

Strengthening Schools from Within
**Developing Strong School Climates Through Team Development
to Improve Teacher Retention**

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Author's Note. This white paper builds on the author's 2023 applied dissertation, *Improving Teacher Retention Within Archdiocese of Washington Schools*, and incorporates descriptive findings from a Teacher Retention Survey (2023) and School Climate Survey (2024).

Executive Summary

Teacher retention is often discussed as a staffing problem, yet educators' decisions to stay are also shaped by the daily quality of school life. Leadership practices, relationships among colleagues, communication, organizational support, and a sense of welcome all contribute to the climate teachers experience. This white paper builds on Ball's (2023) applied dissertation and considers how intentional team development can strengthen school climate and support teacher retention.

The original study used a mixed-methods design that combined individual interviews, a teacher focus group, and an anonymous quantitative survey. Nine teachers and three administrators participated in interviews; the nine teachers also participated in the focus group, and 43 teachers completed the survey. The study was conducted across three schools representing urban, suburban, and rural settings.

The findings varied by data source but converged around three central conditions. Leadership was the most frequently identified theme in individual interviews. Team was the most frequently identified theme in the focus group. A welcoming environment, marked by respect, trust, value, and belonging, was prominent across the qualitative and quantitative findings. Communication, community, support, resources, and opportunities for collaboration further shaped how educators described their school climate and their willingness to remain.

Two subsequent system-level surveys reinforced this pattern. In the 2022-23 Teacher Retention Survey, completed by 92 teachers, the three leading factors were supportive administration, colleagues, and school culture. In the 2023-24 School Climate Survey, completed by 375 teachers, the three leading factors were administrative support, a safe environment, and positive impact. Given that the instruments and respondent groups differed, these results should be interpreted as descriptive evidence of recurring organizational conditions rather than as a direct longitudinal comparison.

The central conclusion of this paper is that team development should be treated as a sustained leadership practice rather than a single event. Schools strengthen retention when leaders create structures that help adults build trust, communicate clearly, collaborate meaningfully, resolve conflict constructively, share responsibility, and recognize one another's contributions. The recommended approach includes annual climate and retention listening, leadership development, protected collaboration, a school-level team development plan, and regular review of both perception and retention data.

Introduction

Schools depend on the continuity, expertise, and relationships that experienced educators provide. When teachers leave, schools lose more than a position. They lose instructional knowledge, trusted relationships, mentoring capacity, and part of the collective memory that helps a community function well. Recruitment is necessary, but recruitment alone cannot solve a retention problem. Schools must also examine the conditions teachers experience after they are hired.

Research has consistently connected teacher retention to working conditions, administrative support, professional relationships, job satisfaction, and school climate (Ball, 2023; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). Teachers are more likely to remain when they experience meaningful work, supportive leadership, collegial trust, professional growth, and a sense that their voice matters. Conversely, unclear communication, disorganization, isolation, inadequate support, and sustained stress can weaken commitment and increase the likelihood that educators will consider leaving.

The 2023 dissertation, *Improving Teacher Retention Within Archdiocese of Washington Schools*, examined how educators perceived their school climate and how those perceptions informed retention strategies (Ball, 2023). This white paper updates and reframes that work. Its focus is not to reproduce the dissertation or combine it with later research presented at the Oxford Symposia (2025 & 2026). Instead, it draws a clear line from the original findings to two subsequent survey efforts and then translates the recurring patterns into a practical framework for team development.

Purpose of the White Paper

The purpose of this white paper is to examine how intentional team development can help schools create strong, positive climates that support teacher retention. It uses the dissertation as the foundational study and incorporates descriptive findings from the 2022-23 Teacher Retention Survey and the 2023-24 School Climate Survey. The paper addresses one guiding question:

How can school leaders use team development to strengthen school climate and improve the conditions that influence teachers' decisions to stay?

Why Team Development Matters

A school climate is experienced through relationships and routines. It is shaped in faculty meetings, planning periods, hallway conversations, decision-making processes, responses to conflict, and the way leaders follow through on commitments. For this reason, team development is not separate from school climate. It is one of the primary ways school climate is built.

Team development includes more than social gatherings or occasional morale activities. It is the intentional work of helping adults establish a shared purpose, build trust, communicate clearly, collaborate around meaningful goals, address disagreements constructively, and support one another's professional growth. When these practices become part of the school's operating culture, educators are more likely to experience belonging, efficacy, and confidence in the people with whom they work.

