



Sustaining the Teacher Workforce: Teacher Retention in Providence

Kate Donohue, John P. Papay, Nathaniel Schwartz, & Burke O'Brien

News stories from the past year highlight an “exodus of teachers” from Providence schools following the state takeover in 2019 and the two subsequent years of pandemic schooling.ⁱ At the national level, though, reports of teachers fleeing the profession are increasingly being replaced by a more complex story, where teachers are feeling burned out by the shifting demands of the work across this period but not yet leaving the classroom at particularly high rates.ⁱⁱ

We aim to bring a similar nuance to teacher staffing in Providence. Providence opened the 2021-22 school year with a larger than usual number of vacant classrooms.ⁱⁱⁱ Like teachers across the country, teachers in Providence are facing substantial burdens produced by the pandemic and are teaching in a difficult political environment. In this brief, we investigate patterns of teacher retention in the district before and during the pandemic and look at how teacher turnover contributes to classroom staffing shortages the district faces. We build on our past analyses of the teacher workforce in Providence, which highlighted the challenges of staffing all schools and the role that more robust teacher recruitment could play in ensuring that all classrooms have effective teachers at the start of the school year.

Using data up and including the start of the 2021-22 school year, we show that, while retention did fall in Providence more than in neighboring districts, the decline was relatively modest. Given Providence’s high historical retention rate, even in 2021 PPSD retained teachers at rates on par with or higher than other districts across the country. The decline in retention came from a variety of causes, with both teacher exits and teacher retirements increasing. However, retention rates for early career teachers actually increased during the pandemic; greater turnover was concentrated among teachers with more than 25 years of experience.

While teacher attrition – exits and retirements – contributed to the classroom staffing challenges this year, they do not tell the whole story. Instead, the district’s efforts to support Covid-19 recovery efforts by hiring additional instructional coaches, assistant principals, and counselors had important unintended short-term consequences for classroom staffing. In the past year, a substantial number of teachers stayed within the district but moved into such non-classroom roles. Finally, more teachers this year went on extended leaves of absence, contributing to beginning-of-the-year staffing challenges.

The combined effect of these changes creates significantly more classrooms to fill at the beginning of the school year. In 2018 and the years before, Providence could expect around 160 positions to fill by the start of school. This current year, that total was almost 300 positions.

Two years after schools first closed for the Covid-19 pandemic and three years after the state takeover, teacher retention rates in the Providence Public School District have dipped but remain higher than other comparable urban districts

We document four key findings about retention in PPSD

- 1 **Retention rates in PPSD are relatively high compared to national patterns.** Overall, before the pandemic, teacher retention in PPSD was on par with peer districts in RI and continues to be high compared to other urban districts nationwide, including peer districts in Massachusetts.
- 2 **The number of teachers retiring and leaving PPSD has increased somewhat over the last three years, unlike in other RI districts, but overall retention rates are on par with peer districts in Massachusetts.** Since the pandemic and state takeover, PPSD has experienced an increase in exit rates with about 50 more classroom teachers leaving or retiring from the district per year than was typical before 2019. This brought the district's one-year retention rates down from 94 to 90 percent. Retention rates in other RI districts were largely flat, while retention fell modestly in similar MA districts.
- 3 **Classroom staffing challenges for the start of the 2021-22 school year were greater than the modest decline in classroom teacher retention because more teachers are moving to non-classroom teaching roles and taking extended leaves of absence.** In the past year, almost twice as many teachers as is typical moved from the classroom into administrative and support positions, including instructional coach, counselor, and assistant principal. Similarly, the number of teachers on long-term leave jumped significantly. Combined, these moves totaled 131 teachers moving out of the classroom this past year, which contribute to staffing challenges but are not the same as teacher attrition.
- 4 **While more veteran teachers retired or left the district, retention rates for early career teachers increased and turnover and hiring patterns have helped the district diversify the teacher workforce.** Changes in teacher retention patterns during the pandemic have implications for the demographics of the teaching workforce. Exits have increased for more experienced teachers in PPSD, but novice teachers were more likely to remain in the district in recent years than they had pre-pandemic. New hires are somewhat more diverse along lines of race/ethnicity than teachers who left the district.

