

# Ultimate Guide to Staff Engagement

FEATURING

**3** WAYS TO EMPOWER STAFF  
AND BUILD TEACHER CONFIDENCE  
IN THE AGE OF ATTRITION



# The numbers are enough to make your stomach turn

## 23%

**of teachers left** their school or teaching role in 2022-23

ERS, 2024

## 44%

**of teacher report “always” or “very often” feeling burned out at work**

Gallup, 2022

## 567,000

**fewer teachers work in America** today compared to pre-pandemic

NEA, 2022



By any measure, the pandemic kicked a hornet’s nest, igniting the most precipitous decline in educational employment in history – and it isn’t even close. While employment has reportedly crept up in some areas, [The Hechinger Report](#) estimates that U.S. schools are staring down a vacancy rate of some 360,000 positions.

Though the pandemic may have been a breakpoint in many school communities, those of us who follow the industry know that we’ve been trending in this direction for years.

Somewhere amid low pay, creeping job dissatisfaction, rising safety and discipline issues, a lack of career growth and a metric ton of compliance-related bureaucracy, the art of teaching, once viewed as a labor of love, where the promise of a light wallet paled in comparison to the imprint a professional educator could have on a child’s future, has become a risk not worth taking.

Unfortunately, students, many of whom also struggled mightily during the pandemic – (See: stats so bad they aren’t even worth sharing) – need and require the support and skill of highly trained educators.

## So what can be done?

Teacher pay is an issue most of America would like to see addressed. Unfortunately, it’s a measure over which educators at any level have little to no control. Where we stand to make the biggest impact in engaging teachers and staff is by providing support and resources, so that they feel fulfilled in their careers, committed to their work, and inspired to become the best versions of their professional selves – no matter the political headwinds.

If you’re an administrator, instructional coach or educator looking for ideas to empower your teachers and staff and reverse staff attrition in your schools, this guide features research and practical ideas, courtesy of Couros and other experts that you can use to start making a difference today.

**“Can we change things? I think it really focuses on how we look at leadership, how we put people in positions to succeed, where staff feel that they are truly valued for what they bring and they’re put in a position where what they do really well is brought to the forefront, as opposed to pushing people down.”**



George Couros, speaker & author of *Innovator’s Mindset*

## READ-ON TO CONSIDER

- 1 How to move from a culture of ‘appreciation’ to ‘value’ among employees
- 2 Promoting an ‘ownership mentality’ through mutual trust with teachers & staff
- 3 A communication framework that you can use to identify & solve problems

**Ready to get started? Let’s get into it.**

# 1 How to move from a culture of appreciation to value

When it comes to empowering staff, one of the biggest hurdles to overcome is the distance between appreciation and value. Both can (and should) factor into your school organization’s overall staff engagement strategy, but the latter is often harder to achieve.

Here’s a great quote on the topic:

**“When an employee is recognized for doing a great job on a project, they can feel valued and know that you are seeing their great work and want to highlight this achievement for others. Appreciation, however, focuses more on valuing the person for who they are, not what they did or achieved.”**

Nexus Family Healing, 2022



Percentage of employees who say they feel they get the right amount of recognition for the work they do.

Source: Gallup, 2023

## Appreciation

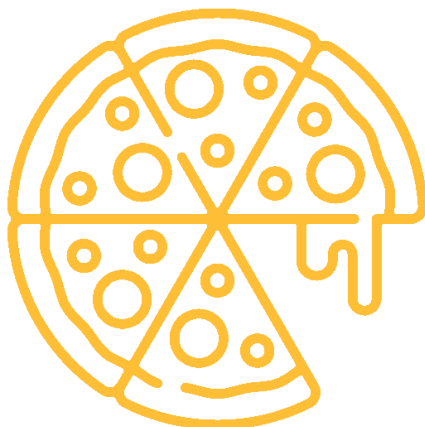
Think of appreciation as a set of actions, or gestures that you can take to show respect or admiration, either for an individual or a group.

Appreciation might look like: a financial bonus, extra time off for employees, or a gift like free pizza!

## Value

Think of value as a feeling. When people ask teachers and staff why they like working at your school or district, the hope is that they say, “Because I feel valued.” This feeling indicates a deeper connection to your mission and it comes from a place of mutual respect.

