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Teachers' Perceptions of Public Policy and their Impact on Teacher Retention

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Teachers' Perceptions of Public Policy and their Impact on Teacher Retention

Abstract

Fewer issues have received more attention by education researchers than understanding the global teacher shortage, especially in public schools. Concurrent with this issue is the concern that the rate of teacher hires is insufficient to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of students. Further, while the research on job satisfaction, specifically in understanding their impact on teacher retention, is multifaceted, causal data underlying these approaches have been limited. This research gains significance in light of policymakers' increasing calls for restructuring the way schools do business to effectively meet the diverse needs of students, often in spite of already-limited school resources and staff capacity. This research study focuses on understanding the global teacher shortage in public schools and its impact on teacher retention, with particular emphasis on the role of public policy. The study aims to address the gap in research by conducting a quantitative, survey-based research study among K-12 teachers in a large public school district in the Midwest. Through a virtual survey covering teacher demographic characteristics, and their understanding and evaluation of education policies, the comprehensive study seeks to analyze how public policy influences teacher job satisfaction and retention. Recruitment for the survey was conducted through teacher association leadership, with no compensation provided to participants. The findings suggested that while there is no significant relationship between public policy and teacher retention generally, with the clear exception for school accountability policy. The findings offer insights into the factors influencing the retention of teachers within the education workforce. The results, implications for practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords

Public education, K-12 education, teacher retention, teacher recruitment, job satisfaction, public policy, education reform, education policy, survey research, quantitative research, correlational research

Author Bio

Carl Bryan works as a Legislative Policy Coordinator for the Policy, Budget and Research Team at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI), a position he has held since May 2022. However, he has worked for the WDPI since February 2015, previously holding positions as Budget and Policy Analyst, Administrative Rules Coordinator, and Grants Specialist. Before joining the WDPI, Carl served two terms on the Kenosha Unified School Board, an elected position he held from April 2009, when he was 19 years old, through April 2015. While on the school board, Carl served as the board's treasurer, legislative chair, and chair of the Personnel/Policy committee. Carl holds a master's degree in public policy and administration from Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois, and a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Carl is currently enrolled at Minnesota State University at Moorhead and is pursuing a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership. Carl has an impassioned interest in public policy and is excited to share his research to inform the direction of K-12 education policy. Carl currently resides in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

INTRODUCTION

In their 2018 article, “The Effects of Working Conditions on Teacher Retention,” published in *Teachers and Teaching*, Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) highlighted teacher attrition as one of the biggest contributors to the global teacher shortage. They identified common factors for teacher departures, including low salaries, unfavorable working conditions, inadequate teacher preparation, student characteristics, and increased workload, all of which negatively affect students, other teachers, and the overall school community. The study emphasized the interconnected influences of student and school characteristics, in combination with organizational characteristics, on teacher supply (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). The complexity of factors contributing to teacher retention suggests a comprehensive approach is necessary for the education field to fully address the issue.

In Wisconsin, the Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) launched the Leading Forward workforce initiative which examines the reasons for staffing challenges across the state and identifies the appropriate measures to support and strengthen the educator pipeline (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2023). The WDPI found that, despite the rate of individuals completing in an educator preparation program exceeding that of educators retiring, Wisconsin faces a steady decline of teachers during their first five years of employment, with retention rates as low as 67 percent (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2023). Because of its strong connection to student achievement, Wisconsin’s experience with teacher retention highlights the need for a multifaceted approach in order to keep teachers in the classroom.

However, one does not need to look to the state of Wisconsin to understand that the ongoing teacher shortage is a phenomenon experienced globally (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018;

See et al., 2020). This is especially prevalent as current economic conditions place a strain on states to expend dollars for public education and increase pressure on policymakers to identify the most cost-effective programs which increase teacher retention (Guarino et al., 2006).

Therefore, identifying strategies that ensure the retention of teachers is an enduring point of many education debates across the education landscape. The author of this study, a budget and policy analyst for a state education agency located in the Midwestern United States, argued that evaluating the way public policy impacts teacher retention is critical to the conversation on this topic. For this study, the author examined the relationship between public policy and teacher retention to identify the appropriate policy prescriptions as a means of alleviating teacher shortages.

Statement of the Problem

Fewer issues have received more attention by education researchers than understanding the global teacher shortage, especially in public schools. Indeed, when comparing attrition rates in other, non-teaching professions, the turnover rate in the teaching sector has far outpaced that of its counterparts (Garcia et al., 2022). Further, while the teaching workforce has more than doubled over the past half century, the distribution of teachers is not spread evenly among schools, and schools with higher concentrations of low-performing students have a disproportionate number of teachers with lesser qualifications compared to other institutions (Loeb & Reininger, 2004). Concurrent with this issue is the concern that the rate of teacher hires is insufficient to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of students (Ansley et al. 2019; Kirby et al., 1999). Taken together, it would not be unreasonable to deduce that these staffing problems could affect student achievement, place increased pressure on active teachers, and

divert already-limited school resources toward teacher recruitment (Coulter & Zaleski, 2007; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023).

Even though these challenges are well understood, defined and researched, there is disagreement among educational researchers as to the degree to which certain factors contribute the most to deficiencies in teacher retention. For example, while the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the education landscape in addressing practices for meeting student needs, including the employment of teachers, it is crucial not to overlook the longstanding and substantial body of research which suggests how those practices influence the retention of teachers. This is against a backdrop of rapidly changing education policy which has altered the way schools are operated and education is delivered. It is possible that trends in teacher retention have been impacted by those policies, but causal data linking the two are extremely limited. It is therefore critical for researchers and the education community to make greater sense of how public policy in the education landscape affects teacher retention.

Purpose of the Study

The debates surrounding education policy is not a new phenomenon, and its reform is generally driven by the perception that students and schools are not achieving as societal needs evolve (Johnson & Foster, 1990). Studies have found that, despite the intentions behind each reform, policymakers have not always paid prudent attention to the repercussions of their policies on retaining teachers, especially those in hard-to-staff areas, such as special education and schools serving students with economic disadvantages (Garcia et al., 2022). At best, some policies were not directly pertinent to addressing teacher inequities (Sykes & Martin, 2019), and at worst, they were implemented to the detriment of teacher retention strategies (Adoniou, 2016; Clotfelter et al., 2004). While perceptions of their impact on the retention of teachers are varied,

the literature finds agreement around the values underlying each reform policy as to their reorganizing effect on school communities and the practices of school leadership (Sun et al., 2016; White et al., 2020). The literature underscores why such policies must be targeted with careful consideration in order to retain teachers, particularly teachers of color and teachers serving hard-to-staff areas (Barret et al., 2021; Brunner et al., 2019; White et al., 2020).

Additionally, the perspectives explaining the persistence of teacher shortages, particularly within public schools, have varied significantly over time. It had been believed that teacher shortages stem from an unstable supply of new teachers to match trends in student enrollments and replace teachers who retire (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). This is contrasted by research that has come to light suggesting that teacher shortages are not merely impacted by the surge in retirements, but are exacerbated by the volume of teachers exiting the profession prematurely. In fact, studies have found that as many as 50 percent of teachers leaving the profession before their fifth year of service and one-third of the teaching workforce experiencing consistent turnover every year (Coulter & Zaleski, 2007). Further, nationally-obtained survey data have revealed that turnover associated with retirement is minor compared to excess demand resulting from qualified teachers leaving for reasons other than retirement, such as teachers pursuing other career opportunities due to a lack of satisfaction on the job (Ingersoll, 2001). This highlights the necessity for understanding the causes of pre-retirement teacher turnover behind any well-informed teacher retention strategy.

