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The First Years Matter

Research Insights on Early Career Educators

The First Years Matter:
Research Insights on Early Career Educators

SAIS Research Partner

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Research Insights on Early Career Educators

Executive Summary

Problem of Practice

Independent schools are increasingly challenged by the retention of early-career professionals, a concern that mirrors the broader national teacher attrition crisis. While turnover has long been a feature of the education sector, recent trends indicate a sharp rise in early-career departures, driven by burnout, lack of support, and shifting generational expectations (NCES, 2024; Foley & Torres, 2024). These dynamics threaten the continuity and culture of independent schools, where mission alignment and community cohesion are central. Compounding the issue is a lack of sector-specific research on the experiences of early-career independent school professionals (ECISP), leaving school leaders with limited guidance on how to foster environments that promote long-term engagement. As SAIS deepens its commitment to sustainable and inclusive school leadership, there is a critical opportunity to identify the conditions that support ECISP retention. Doing so will help schools build resilient, future-ready communities that reflect the evolving needs of both educators and students.

Methodology and Research Questions

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study investigated the experiences of early-career professionals in independent schools (ECISP) to better understand the conditions that support their satisfaction, embeddedness, and long-term engagement. The research began with a survey to identify broad trends, followed by focus groups designed to explore emerging themes in greater depth. Both instruments were developed in alignment with the study's conceptual framework, ensuring a theory-informed approach. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study offers a comprehensive view of the factors influencing ECISP retention and well-being.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- **What contributes to early-career independent school professionals' sense of satisfaction, belongingness, and embeddedness at work? What are the mitigating factors?**

- **What specific resources do early-career independent school professionals need to enhance their sense of support and motivation to stay?**

- **How can independent school leaders support early-career professionals to strengthen their commitment to a long-term career in independent schools?**

Findings

Unsustainable workloads fueled by lack of time and extra roles drive burnout and attrition. ECISP reported excessive workloads, blurred work-life boundaries, and unpaid labor as major contributors to burnout. These pressures were intensified for single or childless professionals, who were often expected to take on additional responsibilities.

Inconsistent or absent feedback and unclear career pathways undermine retention. ECISP expressed frustration with vague evaluation processes and limited visibility into advancement opportunities. Males perceived greater access to career growth than females, highlighting a gender equity concern.

Acts of care from and access to leaders are foundational retention factors. ECISP valued leaders who demonstrated care, checked in regularly, and were accessible. A lack of these behaviors led to feelings of isolation and disengagement.

Lack of role clarity and transparency creates frustration and undermines retention. Confusion around job expectations, extra duties, and vague contracts contributed to dissatisfaction. ECISP emphasized the need for clearer communication and transparency in leadership decisions.

A sense of trust drives motivation and commitment. ECISP who felt trusted by colleagues reported higher levels of satisfaction and a stronger commitment to staying in the profession.

Investment in tailored professional development and graduate study drives motivation and commitment. Access to funded professional development and graduate school support significantly boosted ECISP satisfaction. Those without such opportunities often felt stagnant or sought employment elsewhere.

Recognition, appreciation for loyalty, and feeling "seen" are critical to retention. ECISP expressed a strong desire for both formal and informal recognition. Feeling overlooked diminished their sense of support and motivation to persist.

Relationships and a sense of community fuel embeddedness, though some new ECISP struggle with social disconnection. Strong relationships with students and colleagues were key drivers of retention. However, some new ECISP reported difficulty connecting socially, especially in schools with more established faculty.

Flexibility and autonomy are strong retention drivers, while lack of planning time is a persistent struggle. ECISP who experienced greater autonomy and flexibility reported higher satisfaction. A lack of planning time remained a consistent source of frustration.

Support perceptions declined with increased ECISP tenure. ECISP with one to four years of experience reported feeling more supported than those with five or more years, suggesting a need for sustained support over time.

Conclusion

SAIS and its member schools are increasingly focused on identifying evidence-based strategies to support the recruitment, development, and retention of early-career professionals in independent schools. Understanding what contributes to ECISP satisfaction, support, and motivation to remain in the field aligns directly with SAIS's mission to strengthen member schools and foster a culture of excellence and innovation. Given the critical role early-career educators play in the long-term sustainability of independent schools, this study sought to examine the conditions that shape their embeddedness, well-being, and professional commitment.

Findings from this study reveal that ECISP retention is influenced by a constellation of factors—including workload sustainability, access to feedback, relational trust, role clarity, and growth opportunities. These insights underscore the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership and institutional practices that affirm the value of early-career educators. While grounded in the experiences of SAIS member schools, the study's theoretical foundations and validated instruments extend its relevance across the broader independent school sector.

The recommendations offered—ranging from workload audits to tiered mentorship—are designed to be actionable, scalable, and aligned with SAIS's strategic priorities. It is hoped that this knowledge will not only deepen understanding of ECISP experiences, but also position SAIS, its member schools, and the broader independent school sector to better support, retain, and empower the next generation of educators, advancing a shared vision of excellence, innovation, and community.

The First Years Matter

**Research Insights on
Early Career Educators**

Research Methodology

Background of Study

The retention of early-career professionals in independent schools is a matter of growing concern, particularly as the broader educational landscape continues to grapple with a national teacher attrition crisis. Across the United States, schools are experiencing unprecedented levels of teacher turnover, with early-career educators—those in their first five to seven years—disproportionately affected (Carter, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). While attrition has long been a challenge in the teaching profession, recent data suggest that the problem has reached a critical inflection point. According to a 2022 national survey, more than half of teachers reported that they were considering leaving the profession, citing burnout, lack of support, and inadequate compensation as primary drivers (NEA, 2022).

These trends are not confined to public education; independent schools are increasingly impacted by similar dynamics, particularly as they seek to attract and retain a new generation of educators with evolving expectations and professional aspirations (Foley & Torres, 2024). In the 2020–21 school year, teachers who voluntarily transferred to a different school cited different primary reasons depending on the sector: public school teachers more often pointed to school-related factors (31%), whereas private school teachers more frequently identified salary and benefits as their top motivation (36%) (NCES, 2024).

The implications of this attrition crisis are far-reaching. High turnover rates disrupt school continuity, erode institutional knowledge, and place additional strain on remaining faculty and administrators. For independent schools, which often emphasize mission-driven education and close-knit communities, the loss of early-career professionals undermines both the stability and the sustainability of their educational models. As scholars note (Maddox, 2024; Koppelberger, 2023), the role of school leadership—particularly Heads of School—is pivotal in shaping the conditions that influence teacher retention. Leaders who fail to cultivate supportive, inclusive, and growth-oriented environments risk losing talented educators at a time when the pipeline of new teachers is already shrinking.

This issue is further compounded by generational shifts in the workforce. Millennial and Gen-Z professionals, who now comprise a growing segment of the independent school workforce, bring with them distinct values and expectations. These include a desire for meaningful work, opportunities for advancement, work-life balance, and a sense of belonging within their professional communities (Bollens et al., 2023; Foley & Torres, 2024). When these needs are unmet, early-career professionals are more likely to disengage or exit the profession altogether. This not only exacerbates staffing challenges, but also hinders efforts to build diverse and dynamic school cultures that reflect the evolving needs of students and families.

Despite the urgency of this issue, there remains a notable gap in the literature specific to the experiences of early-career independent school professionals (ECISP). While much has been written about teacher attrition in public education, fewer studies have examined the unique challenges and opportunities within the independent school sector. This study seeks to address that gap by centering the voices of ECISP and identifying the conditions under which they are most likely to thrive. By doing so, it aligns with the strategic priorities of the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS), which aims to equip school leaders with actionable insights to foster sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready learning communities.

Given the financial, cultural, and pedagogical costs of high turnover, the findings of this study have the potential to inform leadership practices, professional development models, and institutional policies that support the long-term engagement of early-career educators. By identifying the drivers of satisfaction, embeddedness, and retention, this research contributes to a growing body of knowledge that seeks not only to understand why ECISP leave, but, more importantly, what compels them to stay—and how independent schools can rise to meet that challenge.

Purpose of the Study

SAIS and its member schools are increasingly focused on identifying evidence-based strategies to support the recruitment, development, and retention of early-career professionals in independent schools. Understanding what contributes to early-career independent school professionals' (ECISP) satisfaction, sense of support, and motivation to remain in the field is a critical area of inquiry that aligns with SAIS's mission to "provide leadership and service that strengthens member schools" and to "foster a culture of excellence and innovation" (SAIS, 2024). As independent schools face mounting challenges related to teacher attrition and generational shifts in the workforce, it is essential to examine the factors that influence ECISP decisions to stay or leave.

This study aims to explore the drivers of retention for ECISP, with particular attention to the experiences of a subset of millennial and Gen-Z educators in their first seven years of service. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the conditions that enhance ECISP's sense of satisfaction, belonging, and embeddedness at work; the mitigating factors that impact their retention; and the specific resources they need to feel supported and motivated to commit to a long-term career in independent schools. By uncovering these insights, the study will not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the early-career experience in independent schools, but also position SAIS to better serve its membership by equipping school leaders with actionable strategies to reduce attrition, strengthen faculty culture, and cultivate the next generation of independent school leaders.

Research Questions

In alignment with these goals, the study addresses the following research questions:

1 **What contributes to early-career independent school professionals' (ECISP) sense of satisfaction, belongingness, and embeddedness at work? What are the mitigating factors?**

2 **What specific resources do ECISP need to enhance their sense of support and motivation to stay?**

3 **How can independent school leaders support ECISP to contribute to their sense of embeddedness and enhance their motivation to commit to a career in independent schools?**

Conceptual Framework

The study employs a conceptual framework that integrates the following scholarly theories:

Perceived Organizational Support Theory: Examines how ECISP perceive the support provided by their organization and its impact on their commitment and retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002, 2003, 2017, 2019).

Workplace Belongingness Theory: Investigates the role of belongingness in ECISP satisfaction and retention (Jena & Pradhan, 2017).

Self-Determination Theory: Explores the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive ECISP engagement and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2012, 2024).

Occupational Embeddedness Theory: Analyzes the factors that embed ECISP within their occupational context, influencing their decision to stay (Mitchell et al., 2001; Crossley et al., 2007).

Data Collection

Survey

The survey instrument was adapted from subsets of five pre-existing validated scales related to perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), occupational embeddedness (Ng & Feldman, 2009), career empowerment (Grabarski, 2021), protean career orientation (Baruch, 2014), and workplace belongingness (Jena and Pradhan, 2018) in order to seek to capture high quality, theoretically based data to inform the research questions. The survey included 48 prompts, all using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree) and three open-ended questions which probed for deeper insights related to the focal phenomena:

- **What resources/efforts from your current employer would increase your desire to stay at your school and your motivation to continue in a career in independent schools?**

- **What specific resources do you need to enhance your sense of support at work and feel more satisfied in your job?**

- **Share a time/experience when you felt supported in your work as an independent school professional in ways that made you want to commit to a career in independent schools.**

Additionally, apart from the aforementioned survey questions, demographic data, such as professional role category, salary range, school's grade levels served, years of employment in independent schools, and racial and gender identity, was collected as self-reported information to be used in analysis. Survey data was collected using the Qualtrics software platform over a ten-week period.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a powerful data collection strategy for providing rich, contextualized descriptions of participants' lived experiences and understanding how perceptions and experiences compare across participants (Alamri, 2019). According to Tracy (2010), qualitative methods are considered rigorous when they incorporate extensive, suitable, and intricate procedures for data collection and analysis. Keeping this in mind, each focus group began with an outline of the purpose of the study and the structure of the discussion, as well as a request for participants to respect mutual confidentiality. Additionally, participants were provided with details about who would have access to the data, how the data would be used, and the fact that the focus groups would be recorded, transcribed, and kept on a password-protected device and data analytics platform.

