

The Case of Wallago School District (#WI01)

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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 (generally 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 Noyce Scholarship recipients.² The district described here was one of those selected in the state of Wisconsin.³

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

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² The Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program is a National Science Foundation program designed to meet the need for well-prepared STEM teachers in the United States. Therefore, the retention of Noyce Scholarship recipients in the teaching profession is of understandably high interest.

³ 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.

The Case of Wallago School District (#WI-01)

Wallago City is a medium-sized rural town in southwest Wisconsin. Wallago City is about 6 square miles and has a population of about 10,000, while the greater Wallago area, at 50 square miles, has 17,000 people and 7000 households.⁴ Wallago lies near major highways and a regional airport and is known for its parks and recreation, small museums, farming, and thriving business park, which include national manufacturers.

The median income in Wallago is just over \$60,000 per year, though that increases to \$75,000 per year for families with children in school. State data indicate that the poverty level rose from 36.9% in 2011 (the half-way point of the period of our study) to 47.3% in 2020 (the period when we were interviewing staff members.)⁵ Though Wallago has many farms, single-family homes, and trailer parks throughout the town, the housing market is regularly described as “tight.” The lone apartment complex in town is run by the local housing authority in order to provide affordable housing to elderly and/or disabled low-income residents.

There is a governmental installation in the area, and 17% of Wallago students’ parents work for this installation. Because of this, there is a fair amount of student mobility, though the school district also receives grants from the government to support these (and all) students in the district.

The Wallago school district currently serves approximately 3,000 students, with about 800 attending the large regional high school. School staff reported a substantial Latinx population in Wallago; the district serves 78% White, 15% Hispanic, 3% two or more races, and 1% Black students.⁶ Additional schools in the district include one large pre-K/ Kindergarten school, three elementary schools, and two middle schools. The high school administration and staff emphasized the need to ensure students graduate with skills they can use right away in the workforce. According to the principal, approximately 50% of the district’s high school students go directly to a 4-year college after graduation, an additional 25% go directly to a technical school, and the remaining 25% go straight into the workforce. Roughly 4% of Wallago Regional High School students are classified as English language learners (ELLs,) though that number is almost 6% district-wide.⁷ The district website includes many documents in Spanish as well as English (e.g. the student/parent handbook.)

The Wallago School District was selected for this study because it was able to retain 91% (n=5) of the science teachers it hired between 2007 and 2012 for a period of at least five years. This placed Wallago within the top 10% of districts in Wisconsin for its five-year retention rate, which was the first criterion 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, Wallago had a

⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/>

⁵ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash>

⁶ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash>

⁷ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash>

number of other characteristics that influenced its selection. The locale is classified by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as a “distant town,” which means it is between 10 and 35 miles from an urbanized area.⁸ Furthermore, Wallago is located in the western part of the state, which lent geographic diversity to the cases. Additionally, the district serves a student population categorized by the National Science Foundation as “high-need” (>50% FRL, 6% Limited English Proficiency,) which was another area of focus for our study.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected via Zoom interviews, and included three administrators, three novice teachers, and three retained teachers. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and each was analyzed using NVIVO software. The research team collaborated on constructing the narrative of the case. The primary goal of the interviews 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.

Findings

As a result of the interviews and subsequent data analysis, we posit four factors that likely influenced the high science teacher retention rate observed in the district. These factors are (1) systemic support for teacher improvement, (2) a supportive and collaborative school community, (3) adequacy of resources for teaching, and (4) community connections.

Factor #1: Systemic Support for Teacher Improvement

Wallago High School has a built-in system of supports that emphasizes growth and improvement. For example, both the principal and experienced science teachers mentioned the expectation that all teachers will support and informally mentor others in their department. In order to encourage this, the principal worked with the scheduling secretary to ensure that all teachers in the same content area would have a common preparation (prep) period during the school day. This was no small feat and took significant attention to detail. One administrator justified this effort, noting, “if you don't give them time in their day to look at each other's data and start norming things, you just keep doing what you've always done.” More recently, the district was successful in convincing the Board of Education to allow the early release of students once every week so that teachers can continue to meet within the school day in their professional learning communities (PLCs.) This early release time is in addition to the common planning time (for each subject/prep) during the school day. Building time into the school day was important because of the obligations that many teachers had after school. Wallago administrators respect their teachers’ outside lives, and value collaboration so highly, they made sure it could happen. One administrator explained how these non-evaluative levels of support affect retention:

⁸ <https://nces.ed.gov/>

We know that staff retention is an issue, and the community does want to have quality teachers. Having that PLC time built in tells prospective employees that we care about our teachers, that we want them, and we're very committed to developing them in-house. We have instructional coaches in our buildings and those instructional coaches are tasked with one-on-one assistance.

