

Lessons From Stay Interviews of Early Career Teachers in Four Utah School Districts

Although Utah has one of the country's lowest teacher turnover rates overall,¹ Utah teachers in their first years on the job leave their schools or the profession at especially high rates, early career teacher attrition is higher in Utah than the national average,² and Utah schools hire approximately 3,500 teachers each year.³ This is a problem because teacher turnover is associated with lower academic outcomes for students, and is fiscally costly for the schools and districts that need to recruit, hire, and onboard new teachers.^{4,5,6} In response, state leaders are exploring new ways to support teacher retention statewide.⁷

The Utah Early Career Teacher Retention (U-ECTR) partnership is a recent collaboration among Utah State Board of Education (USBE) officials, researchers from the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West at WestEd, and leaders from eight Utah school districts (Cache, Canyons, Davis, Duchesne, Iron, Logan, Ogden, and Salt Lake City), who are dedicated to understanding and addressing the root causes of early career teacher attrition. Meeting quarterly since April 2023, the U-ECTR partnership has examined local teacher attrition rates and exit survey results as well as national survey data on teacher well-being and research on new teacher induction and mentoring.

¹ Sutchter, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

² Blevins, L., Boone, M., Cantlon, M., Scott, S., & Li, W. (2021). *Report to the Utah Legislature: A performance audit of teacher retention within Utah's public education system* (Report No. 2021-13). Salt Lake City: Office of the Utah Legislative Auditor General. Retrieved from <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2022/pdf/00002294.pdf>.

³ Utah State Board of Education. (2022). *2022 educator exit survey summary report*. Salt Lake City, UT: Author. Retrieved from <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2023/pdf/00000357.pdf>.

⁴ Hanushek, E., Rivkin, S., & Schiman, J. (2016). Dynamic effects of teacher turnover on the quality of instruction. *Economics of Education Review*, 55, 132-148.

⁵ Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 4-36.

⁶ Synar, E., & Maiden, J. (2012). A comprehensive model for estimating the financial impact of teacher turnover. *Journal of Education Finance*, 38(2), 130-144.

⁷ A review of selected highlights of education-related legislation from the 2024 Utah Legislative Session is accessible online at https://schools.utah.gov/policy/policy_utahlegislative-session/_2024/QuickGuide-Mini_V3.pdf.



EXIT SURVEYS

USBE administers a statewide exit survey to educators who leave their current employment in a Utah district, with districts instructed to administer the survey whenever an educator terminates employment. Educators who transfer positions within a district do not complete this survey. Not every departing Utah teacher completes a survey upon exit, though. USBE estimated that approximately 30 percent of the teachers who left Utah schools during the 2021/22 school year completed the survey. Summaries of exit survey data from 2022 and 2023 have indicated that the most influential factors in educators' decisions to leave their current position are emotional exhaustion/burnout and job-specific stressors, specifically unrealistic workload expectations, limited prep time, and a lack of recognition, respect, or general accountability from within and beyond the school.^{8,9}

STAY INTERVIEWS

In response to recent research on working conditions and teacher retention,¹⁰ several U-ECTR districts have begun to engage their early

career teachers in “stay interviews”—a strategy with evidence from nursing¹¹ and the business sector.^{12,13,14} Stay interviews encourage managers to have proactive, intentional conversations with employees they want to retain to determine what it will take to keep them from leaving. Administrators then analyze the data to build a compelling theory of practice that can be used to support program improvement activities. Interviews can provide more robust information than surveys, and can offer dedicated, individual time for Utah's early career teachers to share what is or is not working for them on the job. The time and effort dedicated to the stay interview process may also demonstrate to teachers that their voice is important—which can be a valuable retention strategy in itself. Moreover, stay interviews afford district leaders time to proactively make changes based on current teacher feedback *before* they leave their job rather than waiting to respond to exit interview data.

STAY INTERVIEW DATA COLLECTION

In November and December 2023, district leaders in the Cache, Canyons, Logan, and Ogden school districts conducted stay interviews with approximately 200 early career teachers



“I come to school every day because some day in some way, I will help that one kid. I want to be a person that can make a difference in that one student’s life.”

“I love my school—everyone at our school, we just feel like family. That’s what keeps me here, even on the really tough days... which happen a lot sometimes! I still love coming in and I still do it for my team and the people that I work with. I just feel safe here.”

⁸ Utah State Board of Education. (2022). *2022 educator exit survey summary report*. Salt Lake City, UT: Author. Retrieved from <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2023/pdf/00000357.pdf>.

⁹ Utah State Board of Education. (2024). *2023 educator exit survey summary report*. Salt Lake City, UT: Author. Retrieved from <https://schools.utah.gov/curr/reports/2023%20Ed%20Exit%20Survey.pdf>.