During data collection, measures were taken to minimize bias and ensure accuracy, such as adherence to the focus group protocol and engagement in dialogic engagement. As part of this process, diligent efforts were made to ensure that the focus group was facilitated in a manner to promote equitable participation and to put participants at ease. Specific attention was paid to exercising emotional intelligence and sensitivity during data collection, given the nature of the phenomenon and participants' personal investment in the problem of practice. To promote researcher reflexivity, the researcher maintained a journal during data collection to openly reflect about the participants, phenomenon, and process of investigation. This practice, known as analytic memoing, supports the investigator's capacity to understand the impact of one's subjective experiences on data collection and interpretation (Primeau, 2003). Focus group data was collected over a one-week period; each gathering lasted between 55 and 65 minutes and was recorded in the Zoom platform.

Finding 1:
Unsustainable Workloads Fueled by Lack of Time and Extra Roles Drive Burnout and Attrition.
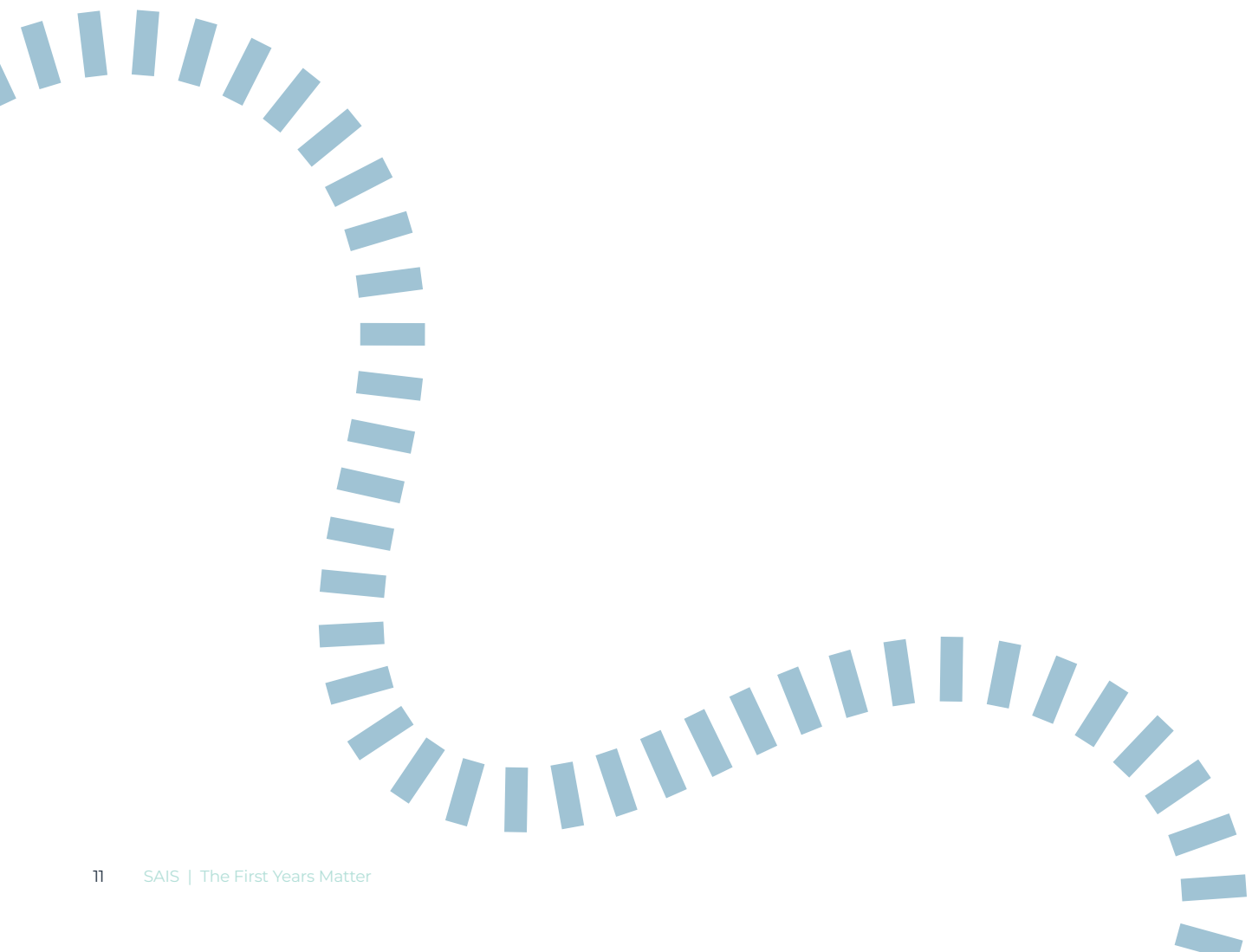
Evidence of Findings

**Finding 1:
Unsustainable Workloads Fueled by Lack of Time
and Extra Roles Drive Burnout and Attrition.**

Workload expectations were amplified for single/childless ECISP. ECISP described excessive workloads, blurred work-life boundaries, and unpaid labor. Survey items related to flexibility and job excitement scored lower. Qualitative data included vivid accounts of 12-hour days and extra role overload. Burnout was exacerbated by being a single or childless person, who was presumed to have more time and therefore "expected" to take on extra work.

Table 1: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 1

Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Lack of Flexibility	The organization offers me the possibility to flexibly arrange my work schedule, wherever possible.	Mean ≈ 3.11	Reflects dissatisfaction with work flexibility, contributing to work-life imbalance.
Moderate Level of Rewards for Effort	My accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded at the organization.	Mean ≈ 3.53	Reflects modest level of acknowledgement for efforts put in.
Extra Effort Disregarded	The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me. (Reverse item) Even if I did the best job, possible, the organization would fail to notice.	Mean ≈ 4.04 (Reverse item) Mean ≈ 4.02	ECISP feel unappreciated and as if their extra labor is not valued or seen.
Support Gaps by School Type	The organization is willing to extend itself in order to help me perform my job to the best of my ability.	$p = 0.025$, Cohen's $d = 0.580$ (medium-to-large effect)	PreK-5/6 professionals feel less supported, suggesting higher workload stress and fewer resources.

The organization offers me the possibility to flexibly arrange my work schedule, wherever possible.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **3.11** |

501 Responses

My accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded at the organization.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **3.53** |

504 Responses

The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me. (Reverse Item)

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.04** |

503 Responses

Even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice. (Reverse Item)

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.02** |

504 Responses

The organization is willing to extend itself in order to help me perform my job to the best of my ability (age range of current school).

489 Responses

	PreK/K-12	PreK/K-8	PreK/K-5/6
	4.17	4.07	3.32

Unsustainable Demands	"I really did feel overworked, like I was getting there at 6:30 in the morning, and leaving at like 6:30 at night, and I just was constantly bringing work home."
	"I get burnt out by the work that happens after dinner... I eat dinner, and then I open my computer back up. That's the stuff that wears me down."
	"If I had an honest job description, it'd be bananas... I'm an instructional coach, interventionist, field hockey coach, lacrosse coach, US history teacher, assistant director... and the person who handles student discipline when needed."
	"Stop overloading faculty members with coaching, advising, teaching, study halls, and countless other duties."
	"It feels like I'm blowing on a river—if I grab onto one thing, I miss a thousand others flying by. Focusing too much on one thing is actually a detriment."
	"I think teachers are being asked to do more than ever—on both the teaching side and the wellness and belonging side. It's just too much."
Free Labor	"The better I do at something, the more work I get. It's like a punishment for being competent."
	"They want us to lead task forces and committees, but there's no compensation or time given for that."
	"You're doing all this extra work, and then they wonder why you leave."
	"We're told, 'We can't pay you more, but you can lead from within.' But when does that happen? During your planning time."
Single / Young Person	"I definitely think that there's an attitude that some people, and especially the younger or earlier career teachers, are, gonna do a lot, and it feels like you kind of have to prove yourself of putting in the really longer hours — the kind of 12-hour days I'm at school for 11 to 12 hours a day."
	"I'll just say it. I feel like oftentimes being a young faculty member, my colleagues think that I have all this time in the world, and a lot of them have children or family-like things that they have to take care of."
	"Don't just lean on the young faculty members that maybe don't have the same types of responsibilities, but still have time set aside for themselves."

Finding 2:
Inconsistent/Absent Feedback and Unclear Career Pathways Undermine Retention. Males Perceive Career Growth Opportunities More Significantly Than Females.

Evidence of Findings

Finding 2:
Inconsistent/Absent Feedback and Unclear Career Pathways Undermine Retention. Males Perceive Career Growth Opportunities More Significantly Than Females.

Both survey and focus group data highlighted a lack of structured feedback and unclear advancement pathways. ECISP reported confusion about evaluation criteria and frustration with vague or inaccessible leadership opportunities. Females perceive fewer career growth opportunities at a significant rate, suggesting a need for equity.

Table 3: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 2

| Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Career Goals	My career goals are well considered by the organization.	Mean ≈ 2.97	ECISP are not optimistic about having their career aspirations supported.
Promotional Opportunities	My promotional opportunities are excellent in this occupation.	Males Mean ≈ 3.87 Females Mean ≈ 3.13	Males report significantly higher optimism about professional growth than females, indicating potential gender disparities in access to advancement.
Rising in the Ranks, Career Advancement	The organization provides me with little opportunity to move up the ranks. (Reverse item)	Males Mean ≈ 3.2 Females Mean ≈ 4.12	Females perceive fewer visible or accessible advancement opportunities.

My career goals are well considered by the organization.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **2.97** |

503 Responses

My promotional opportunities are excellent in this occupation.

