

The Case of Aspen School District (#NJ01)

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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 Case of Aspen School District

The Aspen School District is located in one of the less-densely populated regions of New Jersey, and consists of a single high school fed by four middle and elementary schools. The Aspen School District receives students from a number of surrounding municipalities across an area of over 150 square miles. The district serves approximately 3,000 students and employs over 200 full-time teachers. The high school is split into two separate buildings on a single sprawling campus, one for 9th and 10th graders, and the other for 11th and 12th graders. Most teachers have classes located in only one building, though some are required by their schedules to move between them during the school day. There are approximately 30 high school-level science teachers in the district, a number that has remained relatively constant over the past decade. Despite its somewhat rural character, the Aspen School District is located in a county that ranks among the top 1% in median household income for all counties in the United States. The student population at Aspen High School is over 80% White, with fewer than 10% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Fewer than 3% are categorized as English language learners. Aspen is part of New Jersey's Interdistrict Public School Choice Program, and as such accepts a small number of students each year from other districts.

The Aspen School District was selected for this study because it was able to retain 10 of the 13 science teachers it hired between 2007 and 2012 for a period of at least five years. This placed Aspen within the top 10% of districts in New Jersey for its five-year retention rate, which was the first criteria of selection in our study. Given the larger aim of the study to better understand the varying contexts in which new science teachers work in the state, Aspen had a number of other characteristics that influenced its selection. As a regional school district serving only high school students, Aspen offered a good opportunity to examine retention in a district with a single school where all the science teachers in the district could regularly interact. Aspen was also one of the only schools meeting the main retention criteria in its region of the state. As a school district placed into the highest socioeconomic comparative category by the state, Aspen also offered an opportunity to examine teacher retention in an environment that was well-resourced.² Finally, in contrast to many of the other case study sites for this research, Aspen had not hired any teachers of color during the time period under consideration, and thus we felt it could serve as a point of comparison in the cross-case analysis planned later in the study. In the 2016-2017 data, the most recent available to include race/ethnicity data, 14 of the total 301 certificated staff in the district (4.7%) did not identify as White. Two of those 14 however, were science teachers.

² In New Jersey, a district factor group (DFG) is a state-determined designation that allows for districts with relatively similar socioeconomic indicators to be compared with one another. This terminology is unique to New Jersey and was originally created for the resolution of school finance litigation (Education Law Center, 2020) and is still in common use today as a shorthand way to characterize the socioeconomic differences between school districts in the state. The DFG designation "A" has the lowest household incomes and tax base, through increasing socioeconomic levels "B," "CD," "DE," "FG," "GH," with district "I" as the highest. Aspen is in the "I" district factor group.

The research team interviewed 18 individuals in the district, including administrators, novice science teachers, mentor science teachers, retained science teachers, and the induction program coordinator. The primary goal of the site visit was to better understand the factors that may have influenced teacher retention during the focus period of the data (2007-2018) and to also investigate current practices around the mentoring and induction of new science teachers. Data were collected during a single-day, in-person site visit, which was facilitated in cooperation with the administration. Administrators and the induction coordinator were individually interviewed, and groups of novice teachers, mentor teachers, and veteran teachers were interviewed in focus groups. Other data collected included publicly available district documents and documentation related to the mentoring and induction efforts provided by the Aspen district induction coordinator.

Findings

As a result of this site visit and subsequent data analysis, we posit four factors that likely influenced the high science teacher retention rate observed in the district. These are (1) collaborative and supportive colleagues/department identity, (2) school culture, students, and community, (3) hiring and induction practices, and (4) a sufficient allocation of resources.

Factor #1: Collaborative and Supportive Colleagues/Department Identity

Every person interviewed during the site visit commented on the collaborative and supportive nature of their science department colleagues. Those who had been in the district for over a decade noted that this was not a recent development, and that the science department within the school had historically been cohesive and cooperative as a unit.