Another administrator explained a reality of hiring difficulties:

We hire the best person for right now. And we're going to wrap around them in a positive culture and support that we don't want them to leave, that they don't want to leave, even though [another district will] dangle \$5,000, \$10,000 more in front of them and [a commute that is] a half hour closer to home.

The Wallago School District hires new teachers with the understanding that every new teacher will need support in some areas, so, instead of waiting for the perfect fit, or firing teachers who fall short, leadership pours their efforts into developing their teachers. In the teacher quality literature, such an approach has been termed the "love the one you're with strategy," (Wiliam, 2011, p. 26) The principal and other administrators consistently talked about support over evaluation. For example:

Our principals who conduct our evaluations on our teachers, we truly try to go in with a lens of helping. It's not about catching you not doing something or catching you doing something. It's about "How can we improve our practices?" and "What are your strengths and where can we offer suggestions of improvement?" ... We always try to focus on asking the teachers, "What do you feel you're really strong at? What was going really well?" And then, "Where do you think that you would have changed, what would you have changed?"

The principal noted that if a teacher was not teaching "up to par," his preference was to address the issue with training and support, rather than "punishment."

This administrative attitude of support was confirmed by teachers. "They back their new teachers a lot, which is the reason why I want to stay next year." Two novice teachers told us explicitly about help they received. One said:

The start of the year was rough for me and I felt like the principals did a really good job of supporting me as a new teacher. ... as a very brand new teacher, anything that I had concerns with, they were like, "All right, we have a solution for that" or "Okay, we'll come down and see what we can do" or "Oh, here's information on this population of students that might be helpful."

It is important to note that the novice teachers we interviewed felt comfortable approaching the principal for help – knowing that they would, indeed, receive help and support – without feelings of embarrassment or incompetence. The support given in these instances included general pedagogical advice as well as information about particular students that could help the novice teachers better reach their students on an individual level. The district uses a continuous improvement rotation model of “Plan, Do, Study, Act” in a short cycle of 21-30 days.

Supporting teachers in improving their practice can take many forms, however everyone we interviewed agreed that the most valuable resource in Wallago was the full-time instructional coach. The instructional coach helps all teachers, one-on-one, with a specific focus on new teachers. The visits and comments are confidential. The instructional coach in WRHS is a certified math teacher who has administrative certification. If a teacher is “struggling with something instructionally, the instructional coach will come in, watch what they’re doing, and give them some strategies, suggestions to try, and then come back and follow up.” A novice teacher told us about her experience with the instructional coach:

He observed my classroom. He told me things that I was doing well to continue doing, and he gave me some suggestions on what could maybe help with that group. And so that has been incredibly helpful just to have a person – it's their *job* to help you be a better teacher.

While this type of coaching is an important support for novice teachers, the instructional coach also supports the improvement and retention of experienced teachers, which is why we do not include this under induction later. Instructional coaches were seen as a benefit to the entire district, not only to new teachers.

As they see best practices, they’re like little spreaders that spread other places. You know, “I saw so-and-so over here doing this, we should try that with you, because I think that’ll work.” And [the instructional coach] just takes all those best practices and quietly spreads them all over the place. So having that follow-up piece with those instructional coaches ensures that what we’re doing district-wide is really going into all of our classrooms.

The Wallago School District administrators were also supportive of the continued professional development (PD) of their teachers. The principal said, “I truly believe professional development for teachers is the best way to raise student achievement.” Another administrator echoed the idea of support via professional development.

How can I look at supporting them and what do they need, you know, in the professional development realm... Because it's not about you're doing something wrong, it's about maybe we need something else in your bucket... What kind of

supports can I give to you? What kind of professional development do you need? ... Do we have high quality resources? Do we have a resource that isn't giving you what you need, so is there something I can do to get a better resource in the hands of our teachers?

