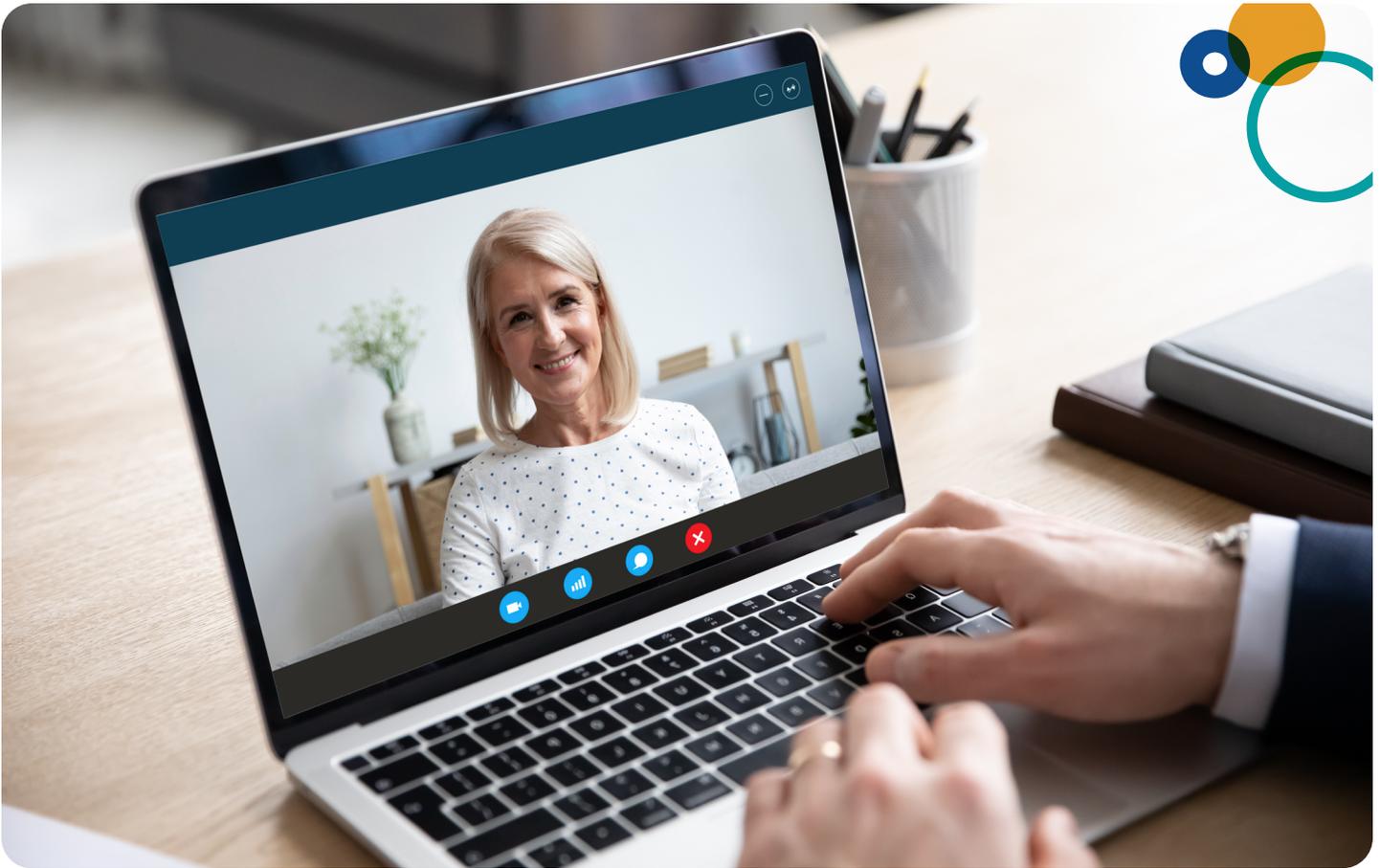




# Tackling Teacher Turnover with **Instructional Coaching**

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## Abstract

In recent years, reducing teacher turnover has become one of the greatest challenges for school and district leaders, particularly those districts serving students of color and students from low-income households. As teacher demand increases and teacher supply decreases on a national scale, principals and superintendents are working to identify ways to recruit and retain great teachers. Fortunately, research suggests that several of the factors that lead teachers to continue teaching in a given school are under the control of school leaders. In particular, when teachers receive instructional support from leaders, engage in collaborative work with their colleagues, and are provided with job-embedded professional development, they are more likely to remain teaching in their school.

