

The Case of Mulberry School District (#NJ05)

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Introduction to the cases

The case presented here is drawn from a larger national study investigating the 5-year science teacher retention rates in four U.S. states (New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin).¹ This study has two distinct phases. In the first phase, researchers used publicly available staffing data from 2007-2018 to construct a 5-year retention map for six cohorts of novice science teachers in each state. This approach differs from sample-based retention studies because full data permitted our team to map the career trajectories of each individual science teacher for a more comprehensive picture of teacher retention, mobility, and attrition. For example, in sample-based studies, the departure of a teacher at the end of one year might simply be categorized as attrition. In viewing a 6-year trajectory, we were better able to identify teachers who left a position in a given year not simply as attrited, but possibly as having transferred to a different district (mobility) or taken a year off and then returned (such as for parental leave.)

After analyzing individual teachers' career trajectories, we calculated the 5-year retention rate of newly hired science teachers in each cohort for the years 2007-2012 for each school district. This analysis informed the second phase of the research, in which five districts per state were identified for a more detailed case study on the factors influencing science teacher retention. Districts were sorted initially for higher-than-average rates of retention, and we focused on those in the top 10% in the state. We then attempted to diversify our selection of districts by looking at factors such as school size, location within each state, type of community (urban, rural, suburban,) and relative wealth of the district. We also looked for districts that had hired (and retained) teachers of color and teachers whose teacher education programs had been funded by the National Science Foundation's Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program, which was created to meet the need for well-prepared STEM teachers in the United States.

The district described here was one of those selected in the state of New Jersey, and a separate NJ state teacher policy case study covering the time period of this study is available on the project website. The district name is presented as a pseudonym for purposes of confidentiality. The names and position titles are similarly obscured in this case, and also in the larger study, in order to preserve internal confidentiality as well.

For further information about the study, please visit: <http://www.montclair.edu/IMPREST>

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The city of Mulberry, located in the densely populated corridor between Philadelphia and New York City, is one of many municipalities along that route with both urban and suburban characteristics. Though relatively small in area, Mulberry is home to about 70,000 people who live in a mix of single-family homes, multistory apartment complexes, and high-rise apartment buildings. The major highways that intersect within the city boundaries are a vital connection between the community and the state, but also a historical reminder of the communities that were razed and divided for their construction in the 1950s and 60s. Economic development in the city over the past two decades has primarily aimed at revitalization and support of existing housing stock and businesses. The list of famous U.S. notable figures from the city is a long and impressive one, and the city's pride in them is evident in the eponyms of Mulberry schools.

Approximately 20% of the population of Mulberry lives below the poverty line, though there are also concentrations of wealth within the stately historic neighborhoods of the city. The average income is lower than the state average, and Mulberry homes are less expensive than the US median. The city's economic diversity is mirrored by its racial, linguistic, and ethnic diversity, even as over 80% of the population (and over 90% of its students) identify as "Black." The census also notes that fewer than 5% of Mulberry's population identify as White. Like few other municipalities in the state, Mulberry is a place with thriving and diverse majority Black middle- and working-classes. The 2020 census notes that over 25% of the city's population is foreign-born, and there are well-documented populations of West African, East African, South American, and Caribbean communities within Mulberry. Though communities with such a demographic profile may be classified as examples of "racial isolation" with respect to school integration and finance (e.g. Baker & Weber, 2021), from the perspective of the residents, Mulberry is a vibrantly diverse community.

The school district of Mulberry currently operates about 20 schools, all of which qualify for federal Title I funds. In state reporting documents from the 2017-2018 school year, more than 75% of Mulberry's students were identified as economically disadvantaged. In the past two decades, there have been numerous consolidations and reorganizations of the district's schools and facilities. In the 1990s, the bankruptcy of a private liberal arts college within the Mulberry city limits eventually led to the property being purchased by the city, and ultimately renovated into what is now Mulberry High School, which is now the district's largest high school.² Two district magnet schools are located elsewhere in the city. Students may apply to Mulberry Arts High School, a performing arts magnet school beginning in sixth grade, or Mulberry Science High School, a STEM-focused magnet school, beginning in ninth grade. Both of these magnet schools were established after 2010. Students not enrolled in one of these magnet schools attend Mulberry High School.