While the research on job satisfaction, specifically in understanding their impact on teacher retention, is multifaceted, causal data underlying these approaches have been limited (Garcia et al., 2022; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; See et al., 2021). The limitations revealed by these studies raise important questions as they relate to teacher retention and addressing

shortages. Numerous studies point to the factors which influence teacher job satisfaction, but the education community may find value in investigating the role that public policy plays in shaping the relationship between teacher job satisfaction and retention. Given the current popularity of education reform in our current political discourse, this presents an exciting opportunity for research. As a result, the purpose of this study is to analyze the extent to which public policy impacts the relationship between teacher job satisfaction and the retention of teachers within the profession.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Research Question

What is the relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers?

Non-directional Null Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers.

Non-directional Alternative Hypothesis

There is a significant relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers.

Definition of Variables

Dependent Variable: Retention of teachers

Constitutive Definition: As See et al. (2020) provide, the definition of teacher retention varies according to the literature. Some studies have defined retention as teachers remaining within their current school, while others expanded their definition to include teachers remaining within their school district, the state, state-funded schools, or even the profession (See et al., 2020). This variability highlights the nature of teacher retention

and the importance of clarifying the context under examination. For the purpose of this study, teacher retention is defined as one of two major aspects of the overall teacher labor market, alongside teacher recruitment, that describes the phenomena in which teachers remain in their current assignment (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

Operational Definition: For this study, the teacher retention variable was measured using an original instrument which measures the likelihood in which surveyed teachers will remain in the same assignment from one year to the next. Participating teachers were given the opportunity to estimate the chances they will remain in their current assignment for the next academic year.

Independent Variable: Public Policy

Constitutive Definition: Given the depth and variation of studies on the topic, a review of academic literature reveals that there is no clear construct for public policy in the education realm. However, reform in education is generally driven by the perception that students and schools are not achieving as societal needs evolve (Johnson & Foster, 1990). For the purpose of this study, public policy should be best understood as government action in response to varying issues or problems within the education realm.

Operational Definition: For this study, the public policy variable was measured using an original instrument which measures teachers' understanding and perceptions of current education policy. The instrument will include indicators which correspond to specific education policies that will be rated by teachers according to their knowledge and evaluation of those policies.

Constant

The constants factored in the study were active public school teachers, excluding those teachers that currently serve in a limited-term assignment. Because of the proximity and accessibility of data for this study, the teachers examined in this study were teachers employed by a large, Midwestern school district. Additionally, because of the variability that exists in public policy, the public policies examined in this study will not include school- or district-specific policies, but macro-level policy topics that are commonly understood in the education realm and under close examination across states and the country.

Significance of the Study

There exists plenty of research which points to the impact of student and school characteristics, particularly in minority or low-achieving student concentrations, on teacher turnover. Specifically, there is variation in the supply of qualified teachers in schools serving minority or economically disadvantaged students relative to those in other communities (Hanushek et al., 2001; Kirby et al., 1999). Conversely, Murnane and Olsen (1990) have shown the importance of salary on the length of time teachers stay in the profession (Murnane & Olsen, 1990). However, limited research exists as to the role that public policy plays in the interplay between teacher job satisfaction and retention, especially when controlling for student and school factors. The need for this research gains significance in light of policymakers' increasing calls for restructuring the way schools do business to effectively meet the diverse needs of students, often in spite of already-limited school resources and staff capacity. A synthesis of the literature on public policy has revealed that education policy is not only diverse but varies significantly based on political context, school context, policy priority, and the level of governance in which

the reform agenda is being implemented (Heneman III et al., 2019; Marianno, 2015; Sykes & Martin, 2019).

Reform in education has taken many different forms throughout human history but has been the topic of extensive research considering the current education landscape's rightward emphasis on outcomes and accountability. The literature often focuses on the application of three major policy regimes that have received much attention in recent decades: national school accountability mandates and their implementation in the states (Courtney, 2019; Sun et al., 2016; Sykes & Martin, 2019); state-level, deregulatory responses to the teacher labor market brought on, in part, by limitations to public sector unions and reforms to working conditions such as tenure (Barret et al., 2021; Brunner et al., 2019; Marianno, 2015; Roth, 2017); and the growth of education alternatives made available by privatization (Jabbar, 2018; Kaimal & Jordan, 2016). There could be additional policies that have an impact on retention, but the current literature seems to focus predominantly on these reforms as to their effects on teacher retention.

These reforms have gained political popularity, perhaps in recognition of, or in spite of, efforts to retain quality teachers. For example, school accountability, designed to enhance school quality by linking education funding to student achievement targets, has had redistributive impacts on the teacher labor market with effects on retaining teachers in hard-to-staff areas, with little consideration for the strain that its implementation has placed on new teachers (Adoniou, 2016). Further, although most reform strategies have been implemented with a focus on school improvement in urban settings, teacher shortages are as substantial a problem as in other types of schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Additionally, various studies show that laws restricting public sector union strength and education privatization schemes play a role in reforming the composition of the teacher labor market. For example, despite the limited evidence that

deregulation in the teacher labor market has strengthened recruitment, especially in the private and charter school sectors (Barrett et al., 2022), the influence of these reforms has both impacted the duration of teacher employment and the diversity of the teaching force (Barret et al., 2021; Brunner et al., 2019; Roth, 2017). While the research examining the impact of these reforms vary, there is consensus as to their transformative impacts on school communities and leadership practices (Sun et al., 2016).

Although a great deal of research highlights the problems facing the current teacher labor market, notable gaps in the literature present a unique and exciting opportunity for further exploration. For example, what is the appropriate approach when understanding the nature of teacher shortages? What extent does education policy play a role in shaping teacher retention? To what extent does public policy impact our understanding of the factors influencing teacher retention? Despite the latitude afforded to policymakers for experimentation in education policy, bridging these research gaps could provide the field with a clearer understanding of how public policy affects the teacher labor market. This, in turn, could provide the education community with the means to identify and implement strategies ensuring that schools have access to a reliable pool of qualified teachers.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Limitations

This study was conducted via electronic means and distributed to active teachers at a large, Midwestern public school district. Although the author had accessibility to many teachers within the school district, there was a chance that the number of people choosing to respond to the study invitation would be minimal. Many of the teachers work full time, have families, work

additional jobs, or have other time commitments which limits the amount of effort study subjects could put into responding to the survey.

Another limitation was that the data for the study was based on each teachers' reported perceptions of each of the public policies examined in the research, in connection to their own assessed chances of job retention. Collecting information through a self-report has its own limitations. For example, teachers may be biased when they report on their own experiences. Further, the study's focus on a large, Midwestern school district suggests that most participants likely live or work in urban areas, potentially leading to varying perceptions of the study's indicators compared to those in rural, suburban, or even private or charter school settings. This context underscores the need for caution when generalizing findings beyond this environment. However, because of the anonymity promised in the study, it was assumed that study participants felt minimal risk in answering honestly to the study questions.