WRHS does some professional development in-house and on-site, mainly through PD days front-loaded in the beginning of the school year. During these days, there will be some school-wide topics such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and there are other sessions, taught by colleagues, that individual teachers can choose to attend, based on their needs. Teachers also have the opportunity to meet in their content-area teams during this time. Throughout the year, during monthly faculty meetings, different content area teams are responsible for presenting a relevant instructional strategy or technology across content areas to the rest of the teachers. Another way teachers are developed in-house is by peer observations. Science teachers are encouraged to observe teachers outside their department for instructional strategies, student relationships, etc. rather than observing science teachers, unless they are specifically seeking help with science content.

Administrators and teachers know that sometimes the best help may come from outside the school itself, particularly in a smaller district. With the ultimate goal of student success, teachers are encouraged to seek out and attend professional development. An experienced teacher said:

Mr. [Principal], he's like, "If you want to go to any type of conference, you just let me know and we can send you there to help with anything that you need." So we are definitely supported in any kind of professional development opportunity as long as it was reasonable and they can make it work.

This is supported with paid time off and substitute teachers, and there is a standing expectation in Wallago that what is learned in such conferences are shared with others. Examples include the annual PBIS conference, as well as conferences for specific content (such as AP courses)/

Outside professional development was provided both by external providers (such as AVID)⁹ as well as the regional CESA.¹⁰ Although the CESA does offer content-specific workshops, sessions for new teachers are more generally focused on pedagogy, classroom

⁹ AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) describes itself this way on their website: "AVID is a nonprofit that changes lives by helping schools shift to a more equitable, student-centered approach. We train 85,000 educators annually to close the opportunity gap, so they can prepare all students for college, careers, and life." <https://www.avid.org/what-avid-is>

¹⁰ In Wisconsin, there are 12 Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs). CESAs are intermediate service agencies that support educational needs by providing programs, services, and resources to all public and private schools in Wisconsin.

discipline, and self-care. Teachers are paid when they attend PD after school, and the district also pays a registration fee for each class per teacher.

Factor #2: A Supportive and Collaborative School Community

We saw this factor as a consequence of the systemic supports described above, but worthy in its own right as a key aspect of teacher retention in Wallago. The district's supports for its teachers were intentional and structured into daily work. One key example of this is the time set aside for collaboration among teachers through PLCs and common prep periods. However, simply providing the time for people to work together does not ensure effective collaboration. A culture of collaboration must be established. In 2008, just after he began, the current principal started a district-wide book study with Rick DuFour's *Learning by Doing* in order to foster collaboration.¹¹ The principal's idea of collaboration is that "it's centered around the group that has collectively said, 'this is what we're going to do together.'" Teachers we spoke with all agreed that the PLCs in the science department were very effective and that they worked well together. Common planning and PLC time have been set aside as "sacred time. That's not for other PD, that's for the PLC work." Such work includes planning common assessments, discussing pacing, or resource sharing. "It's nice to sit down and when we do our PLCs ... they'll be like, 'Oh, my gosh I have this really great lab' or 'I have this really great resource or worksheet that helps connect ideas.'" PLCs are also used to discuss what to expect from students, academically and behaviorally. "This is how the kids will be pushing back. This is how we're going to fight through that." This sort of collaboration is seen as helpful for the retention of novice and experienced teachers alike, and novice teachers' opinions are seen as just as valuable as those of experienced teachers. One experienced teacher described some of the supports that made the most difference to her:

I mean honestly I think just having probably the mentor. Having a mentor really helped. I had a really good mentor but even just my the staff members, I feel like I go to them most often. When I have questions, it's usually I'm turning to my science team to help solve those problems. And for us, I had those two new people that were coming in, as well, so we constantly bounce ideas off [each other.] So I would say, probably the connections that I made with the staff.

Teachers mentioned that the help from other science teachers helped them feel "supported throughout [their] first year, not just on [their] own and on an island." This seems to be working as a positive feedback loop in the science department. After reflecting on the help he received as a novice, an experienced teacher told us "the culture within this department has always been kind of helping out newer teachers. It's nice to be able to give that back to other teachers who are just starting."

¹¹ It is interesting that our study period is 2007-2017, and the principal was just beginning there during this time.

