

# 3 Steps to Empower an Educator Workforce

The Supportive Leader's Guide  
to Building and Retaining an  
Energized Team



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# Introduction

It's no secret that educators have demanding jobs. As school leaders, you recognize the challenges facing them in the classroom—as well as your responsibility to build and retain a qualified team.

You're managing many factors in empowering and developing your staff, but you're not alone. Use this guide to build an empathetic, empowering, and effective school environment—one where teachers want to show up as their best selves each day, confident in their abilities to nurture effective, lasting relationships with their students.

## Why Climate Matters

Lesson planning, dealing with challenging behaviors, sending updates in parent engagement apps, maintaining certifications—the reality is that teachers are strapped for time. Data from a **recent RAND survey** show that the typical teacher spends 53 hours per week working—more than the average of **all** surveyed professions—meaning they miss out on critical restorative hours and time with family and friends.

Let's take a look at the stats:

- + Ninety percent of **surveyed** schools admit struggling to hire.
- + Childcare programs have had to **turn away families** due to the shortage.
- + Roughly 3 times as many teachers reported **difficulty coping with job-related stress** compared to other professions in January 2024.

Plus, with less experienced teachers leaving at higher rates, more work falls to leaders to hire qualified teachers while supporting tenured staff.

However, there is a path forward.



**Research from McKinsey** suggests that educator satisfaction can be directly tied to your school's climate. When asked what is keeping them from leaving, a vast majority of teachers referenced a sense of community and positive work culture.

*"Eighty-seven percent say their coworkers show genuine concern for one another, 83% say their coworkers help one another to achieve their work goals, 85% say they fit in with the culture of the organization, and 84% say they can be themselves at work."* — **McKinsey**

Fostering a sense of community, focusing on day-to-day interactions, and cultivating overall enjoyment of the work are ways to address employee wellness that can also positively impact the learning environment for everyone in the school.

While a lot of the turnover challenges may feel out of control, it's crucial to remember your ownership of one very important aspect—your school's climate. By taking the steps in this guide, you can create a strong, unbreakable community and a more supportive work environment for your educators and school staff.

### **The Bottom Line**

**Studies** show that a focus and foundation in effective interactions between educators and children lead to better child outcomes. But that foundation doesn't just start in the classroom. It starts with your teachers feeling safe, secure, and supported in their school.



## Step 1: Create a Positive Climate

### School Culture Based on Quality Interactions

Building and maintaining a thriving workforce can feel like an uphill battle when navigating multiple priorities within your program. Instead, imagine a workforce where every educator shares the same priority and works together to achieve a common goal. Success thrives in this type of unity. The key to achieving unity in your program is the proven power of interactions.

“Educators have so much power in their classroom that they are able to change the trajectory of lives. Our people are the greatest asset. I want to know how you’re doing—because if you’re not [doing] well as the educator in the room, then students won’t be well. We often say, *Oh, we’re doing this work for the kids*. However, the adults are the ones that are working directly with the students. There’s a different level of leadership that comes with honoring the people that you work with.”

— **Dr. Mike Jacobs,**  
**Educational Consultant**  
**and Chief Learning Officer**





Studies have shown that effective interactions predict positive developmental and academic outcomes for children. And, targeted professional development helps educators improve the manner in which they interact with children, leading to better child outcomes.

As a school leader, you have the power to create change through these interactions. Not alone, and not as quickly as any of us would like, but you spearhead the movement to create educational experiences for children that equip them with the skills they need to thrive.

With the coordinated support of everyone in your program, you can improve the quality of educator-child interactions to create truly impactful, measurable outcomes for children.



## What do we mean by “interactions”?

Educator-child interactions are the most essential element of classroom experiences. These interactions are defined as moment-to-moment, back-and-forth exchanges (both verbal and nonverbal) that build relationships and support child development and learning.

At the highest level, these interactions can be grouped into categories, or domains, that describe different kinds of interactions:

- + **Emotional Support:**  
Interactions that support children’s social and emotional functioning in learning settings
- + **Classroom Organization:**  
Interactions between educators and children in support of children’s behavior, time, and engagement in the learning setting
- + **Instructional Support:**  
Interactions in support of children’s cognitive and language development

Programs and school districts across the United States (and internationally!) use a continuous quality improvement system, **the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS®)**, to focus on, measure, and improve these kinds of interactions.

## A Shared Vision of Interactions

Even the newest educators have experiences that can help them see the value of effective interactions and their role in relationship-building. The most compelling leaders engage educators by asking insightful questions that uncover their existing appreciation for interactions, rather than simply instructing them to value these interactions.

