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LISTENING LESSONS: UNDERSTANDING THE TEACHER EXPERIENCE

Listening Lessons: Understanding the Teacher Experience

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By Jessica Flaxman

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At a recent hiring fair, as I sat at a table with glossy printed materials and branded pens from my school, in between appointments with prospective employees, I took a long look around the conference room. To my right, left, and all around, professionally dressed people of all ages, backgrounds, and passions were seated across from one another engaged in lively conversation.

I remembered the first time I entered this space as a young English teacher looking for a job in a California independent school. For a brief moment, time collapsed, and I was that young woman again with a simple wish—to talk about literature with teenagers—and not the senior administrator on the other side of the table looking to fill a number of vacant teaching positions. For a moment, I felt reassured by the number of people interested in finding their first or their next teaching job. But then I felt the pressure of competing to hire amid a culture shift impacting how teachers and prospective teachers think about their professional aspirations and lives.

Since becoming dean of faculty and employees at Rye Country Day School (NY) in 2021, I have had the challenge and the opportunity to think about teachers and their experiences with a laser-like focus. And over the past four years, in which schools have continued to experience a high rate of teacher turnover, I have learned a lot about both the changing needs of teachers and the changing requirements for schools seeking to recruit, support, and retain them.

Taking Notice

When I started teaching in the late 1990s, I was assigned to teach four classes, advise students, lead a club, and coach at least one sport. My first teaching job came with dorm duty as well. I was happy to earn a paycheck and to have breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner at my school. (Do I wish I had not ignored the advice I was repeatedly given to invest a portion of my tiny salary in my future retirement fund? Yes. But setting any portion of my salary aside then would have meant I couldn't pay my car insurance.)

Sitting at the hiring fair table that day, I took note of how many teachers of all ages and stages stopped by with wide-ranging questions about their potential agreements with schools—topics my younger self never knew I could raise with future employers. During a typical hiring season now, and sometimes in the first conversation, I am asked about workload, duties, personal time, tuition remission, professional development, leadership opportunities, housing, transportation, health insurance, and more. Teachers want to know exactly what they will be expected and needed to do—and what their school will do for them in return.

I am always pleased to talk with prospective teachers about these things and happy to see that they are thinking about and asking these questions. Listening to them and engaging in these conversations, I have gained powerful insights about the experience of teachers that have deeply influenced my work and changed how I think about what it takes to successfully find, sustain, and keep teachers. What I have heard has helped me synthesize two priorities for today's teachers: They want to be appropriately compensated for their work, and they want to feel valued as individuals with expertise.

One particular insight that has had the most impact on my understanding is about teacher turnover and why midcareer teachers—those with 7, 10, or 15 years under their belts—decide to make a move from one school to another, or out of teaching entirely. Their reasons fall into one of three categories: They want advancement and can't secure it in their current school; they are relocating due to family or personal needs; or they are dissatisfied with the nature of their work (i.e., they have been teaching the same thing for a long time and want to teach something else but can't, or they have been teaching the same thing for a long time and want to keep doing so but can't) or their context (i.e., they don't feel adequately supported, inspired, or aligned with their school's culture, mission, or leadership).

As part of the 2024–2025 **NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring School Heads**, two colleagues and I conducted a survey of more than 70 independent school teachers working with middle school students to better understand their current experience. Aggregated data from this survey showed that after compensation, workload, and duties, the No.1 issue for teachers was whether they felt supported by administrators. When asked what admin support looked like, these teachers said it includes timely response to teacher questions; inclusion of teacher perspectives during periods of decision-making; clarity about policy changes; transparent and fair salary increases; and demonstrations of solidarity with teachers when parents question curriculum, grades, or other elements of teachers' work with students.

The State of Teaching

Collecting this kind of experience data from teachers over the past four years has deepened my well of empathy and concern for them. After all, these are the people who not only design engaging learning experiences for children but actively help socialize them, spend hours of time with them, and give them necessary feedback to help them become the ethical global citizens the world needs.

This work is deeply purposeful and truly exhausting, yet teachers are increasingly being seen as service providers rather than experts, as outcomes-generators rather than life mentors. High school students, for example, sometimes perceive teachers as merely the conduit that facilitates—or blocks—their achievements. And, at the same time, parents can forget that teachers are hardworking people with personal lives to balance as well.

Given this backdrop, the work schools do to recruit, support, and retain teachers is paramount—not just to the teachers and the teacher pipeline but to education overall. How can schools improve the way they recruit, support, and retain teachers?

Recruit

The first step is to develop and adhere to a recruitment process that is mission-aligned and universally understood and upheld across the school. Schools need to designate a point person—a director of human resources, a dean of faculty, a director of talent management, or another administrator—to oversee this process while also clarifying the specific responsibilities of everyone who plays a part in recruitment.

At Rye Country Day School (RCDS), our department heads and divisional supervisors lead our hiring committees, and we have a living document, the RCDS Process for Hiring, that we constantly refine through feedback from candidates and current employees involved in the process. For every search, we follow five clear steps:

- Collaboratively develop and share a position description
- Review anti-bias protocols, and compose a unique interview committee
- Review candidates; select and interview semifinalists

- Review semifinalist feedback; select and interview finalists
- Review finalist feedback; conduct reference checks, and move to hire.

Over the years, we have added internal documents and spreadsheets to track searches, build schedules, and welcome visitors to campus.