Delimitations

This study was conducted in a large Midwestern school district. The study subjects were active public school teachers that were contacted via email through cooperation with the teachers' professional association. No private school teachers were included in this study. The study subjects are active participants in the operations of their professional association, so it is assumed the subjects will have some familiarity and level of appraisal with the indicators addressed in the study. Lastly, it was beneficial to limit the study to active participants in the teachers' association, considering the accessibility of data and time constraints associated with this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Body of the Review

School Accountability

Much of the literature focuses on the application of federal planning mandates for public schools and teacher education programs, particularly those which took the form of policy conditioning federal education funds on schools' progress toward meeting targets in student achievement based on test scores. These policies evolved first with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the less-restrictive Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Both have had a role in increasing demands on teachers and alter school recruitment strategies as a feature of addressing school quality (Sun et al., 2016; Sykes & Martin, 2019). These policies, while well-intended, have raised concerns about their impact on teacher retention rates, especially in low-performing and hard-to-staff schools (Adoniou, 2016; Clotfelter et al., 2004). For example, state-level studies such as those conducted by Clotfelter et al. (2004) demonstrated how accountability systems associated with NCLB can exacerbate challenges in retaining qualified teachers in low-performing schools. Further, federal intervention in teacher preparation, resulting in reduced local control, created barriers for new teachers (Bales, 2006) and increased reliance on alternative licensure with minimal preparation (Huang, 2006). White et al. (2020) discovered that alternative licensure pathways, while seen as favorable to individuals seeking low-cost pathways into teaching, could enhance diversity in the teaching supply but often lead to higher rates of turnover by those teachers due to inadequate preparation.

Further study by Sun et al. (2016) and Adoniou (2016) provided nuanced perspectives on the effects of accountability policies. Sun et al. (2016) found a weak increase in teacher turnover, even in disadvantaged schools, and that NCLB actually increased demand for teachers in tested

subjects (Sun et al., 2016), challenging popular claims that NCLB increased teacher attrition, although the authors concede that school leadership may have had an impact on teacher employment practices. Additionally, Adoniou (2016) took an international view of school accountability systems and found that national reform standards may actually have the effect of pushing new teachers out of the profession if school leadership offers no direction or support in managing their responses to accountability policy, and school leaders must be mindful of how their responses to reform agendas are impacting beginning teachers (Adoniou, 2016). While it is not clear whether findings of the study could be replicated in the United States, the findings suggest a powerful warning for state leaders to remember as it thinks about how accountability policy is managed in their own schools.

The transition from NCLB to ESSA, designed to give states greater flexibility in school accountability, brings new challenges concerning the retention of teachers. Sykes and Martin (2019) revealed a wide variation in state accountability plans that were not directly relevant to addressing teacher inequity, with some strategies lacking the proper resources or committed in areas where teacher equity was an issue. Sykes and Martin (2019) pointed to many logistical barriers for states and raised important questions for what improvement strategies states could employ in the current era of ESSA accountability. Finally, Courtney's (2019) study in Kentucky utilized an inferential statistics model to measure the relationship between school improvement designations and teacher quality indicators were statistically more likely to have higher teacher turnover rates, higher percentages of new teachers, and employ teachers with lower rates of advanced education prior to their identification under the new accountability system (Courtney, 2019). While there is much in the literature as to the response of states and schools in our current era of school accountability, each new reform brings attention to the importance of teacher

retention as part of each state's school improvement priorities.

Reforms to the Teacher Labor Market

Additionally, there is literature which highlights reforms to the teacher labor market as a result of laws restricting the strength of public sector unions and changes to terms of employment in the way of tenure policies or other working conditions. Some research has revealed the importance of working conditions in predicting teacher retention, especially in high-poverty schools, rural schools, and in areas like special education, especially when school leadership foster a supportive environment (Ansley et al., 2019; Coulter & Zaleski, 2007; Cowan et al., 2016; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). For decades, labor unions played an important role in empowering workers to bargain collectively over working conditions and oversee management to ensure adherence to negotiated agreements (Shin, 2014). By equalizing union members' wages, for example, they also advocated for fair pay standards across industries (Acemoglu, Aghion & Violante, 2001; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011), which had grown to include public sector employees such as teachers. However, the limitations posed by collective bargaining have also been examined, including restrictions on schools' ability to offer differentiated compensation in high-demand areas (Murnane & Olsen, 1990; Cowan et al., 2016) and constraints on public sector employment practices such as tenure (Barret et al., 2021).

Perhaps the rigidity posed by collective bargaining agreements in the employment of teachers may have motivated recent laws decentralizing public sector employment practices, particularly in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2007-09. The elimination of collective bargaining laws in many states, led by conservative governments, granted public schools to enact unilateral changes to reform teacher employment practices, including tenure policies, dismissal procedures, and salary schedules (Barret et al., 2021; Brunner et al., 2019; Marianno, 2015;

Roth, 2017). However, the implementation of these reforms has varied widely across states and localities (Heneman III et al., 2019), and there is debate as to whether such reforms have had an impact on teacher retention. For example, Marianno (2015) and Roth (2017) uncovered the reforms enacted in Wisconsin and found that while job protections were reduced, teachers gained in other areas like differentiated compensation and benefits but the long-term effects of such changes were uncertain. Brunner et al. (2019) reviewed the set of reforms implemented in neighboring Michigan and found limited overall impact on teacher attrition, but early-career teachers in hard-to-staff areas were more likely to leave the profession. The findings suggest a need for policymakers to carefully consider potential consequences when implementing similar reforms in other jurisdictions, especially in high-demand teaching areas (Brunner et al., 2019).

Education Privatization

Local schools have seen a further decentralization of school employment policies with the creation of school choice programs that have seen a dramatic expansion in many states, raising questions as to their effect on teacher retention. By virtue of their ability to provide incentives and opportunity for prospective teachers, it is long held by school choice advocates that choice or charter schools are an example of the perceived benefits of a free labor market. However, the literature also presents common challenges related to program implementation. For example, Kaimal and Jordan (2016) found that comprehensive, incentive-based models are unviable, confusing in their implementation, and are limited in their effectiveness. Further, their study found that educators need significant salary increases to truly be incentivized by money and for schools to experience improved rates of retention.

Additionally, Jabbar (2018) analyzed data in New Orleans and discovered that the post-Hurricane Katrina deregulatory environment brought on by charter school expansion resulted in

increased instability, or “churn” in teacher retention. In the expanding charter school sector, challenges arise with regard to overwork and lack of job security (Jabbar, 2018). For public schools, this means districts experiencing a large charter school presence will realize new hiring challenges and staffing uncertainty as parents and teachers move from school to school (Jabbar, 2018). Despite enjoying relative flexibility from the constraints of public schools to employ better teachers, questions arise regarding stability in the teaching force and the need for alternative policies that will address these challenges.

Analysis

The impact of recent education reform policies on teacher retention produces mixed results, with a growing role in federal oversight over school accountability and varied state and local control over public sector employment practices. While the literature diverges on the national and state levels, there is consensus by researchers on the necessity for approaches to ensure that schools have access to a stable market of effective teachers (Clotfelter et al., 2004), especially in the context of ESSA. With the emphasis on school context, ESSA gives states new opportunities to integrate teacher retention into their school improvement strategies. It is clear that school context is important in meeting accountability targets and policymakers must consider the strain their responses to reform agendas are placing on new teachers (Adoniou, 2016).

Additionally, studies highlight challenges and varying impacts of reforms to public sector employment, including flexibility in compensating teachers and the complexity of implementing such reforms (Cowan et al., 2016; Heneman III et al., 2019). There appears to be limited evidence that the flexibilities granted by reforming working conditions have contributed to increased incentives for teachers to work in high-need areas, or whether they were intended for

such outcomes at all. The literature also delves into the practical difficulties associated with school choice policies, indicating challenges associated with program implementation and raising questions as to the ability of schools to retain teachers (Jabbar, 2018; Kaimal & Jordan, 2016). The research suggests further study is needed to assist schools with staffing while achieving the goal of creating true choice for families. Despite the extensive research that has been done related to the impact of public policy on teacher recruitment, quality research is still needed to fill in the gaps presented by the literature. Despite the limitations in the current research, Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) provide hope in their findings that the appropriate policy approach may play a mitigating role in retaining teachers. Further study on these topics could greatly inform the field as it seeks ways to improve rates of teacher retention.