While these changes create issues with staffing, they also offer potential opportunities for the district. More teachers are moving into broader support positions, building a more substantial career ladder to retain high performing teachers. And, the ultimate impact of teacher turnover on students depends on who leaves and who stays. The data suggest that teachers who leave tend to have been replaced by a more diverse pool of new teachers, allowing the district to make progress in diversifying its workforce. Going forward, the district can redouble efforts to retain its most effective teachers by creating work environments where teachers can thrive. It can also be sure to effectively take advantage of the opportunities presented to hire new teachers as more teachers will be retiring over the next several years.

Retention rates in PPSD are relatively high compared to national patterns.

Nationwide, estimates suggest that 92% of teachers remain in the profession each year, and 86% return to their school.^{iv} Retention rates in large urban school systems are substantially lower than these national averages, leading analysts to be concerned about a teacher retention crisis in urban public schools.^v

On average, over the past 5 years, 93% of Providence teachers returned to the district (88% in teaching positions) and 83% returned to their school (82% in teaching positions). These rates compare quite favorably to other urban districts nationwide. In fact, Providence has a higher average retention rate than any of the 16 urban school districts examined in a recent report.^{vi}

Pre-pandemic, teacher retention in Providence was also on par with other districts in the state, including other urban districts. For many reasons including relatively high teacher salaries^{vii} and relatively high occupational stability in the state in general,^{viii} teacher retention in Rhode Island tends to be high overall. Pre-pandemic, teacher retention was substantially higher in Providence than in similar-sized Massachusetts districts like Springfield and Worcester.

The number of teachers retiring and leaving PPSD has increased somewhat over the last three years.

Obtaining apples-to-apples comparisons of teacher turnover in PPSD and other districts requires relying on school staffing data from the Rhode Island Department of Education. These data are less detailed than district human resources records and yields a somewhat murkier comparison [see sidebar]. We compare retention rates of certified teachers – including those working in some non-classroom-teaching roles such as instructional coaches – across districts in Rhode Island. Given that other RI districts – even urban districts – are substantially smaller than Providence, we also look at data from Massachusetts. While the definition of “teacher” is again somewhat different in Massachusetts, we believe the estimates are reasonably comparable. We compare PPSD to several urban districts in Massachusetts: Boston, Springfield, Worcester, Lowell, Lawrence, New Bedford, and Fall River.

Prior to the pandemic and takeover, retention rates in PPSD were on par with other districts in the state and substantially higher than in similar Massachusetts districts. However, teacher retention rates in PPSD began to fall starting in 2018-19. These trends have intensified during the pandemic. In the left of Figure 1, we show the retention rates for employees holding a teaching credential in PPSD, other RI districts, and other RI urban districts from the 2015-16 to 2020-21 school years. We count teachers as retained if they remain employed in the district the following year, even if they moved to another role (such as instructional coach or principal). Interestingly, despite the substantial impacts the pandemic has had on the teaching profession and teaching workforce in the United States, retention rates in other RI districts, including other urban districts, did not fall.

About the Data

Our analysis uses teacher employment data from three separate sources: (1) the Providence Public School District (2) the Rhode Island Department of Education and (3) the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Each data source requires a somewhat different definition of a teacher”. PPSD data is the most detailed, allowing us to identify traditional classroom teachers – that is, positions with a class of students assigned to them – and differentiate them from other instructional positions. Because we focus when possible on classroom teachers, our analyses differ somewhat from public reporting that often highlights all teachers in the collective bargaining unit. The RIDE data defines teacher more broadly based on certification; as such, “teacher” encompasses not only traditional classroom teachers but also positions like instructional coaches and specialists who might work with smaller groups of students in pull-out settings. The MA definition is narrower than RIDE’s but broader than PPSD’s – it includes some specialist and support positions but does not include roles like instructional coaches.

Each data source spans the 2015-16 school year to the start of the 2021-22 school year. We use individual longitudinal data from PPSD and RIDE, allowing us to track teacher movements over time. We identify teacher retention in a given year by comparing a teacher’s work information in that year to his or her work information in the following year. The introduction of a Virtual Learning Academy in Providence during 2020-21 makes this somewhat more challenging, but we account for VLA teachers in our analysis. We use aggregate data from Massachusetts reported on the state website.

