



# The Administrator's Dilemma

---

Five ways to rethink  
teacher engagement  
and retention in a  
post-COVID age.

ECCOeducation

**No district is immune to the challenges that face superintendents, principals, and human resource departments when it comes to engaging and retaining a quality workforce—particularly teachers—who are tasked with making an impact on the next generation of students.**

While many are hoping for an eventual return to pre-COVID norms, research has shown that not only are we not likely to rebound anytime soon, trends in the education marketplace were heading in the wrong direction regardless, particularly in three key areas:

- **Fewer teachers** - In a March 2022 Education Week feature, teacher prep programs in colleges are seeing fewer enrollees, pointing to a coming dearth of teachers for districts across the country.<sup>1</sup>
- **Salary disparity** - The difference between teacher salaries and the salaries of other college graduates continues to grow<sup>2</sup>; further, many districts are feeling the pinch of budget restraints from a limited local tax base that neighboring districts might not be experiencing, creating a more obvious case of “haves” and “have-nots” in teacher and administrator compensation.
- **Job-hopping as the norm** - Gone are the days of hiring teachers and counting on many of them to be there for 30 years. Enter “the job-hopping generation”, younger teachers and administrators who are constantly looking for the next best thing, often outside of their current district.

The lone emergent challenge for districts across the country is not industry-specific: quiet quitting.

With a more fluid work environment available—especially with the rise of online schooling and charters—what was once expressed as discontent or a quiet resignation is now a threat to districts everywhere, spreading even to higher education.<sup>4</sup>

Given a national teacher shortage, a lack of funds to compete in a salary arms race, and the insecurity that comes with not knowing how long teachers will stay, how can administrators position their districts to hire, engage, and retain the best teachers, those who can help their students become lifelong learners in an ever changing world?

We suggest a different approach to career satisfaction.

## **FIVE WAYS TO RETHINK TEACHER ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION**

### **I. Career satisfaction is an inside job**

Career satisfaction has long been seen as an outside-in phenomenon that really included just two factors: competency and compensation.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/fewer-people-are-getting-teacher-degrees-prep-programs-sound-the-alarm/2022/03>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-gap-between-teacher-pay-and-other-professions-hits-a-new-high-how-bad-is-it/2022/08>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231587/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2022/08/30/quiet-quitting-wont-solve-problem-burnout-academe-opinion>

If you asked someone why they enjoyed their job, the answer would often deal with what they got to do every day and/or the lifestyle it afforded them. Education was no different, with family-oriented people who loved their subject matter or their students enjoying much-deserved time off in the summer. Even extending the ingredients of career satisfaction to include working conditions and collegial relationships, a trend emerges: these are all external factors.

And external factors are important. But they leave a district at the whim of a workforce, blindly predicting what will keep their teachers happy or offering a curt “take it or leave it” approach to career satisfaction. Further, the current dynamic perpetuates an external locus of control for the workforce, leaving them helpless to improve their situation without a district initiative.

Instead, we suggest that career satisfaction is an inside job, the product of empowered teachers with an internal locus of control, who take responsibility for their engagement and partner with the district to find solutions.

## **II. Career satisfaction is more elegant than we realize**

As alluded to previously, internally motivated career satisfaction is multifaceted; yes, competence and compensation are important, but we’d like to add four more: Impact, Relationships, Environment, and Growth. Those familiar

***...career satisfaction is an inside job, the product of empowered teachers with an internal locus of control, who take responsibility for their engagement and partner with the district to find solutions.***

with the Gallup Q12 survey will find some common elements, but remember that we measure these as internally driven, not problems to be solved by someone else. A more elegant understanding of what engages and retains teachers and staff helps not only the districts but the staff themselves understand what they want from their work.

## **III. There’s a Job-to-Be-Done (Theory)<sup>5</sup>**

Many teachers are the products of a generation that valued security and were taught to pursue certain jobs accordingly. Therefore, many in education don’t actually know what they want beyond students to teach (competency) and a steady paycheck (compensation). When districts empower their employees by teaching them a nuanced approach to career satisfaction—namely, helping them understand what their specific Career Factors are—teachers can name what they want from their career and employ a lens for discovering career satisfaction right where they are (see next section).