Theoretical Framework

The body of research regarding teacher job satisfaction as a driver of teacher retention often highlights the association between certain working conditions, such as compensation, and increased retention (Murnane & Olsen, 1990), while others point to the importance of a supportive work environment (See et al., 2021) and positive relationships between school leadership and staff as it relates to teacher satisfaction (Ansley et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2022). This is often explained by the economic labor market theory of supply and demand (Guarino et al., 2006, Gulosino et al., 2019) which focuses on workplace-level factors which influence why teachers change schools or leave the profession completely. This framework explains that teachers will remain in their current assignment as long as teaching offers them the most benefit compared to other available alternatives (Geiger and Pivovarova, 2018). As such, if a vacant teaching assignment provides better working conditions or greater overall satisfaction, a qualified teacher would likely be willing to switch assignments, assuming all else is held equal.

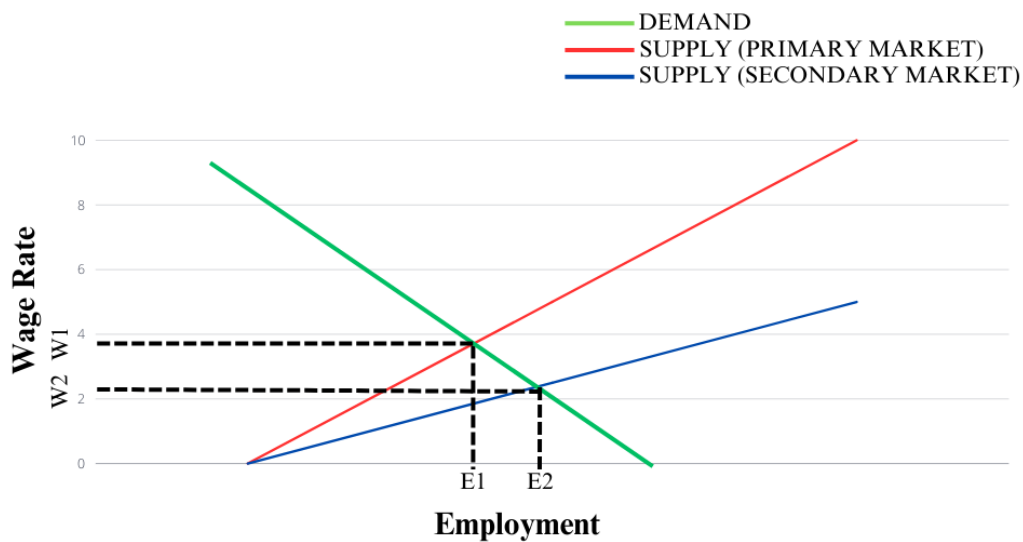
Because the labor market theory of supply and demand assumes a degree of homogeneity in the environments in which teachers teach (Gulosino et al., 2019), turnover studies that have called on this theory do not account for differences in turnover between sectors or barriers in labor mobility across communities. Indeed, workers may vary according to personal preferences, skills, and experience, while schools may differ according to sector (e.g., public, private, or charter), geography, or a wide variety of other characteristics. It would therefore be possible that the preferences, skills, and employability among teachers working in affluent or rural schools would differ from those working in economically disadvantaged or urban schools, as an example. These differences may contribute to differences in turnover trends across communities which provides little evidence for a unified labor market, but rather, labor market segmentation (Gulosino et al., 2019).

Conceptually, this study draws upon the segmented labor market theory introduced by Gulosino et al. (2019), which was used to explain teacher turnover between the charter and public school sector in terms of exit and transfer rates of teachers, and applies it to explain the differences in retention across schools. The assumption underlying their application of the segmented labor market theory was that the teaching market is divided into two essentially distinct segments, by which employment is relatively stable, pay is higher, and career opportunities are more predictable in the primary segment, while employment in the secondary segment does not have any of those qualities (Gulosino et al., 2019). Tests of this theory conclude that segmented labor markets lead to considerable instability in employment and high turnover among the labor force, primarily among those who do not have the means to cross over into other employment opportunities (Kalleberg and Sørensen 1979; Rosenberg 1976; Rumberger and Carnoy 1980, as cited in Gulosino et al., 2019). The mobility of teachers in one

part of the labor market to the other is likely very limited, especially employees who have been working in the secondary segment are not likely to get employment in the primary segment (Gulosino et al., 2019). A visual representation of this theory may be seen in Figure below.

Figure 1

Segmented Labor Market Theory



In framework presented by Gulosino et al. (2019), the job context in the secondary, or charter school, segment is composed of nonunionized workers whose employment stability is typically less structured than those in the primary, or the public school sector (Gulosino et al., 2019). Additionally, they referenced other studies which examined how institutional structures in school sectors, mediated by organizational features, influenced teacher turnover dynamics (Cannata 2011; Cannata and Penaloza 2012, as cited in Gulosino et al., 2019). They note the

degree of variance between sectors is greatly dependent on state laws which authorize the creation of schools in the charter sector (Gulosino et al., 2019), implying the ways in which institutional structures of school sectors shape teacher turnover. Therefore, it would be appropriate to test this theory as it relates to the application of other policies, predicted to impact the relationship between job satisfaction and teacher retention, such as those governing public sector employment, school accountability, and others.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to analyze the extent to which public policy impacts the relationship between teacher job satisfaction and the retention of teachers within the profession. Participating teachers were given the opportunity to estimate the chances they will remain in their current assignment for the next academic year as well as indicate their understanding and appraisal of current education policies impacting the profession. For this reason, a quantitative, correlational survey research paradigm was deemed to be the most appropriate. According to Fraenkel et al. (2019), one major characteristic underlying the survey design is to collect information, on elements such as opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or knowledge, from a group of people in order to describe some aspects or characteristics “of the population of which that group is a part” (p. 358). Gathering the necessary data in a correlational survey enables researchers to explore “the relationship of responses to one question in a survey to another, or of a score based on one set of survey questions to a score based on another set” (Fraenkel et al., 2019, p. 360). In line with this approach, the correlational survey included specific items related to the retention and public policy variables and were administered to the teacher sample. Responses to the survey were subsequently analyzed to identify the correlation between a teacher’s estimated likelihood

of retention with specific indicators of education policy.

Threats to the Internal Validity of the Research Design

As in any study, researchers performing survey research should be aware of threats to internal validity and evaluate those threats to ensure the integrity of their study. Fraenkel et al. (2019) indicate that there are four main threats to the internal validity in cross-sectional survey research, which include location, mortality, instrumentation, and instrument decay. As it relates to this study, a location threat could arise if the collection of data is carried out in places that affects survey participants' responses (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Additionally, instrument decay could occur in surveys if the interviewers get tired or are rushed (Fraenkel et al., 2019). To alleviate these concerns, the survey instrument was field tested by other education professionals outside of the school district under examination prior to the recruitment of participants for the study. A field test of the survey instrument was valuable for identifying possible concerns related to validity and addressing them prior to recruitment. The table below presents further information about the specific threats to internal validity in this study and corresponding strategies to counter those threats.

