

The Case of Pompano Regional School District (#WI-03)

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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 Wisconsin, and a separate 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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Located along one of the main Great Lakes shipping routes, the city of Pompano is known primarily as a major industrial center for the state of Wisconsin. Throughout its history, the area has settled multiple waves of immigrants. The population of the city doubled between 1920 and 1980, owing both to the of Pompano as a center of manufacturing and industry, as well as the migration of Black Americans from the southern U.S. who sought not only jobs, but relief from terror (Wilkerson, 2010). In recent years, the number of residents identifying as Hispanic has increased to about 20%, roughly equivalent to Pompano's African American population. Pompano regularly appears on lists of "most affordable" places to live, particularly with regard to housing.

The Pompano Regional School District contains over 30 schools and serves nearly 20,000 students from both the city of Pompano as well as a number of the surrounding and less densely populated communities. The district, which consolidated regionally in the 1960s, led a successful school desegregation campaign in the 1970s that served as a model for similar efforts across the country.

Like the other districts in this study, Pompano was selected for its higher-than-average retention of science teachers in the state. At the time of selection, Pompano Regional School District had retained 17 of its novice science teachers, which equaled 75% of the total novice science teachers hired between 2007–2012. All of the novice science teachers hired during this period were identified as White. Our data collection focused on teachers from three of the six schools at the secondary level where the novice science teacher retention rate was the highest. We interviewed seven individuals in Pompano Regional School District, including four retained science teachers, one novice science teacher, and two district administrators. The primary goal of the interviews was to better understand the factors that may have influenced teacher retention during the focus period of the study (2007-2018) and to also investigate current practices around the mentoring and induction of new science teachers.

Findings

As a result of these interviews and subsequent data analysis, we posit four factors that likely influenced the high science teacher retention rate observed in Pompano Regional School District. These are (1) personal rewards from their teaching assignments, (2) a high level of teacher autonomy, (3) having relationships with and feeling supported by coworkers, and (4) the benefits of being from the community. In this section we detail each of these four factors, followed by a brief description of current mentoring and induction efforts in the Pompano Regional School District.

Factor # 1: A high level of teacher autonomy

Many of the teachers in Pompano identified having the ability to "do your own thing" as a reason to stay. One teacher likened the autonomy in her classroom to that of "a small business

owner.” She told us that “administration isn't on our butts about a bunch of different little picky things.” One example she cited was that the teachers in her school were not expected to submit weekly lesson plans. She told us, “We don't have to submit them. So, it feels like the administration trusts us here, at least that's the feeling I've gotten. There's a level of trust.” One teacher felt his school is especially good for new teachers, “because you can kind of try a lot of stuff there.”

One teacher reported that the administration was “not coming in and trying to micromanage our classrooms, and they never have”. She added that she was able to choose what to do in her classroom, “If I feel like teaching about an oil spill that happened then I'm going to bring it up. I'm going to show news clips and teach about it.” Multiple teachers connected this sense of autonomy in the classroom to their ability to be creative and respond to the needs of their students:

So, I am teaching an ecology class. I love being outside, I'm a big outdoorsman. So, we have a pond by our school, so I asked one of our principals if we could get a bunch of fishing poles and stuff. We just went fishing for like a week and a half. We collected some data on the fish and put it all together to try to determine if the pond was healthy or not. But after I planned on being done, the kids were like ‘Can we just keep going fishing?’ and I was like ‘Sure let's spend another day fishing.’

Another teacher described his autonomy as an intentional feature of the school district organization:

A big part of why I stay where I am and enjoy what I'm doing is because you know, I do have this little kind of fiefdom carved out for myself. My administrators don't necessarily fully understand the content my classes and the pathway, and you know they are confident to just let me do things the way I see fit. And you know, that's quite nice. I think everyone would appreciate being an employee within an organization that allows them that level of freedom and sort of self-direction.

He drew upon his earlier career in a STEM field to highlight how much he valued this autonomy, and appreciated that his current role as a teacher allowed for less insistence upon “formalities and doing things for the sake of doing things.”

