

Avoiding Turnover: Employee Retention Strategies

Understanding Why Employees Leave – and Why They Stay

Effective employee retention begins with understanding why employees leave and why they stay. Districts that focus on both are better prepared to reduce turnover and strengthen their staff-supervisor relationships.

Why Employees Leave

Employees may leave for many reasons that may be voluntary or involuntary. They may accept another job, return to school, relocate, retire, or leave due to an illness or a negative experience. They could also leave after being terminated or experience a layoff.

Most employees compare what they receive (pay, benefits, growth, flexibility, culture, etc.) with what they give (time, effort, stress, responsibility, etc.). If rewards equal or exceed effort, they are more likely to stay. If not, they may begin looking elsewhere – especially if other opportunities are easy to access.

Paths to Turnover

1. Employee Dissatisfaction – staff may feel unhappy due to pay, management, workload, etc.
2. Better Alternative – employees leave when other employers can offer better pay, benefits, or growth.
3. A Planned Change – some employees plan to leave due to life events (school, family, relocation).
4. A Negative Experience – Impulsive exits often follow a triggering event:
 - Not getting a raise/promotion
 - Conflict with a supervisor
 - Harassment or unfair treatment

Why Employees Stay

Just as important as why employees leave is understanding why they stay.

1. District Commitment and Job Satisfaction – staff who feel proud of their district and satisfied with their work stay longer.
2. Strong Staff-Supervisor Relationships – the relationship your staff has with their board strongly affects retention.
3. Community and Culture – employees stay when they feel connected at work and in their community. The more relationships and social ties employees build, the more they want to stay.

What Districts Can Do to Retain Staff

1. Have competitive pay and benefits. Employees are more likely to stay when:
 - Pay is competitive
 - Benefits meet their needs
 - Health plans are robust

- Retirement and paid leave are meaningful

Benefits are often as important as pay. But what if your district is limited by how much they can pay?

2. Allow flexibility and increase work-life balance.

- Offer flexible schedules
- Support remote or hybrid work
- Provide additional PTO days
- Encourage use of time off

Today, remote and hybrid options are major retention tools. Flexibility reduces burnout and improves loyalty.

3. Increase recognition and appreciation in a specific and timely manner.

- Create formal recognition programs (bonuses, awards, ceremonies, etc.)
- Celebrate service and milestones (tenure, program specific milestones, etc.)
- Recognize effort and results – be specific (Name, thank you for...)
 - i. Frequent verbal praise
 - ii. Personal notes – written or quick email
 - iii. Small gestures – donuts, coffee, lunch
 - iv. Be genuine – be sincere and personal

Employees who receive meaningful recognition are less likely to job search, experience less burnout, and feel more engaged at work.

4. Encourage training and growth opportunities.

- Offer mentorship opportunities or programs – partner with other districts
- Prioritize skill development – webinars, workshops, site visits for agricultural knowledge, BMPs, technical writing, etc.
- Create personalized employee development plans – attend x number trainings per year, etc.

Growth opportunities signal long-term investment in employees and allow staff to increase knowledge base and/or focus on specific job-related topics.

5. Improve communication and set expectations.

- Use onboarding of new staff to set expectations
 - i. Use your plan of work, budget, employee handbooks, operations manuals
 - ii. Implement a 30/60/90-day structured plan to help gain confidence
 - iii. Set realistic goals – SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound)
- Be available – in person, phone calls, video calls, etc. especially with new hires
- Be responsive to their calls, messages, emails, etc.
- Establish regular check-ins – maybe one-on-one with specific supervisor
- Evaluate staff performance and address concerns at least annually

10 Minute Supervisor Training

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- Be open to new ideas and programs brought to the board

Effective communication builds trust, increases productivity, and boosts employee morale. It also improves conflict resolution, helps set clear expectations, encourages staff to share ideas in an open atmosphere.

In Conclusion

Staff retention is not implementing one single strategy or program. It is a combination of fair play, strong leadership, clear communication, flexibility, recognition, growth opportunities, and meaningful relationships. When districts understand why employees leave, and intentionally build reasons for them to stay, they create a workplace where staff feel valued, supported, and committed for the long term.