Table 1

Threats to the Internal Validity of Cross-Sectional Survey Research

Threat to Validity	Description	Strategy
Location	This threat arises when the collection of data is carried out in places that may affect survey participants' responses	The questionnaire was field tested and revisions were made to the instrument based on feedback from the field test
Instrument decay	This threat arises when the interviewers get tired or are rushed	The questionnaire was field tested and revisions were made to the

		instrument based on feedback from the field test
Instrumentation	This threat may arise in the event poor instrumentation increases the chances of spurious relationships emerging	Data for the survey were collected using a single, online questionnaire to reduce data collector bias

Setting

The setting, comprising both the target population and the participants who were selected for the study, included a mix of active teachers working in schools of various sizes and locations that are part of a large school district in the Midwest. Consisting of 21 elementary schools, five middle schools, three high schools, as well as five charter schools and four choice or specialty schools, the school district includes a mix of rural, suburban, and urban communities. It is the third-largest school district of the state in which this school district is located and, as of the 2023-24 school year, served 19,069 students. Like many large school districts, the schools from which participants were selected are experiencing challenges due to declining enrollment and budget reductions, leading to cuts or restructures in programming, staffing, and facilities.

The political landscape of the school district under examination closely mirrors that of its state, marked by significant demographics and economic shifts such as an aging population and the decline of local manufacturing. This district, and its underlying political subdivisions, are often seen as a bellwether for predicting the direction of state politics due to its sharp political divide. This divide greatly contributes to its state's reputation as a battleground in national politics. Consequently, the school district under examination has experienced shifts in education policy due to frequent changes in the composition of state government, from the drastic limitations on public-sector collective bargaining and a dramatic expansion of private school choice. These reforms, which gained popularity following the election of conservative state

legislatures across the Midwest in the aftermath of the Great Recession, were compounded further by changes to school accountability due to the transition from NCLB to ESSA. Taken together, these policy changes reflect the broader political dynamics and culture within the state and shape the education landscape of the school district. Given the impacts these changes have had on the schools in this area specifically, studying retention within this context can provide insight into the challenges experienced by schools that have been impacted by similar policies.

Participants

The participants were active teachers who teach K-12 education in a large, public school district located in the Midwest. As of the 2023-24 school year, the school district was served by 1,631 active teachers. Teachers in this school district were 78.3% women and 21.7% men in the 2022-23 school year, while the racial makeup of teachers in the district were as follows: 94.5% White, 2.0% Hispanic, 2.0% Black, 0.9% Asian, 0.3% Native American, and 0.4% Pacific Islander. Despite the lack of diversity in the population size, this trend is in line with that of the state in which this school district is located. Statistics on the current demographic makeup of the staff employed within this school district were not known at the time of this study as this is not information the school district makes publicly available. However, information about age, gender, ethnicity, and the type of school in which the teacher works was included in the data that were gathered from these participants.

Sampling

The study used a convenience sampling method. According to Fraenkel et al. (2019), convenience sampling is a method by which researchers select participants for inclusion in the sample based on their access by the researcher, which is influenced by factors such as proximity,

availability, or willingness to participate in the research. The target population was composed of active teachers in a large Midwestern school district, with study subjects selected from active teachers who are members of a local teachers' professional association. This selection assumes that the subjects possess a certain level of familiarity and appraisal regarding retention and the public policy indicators included in the study. With cooperation from the local teachers' professional association, leaders of the association were able to email the survey to the entire membership of the association to ensure all possible participants could be reached. Given the time constraints associated with the study, convenience sampling was deemed to be the optimal choice.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was developed and distributed through the Qualtrics platform. Questions were designed with consideration of the segmented labor market theory, focusing on prospective participants' descriptions of school characteristics such as rural versus urban, high-poverty versus low-poverty, and racially diverse or racially homogeneous. The questionnaire underwent field testing to gather critical information from reviewers with the purpose of improving the overall quality of the tool. The questionnaire included a letter of informed consent at the beginning of the questionnaire to assure participants about their rights. Finally, the author guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity for all respondents.

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisted of 26 questions, including multiple-choice, matrix, and short answer formats. Ten of the questions measured demographic characteristics, such as gender, race, and level of education to allow for deeper analysis of respondent characteristics relative to the social phenomenon under study. Additionally, respondents were asked to estimate the likelihood of remaining in their current teaching assignment for the next

school year. The remaining questions focused on the participants' perceptions and evaluations of the three major policy topics under consideration, probing their understanding of each policy's impact on their job, and prompting ratings on the significance of those policies on their satisfaction to remain in their current assignment. Lastly, respondents were invited to identify the factors, if any, influencing their evaluation of each policy, which were coded for subsequent analysis.

Data Collection

The study was conducted in a completely virtual setting and was administered through the university's online survey platform in the spring of 2024. The author initiated contact with teacher association leadership via phone to assess their willingness to distribute the web-based survey. Upon approval of the survey instrument, the questionnaire was distributed through the association's email lists. Recruitment emails were designed to detail the purpose of the study, specify the time frame for data collection, and outline assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Questionnaire links were emailed to teachers who elect to participate, with each participant receiving only one link. The questionnaire was accessible to each teacher at their convenience, allowing them to complete the survey at a time and location of their choosing. The estimated completion time for each questionnaire was twenty minutes, and there was no compensation provided to participants who finished the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included detailed descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages for nominal and interval variables, and measures of central tendency for interval variables. To explore the relationships between variables, specific tests of correlation were

needed to analyze the extent to which each participants' assessed chances of retention was influenced by their understanding and evaluation of education policy. This type of nonparametric analysis is necessary to look for existing relationships among and between variables to describe the nature of the relationship between these variables (Fraenkel et al., 2019). To test the null hypothesis, Spearman's rho correlation was employed to assess these relationships while accounting for differences among the responses to see whether age, education, credential, or content area taught showed any relationships of value. This type of analysis was deemed the most appropriate because the data satisfied two important assumptions for the results to be accurate: first, the variables are continuous or ordinal, and second, the variables have a monotonic relationship (StatsTest.com, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Survey participants were assured that they are at no more than minimal risk of harm. The questions presented in the survey carried the potential to increase current levels of stress as participants reflected on their respective work environments. Survey participants were encouraged to seek assistance with university resources for health and well-being as issues arise. Additionally, survey questions did not include any specific identifiers such as the participant's name or school name, and survey participants were assured that survey responses were kept strictly confidential. These assurances were kept in place in order to receive approval from the university's institutional review board.

RESULTS

Demographic Overview

Participant demographic information was drawn from the first portion of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by a total of 40 teachers. Of these participants,

the majority were women (80%) and White (95%). Further, 50% of the participants held a master's degree or higher with additional credits, while 72.5% held a teaching credential at the tier III, or lifetime license, level. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 62 years with a mean age of 50.18 years. Finally, a plurality of teachers taught at the elementary school level (47.5%) and in a general education or core content area (52.5%). Years of service ranged from 3 to 36 years with a mean of 21.58 years. The number of assignments worked by the participants ranged from one to 34 assignments with a mean of 6.68 assignments. Study participant demographic information of all participants is summarized in Table below.

