SPOTLIGHT ON THE LOWER KUSKOKWIM SCHOOL DISTRICT

How LKSD Used Working Conditions Data to Support Quick Wins in Teacher Retention

This spotlight is part of a series documenting how districts and collaborators are implementing TRR strategies. This resource shares how LKSD tackled TRR challenges and the lessons learned along the way.

A stable, highly qualified educator workforce helps students succeed academically and remain connected to school. The Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) serves approximately 4,000 students in Bethel and the surrounding region, employing 350 teachers across 27 schools. Like many Interior and Western Alaska districts, LKSD has historically faced significant teacher turnover, with rates reaching 27 percent in the 2020–21 school year.

LKSD's geography and cultural communities set it apart from other school districts. It is one of the geographically largest rural and remote districts in the United States, often requiring special transportation to navigate (e.g., small plane, snowmobile, or boat). LKSD is also home to more Yup'ik-speaking children than any other Alaska school district. Educators benefit from specialized knowledge that supports how they navigate and integrate into this community.

Deciding on a teacher retention and recruitment approach

LKSD began its teacher retention and recruitment (TRR) work by examining several years of exit and "stayer" survey data, which showed which factors influenced teachers' decisions to leave or stay. The district partnered with the Regional Education Laboratory (REL) Northwest to understand how this existing data could inform an approach to addressing TRR.

> **"…it made us really think about why people are here."**
>
> – Erin Schalk-Haviland, LKSD's Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Student Services

LKSD staff members leading TRR efforts worked with the REL team to categorize exit and stayer survey responses. They drew on research from REL Northwest, which highlights eight working conditions that affect teacher retention:

- Engagement with families and communities
- School leadership (e.g., trust in principal and support from principal)
- School facilities and resources
- Allocation of teachers' time
- Teachers' access to and engagement in leadership opportunities
- Management of student conduct
- Instructional practices and support
- Professional development

By classifying the responses with this framework, LKSD staff members could determine which working conditions need the most attention and where the district could have the greatest impact on its teachers. This gave LKSD multiple options for addressing teacher retention. The district focused on what would be most feasible given its resources, including available funding, staff capacity, and where there was already community support. LKSD also considered what was most likely to have a direct impact on teachers' experiences. From their review in 2024, district leaders realized they would have the most impact by addressing teachers' engagement with families and communities.

Strategies to improve working conditions

LKSD focused on identifying ways to support teachers' engagement with their communities and came up with two strategies: Community Walks and streamlining housing improvements.

COMMUNITY WALKS

LKSD envisioned Community Walks as a way for incoming LKSD teachers to transition to a remote rural setting by building relationships with community members and learning the practical logistics of daily life in a rural and Yup'ik community. Rather than arriving in a remote village and figuring things out on their own, Community Walks provide teachers with a structured introduction to their new community. LKSD leadership encourages principals to facilitate these walks with their teachers, introducing them to key people, services, and places that might not be readily apparent to newcomers. For example, during a Community Walk, a principal might point out the person or group that the community relies on to get rides to the airport.

When LKSD first implemented the practice, the district received some pushback from principals and not everyone engaged in the walks. In response, LKSD worked with REL Northwest to identify research highlighting the importance of community connection to teacher satisfaction and shared this with school leaders.[1] After the first year of implementation, LKSD leaders shared survey responses on teacher working

[1] REL Northwest has cited a few studies on the role of family and community engagement in teacher retention, including work from Chicago, North Carolina, and rural Illinois.

conditions with principals to show how the Community Walks benefitted teachers and encouraged them to stay (see "A Culture of Continuous Improvement" below for more information).

STREAMLINING HOUSING IMPROVEMENTS

Having a comfortable living space enables teachers to rest and recharge, supporting their overall health and well-being. Providing housing, with varying management structures, is a common practice in some Alaska districts with remote locations and limited housing supply. LKSD provides and maintains housing for its teachers. The district's longstanding housing review board consists of teachers, principals, and maintenance staff members. This group meets quarterly to assess and prioritize housing improvement needs. Principals serve as property managers while the district is effectively the landlord.

Initial exit and stayer survey data showed that dissatisfaction with housing and whether they saw it as comfortable influenced decisions to leave the district. LKSD hypothesized that improvements to teacher housing to make these homes more comfortable and desirable would increase teacher retention. Building on an existing relationship with the housing review board, district leaders worked to streamline the housing improvement process. This included engaging a local do-it-yourself (DIY) team that supports community housing projects such as painting. However, due to potential liabilities, LKSD needed to contract with professional vendors for certain tasks. At times, this caused challenges or delays.

A culture of continuous improvement

As LKSD settled on teacher retention strategies and related activities, the district wanted ways to track progress and understand impact. District staff worked with REL Northwest to develop a 32-question working conditions survey, with questions split between teachers and principals. This survey asks about the specific strategies currently employed by the district (e.g., whether respondents participated in a Community Walk and their experience) and working conditions generally (e.g., experiences with school leadership). After a few attempts to find the best cadence to collect teacher feedback, LKSD opted to administer the survey three times per school year—once at the beginning, once approximately halfway through the school year, and once at the end. This cadence allowed for flexibility and responsiveness throughout the year while being manageable.

The surveys were anonymous and information was reported as general trends to encourage teachers to provide honest feedback. Reporting general trends also allowed district leaders to share information quickly, integrating findings into existing meetings like a standing principal meeting to elicit discussion and reflection. The survey asked teachers about their participation in the Community Walks and the practice's overall connection with their integration into and satisfaction working in the district. Positive responses among teachers whose principals had done a Community Walk showed the utility of the practice and addressed pushback.

Lessons learned

LKSD shared three central lessons learned from its experience addressing teacher working conditions. Other districts interested in improving working conditions can apply these lessons to support teacher retention and recruitment:

- **Start small yet meaningful.** Community Walks were a simple and straightforward practice that required few resources beyond principal time. Based on responses to the working conditions survey, new teachers appreciated these activities. Teachers and members of the school community, even by those who did not personally participate, felt the impact of the walks.
- **Collect and use data.** Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data allowed LKSD to both set a direction and understand whether its efforts made meaningful change. LKSD was already collecting data regularly through its exit and stayer surveys, so the district was equipped to administer additional teacher surveys throughout the year to understand the effectiveness of TRR strategies. Partnering with the REL strengthened LKSD's capacity to analyze and interpret this information to gain a data-informed start and continue monitoring its teacher retention and recruitment activities. The district also demonstrated the importance of its activities to school leaders and the community. Data supporting Community Walks alleviated principal hesitations about the practice and showed school staff members that their district was invested in hearing from them.

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