One teacher felt that it was because of her training in science that she was able to navigate the difficulties of the classroom without a large amount of supervision from her administration. “I don't know, I just went off of whatever seemed right and seemed to work best. ...It was definitely very hectic, but at the same time you know, I actually did enjoy it”.

However, this degree of teacher autonomy did have a downside. Some teachers reported that the vast amounts of freedom they enjoyed was sometimes accompanied by a lack of feedback and accountability. However, for the majority of teachers we spoke with, this was a reasonable tradeoff if it meant they were the ones in control of their own teaching. The combination of autonomy and trust from the district administration—which notably was *not* framed by the teachers we interviewed as neglect—appeared to foster a culture of professionalism among teachers.

Factor #2: Having strong relationships with and feeling supported by coworkers

For many of the teachers we talked to in the Pompano Regional School District, it became evident that the relationships they had built with their science department colleagues played a significant role in their decision to stay teaching at their schools. This sentiment was echoed across schools in the district and amongst retained and novice teachers alike. One teacher noted that in the beginning of his career, he had remained in Pompano because he was “fully vested in the loan forgiveness program.”² And though he cited this financial benefit as an initial reason for staying, he continued, “the longer I’m here, the more I like our science group, it’s really, really good.” For many science teachers in Pompano, the relationships they formed with their colleagues was the basis of support they received from individuals in their department.

Whenever I needed help, I knew I could go to people who are either teaching the same curriculum as me, at the same time, or have taught it, and they would give me whatever they had and help me in any way I needed. It's a very nice feeling when you know you have your department people who do this, who have done this for years, to rely on for resources and material.

One of the retained science teachers summed up the importance of supportive colleagues:

The department that you're joining into, and the extent to which that department is willing to step into that role and offer that support and kind of help somebody figure out all the ropes and learn how to do things... doing all that stuff goes quite a long way. You know, a department that is supportive and you know that is able to help you deal with any situation, ease your anxiety, and otherwise make that kind of job easier for you goes quite a long way.

² Note: this respondent was the only person to mention a loan forgiveness program as a rationale for retention in Pompano. Though the specific program was not named, it was likely the Teacher Loan Cancellation program available for teachers with Federal Perkins Loans. Pompano Regional School District would have qualified as meeting the “low income” school requirement for this loan forgiveness program provided the individual has taught there for “five complete and consecutive academic years.”

In addition to their fellow science teachers, those in charge of the science department also contributed to an individual's network of support. One retained teacher explained that she could always choose to “go to the department head, but because I have so many people to ask, he [the department head] wasn't overburdened”.

One of the other retained teachers told us that his colleagues were the main reason he stays where he is. “The other science teachers that I work with have been like some of my favorite people I've ever worked with. So just my colleagues, especially directly there in the science department is a big reason for me staying. I just really enjoy hanging out with them. There's some really, really good teachers there that I'm learning a lot from and I don't really want to leave them.” This same teacher appreciated the wide range of personalities within his department, and explained to us that most of the science teachers in his department did not originally intend to pursue working in the field of teaching.

They're super welcoming. There's a bunch of different personalities in there, which was nice. A lot of them came from the field, which I think is interesting. Most of them weren't planning on being science teachers and were working in the field and didn't like it. One of the guys I came in with was subbing and he fell in love with teaching so he came in. One is an art major which is kind of funny. But they all have their different styles and we get along really, really well.

Although Pompano had a formal mentorship program, mentioned later in this case, the majority of teachers suggested that it was their informal mentor relationships that provided them with support in their first few years teaching. One retained teacher explained that although the district did provide organized supports, for her, she received so much of her teacher knowledge from her methods teacher and student teaching supervisor prior to becoming a teacher of record. Another teacher discussed how they took it upon themselves to shadow two of the experienced teachers in their department:

I found two teachers, that I really respected and appreciated the way that they taught and I saw a lot of stuff that they were doing. They had a lot of similar styles that I had so I just kind of sat in their pockets and was in their rooms. Like every day at the end of class or at the end of the day, I would ask, “This happened today, what would you have done? Or this happened today, this is what I did. Is that something that makes sense? Or just like, helping with planning, helping like Okay, I have this group of kids that are doing this. “What are some strategies I could do to kind of help me with that?” So, just a lot of picking certain teachers' brains...

