

Teacher retention, mobility, and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota

Challenges related to teacher mobility and attrition have led educators in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota to seek better information about these phenomena. In collaboration with educators in these states, the Regional Educational Laboratory Central used administrative data for 2015/16–2016/17 to identify the proportions of teachers who remained in a classroom teaching position in the same school (stayers), teachers who transferred to a classroom teaching position in a different school or district (movers), and teachers who took a nonteaching position or left their state public school system (leavers). Consistent with prior national-level research, the study found that, across the four states, 82 percent of teachers were stayers, 8 percent were movers, and 10 percent were leavers. The proportion of stayers was similar in rural schools and nonrural schools, and the proportions of stayers, movers, and leavers varied substantially across districts within states.

Why this study?

Educators in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory Central to examine teacher retention, mobility, and attrition. Specifically, this study examined the proportions of teachers who remained in a teaching position in the same school (retention), transferred to a teaching position in another school or district (mobility), or took a nonteaching position or exited their state public school system (attrition). Teacher mobility and attrition are frequently associated with challenges for students and schools, such as low student achievement and inequitable access to high-quality teachers.¹ These challenges arise because teachers often leave low-performing schools and districts and economically disadvantaged areas, and schools and districts incur substantial financial costs to allocate additional resources for teacher recruitment and professional development.² Research has provided a basic, national-level picture of teacher mobility and attrition while suggesting that these phenomena vary substantially across regions, states, and districts.³ This study complements existing research by providing region- and state-specific information on teacher retention, mobility, and attrition.

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What was studied and how?

The study used administrative data provided by state education agencies in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota to address the following research questions related to teacher retention, mobility, and attrition between 2015/16 and 2016/17:

1. What proportion of teachers remained in a classroom teaching position in the same school (stayers), what proportion transferred to a classroom teaching position in a different school or district (movers), and what proportion took a nonteaching position or left their state public school system (leavers)?
2. What proportion of movers remained in the same district, and what proportion transferred to a different district?
3. What proportion of leavers took a nonteaching position, and what proportion left their state public school system?

The state education agencies provided data for all teachers employed during 2015/16 and 2016/17. These data included teachers' employment positions (their professional roles in their state public school system, defined as either a classroom teaching position or a nonteaching position) and district, school, and grade-level assignments. School and district locale indicators were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics Elementary and Secondary Information System. Teachers' primary assignments to teaching or nonteaching positions, districts, schools, and grade levels for 2015/16 and 2016/17 were used to determine their status as stayers, movers, or leavers. For teachers with multiple assignments the primary assignment was the one in which they spent the most time.

Findings

- **Approximately four of five teachers remained in a classroom teaching position in the same school.** Between 2015/16 and 2016/17, 82 percent of teachers across all four states remained in a classroom teaching position in the same school (table 1). The proportion of stayers ranged from 79 percent in Colorado to 86 percent in Nebraska.
- **The proportion of movers was slightly lower than the proportion of leavers.** About 8 percent of teachers across all four states transferred to a different school, and 10 percent took a nonteaching position or left their state public school system (see table 1). The proportion of movers ranged from 7 percent in Nebraska and South Dakota to 9 percent in Colorado, and the proportion of leavers ranged from 8 percent in Nebraska to 13 percent in Colorado.
- **The proportion of stayers was similar in rural and nonrural schools.** The proportion of stayers across all four states was similar in rural schools (83 percent) and nonrural schools (82 percent; figure 1). The proportions of stayers, movers, and leavers within each state were also similar in rural and nonrural schools.
- **Mobility and attrition varied substantially across districts.** About one-fourth of districts had a combined proportion of movers and leavers that was less than 11 percent, and about one-fourth of districts had a proportion that was more than 24 percent.
- **About half of movers in Colorado, Missouri, and Nebraska transferred to a school in the same district, and half transferred to a school in a different district.** In Colorado, Missouri, and Nebraska about half of teachers who transferred to a different school remained in the same district. The proportion was higher in South Dakota (67 percent) than in the other three states.
- **Slightly more than half of teachers who transferred from a rural district moved to a nonrural district.** Among teachers who transferred from a rural district between 2015/16 and 2016/17, 54 percent moved to a nonrural district. Among those who transferred from a nonrural district, 88 percent moved to another nonrural district.