Research Foundation

School Climate and Teacher Retention

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life, including the relationships, expectations, norms, practices, and organizational structures experienced by members of the school community. A positive climate is not defined by the absence of difficulty. It is reflected in how a school responds to difficulty, how people treat one another, and whether teachers believe the organization will support them in doing their work.

School leadership is particularly important because leaders influence priorities, communication, resource allocation, professional expectations, and the degree to which teachers have voice and support. Research has linked leadership behavior and perceived school climate to job satisfaction, well-being, burnout, and persistence (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). Collegial relationships also matter. Teachers who experience collaboration and belonging are more likely to view their work environment positively and to feel that challenges can be addressed collectively rather than carried alone.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Theoretical Lens

The dissertation used Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a theoretical lens for understanding how workplace conditions can influence motivation and persistence. The framework begins with basic physiological and safety needs and moves through belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Applied to schools, the framework suggests that educators are better positioned to flourish when they experience physical and psychological safety, meaningful relationships, professional respect, and opportunities to grow and contribute.

This does not mean that every need follows a fixed sequence or that retention can be reduced to a single theory. It does, however, provide a useful reminder that teachers are people whose professional decisions are shaped by human needs. A strong school climate supports those needs by creating stability, belonging, recognition, purpose, and opportunities for meaningful professional contribution.

Foundational Study: Mixed Methods Design

The original applied dissertation used a mixed methods design that combined qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative components included individual interviews with teachers and administrators and a teacher focus group. The quantitative component was an anonymous school climate survey using a Likert scale. The three data sources allowed the researcher to examine both the depth of educators' experiences and broader patterns in survey responses (Ball, 2023).

Data Source	Participants	Purpose	Primary Contribution
Individual interviews	9 teachers and 3 administrators	Explore perceptions of retention needs and school climate	Detailed descriptions of leadership, culture, communication, community, mission, and support
Teacher focus group	9 teachers from the three schools	Examine how educators collectively described school climate	Emphasis on team, welcoming environment, and leadership
Anonymous survey	43 teacher respondents	Measure perceptions of respect, collaboration, resources, and support	Quantitative evidence used to corroborate qualitative themes

The study was conducted in three faith-based schools serving different geographic contexts: urban, suburban, and rural. Approximately 230 teachers received the invitation to complete the survey, and 43 responded. The nine teacher participants represented the three schools, and three administrators participated in individual interviews. The same nine teachers also participated in the focus group. Participants' identifying information was protected, and qualitative responses were coded to identify recurring themes.

The study included both deductive and inductive elements. The researcher documented three pre-established expectations concerning COVID-era teaching, salary, and students, then coded the data for emerging themes. This process was intended to make the researcher's assumptions visible while allowing participants' descriptions to shape the final findings.

Findings from the Foundational Study

The findings should be understood by data source before they are integrated. This distinction matters because the strongest theme was not identical across interviews, the focus group, and the survey. When the data sources were considered together, leadership, team, and a welcoming environment emerged as the most consistent retention-related conditions.

Individual Interviews: Leadership Was the Strongest Theme

Leadership was the most frequently coded theme in individual interviews, with 38 references to the principal, administration, or school leadership. Participants described leadership as consequential because leaders establish expectations, communicate priorities, allocate resources, respond to concerns, recognize effort, and set the emotional tone of the school.

A culture of hospitality and welcome was the second most frequently coded interview theme, with 33 references to value, trust, respect, and a positive climate. Communication followed with 23 references, community with 20, and mission and support with 11 references each. These findings

indicate that teachers did not describe retention as the result of one isolated factor. Instead, they described a connected experience in which leadership influenced the quality of relationships, communication, support, and belonging.

Teacher Focus Group: Team Was the Strongest Theme

Within the focus group, team was the most frequently identified theme, with 16 references. Participants emphasized the value of working in a school where people know one another, support one another, and share responsibility for the life of the community. A welcoming environment followed with 14 references, and positive school leadership was identified 12 times.

The focus group findings help clarify why team development belongs at the center of this updated white paper. Teachers described school climate through the quality of their relationships and their experience of working together. Team was not simply a pleasant addition to the work. It was part of the reason educators felt connected to the school and willing to continue serving there.

Anonymous Survey: Respect, Support, and Collaboration

The anonymous de-identified survey results provided quantitative evidence that aligned with the qualitative findings. Thirty-seven of the 43 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the administration promoted a school environment of respect. Thirty-six agreed or strongly agreed that staff modeled respect for one another, and 35 agreed or strongly agreed that teachers used strategies to resolve conflict in a Christ-like manner.