In recent years, new science teachers to the district arrived to find themselves being given access to a shared Google Drive folder containing all of the curricular resources needed to start teaching immediately, a technological extension of earlier practices of shared curricular materials among science teachers in the district. Aspen's science teachers were not expected to develop a course from scratch or struggle with wondering what exactly to teach or how to teach it. Importantly, these were not scripted lessons or prescribed curriculum; Aspen's science teachers have always had autonomy in how to teach their lessons. Teachers supported each other through formal and informal partnerships. One veteran teacher noted "the people that I work with in my department are a huge reason why I stay."

In our discussions with Aspen's novice and experienced science teachers, it was clear that they regularly supported and intellectually challenged each other, and possessed a collective sense of self-efficacy from the high academic achievement of the Aspen students. A common theme among the interviews was that the teachers in Aspen felt that they worked hard for themselves, for their students, and for their administration. Noting this common teacher attribute, one administrator said, "One of the things that amazes me about [Aspen teachers] is that these people are doing it because they want to do it and they're excited to do it and make science better for kids here. I don't know how you teach that."

The science department itself had a well-defined identity within the school, and it was clear from our interviews that new teachers felt invited into this professional community. Though the teachers we interviewed mentioned this sense of mutual support, a number of veteran teachers pointed to a particularly difficult stretch of time a decade prior, when the bonds of the current science teacher community in the district were forged. One teacher, who was relatively new at the time, recalled the impact of one new district administrator in particular:

She came down with many rules. She got rid of all of our Jewish holidays. We had a very strict dress code. She'd come into your classroom and accost you in front of your students. If you spoke at a board meeting, she'd come in your class the next day and observe you. I mean, it was not supportive. The morale here was...really bad.

(Interviewer: What convinced you to stay after these incidents?)

The support of my fellow colleagues. We got each other through it.

Though the teachers reported that a number of people left their positions in the district as a result of this atmosphere, this period also overlapped with a time when the retention rates of new science teachers were high. One possible explanation is that during this time, the science department was able to come together in resisting some of the proposed changes—which they perceived to impact students' science learning—and in doing so fostered a coherence as a department around a professional identity. One administrator who began working in the school at the end of this period recounted his initial interactions with the department members:

When I came in, the morale of the department was very low.... I did some activities to get to know the department, like what are all the things I need to know? I got lots of things like, "We're the black sheep of the school," all kinds of stuff like that. Which surprised me because it was a group of really—just excellent—committed teachers who felt like they were under attack by the administration that was in place at the time.

The current and previous science supervisors were frequently mentioned as a source for sustaining both the identity of collegial collaboration in the department as well as individuals' professional development.

The science supervisor reported being able to meet with new teachers weekly in their first two months, then monthly after. He reported that these informal check-ins were a way for him to build relationships and communicate his support, a statement validated by the teachers. One experienced teacher noted, "Thankfully our supervisor is very supportive that way, and tells us, 'If you need something, please come to me.'" It was also apparent that this close-knit science department community had benefited from both formal and informal mentoring efforts by the district (as discussed below). Most of the people we interviewed described these efforts as an outgrowth of the collaborative and supportive atmosphere, rather than its cause.

Factor #2: School Culture, Students, and Community

A defining characteristic of the culture for Aspen students and teachers alike was high expectations. The science supervisor told us, “The science department here, it's a very strong group of teachers. They are devoted to their students. They hold each other and themselves to a very high standard.” Though novice teachers reported that these high expectations and high-performing colleagues were occasionally intimidating, they noted Aspen also provided a lot of support for both new and experienced teachers and encouraged risk-taking and reflection to continually improve their teaching. It was evident that teachers and supervisors supported each other in learning and that teachers were valued as experts.

One driver of the Aspen teachers’ workload as described above was the expectations of the Aspen community. The parents of Aspen students clearly had a reputation among teachers and administrators alike for being both highly involved and demanding. One administrator noted, “We have very demanding parents, and we have a very high performing team. That can be tough for a new teacher.”³ Yet, the willingness to undertake this work was evident in our discussions with teachers. A “students-first” attitude was clearly a part of the professional culture, and was communicated to us from teachers and administrators alike.