The Mulberry School District serves approximately 10,000 students and employs approximately 800 teachers. It is notable that in a state where approximately 15% of teachers identify as teachers of color (non-White or non-Hispanic), data from 2017-18 shows that the vast majority of teachers and administrators working in Mulberry identify as Black or African American.

The Mulberry School District was selected for this study because it was in the top 10% of districts in New Jersey for its five-year retention rate among novice teachers in the state. Given

² A non-district charter school is also co-located on the property, but is not included in the Mulberry case study as it operates essentially as an independent school district.

the larger aim of the study to better understand the varying contexts in which new science teachers work, Mulberry had several other characteristics that influenced its selection. Mulberry retained 8 first-year science teachers hired between 2007 and 2012 for a period of at least five years, 7 of whom were teachers of color.

The research team conducted interviews with 11 individuals from the Mulberry Public School District, which included three administrators, two novice science teachers, and six retained science teachers. District administrators were interviewed individually, and teachers met with researchers either individually or in focus groups depending on their schedules. The primary goal of the site visit was to better understand the factors that may have influenced teacher retention during the focus period (2007-2018) and to investigate current practices around the mentoring and induction of new science teachers. School staff from all three high schools were interviewed in this process. Interviews took place during the time when many school buildings were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and teachers were working remotely, and were therefore conducted via Zoom. All interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in length, were recorded and transcribed, and were analyzed qualitatively for emergent themes using NVIVO12 software. The research team collaborated on constructing the narrative of the case.

Findings

As a result of this site visit and subsequent data analysis, we posit five factors that likely influenced the high science teacher retention rate observed in the Mulberry Public School District. These are: (1) a competitive salary, (2) caring colleagues, (3) a culturally protected environment and community for teachers of color, (4) professional autonomy, and (5) opportunities for professional growth.

Factor #1: A competitive salary

Every teacher interviewed for this study mentioned the district's competitive pay scale, and a number of experienced teachers even noted that they had been persuaded to accept a position in Mulberry with a significant salary increase from a previous teaching job. One novice teacher argued that the stereotype of poorly paid teachers simply did not apply to Mulberry.

In New Jersey, nearly all public school districts are guided by salary tables negotiated between the school board and local teachers union in determining teacher pay. Compensation is determined by two primary factors: years of experience, which are typically listed vertically as "steps" determined by years of experience and education, and education level, determined by degree and additional college credits. It is not uncommon for such contracts to stretch the amount of time beyond a single year to advance a step on the salary guide, and doing so is a time-tested method for keeping the salary lines in school budgets under control. Another common practice is to increase the number of steps in the guide and decrease the salary increment between them, so as to lengthen the amount of time it takes for any individual to reach the maximum on the salary guide. Within the bounds of the policy set by the local school board, a district may have substantial discretion in determining the starting step on the salary guide for any new teacher hired into the district.³ For example, it is possible for a teacher with years of experience in a one

³ Though there is much greater parity in salary across gender in teacher salaries generally, this discretion likely remains a source of the salary inequity that does exist. The ratio of women's to men's starting salaries for New Jersey science teachers in 2010 was 97.8% (Larkin et al., 2022), a sharp contrast to the broader employment data for the United States in the fall of 2010 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

school district to be placed on the initial salary step when they start in another. However, a new teacher with no experience may also be placed on a higher starting step as an incentive to accepting employment. Not only does such placement on the salary guide determine the teacher's initial salary, but it also establishes the amount of time needed for that teacher to reach the maximum on the salary guide. It is reasonable to conclude that having a salary that is unlikely to be matched elsewhere factors into teacher retention decisions.

The recent contracts negotiated between the Mulberry school board and Mulberry Teachers Union have been quite favorable to teachers, and our analysis showed that many teachers in Mulberry were paid a much higher salary than their colleagues with similar teaching experience and education in neighboring suburban districts. For example, in the years 2017-2018, Mulberry's first-year teachers were making approximately \$60,000 per year, about 10% over the state average. The salary guide in the 2010-2014 contract for example, contained 16 steps with ranges for teachers with a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, a Masters plus 15 credits, a Masters plus 30 credits, and a doctorate. Interestingly, the salary guide also included "half-steps" explicitly designed to place teachers at the time of hiring, giving district administrators an extra tool in providing salary incentives for new hires.

