Educator Attrition in North Carolina Public Schools: Updates Through September 2023

Introduction

Engaged and effective educators are essential to North Carolina’s COVID recovery efforts. As such, since the summer of 2020, we have studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the attrition and hiring of educators in North Carolina.1 Our previous analyses showed that educator attrition was either stable (teachers) or on a downward trajectory (principals) prior to the pandemic. During the initial months of the pandemic, fewer educators left North Carolina public schools (NCPS). This was consistent with trends in other states and with patterns in teacher retention during economic downturns. However, educator attrition in North Carolina increased sharply over the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. High levels of educator turnover may adversely impact student recovery and put additional strain on remaining educators. As such, it is important to continue to track and address educator attrition.

With this brief, we update our analyses to assess the current state—as of September 2023—of teacher and principal attrition in NCPS. In particular, we answer the following questions:

1. What are current educator attrition rates in NCPS and how do they compare to prior years?
2. What is the distribution of teacher attrition across North Carolina districts and schools?

We hope these up-to-date analyses inform the broader education community and assist the efforts of state and local education officials to strengthen educator pipelines and support the educator workforce.

Background

To answer our research questions, we use employment records from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction covering the 2017–18 through 2023–24 school years.2 Specifically, we use September employment records to identify individuals working as a teacher or principal in NCPS at the start of an academic year3 and then use September employment records from the following academic year to determine whether that individual remains in the same role. For our first research question, we define attrition as teaching or serving as a school principal in NCPS in September of a given year and no longer serving in that same role in September of the following year.4 We further our analyses by decomposing these September-to-September attrition rates into two parts: attrition within the school year (leaving between September and May) and attrition between school years (leaving between May and September).

For our second research question, we define attrition as working as a teacher in a given district (or a given school) in September and no longer serving in that same role in the respective district (or school) in September of the following year. With this approach, we identify average teacher attrition rates between September 2022 and September 2023 for each district and public school in North Carolina. We visualize these attrition rates—using maps and histograms—to better understand the distribution of teacher attrition in NCPS.

1 Please see the following for our prior work on educator attrition in NCPS during the COVID–19 pandemic: EPIC Educator Attrition Through September 2020; EPIC Educator Attrition Through February 2022; and EPIC Educator Attrition and Hiring Through September 2022.
2 Our analyses include traditional (non-charter) public schools in North Carolina.
3 To be identified as a teacher or principal, an individual needs to work at least 50 percent time in that role.
4 Our definition of teacher attrition differs from that used in NCDPI’s State of the Teaching Profession report. NCDPI identifies a teacher as leaving only if they are not in any other certified position in NCPS. If teachers move to another position (e.g., assistant principal), NCDPI identifies them as retained. We identify a teacher as leaving if they are no longer teaching in NCPS in the following September.
What are current educator attrition rates in NCPS and how do they compare to prior years?

Figures 1 and 2 display teacher and principal attrition rates through September 2023. Of the 92,378 teachers in NCPS in September 2022, we find that 14.4 percent (13,239 teachers) were no longer teaching in NCPS in September 2023. Of these exiting teachers, nearly 5,000 left during the 2022-23 school year, with the remaining 8,300 teachers leaving between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. Relative to pre-pandemic levels, teacher attrition is still high in NCPS—i.e. three percentage points or 25 percent higher than before the onset of the pandemic. However, teacher attrition between September 2022 and September 2023 is 1.2 percentage points lower than in the prior year. This equates to approximately 1,400 fewer teachers leaving NCPS in the most recent period.

Regarding principal attrition, Figure 2 (next page) shows that of the 2,473 principals in NCPS in September 2022, 16.1 percent (397 principals) are no longer in a principal role in NCPS in September 2023. Among these exiting principals, 150 left the principal position during the 2022-23 school year and nearly 250 left between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. Compared to the pre-pandemic period, principal attrition in NCPS remains very high—i.e. 4.5 percentage points or 40 percent higher than between September 2018 and September 2019. However, similar to the data for teachers, principal attrition between September 2022 and September 2023 is down nearly 1.5 percentage points relative to the previous year.

Figure 1: Teacher Attrition in NCPS—September 2017 to September 2023

Note: This figure displays teacher attrition (overall, within-year, between-year) between September 2017 and September 2023.

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Our preferred attrition calculations—serving as a teacher or principal in NCPS in September of a given year and no longer serving in that respective role in the following September—indicate whether a teaching or school leadership position was vacated and likely needed to be filled. However, we acknowledge that some individuals leave teacher or principal roles and move into another position in NCPS (e.g. transitioning from a teaching position to an instructional coach). As such, we also calculated the percentage of teachers and principals who left NCPS entirely. When defining attrition as exiting NCPS, we find a teacher attrition rate of 12.42 percent and a principal attrition rate of 8.45 percent between September 2022 and September 2023. Over the same period in the prior year, 13.70 percent of teachers and 10.20 percent of principals exited NCPS entirely.

**What is the distribution of teacher attrition across North Carolina districts and schools?**

Figure 3 (next page) displays a map of district level teacher attrition rates in NCPS between September 2022 and September 2023. Overall, the average district level teacher attrition rate is 18.2 percent. This is down from 19.5 percent between September 2021 and September 2022. However, pre-pandemic (September 2018 to September 2019) the average district level teacher attrition rate was 15.2 percent. In examining the distribution of district level teacher attrition, we find that 38 districts have attrition rates less than 15 percent while 11 districts have attrition rates greater than 25 percent. Similar to the data from last year (September 2021 to September 2022), we find that district level teacher attrition is generally higher in northeast North Carolina and lower, on average, in the

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7 For these analyses we define attrition as teaching in a district in September of a given year and no longer teaching in that district in September of the following year.
western portions of the state. Further analyses show that district level teacher attrition rates from September 2022 to September 2023 are highly correlated (0.77) with attrition rates from September 2021 to September 2022.

To extend our attrition analyses, Figure 4 presents the distribution of school level teacher attrition in North Carolina. Overall, the average school level teacher attrition rate between September 2022 and September 2023 is 23.7 percent. This is down from 26.2 percent between September 2021 and September 2022. We find that approximately 275 NCPS have teacher attrition rates less than 10 percent. Nearly 500 schools have attrition rates between 15–20 percent and another 450 schools have attrition rates between 20–25 percent. At the far tail of the distribution, we find that almost 220 schools have attrition rates higher than 40 percent. Taken together, these data highlight the ways in which teacher attrition challenges varied across NCPS, from a relatively modest to an acute concern.

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*For these analyses we define attrition as teaching in a school in September of a given year and no longer teaching in that school in September of the following year.

*Further analyses show that school level teacher attrition rates from September 2022 to September 2023 are correlated at 0.41 with school level teacher attrition rates from September 2021 to September 2022.
Discussion

Given the essential role of educators in helping students re-engage with school and recover academically, we continue to assess patterns of educator attrition in NCPS. After consecutive years of rising attrition, this work shows that teacher and principal attrition rates modestly declined in NCPS between September 2022 and September 2023. Educator attrition is still elevated, relative to pre-pandemic averages, and still a serious concern for many NC districts and schools. In fact, over 950 NCPS lost at least 25 percent of their teacher workforce during our most recent study period. Nonetheless, the drop in educator attrition rates is positive news and hopefully signals the start of a trend in educator attrition rates returning to pre-pandemic levels. State, district, and school level officials all have important roles to play in encouraging educator retention. This is especially true as ESSER funding comes to an end and districts face tough decisions about expenditure priorities. As such, we will continue to track educator attrition in North Carolina and push forward with analyses to better understand what predicts educator attrition in the post-pandemic period.

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