In the right of Figure 1, we show a similar comparison for Massachusetts. As noted in the data box, the Massachusetts data reports on a somewhat different group of teachers, and it only reports the share of teachers who remain in the same job classification, not in the district at all. As a result, our definition for PPSD retention is somewhat different here as well to align with the data. Here, we present Boston separately and show the average for the other districts. Retention rates in Massachusetts peer districts also fell in 2021, but not as much as in PPSD. By contrast, retention in Boston fell more. The bottom line is that while PPSD used to have quite high teacher retention rates compared to these MA districts, it is now on par.

Teacher retention in PPSD has dropped since the pandemic, while retention has stayed flat in other RI districts and fallen modestly in similar MA districts.

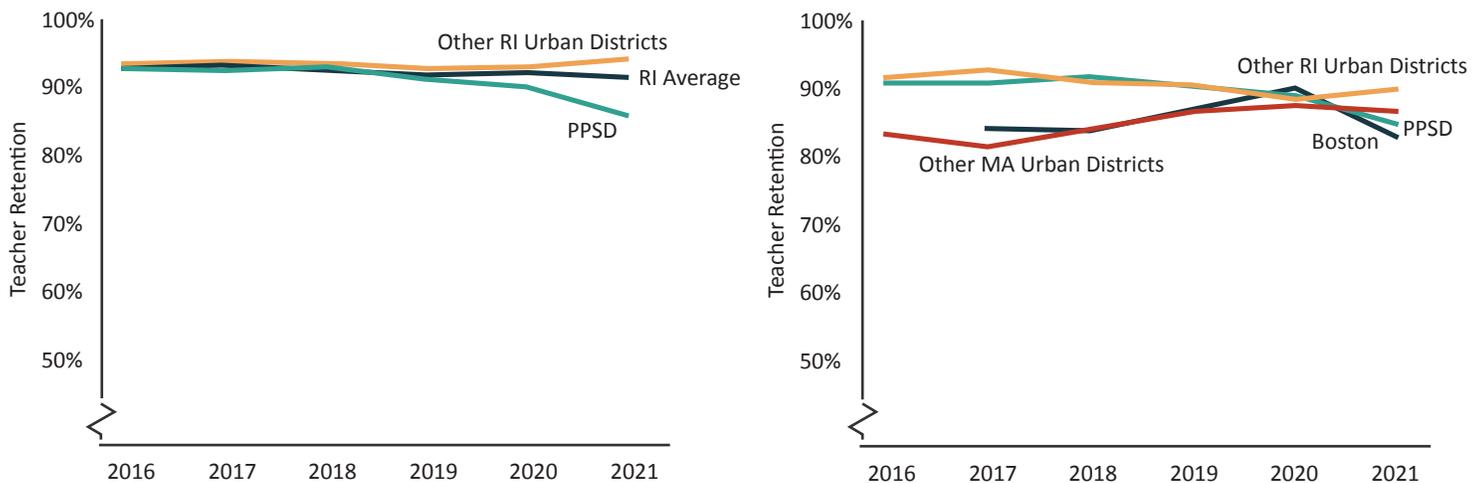


Figure 1: Retention Rates of Certified Teachers in PPSD compared to other RI districts (left) and Massachusetts districts (right), 2015-16 to 2020-21

These analyses also tend to overstate the drop in classroom teacher retention in Providence schools. Unfortunately, the statewide data do not allow us to identify which employees are actively working as classroom teachers in a given year. To do that, we use data provided directly by PPSD. While we cannot make cross-district comparisons using these data, we can further classify certified teachers as traditional classroom teachers or non-classroom certified staff such as instructional coaches or specialists.

When we distinguish between these groups, we find that the overall change in teacher retention rates is relatively small. Pre-pandemic, an average of 94 classroom teachers retired or exited the district each year; in 2019-20, 140 left and 157 left in 2020-21. With more than 1600 classroom teachers in Providence, this corresponds to a drop in classroom teacher retention from 94% to 90% — an important decline but not an exodus.

Staffing challenges are greater than the modest decline in classroom teacher retention because more teachers are moving to non-classroom teaching roles and taking extended leaves of absence.

