

Teacher Retention and Student Engagement in Low-Income Public Schools:

A Qualitative Study of Teacher Perspectives

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Abstract

Teacher shortages persist in low-income public schools across the United States, primarily due to high turnover and challenging working conditions. Although previous research has addressed the causes of teacher shortages and their policy implications, limited attention has been paid to teachers' perceptions of the relationship between staffing instability and student academic engagement. The present study investigates the factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain in or leave low-income public schools and examines how these factors are perceived to affect student engagement. A qualitative methodology was employed, utilizing a structured online survey with a small sample of three current or recently employed teachers in high-poverty school contexts. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns related to teacher retention, workplace conditions, and perceived impacts on student attendance, participation, and motivation. The results indicate that administrative support, workload, and school climate are critical determinants of teacher retention. Furthermore, teachers reported that high turnover and staffing shortages negatively impact student engagement by disrupting continuity, relationships, and instructional quality. These findings underscore the need to improve working conditions to enhance both teacher retention and student outcomes.

Keywords: teacher retention, teacher turnover, low-income schools, student engagement, staffing instability

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Teacher shortages in low-income public schools are a serious problem in the United States, affecting educational fairness and student success. Schools in high-poverty areas face more staff changes, unfilled jobs, and a greater reliance on less experienced teachers. These issues put extra pressure on schools and disrupt learning for students already at risk of losing interest. To improve teacher retention and student results, it is important to understand why these shortages occur and how they affect schools.

National data from federal education agencies and the Bureau of Labor Statistics highlight the scale and persistence of this issue. Analyses using data from the National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Department of Education surveys show that about 15% of public school teachers leave the profession or transfer schools each year, reflecting ongoing workforce instability. This turnover is not evenly distributed. High-poverty schools have turnover rates often more than one-third higher than those in affluent communities. Additionally, federal and state reports show that tens of thousands of teaching positions remain unfilled each year, and many are filled by staff who are not fully certified. Early-career teachers leaving within their first five years further worsen the problem. These patterns indicate that teacher shortages stem less from a lack of qualified candidates and more from systemic retention challenges.

Consistent with these national trends, recent research shows that teacher shortages mainly result from retention challenges in specific school contexts, not a general lack of qualified educators. Barth et al.

(2016) and Sutchter et al. (2016) report that high-poverty schools have significantly higher turnover rates than affluent schools, largely due to difficult working conditions, limited administrative support, and increased job-related stress. Ingersoll (2001) also argues that organizational factors like school leadership, accountability pressures, and limited professional autonomy drive teacher attrition. These findings suggest that improving workplace conditions may be more effective than simply increasing the supply of new teachers.

Beyond identifying causes of teacher shortages, researchers have examined the impact of staffing instability on student outcomes. Evidence shows that frequent teacher turnover harms student achievement by disrupting instructional continuity and weakening teacher-student relationships (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Additional studies find that inexperienced or substitute teachers, often hired to fill vacancies, may be less effective in maintaining student engagement and classroom management (Kraft et al., 2020). However, much of this research relies on large-scale quantitative data and focuses on measurable outcomes like test scores, with less attention to students' daily academic engagement, including attendance, participation, and motivation.

Although existing studies offer valuable insights into teacher turnover patterns and consequences, they often overlook teachers' perspectives. Teachers have unique insights into factors influencing their decisions to stay or leave, which affect classroom dynamics and student outcomes. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and open-ended surveys, can provide a deeper understanding of these experiences and contextualize broader trends identified in quantitative research.

This study aims to contribute to the literature by focusing on teachers' perspectives in low-income public schools. Specifically, it examines the factors influencing teacher retention decisions and explores

how teachers perceive the impact of staffing instability on student academic engagement. By centering teacher perspectives, this research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how school-level conditions affect both educators and students, and to inform policies and practices intended to improve retention and promote student success.