He went on to tell us that for him, his informal mentors took on motherly roles, not only due to a large difference in age, but also because he valued the knowledge they held and their willingness

to share that with him. This same teacher went on to explain that, to his understanding, although there was a district wide induction program, he did not have a specific mentor or induction coach working with him during his first year teaching.

More than one teacher mentioned that either they or others in their district began teaching as a second or sometimes even third career. For one teacher, although she loved “the idea of the medical field” after she had the opportunity to work in it, she realized she did not like hospitals. She then moved into lab work, another job she found herself unhappy in. Eventually she came across an opportunity to use her science degree in the field of teaching, and is now a retained teacher in the Pompano school district.

One of the retained teachers we interviewed suggested that science teachers in Pompano district had high rates of retention because teaching was not their first experience in a work environment. “I would be very interested in seeing, compared to other school districts, how many science teachers had other professional experience outside of education prior. Because I think having that experience goes a long way towards making your peace with a lot of the issues that end up driving novice teachers out of teaching.” He went on to say:

As someone who had this experience within the private sector, there are things that you would not expect someone to complain about as a professional in the sense of you know, like there's this notion, I think that perhaps the grass is greener elsewhere. And having been elsewhere, I know quite well the grass is in fact not greener. So, you know there isn't this notion of I was sold on education being something that it wasn't, now I'm stuck dealing with these kids and I thought I was going to come change kids' lives, none of them even care. You know it's more so I knew what this job was and I chose to do it because I wanted to do that sort of thing and I'm content . . . and it's easier for me to see the positives instead of just focus on the negatives.

Although this idea of switching into the career of teaching came up a few times, we felt that rather than standing alone as its own reason for remaining in the district, these experiences tended to contribute to a shared understanding teachers had with one another in their departments. Sharing the experience of being career switchers, allowed them to develop stronger links with their fellow teachers. These bonds also appeared to be strengthened when teachers were placed in close proximity within their building. “Part of it is being in the same hallway, building relationships by talking between classes. That builds camaraderie.” For others, more than simply teaching in the same hallway, by sharing classrooms teachers were able to develop strong bonds with one another.

So, our science department is kind of cool. All the rooms are connected to each other through doors. There are more science teachers than there are rooms, so we have to share rooms with other teachers. So, you're constantly talking to them like, ‘Hey I need to set

up a lab, is that all right?' So, like as you're walking through, you'll say hi to all the teachers and see how their day is doing. And because we have more teachers in rooms, we share offices. So, like every single one of my preps, I have at least two other teachers in my office that we can kind of just talk and hang out with.

Some teachers recognized the pros and cons of sharing spaces with other teachers. One teacher, noted that prior to having her own room, she was “forced basically to interact with the other teachers.” However, now that she has a room of her own, she also enjoys staying in her classroom all day and *not* interacting with other teachers. “I can organize my space the way I want it,” she noted, and not feel as if she is intruding into other teachers’ classes.

Factor #3: The benefits from being from the community and other community related benefits

A recurring theme in the interviews was that teachers in Pompano both applied to teach and stayed in the district because they themselves were from the community. Indeed, many of the teaching staff we interviewed grew up in Pompano and were even alumni of the schools in which they worked. Such an outcome is well documented in the teacher workforce literature (Reininger, 2012).

