

THE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROMISE

Toolkit Executive Summary

Principle 3:

Attract, Hire, Retain, and Reward the Best People

Building a thriving, future-ready workforce by designing systems where educators feel valued, supported, and inspired to grow and stay.

Purpose

This toolkit supports districts in fulfilling the People Principle of the Public Education Promise by reimagining human capital as a strategic, human-centered system—not a set of isolated HR functions. Strong schools are built by people, and people thrive when systems are intentionally designed to support belonging, growth, and purpose.

This toolkit will help district and school leaders:

- Understand what effective attraction, hiring, retention, and reward systems look like in practice
- Align human capital strategies to culture, values, and community aspirations
- Translate vision into action through practical tools, checklists, and case examples that leaders can use immediately

Rather than treating staffing challenges as short-term shortages, this toolkit encourages districts to design long-term systems that make public education a destination of choice for talented professionals.

Core Understandings

Human capital systems are culture systems. Who we attract, how we hire, how we support people once they arrive, and how we recognize their contributions all signal what—and who—a district truly values.

Key understandings that anchor this principle include:

- Attraction begins with culture, not postings. People are drawn to environments where they feel a sense of belonging, purpose, and professional respect.
- Hiring is a leadership responsibility, not just a process. Candidates experience a district through its leaders, clarity, and follow-through.
- Retention is driven by daily experiences. Supportive leadership, meaningful voice, manageable workloads, and opportunities for growth matter more than isolated incentives.
- Reward systems shape behavior. What districts recognize, compensate, and elevate communicates priorities more clearly than any strategic plan.
- People strategy must be human-centered. Systems work best when they honor identity, well-being, and professional dignity across all employee groups.

When these elements are aligned, districts move from reacting to staffing challenges to proactively building stable, high-quality talent ecosystems.

Key Insights from Participants

Culture Is the Strongest Lever for Attraction and Retention

Participants consistently emphasized that school and district culture—not salary alone—determines whether people apply, stay, and recommend the organization to others.

Leaders described the importance of:

- Clear district and school identity (“Who are we, and why would someone want to work here?”)
- Authentic storytelling that elevates staff voice and lived experience
- Visible signals of belonging, respect, and professionalism across all roles

When culture is intentionally designed and communicated, it becomes a powerful recruitment and retention engine rather than an abstract aspiration.

Hiring Systems Must Reflect Values, Not Just Credentials

Districts noted a shift away from hiring based solely on years of experience or technical qualifications toward practices that elevate dispositions, mindsets, and alignment to student-centered values.

Effective systems included:

- Streamlined, candidate-friendly hiring processes
- Interview protocols grounded in real scenarios and instructional beliefs
- Inclusion of diverse voices—sometimes including students—in hiring decisions
- Clear, timely communication that reflects professionalism and respect

Hiring is most effective when it assesses not only what candidates know, but who they are and how they will contribute to the learning community.

Retention Is Built Through Belonging, Voice, and Support

Leaders shared that people stay when they feel seen, supported, and connected. Retention efforts that showed the greatest impact focused on:

- Strong induction and mentoring systems, especially in the first 90 days
- Regular listening structures paired with visible follow-through (“You said—We did”)
- Protected planning time, manageable expectations, and attention to workload
- Wellness supports that acknowledge the emotional demands of the profession

Retention is not a single initiative. It is the cumulative result of daily leadership behaviors and system design choices.

Reward Systems Should Be Meaningful, Equitable, and Transparent

Participants emphasized that rewarding educators goes far beyond compensation. Effective reward systems included:

- Public recognition aligned to district values and desired behaviors
- Career pathways that allow educators to grow without leaving the classroom
- Transparent criteria for advancement and leadership opportunities
- Multiple forms of reward—monetary and non-monetary—that reflect diverse motivations

When recognition and advancement are intentional and equitable, they reinforce trust and signal that excellence and contribution are noticed and valued.

Practical Tools Accelerate Implementation

Districts consistently requested tools that translate strategy into action. The most effective supports included:

- District- and principal-level checklists that clarify expectations
- Case studies that illustrate what high-quality implementation looks like in real contexts
- Reflection prompts and planning structures that support continuous improvement

These tools reduce ambiguity, create shared language, and help leaders focus on the highest-leverage actions within each domain of Principle 3.

Conclusion

Attracting, hiring, retaining, and rewarding the best people is not a human resources challenge, it is a leadership imperative. When districts design human capital systems that honor belonging, elevate voice, support growth, and recognize contribution, they create environments where educators choose to stay and thrive.

This principle reminds us that the success of every other promise depends on the people who bring it to life. By aligning culture, systems, and leadership behaviors around what educators truly need to succeed, districts can build stable, inspired, and future-ready workforces—ensuring that every student benefits from adults who are committed, supported, and proud to serve.

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