THE URGENCY OF RETAINING BLACK TEACHERS: USING WORKING CONDITIONS DATA TO DIAGNOSE AND RESPOND

Upbeat Memo

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We are living in a unique moment. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many employees to reevaluate their jobs, including teachers. At the same time, the movement for racial justice has further elevated the importance of supporting and retaining Black teachers. Research shows that all students benefit from a diverse educator workforce, with especially large gains for Black students who are taught by Black teachers (Blazar, 2021). Yet, Black teachers today are reporting higher intentions of leaving the profession compared to pre-pandemic times, with increases that are even larger than that of their white peers (see Walker, 2022, Steiner & Woo, 2021). Recent research has shown that intention to leave is predictive, albeit imperfectly, of actual turnover (Nguyen et al., 2022). It is a distinct possibility that the U.S. will face an increasing number of Black teachers leaving the profession in the near future, especially compared to their white peers. In a field already disproportionately representative of white teachers, it is increasingly important that we focus on retaining Black teachers. Lack of support and poor working conditions are a major impetus for these early departures, making efforts to improve working conditions experienced by Black teachers paramount (Gershenson et al., 2021).

**Black Teachers Plan to Quit in Higher Numbers Than Their White Peers**

This memo analyzes over 14,000 responses to a large survey conducted by Upbeat, a company that partners with districts and schools to improve teacher retention through engagement data. The Fall of 2021 Engagement Survey asked teachers to respond whether they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements including, “I can see myself teaching at my school for at least the next year.” Seventeen percent of Black teachers responded that they either “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with this statement, compared to 14% of white teachers—a statistically significant difference.

**Figure 1. Percent of Teachers Reporting They Are Unlikely to Return to their School the Following Year from the Fall of 2021 Upbeat Engagement Survey**

1 For more information on the Fall of 2021 Upbeat Engagement Survey Analysis, see Conklin & Kraft (2022) at [https://www.teachupbeat.com/research](https://www.teachupbeat.com/research).
Black Teachers Plan to Leave the Profession in Higher Numbers Than the Previous Year

Recent survey data collected by the National Education Association and the U.S. Teacher Survey reveals that Black teachers plan to leave the profession in much higher numbers than in the past (see Walker, 2022, Steiner & Woo, 2021). Our analyses reveal similar patterns in a common sample of 6,395 respondents between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. In Fall 2020, 11% of Black teachers reported that they were likely to leave their school within the following year. In Fall 2021, over 18% of Black teachers reported that they were likely to leave their school in the following year—an increase of over 50% in one year.

Figure 2. Percent of Black Teachers Reporting They Are Unlikely to Return to their School the Following Year from the Fall of 2020 and Fall of 2021 Upbeat Engagement Survey
Intent to Leave is Predictive of Actually Leaving

A very recent scholarly paper suggests that even after controlling for teacher and school characteristics, 33% percent of teachers who indicated they intended to leave the profession as soon as possible did leave the next year compared to 7% of teachers who did not indicate they intend to leave. This 26 percentage point difference represents a nearly 400% increase in the likelihood of actually leaving the profession between teachers who intend to leave and those who did not (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Using additional Upbeat data, we also find that intention is predictive of actual turnover. Teachers who indicated on our Spring of 2021 survey that they were likely to leave their schools within the following year did so at much higher rates. For example, of those who “strongly disagreed” with the statement “I can see myself teaching at my school for at least the next year,” 68% actually left the profession by Fall of 2021. On the other hand, those who “strongly agreed” about leaving left at a rate of 8%.

Black Teachers’ Perceptions of Working Conditions Differ from Their White Peers

Prior research has shown that poor working conditions can lead to increased turnover (Gershenson et al., 2021). The Upbeat survey captures data across 22 domains of teacher engagement linked to teacher retention. For more information about what the domains measure, see this link.

In a previous research paper, we explored teachers’ overall satisfaction across all of the domains. In this memo, we further disaggregate the data by race/ethnicity and find that Black teachers report the lowest satisfaction with the domains of Compensation & Career Path, Cultural Competence, Diversity, and Work/Life Balance (Conklin & Kraft, 2022).

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2 For more information on the Fall of 2021 Upbeat Engagement Survey Analysis, see Conklin & Kraft (2022) at https://www.teachupbeat.com/research.
Figure 3. Percent Positive Responses by Domain among Black Teachers, 2021 Upbeat Fall Engagement Survey

Black Teachers (n=2,073)  White Teachers (n=10,054)
We also explore the gaps in satisfaction between Black and white teachers across selected domains. Figure 4 shows how Black teachers and white teachers responses compared to the average of all teachers on the Fall 2021 Upbeat survey.

These average differences capture both differences in working conditions, on average, in the schools where Black teachers work compared to white teachers, as well as differences in how Black and white teachers experience working conditions in the same school. Supplemental analyses confirm that these gaps in the experiences of teachers’ working conditions largely remain when we focus only on comparing teachers who work at the same school. Our analyses suggest that Black and white teachers experience some of their working conditions in meaningfully different ways. We found statistically significant differences for 15 of the 22 domains on the survey, which we display in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Differences in Percent Positive Responses from Average By Domain for Black and White Teachers, Upbeat Engagement Survey, Fall 2021**

For example, Black teachers report that they are somewhat dissatisfied with the Cultural Competence domain, and we can also see that Black teachers' experiences in their schools in the area of Cultural Competence are meaningfully lower than their white peers. The findings illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 serve to identify specific areas of potential focus for retaining Black teachers.
Improving Working Conditions Can Help Retain Black Teachers

The differences in how Black and white teachers experience their working conditions illustrated above can help district and school administrators better understand why Black teachers might leave their teaching positions. Focusing on improving these policies and practices are promising ways to increase the likelihood that Black teachers will stay.