Our recruitment process begins when an administrator, teacher, or staff member recognizes a need for a position that will help deliver on the promise and potential of our programs. Often, the decision to hire is directly impacted by decisions made to create or reduce classes or sections due to student interest or attrition, but hiring can also be determined by the decision to launch a new program of study or reorganize a department.

Once the position is approved by the board, we move to the next phase, which is to collaboratively write the job description. This writing process is iterative and involves division and department leaders, relevant administrators, and HR. Once the description is finalized, we spread the word about the position on multiple job boards and to supportive search firms. When the window has closed for applications, the hiring committee follows the steps outlined in our published process document.

An important part of recruitment happens from January through April, when representatives from our school—administrators or department leaders—attend in-state and national recruiting fairs to connect and promote Rye Country Day to prospective employees. We've found that these efforts draw a larger and more qualified pool of candidates than previous efforts while also increasing the visibility of our school in the broader education community. They can also bring more efficiency to the hiring process insofar as that initial conversation with an interested candidate can take place in a space dedicated to recruitment and in person rather than over the phone or on a Zoom meeting in between other events on a regular school day.

Throughout the recruiting stage, we make every effort to communicate in a warm, informative, and timely manner and to keep candidates informed of where we are in our process.

Support

All teachers need support to meet the expectation that they be constantly engaged in developing themselves and their students. In their attempts to keep pace with new technologies and changing practices, respond to student and parent outreach, and complete ongoing trainings related to safety and child welfare, they can easily get burned out.

In this context, support for teachers needs to be differentiated and highly adaptive. A new teacher, for example, may need 1:1 mentoring along with the opportunity to be part of a new teacher cohort and a foundational training course in the Responsive Classroom. Another teacher may need training in using Google Workspace, regular meetings with

the Student Support team to understand differentiation, and release from duties on a certain day of the week for collaboration with colleagues.

And there are some kinds of support that everyone needs. For example, as part of my work I regularly hire and staff a roster of experienced substitute teachers who are on call when teachers become ill or need to attend professional development off-site. Knowing that they can miss school without adding to the workload of their colleagues is a comfort and relieves the pressure on teachers who need to attend to off-site professional or personal concerns.

Through regular surveys to understand what faculty and staff experience, we have learned that they enjoy sharing food in community—this is basic but important support that we should consistently provide. For all required teacher meetings, we offer breakfast and lunch, as well as snacks and refreshments. In addition, our parents association organizes beautiful breakfasts throughout the year and during teacher appreciation week. And our Employee Community Association organizes and operates inclusive gatherings like play performances, trivia nights, softball games, and off-site excursions that include meals.

We also offer employee yoga, strength-training boot camps, mindfulness sessions, and other benefits to support physical and mental wellness. These distributed and collective support efforts make a difference to the general feeling of support for employees.

Retain

Teaching is high-impact, high-stress work without significant monetary gain from year to year. A misconception persists that because they often feel called to serve, teachers are less concerned about money than other professionals—so even if salaries can't increase much each year, other financial rewards can go a long way, such as paying them an agreed-upon stipend for extra teaching and coverage duties.

The cyclical nature of the school year, with its holiday and summer breaks, helps offset the financial realities, as seasoned teachers know that they will have time to restore themselves, but it can also present challenges for anyone seeking more radical change from year to year. As different as today's classrooms may look and feel from those of the past, the work that teachers do has not changed much at all. Good teaching comes down to thoughtful design, engaging delivery, individualized relationships, detailed feedback, and summative assessment. And good teaching is tiring.

Talking with teachers about their preferences for what and who they teach is an essential element of retention, as is asking teachers what kind of professional learning they need and would like to engage in to advance their goals. Making every effort to address concerns that they raise is helpful, and if the concerns can't be addressed easily, communicating the "why" can go a long way to demonstrating care and concern.

I have also found that giving teachers opportunities to conduct practitioner research and lead their colleagues in professional inquiries can boost morale and contribute to retention. This autonomy offers a sense of ownership of their work and professional development, which can be highly motivating. They also feel more connected to their colleagues, and they are recognized and valued. Through the RCDS's Center for Innovative Teaching & Learning, we have been able to fund and support school-sponsored research projects that not only help advance our mission but directly inspire and reenergize teachers and staff. Teachers have completed original research projects on student leadership, artificial intelligence, and competencies-based learning. Through our Professional Learning Cohorts program, nearly 50 employees have led a group of their peers in smaller-scale inquiries on topics such as parent-school partnerships, alternative assessment practices, and student apprenticeships.

Relationships Are Key

Education is a relationship-driven industry where individual faces, voices, and values matter. And recognizing teachers—seeing them, listening to them, understanding their full experience—is the key to keeping education alive.

In the end, though, simply taking the time to recognize them individually for their strengths—whether with words or rewards—goes a long way toward making teachers feel valued. In this way, particularly, teachers are very like students. Motivated, enterprising, individual, and committed, they are powered by authentic acknowledgment of their creativity, talents, growth, importance, and promise. Keeping these understandings top of mind throughout the teacher hiring process helps a school become a teacher's chosen community now and for the years to come.

Go Deeper

- Gain a better understanding of what teachers want and how to meet their needs. Check out the NAIS Research Advisory, "**Teacher Well-Being: Identifying the Reasons Behind Teachers' Decisions to Stay or Leave**," which includes data, anecdotes, and action steps.
- Listen to a dean of faculty talk about his proactive year-round approach to hiring in episode 95 of the **Member Voices** podcast.
- **NAIS's Recruiting, Hiring, and Retention Resource Guide** curates articles, best practices, job descriptions, research, and more.

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