Research Question

This study addresses the following primary research question: What influences teachers to stay at or leave low-income public schools, and how do they perceive the effects of staffing instability on student academic engagement? This question is designed to fill gaps in current research, which often focuses on structural causes and policy solutions but pays less attention to teachers' own experiences and views on how staffing changes impact classrooms.

Based on prior literature (Barth et al., 2016; Ingersoll, 2001; Sutchter et al., 2016), it is expected that teachers will identify working conditions such as workload, administrative support, and compensation as primary factors shaping their retention decisions. It is also expected that teachers will perceive a negative association between staffing instability and student engagement, particularly in areas of attendance, behavior, and motivation. Because this study uses qualitative and descriptive methods rather than experimental designs, it does not attempt to establish causal relationships. Instead, it identifies patterns in how teachers interpret and experience staffing conditions in high-poverty school settings.

Setting

This study is situated within low-income public school environments in the United States, which are disproportionately affected by teacher shortages and high turnover rates. All three participating

teachers reported working in schools serving primarily low-income student populations, many of whom face additional academic and behavioral challenges. The schools represented in the sample include elementary (K–5) and middle school (6–8) grade levels, reflecting a range of instructional contexts. These environments are characterized by high demands on teachers, including large workloads, limited instructional resources, and varying levels of administrative support.

Rather than evaluating a formal instructional intervention, this study focuses on teachers' experiences within existing school conditions. The natural variation in staffing stability and working conditions across schools serves as the basis for examining how perceived instability shapes both teacher retention decisions and perceptions of student engagement. Some teachers described relatively stable environments with supportive leadership, while others reported frequent turnover, heavy workloads, and insufficient resources.

Data Sources and Sample

Data were collected through a structured online survey distributed via Google Forms to teachers currently or recently employed in low-income public schools. The survey was distributed to a pool of approximately seven potential respondents, and three individuals completed the survey in full, yielding a response rate of approximately 43% (3 out of 7). The final analytic sample consists of three teacher respondents ($N = 3$), representing a small qualitative case study designed to explore patterns in teacher perceptions rather than to produce generalizable statistical estimates.

All three respondents identified as Black or African American, representing 100% of the sample. Two teachers were early-career (0–2 years of experience) and one was mid-career (3–5 years). All three

taught in schools serving predominantly low-income student populations. Three teachers taught at the elementary level (K–5), and two also taught at the middle school level (6–8). Subjects taught included English, Math, Science, Social Studies, and History. Table 1 presents a summary of key sample characteristics.

Table 1

Sample Demographic and Professional Characteristics (N = 3)

Characteristic	Category	n (out of 3)
Race/Ethnicity	Black/African American	3 (100%)
Years of Experience	0–2 years	2 (67%)
	3–5 years	1 (33%)
Grade Level	Elementary (K–5)	3 (100%)
	Middle School (6–8)	2 (67%)
Subjects Taught	English, Math, Science (multiple)	2 (67%)
	English and History	1 (33%)
Student Population	Mostly low-income	3 (100%)
Free/Reduced Lunch	High-poverty schools (>75% est.)	3 (100%)

Note. T = Teacher respondent. Grade level categories are not mutually exclusive; teachers may serve multiple grade levels.

No respondents were excluded from analysis due to missing data; all three surveys were completed in full. Because the sample is small and non-random, findings are not statistically representative and should be interpreted as exploratory in nature.

The survey consisted of five sections containing both Likert-scale and open-ended items. Section 1 gathered demographic and professional background information. Section 2 addressed teacher retention and turnover. Section 3 examined the school environment and working conditions. Section 4 explored perceived impact on students. Section 5 invited reflections on solutions and policy. The full survey instrument is included in Appendix A.

Key variables included: (1) teacher retention factors, measured via open-ended items and a 5-point turnover rating scale (1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High); and (2) perceived student engagement outcomes; measured via a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) and open-ended responses. On the Likert scale, scores of 4–5 indicate agreement or strong agreement, scores of 2–3 indicate moderate or mixed views, and a score of 1 indicates strong disagreement. These scales do not have established proficiency cutoffs; they are used here to gauge the relative strength and direction of teacher perceptions.