503 Responses

3.87

4.00

3.13

3.00

2.00

1.00

Male   Female

The organization provides me with little opportunity
to move up the ranks. (Reverse Item)

502 Responses

5.00

4.12

4.00

3.20

3.00

2.00

1.00

Male   Female
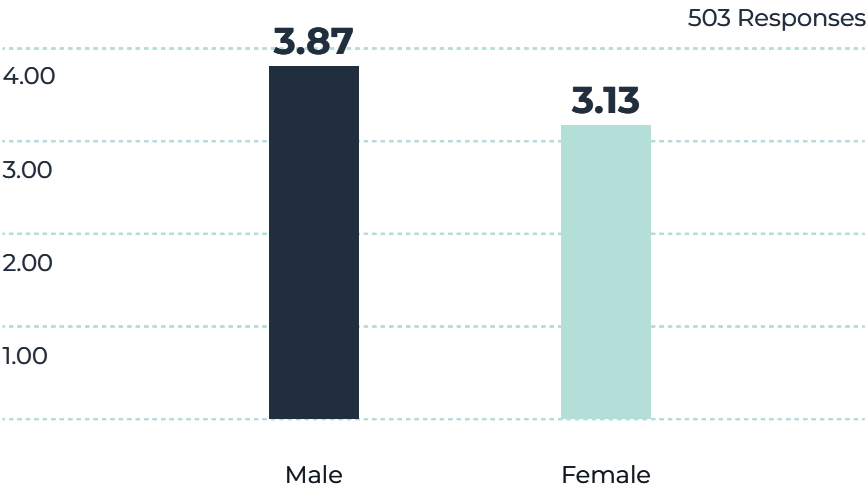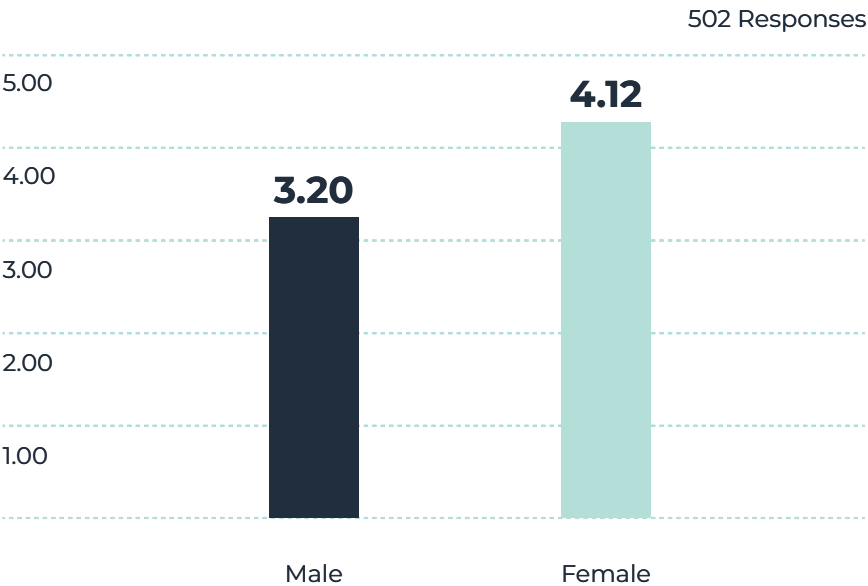
Table 4: Qualitative Data for Finding 2

|	
No Feedback/Oversight	"Sometimes you just want to know you're doing a good job—or that admin even knows what's going on in your room." "We don't have formal observations. I asked, 'When do we have our formal observations?' and the answer was, 'We don't.' That was weird for me." "I don't even know what I'm being measured on. What does a good year look like for me? Is it test scores? Is it student happiness? I have no idea." "Feedback comes in bursts. Sometimes I get weekly feedback, then nothing for two years. It's inconsistent and frustrating." "I've been here for four years. I was observed in year one. Since then, nothing. And I don't think the current admin even has the content knowledge to give me meaningful feedback."
No Clear Path to Leadership	"I applied for a lead position, but they said I lacked experience—experience I didn't know I needed. It wasn't established beforehand." "If I want to advance my career, I have to leave. There's no recognition for excellence within the role I'm doing." "Career growth feels vague and inaccessible unless you push for it yourself. You have to ask, 'What's my next step?' and hope someone has an answer." "I've worked for people who say, 'Just keep your head down and master what you're doing. When the time comes, we'll talk.' I didn't love that approach." "There's a lot of false hope. The word 'growth' is thrown around, but it doesn't lead anywhere." "There's this idea that if you're good at your job, you'll be asked to do more—but not necessarily promoted or compensated." "I want to grow, but I don't know how. I'm not a business person. I don't know how to become a head of school. It feels like a different world."

Finding 3:
Acts of Care from and Access to Leaders Are Foundational Retention Factors.
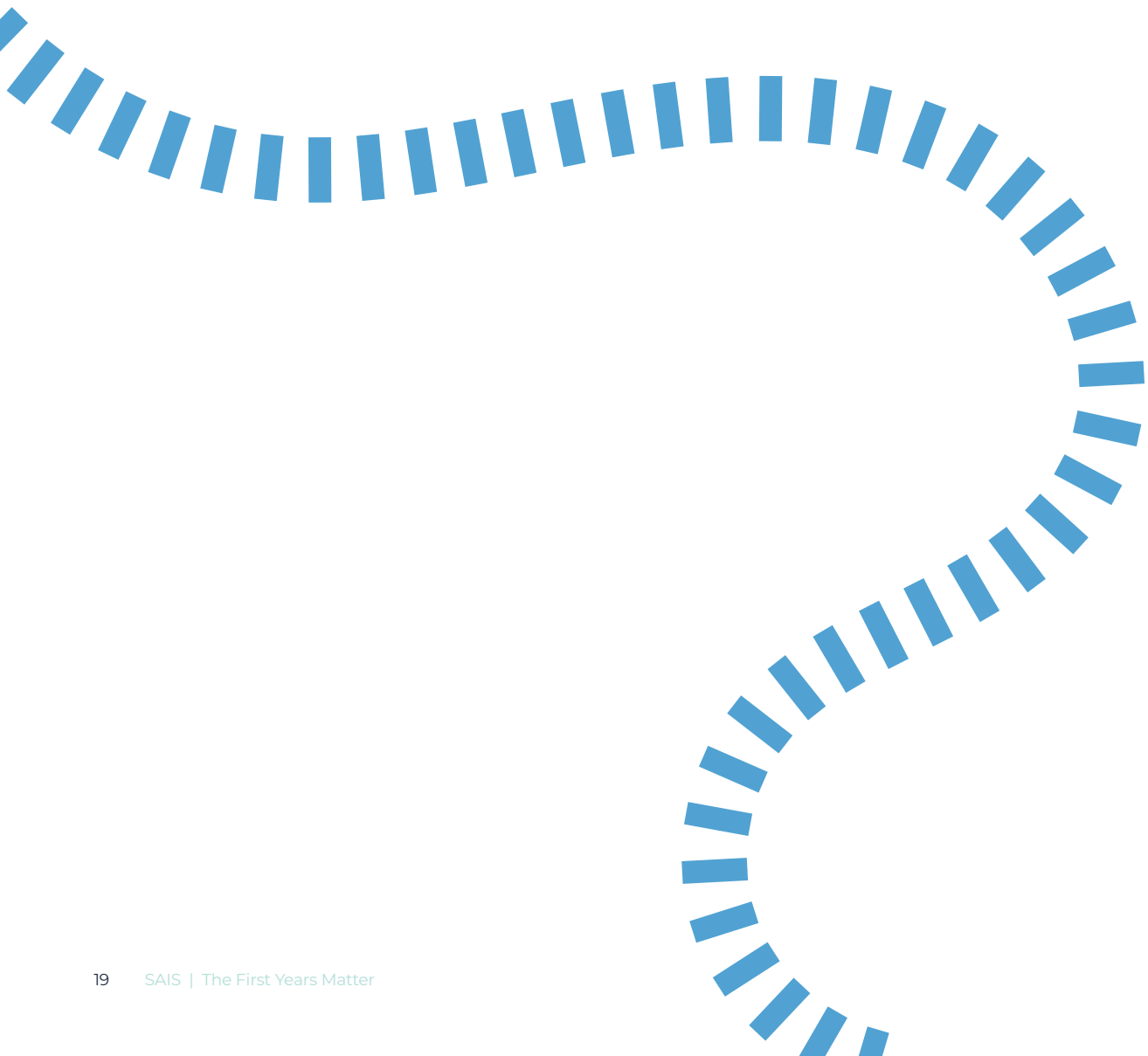
Evidence of Findings

Finding 3:
Acts of Care from and Access to Leaders
Are Foundational Retention Factors.

Demonstrated acts of care from and access to leaders/administrators were overwhelmingly valued by ECISP. ECISP valued leaders who were available, actively cared, and "checked in" with them to support their growth and well-being. A lack of these characteristics was linked to disengagement and attrition.

Table 5 Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 3

Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Feeling Cared For	The organization really cares about my well-being.	Mean ≈ 4.12	ECISP highly value feeling cared about.
Feeling Support	The organization is willing to extend itself to help me perform my job to the best of my ability.	Mean ≈ 4.12	Reflects a sense that ECISP feel generally supported
Finding Help	Help is available from the organization when I have a problem.	Mean ≈ 4.37	ECISP report receiving help when needed.

The organization really cares about my well-being.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.11** |

505 Responses

The organization is willing to extend itself in order to help me perform my job to the best of my ability.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.11** |

506 Responses

Help is available from the organization when I have a problem.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.37** |

506 Responses
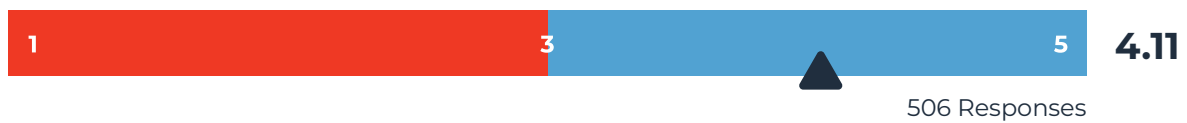
|	
Acts of Care from/ Access to Admin	"I actually have a meeting tomorrow with our associate head of school. And starting that off, you know, she makes herself so available and to be able to go have those conversations."
	"But just having the head of the Lower School right there. I'm an elementary school teacher. Door's always open just to go in and check in about anything. That feels really, really supportive for me."
	"If you're trying to help a student and you can't think of X,Y, and Z. That admin being there and being like, hey? Well, let me help you figure this out, not just telling you like, well, you're doing great, but putting forth their time to help me, shows me that they care, and are willing to devote some of their time towards me."
	"I have a department chair that's really supportive and every time he schedules an observation to see me teach, he does a really good job of offering praise and saying these are things that you're really good at."
	"I feel like he strikes a really nice balance of giving me things that actually help me become a better teacher, as opposed to just saying, you're doing great, or you're not doing great, and he coaches me through those things, so I think coaching is huge."
	"When the Head of the division proactively seeks me out. Like stopping by and being like, hey, how are things going? Or after, a difficult kind of community interaction, or something like that, just sort of proactively going and saying, Hey, how are things going for you? Are you handling this? Okay? And that made me feel really seen, I guess, as a faculty member."
	"Yeah. And they're very personal, too. Right? How are you doing? Really caring. It was like, this is a particular area that either is, you know, strong or challenging. How is that going?"
	"Check-ins that are very casual. My head teacher has a way of sort of lowering the stakes of things when I'm hard on myself. She'll say things like your kids are lucky to have you or things like that that are just sort of simple affirmations."
	"Our Upper School assistant head has been so unbelievably supportive, while also giving me space to do the job. He's always happy to give me historical context on how things have been done, and trying to tell me where all the landmines are without telling me how to do the job. And he'll always give me advice if I ask for it, but he's also very good about empowering me."
	"As somebody who asks a lot of questions, my head of Lower School, we have time in the rotation for me to just sit there and pick her brain about things, which makes me feel really awesome."