Responses also identified areas where continued attention was needed. Twenty-seven of 43 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the administration provided opportunities for teachers to work together collaboratively. Twenty-nine agreed or strongly agreed that resources were allocated fairly, while 25 agreed or strongly agreed that teachers had enough resources to meet student needs. These patterns suggest that a positive relational climate must be supported by practical structures, including time, access to resources, and consistent opportunities to work together.

Integrated Interpretation

Condition	Evidence from Interviews	Evidence from Focus Group	Implication for Retention
Leadership	Most frequently coded interview theme	Third most frequent focus group theme	Leaders shape expectations, support, fairness, communication, and the tone of the school
Team	Present through community, collaboration, and support	Most frequently identified focus group theme	Collegial trust and shared responsibility reduce isolation and strengthen belonging
Welcoming environment	Second most frequent interview theme	Second most frequent focus group theme	Respect, value, safety, and inclusion support teachers' desire to remain
Communication and organization	Third most frequent interview theme	Embedded in descriptions of effective teams	Clarity and follow-through build trust and reduce avoidable frustration
Support and resources	Recurring interview theme and survey concern	Connected to leadership and team care	Teachers need emotional, instructional, and practical support to sustain their work

Follow-Up Survey Evidence

Following the dissertation study, additional surveys were distributed to collect educator feedback through a Teacher Retention Survey and a School Climate Survey. These surveys expanded the number of educator voices represented and provided an opportunity to examine whether the conditions identified in the dissertation continued to appear in later data.

2022-23 Teacher Retention Survey 92 teacher responses	2023-24 School Climate Survey 375 teacher responses
1. Supportive administration 2. Colleagues 3. School culture	1. Administrative support 2. Safe environment 3. Positive impact

Figure 1. Recurring retention-related conditions across two subsequent system-level surveys.

The surveys were not identical instruments and did not follow the same cohort of educators. For that reason, the findings should not be presented as evidence that one initiative caused a particular change or that the two years form a direct longitudinal trend. Their value lies in the recurrence of similar organizational conditions across larger groups of respondents.

Administrative support appeared among the leading factors in both surveys. Collegial relationships and school culture were prominent in the Teacher Retention Survey, while safety and positive impact were prominent in the School Climate Survey. Together, these findings reinforce the dissertation's central conclusion: teachers' decisions to stay are influenced by the climate they experience, the quality of leadership, and the relationships that surround their work.

Team Development as a School Climate Strategy

The updated evidence supports a practical shift in emphasis. Schools should not treat team development as an occasional activity designed only to increase morale. Team development should be understood as an ongoing organizational strategy that strengthens the conditions associated with teacher retention.

Effective team development creates repeated opportunities for adults to learn how to work together. It establishes common language, clarifies expectations, builds confidence in colleagues, and creates processes for communication and problem-solving. These practices are especially important in schools, where complex student needs, limited time, and emotionally demanding work can otherwise lead to isolation.

Six Conditions of Strong School Teams

1. Shared Purpose and Mission

Teachers need a clear understanding of what the school is trying to accomplish and how their work contributes to that purpose. Shared purpose helps individuals see beyond isolated tasks and recognize their place within a larger mission.

2. Trust, Respect, and Belonging

A team becomes stronger when members believe they can ask for help, share concerns, and contribute ideas without being dismissed. Respect is demonstrated through listening, fairness, confidentiality, recognition, and attention to individual dignity.

3. Clear Communication and Follow-Through

Communication should be timely, organized, and aligned across leaders. Trust weakens when messages are inconsistent or commitments are not carried through. Clear systems reduce uncertainty and help teachers focus their energy on students.

4. Protected Collaboration

Collaboration requires more than encouragement. It requires time, purpose, facilitation, and useful structures. Grade-level teams, departments, mentoring partnerships, and professional learning communities should have clear goals and the support needed to act on their work.

5. Shared Leadership and Teacher Voice

Teachers are more invested when they can help identify problems, shape solutions, and contribute their expertise. Shared leadership does not remove the principal's responsibility. It strengthens decision-making by drawing on the knowledge of the team.

6. Support, Recognition, and Constructive Conflict

Strong teams provide practical and emotional support. They recognize effort and progress, address concerns directly, and use conflict as an opportunity for clarity and growth rather than allowing unresolved tension to shape the culture.

Recommended Framework for School and System Leaders

The dissertation recommended a Retention and Recruitment Committee, a leadership course, and an annual school climate survey. Those recommendations remain relevant. The updated white paper strengthens them by placing team development at the center of implementation.