Each year, a classroom teacher can do one of the following things:

- stay in their school in a classroom teaching position,
- move to a teaching position in a different school in the district,
- take a leave of absence,
- move to a non-classroom teaching role (e.g., instructional coach, guidance counselor, administrator),
- retire, or
- exit the district (e.g., resignation, non-renewal)

These moves have different implications for understanding teaching turnover. Large numbers of teachers exiting the district can be a symptom of dissatisfaction with the profession or teaching in the district while moves to non-classroom teaching roles can reflect teachers seeking new professional challenges by working in different types of positions. Of course, the causes of turnover are quite varied – teachers leave the district because of family moves or retirements, and shifts to non-classroom teaching positions may well reflect building-level challenges.

In Figure 2, we illustrate how these decisions have changed over time. Pre-pandemic, approximately 84% of teachers remained in their school each year while 6% moved to a teaching position in a different school. Of the 10% of teachers who left the classroom, about 2% moved to non-classroom teaching roles, 2% went on leave, 2% retired, and 4% exited the district.

The number of teachers leaving the classroom has nearly doubled the last two years, but many of these teachers are staying in the district.

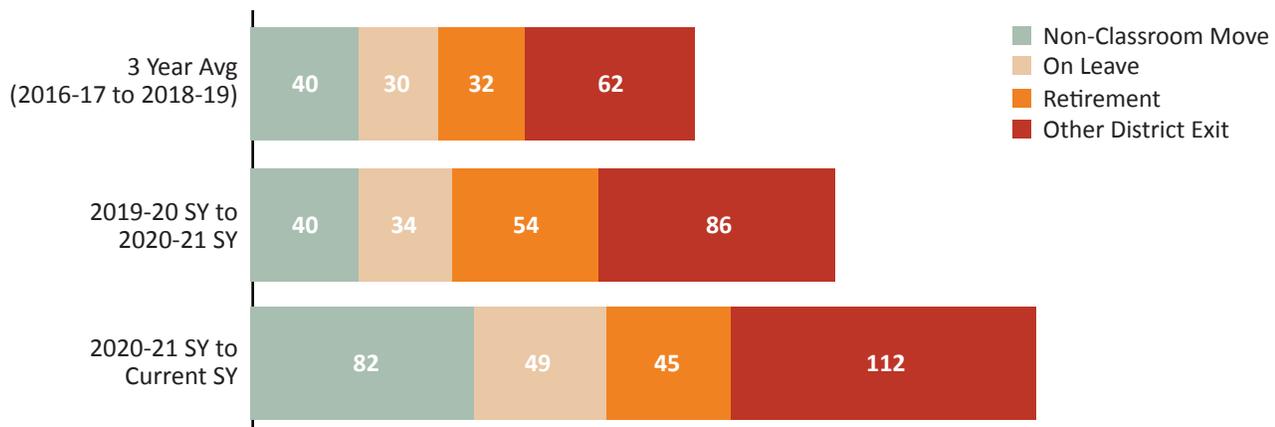


Figure 2. Classroom Teacher Exits by Year

Since the pandemic, we see four key patterns:

(1) *Teacher retirements and district exits have steadily risen over the last two years.*

Prior to the pandemic and takeover, 95 teachers either retired or exited the district entirely. That number climbed to 140 during the 2019-20 school year and increased again to 157 during the 2020-21 school year. During the 2019-20 school year, half of this increase came from retirements and the other half district exits. Last year, about one-quarter of the increase came from retirements. While the district can work to reduce the number of exits by taking steps such as building more supportive and professional environments in schools, a higher number of retirements will likely continue to be a source of turnover in coming years as nearly one quarter of all teachers in the district have more than 25 years of teaching experience. This suggests that returning to pre-pandemic and takeover retention rates may not be a realistic goal for the district.

(2) *Many more classroom teachers moved to non-classroom roles for the 2021-22 school than was typical in past years.*

There are two factors driving this pattern. First, retention rates for teachers working in non-classroom roles fell substantially in 2020-21 (from over 90% to 76%). Second, the demand for these positions increased as the district endeavored to provide more instructional coaching and student support. In particular, the number of teachers who left the classroom to become instructional coaches increased from 7 in 2019-20 to 30 in 2020-21. Similarly, 7 teachers moved into administrative roles such as assistant principal, and 5 to become guidance counselors. This reflected overall hiring in the district, which increased the number of instructional coaches and specialists by 25 positions and hired 20 new counselors. Many of these roles were supported by COVID relief funding and are seen nationally and locally as important efforts to address unfinished learning and support students with pandemic-induced mental health needs. While many of these roles were filled by current teachers, classroom teachers were not the only source of talent for these roles. Instead, the district also moved central office staff and hired externally to fill these roles.