Finding 4:
Lack of Role Clarity and Transparency Creates Frustration and Undermines Retention.
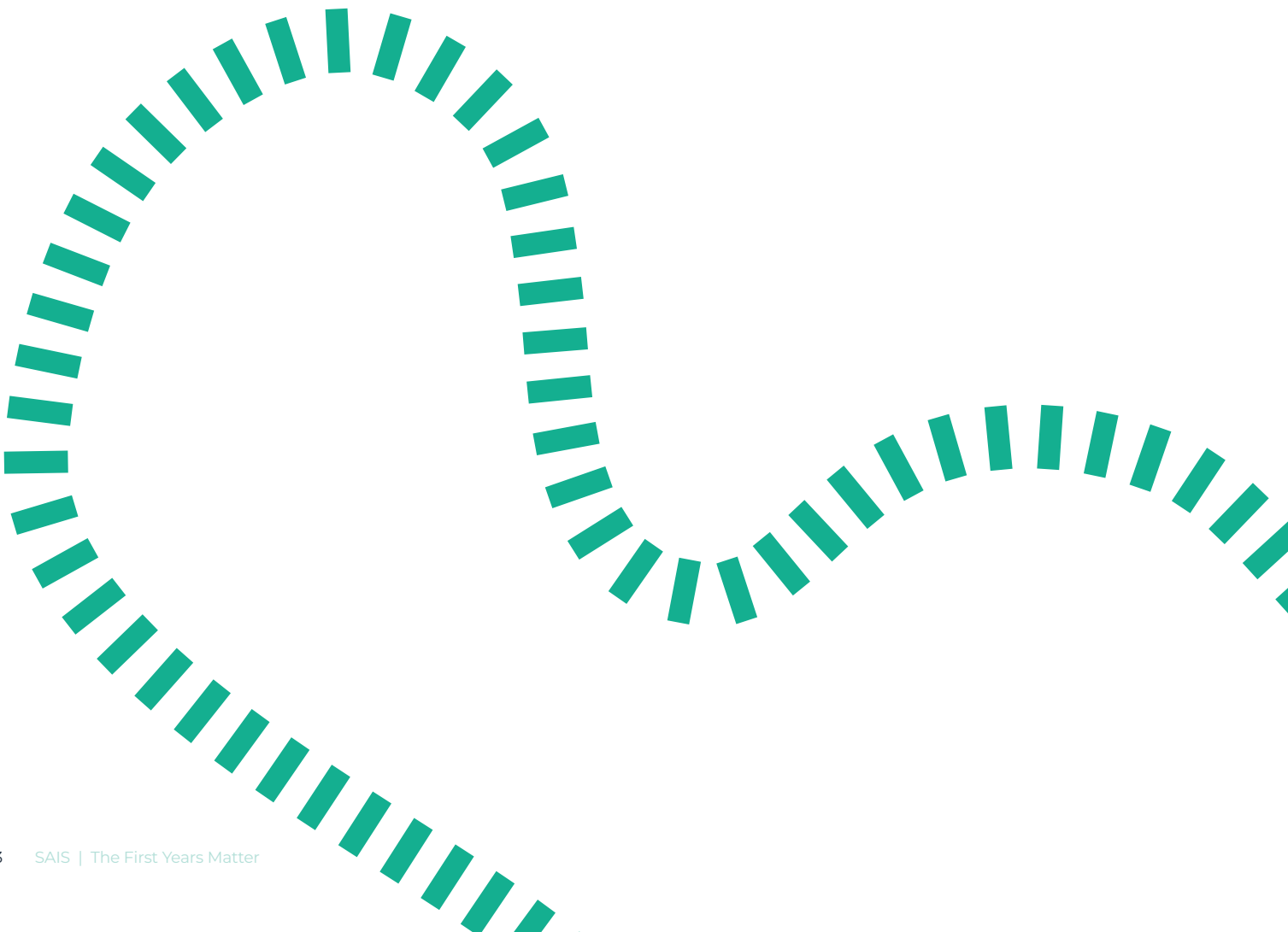
Evidence of Findings

Finding 4:
Lack of Role Clarity and Transparency Creates
Frustration and Undermines Retention.

ECISP reported confusion about job expectations, especially regarding extra duties and contracts. Focus group participants described vague contracts and inconsistent expectations, in addition to frustrations regarding a lack of transparency with leadership decisions.

Table 7: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 4

Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Undercompensated for Effort	I am well compensated for my level of performance in this occupation.	Mean ≈ 3.02	Indicates perceived misalignment between effort and compensation, which may be tied to unclear or inconsistent contract terms.
Benefits Don't Adequately Offset Low Compensation	The benefits associated with working in this occupation are outstanding.	Mean ≈ 3.36	Moderate rating of benefits indicates additional form of undercompensation.

The benefits associated with working in this occupation are outstanding.

1	3	5

3.36

503 Responses

I am well compensated for my level of performance in this occupation.

1	3	5

3.02

503 Responses

Table 8: Qualitative Data for Finding 4

|	
Lack or Role Clarity and Expectations	"There's a lack of transparency in contracts—what did you hire me for?" "We actually teach Monday through Saturday… I think having explicit expectations or explicit guidelines for taking care of ourselves so that we can then fully suit all of the expectations of our jobs would be really nice." "Some extra duties are awarded an extra bonus, and some are not—even when some that might be super labor intensive are not included in that. It's kind of a bummer." "My contract says I have to be here by 7:45, stay until 3:30, coach JV volleyball and basketball, and then 'other duties as assigned'—like all contracts do." "I would have been doing more work for the same amount of money. That was a little upsetting." "If you know you're doing a good job and what's expected of you, then you're going to feel fulfilled." "My first two years here I felt like I was drowning because there was so little framework on what I was supposed to be doing… I would have loved for a 'Hey, here's exactly what we want you to do. Please execute it.'"
Lack of Transparency	"You don't want the board or whoever making decisions and then saying, 'Here's how we're going to do things now.' Where was my say in that?" "There can't be any secrets or big decisions made out of the blue without everyone being consulted or having their voice heard." "If there's a student issue and the school wants to keep a lid on it for privacy, faculty still need to know what's going on so we're not in the dark when kids bring it up in class." "It would have been nice for admin to have a more open conversation with us. It wasn't hidden that we wanted this person, and then it was never really talked about."
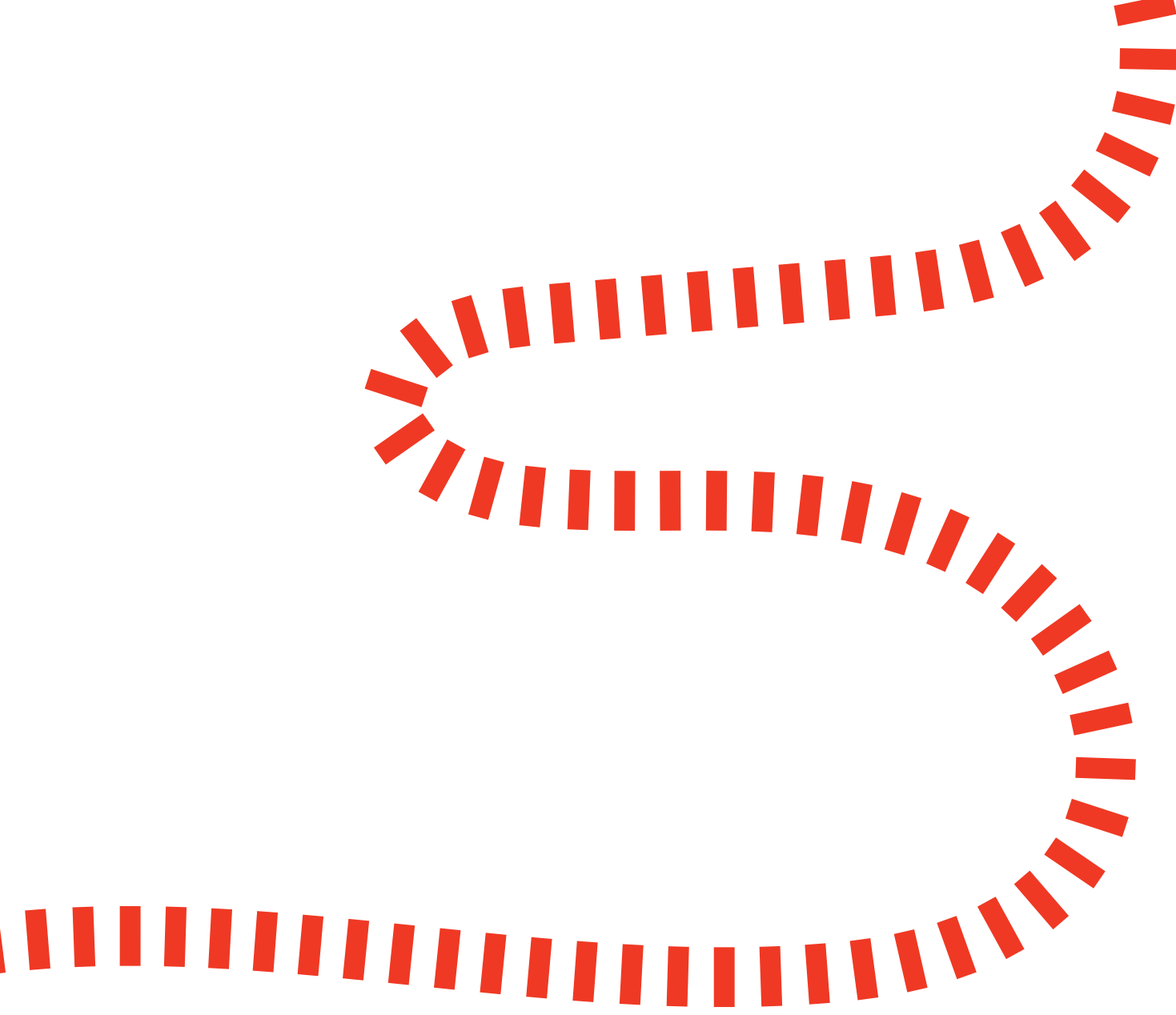
Finding 5:
A Sense of Trust Drives Motivation and Commitment.

Evidence of Findings

Finding 5:
A Sense of Trust Drives Motivation and Commitment.

ECISP who experience a sense of trust at work reported higher satisfaction and commitment.

Table 9: Qualitative Data for Finding 5

Trust

"Seeing how much freedom and trust I can have as an educator is really special. And so in those moments where I am frustrated with something, or I, you know, wondered like, is this a job I can do for years and years and years in the future? I come back to that, and it's just wonderful being at a place where I just come back to the word trust."

"I think that it's really important that teachers feel trusted in their ability to meet their students' needs, and that we are trusted by our administration to know that we are. We know what we're doing."

"I think, having those meetings with my lead teacher during my first year were really helpful in me, trusting her, and then her also, pouring into me and showing that she trusted me. It wasn't like she was micromanaging me. It was like she was trying to get to know me, and also give me as much support as possible, so I felt like I could handle things on my own. And so I feel like that led to trust."

"To me when I think of trust in schools, I think a lot of it has to do with, Are you gonna have my back in a pinch, whether it's a parent that's upset about something I did in my classroom or a student who's complaining about something going on with this test, or whatever it may be. And so I think to me you earn trust, if you're going to support me, not blindly, but if you're overwhelmingly going to be supportive of me, especially when the rubber meets the road, and then behind the scenes."

"I have a lot of freedom, and there's kind of inherently a lot of trust given to me, because nobody else has knowledge of or can have opinions of the things that I say that we're going to do, which is, you know, they very much trust me and value my judgment, which feels very good."

"I have a lot more trust for the people that I work with now than I did at my last school, and I think that makes me a lot happier and more content with the work that I'm doing, because I, like, believe in the people that are making it happen."