At BetterLesson, we have found that one of the most effective ways to strengthen these three factors in a teacher's professional development is by providing

high-quality instructional coaching. When teachers receive personalized instructional coaching, they gain the support, resources, opportunity for collaboration, and training that they need to be successful and satisfied in their role. Ultimately, instructional coaching decreases teacher turnover, reduces costs associated with teacher recruitment and hiring, and improves student achievement outcomes.

**“I was inspired to deeply reflect on my current practice in a thorough fashion as well as build my teacher toolkit towards mastery in the profession. I am completing the academic year with a rejuvenated and inspired composure. This is absolutely a [result] of my work with my coach.”**

**Michael Seymour**  
M.S. 88, New York, NY





# The Challenge and Impact of Teacher Retention

Teacher retention has become such a significant challenge that a 2018 Gallup survey found that finding and keeping qualified teachers is currently the highest-priority issue for school superintendents.<sup>1</sup> A number of factors have created a perfect storm for school leaders attempting to decrease teacher turnover:<sup>2</sup>

## Dwindling Supply

Nationwide, enrollment in teacher preparation programs declined by 30 percent between 2010 and 2014.<sup>3</sup> This declining enrollment led to almost 240,000 fewer teachers entering the classroom in 2014 as compared to 2009 and continues a trend towards the lowest number of teachers available for hire in the last decade.<sup>4</sup> The supply of experienced teachers is also dwindling as more teachers choose to retire. According to a study by the RAND Institute, nearly one in four teachers said that they were likely to leave their jobs by the end of the 2020–2021 school year, compared with one in six teachers who were likely to leave, on average, prior to the 2020.<sup>5</sup>

## Growing Demand

Although teacher supply is decreasing, demand for teachers is increasing. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that enrollment in elementary and secondary schools will increase by over two million students in the next decade.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the gap between teacher supply and demand, school districts are unable to fill all of their teaching positions with qualified educators. In California, 80% of districts reported a shortage of qualified teachers in 2017-2018; in Oklahoma, the school year began with nearly 500 teaching vacancies; and in Chicago Public Schools alone there were nearly 1,300 teacher vacancies at the start of the year.<sup>7,8</sup>

## Rising Attrition

To compound the challenge of higher demand and lower supply, teacher attrition (the percentage of teachers leaving the profession in a given school year) has grown by 50% over the past 15 years,<sup>9</sup> and over 18% of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years.<sup>10</sup> According to the National Education Association (NEA) in 2022, an alarming 55% of educators indicated they are ready to leave teaching earlier than planned—including midyear resignations. 74% of NEA members said they've had to fill in for colleagues or take other duties due to staff shortages and 80% of members report that unfilled job openings have led to more work obligations for the educators who stay in their positions.<sup>11</sup> What makes matters worse is that the best teachers aren't staying, either. An estimated half of the teachers who leave the classroom every year are among the most effective teachers in their schools.<sup>12</sup>

These three factors have led to a teacher retention crisis that negatively impacts both student achievement and schools' budgets.

According to a 2012 Calder Center report, teacher turnover has a significant, negative effect on student achievement as measured by both Math and English Language Arts standardized test scores.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, teacher turnover compounds the existing achievement gaps in K-12 education. Teacher shortages are particularly acute in schools that serve a high percentage of students of color and students from low-income households, largely due to inequities in school funding that translate into differentials in salaries and working conditions—factors that greatly affect teacher labor markets.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the impact of teacher turnover on student learning is particularly harmful to students of color and students from low-income households.<sup>15,16</sup>

Teacher turnover also consumes sizable chunks of school budgets—funds that could otherwise be used to retain and grow great teachers. The cost for a district to hire a single new teacher ranges from \$9,000 in rural and suburban areas to \$20,000 in urban areas according to The Learning Policy Institute.<sup>17</sup> Across the U.S., the estimated cost of teacher turnover in public school districts amounts to a staggering \$7.3 billion each year.<sup>18</sup> School leaders are increasingly funneling time, energy, and money into a costly annual teacher recruitment and hiring cycle.