¹⁰ Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. (2022). *Addressing working conditions to improve teacher retention: An exploration of the research*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

¹¹ Forde-Johnston, C., & Stoermer, F. (2022). Giving nurses a voice through “listening to staff” conversations to inform nurse retention and reduce turnover. *British Journal of Nursing*, 31(12), 632-638.

¹² Finnegan, R. (2015). *The stay interview: A manager’s guide to keeping the best and brightest*. New York: American Management Association.

¹³ Kaye, B., & Jordan-Evans, S. (2015). *Hello stay interviews, goodbye talent loss: A manager’s playbook*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

¹⁴ Lochmiller, C. R. (2023). Using empathy interviews and qualitative evidence to improve human resource development practice and theory. *Human Resource Development Review*, 22(1), 84-103. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/15344843221135672>.

to gather information about what they most value in their job every day (figure 1), and what they would change if they could (figure 2). These teachers had been teaching in the district for two to five years, and have completed their initial induction program. The 30-minute interviews were conducted by district-level leaders (in Canyons and Logan) or by instructional coaches (in Cache and Ogden). The districts avoided having the teachers' direct supervisors (that is,

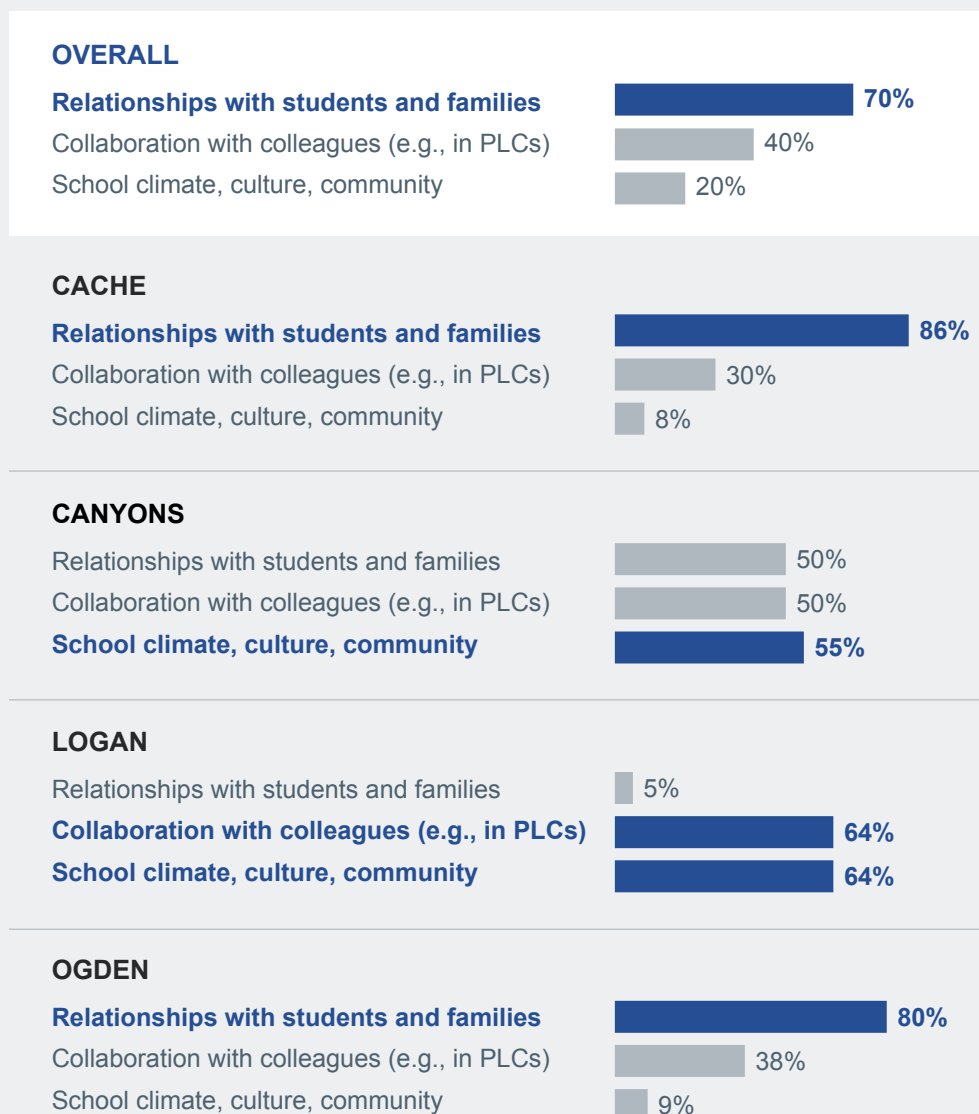
site administrators) conduct interviews. The interviews were conducted in the teacher's classroom or an empty meeting room, either before or after school or during prep periods, with similar (but not identical) questions asked across the districts (see appendix table 1). Several participating districts received small grants from USBE's statewide federal Title IIA funding to support the conducting of local stay interviews.