Finding 6:

Investment in Tailored Professional Development and Graduate Study Drives Motivation and Commitment.
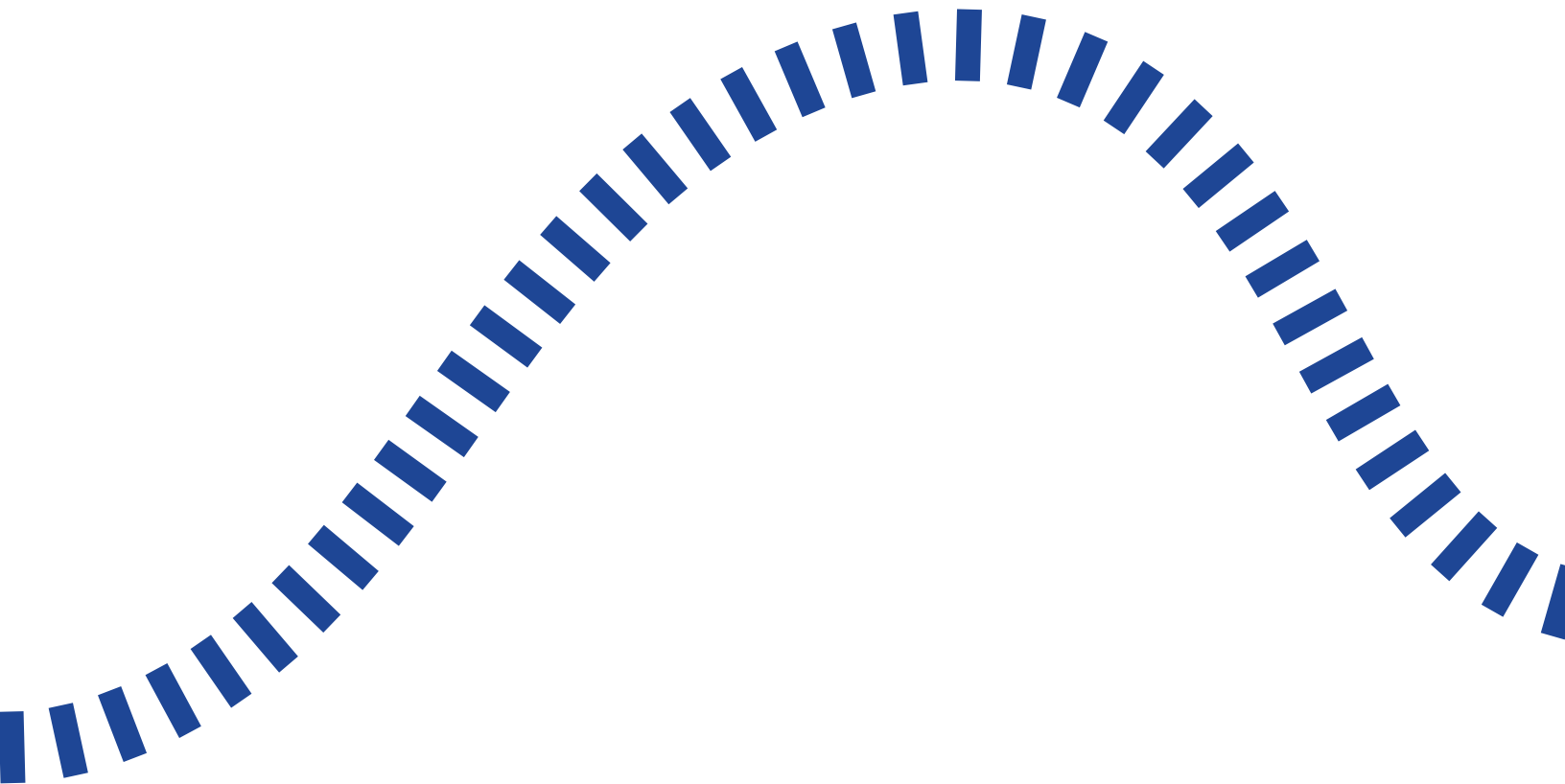
Evidence of Findings

Finding 6:
Investment in Tailored Professional Development
and Graduate Study Drives Motivation and Commitment.

ECISP who received funded PD that matches their interests and/or graduate school support reported higher satisfaction and commitment. Those without access to these resources felt stagnant and/or motivated to exit and seek these benefits elsewhere.

Table 10: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 6

Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Continuous Learning	My career provides me with ongoing learning opportunities.	Mean ≈ 4.32	ECISP highly rated access to ongoing learning in their work.
Sponsorship of Professional Development	The organization encourages me to broaden my skills by sponsoring my professional development.	Mean ≈ 4.32	This reflects a sense that ECISP have PD that is funded by

My career provides me with ongoing learning opportunities.

1	3	5	**4.32**

503 Responses

The organization encourages me to broaden my skills by sponsoring my professional development.

1	3	5	**4.32**

503 Responses

Professional Growth/Investment in Me

"I think there has been a call from many people in our school for PD to be much more specific, and I think that our school has really listened. And that has been a positive for me. They're very supportive about continuing education."

"From that training I went to I could implement things in my classroom right at the start of the school year. And I think when you can go to a training and you could implement things, you know, right away. That makes a huge difference."
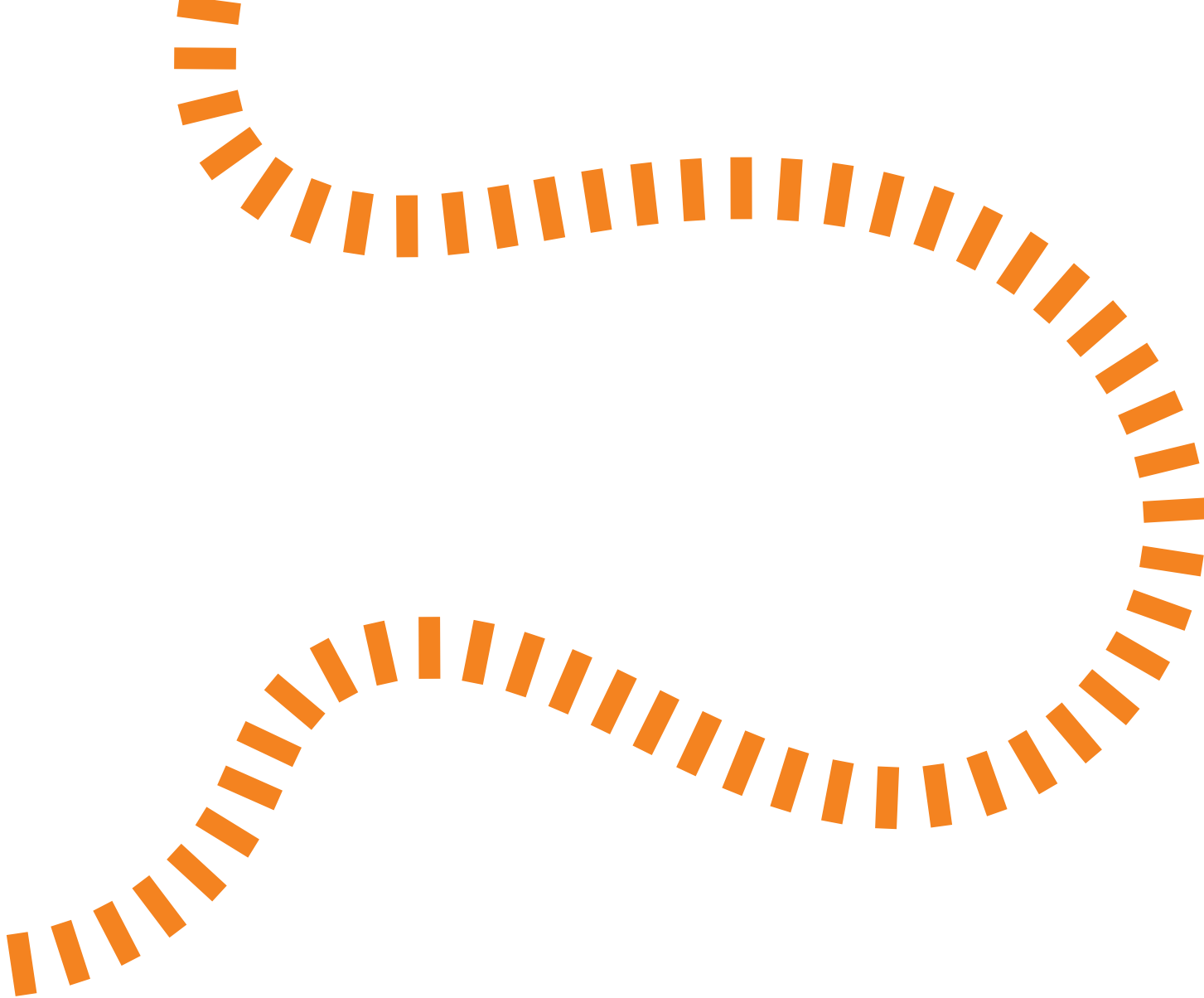
"I come back year after year, and ask am I learning and growing in this role? And do I feel supported, but also challenged? Am I still intellectually stimulated? Yeah, professional development is huge, absolutely."

"The ability to go to conferences and have some professional development that is of direct interest. We have a professional development day coming up and we get to actually select some kind of breakout sessions for the afternoon, which is new, which I'm excited about having that kind of choice."

"I've been able to go to two major conferences that match my interests and work and they kind of support me to expand and grow."

"Continued support in professional development like, getting my masters and everyone has been like, yes, do it! Go for it. That's awesome, which I love."

"We do have a lot of PD opportunities. If there's an area that you really want to grow in, and you find an option and you bring it up, usually they can make it happen, which is nice."

Finding 7:
Recognition, Appreciation for Loyalty, and Feeling "Seen" are Critical to Retention.

Evidence of Findings

Finding 7:
Recognition, Appreciation for Loyalty,
and Feeling "Seen" are Critical to Retention

ECISP expressed a strong desire for recognition—both formal and informal. Survey items like "The organization takes pride in my accomplishments" showed significant gender differences, and qualitative data emphasized the emotional impact of being overlooked.

Table 12: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 7

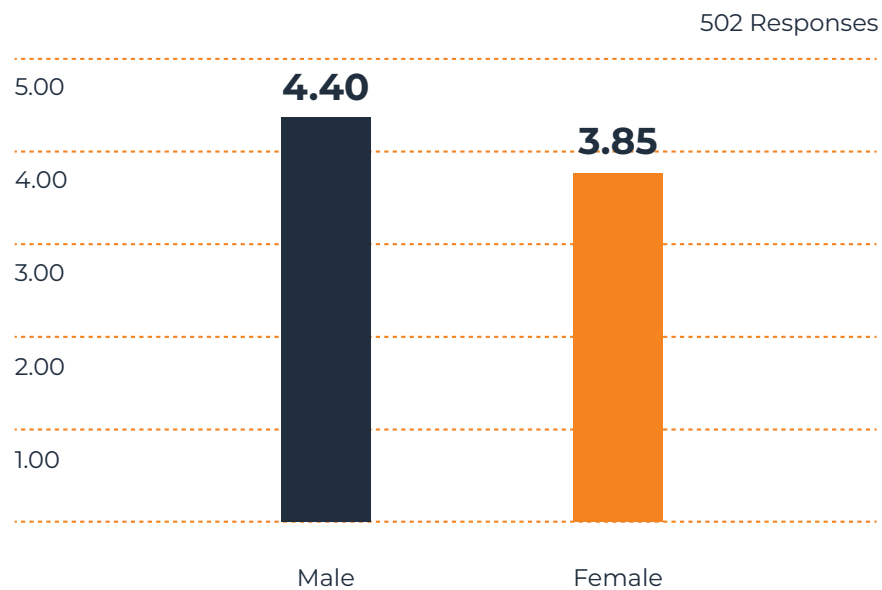| Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Lack of Rewards for Accomplishments	My accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded at the organization.	Mean ≈ 3.53	ECISP express a moderate sense of diminished rewards for their contributions.
Feeling Disregarded	The organization cares about my opinions.	Mean ≈ 3.74	ECISP feel their perspectives are not very highly valued.
Recognition and Pride	The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work.	Males Mean ≈ 4.4 Females Mean ≈ 3.84	Females report significantly lower perceptions of organizational pride in their accomplishments than males.
Supervisor Recognition	My supervisors are proud that I am part of this organization.	Males Mean ≈ 3.58 Females Mean ≈ 3.16	This suggests a gender gap in perceived supervisor recognition, with females feeling less "seen" by superiors.