(3) *More teachers who taught in 2020-21 are on extended leaves of absence this year.*

After the 2020-21 school year, we see substantial shifts, with the number of teachers going on leave increasing by 35% (from 36 to 49 teachers).^x Recall that we only consider a teacher on leave if they do not teach actively at all in a given school year. Thus, our figures underestimate the staffing challenge. Leaves of absence are particularly tricky for school staffing because teachers generally (and reasonably) maintain the right to their position. As a result, it is difficult for schools to hire permanent teachers to staff these classrooms. At the same time, many teachers who are on extended leaves of absence do not return to teach in the district, eventually converting these leaves into vacancies. We do not have clear information about why teachers are on leave. Medical leaves may have increased because of the pandemic and the return to in-person schooling. Recent changes to the Collective Bargaining Agreement make it more difficult for teachers to use a leave to hold on to their position while teaching in another district. Some portion of the uptick may reflect teachers using this option before it went away.

(4) *Since the pandemic, some metrics have NOT changed.*

Finally, it is worth noting that several patterns have not changed substantially during the pandemic. As of November, we saw no increase in mid-year exits during the pandemic. Thirteen classroom teachers left the district in fall 2021, compared to 17 last year and an average of 15 per year in the three years pre-pandemic. Similarly, teachers moving across schools in the district can create problematic instability and lead to additional staffing challenges. We see no difference in within-district moves between classroom teaching positions during the pandemic. Finally, we see no change in the share of teachers who move from PPSD to another district in the state. Each year pre-pandemic, about 30% of teachers who leave the district move to another RI public school district. After the 2019-20 school year, 22% did, and 25% after the 2020-21 school year. That said, given that more teachers are leaving the district, more teachers are moving to other districts (40 after 2020-21, compared to 25-30 pre-pandemic).

While more veteran teachers retired or left the district, retention rates for early career teachers increased and turnover and hiring patterns have helped the district diversify the teacher workforce.

(1) Turnover rates for early career teachers have fallen, while those for veteran teachers have increased.

Echoing career patterns in other professions and national trends for teachers, retention rates tend to be substantially lower for early career teachers. On average, 28% of novice teachers (defined as being in their first three years) exit the district, with an average of 42 novice teachers leaving every year. By contrast, veteran teachers are quite likely to remain in the district.

However, the somewhat higher turnover in 2020 & 2021 that the district saw was disproportionately concentrated among teachers with at least 25 years of experience. This is a sizable group in Providence (approximately 25% of all teachers), reflecting the quite experienced teaching force in the district. Of the 295 teachers who left PPSD in 2020 and 2021, 98 were retirements, nearly all of which fall in the 25+ bucket. By contrast, while early-career teachers tend to have higher turnover rates in general, they have been staying in the district at somewhat greater rates during the pandemic. We illustrate turnover rates by experience in Figure 3.

Experienced teachers are retiring and leaving the district at higher rates in the last several years, while novice teacher turnover has fallen.