Value might be achieved by some combination of: asking staff to weigh in on strategic decisions, providing more voice and choice in professional learning, or seeking honest advice and insight into key learning initiatives.



**“You’re seeing all these posts and it’s like, Hey, we’ve treated you like crap the entire year, but do you want pizza, on a random day in May? Like that will fix everything?”**

– Couros

## 1 How to move from a culture of appreciation to value (cont'd)

### So, why is valuing teachers so important?

Gallup researchers recently released a report highlighting the CliftonStrengths, a research-backed psychological framework for employee recognition.

In an article entitled, "Why Appreciating Teachers is More Important Than You Think," Gallup's Tim Hodges writes about The Real Value of Feeling Valued.

**According to Hodges,** "Research shows that consistent recognition for doing good work has a direct influence on the key performance measures that we use to evaluate our schools."

#### TEACHERS WHO RECEIVE REGULAR RECOGNITION AND PRAISE

- are more productive
- are more engaged at work
- are more likely to stay with their school
- are more likely to receive higher satisfaction scores from students and parents

Strictly from a performance perspective, it's clear that when we fail to recognize our best teachers, we are leaving our schools' potential on the table."

Thank you!  
I see you.  
I appreciate you.  
How are you?  
Great job!

### So, how do we move from a culture of basic appreciation to one of genuine value in school organizations?

**What follows are two key strategies that will help you:**

1. Foster an ownership mentality among teachers and staff in your schools and
2. Use a foundation of mutual trust and communication to solve problems and improve workplace culture.

## 2 Create 'an ownership mentality' with teachers & staff

When we consider the goal of professional confidence in schools, experts say we need to proactively shift our thinking from compliance, or requirement, to ownership.

**Said another way:** Educators tend to perform better (and feel more confident in their work) when they have a meaningful stake in what's happening around them.

But that isn't how it typically goes down in a school, says Couros. "We have this notion that how people feel valued comes from the administration, as opposed to 'do you create a culture where teachers across the hall cheer each other on and want to do better, and actually learn from each other.'"

As Couros tells it, teachers and staff have a lot of great ideas, but they aren't always forthright in sharing them. That's because the culture hasn't typically promoted that mindset.

He refers to a story from his own career, when, after being hired as a seventh-grade teacher, his principal asked him about staff training. Later in the year, the conversation shifted to technology spending, same thing – not exactly the purview of a typical seventh-grade teacher.

"She was like, 'What would you do?' I said, 'What do you mean, what would I do?' Because I always kind of felt that the admin tells you what to do, right? That was my experience."

But his principal pushed him to think beyond those boundaries. When he made suggestions, she said, "Go with it. See how it does."

"So, I took the time," explains Couros. "Now, I'm accountable to my teaching partners. And, if anyone complains... I'm sitting there. It's me who made the decision. So I felt I had ownership over that process."



**"When you create that culture of getting people excited about their ideas and they have the opportunity to explore them, it permeates throughout the entire organization."**

– Couros

**97%** Percentage of **employees who intend to stay** at their organizations **when they feel a sense of ownership.** Source: Gallup, 2023

The research backs this up. Gallup reports that, at organizations where employees report a sense of ownership, 97% say they intend to stay with their company. Contrast that to the gaudy attrition rates currently reported by groups like RAND in schools, with the national average hovering at close to 11%, and some urban and resource challenged institutions reporting numbers in the teens, even 20s.

## 2 Create 'an ownership mentality' with teachers & staff (cont'd)

### So, again, what can be done?

A good place to look is inside some of the world's most innovative and agile workplaces.

In [Atlassian's WorkLife blog](#), [Twilio CEO Jeff Lawson](#) says ownership comes down to two factors:

1. Taking responsibility for outcomes and
2. Being empowered to make decisions that result in said outcomes.

### Ideas include

#### Shifting from a project to a product mindset

Rather than focus employees on finishing a project and "washing their hands of it," find ways to get them focused on the overall product – say, student learning – then empowering teachers and staff to develop strategies to both achieve and maintain that outcome over time.