Cultural Competence

Black teachers rate the cultural competence of their schools as relatively low overall, and meaningfully lower than their white peers. Within the Cultural Competence domain, we see that Black teachers report statistically significant lower levels of dialogue about racism in their schools, but also report statistically significant higher levels of feeling more prepared to discuss issues of race.

Figure 5. Differences in Percent Positive Responses in the Cultural Competence Domain for Black and White Teachers, Upbeat Engagement Survey, Fall 2021
Principals and district leadership can address issues of Cultural Competence in a couple of ways. First, administrators can create more opportunities for direct conversations about race, ethnicity, and culture among staff. This may include using current events, cultural happenings, and local issues to spark relevant and meaningful discussions among teachers in staff meetings or during other dedicated times. It is also important to be aware that having or leading these conversations is not easy work, and some school leaders might choose to seek out training or resources to make them better equipped to guide these discussions. Second, to proactively address racism and discrimination, principals and district leadership can evaluate their policies and practices through an implicit bias lens to ensure that practices are implemented in fair and balanced ways. This may include disaggregating data and questioning gaps between students of different races or ethnicities. For example, a school may conduct an analysis of discipline practices by identifying disparities in discipline frequency or severity by gender, race, and ability. Based on these findings, schools can then explore culturally responsive frameworks such as restorative justice to promote equitable behavioral interventions for all students (Larson et al. 2018; Gonzáles, Sattler, & Buth, 2018).

**Equity**

Upbeat survey data also indicates that Black teachers report lower satisfaction with equity compared to their white peers, although, in general, Black teachers rate equity more positively than other domains. At the question level, Black teachers report statistically significant differences compared to white teachers. For example, Black teachers report less positive experiences with their perspectives being valued and when it comes to opportunities being equitably accessible.

Figure 6. Differences in Percent Positive Responses in the Equity Domain for Black and White Teachers, Upbeat Engagement Survey, Fall 2021
Research has shown that in schools with poor working conditions, Black male teachers report that they are not seen as intellectual peers, and instead are most often tapped for help with student behavior (Bristol, 2020). This lack of feeling as though one's perspectives are valued can degrade trust and contribute to teachers leaving. To help combat this, schools can ensure that they are proactive in seeking out advice about instruction and student achievement from Black teachers. Districts or schools can establish affinity groups at the school or district level to address issues Black teachers share, including the lack of resources, typical feelings of isolation, and the physical and psychological effects of being teachers of color at their schools (Bristol, 2020). Districts and schools can also address issues of equity by examining whether or not all teachers have equitable access to opportunities, such as opportunities for advancement and leadership.

**Collaboration**

Lastly, Black teachers report lower rates of satisfaction with Collaboration at their schools in general, and especially compared to their white peers. At the question level we find statistically significant differences in positive responses between Black teachers and white teachers, and the most striking difference is around issues of trust.

**Figure 7. Differences in Percent Positive Responses in the Collaboration Domain for Black and White Teachers, Upbeat Engagement Survey, Fall 2021**
Johnson (2003) found “important emotional and psychological benefits associated with working closely with colleagues in teams.” One reason for this might be that teacher collaboration mitigates feelings of isolation and helps to develop a climate of trust. Addressing issues of trust with staff through collaboration may feel more nebulous, but there are proven methods to improve employees’ trust with one another. First, principals who have a clear vision for teaching and learning can use this as a focal point for collaboration, providing time for collaboration within grade-level or department teams and helping teachers feel that they are united in their work. Second, getting to know colleagues, understanding their passions, and taking the time to connect on a personal level can help members gain mutual respect. Lastly, dialogue around various educational topics that encourage all teachers to speak can foster trust by inviting multiple perspectives, valuing the exploration of biases and assumptions and entertaining new ways of knowing. Collaboration, while challenging to instill between teachers, can be a key lever to strengthen educator retention in a school.

**Conclusion**

The compounding challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic are taking a toll on teachers nationwide. Reports of teacher shortages, health and safety fears, and chronic stress are common headlines. The potential for a large wave of teacher resignations remains a real possibility. As such, schools would be wise to increase their efforts to retain all teachers, but especially Black teachers, who indicate they are more likely to leave. Our analyses point to several aspects of teacher working conditions where administrators might focus their efforts. Principals and district leadership can further refine their efforts using data around teacher satisfaction and engagement to perform a gap analysis and address challenges specific to their context.
Works Cited


About Upbeat

Upbeat works with K-12 districts across the country to administer a research-grounded survey to elevate teacher engagement and retention by fostering strong school environments. Founded and led by former educators, we bring together data scientists, technologists, and experienced former school leaders to deliver a research-backed solution. Our surveys paired with tailored toolkits and intervention strategies, surface real-time insights so that principals and district leaders are able to better understand and uncover the conditions affecting employee morale and establish actionable plans to improve teacher and staff retention.

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