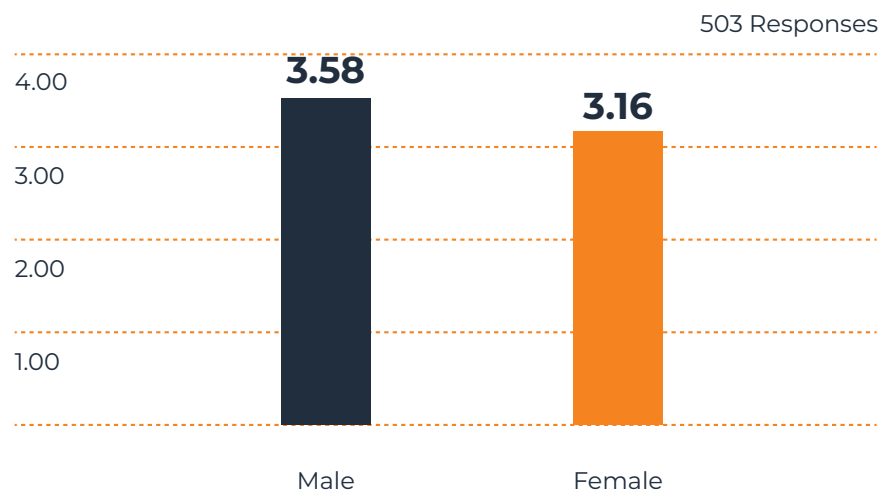My accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded at the organization.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **3.53** |

504 Responses

The organization cares about my opinions.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **3.74** |

504 Responses

The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work.

502 Responses

	Male	Female
Score	**4.40**	**3.85**

5.00
4.00
3.00
2.00
1.00

My supervisors are proud that I am a part of this organization.

503 Responses

	Male	Female
Score	**3.58**	**3.16**

4.00
3.00
2.00
1.00

Seen, Valued, Heard	"My school really focuses on being seen, heard, and valued—both the students and the faculty, and so I feel like if I am being seen and heard and valued as an individual that really makes me want to stay."
	"I was given the Faculty of the Year award last year. This was voted on by my colleagues, so it made me feel incredibly honored and valued."
	"Recognition, affirmation, and just the acknowledgement that the great things happening in the classroom are not going unnoticed—that's being seen."
	"The school didn't give me everything I wanted, but they listened. There was compromise, and everyone got more clarity on what was expected."
	"It doesn't feel like they're upfront with a lot of things, but I feel like I'm allowed to ask questions and be heard. That listening piece is important."
	"So I appreciate that I can talk to my supervisor about those things. She's great about confidentiality. And then moving really like tactfully, and supporting me and supporting others in those ways."
	"I am definitely hungry for more opportunities and want to know what a pathway for career growth looks like and I think at my school that they've been very encouraging, and in making me feel seen and valued."
Recognition/Loyalty	"It's frustrating when internal candidates are passed over for leadership roles in favor of external hires."
	"I've stayed loyal, but it feels like that loyalty isn't rewarded or even acknowledged."
	"The school appreciates when I can go above and beyond. But the school can't also entertain how I should be paid for above and beyond."
	"They were trying to fill it with other people, instead of looking internally at people that had been loyal to the school."
	"I was told I wasn't qualified for a leadership role because I hadn't worked somewhere else—even though I'd been here for years."

Finding 8:
Relationships and a Sense of Community Fuel Embeddedness. However, Some Brand New ECISP Struggle with Social Disconnection.

Evidence of Findings

Finding 8:
Relationships and a Sense of Community Fuel Embeddedness.
However, Some Brand New ECISP Struggle with Social Disconnection.

ECISP overwhelmingly cited deep, multi-contextual relationships with students and colleagues and a sense of community as key reasons for retention. These factors were powerful sources of joy, purpose, and professional fulfillment. However, some brand new ECISP sometimes struggle to find their sense of community, especially in schools with older, more established faculty.

Table 14: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 8

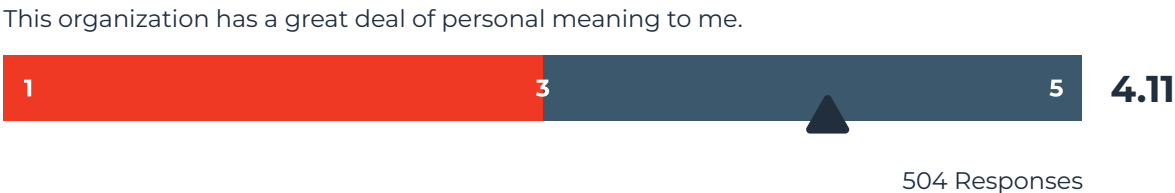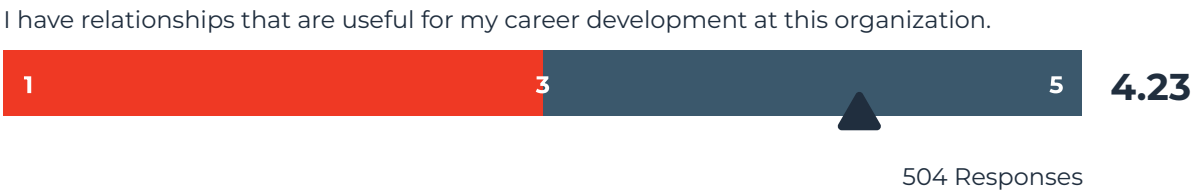| Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Quality Relationships	I have relationships that are useful for my career development at this organization.	Mean ≈ 4.23	High mean suggests that career-supportive relationships are a strong positive factor in ECISP occupational experience.
Meaningfulness	I have relationships that are useful for my career development at this organization.	Mean ≈ 4.11	This reflects emotional connection and meaningfulness, possibly stemming from work relationships.

I have relationships that are useful for my career development at this organization.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.23** |

504 Responses

This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **4.11** |

504 Responses

Table 15: Qualitative Data for Finding 8

Relationships	"I think I mentioned about mentorship from, say, like from admin, or from or peer to peer. Mentorship also, I think, is fantastic. And just that sense that I'm not just on my own isolated in my classroom, which is important. But to have someone else."
	"A sense of camaraderie, I think, amongst faculty or staff, or administrators goes a long way because you're doing hard things all day. You're having complex conversations, with kids, with parents, with faculty, with staff, whatever it is. And so I think feeling like you enjoy the people that you work with, I think that is really important to me."
	"You know me personally with motivation and connecting with colleagues. Outside of work. And we're not just talking about work like we're hanging out with each other, it's a kind of facilitating more of that just like familial or collegial relationship. I think it makes it easier to want to work here and to make it more enjoyable. I'm more excited to go to work because I have friends at work. It's not just the people that work beside me. But people that I enjoy hanging out with in the school—having those relationships and having positive and meaningful interactions with coworkers."
Connections with Kids	"It's really fun to build that community. And then I get to see kids that I taught when they were 3 that are now in like second grade. And it's like just the opportunity to be like, I could know these kids all the way till they graduate. I could literally watch them grow up and turn into a young adult and see how they transition."
	"Our school is very community based. I think that every year that I've signed the contract I've thought specifically about the students that I know both in the classroom. I also coach, so on the athletic fields. And also I live in a dorm. So I feel like I get to know my students as a whole human rather than just as a student."

Connections with Kids (Cont.)	"You know, you teach a kid, and you get to know them in one context in the classroom, and then you see them in advisory and you get to know them in a different context. And maybe you sponsor a club or two that they're a part of, and you see them in a whole different light. And then you come out to practice, and you know you get to know them even better. And so I think the deep personal connections and relationships are what I'm all about, and I love that piece."
Community	"And so there's a really good vibrant community for me to work with. We share resources, we communicate. We work through things together, which is really great." "Just supportive—this whole school. It feels less like a school sometimes, and more like a community." "I love the consistency of attention to community and how that can be really valuable." "The way to hook people is with community, I think it is a really big deal. Like, finding a way to make them feel connected to the community is a big deal, and it's like a big driver for me." "I would say community is probably the biggest draw."
Lack of Social Community for New ECISP	"It's hard to form bonds when you're new and everyone else has been here forever." "Young professionals struggle to find community, especially if they didn't grow up here." "We need more organic ways to build relationships across departments and age groups." "There's a big difference between being in your twenties and working with people in their forties with families. It's just different life stages." "You just have a different mindset being early in your career versus late." "I'm almost always one of the only people in their 20s or early 30s. It presents a very professional sense of community, but not a personal one." "If the school can't provide a community, then there has to be time for me to build my own. But I coach two seasons and wear other hats—I don't have time to build my own community." "Young professionals who come to this area struggle to find other young people to build connections with. A social chair or something to help young people get together could be helpful."

Finding 9:
Flexibility and Autonomy Are Strong Retention Drivers, While Lack of Planning Time is a Persistent Struggle.

Evidence of Findings

Finding 9:
Flexibility and Autonomy Are Strong Retention Drivers,
While Lack of Planning Time is a Persistent Struggle.

ECISP who reported higher autonomy and work flexibility reported greater satisfaction and intent to stay. Qualitative data emphasized the value of flexible scheduling and autonomy in one's teaching practices and a lack of time for planning as a significant frustration.

Table 16: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 9

Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Flexibility with Schedules	The organization offers me the possibility to flexibly arrange my work schedule, wherever possible.	Mean ≈ 3.11	Flexibility is perceived as lacking overall, which may reflect time-related struggles.

The organization offers me the possibility to flexibly arrange my work schedule, wherever possible.

| 1 | 3 | 5 | **3.11** |

501 Responses

Autonomy

"The freedom to really be creative. In my lessons."

"I really love being able to be very creative with my curriculum."

"There's not a lot of micromanagement. But just as a teacher I feel like to empower my students, I feel like the school supports empowering me as a teacher to do the things I want, and work with and alongside the school so that is really exciting and attractive to lead me to sign a contract to stay here longer."

"I'm not micromanaged and I'm trusted that I know my students best. We were hired for this job for a reason, and so let us do our thing, and it's amazing."

Flexibility

"My school piloted flex days—once a week, every Lower School teacher has the morning off until 10:30. They use it for meetings, grading, PD, or personal time. It's fantastic."

"Most contracts say you've got to be here at 7:45 and stay until 3:45... I get why that is, but if Heads of schools could be creative about flexibility—like if you don't teach until 10:30, maybe you don't need to be here until 10—that would be nice."

"Flexibility with doctor appointments and time to prepare during the day allows me to maintain a healthy work-life balance."

"The more creative schools can be with offering flexible schedules... especially for younger folks who see their friends doing cool stuff during the week and feel like they can't because they're stuck at school until 6."

Structured Planning Time

"In middle school, they take a subject out for the whole day so all those teachers can meet, collaborate, and have time for planning. It's extraordinarily helpful."

"I had days with no planning periods and no one to support me as I took on this new role."

