



## COACH'S NOTEBOOK

Kathy Perret

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## WANT TO RETAIN TEACHERS? ASK THEM WHAT THEY NEED

**H**ave you seen the movie *Field of Dreams*? It's about a farmer from my home state of Iowa who builds a baseball field among his cornstalks that attracts the spirits of past baseball legends. Even if you haven't seen the film, you've probably heard the quote, "If you build it, he will come" (Robinson, 1989). These days, we often hear an adapted version of this quote: "Build it, and they will come."

Building something and hoping people will come may work in a movie, but, unfortunately, it doesn't miraculously happen in our schools. In my work with instructional coaches and school leaders, I have adopted a different spin on the quote: Build together so they will stay.

The word "stay" is key. We are seeing teachers leave the profession at alarming rates, and declining rates of people entering the profession make it even more important to hold on to the teachers we have.

The word "together" is also key.

We all have to work in collaboration to improve teacher retention — leaders, coaches, teachers, and all staff. Building collaborative school culture is an ongoing process. Here's one strategy I recommend, regardless of where you are in your leadership journey, that ties directly to improving retention.



### THE STAY INTERVIEW

If you have ever left a position, perhaps you were invited to an exit interview. Typically, the goal of an exit interview is to ascertain why the employee is leaving. The information can help employers change their practices going forward to retain future staff. But why not be more proactive? Why wait until an employee has already decided to leave before figuring out how to improve things?

Try setting up stay interviews to gather information on how teachers (and other staff members) feel about their working conditions and what they need to happily stay at their current school. Such reflective, one-on-one conversations between teachers and school leaders are critical for nurturing a healthy school culture, and stay interviews can show staff that you are invested in them for the long term.

Melissa Harvey, principal at Bobby Summers Middle School in Fate, Texas, first learned of stay interviews from a yearlong principal institute run by the nonprofit organization N2 Learning, through which school administrators collaborate with peers from other districts to learn about building and sustaining school transformation.

Stay interview questions should be tailored to each school environment. They might include inquiries like, "What do you look forward to when you come to work each day?" and "If you were to consider leaving this position, why would that be?" (Heubeck, 2022). Harvey chose her questions from a bank created with her principal institute cohort and piloted them with two teacher leaders and one teacher before finalizing them.

She offered her staff a chance to sign up for voluntary stay interviews, and many immediately signed up and sought her out. She reminded teachers that the process was about making things

better for them and students. She told them, “You can be completely honest with me. You have my word that, when you walk out of the office, anything you say will not be held against you.”

Harvey says the stay interviews were “amazing for my soul.” Not every answer was positive, but she gained valuable insight, especially about what the teachers’ “perfect school” looked like and steps they could take toward that vision. The teachers at her school were thankful to be listened to.

### INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES’ ROLE

Administrators’ roles in schools are complex, and their responsibilities are many. They need support and collaboration to add new tasks like stay interviews. Instructional coaches are a great resource and, indeed, often a lifeline for administrators just as they are for teachers.

One way instructional coaches can help with stay interviews is to co-facilitate the analysis of the interview data. Coaches are skilled at stepping back and reflecting, so they are well-positioned to help leaders and teachers understand the data and how to apply it. They also tend to be skilled at building relationships and ensuring follow-through. Anytime we collect data in schools, the key is to make use of the data. Otherwise, teachers will see the exercise as a waste of time, at best, and become cynical and distrustful of leaders’ intentions, at worst. Coaches

can facilitate the conditions to make sure the data are used.

To ensure this process leads to long-term improvement, I recommend that coaches use the GPS process Kenny McKee and I laid out in our book, *Compassionate Coaching* (ASCD, 2021). Our GPS stands for goal, plan, and steps.

1. Set **goals** together as a staff of the ideal working environment at your school.
2. Develop a **plan**. What changes do you need to consider? What can be changed quickly? What will take more time?
3. Determine the **steps** necessary. Consider: How will you monitor changes over time? What will you do to course correct if you are veering off your desired plan?

While engaging in these steps, coaches and leaders should consider the following to make sure the stay interview data are useful and used.

- Organize the data anonymously so that teachers can be a part of the analysis and decision-making. Be clear with teachers from the outset that their insights may be shared but in an anonymous form.
- Look for trends with both the positive and challenging situations.
- Identify trends that can be celebrated right away — and celebrate them!

- Determine a few quick wins to make changes in the school environment immediately.

After these steps, leaders and coaches should monitor the changes over time and collect artifacts to share with staff about progress and areas in continuing need of improvement.

### A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Not all administrators will feel the need to conduct stay interviews, and that’s OK. There are other ways coaches can facilitate and incorporate teacher feedback. For example, coaches may want to consider conducting midyear checkpoints with teachers about the coaching opportunities in their school. The anonymous data collected could then be analyzed, keeping in mind similar considerations to those described above.

Whatever approach you take, the key is to find ways to build our school environments together. Teachers are the heart and soul of our schools, and they deserve to have a voice.

### REFERENCES

- Heubeck, E. (2022, June 22).** The stay interview: How it can help schools hold onto valuable staff. *EducationWeek*. [www.edweek.org/leadership/the-stay-interview-how-it-can-help-schools-hold-onto-valued-staff/2022/06](http://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-stay-interview-how-it-can-help-schools-hold-onto-valued-staff/2022/06)
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