There was also evidence of fellow staff supporting each other on a personal level. One experienced teacher reflected on her first year, and spoke of her mentor teacher as a “second dad.”

When I first got here, there were two women [who] had been in the district for probably about 30 years. And they were just phenomenal role models and they kind of were the mother hens that took you in. They introduced you to other staff members. They were the type that would invite you out on a Friday night, you know just so we could have like that morale. And from there, I mean those women, they also had family, and so, then I met their sons and daughters.

Factor #3: Adequacy of Resources for Teaching

Another factor that appears to affect retention – and recruitment – of new teachers is the availability of funding and resources, particularly in the science department. One novice teacher told us that during her interview process, “it seemed like there was good funding, that I would have support” and that was what convinced her to accept the position. This funding is not necessarily always a part of the regular school budget. As mentioned previously, Wallago Regional High School regularly applies for and receives grants from the federal government. A recent grant was awarded to the science department and this allowed teachers to order “brand new equipment, like it was Christmas!”

That support and that funding is definitely a plus. I was shocked when I found out. I’m like, wait, I can just order that? I can just do that? And so I would say that’s definitely one thing that was surprising and exciting about the science department, specifically.

The principal, who was previously a chemistry teacher, told us, “I understand the importance of science education. I understand the importance of hands-on experiences.” He reported helping secure funding for the science department by using a “zero-based budget” and asking each department what they needed.¹² All departments get what they need, but the science department also gets much of what it wants. “This is what we would like to have, this is what we need to do to expand our students’ love of science.”¹³

Factor #4: Community Connections

The town and local community of Wallago appear to be a factor in retaining teachers. New teachers were taken on a guided bus tour, which was their introduction to the physical

¹² A zero-based budgeting is an accounting strategy that requires the development of a new budget each year, rather than adjusting amounts from each budget category from the previous year.

¹³ In responding to a written draft of this case, one participant noted that the science team “is not the only ones who get their ‘wants’, as often other area requests are granted as well.”

community of Wallago, and helps teachers understand, literally and figuratively, where their students are coming from. All the teachers we spoke with spoke positively of the community. One staff member described Wallago as a beautiful area with a “rich history” and “so many awesome things to do” due to its proximity to a mid-sized city. The town has “everything it needs to be self-sustained.” One teacher told us “there's a lot of pride in the community.” This, along with the “small, hometown feel,” makes Wallago a desirable place to live. However, due to a housing shortage, less than 50% of the staff actually live within the Wallago community. Often younger teachers live approximately half-an-hour away in a university city, but many choose to settle down in Wallago as they become more established and decide to buy single-family homes. On a personal level, working or living in Wallago can be summed up as, “I mean the community has been great. I've made a lot of connections, a lot of friends, and so that keeps me here as well.”

The community – broadly conceived of as its residents and businesses – supports the school in various ways, as school sports are central to the social fabric of the community. Parents were very supportive of allowing the school to provide teachers with the Wednesday afternoon PLCs, even though that meant their children would be leaving school early one day each week.¹⁴ They also recently passed a multi-million dollar referendum to build a new elementary school.

The school has partnerships with various businesses in town, especially manufacturing and health professions. These businesses provide guest speakers and internships at the high school level, as well as specialty manufacturing equipment that students learn to use.

Mentoring and Induction in Wallago

The mentoring and induction process at WRHS is extensive. Below, we describe the official induction and mentoring programs for new teachers at Wallago Regional High School.

Induction

In some cases, induction begins before the new teachers have even begun their contract. “I’m very conscientious about how we onboard people.” As soon as a new teacher is approved by the board (sometimes as early as April for the following September,) their mentor gets in touch to share contact information as a friendly way of welcoming the new teacher to the district.

