

# Utah Spotlight: Inspiring Educators

October 2021

## Excelling in Teacher Retention

### What does it take?

Across the nation, teacher retention is a critical issue. High teacher turnover in schools has been found to negatively impact student achievement for all students in a school, not just those in a new teacher's classroom. The cost and time associated with recruiting, hiring, training, and providing ongoing support to a constantly shifting educator population is substantial. Given there is a teacher shortage, what can be done to retain teachers and improve student learning? Let's start by considering what our local data tells us.

In 2019, Utah administered the [Educator Engagement Survey](#) in an effort to understand the factors that influence teacher retention. The results of that survey found that the top three reasons educators remain in the profession are:

- they find their day-to-day work rewarding,
- they find their day-to-day work interesting, and
- their principals give them the opportunity to innovate.

Provided the impact of teacher retention on resources, student learning, and understanding the factors that most influence a teacher to remain in the profession, what are the effective strategies school districts and charters can employ to improve teacher retention?

To answer this question, we analyzed Utah's teacher retention data over the last several years. In that analysis, one school district stood out year after year--Washington County School District (WCSD)—Utah's 17<sup>th</sup> largest school district. In the 2021-2022 school year, WCSD has approximately 1500 educators. Historically, WCSD retains about 72.8% of their educators after five years of employment. WCSD exceeds the state average for teacher

**We believe that efficacy requires a regular mechanism by which teachers gather evidence they trust to gauge their impact and then make adjustments. Our coaching model builds around that process.**

--Robert Proffit, Professional Learning Director



## Washington County SD



### District Demographics

Total Enrollment: 35,346  
students

- 31% of students with limited income
- 6% of students learning English
- 12% of students with a disability

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retention (56.1%) by 16.7%. Given this significant difference, we interviewed some of WCSD's top leaders—Lyle Cox, Executive Director of Human Resources; Brad Ferguson—Assessment Learning Director, and James Sparks—EYE Coordinator and Secondary ELA Coordinator—to identify the secrets to their success.

### Personalized System of Support

In speaking with the team at WCSD, it became abundantly clear that the secret to their success was in the intentional professional learning and coaching supports to which they have dedicated their time, effort, and resources in. Specifically, the three key strategies they have come to employ over the years with ongoing refinement and reflection are:

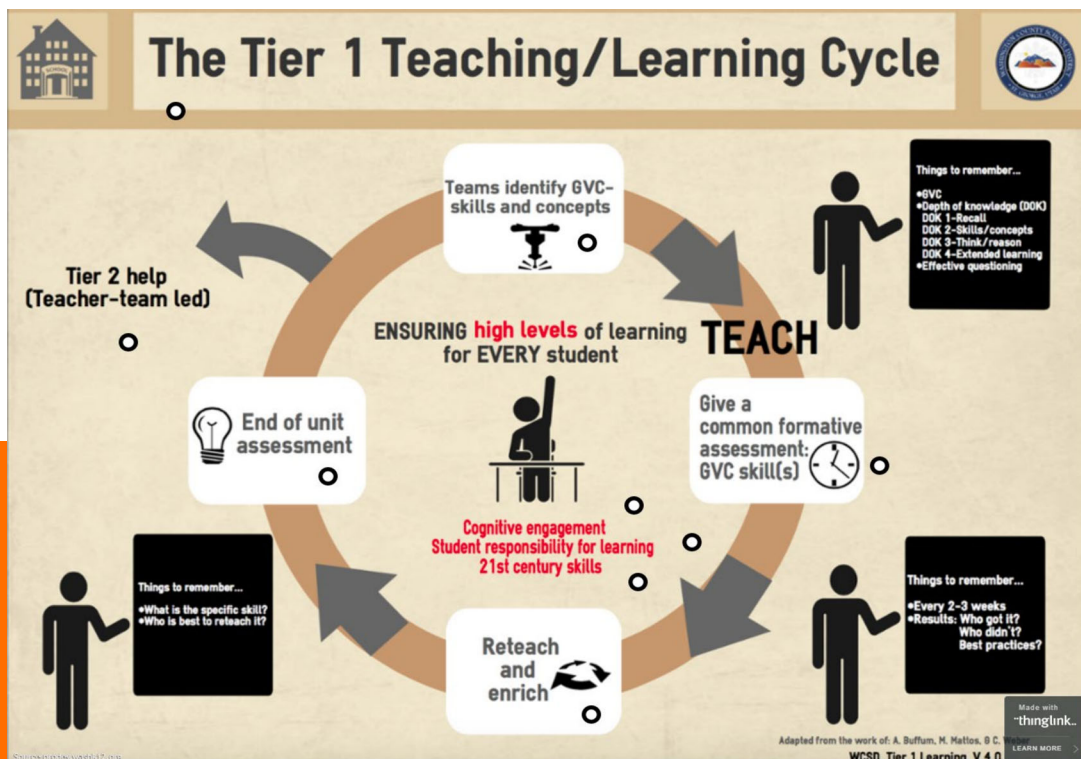
- Unwavering focus on student learning
- Student-centered coaching
- Culture of feedback and data to inform continuous improvement