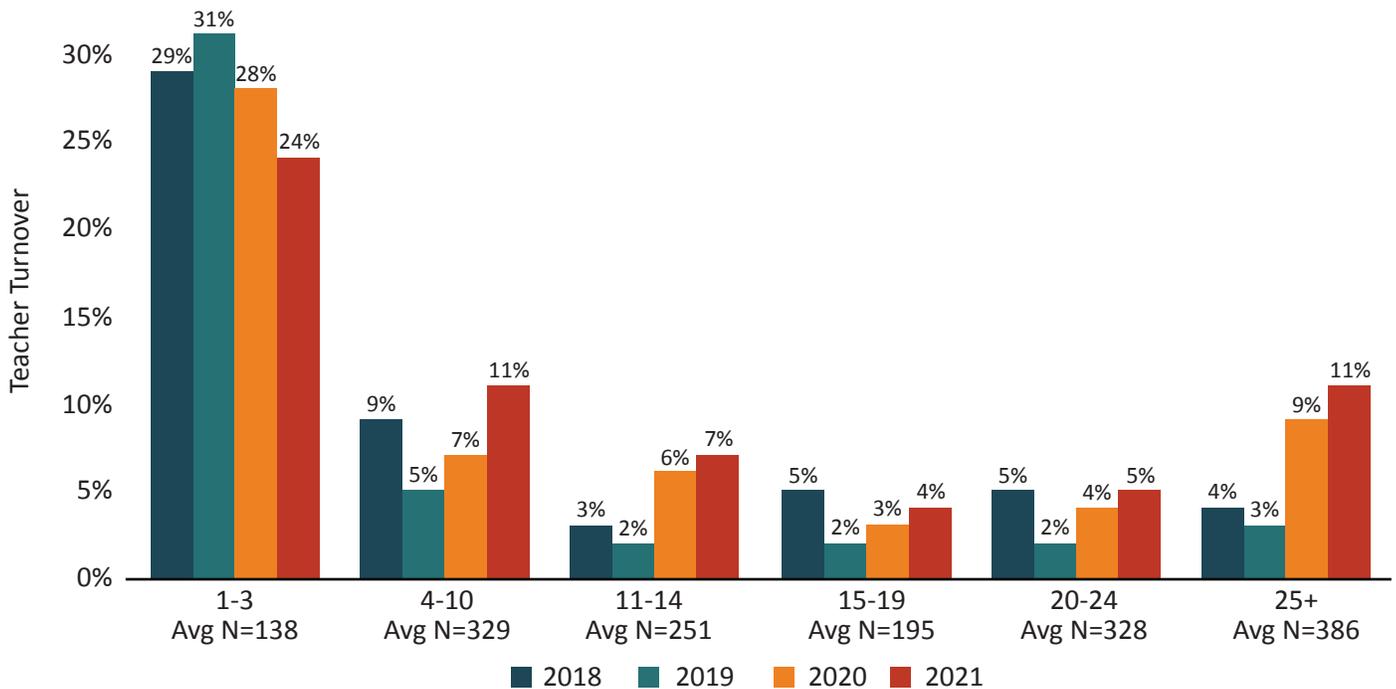


Figure 3. Turnover by Teacher Experience, 2017-18 to 2020-21

(2) Turnover and hiring patterns have led to a modest increase in the racial/ethnic diversity of the teacher workforce.

One of Providence’s key challenges is diversifying the teaching workforce, ensuring that teachers become more representative of the students they teach. Retention and hiring both play a role in diversifying the workforce – it requires that more teachers of color enter the district than leave.

Pre-pandemic, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White teachers in Providence stayed in the district at relatively similar rates. This year, however, a somewhat larger share of Black, Hispanic, and Asian teachers left the district, as compared to their White counterparts. However, these increases represent a relatively small number of additional teachers of color leaving each year. For example, 42 teachers of color left in 2020-21, compared to 31 in 2019-20.

More teachers of color left the district this year than past years but overall the numbers have not changed significantly.