<sup>5</sup> <https://strategyn.com/jobs-to-be-done/jobs-to-be-done-theory/>

#### IV. Employee engagement is not expensive

In his famous 1890 speech “Acres of Diamonds,” Russell Conwell encouraged his listeners to put their shovel in the ground right where they stood because what they were looking for was at hand. We believe the same thing: whatever teachers are looking for in their careers likely already exists in their current district. What that means for administrators is that they can begin engaging and retaining their current employees sooner than later and that the solution will likely not cost very much. When administrators and teachers have a common language for engagement and retention, they solve problems more quickly and create opportunities for collaboration that were seemingly impossible.

#### V. Employee engagement and retention is responsive, not reactive

For many teachers, their understanding of and interaction with the Human Resources department is limited to beginning and ending their time with the district. At the same time, HR directors are often forced to operate under a “no news is good news” philosophy, aware of staff discontent only via a letter of resignation or an exit interview. Administrators simply do not have the time or resources to keep their finger on the pulse of everyone in the district.

But we think they should.

And we think they can.

Responsive employee engagement allows for:

- Annual assessment of career satisfaction for all staff
- Integrating career satisfaction into evaluative assessment
- Supervisors positioned as coaches
- Staff to recognize changes in their motivators over time

Responsive employee engagement creates a proactive HR department that can predict a district’s hiring needs in advance and can attract the right teachers to fill vacant positions.

***Responsive employee  
engagement creates a  
proactive HR department...***

#### THE CAREER FACTORS DEFINED

Additional to the more commonly known career satisfaction factors of Strengths and Lifestyle, Impact, Relationships, Environment, and Growth offer a robust, actionable picture of employee engagement. Keep in mind that some of these factors are more important to some than others, but all contribute to a comprehensive understanding of career satisfaction.

## IMPACT: MY WORK MATTERS

Whether you're on an assembly line or at a brokerage house, the work you do makes a difference in a few ways, each a contributing factor to an individual's career satisfaction.

1. I have a passion for what I do at work.
2. The end product of my work affects others' lives.
3. My company's mission is aligned with my own.

## RELATIONSHIPS: WHOM I WORK WITH IS IMPORTANT

As social creatures, we value belonging, and the desire to be part of a group can be a determinant of one's career satisfaction depending on internal drives.

1. I am a valuable contributor to my team.
2. My value goes beyond what I can produce.
3. I am a positive influence on others in the company.

## ENVIRONMENT: WHERE I WORK INFLUENCES HOW I WORK

No Career Factor has become more obvious in the past three years than working environment, and research shows that when given the opportunity, many employees want a say in where they work. But Environment is more nuanced when employees share what they're looking for:

1. The pace of my workplace contributes to my best output.
2. I like the sense of control over my work space.
3. My physical location influences my ability to work well.

## GROWTH: OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE MYSELF ENHANCE MY WORK

Emerging as a key contributor to career satisfaction in recent decades, Growth is an underrated area of focus for managers and employees alike, often coming to the fore after another factor has gone unmet. As with the others, the Growth component can show up in a variety of ways for a variety of workers.

1. I am a better person because of my job.
2. My company provides opportunities to improve my skills and learn new ones.
3. HR is invested in its employees.

## CONCLUSION

Administrators who want to attract and retain the best and brightest teachers cannot continue with an externally motivated approach to teacher engagement and retention. COVID's effect on the workplace only accelerated what was an inevitability, so we need a new approach to employee engagement. Districts who adopt an inside-out approach to hiring and engagement will increase retention and hire candidates who own their career satisfaction and perpetuate a culture of self-motivated educators.

*Sam Feeney is the creator of The Career Factors and founder of ECCO Education, a company that helps schools engage and retain their employees while attracting the best and brightest new talent. ECCO Education offers tailored solutions to meet the needs of schools, including professional development, leadership coaching, and strategic planning.*

*Find out more at [ECCOeducation.com](https://ECCOeducation.com)*