Educators' prior knowledge and experiences can lead them to a shared understanding of the importance of effective interactions. Try this activity to see it in action.

### ACTIVITY

#### 1: Ask Educators to Reflect

Think of an educator who stood out to you as a child. What was your relationship like? What moments stick with you to this day?

#### 2: Ask Educators to Share

Facilitate a discussion with your teachers in teams, sharing their reflections. What stands out in these moment-to-moment interactions? What helped foster that special relationship?

#### 3: Commit to an Interaction-Focused Environment

Tie these reflections to your program. In what ways can you create moments that are as impactful for your students as they were for your educators? If you're using a tool like CLASS to measure and improve your educator-child interactions, use this as an opportunity to tie in specific domains and dimensions.

#### 4: Create Shared Values

Using the conversations, begin charting out your values. What outcomes do you want your families and staff to experience? What interactions can support that? For example:

- + We *value* environments where every child feels welcome. We show this by taking the time to learn each family member's name and using it when we see them.
- + We *value* a school where children are encouraged to explore their unique interests. We show this by allowing children choices within each lesson.

This activity sets the tone for the culture you strive to achieve. Additionally, kick off the school year by centering interactions, including:

- + Adding a shout-out section to your staff newsletter to highlight some of the great interactions you observe between teachers and children and among adults
- + Hanging posters with examples of quality interactions
- + Offering a **family engagement workshop** to spread the word to your families
- + Hosting a back-to-school **virtual in-service day**

Remember, the same interactions that help children grow and develop also positively impact educators. Using the same interactions that support children to support adult staff is called the **Parallel Process**.

“ I would say ground your staff, your teachers, and the communities that are going to implement this in, in the vision of what is possible and the why. . . . To ground people in the vision of what this is going to enable to make a better future for our students is where I would start. From that, all the other things will flow.”

— **Grant Van Eaton, Senior Researcher, Teach for America**





This chart outlines different kinds of effective adult-child interactions as well as interactions among adults.

Type of Interaction	Between Educators and Children	Among Adults
<b>Having Regard for Different Perspectives</b>	A teacher offers a preschool student whether he wants to sit on the carpet with friends or jump around behind the table during storytime.	A coach asks a new team member if she prefers to take the onboarding training in a small cohort with two other new team members, or asynchronously online.
<b>Offering Different Instructional Learning Formats</b>	During a lesson on vowels, the teacher first asks students to trace the letter A in sand and then allows children to find objects that start with A around the room.	During an in-service day, the school director offers different modalities and strategies to engage staff in the training.
<b>Strategies for Concept Development</b>	At the water table, the educator encourages children to figure out a way to make a tower that won't tip over in the water.	A coach encourages an educator's metacognition through activities that require reflection, self-evaluation, and planning.

## Step 2: Build on Your Training

### Give Educators the Confidence and Competencies to Do Their Job Well

With shared expectations around what a quality environment looks like, you can now build an aligned training plan centered on interactions. Let's examine the key elements of successful onboarding programs and continuous professional development plans.

### Invest in Onboarding Programs

To create a welcoming and supportive environment for new educators, it's essential to provide comprehensive support that mirrors the care given to new families in your program. For new staff to thrive, they need:

1. **Clear Expectations:** A solid understanding of expectations around teaching strategies, lesson plans, behavior management, and family engagement
2. **Defined Standards of Excellence:** A clear vision of what effective teaching looks like within your program, including specific examples and benchmarks of effective interactions
3. **Accessible Resources:** Knowledge of where to find answers to their questions and whom to approach for support
4. **Ongoing Professional Development:** Information about the training and professional development opportunities they can expect, especially during their first year—more to come on this later in this section

These elements are crucial for helping new staff integrate smoothly and feel confident in their roles. Your official onboarding process, which explicitly aligns new educators with your school's interaction-focused culture, is vital. This structured approach ensures everyone understands and embraces the shared values and practices that define your program's success. And, educators will feel confident ahead of a classroom observation.



As educators, we are lifelong learners. But when many educators hear "professional development," they cringe and immediately put up a wall. As a result, they are not open to learning new strategies that can potentially improve their practice. It's time that we shift our mindset around professional development as leaders and coaches. Take the time needed to evaluate your team and their needs so that you can make the most of their time in professional development."