Table 2*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Participant Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Women	32	80
Men	8	20
Ethnicity		
White	38	95
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	2.5
Other	1	2.5
Highest Postsecondary Level		
Bachelor's Degree	4	10
Bachelor's Degree with Additional Credits	5	12.5
Master's Degree	4	10
Master's Degree with Additional Credits	20	50
Specialist Degree	4	10
Doctoral Degree	3	7.5
Teaching Credential		
Tier I emergency license or license with stipulations	1	2.5
Tier II provisional license	4	10
Tier III lifetime license	29	72.5
Tier IV master educator license	6	15
Grade Level		
Preschool	1	2.5
Elementary school	19	47.5
Middle school	9	22.5
High school	11	27.5
Content Area		

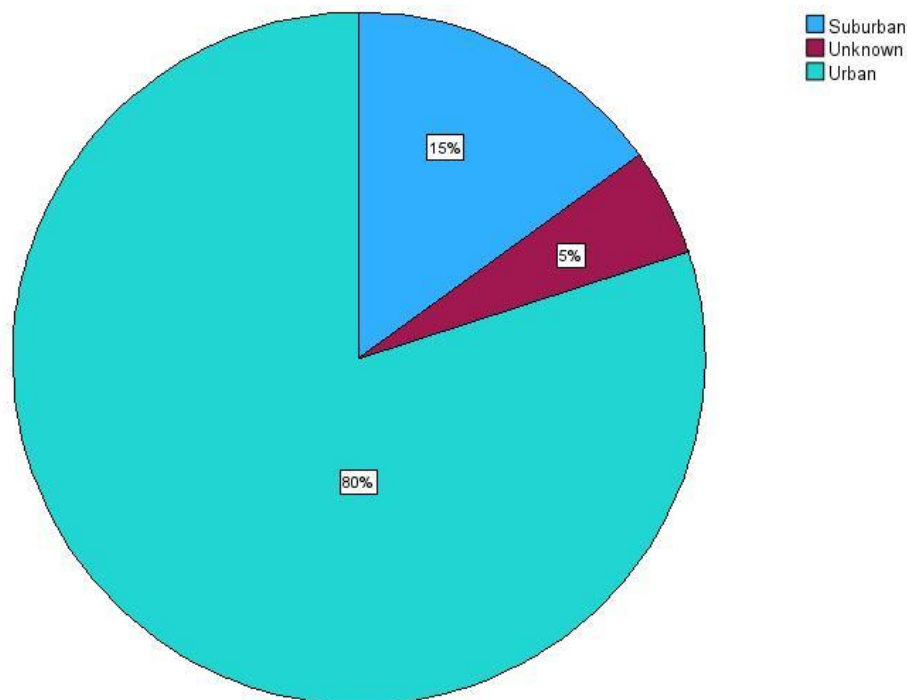
General education or core content area	21	52.5	
English learners	2	5	
Special education	5	12.5	
Specialist or other instructional area	7	17.5	
Other	5	12.5	
<hr/>			
Participant Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	50.18	52	8.3
Years of Service	21.58	23.5	9.65
Number of Assignments	6.68	4	6.9

Note. $n = 40$.

Additionally, the geographic, economic, and demographic characteristics of the schools where the participating teachers worked were also examined. A majority of the participants reported working in urban settings (80%). Figure summarizes the geographic characteristics of the schools as described by the study participants.

Figure 2

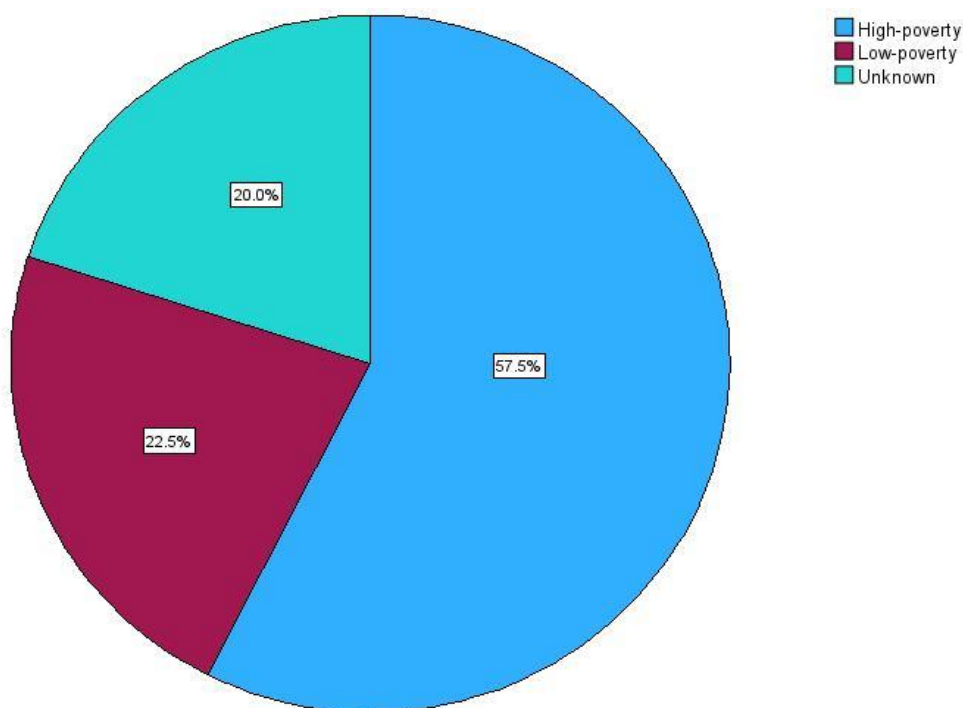
Geographic Characteristics of Participant Schools



Next, participants were asked to describe the economic characteristics of the students served by the schools in which they worked. A majority of the study participants (57.5%) reported working in schools serving students in high levels of poverty. Figure 3 summarizes the economic characteristics of the schools as described by the study participants.

Figure 3

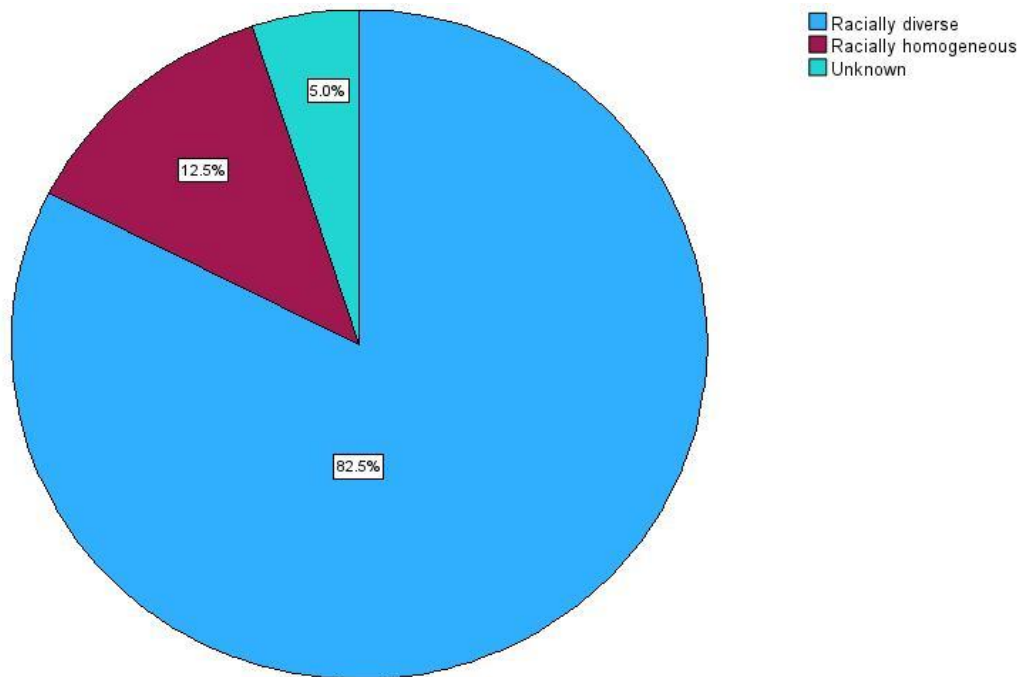
Economic Characteristics of Participant Schools



Finally, study participants were asked to evaluate the demographic characteristics of the students served by the schools in which they worked. A majority of the study participants (82.5%) reported working in racially diverse environments. Figure summarizes the demographic characteristics of the schools as described by the study participants.

Figure 4

Demographic Characteristics of Participant Schools



Results

The following section provides an analysis of the data and the results based on the research question.

