Our mission is to coalesce, inspire and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.

Leading by Exemplar: Teacher Retention

This brief focuses on the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs from the Leading by Exemplar research project. Below you’ll find details on the teacher retention strategies and processes used by each program. You’ll see that not all of these programs are able to provide competitive compensation and for those who have trouble with retention strive to develop creative and innovative strategies to better listen to and support their staff’s needs. NHSA shares this brief in order to share the findings of the Leading by Exemplar work and to support high-quality practice in the Head Start field.

Acelero prioritizes upward mobility within the organization.

Along with Acelero’s ability to provide competitive compensation, they develop a career pathway road map for every educator that includes an individual professional coaching plan. Acelero also prioritizes upward mobility within the organization to encourage retention.

CAP Tulsa encourages staff to communicate their career interests with their supervisors.

CAP Tulsa assesses market compensation data every year to ensure all staff salaries are comparable to the surrounding community. Along with providing each staff with a clear professional advancement trajectory, CAP Tulsa has built informal opportunities for staff to communicate their interests in leadership positions to supervisors, who then provide the staff the support they need to pursue those roles. In turn, program leadership is encouraged to proactively seek out staff for career advancement and promotion opportunities.

Because matching compensation rates is difficult, Educare Miami-Dade finds other ways to support staff.

Like many early education programs, Educare Miami-Dade has trouble with retention - mostly because of compensation. To address this, they have initiated a series of annual raises and operate on a shorter program year to give many teachers the summers off as an added benefit.

Compensation isn’t the only driver of teacher turnover.

Fairfax County early childhood teachers are compensated according to the same salary schedule as all other district teachers, which is higher than other local early childhood programs. Even with competitive salaries and connection to strong district-wide resources and benefits, FCPS still struggles with retention due to circumstances outside of their control, like work commutes and military relocation. The program is currently developing strategies to address these concerns.

Utah Community Action places a strong emphasis on listening to staff’s needs.

Even though Utah Community Action is doing what they can to raise compensation, they also focus on improving working conditions and staff morale to boost retention. They use regular staff surveys and focus groups to learn more about how they can support their staff and improve morale and retention.

Key Takeaway

Competitive compensation isn’t the only thing that can help Head Start programs improve staff retention. Programs should listen to their staff to identify creative and innovative ways to address staff’s needs.