### Strategy 1: Unwavering Focus on Student Learning

When you speak to a district or school leader in

Washington County, it is very common to hear a focus on student learning in every discussion. There is a clear understanding that the primary purpose of the daily work being done in schools is to advance student learning. There is a strong belief that teachers are their most valuable resources in achieving high levels of student learning and they invest their energies in ensuring teachers have the tools, knowledge, and supports necessary to do so. They work with educators to set meaningful goals through the PEER Goals structure (Jim Knight, The Impact Cycle). PEERS goals are:

- **Powerful**—makes a big difference in children's lives
- **Easy**—simple, clear, and easy to understand
- **Emotionally Compelling**—matters a lot to the teacher
- **Reachable**—identifies a measurable outcome and strategy
- **Student-Focused**—addresses a student achievement, behavior, or attitude outcome



Once goals are identified, they align resources and supports to facilitate the achievement of the goal. Teachers in Washington County are supported by leaders and coaches who are truly invested in their development as an educator with student learning at the center.

### **Strategy 2: Student-Centered Coaching**

WCSD has utilized learning coaches for over 15 years. Using a combination of stakeholder panels, teacher surveys, coaching logs, and student growth data, they have continuously refined their model to arrive at the student-centered coaching model they employ today. Within their model, coaches collect data on students during instruction and facilitate the analysis and interpretation of that data with the teacher. The teacher then draws conclusions from the data and together they identify the necessary supports or professional learning needed to improve. By focusing on the student data, the focus shifts from 'fixing' teachers to collaborating with them to design instruction with the intent of improving learning. For new teachers and new teachers to the district, the learning coaches develop the culture of using student data by starting with a focus on engagement: *Which students are most engaged? How do you know? Why? Which students are least engaged? How do you know? Why?* This starts to build the teacher's efficacy in using student data to advance student learning more effectively.

### **Strategy 3: Culture of Feedback and Data to Inform Continuous Improvement**

As demonstrated in the first two strategies, WCSD has a robust system's approach to providing new and veteran teachers with feedback and targeted support driven by data. This approach extends beyond the classroom as their school and district leaders also engage in using data and feedback from their educators to continuously refine their processes, resources, and supports to ensure

effectiveness. To foster this culture of continuous improvement, the district has intentionally developed feedback mechanisms to evaluate what is working and what may need to be adjusted all while leaning on different data sets to make those adjustments. For example, the district:

- facilitates a Learning Coach Steering Committee in which they invite a selected contingent of their learning coaches to provide ongoing feedback and lead out in creating and refining coaching tools
- administers the Net Promoter Score (NPS) to understand their teachers' overall perception of the coaching support and professional learning offered at their school (New Teachers report a 62; Veteran Teachers report a 52)
- measures the frequency of coaching sessions (over 15,000 coaching sessions annually) and aligns that with teacher feedback on the amount of coaching they desire.

### **Conclusion**

As evidenced by the three key strategies WCSD employs to effectively impact student learning, it is clear as to why they are experiencing high levels of teacher retention. The supportive learning conditions in WCSD foster work that is rewarding, work that is interesting, and opportunities for educators to innovate while feeling supported and valued. Through the delivery of a personalized system of support that leverages student data, provides the educator with a voice and choice in their craft, and affords essential levels of support at every tier of the system, it is not surprising that Washington County School District is experiencing such high levels of success in teacher retention.