The formal induction of new teachers takes place over two or three days in August, before returning teachers are brought back for school-wide professional development to start the school year. This allows administrators to focus on the new teachers. The first day is a district-wide induction, which includes district values and protocols, PD on technology, and learning what the community is like. The second day for new teachers was a community bus tour. “We all got on the bus and we had a tour around Wallago and we got to see everything and get to know the town... It was helpful. It was cool. I mean, it got the new teachers to bond, which I think was

¹⁴ The use of early release time is a strategy arising from the reallocation literature within the field of school finance (Archibald et al., 2011; Odden et al., 2002). It appears to be used more commonly in some states than others.

important.” The bus tour includes all new teachers, their mentors, and some administrators. “It’s fun, because you get to talk to people, they get to see you in a light that’s, you know, a human being.” Teachers are shown all of the schools of the district, and drive through downtown, where they see the public library, the courthouse, parks, and restaurants. Following the bus tour, teachers enjoy lunch at the local museum and are able to chat informally with each other and their mentors. This tour is seen as an important way for new teachers to build a support system, both with mentors and fellow new teachers, even though they may be teaching in different schools. The tour was also intended to help new teachers who reside outside of the town an opportunity to get to know the community.

The afternoon of the second day of induction is spent with curriculum teams. Funding is provided for experienced teachers to attend in order to support novices in learning about the resources, curriculum, and pacing, and for novices to “have time to ask questions [and] to get a sense of our culture and community.” Especially noteworthy is that if novice teachers are scheduled to teach more than one subject (e.g. biology, chemistry, and physics,) they will have separate induction days for collaboration with each content team.

The third day of induction is site-specific. At WRHS, this focuses on their “interior culture,” the resources available (One teacher said, “You’ve got to know where the copiers are!”) and contacts for various needs in the school. Among other items, they talk about their approach to student behavior, school safety, and student services. They spend the rest of the day with their mentor “so they can go through the basics, like this is how you log in to the network, here’s where you put in your time off,” and other “things that a teacher needs to do, besides teach.”

Mentoring

All new teachers at WRHS have the same mentor for two years. This is the “key person” to whom they can ask questions on a continual basis. It is expected that mentors and their mentees will meet, at minimum, monthly. Mentors are compensated approximately \$850 for the year, which is paid by the district. Mentors are hand-picked by the principal (with input from others.) Many teachers ask to be mentors, but the principal is both selective and honest with teachers when they are not selected as mentors. Wallago administrators see the following as important qualities when considering a teacher as a mentor: collaborative, open-minded, willing to learn, good/constant communication with mentee, positive, and “understanding of the direction that we need to go to increase student achievement, based on our kids.” They also noted, “A good mentor also needs to let the novice express their struggles, and to be transparent about not always having “great lessons, even as an experienced teacher.”

New teachers in Wallago are intentionally paired with a mentor outside of their department, partly because it is already assumed or expected that science teachers will support one another, and also because it can be important to get a perspective from outside the department. Many of the teachers we spoke with – both novice and previous mentors – agreed that this was important for making connections throughout the school and having an external person in whom to confide. Mentors were seen as useful for explaining the grading and learning

management systems, what to email parents before school started, and other new teacher necessities.

Mentors are trained through the local CESA and attend a full day of training each year. Every mentor also receives a packet from WRHS with a checklist of topics for each month, such as collaboration, data analysis, teaching, entering grades, etc. District mentor training occurs in the middle of August, just before new teacher induction, “so they’re fresh—the mentors are ready to go.” One administrator who had previously served as a mentor said she:

...would do a daily check. “Yeah, how [are] you doing today? Anything I can help you with today?” Because it’s not just about what we’re teaching on a daily basis. It’s about our mental health, it’s about, just, “What can I help you with today?”

One teacher agreed that “having a mentor really helped” when she was a new teacher. She also appreciated her role in being a mentor to new teachers outside the department:

...not always helping them with the day-to-day stuff, but the big picture stuff to making sure that they understand how to put in their grades, and how to take time off and, just like the layout of the school. I've mentored quite a few people... Some would reach out and have those conversations, if they were struggling with a classroom situation or they didn't know what to do.

Conclusion

During the period of our study (2007-2018,) Wallago High School retained more novice science teachers than most other districts in Wisconsin, both in terms of raw numbers and as a percentage of new science teachers as well. This was true despite the fact that nearby districts offered higher salaries. The district as a whole, and particularly the high school teachers and administrators—ensure that novice science teachers are well supported. These supports come in the form of built-in supports for improvement, such as time for collaboration and an instructional coach, a culture of collaboration and support within the science department, adequate funding for resources, and connections within the local community. Additionally, the district-provided mentor and induction program helped teachers develop relationships both within and beyond the school, which also appear to support Wallago district retain its teachers.

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