Analytic Method

The data were analyzed using a combination of qualitative and descriptive methods. Survey responses were first organized in a spreadsheet to facilitate systematic review. Quantitative items, such as Likert-scale questions, were summarized using basic descriptive statistics including counts and response distributions (see Table 2). These summaries helped identify general patterns in how teachers viewed workload, administrative support, and the effects of staffing instability on student engagement.

To analyze qualitative responses, thematic analysis was conducted on open-ended survey items following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Responses were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns and categories. Initial coding addressed key themes related to teacher

retention, such as workload, compensation, administrative support, student behavior, and school resources. A subsequent round of coding examined perceived impacts of staffing shortages on students, including engagement, attendance, academic performance, and classroom relationships.

After coding, themes were grouped into broader categories to identify dominant patterns across participants. For example, workload and low pay were combined under a broader 'structural stressors' category, while administrative support and school climate were grouped under 'organizational support factors.' Similarly, student engagement impacts were synthesized into themes such as 'disrupted learning environments' and 'weakened teacher-student relationships.'

Findings were visualized using bar graphs (Figures 1 and 2) generated with Python (matplotlib) to facilitate clearer interpretation of patterns within the small sample. Because the study is based on a limited sample (N = 3), the analysis does not aim to establish causal relationships but instead focuses on identifying consistent themes in teacher perceptions.

No observations were excluded due to missing data, as all three respondents completed the survey in its entirety.

Table 2

Likert-Scale Response Summary by Teacher Respondent (N = 3)

Survey Item (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)	T 1	T 2	T 3
I feel supported by my school leadership.	4	3	—
My workload is manageable.	4	2	5
My school has enough resources.	4	2	3

Staffing shortages negatively affect student engagement. 2 5 5

Teacher turnover at my school (1=Very Low, 5=Very High) 2 3 5

Note. T1, T2, T3 = individual teacher respondents. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree (or 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High for turnover item).

— = item not completed by respondent.

Findings

Teacher Retention and Turnover

Across the three respondents, two out of three (67%) reported seriously considering leaving their current school or the teaching profession. The most common reasons cited were workload, low pay, and lack of administrative support, with student behavior challenges also mentioned. These findings suggest that both structural and environmental factors contribute to teachers' decisions to consider leaving, consistent with prior research on teacher attrition.

Despite these challenges, teachers also shared reasons that made them want to stay. The most commonly cited factors were positive relationships with students and a genuine passion for teaching. One respondent noted that supportive administration also played an important role. This suggests that while difficult working conditions can push teachers toward leaving, personal connections and professional purpose serve as meaningful retention anchors.

Teachers' perceptions of turnover at their schools varied, with ratings ranging from 2 (low) to 5 (very high) on a 5-point scale. This variation suggests that even within similar school contexts, individual experiences with staffing stability can differ considerably. Nonetheless, all participants recognized turnover as a meaningful issue in their schools.

School Working Conditions

Responses related to working conditions revealed mixed experiences across the three teachers. Administrative support ratings ranged from 3 to 4, suggesting moderate levels of perceived support. Ratings for workload manageability ranged from 2 to 5, indicating more substantial variation, one teacher found the workload manageable, while another did not. Resource sufficiency ratings also varied (2–4), reflecting inconsistency in access to materials, staff, and support.

Qualitatively, respondents emphasized that inadequate pay, limited resources, and heavy workloads contribute to stress and burnout. One teacher commented that insufficient pay directly affected their ability to remain long-term at a school. Another noted that stronger leadership and a more supportive community would help address challenges related to student behavior and workload. These responses illustrate how financial and organizational conditions intersect in shaping teacher retention.