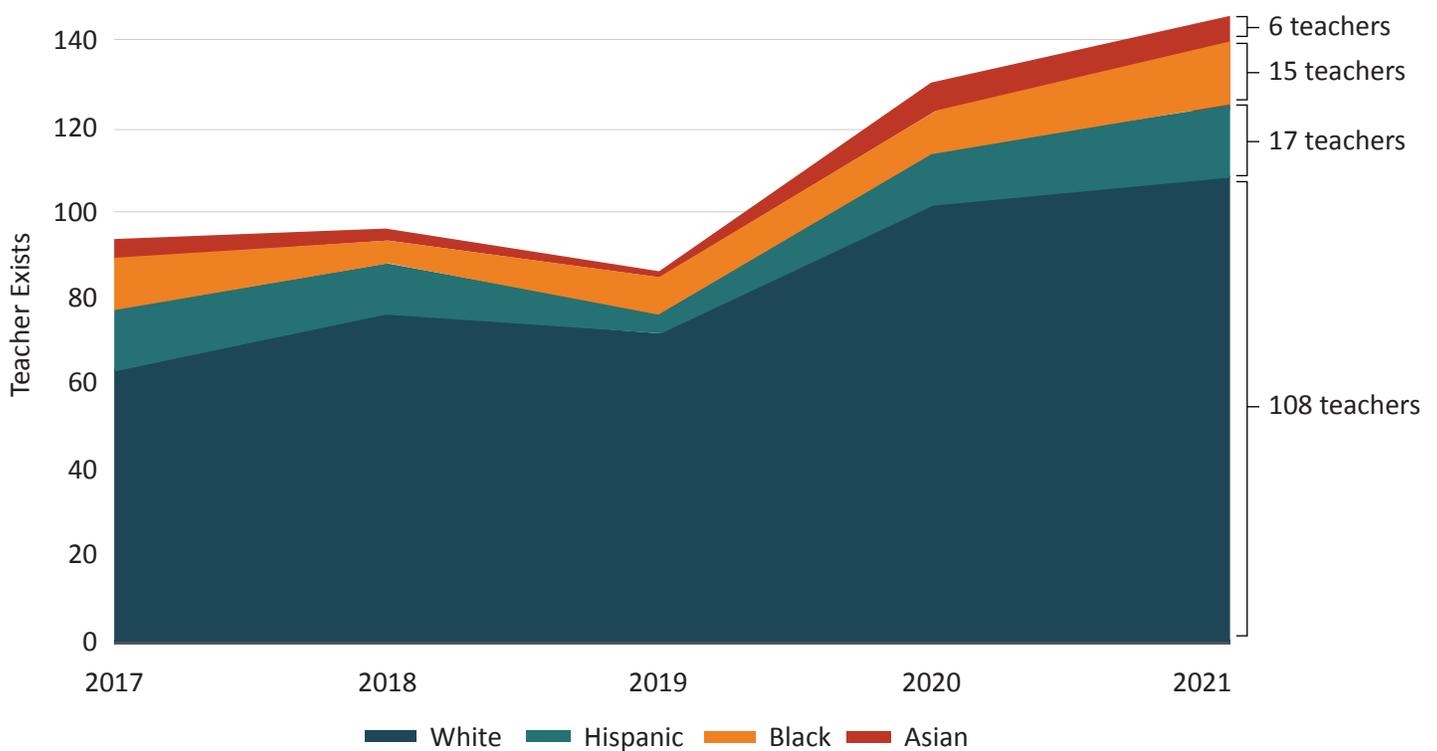


Figure 4: Turnover by Race

NOTE: We do not include the few teachers who identify as multiracial or indigenous in this figure.

While there has been a modest increase in turnover of teachers of color, there has been a more significant increase in the share of new hires who are teachers of color. Prior to the pandemic, about 20% of new hires were teachers of color. In the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, that number jumped to 30%. Taken together, this has resulted in a somewhat more diverse teacher workforce than pre-pandemic.

Policy Implications

Teacher turnover is a persistent challenge in many urban school systems. A “revolving door” of teachers into and out of the profession leads to organizational instability that hurts students and can be a symptom of serious issues in the workplace professional culture.^{xi} It also leads to staffing challenges: when a teacher leaves, the district needs to fill a vacancy. Higher turnover thus means greater recruitment costs and more novice teachers.

Pre-pandemic, PPSD was having real success retaining teachers, particularly mid- and late-career teachers. Over the past two years, retention has fallen somewhat, although it still remains on par with or greater than in peer districts. While turnover has contributed somewhat to the staffing challenges the district faces, a substantial number of teachers also moved to non-classroom teaching positions. We should note that, while we describe these changes as happening during the pandemic, we do not know whether the pandemic itself caused some of these changes. The state takeover, district turnaround efforts, and a new collective bargaining agreement that provided substantial pay increases and other policy changes all happened at the same time. Critically, this brief does not explore the reasons behind teachers' decisions to stay or leave. This does not mean that understanding teacher voice is not important; indeed, we see it as a necessary next step in this work.

Regardless of the cause, though, the patterns highlighted above and national evidence about teaching during the pandemic suggest several implications for policymakers.

Teachers across the country are struggling under the weight of addressing students' unfinished learning, supporting students' increased socio-emotional and mental health needs, and dealing with concerns about physical safety in the classroom. Concerns about teacher well-being are widespread and with good reason. The substantial financial investments from stimulus funding can be used to build more supportive professional climates in schools.

