

The Moral Imperative for Teacher Retention

BY BECKY EVERS-GERDES AND RYAN SIEGLE

Today's teachers face unprecedented challenges in the workplace. From rising poverty levels to a heightened awareness of school violence, from working on the front lines of a youth mental health crisis to dealing with increased public scrutiny following the pandemic, many educators are left trying to balance newfound demands in what was already a complex profession. The consequence? Tired, stressed, burned-out teachers. Current retention findings tell much of the story:

- ▶ K-12 educators have a higher burnout rate than any other profession (Marken & Agrawal, 2022)
- ▶ Teachers are twice as likely to feel stress than other occupations (Doan et al., 2023)

All of these ingredients combined create a recipe for the diminished mental health and well-being of our nation's teachers, resulting in a mass exodus in what has been dubbed The Great Teacher Resignation. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, around 300,000 teachers and education-related workers left the profession between February 2020 and May 2022 (Dill, 2022). If every person that left education between those dates lined the border of the United States, there would be an educator standing every 53 yards all the way around the country.

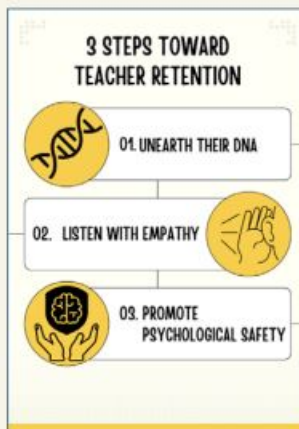
So, what can leaders do to curb the tide of teacher attrition? Below, we suggest three ways you can start making a difference today.

1. Unearth their "DNA."

The confidence and self-efficacy of a teacher can be the difference between a teacher remaining in the profession and a teacher quitting. For leaders to build self-efficacy within their teachers, they must first know their DNA, or their Desires, Needs, and Abilities. Take time to get to know each of your teachers' personal stories, goals, and strengths. As you get to know your teachers as people, you'll start to understand what shapes their beliefs and values, influencing how they respond to the difficult things they're facing.

2. Listen with empathy.

Teachers are more likely to stay in the profession when they feel like their voice matters. Leaders give teachers a voice when they stand alongside them, genuinely listen to



them, and seek to understand their point of view. Start by asking open-ended questions and refrain from interrupting or making counterpoints. Then, supportively respond by putting yourself in their shoes with a phrase such as, "I understand why you might feel that way."

3. Promote psychological safety.

To counteract high levels of teacher stress, promote a culture where teachers feel safe enough to fail. School leaders promote safety when they model vulnerability by asking for feedback and when they intentionally acknowledge staff who embrace hard times as learning opportunities.

As school leaders, we have a moral imperative to curb the tide of teacher attrition. But what keeps teachers

teaching even in the most difficult of times? *You do.* The common thread that weaves the quilt of teacher retention factors is you, the leader of the school. Teachers are more likely to stay in the profession when they feel supported by their leader, and we support our teachers when we unearth their DNA, listen to them with empathy, and promote their psychological safety.

References

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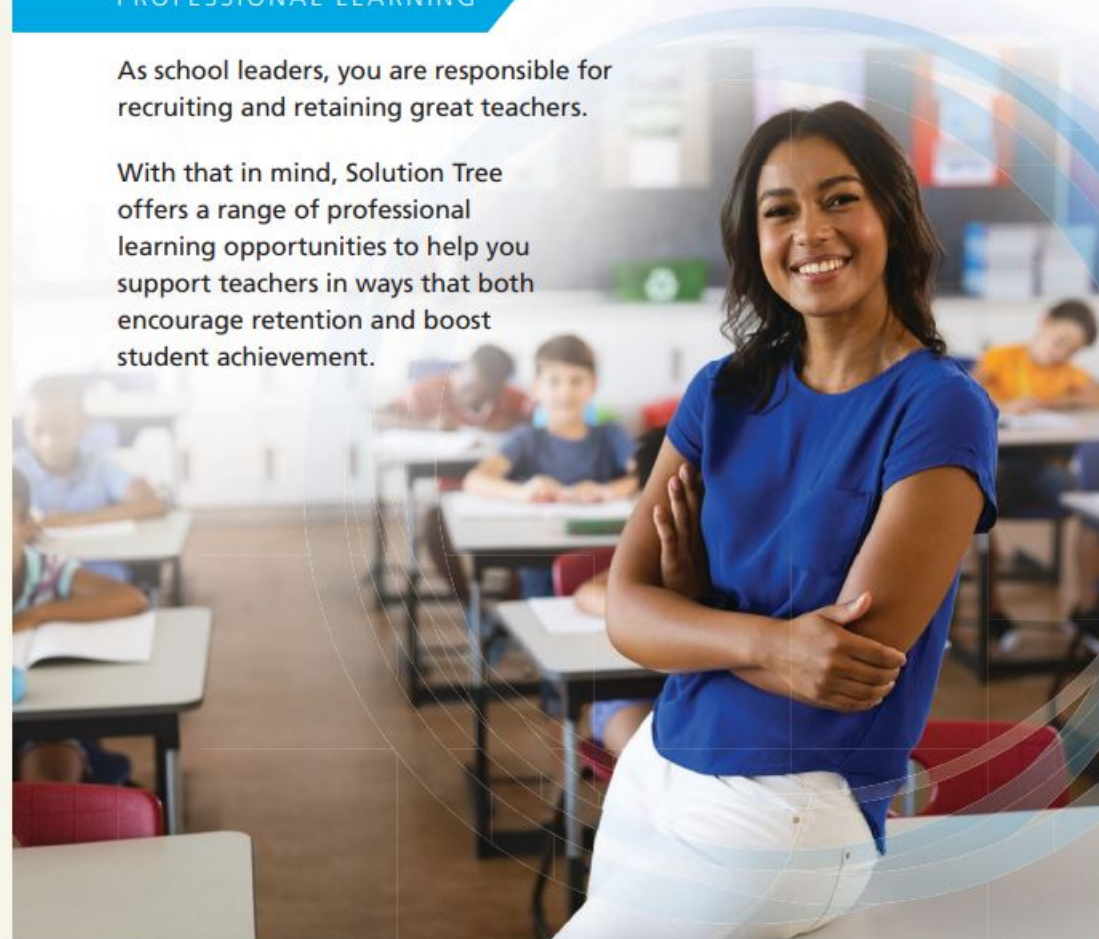
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