— **Dr. Mike Jacobs, Educational Consultant and Chief Learning Officer**

Some trainings that support this include:

- + **Intro to Interactions for Educators:** This 6-hour self-paced online course is designed to help educators gain confidence and understanding in the CLASS observation process while unlocking the transformative potential of educator-child interactions in their daily practice.
- + **Intro to Interactions for Educators:** Help busy pre-K-3rd grade teachers gain foundational knowledge of interactions and the CLASS tool as a way to support and improve educator-child interactions in a one-day training.
- + **CDA with CLASS:** This training covers the core competencies and guides new teachers on the road to earning their Child Development Associate credential. It also helps them create the portfolio required for earning a CDA.

## Partnerships Can Pave the Way

Finding funding for your workforce to get credentials and Continuous Education Credits (CEUs) can be difficult, especially for smaller, independent programs. Community and local partnerships are a good way to support your teachers' growth and development without emptying your bank account.

- + **Local Businesses and Community Foundations:** Many local businesses and foundations are willing to invest in education. Reach out to companies with a strong community presence or philanthropic arm.
- + **Government Grants and Programs:** Look for state and federal grants designed to support educational initiatives, such as the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program, T.E.A.C.H. Scholarships, or the Early Childhood Education Professional Development Grant.
- + **Educational Nonprofits and Associations:** Organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or local education associations and childcare resource and referral agencies often offer grants and scholarships for professional development.

## Create an Informal Mentorship Program for First-Year Teachers

A mentor can significantly help first-year teachers—whether they are recent college graduates, career changers, or transplants—feel acclimated and integrated into the school community. Teacher-mentors can provide valuable lived experience and guidance on:

- + Emotional stability
- + Confidence in one's own abilities
- + A toolbox of methods
- + The ability to predict and plan ahead for stressful situations (e.g., fire drills, coming back from winter break)
- + Lesson plans that work
- + Tested and proven routines

Mentoring offers a wealth of rewards for the mentor as well. There's a deep sense of fulfillment in watching the mentee grow and succeed, knowing that their guidance has played a role in that journey. It also provides the mentor with the growth opportunity to reflect on and enhance their own teaching and leadership skills. And finally, the mentor can benefit from gaining new perspectives from new educators, who often bring a wealth of new ideas, helping them stay energized and current with educational trends.

This exchange not only strengthens the mentor's practice but also builds a supportive, meaningful relationship between them and the mentee. On a professional level, mentoring can open doors to recognition and new career opportunities. Most importantly, by helping to shape a confident, skilled educator, the mentor builds a stronger community centered on interactions.



## Prepare Educators for Strengths-Based Observation

It's intimidating to be observed, for newer educators especially. To remedy this, school leaders must create a supportive environment before an observer ever enters the room. Your teachers should feel comfortable asking for feedback and support in non-punitive settings that celebrate growth and acknowledge mistakes.

When educators lack information about their observations, this can create stress and resistance. Avoid this by ensuring educators understand the purpose of their CLASS observation and know what to expect before, during, and after an observation.

Successful implementers provide clear and concise information to all staff who will be observed with CLASS tools. This information should:

- + Explain what to expect
- + Emphasize observations link to improvement
- + Be sent at least a week in advance of the observation, so teachers have time to sit with the information





Here are a couple templates you may find helpful as you communicate with educators before and after data collection.

### **Email Template to Send Ahead of Classroom Observations**

Subject: Upcoming Classroom Observations

Dear [Teachers' Names],

I wanted to let you know that an assessor will be visiting our center to conduct observations between [Insert Date Range]. This observation is an important part of our continuous improvement efforts and helps us ensure we are providing the best possible environment to help our children thrive.

During the observation, the assessor will be in each classroom for three cycles of 20-minute observations, with 10-15-minute breaks in between. The purpose of these observations is to gather information on educator-child interactions, which are crucial for helping children with cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Please continue with your lesson plans as usual. You do not need to make any special adjustments. The assessor will be observing everyday activities and interactions, so please continue with the great work you are already doing.

It's natural for children to feel curious or even a bit nervous about a stranger in the room. Please reassure them that the assessor is there to watch and learn about the wonderful things happening. Remember, children's reactions to the new person in the classroom will not impact the observation scores.

I will send a follow-up email about a week after the observations have wrapped up. In that email, I will schedule time to connect with you to talk through what we can learn from the results. We'll talk specifically about your areas of strength and how we can leverage them to best support the children you work with.

If you have any questions or concerns about [the chosen assessment tool] or the observation process, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. We can arrange a time to discuss any specific questions you might have.

Thank you for your continued dedication and hard work. I'm confident that this observation will highlight the amazing work you do every day.

Thank you,

[Your Name]

[Your Title]

[Your Program Name]

## Email Template to Send After Classroom Observations

Subject: Thank You and Follow-Up on Observations

Hi [Teachers' Names],

I hope you're all doing well! I wanted to send a big thank you for your flexibility during the recent observations. I know having someone in the classroom may feel weird and stressful, but you all handled it wonderfully, and I truly appreciate you.