#### Delegate decision-making to the lowest levels

This is a big one, because it goes against the way we've traditionally operated in schools. Couros also talks about this. At its core, the idea says that "Authority over everyday judgment calls about how to achieve an outcome should sit with the people closest to the work." The result: faster decision-making and more motivation.

#### Be transparent in sharing information

This amounts to more than just posting and sharing your strategic plan. Think about creating a library of information that includes strategies that align to your goals, past mistakes and other information that would inspire innovation and problem-solving. When team members understand strategy and have access to information, they are empowered to "think like owners" within the organization.

#### Invest in empathy

Seek to know and understand your employees. Ask for feedback, spend time with teachers and staff and start building mental models and maps for how to integrate their motivations and needs with the necessary resources to achieve their goals. This is all about reducing friction and creating more productive interactions, which lead to results.



### Don't forget the obvious

To make your next PD better, consider these 5 must-dos.

1. **Focus on a timely challenge** – teachers & staff have a lot on their plates. Make sure the professional learning you are planning has a clear connection to a problem they are facing in their work, and that it offers a solution.
2. **Empower staff by creating 'buy-in'** – just because something is written into your strategic plan doesn't mean staff inherently understand their role in achieving it. Make sure your next PD gives your team time & space to build personal ownership.
3. **Make it last** – we often hear the word "continuous." But that doesn't really fit. PD shouldn't consume your staff; it should take them on a journey of discovery that lasts beyond a couple of misplaced training hours a year.
4. **Make it job-embedded** – not the same as making it timely. Job-embedded means showing team members how to achieve goals within the context of their role & work.
5. **Consider personalizing it** – not everybody gets excited about the same stuff. Your PD should stoke educators' passions. Provide a selection of learning opportunities designed to meet team members where they are and around topics they care about.

**Finally, don't forget: this is an exercise in career growth, not compliance.**

Show your team you value their professional time and commitment by awarding that effort with a certificate and/or credential that they can apply toward some type of earnings, position, or career advancement.

Source & inspiration: Prodigy, 2023

### 3 Install a communication framework to identify & solve problems

"I always tell people, I can't help solve a problem that I don't know exists," says Couros.

Communication, particularly in schools, has often been seen as a one-way street: Administration says and staff does. But, as the information and research in the guide has pointed out, that system is antiquated and ineffective.

If the goal is truly to help employees feel engaged and be empowered, communication has to flow two ways.

**"Only 10% of employees have been asked how they like to be recognized at work."**

Source: Gallup, 2024

#### So, what does that look like?

Couros recommends starting with three basic question prompts:

1. What are your ideas?
2. What are your questions?
3. What are the things you are struggling with?



#### A note of caution

While employee surveys can be valuable as part of a larger organizational feedback loop, asking for this information once or twice a year at the beginning and end won't cut it.

School district has to find a way to check in with teachers and staff throughout the year, as problems, priorities and needs on the ground in classrooms shift.

