

Honoring Teachers: an Underused Tool in Retaining Talent During the Teacher Shortage
by Katherine Boone

The stories, run in newspapers across the country each week, paint a desperate picture: a Pre-K teacher in [Texas](#) juggling two classrooms alone; classes across the [country](#) led by a recurring series of long-term substitutes with no formal [training](#); a school district in [Pennsylvania](#) forced to shorten school days due to lack of staff; districts in [North Carolina](#) reporting hundreds of vacant teaching positions even as the school year begins.

In the [words](#) of National Education Association (NEA) union leader Becky Pringle: “The educator shortage is a five alarm crisis.”

According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, approximately [360,000](#) fewer teachers and support staff are employed in public schools nationally than there were in March 2020. In 18 of 20 large U.S. school districts [surveyed by Chalkbeat](#), the number of teacher vacancies was significantly higher than in previous years. In Los Angeles, teaching vacancies at the beginning of the school year had grown from 100 to 500, while in Memphis the 200 unfilled teaching positions represented a five-year high.

The current teacher shortage crisis has a long time in the making, but the Covid-19 pandemic brought it to a breaking point. In poorly funded, low-income districts, in particular, teacher shortages have been an intractable problem for decades; and some subjects, like math and special education, have always been difficult for schools to staff. But in the wake of the pandemic and subsequent [Great Resignation](#), the problem has metastasized into [nearly all](#) states and districts across the country, regardless of funding or resources. In a [poll](#) by the NEA, 55% of teachers said the pandemic made it more likely they would leave the profession early, an [increase](#) from pre-pandemic years. [Gallup's research](#) shows almost half of teachers in the U.S. say they are actively looking for a different job or watching for opportunities.

To fill these vacancies, school administrators have had to [scramble](#), turning to hiring less experienced or less effective teachers, alternatively certified teachers, or even applicants they previously passed on. Many classes are filled with a rotation of long-term substitutes, whose qualifications to teach vary [dramatically](#) by state and county. Principals are often forced to lean on their remaining teaching staff to take on additional classes, whether or not they have subject matter expertise or training. [Seventy-five](#) percent of teachers report having to fill in other classes due to teacher and school staff shortages, creating [significant](#) stress for the majority of teachers.

For teachers who are already facing challenges of pandemic-era learning and behavior setbacks, the stress of taking on extra classes can push them to a breaking point: nearly [80%](#) of teachers said they didn't have as much enthusiasm now as when they began teaching. The indication of widespread burnout is particularly alarming, as burnout is not only one of the [leading](#) causes of attrition in the profession but can actually [reduce the effectiveness](#) of the teachers who stay. Indeed, a [Gallup](#) poll in February 2022 found that teachers were the single most burned-out segment of the entire U.S. labor force, with nearly half--44%-- reporting that they felt burned out at work always or very often.

To address this crisis, many politicians, policy-makers, and school leaders have primarily focused on [teacher recruitment](#). However, recruiting new teachers and career-changers into the profession offers only a partial solution, as new teachers have [higher](#) turnover rates than their more experienced colleagues. Furthermore, alternatively-certified teachers often have [less preparation](#) than traditionally-certified teachers and [leave](#) the profession at twice the rate. The problem is not just, as the saying goes, academic: high rates of turnover [destabilize](#) school culture so much that in [schools](#) with significant teacher turnover, *all* students suffer academically- not just those in the classrooms with new teachers.

All of which means we can't recruit our way out of this crisis: we also must focus on *keeping* the great teachers we already have.

The reasons for teacher attrition are myriad and complex; but there exists a simple tool, underutilized in most schools, that not only significantly reduces teacher attrition, but can also *improve* teacher performance and school culture overall: teacher recognition.

Teachers who are regularly [recognized](#) are more productive, more engaged at school, more likely to receive higher satisfaction scores from students and parents, and more likely to stay at their school. And yet, [70%](#) of teachers report they have not recently been acknowledged or praised for their work, and a full [40%](#) said they did not feel personally valued as a teacher in general.

Think of teacher engagement as the antidote to burnout: when teachers are engaged in and excited about their work, the entire school community benefits. In fact, teacher engagement is the number one [predictor](#) and driver of student engagement, which in turn [predicts](#) both academic success AND student well-being.