Fortunately, there are demonstrated proactive teacher retention strategies that protect budgets, improve student achievement, and curb high rates of teacher attrition.<sup>19</sup>

**“My coach was a breath of fresh air. She is encouraging, positive, and understanding. She made it so easy to communicate my positive and also negative feelings during this process. She was very uplifting and made my job feel a lot easier.”**

**Abbie Lee**

Foothills Charter High School; Alto, GA

## What Works to Retain Teachers

Although some of the school characteristics predictive of teacher turnover are often out of the control of school leaders (e.g., school facilities and teacher salary scales), many of the factors that increase teacher retention fall under the responsibility of a school's instructional leadership. Below, we identify three of the key factors of teaching and learning conditions that are most highly correlated to teachers' decisions to remain in a given school:

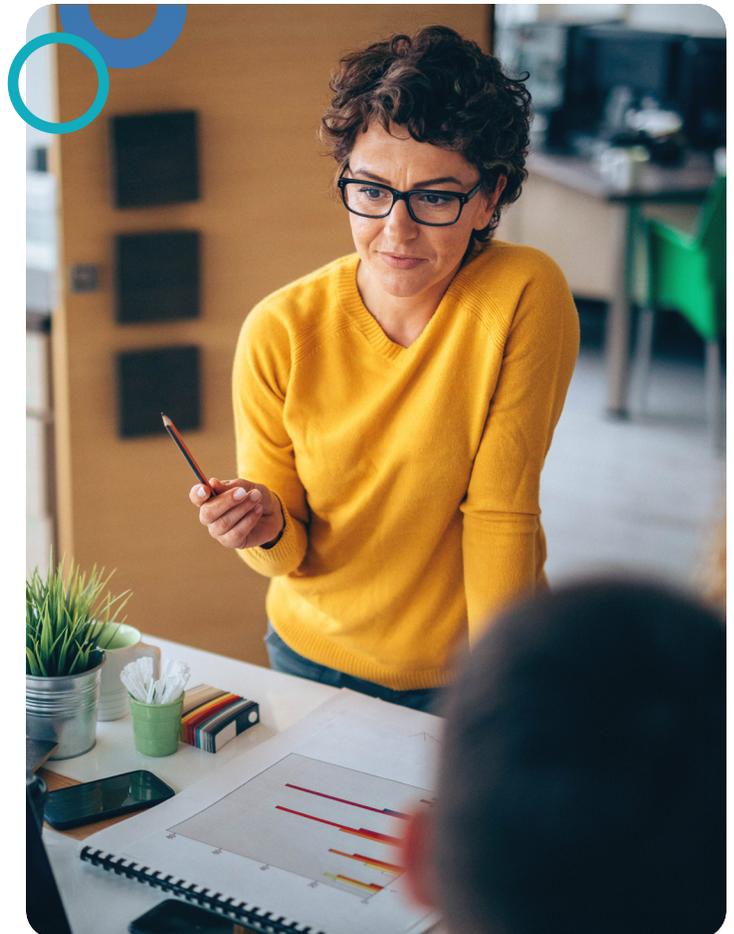
### Factor #1: Instructional Support from Leaders

In schools that provide adequate administrative support to teachers, turnover rates are 23% lower,<sup>20</sup> and when teachers do not think their administration is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching.<sup>21</sup> Although administrator support can take many forms, schools with the lowest teacher attrition rates have school leaders who provide support specifically through instructional resources, teaching materials, and professional learning opportunities.<sup>22</sup>

School leaders interested in improving teacher retention can begin by ensuring their teachers feel adequately supported in their instruction. This support might take the following forms:

- Implementing a system of regular observation and feedback for all teachers.
- Onboarding new teachers via orientation sessions, retreats, and seminars.
- Facilitating ongoing professional development sessions focused on student learning goals, effective teaching practices, and subject-specific teaching best practices.
- Demonstrating exemplar instructional practices by modeling the strategy for teachers or using classroom videos.
- Providing ongoing classroom-based assistance in implementing instructional strategies taught in professional development workshops.
- Seeking authentic feedback from staff (e.g. via faculty-wide surveys) to identify and respond to areas where teachers feel they are not receiving enough support.
- Ensuring teachers have access to up-to-date instructional materials, supplies, and curriculum.

