

Prepare, attract and retain quality educators for Alaska's future

Alaska has a high teacher and principal turnover that not only harms student learning and school success but also wastes money.

Some disturbing statistics:

- The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development reports teacher and principal turnover rates have averaged 25-30% each year since 2013.
- An ISER study estimated the minimum cost of teacher turnover to a district is \$20 thousand per teacher.
- The Learning Policy Institute estimates the cost of principal turnover is \$75 thousand per principal.

When we dig deeper, the details show a more alarming fact: the rate of teacher and principal turnover is nearly twice as high in rural Alaska compared to urban Alaska.

Why is this constant churn of personnel detrimental?

Consider what it takes moving to a new community; making friends, getting settled, feeling connected, and cultivating a sense of belonging. Now consider a young child who attaches to a particular teacher, only to have that teacher leave after only one year. The same thing happens the next year. And the next.

How does this instability affect the child, classroom, school, and community?

Constant employee turnover takes time, money, and energy away from educating young people to become tomorrow's productive citizens. Administrators in high turnover schools are in a perpetual recruit-hire-train mode, which takes them away from the primary mission of fostering a positive environment for learning. The endless stream of new teachers is a drain on the seasoned teachers, who must continually mentor them. This cycle takes experienced teachers away from what they do best, teaching young people, and leads to their burnout.

Not all teacher and principal turnover is a bad thing. New ideas and fresh faces can energize any organization. Yet the high turnover levels we experience in Alaska leave room for improvement. Causes are complicated and have to do with a host of issues including living and working conditions, leadership, workload, compensation, amenities, cultural differences and other factors. Solutions that work in one community might not work in another.

Only 30 percent of Alaska's teachers are "homegrown," meaning educated and trained right here in Alaska. The rest come from Outside, which means most new teachers are grappling with adjustments like challenging weather, remoteness, darkness, higher cost of living, less access to health care, and a steep learning curve of different cultures.

Of the teachers who leave Alaska's rural schools each year, a substantial 80 percent leave the state entirely. Only 10 percent switch to urban schools. Research shows teachers educated in Alaska stay in Alaska.

We strongly support the University of Alaska's stated goal to triple the number of homegrown teachers by 2025 and the Educators Rising program, as well as additional educator supports now under legislative consideration, including national board certification for public school teachers (HB 128) and limited teacher certificates for instruction in languages other than English (HB 24).

What would a comprehensive statewide plan focused on preparing, attracting and retaining qualified teachers look like?

It would be collaborative and include teachers, district leadership, the University of Alaska, and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. It would involve communities, where parents and employers have a vested interest in fostering stability and high-quality schools. It would be a worthwhile endeavor.

With budget cuts sucking up all the oxygen these days, let's not take our eye off this important long-term critical goal.

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