"More planning time: Extra planning periods to prepare lessons and materials would help me create a more tailored learning experience without sacrificing my personal time."

Finding 10:
Support Perceptions Declined with Increased ECISP Tenure.

Evidence of Findings

Finding 10:
**Support Perceptions Declined with Increased ECISP Tenure.**

ECISP with one to four years of tenure reported significantly higher support scores than those with five or more years.

Table 18: Quantitative Survey Data for Finding 10

| Theme	Survey Item	Evidence	Interpretation
Perceptions of Having Access to Support Resources	Help is available from the organization when I have a problem.	Mean score declined as tenure increased.	Newer employees (1–4 years) feel they have more access to support than those with 5+ years, indicating a decline in perceived support.
Perceptions of Being Valued	The organization values my contribution to its well-being.	Mean score declined as tenure increased.	Newer employees feel more valued.
Perceptions of Having Access to Support Resources	The organization is willing to extend itself to help me perform my job well.	Mean score declined as tenure increased.	Newer employees feel more supported.

Help is available from the organization when I have a problem (by years of employment with current school).

	1-2 Years	3-4 Years	5-6 Years	7 Years
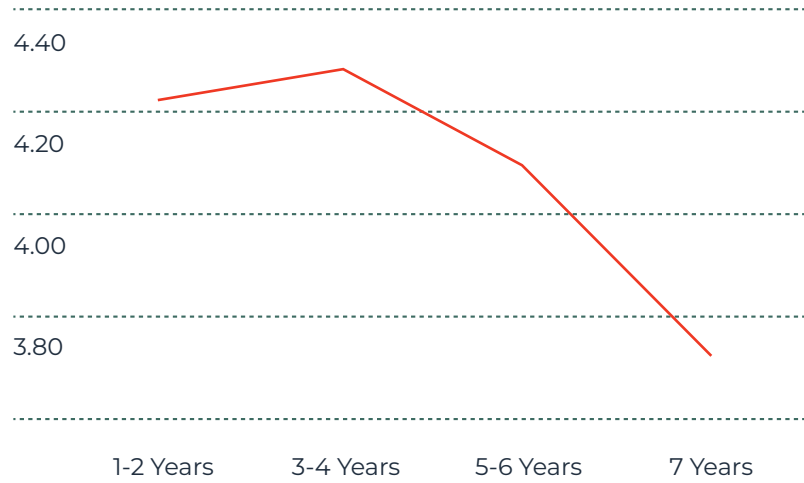
The organization values my contribution to its well-being (by years of employment with current school).
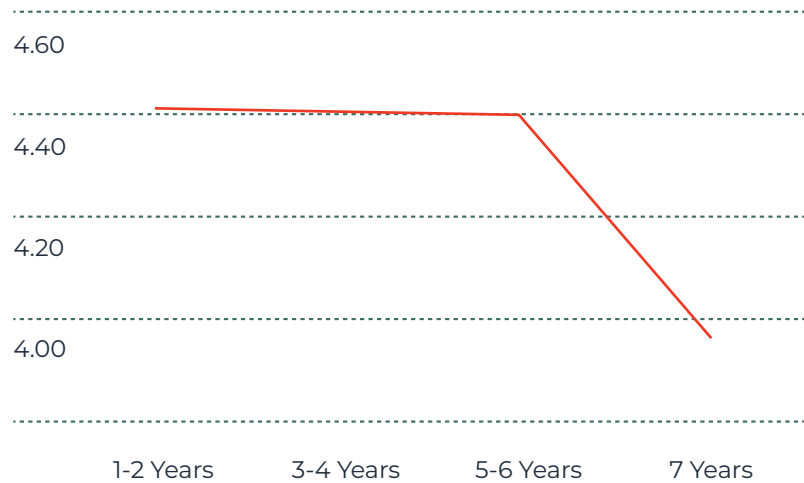
495 Responses

	1-2 Years	3-4 Years	5-6 Years	7 Years

The organization is willing to extend itself in order to help me perform my job to the best of my ability (by years of employment with current school).

495 Responses

	1-2 Years	3-4 Years	5-6 Years	7 Years

Recommendations

Recommendations are provided in alignment with findings. Execution of some recommendations may require strategic collaboration with advancement teams to fundraise the necessary resources. It should be noted that all recommendations are theoretically supported and reflect a range of inputs and commitments from organizations to foster improvement, which understandably must be negotiated amongst competing strategic priorities. A consideration of recommendations is encouraged against the backdrop of strategic planning and organizational visioning activities.

Finding 1:

Unsustainable Workloads Fueled by Lack of Time and Extra Roles Drive Burnout and Attrition. Workload Expectations Were Amplified for Single/Childless ECISP.

To address the chronic overload and burnout experienced by ECISP, schools must take a systemic approach to workload management. A foundational step is to conduct a workload equity audit, grounded in Social Climate Theory's system maintenance dimension. This process involves forming a cross-functional committee to assess how responsibilities—both instructional and non-instructional—are distributed across faculty. Using surveys, interviews, and time-use data, schools can identify patterns of inequity, such as the disproportionate assignment of extra duties to younger or childless faculty. The audit should culminate in a set of actionable recommendations that promote fairness, transparency, and sustainability. This initiative, while moderately complex, aligns with best practices in workforce planning and performance management.

In parallel, schools should implement human resources policies and practices that explicitly protect planning time and limit unpaid labor. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy and well-being, these interventions should ensure that ECISP have dedicated time for lesson preparation, reflection, and professional growth. Leaders must be willing to examine current scheduling blueprints and implement proven methods, such as designing a master schedule to establish common planning time, and incorporating alternate enrichment schedules, flex-time periods, dedicated planning days, and/or late starts/early dismissals. Leaders must be committed to upholding boundaries related to excessive extra roles and resist the cultural norm of overwork. Schools might also consider compensating or reducing other duties for faculty who take on additional responsibilities, thereby reinforcing the value of their time and expertise. These changes, while initially time-intensive to implement, send a powerful message that the institution respects and supports its educators.

Finding 1 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Conduct a Workload Equity Audit.** Establish a cross-functional committee to assess how instructional and non-instructional duties are distributed among faculty. Use surveys, interviews, and time-use data to identify inequities, and develop actionable, fair, and transparent workload policies.

- **Protect Educators' Planning Time via Master Scheduling.** Implement human resources policies and scheduling infrastructures that safeguard dedicated time for lesson planning, reflection, and professional development. Ensure these policies are grounded in autonomy and well-being, and train leaders to uphold them consistently.

- **Compensate Additional Responsibilities.** Recognize and reward faculty who take on extra duties by offering compensation, reducing other obligations, and/or offering non-monetary benefits. This reinforces the value of their time and helps combat the culture of overwork.

Finding 2:

Inconsistent/Absent Feedback and Unclear Career Pathways Undermine Retention.

A lack of structured feedback and unclear advancement pathways emerged as significant drivers of attrition among ECISP. To address this, schools should establish transparent, routinized feedback systems for ECISP that are grounded in Perceived Organizational Support Theory. These systems should include regular check-ins, formative observations, and growth-oriented evaluations that are consistent across departments. Leaders or hired instructional coaches must be trained in delivering feedback that is both affirming and developmental, and ECISP should be given opportunities to reflect on and respond to the feedback they receive. This initiative supports both performance management and employee engagement and is particularly imperative for brand new ECISP.

In addition, schools must develop clear and accessible career roadmaps that reflect the principles of Protean Career Orientation. These roadmaps should outline potential leadership pathways, professional development milestones, and opportunities for advancement within the school. Importantly, they should be co-created with ECISP to reflect individual aspirations and institutional needs. Schools can support this process by offering career coaching, mentorship, and visibility into internal hiring practices. While more resource-intensive, this initiative can be phased in over time and aligns with workforce planning and succession development strategies. When ECISP can see a future for themselves within the organization, they are more likely to invest in its success.

Finding 2 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Establish Structured Feedback Systems.** Implement consistent, growth-oriented feedback processes—including routinized check-ins, formative observations, and evaluations—delivered by trained leaders, peer colleagues, middle managers, or instructional coaches. These systems should promote reflection and development, especially for new ECISP.

- **Develop Transparent Career Pathways.** Co-create clear, individualized career roadmaps with ECISP that outline leadership opportunities, professional milestones, and advancement options. Support these with mentorship, coaching, and visibility into internal hiring.

- **Invest in Leadership and Coaching Capacity.** Train school leaders, middle managers, and instructional coaches to provide affirming, developmental feedback and career guidance. This builds internal capacity to support ECISP growth and retention over time.

Findings 3 and 5:

Acts of Care from and Access to Leaders Are Foundational Retention Factors and A Sense of Trust Drives Motivation and Commitment.

To foster retention among ECISP, schools must prioritize leadership practices that build trust, connection, and psychological safety. This begins with leadership development programs that emphasize emotionally intelligent and relational leadership. These programs, grounded in Organizational Support Theory, should include opportunities for leaders to receive feedback from their teams and reflect on their own practices. Leaders should be trained to demonstrate care through regular check-ins, support during challenges, and recognition of milestones, while also communicating openly and following through on commitments. These behaviors, though simple, significantly impact ECISP's sense of belonging and motivation.

Equally important are structures that promote dialogue and shared decision-making. Schools should implement mechanisms such as listening sessions, advisory councils, faculty forums, pulse surveys for input, lunch roundtables, and open door office hours that give ECISP a voice and serve as vehicles for building trust. Grounded in Self-Determination and Organizational Support Theories, these initiatives are low-cost; feasible within a short timeframe; and essential for cultivating a culture of empathy, inclusion, and mutual respect. When ECISP feel heard, valued, and supported by accessible leaders, they are more likely to invest in their roles and remain committed to the school community.

Finding 3 and 5 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Train mid- and upper-level leaders in emotionally intelligent/relational leadership.** Invest in leadership training that equips school leaders with the skills to build trust and connection through consistent, caring behaviors—such as regular check-ins, open communication, and follow-through. As part of this effort, a 360 degree feedback approach is recommended to bolster leaders' self-awareness of strengths and growth dimensions. These practices foster psychological safety and enhance a sense of perceived organizational support among ECISP.

- **Establish two-way dialogic structures.** Create formal and informal, two-way communication channels—like listening sessions, advisory councils, faculty forums, pulse surveys for input, lunch roundtables, and office hours—that empower ECISP to share their perspectives. These structures promote agency, recognition, and long-term commitment.

Finding 4:

Lack of Role Clarity and Transparency Creates Frustration and Undermines Retention.

To mitigate the frustration and disengagement caused by vague job expectations and opaque leadership decisions, schools must prioritize clarity and fairness in their employment practices. Anchored in Social Climate Theory, one essential step is to revise contracts and job descriptions to ensure they accurately reflect the scope of responsibilities, expectations, and compensation. This process should begin with a comprehensive audit of existing documents and input from employees in which they provide their own version of their job description, followed by the development of clear, standardized templates that are legally sound and contextually appropriate. While this work is more resource-intensive and may require legal consultation, it is a critical long-term investment in workforce planning and performance management.

Equally important is the need to pair role clarity with authentic care and equity. Perceived Organizational Support Theory underscores that employees are more likely to remain committed when they believe their organization values their well-being. To that end, school leaders should receive training on how to embed care and fairness into their supervisory practices, including how they evaluate performance, assign duties, and communicate decisions. These efforts can be supported through targeted training modules and feedback tools. When role expectations are clearly defined and delivered with empathy and transparency, ECISP are more likely to feel respected, supported, and motivated to stay.