Perceived Impact on Student Engagement

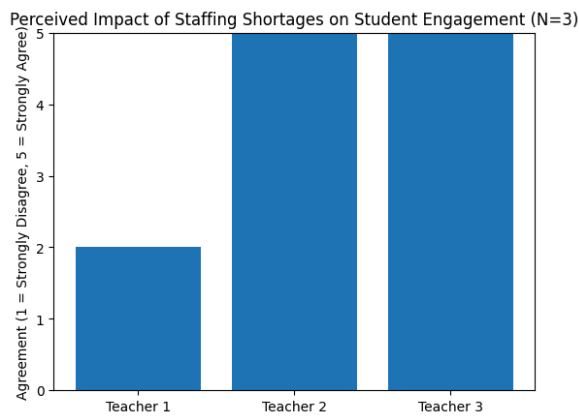
All three teachers agreed that staffing shortages and high turnover negatively affect students. The most frequently mentioned consequences included lower student engagement, disrupted learning environments, weakened teacher-student relationships, and lower academic performance and attendance. Two out of three teachers strongly agreed (rating of 5) that staffing shortages hurt student engagement; one teacher gave a lower rating of 2, suggesting some variability in the perceived severity of this impact.

Open-ended responses provided additional texture. One teacher observed that when staff change frequently, it becomes difficult to build stable relationships with students, which in turn leads to more behavioral challenges and reduced engagement. Another noted that staffing challenges made it harder to build consistent relationships with students and that instability tends to increase acting-out behavior.

These qualitative accounts reinforce the Likert-scale ratings and highlight the relational dimension of staffing stability.

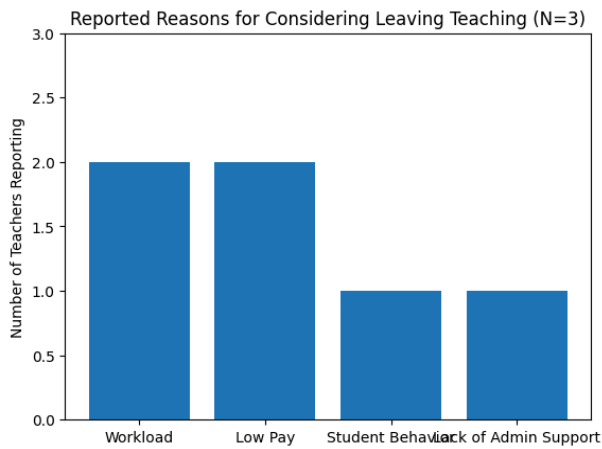
Figures 1 and 2 display the most commonly reported patterns across respondents.

[Figure 1. Perceived Impact of Staffing Shortages on Student Engagement (N = 3)]



Note: Based on teacher-reported ratings on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate stronger agreement that staffing shortages negatively affect student engagement.

[Figure 2. Reported Reasons for Considering Leaving Teaching (N = 3)]



Note: Frequencies represent the number of respondents (out of 3) who cited each reason. Workload and low pay were most frequently cited.

Teacher-Recommended Solutions

When asked about potential solutions, teachers most commonly identified higher salaries, stronger administrative support, improved access to classroom resources, and more manageable workloads and smaller class sizes. Respondents also emphasized the importance of a supportive school community and stable leadership as factors that would increase teacher retention in low-income schools.

Discussion

This study found that teacher retention in low-income public schools is shaped primarily by working conditions, including workload, compensation, and administrative support. All three participants identified these factors as central to their decisions about staying or leaving. These results align with prior research demonstrating that teacher turnover is more closely connected to school organizational conditions than to teachers' qualifications or individual motivation (Ingersoll, 2001; Sutchter et al., 2016).