Now that the observations are done, I will be scheduling a follow-up chat with each of you. These conversations are a great opportunity to go over the feedback and insights from the observations. We'll focus on what went well and explore how you can use your strengths in new and engaging ways in the classroom.

This information also helps us make decisions about future professional development and training opportunities to ensure we're providing the best support for you and our program.

Please be on the lookout for a calendar invite for this conversation. I look forward to catching up and discussing all the great things happening in your classrooms!

Thanks again for all your hard work and dedication!

[Your Name]

[Your Title]

[Your Program Name]

## Keep Momentum with Continuous Learning Opportunities

By equipping educators to be purposeful in their daily interactions, we have the potential to cultivate a more engaging and supportive learning atmosphere that positively impacts children's outcomes. As educators adopt new practices, we want to support them while building a culture of continuous improvement.

### Streamline Your Approach

It's tempting to host many different professional development (PD) trainings that hit on all sorts of interesting topics. While well-intentioned, investing in too many training options can be counterproductive. With educators feeling burned out, PD that's not aligned to your core goals or their daily realities can actually contribute to their stress.

As you develop your ongoing teacher development programming, choose deep and practical trainings that will drive better educator outcomes. Consider whether they will leave teachers feeling like they not only understand “what” to teach, but “how” to teach. These sessions will help reduce initiative fatigue and align with your focus on meaningful interactions that help children thrive.

### Use Strengths-Based PD

Research shows that educators thrive when they can unpack and understand their moments of effectiveness. A strengths-based approach can help educators view change as an opportunity to further enhance what they can do rather than seeing it as something *imposed* upon them because of their deficiencies. The latter approach usually leads to feelings of shame and resistance.

The first step in creating a space for strengths-based PD is to ask educators to reflect on their practice and consider areas for improvement. Reflecting on our work with someone else is a vulnerable activity. Creating an environment where educators feel safe enough to be vulnerable is most successful when there are frequent, **informal observations** from leaders.



Informal observations should feel safe and approachable to both the leader (or instructional coach) and educators. To add structure, narrow the focus of the observation and take notes only about a specific area (productivity, instructional support, behavior management tactics, etc.). And, consider an informal reflection tool to help educators set their own personal and professional goals for learning.

“

We always say that coaches are thinking partners. Partners don't really make decisions for one another. Partners listen to and respect one another. It's the same thing with instructional coaches. They don't simply tell teachers what to do. Coaches create those conditions that really empower educators to take control over their learning. They share observations, they ask questions to spark their thinking, and really get them moving along. . . . that thinking.”

— **Claudia Perez, Development Lead, Teachstone**



Conducting more casual check-ins can help you build trust among your team, understand your educators' strengths, and meet your team where they are. Small but frequent check-ins can drive change, supporting your continuous improvement efforts. You'll be able to offer timely feedback and refine your PD plans, rather than waiting for the typical fall and spring data collection periods to make organizational decisions.

Finally, one common misconception about strengths-based PD is that just because you're focusing on "strengths," doesn't mean you can't give feedback on less effective areas. Instead, you may intentionally focus on the areas where educators did do well. Effective leaders and coaches look for the "sparks" in teacher practice (even if it's just one open-ended question that didn't go anywhere) and build on them.

## Step 3: Scale Your Support

### Expanding Your Well-Being Initiatives

With a shared vision of quality and aligned training for new and tenured teachers, you are well on your way to maintaining a positive work environment. Now, it's time to expand your well-being initiatives in equitable and impactful ways. Let's explore key elements of supportive work cultures and expand on your solid foundation.

### **Build Communication and Trust**

Trust among faculty, staff, and leaders depends on clear and open communication. You can also build trust by giving your team autonomy and relying on their competence.

### **Make Sure That Your Team Is the First to Hear about Important Updates or Changes**

Your staff should hear news through you, not through hearsay or families. Prioritizing staff when communicating news and updates is a way to show that you trust and respect them, and it gives them the opportunity to raise concerns and ask questions before implementing changes.

If you have the opportunity, offer a quick stand-up meeting so questions and concerns can be handled quickly. At a minimum, communicate ahead of time with an email.

### **Be a Trusted Partner When Communicating with Educators and Families**

Sometimes, a family may be concerned about ensuring that a child's teacher has the best in mind for their student, leaving the educator under continued scrutiny. Build trust with your educators by standing with them in tense situations with families by reaffirming their skills and expertise while mediating and assuring families that their child's best interest is in mind.