“I’ve seen a huge increase in (problematic) behaviors, and I would love to have professional development at the beginning of the year about de-escalation strategies and the process for what to do when we have a really hard student. We just need more training.”

“I’d really like to take less work home. Part of that comes down to constant changes in curriculum and goals and initiatives that make it so that everything from the year before is useless. I don’t really know what to prioritize and I have to start from scratch.”

Figure 1. What is keeping early career teachers on the job?



Note: This figure only displays results that were cited by 20% or more of the overall pool of teacher respondents (n=201).

In February and March 2024, participating LEA officials worked with REL West to co-analyze their local interview data. During meetings with the LEA officials, REL West guided them through data review and a collaborative analysis of the data. The district officials then presented their local insights to district and school board leaders to help guide improvements in policy and practice.

STAY INTERVIEW THEMES ACROSS DISTRICTS

The importance of different aspects of teaching varied across districts. When asked what they most enjoy about their

job, early career teachers across Utah highlighted the people they interact with—their relationships with students, families, colleagues, and the school community as the spotlighted quotes indicate. Secondary teachers also tended to cite supportive leadership and administration (not shown).

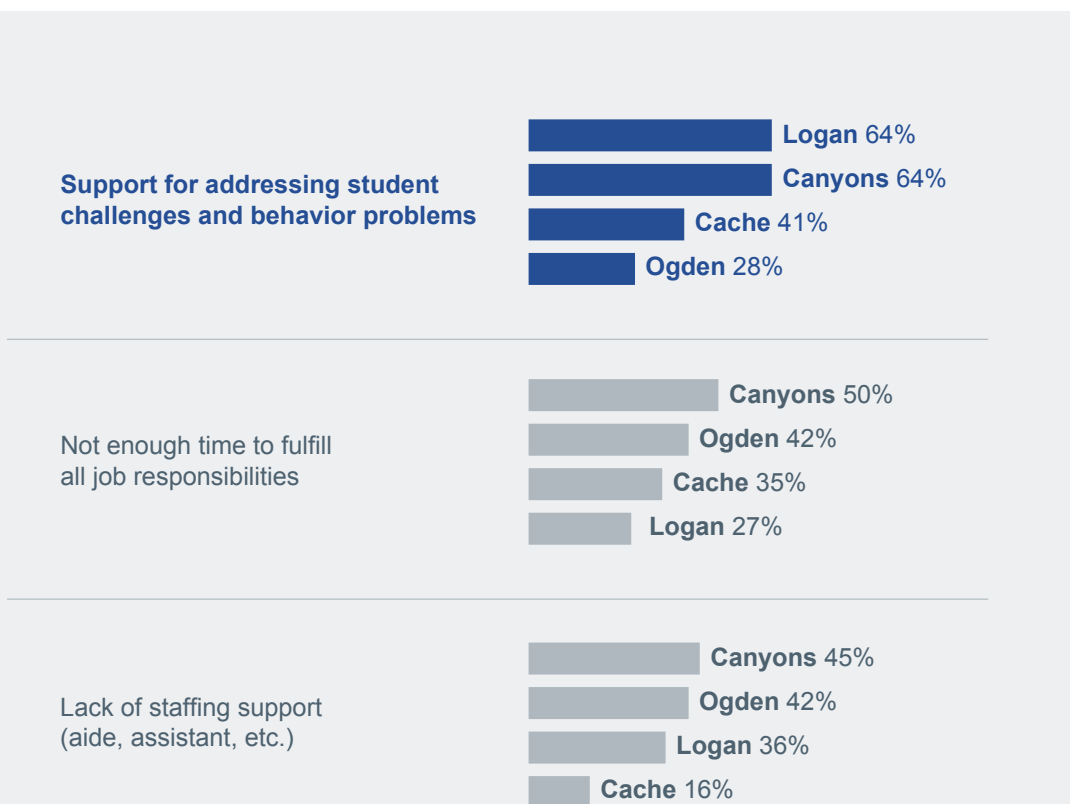
At the same time, when asked what in their job needs to improve, the early career teachers interviewed across districts tended to cite a lack of supports and time to address the demands of the job—specifically, challenges in addressing student behavior problems, the limited time they have to fulfill all of their job responsibilities, and a lack of staffing support (for example,



“You want to have the time to coordinate with team members but because of all the busy work, we can’t PLC effectively. We can talk about the data but we don’t have time to talk about how you are going to (respond to) the data.”

“It would be great to have an aide for each teacher, or give the ones we have more time. Right now they are volunteering their time to help us after school. Additional aide support or more time to work would be helpful, so we can hit the ground running with kids each day.”

Figure 2. What do early career teachers think needs to improve?



