexity of stressors brought on by the pandemic, our lens may be widening to include creative supports new teachers would value.

The study also found a high association between a lack of administrative support, the quality of school leadership, professional learning opportunities, instructional leadership, time for collaboration and planning, collegial relationships, and decision-making input—all influencing the degree of educator engagement. The safety mechanism being put into place and resulting changes in how educators manage their classrooms may influence the nature of engagement, possibly increasing the burden.

Engagement is a broad term with deep meaning, necessitating a closer look in this new era of instruction. With the temporary shift toward virtual instruction and possibly longer-term use of a hybrid model, engagement between all levels of the system needs rethinking. If we can better understand how contact is made and maintained between different subsets of the system, we may learn where and how to strengthen those connections. In doing so we may find creative ways to attract and sustain more qualified educators who wish to rise to the challenge.

## Key Points

- ▶ Our effort to raise accountability has potentially lessened autonomy, creativity, and investment. Balancing these polarities is an important task for district leaders.
- ▶ Accountability is important, but an overemphasis can shift us toward an outcome focus, neglecting important processes.
- ▶ SEL can be a way to support educator well-being while improving student achievement, including addressing social justice issues.
- ▶ Recruitment and retention are even more critical to sustain our schools, requiring more in-depth appreciation of individual wellness and organizational health.

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