#### Why this matters

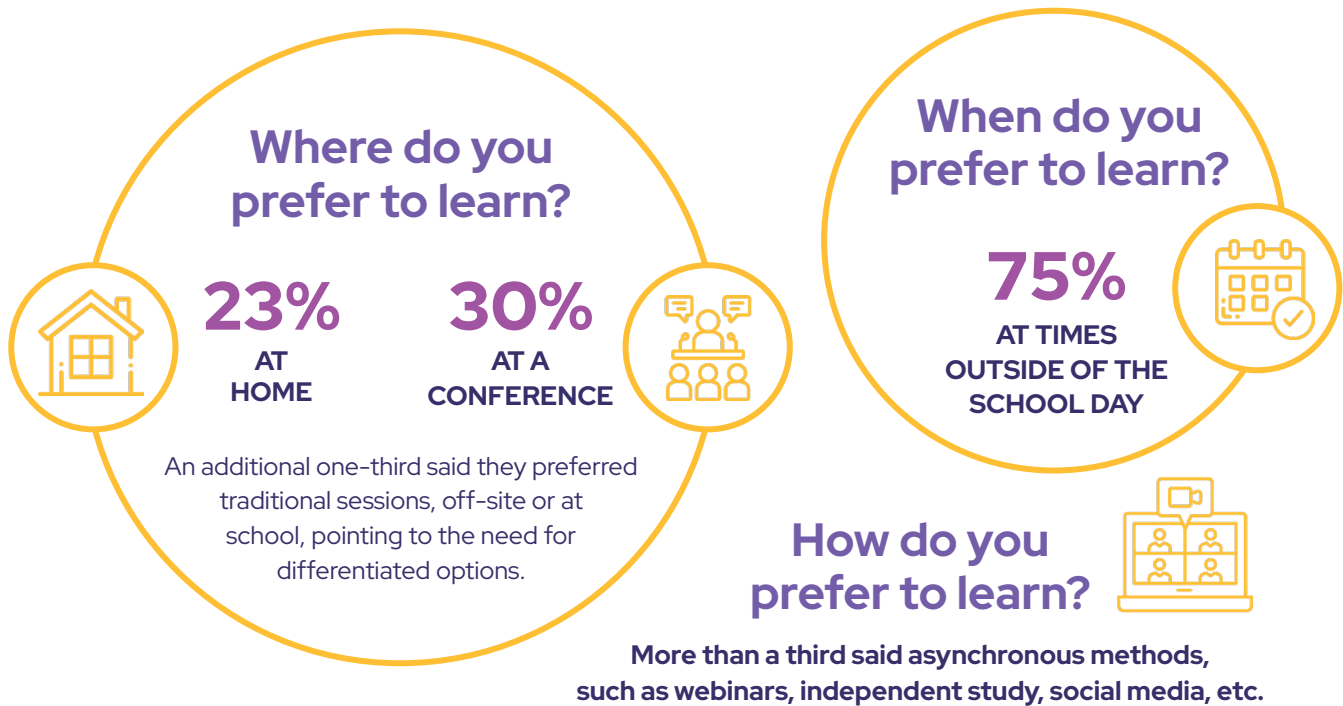
As information gets analyzed and shared, whether through coaching sessions, PLCs, or face-to-face meetings and evaluations, employees can use that feedback to create their own learning and development, fusing both their personal professional knowledge and broader organizational insight to solve problems, as opposed to operating in a vacuum.

### 3 Install a communication framework to identify & solve problems (cont'd)

## When we ask, we learn

Here's what teachers & staff are telling us.

When school districts integrate employee feedback loops into staff engagement efforts, they almost always learn. Below is an example of a teachers survey about professional development, first reported in Edutopia in 2020, just prior to the pandemic.



Edutopia's analysis –

**“Taken together, these results indicate that most current PD doesn’t take teachers’ preferences into account. Sending teachers to conferences is common, but many prefer to learn in other places. Likewise PD offered during school hours neglects those who are looking to learn during other times.”**

## So, what do we do with all this newfound information?

Two things, says Courso: “You have to be willing to act upon what is being said, or be clear on why you can’t.”

In the end, it comes down to this: Encourage communication, be transparent and open, and be clear on your decisions.

There are many things that you can (and should) do for your employees. But few, as outlined here, are as important to demonstrating value as ownership and empowerment and mutual respect.



## More on staff engagement & employee retention

### Catch George Couros on The RocketPD Podcast

Don't miss Corey Murray's interview with George on The RocketPD Podcast. Listen to **Episode #1: Igniting passion: the fight for teacher retention.**

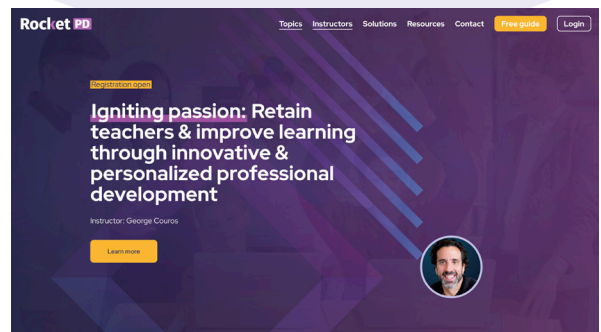
Subscribe to RocketPD on YouTube, or download wherever your favorite pods are found!



### Register for George's Virtual Cohort

Don't miss your chance to join best-selling author George Couros and other administrators, instructional coaches and educators from around the world, for a five-part collaborative learning series, **Igniting passion: How to retain teachers & improve learning through innovative & personalized professional development.** Discounts available for teams.

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