Note: This figure only displays results that were cited by 20% or more of the overall pool of teacher respondents (n=201). Although time was the challenge that had the highest total number of responses across districts, figure 2 is sorted by the highest proportions within each district.

classroom aides). The lack of staffing support was more commonly cited by responding secondary teachers.

CONSIDERATIONS

Approximately 200 teachers in their first two to five years of teaching participated in the stay interviews. While a sizeable number of interviews, this number reflects a small proportion of teachers in the state. Also, more than half of the total interviews were conducted in Ogden schools. A more diverse representation of districts and schools in Utah may have yielded different themes. Finally, the four participating districts slightly varied in their selected interview questions (see appendix table 1).

IMPLICATIONS

Participating district leaders plan to develop strategies in the coming months to make improvements in the 2024/25 school year in response to the concerns raised by local teachers in stay interviews—for example, creating more structured time for early career teachers to collaborate with peers and with counselors about problematic student behavior, and exploring avenues to hire more aides. The protection of teachers’ time and positive conflict mediation have been highlighted as key retention strategies in other recent Utah research as well.¹⁵ Leaders from all four districts also indicated that they plan to continue to conduct local stay interviews with their early career teachers moving forward. Noting how helpful the process and resulting information is, one district leader said, “It’s hard to believe we haven’t done this formally in the past.”

Two districts have already trained all of their instructional coaches to carry out stay interviews, and another has included stay interviews in the job description for local human resources leadership.

NEW TEACHER RETENTION SUPPORTS IN UTAH

The 2024 Utah Legislature passed several new bills to address some of these issues and support teacher retention statewide. For example, H.B. 431 will provide new one-time funding for the “Mentoring and Supporting Teacher Excellence and Refinement (MASTER) Pilot program. These competitive grants, requiring local matching funds, will enable new opportunities for districts to create teacher leadership and mentoring roles, which could include conducting stay interviews as well as differentiated pay scales. USBE will develop applications and plans for overseeing the program in the coming months, likely with U-ECTR partnership support. Other new statewide regulations (with no state funds attached) have afforded more flexibility around teacher evaluation procedures and paid hours (S.B. 137) and provided new stipends for student teachers (H.B. 221). Additionally, given concerns with rising levels of disruptive student behavior across the state (figure 2), H.B. 347 requires Utah’s districts to establish new rules to ensure that their local classrooms are not disrupted “by a pattern of behavior that interferes substantially and materially with classroom instruction.”



¹⁵ Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic Education. (U-LEAD, 2023). *Educator job satisfaction: Innovative practice report*. Salt Lake City, UT: Author. Online at <https://schools.utah.gov/ulead/uleadfiles/reports/ipr/Job%20Satisfaction%20IPR.pdf>.

CACHE

Sample Size: 37

Year of Teaching: Fourth

- What do you look forward to when you come to work each day? [OR] What aspects of your job do you find the most fulfilling?
- What are some aspects of this job that you would like to see change? [OR] What would make your job more satisfying?
- If you were to consider leaving this position, why would that be? What factors may trigger a departure?
- If you could change one thing about your job (or school, or district) with a snap of your fingers, what would it be?
- What can the district leadership team do to support you and make this a great place for you to work?

CANYONS

Sample Size: 22

Year of Teaching: Fifth

- What are the factors that make you passionate, committed, and loyal to your school and the district? In short, what keeps you here?
- What would make your job more satisfying?
- Is there any additional support that we could provide that would add to your job satisfaction?
- If there were something you could change about your job, your school, or the district, what would it be?
- When you have a challenging student in your classroom, what supports do you have, or would like to have, to be able to meet your student's needs?
- When you think about your professional growth and career in education, where do you want to go?
- In Canyons District, what are things we do (or don't do) to make you feel valued, seen, and heard?

LOGAN

Sample Size: 22

Year of Teaching: Fourth

- On a scale of 1–10, how committed are you to your school? District? What are the factors that make you passionate, committed, and loyal to your school and the district? In short, what keeps you here?
- What would make your job more satisfying?
- If there were something you could change about your job (or school, or the district), what would it be?
- Is there any additional support that we could provide that would add to your job satisfaction?
- When you have a really tough student in your classroom, what helps you feel supported in meeting that student's needs?
- Where do you see yourself in three years? What factors may trigger your departure?

OGDEN

Sample Size: 120

Year of Teaching: Second/Third

- What do you look forward to when you come to work every day?
- What kind of feedback or recognition do you like to receive?
- What professional development has provided you the most value, and what do you feel would enhance your employee experience?
- What are some aspects of this role that you would like to see change?
- If you were to consider leaving this position, why would that be? What factors may trigger a departure?
- If you could change one thing about your job (or school, or district) with the snap of your fingers, what would it be?
- What can I do to make your experience here better? [OR] What could your leadership team do to make your experience here better?