Research Question

What is the relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers?

H₀: There is no significant relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers.

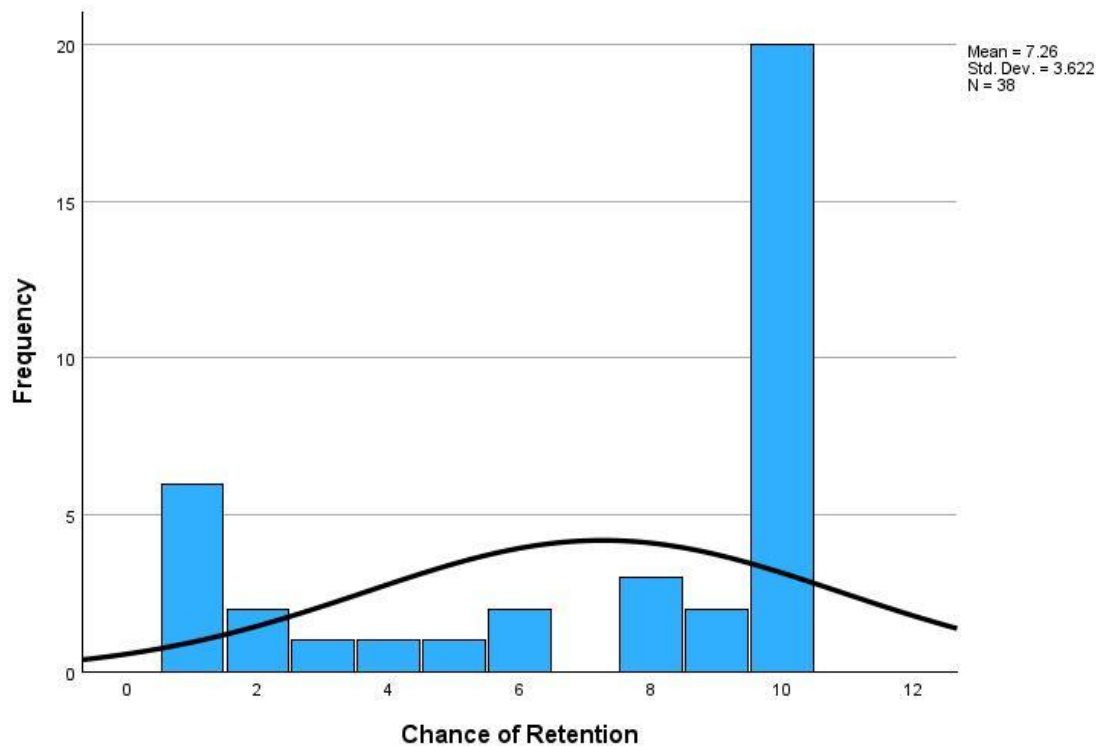
H₁: There is a significant relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers.

The researcher investigated the relationship between variables by first examining data

obtained from the retention portion of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate their assessed likelihood of voluntarily remaining in their current teaching assignment on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest. The distribution of the results for the dependent variable, indicated by the likelihood of retention, is shown in Figure 5 below. The distribution is negatively skewed and does not follow a normal distribution pattern. Because the score distributions were not normal for this variable, nonparametric tests were employed to test the study's hypothesis.

Figure 5

Self-Reported Chance of Retention

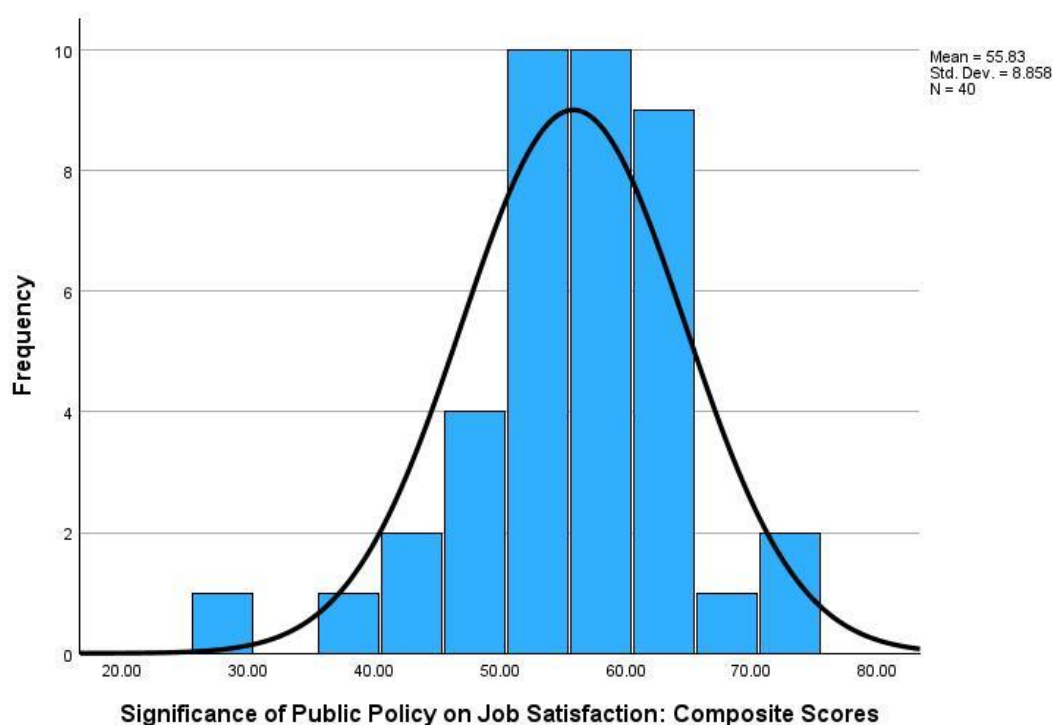


Further, the independent variable, public policy, was analyzed using a composite score for each participant based on responses to the public policy segment of the questionnaire.

Participants were asked to rate the various aspects of education policy on the significance it plays in their job satisfaction as a predictor of retention. Composite scores were derived by adding the scores for the 15 items together to arrive at a total score. The highest possible score on the survey was 75. The minimum score reported was 28 with a maximum reported score of 73. For these participants, the mean score was 55.83 ($Mdn = 57.5$, $SD = 8.86$). The distribution of the results for the independent variable is shown in Figure below.

Figure 6

Significance of Public Policy on Teachers' Job Satisfaction



To address variations within job satisfaction as it related to specific education policies, additional measures were incorporated into the analysis. Participants were asked to rate the significance of various aspects of education policy in their job satisfaction, which was categorized into changes in accountability policy, labor market policy, and school choice policy.

Each indicator ranged from a minimum score of 5, indicating low significance on job satisfaction, to a maximum of 25, representing the opposite. Across all three indicators, the lowest reported score was 5, while the highest was 25, reflecting the range of perceptions regarding the impact of education policies on job satisfaction. For these participants, the mean score for accountability policy was 19.22 ($Mdn = 20.5$, $SD = 4.92$), while labor market policy was 19.45 ($Mdn = 22$, $SD = 6.59$), and school choice policy was 17.15 ($Mdn = 19$, $SD = 4.19$). Table 3 summarizes the information related to these variables.

Table 3

Significance of Public Policy Domains on Teacher Job Satisfaction

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min. Statistic</i>	<i>Max. Statistic</i>
Public Policy	40	55.83	57.5	8.86	15	75
Accountability Policy	40	19.22	20.5	4.92	5	25
Labor Market Policy	40	19.45	22	6.59	5	25
School Choice Policy	40	17.15	19	4.19	5	25

To explore the relationships among these variables with teacher retention, a Spearman's rho correlation was used to measure the strength and direction of association of various bivariate correlations. According to Fraenkel et al. (2019), a positive relationship is indicated when high scores on one variable are accompanied by high scores on the other, and vice versa, while a negative relationship is evident when high scores on one variable are accompanied by low scores on the other, and vice versa. Some missing scores were imputed to account for missing data. However, the characteristics of the variables satisfied the assumptions that the variables for being continuous or ordinal in nature and for having a monotonic relationship.