Teachers also perceived a clear link between frequent staff changes and lower student engagement. Participants reported that high turnover disrupts instructional continuity, undermines the development of strong teacher-student relationships, and contributes to lower engagement, attendance, and academic performance. These views are consistent with earlier quantitative studies showing that teacher turnover negatively affects school stability and student outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

A central implication of these findings is that improving teacher retention may be a meaningful pathway to improving student engagement. Policies that reduce workload, offer better administrative support, and raise compensation may help stabilize staffing in high-poverty schools. Teachers in this study

indicated that even incremental changes, such as stronger leadership or more accessible classroom resources could meaningfully influence their decisions to remain in teaching.

Conclusion

This study examined teacher retention and its perceived relationship to student academic engagement in low-income public schools, using a qualitative survey-based design with a small sample of three teachers. Findings consistently pointed to structural working conditions as the primary drivers of turnover, and to staffing instability as a perceived contributor to lower student engagement and disrupted learning environments.

There are important limitations to acknowledge. The small sample size ($N = 3$) limits the generalizability of findings, and the study relies exclusively on teacher self-report, which may introduce recall or social desirability bias. The absence of direct student performance data means that all conclusions about student engagement are filtered through teacher perception rather than verified with objective measures. Additionally, all respondents shared similar demographic characteristics, which may limit the diversity of perspectives captured.

Despite these limitations, this study adds to existing research by centering teacher perspectives and illuminating how educators interpret the relationship between staffing instability and student engagement in high-poverty contexts. Future research with larger, more demographically diverse samples, and designs that incorporate both teacher and student data, could further clarify these relationships and assess the effectiveness of specific retention-focused interventions.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

The following survey was distributed via Google Forms to current and recently employed teachers in low-income public schools. The survey was organized into five sections.

Section 1: Background Information

1. How many years have you been teaching?

(Multiple Choice)

- 0–2 years
- 3–5 years
- 6–10 years
- 11–15 years
- 16+ years

2. What grade level(s) do you currently teach?

(Checkboxes)

- Elementary (K–5)
- Middle School (6–8)
- High School (9–12)
- Other: _____

3. What subject(s) do you teach?

(Short Answer)

4. How would you describe your school's student population?

(Multiple Choice)

- Mostly low-income
- Mixed-income
- Mostly middle/high-income

Section 2: Teacher Retention & Turnover

5. Have you ever seriously considered leaving your current school or the teaching profession?

(Multiple Choice)

- Yes
- No

6. What are the main reasons you have considered leaving?

(Checkboxes)

- Workload
- Low pay
- Lack of administrative support
- Student behavior challenges
- Lack of resources
- Stress/burnout
- Other: _____

7. What factors most influence your decision to stay at your current school?

(Checkboxes)

- Supportive administration
- Positive relationships with students
- Job stability
- Passion for teaching
- School community
- Other: _____

8. How would you describe teacher turnover at your school?

(Linear Scale: 1-5)

1 = Very low turnover
5 = Very high turnover

Section 3: School Environment & Working Conditions

9. I feel supported by my school leadership.

(Linear Scale: 1-5)

1 = Strongly disagree
5 = Strongly agree

10. My workload is manageable.

(Linear Scale: 1-5)

1 = Strongly disagree
5 = Strongly agree

11. My school has enough resources (materials, staff, support).

(Linear Scale: 1-5)

1 = Strongly disagree
5 = Strongly agree

Section 4: Impact on Students

12. In your opinion, how do teacher shortages or turnover affect students?

(Checkboxes)

- Lower student engagement
- Lower attendance
- Lower academic performance
- Disrupted learning environment
- Weakened teacher-student relationships
- No major impact
- Other: _____

13. I have noticed that staffing shortages negatively affect student engagement.

(Linear Scale: 1–5)

1 = Strongly disagree

5 = Strongly agree

14. How do staffing challenges affect your ability to teach effectively?

(Short Answer)

Section 5: Reflection & Solutions

15. What would make teachers more likely to stay in low-income schools?

(Paragraph Response)

16. What changes or policies do you think would reduce teacher shortages?

(Paragraph Response)