Providing instructional support to all teachers can be incredibly time-intensive for school leaders. As we describe in Part 3, one effective way to increase school leaders' capacity to support teachers is by partnering with high-quality instructional coaches who can help provide the resources, materials, and professional development teachers need.



## Factor #2: Collaboration Among Colleagues

A culture of collegial support can also positively impact teacher retention. According to the National Education Association, teachers frequently rank “cooperative, competent teacher colleagues” as the most important factor helping them in their work.<sup>23</sup> This cooperation can take many forms including mentoring, professional learning communities, and both formal and informal peer observation and feedback. Novice teachers who receive mentoring, coaching, and feedback from experienced teachers in the same subject area or grade level stay in teaching at rates more than twice those of teachers who lack these supports.<sup>24</sup>

Teacher collaboration, however, will not happen without purposeful planning and facilitation. School leaders can increase teacher satisfaction by facilitating collaborative work among instructional staff in the following ways:

- Setting up a peer mentoring program among teachers and providing training to mentors on effective tools to support novice teachers.
- Creating a classroom-based training program (e.g. a teacher residency) for prospective teachers.
- Establishing norms for faculty collaboration.
- Facilitating collegial observations and ensuring novice teachers have the opportunity in their schedules to observe expert teachers.
- Building time into teacher schedules for collaborative planning and preparation, ensuring that teachers’ schedules allow them to work with colleagues who teach the same subject or students.
- Scheduling collaborative workshops and professional development such as student work review, co-planning lessons or units, and school-wide data analysis sessions.



In Part 3, we identify how high-quality instructional coaches can help ensure that, in addition to collaborative procedures and systems facilitated by school leaders, teachers have access to expert colleagues with whom they can collaborate via mentoring, thought partnership, and regular observation and feedback cycles.

**“I felt that I had a lot to share with my colleagues, as I was excited about the things we were doing in my classroom.”**

**Jocelyn Lathers**

Groton Elementary School District; Groton, NY

### Factor #3: Job-Embedded Professional Development

When asked what they need to be successful in a school, teachers overwhelmingly report a desire for guidance on what to teach and how to teach it, a coherent long-term plan to meet specific learning objectives, and ongoing observations and feedback.<sup>25</sup> Schools that provide high-quality instructional resources, teaching materials, and professional learning opportunities have the lowest teacher attrition rates.<sup>26</sup> Top teachers who receive regular, positive feedback and access to resources for their classroom generally plan to keep teaching at their schools for nearly twice as long as those who do not.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, these supports are rare; most new teachers receive little guidance, struggle on their own to develop curriculum, and rarely receive classroom visits by colleagues or administrators.<sup>28</sup>

Increasing the amount and quality of resources and job-embedded training, especially for early-career teachers, can improve teacher retention. In order to strengthen the school or district's professional development, consider:

- Engaging in regular, frequent, and quick classroom visits, also known as “walkthroughs” or “learning walks,” in order to stay in touch with the teaching and learning in your school.
- Providing teachers with complete, standards-aligned, flexible curriculum, and professional development to support implementing that curriculum.
- Facilitating high-quality induction and orientation programs for novice teachers.
- Partnering with local community organizations that provide support services to schools.
- Ensuring teachers receive up-to-date resources about how to work with students with disabilities, English learners, and other populations who may require a particular pedagogical approach.
- Training teachers on how to plan curriculum aligned to state standards and how to gather and respond to formative standards-aligned assessment data.
- Providing teachers with necessary support for any schoolwide initiatives such as tech support for schools moving towards more blended classrooms.



Providing comprehensive, personalized professional development to all teachers can strain a school leader's capacity. To avoid requiring the school leader to “do it all,” dedicated instructional coaches can help with additional personalized professional development for teachers to ensure they receive the training they need to be successful in the classroom.

