Can a Teacher Professional Learning Program Reduce Teacher Burnout?

AIR Impact Study Finds That a Unique Instructional Coaching Program Boosted Teachers' Enthusiasm About Teaching

A Lever to Reduce Teacher Burnout

Findings from RAND's 2023 State of the American Teacher project underscore the importance of teacher well-being. Compared to average workers in the United States, teachers exhibit higher levels of job-related stress. In addition, roughly half of teachers show signs of burnout (Doan et al., 2023).

What can be done? For policymakers and school leaders, some promising levers are salaries, work schedules, and working conditions, according to RAND's investigation of the State of the American Teacher Survey data (Steiner et al., 2023).

A new impact study from the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) calls attention to another lever to reduce teacher burnout—instructional coaching that focuses on teachers' successes in the classroom. The study examined the impact of a program called MyTeachingPartner, which has features that distinguish it from most coaching programs.

To assess the program's impact, AIR launched a randomized controlled trial in fall 2021. Within each study school, AIR randomly assigned half of the volunteering teachers to participate in the instructional coaching program for 2 years on top of their normal activities (i.e., treatment teachers). The other half of volunteering teachers (i.e., control teachers) just continued as normal. At the end of the program, AIR compared the treatment and control teachers.

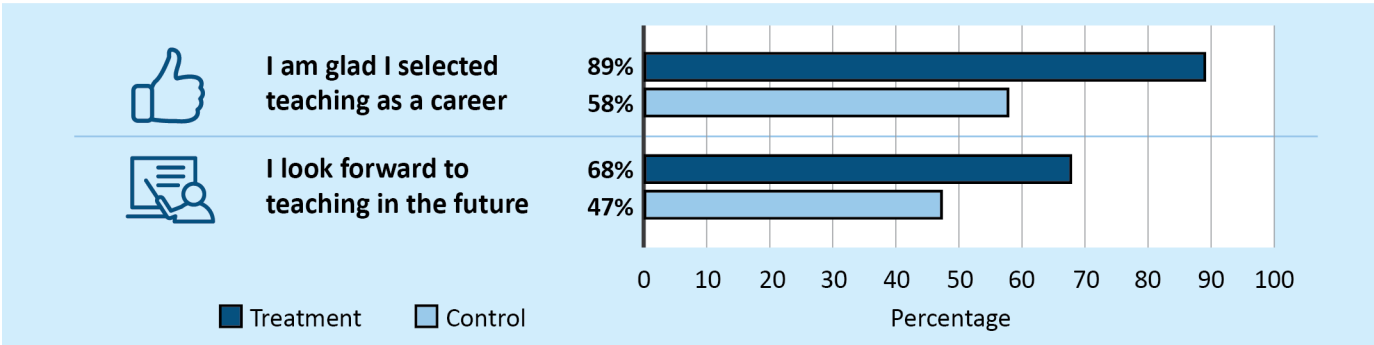### AIR's Findings About the Program's Impact on Enthusiasm About Teaching

To measure enthusiasm about teaching at the end of the 2-year program among treatment and control teachers, AIR used the same survey question that RAND uses in its State of the American Teacher Survey to measure burnout. The question asks teachers to indicate their level of agreement with four statements about teaching—two statements that express positive sentiments about teaching and two statements that express negative sentiments.

For the two positive statements, a higher percentage of treatment than control teachers agreed (Exhibit 1). For example, 89% of treatment teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am glad I selected teaching as a career," compared with 58% of control teachers.

