

EVIDENCE MATTERS
VOLUME 3, NO. 1

Preventing Turnover, Increasing Retention: How PBL Professional Learning Can Help

The driving question for this brief concerns one of the most pressing issues facing schools and districts as they recover from widespread staff shortages in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. What role do high-quality professional learning services play in increasing teacher retention? Why should leaders invest in Project Based Learning professional learning for teachers?

Authors:

Lauren Coleman, Ph.D.
Research Associate, PBLWorks

Kristi Wagner, Ed.D.
Director of Research and Evidence, PBLWorks

Coleman, L. and Wagner, K. (2024). Preventing Turnover, Increasing Retention: How PBL Professional Learning Can Help. PBL Evidence Matters 3(1). The Buck Institute for Education.

Teacher shortages in U.S. K–12 public schools, exacerbated by the pandemic, underscore the urgency of addressing both recruitment and retention. High-quality professional learning is one treatment that correlates with increased teacher satisfaction and retention rates. PBLWorks offers dynamic opportunities for professional learning that foster collaboration, autonomy, and responsiveness to individual needs. By investing in such professional learning, schools can cultivate a thriving community of educators committed to student success and mitigate the impacts of teacher shortages.

Nationwide Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages are pervasive in K–12 public schools across the country. According to the Condition of Education 2023 report published by the National Center for Education Statistics, the coronavirus pandemic posed significant challenges to teacher staffing and retention. 40% of public schools reported difficulties filling their open positions in the 2020–2021 school year, compared with just 17% in 2011–2012; additionally, enrollment numbers for teacher preparation programs decreased by 30% from 2012–2013 to 2019–2020.¹ The nation struggles both to recruit new teachers and to keep existing ones. Not only do schools report challenges filling positions, vacancies are also increasingly widespread. 43% of public schools nationwide reported teacher position vacancies on the 2022 School Pulse Panel, with 63% of those schools citing the coronavirus pandemic as a contributing factor.²

Given the demonstrated crisis of the ever-growing teacher shortage, the question becomes: **How can we develop and retain highly qualified teachers in K–12 public education?** Research consistently shows that teacher quality is the most important in-school predictor of student achievement.³ To this end, leaders and district officials must create a culture of support for teachers already in schools to be motivated to stay in the profession and hone their craft.

High-Quality Professional Learning Can Help

There are several research-based interventions shown to ameliorate teacher turnover and attrition. Many of these strategies, such as raising teacher salaries and reducing the economic burden of teacher preparation, operate on a system-wide, long-term level.⁴ However, there are several factors that are within a school or district’s level of control. Within the school environment, teachers are motivated by ample collaboration time, greater feelings of autonomy, supportive and involved administrators, and allocated time for high-quality professional development that is collaborative, individualized, and immediately useful within their classrooms.⁵

Several pieces of evidence indicate that positive professional development experiences are associated with improved teacher satisfaction and retention. The Economic Policy Institute reported in 2019 that teachers who stayed in the classroom were significantly more likely to have experienced “very useful” professional development activities, compared to those who quit the profession.⁶ The Learning Policy Institute’s 2021 report on teaching and learning conditions in North Carolina found, after surveying thousands of teachers, that “professional learning and collaboration” was one of the most important factors related to positive teacher working conditions and retention, particularly in high-poverty school environments.⁷ In the same study, however, only 20% of respondents strongly agreed that they had access to sufficient professional development resources. Professional development can be leveraged as a key driver in teacher retention, and it is an area of high need.

Characteristics of High-Quality Professional Learning

As indicated above, High-Quality Professional Learning is one intervention that is positively correlated with teacher retention rates. But what is High-Quality Professional Learning? According to the Northwest Comprehensive Center at Education Northwest, strong professional development programs have some traits in common:

- Strong, relevant **content focus**,
- Ample opportunities for inquiry-based, **active learning** for teachers,
- **Collaboration** and interactive participation with other teachers, and
- Opportunities to connect multiple times **across the school year** or term.⁸

By engaging in these high-quality learning experiences, teachers have access to ongoing learning that furthers their career, as well as opportunities to form professional learning communities that foster the positive support teachers need to stay in the profession. Luckily, the offerings facilitated by PBLWorks National Faculty embody all of the above characteristics. Additionally, Project Based Learning as a pedagogical framework opens the door to creating the school and classroom conditions most positively associated with teacher job satisfaction and teacher retention. Let's find out how!

