



How Teacher Turnover and Burn-Out Can Undermine the Effectiveness of "No-Excuses" Charter Schools

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Replicating successful urban charter schools is a cause that gets plenty of attention – and money. No charter schools are more popular or polarizing than the “no excuses” variety that are often regarded as a successful and replicable school model. “No-excuses” charter schools are characterized by high expectations for students and staff, a college preparatory focus, longer school days and school years, data-driven instruction, and very strict behavioral expectations for students. However, even though a number of rigorous studies of “no-excuses” schools such as those focusing on the Knowledge is Power Program document promising academic results, supporters and critics alike question whether this model can spread because of the limited supply of teachers willing and able to work in such intensive environments. Indeed, many of these schools see up to one in every three or four teachers leave annually.

A New Exploratory Study

Why do so many teachers move on? Common explanations point to the intense workload, which can be as high as 60 to 80 hours per week. Others suggest that these school models often rely on Teach for America teachers who are likely to remain only for a short time. Such factors are important, but overlook more specific working conditions or school practices that influence teacher retention and commitment. To pinpoint such nuanced influences on career choices, my exploratory research uses data from in-depth interviews and survey responses from teachers working in a large charter management organization.

A general theme from my research is the importance of the disciplinary climate in “no-excuses” charter organizations. This climate affects teacher autonomy and, if the climate is dysfunctional, can further burnout in ways that prompt teachers to leave.

Especially in no-excuses charters, strict behavioral expectations mandate how students dress, enter a classroom, walk in the hall, or sit in class, and teachers are expected to enforce these expectations using explicit rewards and punishments, such as merits/demerits or adjustments in “paychecks” that allow students to purchase items from a school store. Supporters consider such close and intense monitoring of student behavior as helpful, while detractors believe that such strict expectations can be demeaning, and counterproductive to students’ overall development, no matter how much academic growth occurs.

As the debate rages, however, little attention has been paid to the impact of disciplinary practices on teachers and their career decisions. My research probes those effects, and my survey analysis reveals that overall teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of student disciplinary systems is an important predictor of rates of voluntary turnover. This is true even after other important factors are taken into account, such as teacher experience, workloads, and teachers’ perception of support from principals. Overall, I discovered that teacher perceptions of school disciplinary environments can affect their career choices in two important ways:

- School-wide behavioral rules are considered critical to “no-excuses” schools, and teachers in some of these institutions have little input into the creation or adaptation of strict behavioral expectations, and enjoy little discretion to influence exactly how rules are applied. Experienced teachers, especially, can find such strict sets of rules frustrating because they undermine their professional autonomy. Or teachers may end up in conflict with school leaders on issues of how best to discipline or shape the behavioral socialization of students. When teachers feel such frustrations, as many explained in interviews, they may choose to leave.
- Teacher burnout in “no-excuses” charters is often attributed to exhaustion from long working hours, but as psychologists understand, feelings of inefficacy can also lead to burnout. Some teachers I interviewed said they found it difficult to enforce detailed behavioral expectations throughout the day, leaving them feeling not very successful. For others, difficulties in enforcing school-wide rules and

punishments led to increased student resistance and undermined student-teacher relationships. Since teachers value positive relationships with students, they may choose to leave if they feel good ties are undermined.

From Research to Practice

Many observers consider the disciplinary culture of “no-excuses” charter schools to be essential to their academic success, yet the severe disciplinary practices of these schools continue to arouse controversy. Reports of extremely high suspension rates and questions about the lawfulness of disciplinary practices in “no excuses” schools in New York and New Orleans have only increased such concerns over disciplinary practices. Clearly, policymakers and charter leaders need to look at outcomes other than student academic scores when they consider the success of the “no excuses” model and ponder how readily it can or should spread.

My exploratory work adds to a growing body of mixed evidence on the success and broader viability of this approach to schooling. Although consistent, school-wide expectations are crucial, my findings about teacher burnout and turnover suggest that teachers and students should have more input into the creation and adaptation of rules about behavior. A more consultative and adaptive approach might reduce conflict, resistance, and teacher turnover. Recognizing the sorts of realities I have documented, some charter schools have started to experiment with alternative approaches to discipline. For example, the Knowledge is Power Program’s San Francisco schools have adopted a restorative justice approach to discipline, and other no-excuses schools are beginning to experiment with more positive approaches. These new developments may offer insights about how to combine academic rigor, clear behavior expectations, and a degree of flexibility. Ideally this will result in more successful, inclusive schools for teachers and students alike.

Read more in Alfred Chris Torres, “Is This Work Sustainable? Teacher Turnover and Perceptions of Workload in Charter Management Organizations.” *Urban Education* (2014): 1-24; and “Are We Architects or Construction Workers? Re-Examining Teacher Autonomy and Turnover in Charter Schools.” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22, no. 124 (2014).