One of the department chairs we interviewed attributed teacher retention to the teachers having a greater understanding of the community that was gained by being a part of it prior to becoming a teacher. “A lot of the learning about the community, like you've kind of already checked that box, you know, because you grew up here you have a family here, so you have experience here.” One of the retained teachers said, “I suspect more of them are people from the area who have a more developed sense of what the areas are like, what the community is like, what the characteristics of the students are like, and are going back into education.” Another teacher plainly stated, “Let's see, what else made me stay? Well, I graduated from here and now I work here so that's pretty cool.”

One teacher we interviewed had not grown up in Pompano but had attended college in the area, which offered her “a lot of that experience in and knowledge of the community.” According to one of the retained teachers, although he struggled to identify reasons for his district's high retention rates, offered the notion that “it might be just that they want to teach where they grew up.”

Other benefits related to the surrounding community were brought up in our interviews in Pompano. One of the teachers explained the benefit of working in the same district that her children attended, including sharing the same days off. Another teacher who had grown up nearby Pompano had recently decided to purchase a home in the city. She found the city of Pompano “nice because it's a lot cheaper to live here,” but noted that the cost of living did not particularly impact her decision to remain teaching in the district.

Another community-related factor—brought to our attention by a district administrator—was that the community was given the opportunity to be a part of developing curriculum goals

within the district of Pompano. About six years prior, the district moved towards an academy model within its larger comprehensive schools, which also happened to be the three schools included for this case. The district administrator explained that prior to implementing the academy model:

We really did a lot of background in terms of—in the community—what kinds of skills, what kinds of jobs are needed and in demand, and, what are serving as barriers to our students to entering the workforce or you know college and then the workforce after. So, we did a lot of work in terms of aligning what we offer to students to an academy or pathway. So, for example, one of the pathways at park at the time that I work there was health sciences and education. So, if a student was to enter the health sciences pathway, they were they were part of a group of students of that same focus, there was a series of classes in health sciences that they would take. There were conversations around, you know, if you desire a career in health sciences. What does that look like in terms of what we offer at park high school, you know in science, that would prepare you for college post-secondary or a career in the medical field post-secondary. A lot of that work was really focused on getting kids engaged and getting them to see that what they're doing now has meaning and has impact post-secondary. So that was really exciting work.

This same administrator later told us that in addition to the academy models, the surrounding community is also influential in the types of professional development offered to Pompano teachers as well as the opportunities made available to students. They explained that the district has made an effort to “build up connections with community partners, whether that be the universities that are close to us, but also businesses that are around us too.” Examples of these opportunities included “externships” for both teachers and students. The administrator highlighted what they felt were the benefits of these community partnerships, one science specific reason being “a global look, a post-secondary look, and then take that back into the classroom. It helped me reflect as a teacher in terms of what's important skills-wise, or what's important content-wise because of those goals that my students in my academy are looking for post-secondary. I don't think, that's something we get in many places.” Notably, multiple people commented on the difficulty of keeping these partnerships sustained during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Factor #4: District support for individual teacher needs and personal rewards from their teaching assignments

We propose one remaining factor that we believe affected teacher retention in Pompano, and though it is more tentative in nature, it remains worth a brief discussion. Many of the teachers and even the administrators that we interviewed made mention of individualized reasons

for remaining within the district of Pompano. However, the exact reason was not always shared amongst them or across the different school buildings in which they taught. In an effort to capture each of these important reasons into this case, we began to realize that although the reasons may not have been the same, they may have resulted from the agency the district allowed teachers to have over their own teaching careers. We use of the term agency to refer to teachers' control over the direction of their careers, as distinct from teacher autonomy over their own classroom teaching discussed above. The difference appears to have been a consequence of the ways in which the district supported individual teachers' own visions for their teaching career—including which students they were to teach.

For example, two of the teachers we interviewed, cited the higher level of student performance that kept them in Pompano. For these teachers, it seemed to be the eventual perks associated with longevity, or holding out for the favorable teaching assignment, that bolstered their capacity to remain in their school. One teacher, who had been in the district for over 10 years, discussed her early years in the of teaching an infamous group of freshman, known amongst the school as the most difficult grade to teach. She told us that the freshman classes were routinely given to “the newest teachers”. However, over her time in the district she received training to teach one of the specialized pathways in the school, and went from teaching “people who hate science to science, to people who absolutely love it, and it's been awesome.” She explained having the opportunity to teach a course to students who were more inclined to learning science allowed her “to be more creative” in her teaching.

