

Insights: Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in this Era

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Throughout the past two years, the world has witnessed the incredible contribution of teachers as they navigated numerous challenges: shifting learning online instantly, supporting students during a period of high stress and anxiety, and working to remediate “learning loss” as in-person classes resume.

This has all placed a heavy burden on teachers, compounding the existing challenges faced around the world in both retaining current teachers and attracting new teachers into the profession.

At Teach For All, our learnings on this topic come from three key areas --

- Our recruitment and marketing knowledge leads have been working with network partners to conduct and learn from focus groups of top recruitment prospects, to understand **what it will take to inspire the rising generation to join us.**
- Our teacher development team has been partnering with heads of training and teacher coaches across our network to understand **the root causes of and potential solutions for unusually low engagement and high retention risks.**
- Our Global Leadership Accelerator has been working to understand **why we're seeing greater demand for support with teacher well-being across our network and to learn how to foster it.**

While these learning activities are part of Teach For All's ongoing effort to foster network learning for the purpose of strengthening our network partners, some of our findings have relevance to the broader concerns about the teaching profession. The following are the four most salient lessons emerging from our work:

1. **While there are new challenges in recruiting this generation to teach, there are also new opportunities.**

Through focus groups of university students conducted by network partners in Armenia, Austria, India, Colombia, and Brazil, as well as international focus groups conducted by Teach For All, we heard:

- **Prospects are rethinking their career paths and are searching for pursuits that are meaningful and that align with their values**, especially a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusiveness. While we typically hear prospects talk about their fear of getting off track from other career aspirations in order to teach, we didn't hear this as loudly. There is a significant recruitment opportunity if we can present teaching as a path to tackling the inequities that concern this generation and to realizing their aspirations for a just, peaceful, sustainable world.
- **Prospects place a higher value on their well-being and finding balance** than we've heard in previous years. While this could be a new challenge, it could also present a new opportunity. We will need to be clear about what we will do to support their well-being as teachers, while also helping them see that well-being can come from immersing ourselves in pursuits that matter and from achieving congruence between our values and where we invest our energy.
- **Prospects find the day-to-day responsibilities of the teaching profession unattractive**, even though they find the cause of ensuring educational equity to be important. We heard this

concern more loudly than in previous years and to succeed in recruiting this generation, we need to help prospects see teaching as the opportunity for leadership and impact that it is.

2. While the pandemic has only exacerbated the problem, we continue to see the same factors contributing to teacher attrition.

The network's Heads of Training community explored the patterns in reasons for teachers dropping out during their two year commitments, and found that, while the pandemic has exacerbated the factors driving teacher retention, the top issues remain the same:

- Teachers experiencing a **misalignment between their expectations and the reality** they face on the job.
- Teachers experiencing **stress and burnout**, which was made worse by constantly having to adapt to new situations: "Zoom fatigue" from teaching classes and engaging in ongoing training, and uncertainty around students' access and school closures.
- Teachers **feeling isolated and lacking support**, exacerbated by the lack of in-person connections with trainers and peers.
- Teachers **feeling ineffective**. While this is a common struggle for new teachers, the combination of the factors above plus the hardships students have faced due to the pandemic has led many teachers to feel this gap between the need and what they can offer even more acutely.

3. We need to place an intentional focus on promoting and ensuring teachers' wellbeing.

A Teach For All study of the correlations between network teacher retention and other factors identified two important insights:

- 1) There is a significant correlation between teacher retention and their organizations' staff engagement scores. In fact, this correlation was twice as large as the correlation between teacher retention and the teachers' Net Promoter Scores. These findings tell us that **what we do to take care of our staff translates to how teachers feel**.
- 2) Perception of the level of support from program staff correlates more with teacher retention than the intrinsic motivation of the teachers. **This tells us that it's really important to develop strong teacher coaches.**

It is encouraging that we're coming out of this pandemic with a **greater recognition that mental health & wellbeing support for teachers is necessary**; across our network, we are seeing more people talking about this topic, when previously it was often taboo.

We know it's important to focus on this, for two reasons:

- 1) The risk of teachers exiting the profession, as we're seeing with many frontline professions.
- 2) Even if teachers choose to stay, we can see that it's not good for student wellbeing and learning when teachers are operating in stressed states.

Science shows us that a **student may mirror** the emotional state of a teacher: a calm teacher can inspire calm in her students, whereas a stressed teacher can pass on stress to students. Brain science also shows

us that when students are in stressed states, it not only affects their wellbeing, but it also inhibits their **ability to learn**. If we're concerned about student well-being and learning, then **teacher well-being is not a nice-to-have, it's a must-have**.

4. While teacher well-being requires thinking about hygiene factors (e.g., rest, safe work environment), and these are absolutely important, they alone are not enough.

Our work through the Global Leadership Accelerator has pointed us to four main strategies for promoting teacher wellbeing:

- **We need to focus on supporting teachers to do the “inner work” to build skills & mindsets to navigate increasingly complex and uncertain environments.** Across our network, we are seeing many of our partners more explicitly build teacher training that focus on skills like resilience, mindfulness, managing energy, and managing emotions. For example, Teach For Malaysia has built a teacher well-being playbook to support teachers in building skills through a range of practices that support wellbeing, ranging from cognitive behavioral practices of being able to name one's emotions & disrupt one's negative thought patterns, to physical practices such as mindful breathing.
- **We need to build our teacher's capacity to address trauma in themselves and in their students.** This is important to enable them to navigate the contexts which form the backdrop to their learning – whether macro challenges such as the pandemic, war, and refugee crises; or more individual or local challenges, such as domestic violence and the impacts of poverty.
- **We need to build support networks around teachers.** Research shows us that even if a teacher has 1-2 key relationships within the school, it can make a huge difference, and what's even more powerful is if a teacher has a holistic network of support around them. In New Zealand, our network partner Ako Mātātupu has created a community of care around teachers to support their well-being grounded in indigenous practices and indigenous understanding of health, which emphasize the importance of holistic care, and which also emphasize the importance of deep relationships. Teachers have access to coaches that focus on pastoral care and a narrative therapist who is deeply grounded in the organization's values.
- **We need to ensure the well-being of those involved in training and coaching teachers.** This year, we launched a global five-month Trauma & Wellbeing Fellowship bringing together teacher developers from across 22 different countries with the focus on first developing their own capacity to explore trauma and toxic stress in their own lives, before supporting them to think about how they support teachers and students.