New research into retention has uncovered some of the reasons why teachers quit the profession as well as those vital ‘protective factors’ that can help a school to retain, engage and motivate their teachers. Researcher Sarah Lynch takes a look.

Teachers feel and analysed how this relates to their job satisfaction, but other significant predictors included the proportion considering leaving has increased significantly in the last year, from 17 to 23 per cent. Smaller proportions than this actually leave the profession (10 per cent in 2015 including retirees), but this figure too has increased in recent years, suggesting that retention pressures are growing. The research found that while the majority of teachers were not considering leaving the profession, the proportion considering leaving has increased significantly in the last year, from 17 to 23 per cent. Smaller proportions than this actually leave the profession (10 per cent in 2015 including retirees), but this figure too has increased in recent years, suggesting that retention pressures are growing.

Further analysis of teachers’ responses to the engagement statements revealed a range of ‘protective factors’ which were associated with more time to stay, and are therefore likely to be critical for improving retention. Unsurprisingly, by far the strongest predictor was job satisfaction, but other significant predictors included being well supported and valued by management. Having an effective governing body in the teachers’ school also increased the likelihood of them staying in the profession. These findings strongly suggest that the right support for teachers could help to retain them.

While receiving appropriate pay for their level of responsibility was a protective factor for teachers, a number of those interviewed felt that pay was not a motivating factor. Rather, they felt other forms of reward and recognition would also make them feel more valued.

How to support teacher retention

Monitor teacher intentions and engagement: The more engaged teachers are, the less likely they are to consider leaving. School leaders should monitor levels of engagement among their staff, either informally or through more formal methods such as teacher surveys. They may be able to improve engagement by investigating the causes of any ambivalence or low engagement.

Engage (or re-engage) the workforce: School leaders should reflect on the protective factors found to be associated with teacher retention, which could help to engage staff. These include the support they themselves give as managers, but also job satisfaction, having adequate resources, and being paid (or rewarded) appropriately.

Support staff wellbeing: A greater focus should be placed on staff wellbeing. This could include schools having a governor or trustee responsible for staff welfare, or a member of the management team with specific time responsibilities in this area. Mentoring and/or mental health provision could be beneficial for some staff. School leaders have a key role to play in protecting staff from what was described as a “tsunami of change”. This should include being able to distil policy without it becoming burdensome for staff. School leaders should also help staff to juggle their responsibilities, including by looking more closely at how flexible working opportunities could be implemented more widely and effectively, to ensure that they benefit both teachers and the school.

Value and trust teachers: Too much negativity about the profession and too little support can lead to teachers feeling undervalued. Methods of engaging teachers need to take place within a positive narrative, to ensure they feel valued and trusted.

Protecting teachers from the pressures

We interviewed a small sample of 21 teachers who had left the profession or were considering the move. They gave interesting insights into why some teachers may be leaving the profession and workload was at the centre of these. This was thought to partly stem from trying to keep up with the pace of policy change. One teacher said “It’s ridiculously hard to keep on top of (policy change).” Teachers wanted more non-teaching time to plan, to reflect on their own practices, and to learn from others. Managing workload had, in their view, prevented them from having spare time for effective planning and reflection.

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Many of our 21 teachers reported that they did not feel sufficiently valued for all of their efforts, by government or by their leaders in their schools. For some, a tipping point was reached, such as stress-related illness. The pressure had taken its toll and they decided to leave the profession.

Protective factors

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