In Providence, the district has already undertaken some of these investments – supporting instructional coaches to support the ongoing development of all teachers and providing more school support staff to help meet students' non-instructional needs. However, such efforts paradoxically contributed to staffing challenges this year. As such, efforts to move up hiring timelines, streamline the hiring process, and invest in more robust teacher recruitment are critical. Ensuring that open positions are identified and filled as early as possible is critical not only for students but also for teachers; dealing with the consequences of vacancies leads to additional burnout.

While keeping talent in the district should always be seen as the district's primary goal with regard to teacher staffing, the recent turnover does present some unintended opportunities around teacher recruitment. A key goal of the Turnaround Action Plan is to diversify the teacher workforce and build a broader pool of teachers in hard-to-staff positions. Providence should redouble efforts to fill any open positions that arise with a more diverse pool of teachers. The district has had some modest success in this regard. In 2020, 23% of the teachers who exited the district were teachers of color, compared to 30% of the new hires in 2021. Making progress here will require more substantial shifts in hiring, again speaking to the importance of timeline and recruitment. Importantly, it will also require reversing the increased turnover among teachers of color in 2020-21. Again, we see signs of movement in the right direction; this year, the district is offering large signing bonuses to attract new teachers in hard-to-staff positions and is helping to reimburse costs for teachers working toward English-language-learner certification.

Finally, in this brief we have focused entirely on the number of teachers in the classroom with no attention to instructional effectiveness.^{xii} We know that teachers vary widely in their ability to support students' academic and socio-emotional development. Any efforts to boost retention must also include a focus on instructional effectiveness.

The district should work to develop supportive professional climates where exceptional teachers can thrive and want to stay. And, the district should work to find a pathway out of the district for teachers who are not succeeding with students and who do not improve with support over time.^{xiii}

ⁱ Borg, Linda. "Providence has experienced an exodus of teachers during the past two years". The Providence Journal, September 7, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3urEokn>

ⁱⁱ Barnum, Matt. "Uptick but no exodus: Despite stress, most teachers stay put". Chalkbeat, March 9, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3quQw2X>

ⁱⁱⁱ Machado, Stephanie. "Nearly 10% of Providence teachers have left in 2021 amid staff shortages across RI." WPRI, September 7, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3tMjIKp>

^{iv} Carver-Thomas, Desiree, and Linda Darling-Hammond. (2017). *Teacher Turnover: Why It Matters and What We Can Do About It*. Learning Policy Institute.

^v Ingersoll R, Merrill E, Stuckey D, Collins G, Harrison B. (2021). *The Demographic Transformation of the Teaching Force in the United States*. *Education Sciences*, 11(5):234. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11050234>

^{vi} Papay, John P., Andrew Bacher-Hicks, Lindsay C. Page, and William H. Marinell. (2015). *The Challenge of Teacher Retention in Urban Schools: Evidence of Variation from a Cross-Site Analysis*. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2607776>.

^{vii} García, Emma, and Elaine Weiss. (2019). *U.S. Schools Struggle to Hire and Retain Teachers: The Second Report in "The Perfect Storm in the Teacher Labor Market Series*. Economic Policy Institute.

^{viii} Hermansen, M. (2019). "Occupational licensing and job mobility in the United States", *OECD Economics Department Working Papers*, No. 1585, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4cc19056-en>.

^{ix} "Staffing Retention Rates." *Massachusetts Department Of Elementary And Secondary Education - Staffing Retention Rates 2022 Statewide Report*. Accessed March 18, 2022. <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/staffingRetentionRates.aspx>.

^x We are unable to observe whether any of the 49 teachers who have been on leave for the entire year will return at any point during the remainder of the school year; however, in past years, very few teachers who were on leave for the whole first semester came back during the second semester.

^{xi} Ronfeldt, Matthew, Loeb, Susanna, and Wyckoff, James (2013). *How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50, no. 1, pp. 4-36, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212463813>.

^{xii} Related, the district is having a much harder time retaining teachers in some subjects than others. For example, less than 1 in 10 elementary generalists leave their school each year, but more than twice as many EL and STEM teachers do. Higher turnover rates compound the persistent issues in staffing these high-needs areas as they are also the subjects where the district struggles to recruit applicants.

^{xiii} Weingarten, Randi. "Freedom to Teach." *National Press Club*, April 18, 2019, Washington D.C. Retrieved from: https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/freedom-to-teach_04182019.pdf