A number of teachers described Aspen as a good place to work, referring to the larger community as well as the student body. Participation by parents was reportedly high in school events and activities, including a recent workshop offered by the district on improving resilience in their children. Such workshops are reportedly well-attended. There also appeared to be clear lines of communication between teachers and students’ families. One teacher said “I knew I was also teaching at a community that valued education. That our students were there to learn and that helped my day go better and felt more professionally rewarding.” Even more than the parents, teachers spoke about the students as a reason they stay.

If you sit down and really take a look at our student population, for the most part, they're really good. We don't have a lot of volatile situations and things like that. We don't have the same student population as perhaps an inner city school does, where perhaps the burnout rate is a bit higher. So in general... I don't feel tremendously threatened when I walk into one of our classrooms.⁴

Another teacher described it this way:

³ The research team noted that the term “parents” was used almost universally by Aspen teachers and administrators. On the district website, the more inclusive term “parents/guardians” is used. It is difficult to draw conclusions based on limited data on language use and word choice, but it is possible that this tentative data point speaks to the construction of a “typical Aspen student” as discussed below.

⁴ A few of the teachers contrasted Aspen High School with images of other schools. Some appeared to the research team to be grounded in popular representations and misconceptions about “inner city schools” rather than from first-hand experiences in such settings.

Our student body's a good one in terms of behavior. So, I always felt like my energies were on instruction and not discipline. Now, part of that comes with being a physics teacher of juniors and seniors, but in general our issues are not the same issues that other teachers have to deal with in districts where concerns are—can be—more dire at times.

There were a few contradicting comments about select groups of students (English language learners, out-of-district students, and students with special needs), but these students were seen as a challenging exception to the typical Aspen student, rather than a full part of the Aspen community:

Teacher 1: We do have a growing ELL population and we have a lot of kids that come into the district for special services.

Teacher 2: Absolutely, I have several students who are actually driven from [nearby urban area] this year.

Teacher 3: ... since we're a choice school.

Another teacher described her work with a group of students in the school's program designed to address the needs of students identified with certain disabilities:

I taught this program we have...which is basically kids that are emotionally damaged in the school and they can't do a traditional school. They can't, it doesn't work for them. They stay with each other all day. I got into it too deep emotionally and I had to step away from that program.

One final noteworthy aspect of the school community was that several teachers we interviewed either went to Aspen as students, or were placed there as a component of their teacher preparation program (i.e. student teaching). One veteran teacher said, "I always knew I wanted to teach here. I went to high school here actually. I always knew I wanted to come here. Then as soon as a job opened up here, I applied and got the job." Another said, "I was close with everybody here in the department already from student teaching."

Factor #3: Hiring and Induction Practices

Given the collaborative and supportive nature of Aspen's science department, it came as little surprise that teachers played a role in both the hiring and induction of new members of the group. These processes had changed somewhat over the past decade, both driven by policy decisions at the state level as well as efforts to build on practices that were already considered successful.

Within recent memory of the teachers and administrators, Aspen has remained a desirable district in which to work. Even as science teacher vacancies attracted fewer applicants than those in other subject areas, the district appeared to weather the shortages that vex many other districts

in the state. Throughout, a key strategy for science teacher retention in the district has been recruiting teachers who are seen as likely to succeed.

Participants reported that in past years the district had embraced taking on student teachers both as a part of their professional obligation to the field of teaching and as a type of long-term interview for recruiting new teachers. In those times, student teachers had been a steady source of potential science teacher hires. In recent years however, Aspen ceased working with student teachers altogether. It also ceased hiring new teachers from the state's alternate route programs, in which teachers earn their certification as a full-time teacher over a two-year provisional period. One reason for this offered by a teacher referenced the privacy issues raised by the state-mandated performance assessment required for all new teachers in the state since 2017, which has a video recording requirement. However, there does not appear to have been an official policy; the district simply stopped taking student teachers when the requirement went into effect.