From our interviews, it does appear that the Mulberry school district used these tools available to them in order to recruit and hire science teachers, and recognized the value of prior experience by compensating teachers accordingly. One novice science teacher stated how important it was to be compensated for the college credits she earned prior to her teaching career that would not have been recognized in the other districts where she applied because they were not explicitly connected to her teaching degree:

I love that they pay well. They gave me an additional five thousand or something and other places didn't care that they just focus on the science experience, so I actually started off my first year, making more money than people who were teaching for like five years. I mean they give you money for extra education, I like that. That's important.

Novice and retained teachers alike mentioned that Mulberry placed teachers on their salary scale in ways that accurately reflected the experience they brought to teaching. One teacher with 16 years of experience, with his most recent six years in Mulberry, expressed how Mulberry valued his prior experience, a welcome change from the previous district. He noted that Mulberry raised his salary very generously, every year:

Mulberry has a very good pay scale, not an asymptote. Basically, in the amount of time I've been over here, my pay has gone up a tremendous amount. Now that doesn't really affect how I do my job because I still do the same job, you know, to the same level of care that I always try to do. I like to think I have a level of professionalism that comes from all other jobs that I worked before I became a teacher. But pay matters to you and that is a good thing.

Given the number of science teachers who come to the profession as a second career after working in scientific fields (e.g. Navy et al., 2021), such an orientation to valuing prior experience and education in setting teacher salaries seems particularly important.

We posed the question to a number of interviewees—teachers and administration alike—as to how Mulberry had been able to maintain such a strong salary for its teachers over the years. The explanation that emerged from the interviews was that Mulberry had a very active teachers union that was regularly engaged in a broad range of issues. One administrator stated, “The union that we have for the teachers is very strong, I will say from my own personal experience, I feel like they stand up for teachers, they fight for their teachers.” This sentiment was echoed by a number of people, and the relationship between teachers union and district was often characterized in terms of partnership.⁴ The administrators often referred to the teachers’ contract in our interviews in such a way as to make it clear that the contract was a living document, and familiarity with its details an essential part of their jobs.⁵

Of course, school districts must have funding in order to be able to pay teachers, and it should be noted that Mulberry was one of the 30 so-called “Abbott districts” in New Jersey. Abbott districts are those have been awarded special funding from the landmark New Jersey Supreme Court case of *Abbott v. Burke* in 1985, in order to mitigate long-standing funding inequities in those districts (Education Law Center, 2020). Given that salaries are typically about two-thirds of school budgets (Odden & Picus, 2000), this additional state funding is clearly a factor in ensuring that the Mulberry School District is able to sustain competitive salaries for its teachers and administrators.

Factor #2: Caring colleagues

The teachers interviewed for this project reported uniformly that their schools were good places to work, and made reference to their colleagues, administrators, and members of the Mulberry community as key reasons in making this so. Even with two decades of almost continual changes in district-level administrators and school facilities, this district culture was perceived by novice and experienced teachers alike as an important factor in retention.

Many of the teachers we interviewed at Mulberry stated that most of their administrators were caring, and that this was reflected in the school culture. Some of the experienced teachers we interviewed came from neighboring urban school districts seeking better pay and/or working conditions, and noted that the culture of their school and district was a factor in their own retention. For instance, one teacher said, “Whether it's a birthday, or a recent family tragedy during the pandemic. Folks are beyond supportive.” He also mentioned, “I really feel like there is a sense of care. You see somebody expressing a concern and it’s addressed within a day, versus somebody expressing a concern and it takes you a year.”

Nearly all of the teachers mentioned the importance of having supportive colleagues in deciding to remain in the district. One teacher who talked about why she had remained in Mulberry emphasized the way in which colleagues eased the isolation of teaching:

You know, for a few reasons, I would say, probably at the top it has been my colleagues. We have a set of colleagues here that is very supportive, very welcoming, very encouraging. It just really makes you feel right at home. But my

⁴ In fact, one teacher expressed some frustration that the union was not active *enough* in terms of job actions, noting that the most recent contract had taken over two years to finalize after the expiration of the previous one.