Another teacher specifically cited ability-grouping of students as a factor in his retention::

The pathway I teach is one that tends to attract the higher achievers within the school. It's a college prep pathway, it offers college accreditation for doing well enough in the classes. And, as a result of that I tend to attract students who are a little bit more academically inclined, and as well, tend to be more mature, I suppose, for the lack of better descriptor, and as a result of that I really don't, you know, get the worst of it, I have kids who are not causing me quite a lot of emotional turmoil, or you know challenging my authority or otherwise, you know burning up willpower.

This same teacher compared his retention with the attrition of others:

You know, realistically speaking, I think a large part of it does boil down the fact that I have students who are better than the average student within the building, and to play devil's advocate, you know you could make a very strong argument that many of the things that I've said would ring hollow if I had very difficult students who were particularly rowdy and left me emotionally drained at the end of every day. I see that in some colleagues, where you know they deal with rough

classes, all day in and day out, and you know, I don't think it's hard to see why [they leave] at that point.

By moving teachers away from classes they felt were more difficult and into placements that met their own expectations of what teaching should look like, the district helped to keep these two teachers within the schools they were teaching. This of course raises questions about both equity in classrooms related to tracking (Oakes, 2008) and the overall impact of such a strategy on the school and district as a whole. Yet, we include this example here because the pairing of this teacher with a particular group of students was cited as a retention factor.

Others that we interviewed spoke more plainly about the districts move teachers between schools in the district or between subject areas within a school. Our tentative claim is that Pompano has supported teacher retention by being attentive to the needs of its teachers. One of the administrators told us that during her time teaching in Pompano, the school underwent a significant drop in enrollment. Rather than reduce the size of the district's teacher workforce (i.e. lay off teachers) the district restructured in order to keep its teachers. The administrator noted particular attention to new teachers in this restructure: "We were able to keep folks that came on board, simply because you know, as the school shrunk and folks retired, we just didn't fill those positions. We were able to structure the schedule in a way that we kept people." This idea was echoed by one of the teachers we interviewed. They told us, "they're [Pompano Regional School District] very good with moving people around, so like if you're struggling or just disliking something, they're good at, you know, placing you somewhere else." However, both the administrator and the teacher explained that this type of restructuring becomes more difficult when a teacher holds a specialized or less flexible teaching license.

We also included in this factor the personal rewards that teachers may have experienced from their particular teaching placement. One example of this was the feeling of helping students in need, what some teachers described in one way or another as playing a part in providing an equitable teaching experience for students. According to one teacher, to those outside the district, Pompano often gets a "bad rap," and expressed that one of their main reasons for staying is because they want to continue to support their students. One teacher explained:

One thing that I think a lot of us can relate to is that our school is pretty low in the district, we have very low reading and math [scores] and, in general, I think a lot of us feel, not guilty or responsible, or like I don't know what the correct word for this is, but a lot of us really just want to help them. Like with my seniors I'm teaching, some of them don't know how to do percentages. . . And we, I think, as a science department, we understand that it's not them, they've just been wronged somewhere along the line. Like, if you're a senior in high school and you don't know how to do fractions it's not your fault. You should have heard that enough times, so I think a lot of us just get really connected to the kids and don't want to leave these kids and just be like, 'you're somebody else's problem now.' So, I

think a lot of us just kind of get attached to them, take it personally, and just really want to help these kids out.