In recent years, it appears that Aspen preferred to hire teachers with experience, and both teachers and administrators in Aspen mentioned intentionally hiring teachers away from other districts. The individuals we interviewed noted a preference not only for certain nearby districts from which these teachers tended to be hired, but a strong preference for and against specific teacher preparation programs as well.

In addition to experience, mindset seems to be important to their hiring process. One administrator noted "It's nice when somebody has teaching experience for sure, but just because they have teaching experience does not mean they're necessarily a good teacher or that their teaching philosophies align with our district mission and our philosophies on pedagogy." Another administrator echoed this sentiment, saying "I think there's a temperament that you want to look for even in recruiting someone. To be honest I've interviewed folks who you just know are not going to last more than a year." The clear message was that the Aspen administration was willing to put in the time to support teachers in their growth as long they are open to continue learning.

One notable feature of the Aspen School District is that its current teachers are included as part of the hiring process. Science teachers in Aspen reported that they are regularly brought into interviews and demonstration lessons for job candidates, and that their opinions about hiring were valued by the administration. One experienced teacher explicitly described this fit as a key aspect of department collaboration:

I think it's probably safe to say we've known who wasn't going to make it, probably before they knew it. Or before they were told they weren't coming back if they left not of their own choice. You can kind of get that sense from someone just as to how they fit in. Like we were talking about the collaboration, and everything that happens and the people that are offered and opportunities and assistance and kind of rejected it or just flat out aren't on board. I don't think any of those people are still here.

The state of New Jersey requires all districts to provide induction support for all new teachers as a component of their provisional license, and one unique feature of the Aspen district is that it provides such support to novice and experienced teachers alike who are new to the district. Once a teacher is hired in Aspen, they undergo a thorough onboarding process through a three-day summer institute—referred to locally as the Aspen Teacher Academy—and then participate in an induction program for the remainder of the year. Given that most teachers are hired with the expectation that they are already well-prepared to teach, topics covered in this institute generally focus more on the specific culture and community of Aspen, including procedural and instructional supports, training in Aspen’s teacher evaluation system, and the development of reflective practices.

All first-year teachers are assigned a *mentor*, as required by the state’s Provisional Teacher Program for all new teachers. However, we found it notable that experienced teachers new to the school were also assigned a *buddy*, who had many of the same responsibilities as mentors—particularly in serving the role of a designated confidant who was available to assist in answering the day-to-day questions that arise when acclimating to a new workplace. The buddy role was created to ease the transition of seasoned teachers to a new district, and is not a paid position. For many years, only the mentors of first-year teachers received any compensation for their mentoring work, which included the mentor training that was part of the summer Aspen Teacher Academy activities. However, the year of our site visit marked the first time that buddies were also paid a stipend to attend the third summer day of the Aspen Teacher Academy. This day involved mentor/buddy training in the morning by the district induction coordinator, followed by a session when mentor/mentee and buddies were paired for conversations in the afternoon. Unlike the stipends for mentors, this buddy stipend was paid directly by the Aspen District.⁵

The content of the induction program—which continues throughout the year as the Aspen Teacher Academy—is responsive to needs of the new teachers, and might include topics such as time management, administrative tasks, how to write their official Student Growth Objectives (which are state-mandated for evaluation purposes), and the creation of student-centered lessons. Attendance is required for first-year teachers and “strongly suggested” for experienced teachers new to the district. Teachers we interviewed reported that although the induction program was a substantial time commitment, it was worthwhile. Novice teachers we interviewed in Aspen noted that induction was also valuable in building community outside the science department, especially in such a large school.