⁵ As is common in New Jersey, the administrators were members of their own union, separate from teachers. They negotiated their compensation, benefits, and terms and conditions of work collectively with the board of education in the same manner as the teachers’ union.

colleagues would be my top reason. I mean I don't feel like I'm in my classroom alone, sometimes teaching can be an isolating kind of endeavor but right next door, I know I can always knock.

Another retained teacher mentioned her appreciation to the colleagues who had started during the same year as her. She noted that the group of teachers had not only remained in the district, but in the same school.

Other teachers pointed specifically to the collegiality within the Mulberry science department across the three high schools. “Everyone gets along in my department,” one experienced teacher said. “No one has ever given me a hard time about borrowing supplies or anything like that.” Another teacher described the supportive environment for teachers in the science department:

All my colleagues here have been warm and welcoming but even within the science department, we have our own. For lack of a better word, we also have our own culture of support and care. Colleagues who remind me of that spiritual nourishment to me honestly. That's how I got through, you know I could knock on someone else's door, come across the hallway and share a burden, share a challenge, share a concern or question and you know connect with them and it's kind of like the intangible thing that helps you get through.

What was notable about the descriptions of support were that they extended beyond personal concern for well-being into direct pedagogical support as an extension of that care:

Our department, especially in science, we have a lot of other teachers that also play a role in supporting new teachers, in addition to mentors. One of our science teachers, she's one of our great engineering teachers and she just loves, you know, to spend a lot of her time [with] new science teachers in the district.

All of the novice teachers we interviewed reporting feeling appreciated, valued, and supported by their administration. One novice teacher pointed the collegiality of the teachers and administrators to be his main reason of staying in the district: “The teamwork between the administrators and the teachers, I think that has been a strong point for me. this positive approach to employees that's what I would think. I said this, we work as a team.”

Teachers at Mulberry also commented on the support they had received individually from district science supervisors, both past and present. Several teachers spoke highly of a past supervisor, who had an open door policy and was very concerned with making sure teachers had the resources they needed, practices that a newer supervisor continued.

Factor #3: A culturally protected environment and community for teachers of color

As we analyzed the data for this case, it became more and more obvious that an important aspect of this culture was that the Mulberry district offered a degree of refuge to the teachers of color who worked there. In summarizing the shared features of racially segregated schools in the U.S. South in the early 20th century, Siddle Walker (2000) made the following observation:

Many of the schools' characteristics appear to have been a direct response to the challenges they faced and intimately connected to the oppressive circumstances in which they operated. In their world, there was a clear "enemy"—racism. As such, the schools operated with a well-defined purpose for African American uplift that was shared by teachers, principal, and community members. All the training and modeling by teachers and principal were aimed at helping themselves and their students overcome that enemy. The curriculum and extracurricular activities were other avenues to support the same goal. Even parents supported the goal, as they provided for the schools what the schools could not provide for themselves—financial support. In this world, all worked together to achieve the common goal of educating students to function and achieve in a world where the odds were stacked against them. (p. 276)

Educational historians have noted that despite being extremely under-resourced, racially segregated schools have historically served as centers of black teaching excellence (Acosta et al., 2018; Foster, 1997). In many ways, the working conditions for teachers in Mulberry—over 60% of whom were Black—was reminiscent of the environment of uplift and support often found in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Albritton, 2012; Crewe, 2017). When presented with this idea, one Mulberry administrator said, “I totally feel what you're saying, like absolutely a hundred percent”, and recounted an event where Mulberry graduates had returned to discuss their college experiences:

The kids were talking about their experiences once they went to college—and some went to, like NYU, and some went to Howard. And so they said when they left and when some would go to like those HBCUs, they said it was almost like a continuation of where they came from. They're like “Oh I'm used to this! This is what we're doing!” But the ones that went to non-HBCUs, they said that they had to kind of see the world differently, because it was like, “Wow.” The feeling, the unity, the togetherness, it wasn't there for them...the school district is definitely connected with the community, in a sense, it's not like a separation, you know?