The third and fourth statements express negative sentiments about teaching, consistent with burnout. For these statements, a lower percentage of treatment than control teachers agreed or strongly agreed, again demonstrating that the program had a positive impact on teachers' enthusiasm about teaching (Exhibit 2).
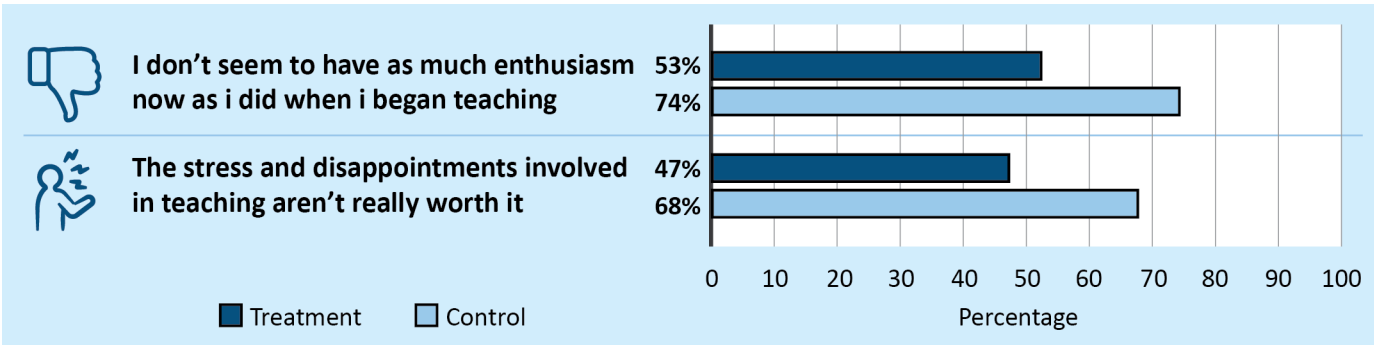
To provide a high-level summary of findings across all four survey items, AIR combined the four items to form an overall measure called Enthusiasm About Teaching and compared the average value of this overall measure between treatment and control teachers using a statistical model that properly accounts for both the study design and teacher characteristics. The impact analysis showed a difference of 0.55 points on the 4-point agreement scale.[1]

Exhibit 1. At the End of the 2-Year Program, a Higher Percentage of Treatment Than Control Teachers Expressed Positive Sentiments About Teaching

I am glad I selected teaching as a career — Treatment 89%, Control 58%

I look forward to teaching in the future — Treatment 68%, Control 47%

Treatment ■ Control ■

Note. The percentages shown reflect observed teacher survey responses from the 19 treatment teachers and 19 control teachers, unadjusted for study design or teacher background characteristics.

Exhibit 2. At the End of the 2-Year Program, a Lower Percentage of Treatment Than Control Teachers Expressed Negative Sentiments About Teaching

I don't seem to have as much enthusiasm now as i did when i began teaching — Treatment 53%, Control 74%

The stress and disappointments involved in teaching aren't really worth it — Treatment 47%, Control 68%

Treatment ■ Control ■

Note. The percentages shown reflect observed teacher survey responses from the 19 treatment teachers and 19 control teachers, unadjusted for study design or teacher background characteristics.

Distinctive Features of MyTeachingPartner That Could Explain Its Impact

A digital story accompanying the impact study report illustrates how the MyTeachingPartner program works, highlighting its distinctive features.

One of these features is a focus on teachers' successes. Coaches select short video clips that illustrate the teachers' successes in the classroom and then help teachers understand their successes and how they might replicate and deepen them. By contrast, many instructional coaching programs call out both strengths and weaknesses or ask teachers to set goals.

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[1] For each of the four items, responses were coded as follows: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Strongly agree.

Other distinctive features of MyTeachingPartner include the efficiency and predictability of the coaching cycles. Each cycle has the same five concrete steps. Added together, the steps take about 2 hours spread across 2 weeks. Teachers commented that the predictability helped them fit the coaching smoothly into their schedules and kept the coaching dialogue focused. In a more typical coaching model, coaches and teachers follow a cycle organized into phases or stages, rather than concrete activities. The activities in a typical coaching model are less predictable, and a single cycle could span a few weeks or an entire school year.

In addition to the digital story, some online white papers and other resources explain what makes the program unique and highlight participants' voices (see sidebar).

Implications of the Finding About Teachers' Enthusiasm About Teaching

Many policymakers and school leaders are looking for ways to ensure that teachers feel energized about teaching and their teaching careers. The statistically significant impact of this program on teachers' enthusiasm about teaching demonstrates that a professional learning program can reduce burnout. However, not all professional learning or instructional coaching can reduce burnout. The MyTeachingPartner program has innovative features that distinguish it from most coaching programs.

Study Background

The study was part of a broader project funded by an Education Innovation and Research Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to help scale MyTeachingPartner. For all resources from the project, visit https://www.air.org/project/scaling-evidence-based-instructional-coaching-program-teachers.

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MyTeachingPartner Resources

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