PBLWorks Offers High-Quality Professional Learning Opportunities

By providing professional learning that is dynamic, challenging, and stimulating, PBLWorks offers teachers the chance to build connections, deepen understanding, and immediately improve their classroom practices—all factors associated with positive outcomes regarding satisfaction and retention.⁹ Let's dive into some of these qualities and how PBLWorks can support their development.

- PBLWorks Professional Learning is **collaborative**. Participants in all PBLWorks services work together throughout the day on a variety of hands-on activities, fostering communication and new connections. In our [Project Slice](#) services, for example, participants engage in an immersive PBL experience, working in groups just as learners do in a PBL classroom.
- PBLWorks Professional Learning encourages feelings of **teacher autonomy**. PBLWorks' [Gold Standard Teaching Practices](#) put teachers in the driver's seat, encouraging them to consider their class' unique needs as they plan out their projects and scaffold student learning. Our Project Based Learning units contain ample opportunities for teachers to customize learning activities towards what makes the most sense for themselves and their students.
- PBLWorks Professional Learning is **responsive** to individual student and classroom needs. In a PBLWorks service, such as [PBL 101](#), teachers walk away with a toolkit of routines, protocols, and design ideas that they can immediately implement into their classroom practice, a key factor of successful professional development. Additionally, through the [Gold Standard Design Elements](#) of Project Based Learning, we put students at the center of everything we do. Projects are **authentic** because they have a real-world impact on students' lives; opportunities for student voice and choice help develop students' agency as lifelong learners.

- PBLWorks Professional Learning is **engaging**. In order for professional learning to “stick” with teachers, it should be fun! PBLWorks services are active, hands-on, immersive, and participatory. Teachers are able to bounce ideas off of one another, working with real-life projects that they will go on to implement in their classrooms. There is not a single wasted moment in a PBLWorks session, and teachers walk away excited about what they have learned!
- PBLWorks offers **wraparound** professional learning opportunities for **school and district leaders**. Research shows that the presence of a supportive, involved administration also contributes to improved teacher retention.¹⁰ Through PBLWorks services for [school](#) and [district](#) leaders, participants can build their capacities to support system-wide implementation of High Quality Project Based Learning, developing a culture of PBL across classrooms and schools. Even better, services for school and district leaders follow the same design format as our teacher-facing workshops, so administrators are able to engage in participatory, collaborative learning that models Gold Standard PBL Design Elements. For more information, check out our [PBL Leadership Jumpstart](#) series, where leaders develop plans to build schoolwide culture and capacity for Project Based Learning.
- PBLWorks professional learning develops high-quality **instructional coaches**. Research indicates that access to high-quality mentorship and coaching also positively impacts teacher satisfaction and retention.¹¹ It is just as essential to retain and develop excellent, motivated coaches as it is to provide professional learning to teachers. Our [PBL Coaching Workshops](#) allow anyone who supports teachers implementing PBL to gain tools to plan and implement successful PBL Coaching Cycles.
- PBLWorks offers opportunities for **continued** development. Whether a teacher experiences a Project Slice, attends PBL World, or goes to a three-day PBL 101 training, the development doesn't stop there! PBLWorks offers many opportunities to continue to engage in PBL professional development as the school year progresses. Our [Online Teacher Consultancies](#), [Sustained Support Visits](#), and Project Design Consulting opportunities offer ongoing, targeted support to help teachers build their PBL skills and implement the most effective projects possible.

When done well, professional learning offers ample opportunities for collaboration, engagement, and community building. It allows teachers to share ideas and grow their professional networks. Ultimately, these experiences can have an impact on teacher satisfaction and are even associated with improved teacher retention. Through PBLWorks' services, teachers are able to experience the Gold Standard Design Elements firsthand, participating in hands-on experiences with colleagues. Most importantly, teachers leave satisfied, equipped with deliverables that they can immediately implement into their classroom practice.

Curious about the professional learning opportunities at PBLWorks? Visit our [PBL Services Overview](#) page to learn more about how your school can participate.

Endnotes.

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