Administrators claimed that teachers of color felt comfortable in this school district and community because of its distinctive culture. One administrator remarked, “It's probably one of the most unique urban settings that you'll ever come to.” Another teacher noted: “I was kind of afraid to work in a district where there's more White kids because I feel like the parents are... [trails off]. Well, the thing is, I don't really have much experience with White people or other races, which is not really good at all.” Interviewees noted that the school leadership reflected the student population, and one administrator observed that such an administrative demographic profile was somewhat unusual:

In districts where the students are predominantly African American, the top-level administration rarely reflects the population. In [Mulberry] it does, and I think that makes us unique...How did that happen? I'm not sure, it's just always been that way since I've been here. It's one of the reasons that drew me to the district in the first place.

Another administrator spoke about the diversity of culture in the leadership of Mulberry, noting that the district had a large number of both women and men of color who had earned a doctorate. One interviewee described growing up in Mulberry with a mother who was also an administrator in the district:

You know, my mom was a black woman in the 1980s becoming an administrator... [Mulberry] had different administrators of color, not just all White males or White females. White, Black, Spanish or you know what I mean? So I don't feel the administration—especially growing up—was one-sided.

One administrator described a well-worn pathway from attending schools in Mulberry to returning to teach there:

It is encouraged. We have several people who grew up here who teach. My best friend and his department supervisor were born and raised in [Mulberry]. There are a couple people in the department who attended [Mulberry] schools and are now in leadership in [Mulberry] from coaches to teachers.

One novice teacher even discussed how she referenced this pathway to offer motivation to her students when she was teaching:

I graduated from the [Mulberry] school district in 2006. I went to [Mulberry] Middle and that's where I learned how to swim, so I was able to really connect with my kids, my students, you know because I'm like this is where I learned how to swim guys, like, and I'm here You can actually become anything you want to be, look at me, I became a teacher! You know everything that you're doing or going through, you know I went through it, I've been there, ... I love teaching in the district I grew up in. It's surprising, a lot of schools who are in you know a lot of districts that are supposed to be better, I think we're doing a fantastic job with our students. So having been able to be involved in the development of the district, and encourage students and children who look like me to further their education and dreams; it's amazing and I love it.

Teachers also noted the involvement of students' families in the schools. The district runs a "parent university" program to help connect students' families to the curriculum in the classroom. One teacher compared Mulberry to his previous urban district: "Whether it's a positive interaction or negative interaction, you know, like the parents complaining about something, it's always clear that the parents value the teachers more."

One final aspect of the culturally sustaining environment concerns the role that the city of Mulberry played with respect fostering close relationships to the schools. One administrator noted that the city regularly planned events—such as the planting of community gardens or reading events, and communicated with the schools in order to better involve teachers, students, and families. This administrator continued:

Whatever the city may be putting together, they're like, "Tell the kids! Come on, tell the teachers to bring them over!" In the spring, we had the families come in. Even if your kid didn't even go to school, come back we're planting gardens right there's a community garden across the street from [school]. And the city did that, so that's just one way like just to get the parents involved because anybody could grow, they have their own little spot they're like "Oh, this is Miss Wilson's vegetable patch that everybody was invited to be a part of." From elementary all the way to high school, the teachers were invited to go in and bring the kids in...It's just something that's a part of the culture.

We wish to be careful in our claims here—the perceived sense of caring and community on the part of the science teachers and administrators we spoke with may say very little about how the school climate was perceived by those we did not interview, including students, other teachers, families, and community members. Nonetheless, it is difficult to avoid concluding that the work environment for novice science teachers of color in the Mulberry School District offered a measure of cultural affirmation and protection that would likely be more difficult for these teachers to find in other area school districts.

Factor #4: Professional autonomy and support

One consistent response from teachers and administrators alike in nearly every interview was that teachers were not "micromanaged" in Mulberry. The teachers stated that they felt trusted by their school district, and correspondingly, had latitude to teach as they saw fit in their classrooms. One retained teacher said:

I'm allowed to teach what I teach in the manner that I feel that I need to teach my subjects. I don't really have people telling me, you need to teach this a certain way, you know I have flexibility. I feel like I know what I'm doing, and that flexibility is very important to me because you know there's a lot of other parts of the job. At least the flexibility to at the end teach the way that you want is worth quite a bit. I still have the freedom to act as a teaching professional.