The problem is that most of the ways that students, families, and school leaders celebrate or thank their teachers don't align with the latest research on effective professional recognition: ad-hoc, occasional, and impersonal recognition doesn't actually confer the psychological benefits that drive engagement. The latest workplace [research](#) has identified five key characteristics that any system of professional recognition needs to actually have an impact on employee morale and performance: it needs to be fulfilling, authentic, equitable, embedded in the culture, and personalized.

So what does that look like in a school?

Last year, 16 schools in Washington, D.C., and Washington Township, Indiana, ran a groundbreaking teacher recognition program called Honored Schools that operationalizes the five pillars of effective recognition. Honored Schools' program empowers students and families to recognize great teachers by submitting an "Honor Story" describing how the teacher has impacted a student's life. Over the course of the program, over 1,600 Honor Stories were submitted and shared with teachers, giving them the direct, frequent, and personalized recognition that has such a powerful impact on teacher [performance and retention](#). Based on those Honor Stories, four exceptional teachers received the \$5,000 Honored Transformative Teacher Award at the end of the school year. While the award itself was both a powerful motivator for students to submit the stories and provided the occasion for the school communities to shine a spotlight on a few of their most exceptional teachers, the true impact of the program came from so many teachers receiving affirmation throughout the school year that their work truly makes a difference.

A critical part of effective recognition is embedding it into organizational culture. Submitting Honor Stories about their teachers became an integral part of the way that students and families related to and communicated with their teachers; in program surveys, teachers noted that the Honor Stories opened channels of communication with families about teaching methods and support. Honored Schools was piloted in the 2019-2020 school year in Washington, D.C., so for students who have progressed through those schools during the past three years, recognizing teachers in this way has become a normative part of how they relate to teachers. Additionally, in both the Honored Schools cities, the school administrations supported the program by regularly sharing Honored Schools updates with parents through newsletters and social media; encouraging students and families to tell their stories throughout the year; and highlighting Honor Stories submitted about their school's teachers. By bringing in the administration, as well as students and families, the Honored Schools program weaves a culture of recognition into the school.

The quantitative results of the program, as analyzed by Education Elements, are remarkable. At the 16 Honored Schools, 88% of teachers surveyed felt that receiving Honor Stories made them more certain they would continue to be a teacher in the next five years, and 85% said that it made them want to remain teaching for as long as they could.

The program also made a significant impact on teacher burnout in participating schools. A full 95% of teachers surveyed felt more inspired in their teaching practice after receiving Honor Stories; 94% felt more enthusiastic about teaching; and 96% felt they are positively influencing other peoples' lives through their work, a statistic that is particularly important as teachers' [decisions](#) about whether to continue teaching were often heavily influenced by their perception of impact on their students.

As one teacher who received an Honor Story wrote: "This is better than any other feedback or reward a teacher can receive. This just really uplifts us and gives us the energy to keep showing up for our students in all the ways we possibly can. My heart grew three sizes."

Another teacher, writing to the student who submitted the Honor Story, wrote, "Truthfully, I was blown away by your kind words and comments. Guess you never know what an impact you can have on someone as a teacher. Thank you for this honor. I will never forget it, and I'll always try to live up to your idea of me to all my current and future students. You've inspired me to try to maintain the standard you described."

Other teachers described that reading their students' Honor Stories reconnected them with the desire to build the kind of individual student-teacher relationships that can have such a profound impact on student achievement; as one teacher wrote, "Receiving an Honored nomination has been a reminder of the impact the relationships we establish and foster with students and families can have on students' approach to school, learning and their academic success. Additionally, this honor has encouraged me to continue doing the work necessary to build relationships with students and families in order to support student learning."

Developing and expanding Honored Schools and other teacher recognition programs that are grounded in the science of effective recognition will be particularly important during the upcoming generational shift of teachers, since [younger teachers](#) seek more frequent [recognition](#) and validation. And with Millennials and Gen Z professionals searching for more meaning and [impact](#) in their professional lives, making sure those teachers see the results of their work in and out of the classroom will be critical in retaining the next generation of teachers.

From the days when frontier families would bring in apples to express appreciation for teachers in their one-room schoolhouses, families have known that recognizing the importance of teachers and their work is the right thing to do. We now know that it is also one of the most effective things we can do to keep teachers engaged and in the classroom longer. If we are going to address the teacher shortage and change the doom-and-gloom media narrative, we need to start by building recognition for exceptional teachers into our schools.

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