# Addressing the Retention Challenge through 1:1 Instructional Coaching

At BetterLesson, we have found that the most direct and impactful way to support teachers to continue teaching in their schools is to provide them with high-quality instructional coaching.

There are three primary ways in which high-quality, personalized instructional coaching leads to improved teacher retention:

## Coaches provide personalized support.

School administrators are often asked to be instructional leaders in addition to the many other responsibilities they hold; as a result, they are unable to give teachers the personalized support they crave. Dedicated instructional coaches, on the other hand, are able to provide targeted, non-evaluative instructional guidance and professional learning opportunities to teachers. When coaches meet 1:1 with teachers over the course of the year, they ensure that teachers have the support they need to thrive in the classroom and help their students make both academic and social-emotional growth.

## A coaching relationship promotes high-quality collaboration.

Teaching alone in a classroom can be isolating and leads many teachers to feel they are on their own when facing instructional challenges. With an instructional coach, however, teachers always have a trusted and non-evaluative professional with whom they can discuss the successes, challenges, and questions that come up in their day-to-day teaching. Instructional coaches, who

are themselves expert educators, can provide mentoring, coaching, feedback, and empathy and compassion via regular meetings with the teachers they support. Whether helping a teacher identify an intervention to try with a behaviorally struggling student, brainstorming a new way to teach a challenging concept, or integrating a new type of technology in the classroom, an instructional coach's collaborative support ensures that teachers have thought partners for the most challenging parts of their work.

## Coaches can find the right resources and training for teachers.

When teachers are deciding what to teach and how to teach it, they often do so without any guidance. The popularity of online lesson-sharing platforms and teacher-facing social media pages is evidence of how eager most teachers are to find resources, materials, and training that will help them improve their work with students. Instructional coaches can help teachers avoid hours searching the internet for support because they can serve as a bridge between teachers and relevant, high-quality instructional strategies and lessons. An effective instructional coach will ensure that teachers receive personalized recommendations, feedback, and tools that help them maximize student growth and achievement.

## The Impact: What We've Learned

In surveys of hundreds of teachers across the country who received instructional coaching from BetterLesson, we found that high-quality instructional coaching directly impacts the main drivers of teacher retention:



**96%**  
OF TEACHERS

reported that their morale had improved as a result of working with their coach.



**96%**  
OF TEACHERS

felt they were more able to grow as a teacher as a result of working with their coach.



**94%**  
OF TEACHERS

report BetterLesson coaching made them more likely to stay in the teaching profession.

Providing instructional coaching to teachers is one of the most effective ways to improve the factors that research has shown are correlated with teacher retention. High-quality instructional coaching can help teachers improve their practice, provide collaborative mentorship and guidance, and give educators the additional training and resources they need to be successful in the classroom. When leaders create a supportive, collaborative, and resource-rich environment, teachers want to teach, and stay teaching, in their schools. By hiring instructional coaches to provide this support to teachers, leaders ensure that their school or district is doing the important work of keeping great teachers in the classroom inspiring, challenging, and engaging their students.

**“My time with my coach was empowering for me. She gave me confidence to take risks with my students. We worked together toward a common goal which was to help me grow as an educator. Her encouragement and input have been invaluable in helping me to find various ways to support my students with their progress and achievement this academic year.”**

**Wanda Ketner**

Mark Twain Elementary School, Corcoran Unified School District; Corcoran, CA

## Elements of High-Quality Coaching



### Personalized, Continuous, and Ongoing

Create a structure in which teachers can get 1:1 suggestions and support over the course of an entire academic year.



### Make it Measurable

Support teachers to set meaningful, attainable goals connected to data that promote student learning and growth.



### Be Specific

Provide targeted, actionable feedback related to educators' goals.



### Promote Reflection

Help educators use student work and reflect upon what types of strategies were most effective in their classrooms.



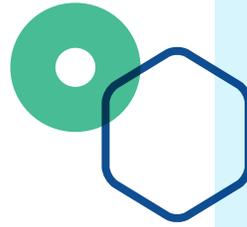
### Empower with Data

Develop teacher capacity to analyze student work and assessment results and plan instruction based on that data.



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## Get in Touch

Sign up for a free consultation to learn more about how instructional coaching can increase teacher retention.



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