In coding the data for this case study, we chose to designate responses such as the above with the label of professional autonomy, which is closely related (but slightly more expansive) to the notion of classroom autonomy in the literature. For example, Ingersoll et al. (2016) describe classroom autonomy as related to certain key issues: "selecting textbooks and other instructional materials; choosing content, topics, and skills to be taught; evaluating and grading students; selecting teaching techniques; determining the amount of homework to be assigned; and disciplining students," (p. 46). To this list we add the respect and trust accorded to teachers in their relationships with administrators, and thus view the classroom autonomy as a subset of a wider professional autonomy granted to teachers. A number of retained teachers in Mulberry stated that such professional autonomy was crucial to their retention in the district, and many reported feeling a sense of freedom and flexibility in their teaching.

One retained teacher stated that the commitment on the part of his school to ensure that each teacher had their own classroom was an important aspect of this autonomy. "Teachers basically have the luxury of being in one room all day," he said, "and when there's not any classes being run, we can actually stay in the room." He was very aware that this was not the

case in many other schools. Indeed, another teacher noted that (prior to the district's COVID-related move to block scheduling) she taught four classes and had two "prep" periods each day, which provided her with adequate time to tend to administrative tasks, planning, and lab setup.

Factor #5: Opportunities and support for professional growth

In many ways, the professional autonomy extended to teachers in Mulberry described above was closely related to the district's support for professional growth. In discussing what lessons Mulberry as a district might offer to educators generally, one novice teacher emphasized the extent to which the administration supported and valued teachers:

[My school] gives me a lot of support. If you need help with this there's somebody for that. There's somebody to help you move you to the next level. And specifically the principal and assistant principal here are very positive, very approachable individuals. [The principal] is always motivating the students and the staff, and he looks for the positive. He doesn't just focus on the negative... People have to be positive; they have to show appreciation and I like [how here at this school they] really appreciate their staff. The staff work hard, and they are thanked for it. I like that they celebrate the staff here.

The science teachers in Mulberry who we spoke with uniformly described a range of opportunities to grow professionally and felt supported by their district in this effort. These opportunities included leading professional development sessions, applying for funds to support further education, mentoring novice teachers, applying for administrative or supervisory positions, and joining the leadership of the local teachers union. While it may be the case that such activities may exist in other districts, what seemed unique is the way that teachers described begin actively encouraged to avail themselves to these opportunities. Multiple people noted that administrators not only encouraged them to grow professionally, but also provided resources to achieve their goals. The science supervisor noted that one way science teachers are supported is through district support for them to attend the annual state science convention.

Teacher-led professional development appeared to be a regular occurrence in the Mulberry district. One retained teacher noted that the Mulberry district offered him the opportunity to facilitate programs and mentor student teachers/novice teachers, contrasting this with his previous district that discouraged his desire to advance his career. He described this district support during his first few years as a mentor:

It has been an opportunity for growth, I mean I've had the opportunity to facilitate different programs, like the project SEED program from the American Chemical Society, which is set aside for students who come from low economic backgrounds to give them research experience. I remember talking to an administrator in another school district, who said she would not have given me the chance to do that because I didn't have enough experience in her eyes, I don't know why she told me that as if I work for her anyway, but just to hear that, like. You know some places would block you from these opportunities, whereas here for the most part they welcome ideas here. I get to try the things that I generally want to try.

Rather than the broad and general efforts critiqued in the literature (e.g. Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), in Mulberry, professional development appeared to be more likely to be tailored to individual teachers' needs. One novice teacher described being supported by the district in taking a four-day summer workshop for teaching an Advanced Placement science course. Another novice teacher noted that professional development in the district was often long-term and included feedback on its implementation, and pointed to the recent efforts to support teachers in using video technology to teach remotely during the pandemic:

There was rigorous training on technology, so from the time we were taught the technology being offered at [Mulberry], they also gave us feedback weekly on how we were doing with the students. That immediate feedback was very good. Even now, we are using the same tools... I know I have almost 45 hours of training.

Such attention to teacher professional growth reflected the investment of the Mulberry district as a support system that values teachers and their career as professionals who contribute to the community.

Mentoring and Induction in Mulberry

Mulberry offers a formal induction program to all teachers who are new to the district. First-year teachers in Mulberry were assigned a mentor in order to satisfy the state-mandated 30-week mentoring requirement for all new teachers. Additionally, Mulberry has maintained a number of district-level trainers that work with teachers across grade levels and subject areas.