Within the science department, mentors and buddies were selected by the department supervisor, who looks for a person that will take an active role in supporting the new teacher. The mentor and buddy teachers we interviewed mentioned flexibility as being important in this

⁵ The state of New Jersey requires all first year teachers to complete the Provisional Teacher Process. Mentors are paid a stipend at a set rate, which is \$550 for teachers who have completed a traditional teacher preparation program, and \$1000 for those earning an alternate route certification. This amount is deducted from the new teacher’s paycheck as a fee, and paid directly to the mentor. In Aspen, “buddies” are paid \$145 for their attendance at the Aspen Teacher Academy.

relationship. Matches were also made based on common prep time and content.⁶ Given the strong collaborative nature of the Aspen science department, this mentoring process was viewed as one of socialization and enculturation through extensive support. One mentor's comment encapsulated this view: "My job is not to tell you how I would do it. It's to help you be successful in this environment."

One ongoing challenge in Aspen's mentoring and induction efforts was the absence of a designated time for mentors and mentees to work together after the initial summer sessions. Mentors were expected to schedule meetings during their prep periods or after contractual hours, and the amount of time spent together was determined as much by availability as the needs of the mentee. Similarly, the attendance of teachers at the Aspen Teacher Academy over the year was often contingent on the availability of teachers to attend sessions held after the end of the contractually obligated day had ended.⁷

Finally, though the official mentoring and induction programs provided by the district served as a way to ensure that every new teacher received support, the collaborative culture within Aspen's science department was the primary means for supporting new science teachers. Many of the teachers we interviewed indicated that they received a great deal of support from colleagues who served as unofficial mentors within their department as well.

Factor #4: Sufficient Resources

Upon entering the high school media center in Aspen, our team was confronted by a sight that none of us had ever encountered in a school previously: a cluster of exercise bicycle-desks, prominently situated in the main space, accessible for use by both students and teachers alike. As our team constructed this case study, these bicycle-desks took on a symbolic role in our analysis. To us, they represented an effort by those who had ordered them and authorized their purchase to communicate a vision of both health and industriousness. They also seemed to be an existence proof of the fact that if someone had a good idea to benefit the education of students in Aspen, funding was available to support that idea.⁸

⁶ *Prep time* is any time period of the school day when a teacher is not assigned to teach a class or undertake a specified duty, and is typically designated for the preparation of lessons and carrying out the bureaucratic requirements of teaching. This period is often referred to as prep time by teachers and administrators to indicate that the time is part of the salaried professional work day, and is not simply a break from teaching.

⁷ This situation was not unique to Aspen; the literature on teacher mentoring and induction is replete with accounts of such time pressures. The heart of the dilemma is that new teachers are often required to engage in mentoring activities as a condition of their state certification, but that these activities often extend beyond the contractual school day. From one perspective, the time and labor spent allocated to being mentored is a function of professional advancement. In New Jersey, engaging in 30 weeks of mentoring is a requirement for completing the Provisional Teacher Process and advancing from provisional to standard certification. Yet from another perspective, a district that wishes to retain a teacher must ensure that the teacher completes any provisional requirements in order to remain employed. One possible solution is to build time into teachers' (and mentors') contractual schedules in order to ensure that adequate time is available for mentoring activities. Yet such an approach runs counter to the scheduling approach in most U.S. schools, where teachers are maximally scheduled for classes.

⁸ The bicycle desks may also communicate other messages, including a vision of the "ideal" Aspen student. As a public space accessed by visitors, the presence of the bicycle desks may also serve as a signifier to families and the community in general that Aspen remains on the cutting edge of educational innovations, a position likely to confer competitive advantages to students.

As noted above, the Aspen School District is located in one of the wealthier communities in New Jersey. Though gains have been made in New Jersey toward equitable school funding, school finance formulas and funding mechanisms continue to permit districts with a greater tax base to spend more money per pupil than poorer districts (Baker, 2018). And like many of the wealthier districts in the state, Aspen High School has a foundation that also makes funding available for initiatives not funded through the school budget.