Another teacher explained, “To be completely honest, when I'm thinking of teaching, I want to teach more at-risk students. I want to be involved in the experience of students who don't get the resources that every other student gets.” She continued by saying that for her, one of the “big things that's kind of kept me around” was her ability to “teach a diverse set of students that aren't as privileged as other students in the surrounding areas.” For this teacher, not only was teaching high-needs the population of students at her school important, but coaching them even more so. She explained that the families of her players were unable to pay for their children to participate in club sports in the city, a major avenue for other players in the districts to gain advanced skills and experiences. She told us:

I think that's another reason why I've stuck here as well, because I just feel like my players deserve a quality coach, not just anyone they can find that can act like they know what they're doing. Regardless of the fact that they don't have money or experience, I feel like they deserve someone to teach them the game properly. So that's honestly, probably the biggest reason why I'm still at [Pompano High School #1]. Other than that, I have nothing but probably issues or reasons for me to leave.

Teachers reported an appreciation for the diverse group of students they taught in Pompano. For some, this may not have been the reason they initially chose to work in the district, but it eventually became one of their main reasons for staying. “Well, the students are pretty cool. You get some rough classes, it's the typical mix of kids from wildly different backgrounds. I mean you got kids that live out in the richest place in the city, next to kids who live in apartment complexes in very poor areas. So, you get a wide variety of personalities.”

One teacher noted the importance student diversity in their retention. After a brief discussion about district demographics, this teacher said “Very diverse cultures are awesome for me, I really appreciate that.”

Mentoring and Induction

In Pompano, teachers participate in a new educator orientation which takes place in August, prior to the start of the school year. Similar to other districts across the country, this consists of technology set up, along with meeting various district personnel. Additionally, teachers are provided what was described as necessary professional development, such as workshops on the district's Individual Education Plan (IEP) process, social emotional learning, and general classroom management strategies. During the orientation, new teachers also have the opportunity to meet their “induction coaches.”

For the state of Wisconsin, between the years of 2005 and 2018, all new teachers were required to participate in a district approved mentoring program, which included mentorship under a district approved mentor. However, individual districts had autonomy in the implementation of such programs. Previously in Pompano, an individual mentor from the same department was assigned to new teachers, and paid a stipend from the district. More recently, Pompano has moved to a model of full-time induction coaches. This change took place about five years ago and is funded through federal Title II funds. This position is solely focused on mentoring, and those in this position do not have their own teaching load in addition to their role as coach. Furthermore, coaches in this position are typically matched with multiple teachers rather than the more traditional one to one, mentor to mentee, pairing.

The individual overseeing instructional coaches in the district explained that induction coaches serve in a non-evaluative capacity, with their biggest role in helping teachers with their “instructional cycles.” She also clarified that this support was not exclusively for new teachers, as any teacher is able to receive mentorship through the induction program. Most recently the district has adopted the use of the Plan-Do-Study-Act or PDSA model in instructional cycles.³

When speaking with one of the retained teachers at Pompano, they informed us that they appreciated their induction coach as well as the seminars provided through the induction programs, specifically they valued the level of autonomy they had in choosing which sessions in which they wanted to participate. However, this same teacher explained that efforts to promote community amongst teachers were not much different than any other time they had been placed in the same room with other teachers for professional development, stating, “You know, that's kind of just what happens inevitably on a PD Day when everybody teaches from the same room.”

Conclusion

From our interviews, it was clear that teachers in the Pompano Regional School District valued the ability to teach the way they wanted to with little micromanaging from administration, even when autonomy may also mean reduced support. Additionally, although the district provided a structured mentoring and induction program, for the teachers in Pompano, it was the informal relationships they developed with their colleagues that many cited as a primary reasons they have decided to stay teaching in the district. In addition to their relationships with each other, many teachers also have connections to the community, including their own personal histories as well as from the partnerships fostered by the district in developing curriculum and professional development opportunities. Lastly, teachers in Pompano seem to benefit from the district’s attentiveness to their individual needs and desires as teachers in the district. By finding ways to both move teachers within their own school as well as amongst the other schools in the district, teachers have gained a sense of agency in their teaching careers that allows them to flourish and remain in teaching.

³ An overview of the PDSA model can be found here <https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/PDSAToolkit.pdf>.

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