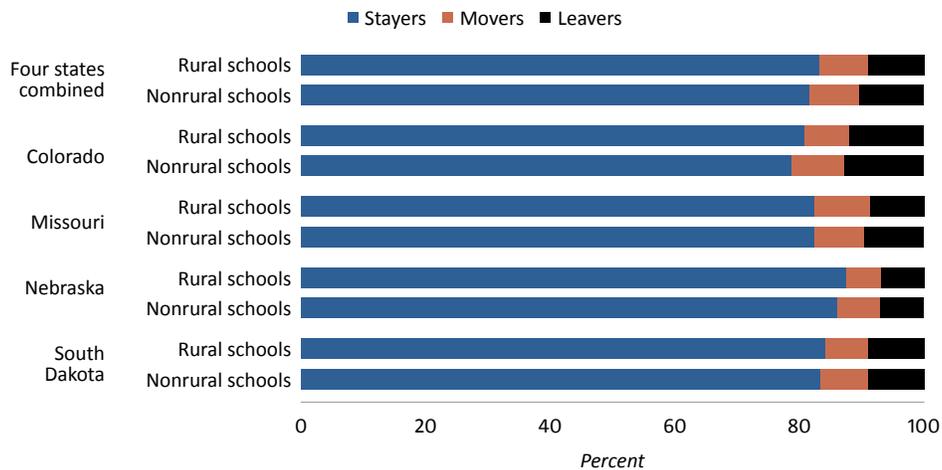
Table 1. Stayers, movers, and leavers, by state, 2015/16–2016/17

State and statistic	Stayers	Movers	Leavers	Total
Four states combined				
Number	127,241	12,527	16,166	155,934
Percent	81.6	8.0	10.4	100.0
Colorado				
Number	41,185	4,487	6,772	52,444
Percent	78.5	8.6	12.9	100.0
Missouri				
Number	55,857	5,647	6,551	68,055
Percent	82.1	8.3	9.6	100.0
Nebraska				
Number	22,313	1,696	1,977	25,986
Percent	85.9	6.5	7.6	100.0
South Dakota				
Number	7,886	697	866	9,449
Percent	83.5	7.4	9.2	100.0

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. The sample includes all teachers for whom a primary school and district assignment could be identified.

Source: Authors’ analysis of administrative data provided by the state education agencies in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota.

Figure 1. In the four states combined and within each state, the proportion of teachers who remained in a classroom teaching position in the same school between 2015/16 and 2016/17 was similar in rural and nonrural schools



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. The sample includes all teachers for whom a primary school and district assignment and school locale could be identified.

Source: Authors’ analysis of administrative data provided by the state education agencies in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota.

Implications

The finding of substantial variation in proportions of movers and leavers across districts within states suggests that support for teacher recruitment and retention could prioritize districts with the highest rates of mobility and attrition. This variation across districts also suggests that state education agencies might wish to continue to monitor teacher retention, mobility, and attrition at both the state and local levels.

Ongoing identification of districts with high proportions of movers and leavers could foster collaboration among districts that share needs. For example, district leaders within and across states might work together to better understand the causes of high mobility and attrition and explore potential solutions. Because transitions to a different district may require additional support for teachers to learn new curricula, policies, or procedures, administrators in schools and districts with high proportions of movers and leavers might want to consider ways to support teachers who make these transitions. Such support could include, for example, providing mentorship opportunities or adjusting the teaching load.

This study shows how administrative data maintained by state education agencies can provide detailed information about teacher retention, mobility, and attrition. Reviewing this information could prompt state education agency leaders in the four study states and elsewhere to collect additional information, or adapt the information they already collect, to better address questions about the teacher workforce. For example, teacher movement across state lines is an issue for states that share borders near population centers. State education agency leaders might wish to explore ways to share data to better understand the movement of teachers from one state public school system to another.

This brief was prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0005 by the Regional Educational Laboratory Central administered by Marzano Research. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The full report is available on the Regional Educational Laboratory website at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Meyer, S. J., Espel, E. V., Weston-Sementelli, J. L., & Serdiouk, M. (2019). *Teacher retention, mobility, and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota* (REL 2019–001). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.