Action	What It Looks Like in Practice
1. Listen and Diagnose	Administer an annual school climate or retention survey, review actual retention patterns, and provide confidential opportunities for teachers to explain their experiences. Disaggregate findings by school, role, and years of experience when sample sizes permit and confidentiality can be protected.
2. Develop School Leaders	Provide leadership learning focused on communication, trust, team facilitation, conflict resolution, teacher recognition, workload awareness, and the use of climate data. Include opportunities for leaders to reflect on their own well-being and leadership habits.
3. Create a School-Level Team Development Plan	Each school should identify one or two team conditions to strengthen during the year. The plan should name the desired condition, current evidence, specific practices, responsible leaders, and indicators of progress.
4. Protect Meaningful Collaboration	Schedule regular time for teachers to solve shared problems, examine student needs, exchange resources, and learn from one another. Protect the time from avoidable operational tasks and evaluate whether collaboration is useful rather than merely whether it occurred.

Action	What It Looks Like in Practice
5. Strengthen Support and Recognition	Establish mentoring, onboarding, peer support, and recognition practices that are consistent and equitable. Recognition should be specific and connected to the school's mission, not limited to public praise or occasional celebrations.
6. Review, Respond, and Communicate	Share major findings with faculty, identify actions the school will take, and report progress. Surveying teachers without visible follow-through can weaken trust. Leaders should also explain which concerns cannot be addressed immediately and why.

Suggested Measures of Progress

Retention work should be evaluated through multiple forms of evidence. No single survey item can determine whether a school climate is healthy or whether a teacher will remain. A balanced review can include:

- year-to-year teacher retention and transfer patterns;
- school climate and retention survey results;
- new teacher onboarding and mentoring feedback;
- participation in and perceived usefulness of collaboration structures;
- themes from stay interviews, exit interviews, and faculty listening sessions;
- indicators of workload, absenteeism, vacancies, and leadership follow-through; and
- evidence that teachers understand school priorities and feel able to contribute to them.

Implications for Leadership Practice

The findings do not suggest that school leaders can control every factor influencing retention. Compensation, family circumstances, career opportunities, commuting distance, certification requirements, and personal decisions all matter. The findings do show that leaders have meaningful influence over the environment in which teachers carry out their work.

That influence is exercised through everyday practices. Leaders strengthen climate when they communicate clearly, notice effort, allocate resources fairly, protect collaboration, address conflict, invite teacher voice, and follow through on commitments. They weaken climate when teachers experience inconsistent expectations, avoidable disorganization, unresolved tension, or a gap between stated values and daily practice.

The role of team development is to make healthy practices repeatable. A positive climate cannot depend entirely on individual personalities or goodwill. It requires routines, expectations, and leadership behaviors that help the school community sustain trust even during periods of change or pressure.

Limitations and Boundaries of Interpretation

The foundational study was conducted in three faith-based schools within one school system. The sample was relatively small and was selected according to the applied dissertation's participation criteria. The timing of data collection near the end of the school year may have affected participation. In addition, all teacher participants had taught during the COVID-19 period, which may have influenced how they described stress, support, and school climate.

The 2022-23 Teacher Retention Survey and the 2023-24 School Climate Survey included larger numbers of respondents, but they were different instruments administered to different groups. The survey summaries identify leading factors, but they do not establish causation, measure individual teachers over time, or prove that a particular leadership action directly produced retention.

The findings should therefore be used as a basis for reflection, planning, and continued inquiry. Future research could examine how specific team development practices relate to changes in climate perceptions and actual retention over multiple years. It could also explore differences across school levels, career stages, leadership transitions, and geographic contexts.

Conclusion

Teacher retention is strengthened from within. Schools cannot recruit their way out of every staffing challenge, nor can they rely on commitment to mission while overlooking the conditions in which educators serve. Teachers are more likely to remain when they experience supportive leadership, trusted colleagues, clear communication, practical support, and a school culture in which they feel welcomed and valued.

The dissertation findings and the two subsequent surveys point in the same direction. Administrative support matters. Team relationships matter. Safety, school culture, and the opportunity to make a positive impact matter. These are not isolated benefits. They are interconnected conditions that leaders can intentionally strengthen.

Team development provides a practical pathway for doing so. When leaders help adults build trust, collaborate around shared goals, communicate honestly, and support one another through challenge, school climate becomes more than an aspiration and becomes a lived experience.

Strong teams help create strong school climates. Strong school climates give great teachers more reasons to stay.

At their best, these conditions also make room for joy. Joy is not a substitute for sound leadership, fair systems, or adequate support. It is more likely to take root when educators know their work is meaningful, their contributions are valued, and they do not carry the mission alone. Strengthening schools from within begins by strengthening the people and relationships that bring the school's mission to life each day.

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