The Mulberry induction program starts in August prior to the beginning of the school year. Once school begins, novice teachers from across the district attend induction meetings monthly through March (a calendar driven by state standardized testing). Most of the teachers we interviewed spoke very highly of the induction program, and pointed specifically to examples where it had helped them. The current induction coordinator described how her own experience as a new teacher in Mulberry shaped her view of induction:

I started out in the district as a new teacher. They had new teacher orientation for an entire week for from 8 to 3 for like the last week of August. It was probably one of the most valuable times that I had, which is why I love working now with new teachers and doing orientation because I'm like, "I did the same thing you guys are doing right now years and years ago, and it was so valuable to me."

She continued with a description of the induction as more than just the delivery of information, but also as an expression of the district culture of care for new teachers.

Because we're kind of giving them a heads up of how things run in the district. Teachers have asked "What time does school start at my school?" because every school kind of starts at a different time... Where should I park?...It's just those little things we kind of help assuage the fears with that time and that contact versus, "You're hired, now go to the classroom," and then we leave you to your own devices.

One retained teacher stated:

There was also an induction program that [Mulberry] had. Maybe once a month, during a staff meeting I would have to go to the central office to go for training, it might be training on whatever the latest ED software was. Your typical classroom management stuff. That was the nature of the induction program and the mentoring. I was impressed with [Mulberry] because, even though I was a seasoned teacher when I got here, any new teacher who is new to the district goes to those trainings and it just kind of helps to see what the expectations are for the district.

Mentors and Trainers

Teachers who had participated in the mentoring mostly spoke positively of the individual mentors, though for some the mentoring relationship was not particularly distinct from their other colleagues in the department. In the time period examined here, Mulberry Public Schools was also able to fund district-level trainers through a variety of federal grants and state aid allocations. These trainers work across grades, subjects, and schools wherever they are needed or requested (as opposed to mentors who must be assigned to novice teachers as part of the state licensing process). Retained teachers rarely made a distinction between mentors and trainers:

I mean it's a little different because the person who trained me for chemistry teaches in this building. So yeah so, I had access to her, which was helpful because when I started teaching chemistry, you know chemistry is complicated, you know it has a lot of you know it's not it's not a straightforward subject. They assigned me a mentor that was there with me for the whole year. I would see her every week.

Another teacher spoke highly of the trainer she had worked with:

In my first year, I had Ms. C she would come into my class maybe every Thursday, or maybe sometimes twice a week to make sure that I know what I'm doing to keep my students engaged, you know she was there for that. She sent me even to decorate my classroom and you know, make the students want to be there. She'll send me materials for that, so it was that they have a lot of support here, especially for if you're a first-year teacher and even now, I can still contact you for advice on anything.

Trainers were issued mobile phones by the district to support their accessibility, and in our conversations were more frequently mentioned than assigned mentors:

Trainers have our own phones for the district, so that the teachers can reach out to us. Teacher will text us, "Hey can you stop by my classroom," and so it's not on my personal phone. It is a district-issued phone and it's invaluable because they feel like they have a direct line. Email is great, but a phone call or text makes a difference, I think.

All teachers—novice and experienced alike—are provided the opportunity to make use of teacher trainers in the Mulberry school district. For example, if a teacher wishes to implement a strategy learned about in a professional development course, they can request a teacher trainer from the district to support them.

In summary, induction, mentoring, and training in Mulberry are closely related, and are part of a broader effort to build a district culture that supports teacher learning.

Conclusion

The Mulberry school district was able to retain 8 first-year science teachers (most of whom were teachers of color) who were hired between the years of 2007 and 2012 for a period of at least five years. We identified five factors that likely influenced the high science teacher retention rate observed in the Mulberry Public School District. The first and most broadly reported factor was the district's competitive salary guide, undergirded by an active local and state teachers' union. The second was the open perception of care and support that colleagues regularly displayed for one another that was an important part of the district culture. The third factor was that much like a HBCU, Mulberry provided a culturally protected environment and community for teachers of color. Fourth, we found that teachers in the district were permitted significant professional autonomy, and did not feel micromanaged by their administration. Finally, the district not only offered regular opportunities for professional growth, but supported such growth in the district's schools with mentoring and induction for new teachers, trainers for anyone who requested one, as well as internal and external professional development.

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