Finding 4 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Clarify Roles Through Updated Contracts and Job Descriptions.** Revise contracts and job descriptions to clearly define responsibilities and compensation.

- **Train Leaders to Embed Equity and Care in Management Practices.** Provide targeted training for school leaders on equitable supervision, transparent communication, and empathetic performance evaluation to strengthen trust and support among ECISP.

Finding 6:

Investment in Tailored Professional Development and Graduate Study Drives Motivation and Commitment.

Professional development is a key driver of ECISP motivation and retention. As budgets allow, schools should offer personalized, funded professional development opportunities that align with individual interests and institutional goals. These offerings might include a choice of options on an in-house PD day, conference attendance to match goals/interests, specialized workshops, or graduate coursework. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Protean Career Orientation, this approach affirms ECISP's need for autonomy and competence. Schools should also provide coaching and support to help ECISP identify and pursue meaningful learning opportunities. While implementation may require budgetary planning and strategic fundraising, it can be phased in over time and supported through PD planning tools and mentorship.

Additionally, schools should consider creating internal fellowships, travel grants, professional learning communities, or leadership pipelines that allow ECISP to grow and collaborate in-house. These programs can include mentorship, project-based leadership roles, funded research opportunities, and peer learning circles/observations and should be designed to reflect the principles of Occupational Embeddedness Theory. Though more complex to implement and fund, these initiatives signal a long-term investment in talent development and institutional continuity. When ECISP see that their school is willing to invest in their growth, they are more likely to invest in the school in return.

Finding 6 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Offer Personalized/Choice-based, Funded Professional Development.** Provide ECISP with access to more individualized professional learning opportunities—such as conferences, choices on PD days, virtual and in-person workshops, or graduate coursework—that align with both personal interests and school goals. Support this with coaching and planning tools to help ECISP identify meaningful growth paths. This approach fosters autonomy and competence, key drivers of motivation and retention.

- **Create Internal Growth Pathways.** Develop internal fellowships, programs, peer-to-peer learning, and leadership pipelines that allow ECISP to take on new challenges without leaving the schoolhouse. These might include mentorship, project-based roles, or rotational assignments and should be designed to promote long-term engagement and institutional continuity.

Finding 7:

Recognition, Appreciation for Loyalty, and Feeling "Seen" Are Critical to Retention.

Recognition—both formal and informal—plays a critical role in ECISP retention. Schools should develop robust recognition systems that affirm the contributions of early-career professionals. These systems might include peer-nominated awards, spotlight features in school media, or public acknowledgments during faculty meetings. Grounded in Perceived Organizational Support Theory, these practices reinforce the message that ECISP are valued and respected. Beyond formal recognition, schools must cultivate a culture in which leaders (including middle managers) consistently demonstrate relational transparency and appreciation. Training in emotionally intelligent leadership can help administrators build trust, demonstrate empathy, and foster a culture of mutual respect. These trainings should include opportunities for reflection, role-play, and feedback and can be delivered through workshops or coaching sessions. When leaders model transparency and care, employees are more likely to feel seen, heard, and motivated to stay. These efforts not only enhance morale, but also contribute to a more inclusive and affirming school culture.

Finding 7 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Implement Formal Recognition Systems.** Create structured ways to celebrate ECISP, such as peer-nominated awards, social media spotlights, or public acknowledgments in meetings. These low-lift initiatives can be launched quickly and reinforce a culture of appreciation.

- **Foster a Culture of Relational Transparency.** Train school leaders in emotionally intelligent leadership practices that emphasize empathy, trust-building, and open communication. This helps employees feel seen, respected, and supported in their roles.

- **Integrate Recognition into Daily Leadership Practices and "Check-ins."** Encourage leaders and middle managers to regularly express appreciation and acknowledge contributions informally. Consistent, genuine recognition from leadership strengthens morale and retention.

Finding 8:

Relationships and a Sense of Community Fuel Embeddedness. However, Some Brand New ECISP Struggle With Social Disconnection.

To address the relational and social integration challenges experienced by early-career professionals—particularly those new to a school community—schools should consider implementing a suite of intentional practices designed to foster connection and belonging. Drawing on Occupational Embeddedness Theory, one promising approach is to cultivate cross-role collaboration by creating interdisciplinary teams or advisory groups that bring together faculty and staff from different departments or divisions. These structures not only deepen relational ties, but also promote a shared sense of purpose and institutional coherence. Such efforts align with workforce planning and employee relations strategies and can be supported through the use of collaboration tools and team-building resources.

In addition to structural collaboration, schools should design and promote relational rituals that foster informal connection and psychological safety. Grounded in Workplace Belongingness Theory, these rituals—such as shared meals, faculty storytelling circles, weekly happy hours, or gratitude practices—can be simple yet powerful mechanisms for cultivating a sense of inclusion. These initiatives are relatively low in cost and complexity, and can be implemented in the short term (one to three months) using basic event planning templates and a commitment to consistency. To further support social integration, especially for new or underrepresented ECISP, schools should consider launching social cohorts. These groups, rooted in Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on relatedness, provide a space for connection and peer support. Establishing such groups requires moderate effort, including the development of group charters and the identification of facilitators.

Finally, schools should revisit and redesign their onboarding processes to explicitly include community-building goals. Rather than focusing solely on logistics and compliance, onboarding should be reframed as a relational experience that introduces new ECISP to the social fabric of the school. This may include assigning peer mentors, hosting welcome gatherings, and embedding opportunities for school-sponsored early and consistent social connection with similarly-aged colleagues. With thoughtful planning, these enhancements can be introduced within the first three months of a new hire's tenure and maintained throughout the first year of employment to fortify relationships.

Finding 8 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Foster Cross-Role Collaboration.** Create interdisciplinary teams or advisory groups that bring together staff from different departments to build relational ties and a shared sense of purpose. These structures promote institutional coherence and can be implemented using collaboration tools and team-building resources.

- **Establish Relational Rituals.** Introduce informal, community-building practices—such as shared meals, storytelling circles, happy hours, or gratitude rituals—that cultivate psychological safety and belonging.

- **Launch Social Cohorts.** Support social integration by creating structured groups for new or underrepresented ECISP. These spaces provide peer support and connection and can be implemented with moderate planning and facilitation.

- **Redesign Onboarding for Community-Building.** Reframe onboarding as a relational experience by incorporating peer mentorship, welcome events, and early opportunities for connection. These enhancements are relatively easy to implement and can be introduced within the first three months of a new hire's tenure and maintained throughout the first year of employment.

Finding 9:

Flexibility and Autonomy Are Strong Retention Drivers, While Lack of Planning Time is a Persistent Struggle.

Flexibility and autonomy are among the most valued workplace conditions for ECISP. To support these needs, schools should institutionalize flexible work policies that allow for staggered start times, remote planning days and/or teaching options, or individualized scheduling adjustments. These policies, grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Protean Career Orientation, should be developed collaboratively and piloted with clear metrics for success. Implementation is achievable and aligns with workforce planning and employee relations strategies.

In addition, schools should encourage the co-design and co-teaching of roles and curricular responsibilities, allowing ECISP to shape their professional identities in alignment with institutional needs and engage in collaboration. This practice fosters a sense of ownership and purpose and can be facilitated through structured summer strategy workshops and supported by department chairs and administrators. Practices of co-designing and co-teaching not only enhance autonomy and job satisfaction, but also contribute to a more agile and responsive organizational culture. With regards to enhancing time management, refer to Finding 1's recommendation related to master scheduling and work equity audits.

Finding 9 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Implement Flexible Work Policies.** Develop and pilot flexible scheduling options—such as staggered start times, remote planning days/teaching options, and/or individualized scheduling adjustments —that support ECISP's need for autonomy. These policies should be collaboratively designed and evaluated using clear success metrics.

- **Co-Design Roles and Responsibilities, Promote Co-Teaching.** Engage ECISP in shaping their roles and responsibilities through structured co-design processes and co-teaching enterprises to enhance agency, job satisfaction, collaboration, and organizational adaptability.

Finding 10:

Finding 10: Support Perceptions Declined with Increased ECISP Tenure.

To sustain engagement across the ECISP lifecycle, schools must recognize that the needs of early-career professionals evolve over time. One effective strategy is to design tiered mentorship and feedback systems that provide differentiated support based on tenure. These systems, grounded in Occupational Embeddedness Theory, might include peer mentoring for new hires, leadership coaching for mid-career professionals, and strategic planning roles for veteran educators. Implementation should be integrated into broader retention strategies.

In addition, schools should offer leadership and growth opportunities specifically tailored to mid-career professionals. These might include department chair roles, curriculum leadership, or strategic initiatives that allow ECISP to expand their impact. Such opportunities, aligned with Self-Determination Theory, reinforce autonomy and competence while deepening institutional commitment. Schools should also ensure that these roles are accessible, equitably distributed, and compensated whenever possible, with clear criteria and support structures in place. When ECISP feel that their growth is supported throughout their tenure, they are more likely to remain engaged and invested in their school communities.

Finding 10 Affiliated Recommendations

- **Design Tiered Mentorship and Feedback Systems.** Create differentiated support structures that evolve with ECISP career stages—such as peer mentoring for new hires, leadership coaching for mid-level ECISP, and strategic roles for more established early career educators. These systems promote long-term engagement and should be integrated into broader retention strategies.

- **Provide Targeted Leadership Opportunities for Mid-Level ECISP.** Offer accessible and well-supported growth roles—like department leadership, curriculum design, or strategic initiatives—that align with ECISP evolving skills and aspirations. Clear criteria and equitable access ensure these opportunities reinforce autonomy, competence, and institutional commitment.

Discussion & Conclusion

As initially stated, SAIS and its member schools are increasingly focused on identifying evidence-based strategies to support the recruitment, development, and retention of early-career professionals in independent schools. Understanding what contributes to these professionals' satisfaction, sense of support, and motivation to remain in the field is a critical area of inquiry that aligns with SAIS's mission to "provide leadership and service that strengthens member schools" and to "foster a culture of excellence and innovation" (SAIS, 2024). Since the retention of early-career educators is essential to the long-term sustainability and vitality of independent schools, this study sought to deeply examine the factors that enhance or diminish ECISP embeddedness, well-being, and professional commitment.

This investigation revealed that ECISP retention is shaped by a constellation of interrelated factors, including workload sustainability, access to feedback and career pathways, relational trust, role clarity, and opportunities for professional growth. The findings underscore the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership, transparent communication, and institutional practices that affirm the value and potential of early-career educators. In particular, the study highlights the critical role of perceived organizational support, workplace belongingness, and autonomy in shaping ECISP motivation and persistence.

While the data in this study reflect the lived experiences of ECISP at SAIS member schools, it is complemented by theoretical frameworks and validated instruments that extend the relevance of the findings beyond the SAIS context. This serves to deepen understanding of the focal phenomena and increases the potential for broader impact across the independent school sector. The recommendations provided—ranging from workload audits and flexible scheduling to tiered mentorship and leadership development—are designed to be actionable, scalable, and aligned with SAIS's strategic priorities.

The hope is that this knowledge and the affiliated recommendations will not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of early-career professionals' experiences, but also position SAIS and its member schools to better support, retain, and empower the next generation of independent school educators. In doing so, SAIS can continue to "stretch the potential" of its schools and educators, while advancing its vision of excellence, innovation, and community across the independent school landscape.

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