Results of the Spearman's rho correlation, examining the relationship between retention

and public policy, revealed a statistically insignificant and weak correlation between retention and public policy, ($r_s(38) = .225, p > .05$). This remained true when controlling for participant characteristics, including years of service, number of teaching assignments, education, credential, grade level, and the teacher's described school characteristics. The only instance where this correlation resulted in statistical significance was when controlling for the teacher's content area, in which the positive correlation was moderate but significant among teachers of general education or a core content area ($r_s(20) = .525, p < 0.05$). However, the size of this segment of the sample requires for this finding to be considered preliminary.

The relationship between retention and specific education policies was examined further. A Spearman's rho correlation was again examined to reveal a statistically significant, moderately strong positive correlation between retention and accountability policy, ($r_s(38) = .332, p < 0.05$). The strength and significance of the relationship generally becomes weaker when controlling for participant characteristics, but the correlation remains significant among participants who teach in a general education or core content area ($r_s(20) = .535, p < 0.05$), work in an urban setting, ($r_s(31) = .389, p < 0.05$) or in high levels of poverty ($r_s(22) = .455, p < 0.05$). Coincidentally, this was the policy area that received the most attention from participants during the open-ended section of the questionnaire. When they were asked to indicate any specific factors that affected their evaluation of the policy, participants cited areas such as the behavior of students and support from administrations. Conducting a Spearman's rho correlation between retention and the other policy indicators did not reveal a statistically significant or strong correlation, even when controlling for participant and school characteristics. This suggests that despite the minimal relationship that public policy has with teacher retention, policy indicators such as labor market and school choice policies may have diluted the results of the analysis. Table 4 provides a

summary of these results.

Table 4

Summary of Correlation Coefficients Between Public Policy Domains and Teacher Self-Reported Retention

Variable		Retention Score	Public Policy Score
Public Policy	Correlation Coefficient	.225	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.175	.
	<i>n</i>	38	38
Accountability Policy	Correlation Coefficient	.332*	.454**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.042	.003
	<i>n</i>	38	38
Labor Market Policy	Correlation Coefficient	.101	.726**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.548	<.001
	<i>n</i>	38	38
School Choice Policy	Correlation Coefficient	-.068	.439**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.685	.005
	<i>n</i>	38	38

Note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on these findings, it was determined that there was no relationship among the study variables, with a clear exception between school accountability policy and teachers' estimated chances of retention ($p < 0.05$). The findings of the study therefore support the null hypothesis (H_0), indicating that there is no relationship between teachers' satisfaction with public policy and their self-reported chances of retention.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to investigate the relationship between public policy and the retention of teachers along several indicators, including accountability, labor market and school choice policies. Spearman's rho correlation demonstrated there was no significant relationship between public policy and teacher retention, except for the specific case of school accountability policies and when controlling for student or school-related factors such as economic and geographic characteristics. It is evident that certain policies matter more to teachers than others when it comes to retention. This finding aligns with frequent comments raised by participants who cite the importance of administrative leadership and supportive school culture in implementing accountability measures to increase student performance. This emphasis on the role of school leadership is similar to the work of Adoniou (2016) who found that accountability standards may actually drive teachers out of the profession if not adequately supported by school leadership, and school leaders must carefully consider how their responses to reform agendas impact teachers (Adoniou, 2016).

The study was influenced by the segmented labor market theory, as applied by Gulosino et al. (2019), which was used to explain teacher turnover between teachers in the charter and public school sectors. The segmented labor market theory assumes that the market for teaching is divided into two essentially distinct segments: the primary market, characterized by job stability, higher pay, and predictable career opportunities, and the secondary segment, which does not have any of these qualities (Gulosino et al., 2019). This study attempted to control for differences in the employment of teachers as a way of explaining the significance of education policy on job satisfaction within sectors. For instance, the study controlled for participant characteristics like teacher credentials, years of service, or teaching assignments, as well as student or school

characteristics such as geography, economic factors, or demographics as a means of highlighting any disparate impacts of education policy on the market for teachers. However, given the lack of statistical significance observed as a result of these moderating variables, exploring the segmented labor market theory requires further exploration.

Indeed, while the study focused on the relationship between teachers' evaluations of various public policies and their chances of retention, it is essential to acknowledge that policies beyond school accountability may also play a role when it comes to the ability of schools to retain teachers. For example, the study did not explore what preferences teachers held to improve those policies as a means of increasing retention. Furthermore, the time gap between the enactment of these policies and the administration of the survey, taking into account the ages of survey participants or their years of service, may have mitigated recency bias that could have been more pronounced when those policies were being debated. Additionally, the study solely relied on teachers' self-reported perceptions of their chances of retention in relation to public policy and did not incorporate actual retention data. Furthermore, it did not explore other policies that teachers might deem significant in terms of job satisfaction, thus highlighting some limitations in the study's scope. Finally, regarding the policies under examination, it is possible that they may have indirect effects on teacher retention through their clear impacts on public schools, such as the resource implications brought on by education privatization or limitations on collective bargaining. Considering these factors, the correlation between teacher retention and specific policies could potentially be stronger if the study included other stakeholders within the public school system who deal with the effects of these policies on a routine basis. This highlights the complexity of the relationship between public policy and teacher retention, suggesting a need for further exploration within the education landscape.

Recommendation for Practice

This study explored the relationship between public policy and teacher retention and found some statistical significance between school accountability policy and teacher retention. There is a significant amount of literature citing the importance of school leadership in addressing teacher inequities for school improvement (Adoniou, 2016; Courtney, 2019; Sykes & Martin, 2019), potentially leading to increased job satisfaction and improved teacher retention. They found that school leaders must carefully consider how school accountability measures are implemented locally and that addressing teacher inequities are an integral component of school improvement efforts. The findings of this study in part support the previous literature, but further recommendations for practice are provided.

While this study was conducted in a large school system with diverse schools in terms of size, location, and student characteristics, it should be acknowledged that this school district has specific characteristics that make it unique. As a result, the findings of this study may not necessarily be applicable within other communities. Therefore, the first recommendation is to replicate this study within other school districts and other school sectors, such as private and charter schools. Comparing the findings across educational settings could yield valuable insights into how policy interventions may be tailored to support teacher retention. It may also be helpful to replicate this study with other education stakeholders, such as school administration, who are responsible for implementing or managing the effects of the policies under examination. Administering a comparative analysis could highlight which policies are the most effective while accounting for factors such as school leadership and educational settings.

Another recommendation would be to refine the survey instrument used in the study. While the questionnaire was developed to assess the impact of specific policies on teacher

retention, some questionnaire items were intentionally broad to facilitate extensive data collection. However, this approach, specifically the wording of certain questions, resulted in some confusion among study participants and led to missing data. Therefore, refining the survey instrument to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness is necessary for obtaining accurate findings. Future research should focus on creating a validated instrument focusing on key policy variables to enhance the quality of data collected and obtain reliable insights into the relationship between public policy and teacher retention. A more targeted and nuanced approach to the research topic may lead to more actionable recommendations for policymakers and school leaders. By understanding the nuanced effects of various policies on teacher retention, the education community can better tailor policy interventions to support efforts aimed at retaining teachers in the education workforce.

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