As a result, teachers in the district enjoyed an unusually ample level of financial support for their work. Each teacher was provided their own computer tablet and all students were issued Chromebooks.⁹ In addition to the bicycle-desks, the media center also housed a well-resourced maker space for student use, as well as extensive holdings and databases. Teachers we interviewed reported that supplies and equipment needed for teaching were readily acquired.

This support for teachers at Aspen also extended to ongoing professional development opportunities, including reimbursement for graduate-level coursework. Aspen has supported both in-house and external professional development, with teachers encouraged to seek out opportunities that feel professionally relevant to them. Such activities have been supported by the district, and if they occur outside of contracted time, teachers have been paid to attend. Professional development that occurs during the school day, including observations of peers, has been supported by the district through the provision of a substitute teacher for coverage. This struck our research team as notable, particularly because of our awareness (from being teachers and from providing professional development ourselves) that class coverage for professional development purposes has become quite rare throughout the state. Supporting these professional development opportunities for all teachers, as well as the mentoring and induction program for new teachers, required significant financial and structural support, which the district was clearly willing to bear. For example, the induction coordinator, who is a teacher in the district, receives both a stipend and a reduced course load.

In the 2018-2019 school year, the average district per-pupil expenditure in New Jersey was \$22,816. The per-pupil expenditure that same year in Aspen was approximately \$26,000. In contrast, the median teacher salary in Aspen was nearly identical to the median teacher salary in New Jersey. Teachers perceived that the starting pay in Aspen was lower than in surrounding districts, but a recurring theme in the interviews was that the availability of resources for students and teachers more than made up for this fact.¹⁰ One experienced teacher explained this as an explicit trade-off:

When I first got hired here, the pay was terrible, but when I looked at it comparatively to pay versus resources for students, the resources that we had here were immeasurable.

That to me was very important....The fact that my pay wasn't that high, I could rationalize

⁹ This was standard before the start of the pandemic in spring 2020, when such practices became commonplace in many school districts in the state through the allocation of emergency state funding for remote teaching technology..

¹⁰ The actual starting salary in Aspen was \$8000 above the state median starting salary, so the teachers' perception of a lower than average starting salary was incorrect..

it. The draw for me here... was because of all of the opportunities that were here for teachers and for students, plus it's a beautiful school.

Because of the large faculty at Aspen, most science teachers did not have their own classrooms. Yet, teachers in Aspen reported having shared office space, which was mentioned as a factor contributing to the culture of collaboration described above. Related to this collaboration was the fact that most teachers taught five classes per day and are typically limited to two preps each year, thus ensuring the ability of teachers to engage in a manageable number of in-depth collaborations with colleagues.¹¹

Conclusion

The teachers we interviewed cited supportive colleagues as the main reason they were satisfied in their district during good times and what helped them remain in the district during times of struggle. The school culture, students, and community in general also played an important role in fostering the type of work environment where teachers wished to remain. The active fostering of a collaborative culture among faculty led to the inclusion of teachers in decision-making processes. Treating teachers as professionals including their voice in the culture of the school and in the hiring, mentoring, and development of new colleagues, valuing them as experts, and giving them autonomy to be creative and take risks in their teaching—seemed to be valued by Aspen teachers. Finally, the shared vision of excellent science teaching and high expectations was maintained in Aspen through appropriate supports for both new and experienced teachers alike. Such supports included adequate resources for students, as well as for continued teacher professional development.

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¹¹ A “prep” in this context refers to the preparation of a class with a specific title and curriculum. For example, biology and honors biology might each be considered separate preps if they involve the preparation of different lessons for each. In New Jersey, the negotiation of the number of preps is a common topic of collective bargaining in contracts between the school board and the local teachers union. Under the most recent contract between the Aspen School Board and the Aspen Teachers Union, teachers hired prior to 2017 who are asked to teach a sixth class are paid an extra 10% in salary. Teachers hired after 2017 do not receive this additional compensation.