## Prioritize What You Are Picky About

As your educators are facing countless challenges every day, it is important to pick your battles wisely and not burden your team with micromanaging. Trust them to decide what is best for their classroom and students in the following areas:

- + **Lesson Planning:** If your teachers submit their lesson plans every week, be flexible in formatting and standardization.
- + **Classroom Setup:** Let teachers design their own classrooms. Allow for flexible seating if that is their preference and if it suits the needs of their students.
- + **Classroom Decor:** Allow your team to decorate their classrooms in a way that allows them to enjoy the space. After all, they are the ones spending most of their time there!
- + **Pedagogy:** Encourage your educators to use instructional styles that fit their personalities and experiences rather than requiring scripts or specific methods.
- + **Technology Usage:** Give educators the option to use technology in a way that enhances their practices rather than mandating certain programs and tools.
- + **Parent Communication:** Allow teachers to maintain communication with parents in a way that fits their classroom practices.

## Avoid Overcorrection

Most people know when they can be doing something better. On the road to progress, it is important to note areas where improvement is needed but not overcorrect. Point out the weak spots but then defer that improvement to your educators and coaches. A leader who regularly points out weak spots may mean well but could negatively impact morale. Instead, focus on educator wins and keeping spirits high while providing the necessary resources and support. It's all about finding a balance.



“

I have to take it back to the 'balance.' I have never actually called a kindergarten asking what happened with the results from the observation. Because I think we have the competence—and if we have the structure and support, they're going to make the right choices. We have used the data for my team to make sure they have the support they need.

I could start calling and ask, *What do you do now to make sure that you have higher quality?* but we haven't had to do it once. The results have gone up in every dimension and domain. Really, it's trusting our colleagues, and it's about balance from our part."

— Ståle Gerhard, Advisor, FUS Barnehaene and Board Member, Norwegian Network for Implementation Research (NIMP)



## Ask for Team Feedback Before Implementing Changes or New Activities

Before changing a school- or center-wide routine, check in with your team. What may seem like a small school-wide change could have a strong ripple effect on the daily lives of the young learners in your building. Give your team the opportunity to offer feedback before implementing a new routine, such as how you do morning announcements, or activities, like a holiday-themed day.



## Celebrate Wins

It's essential to celebrate educators for what they're getting right. But for that to happen, school leaders and coaches need to:

- + **Visit Classrooms Regularly and Check in with Educators:** Regular check-ins and progress assessments are vital in providing timely feedback and support.
- + **Track Accomplishments:** Successful tracking systems should not only document educators' advancements but also help call attention to small wins.

Use the following examples as ideas for celebrating small wins with educators to motivate and encourage them throughout the year.

- + **Shout-Outs in Meetings:**

During staff meetings, recognize educators for specific examples of effective interactions. This not only celebrates the individual but also sets a positive example for others.

- + **Newsletters and Bulletins:**

Feature a "Spotlight" section in school newsletters or bulletins where you highlight an educator's achievements, specifically their successful interactions with students.

- + **Handwritten Notes:**

A handwritten note from a school leader, coach, or mentor teacher acknowledging a specific instance of effective interaction can be especially encouraging.

- + **Interaction Excellence Award:**

Create a monthly or quarterly award that recognizes educators who consistently demonstrate meaningful interactions with children.

- + **Certificates of Appreciation:**

Provide certificates for specific achievements, such as mastering a new interaction technique or successfully implementing a new strategy.

- + **Gift Cards or Treats:**

Offer small tokens like coffee shop gift cards, books, or treats as a way of saying thank you for a job well done.

- + **Team Celebrations:**

Organize small celebrations, like a breakfast or lunch, to celebrate the staff's collective achievements. This fosters a sense of community and shared success.

- + **Classroom Visits:**

Have leaders visit classrooms to personally congratulate educators and witness their effective interactions in action.

# Prioritize Work-Life Balance with This Simple Checklist

Use this checklist to discover ways to create even more well-being opportunities throughout the workday for everyone in your program.

## **CHECKLIST: Ideas for Improving Educator Well-Being**

Be intentional about offering times for faculty to eat and use the restroom.

Offer compensation for additional hours and activities.

Encourage your staff to turn on an automatic email response at the end of the day.

Build opportunities for staff to attend conferences.

Find scholarship opportunities.

Make it easy for staff to take advantage of opportunities for continuing education.

Provide substitutes.

Respect planning periods.

Regularly ask for feedback and address concerns—even if you can't say yes to all their suggestions, address the idea and talk through what is possible and what isn't.

Don't text staff after hours.

Make sure meetings and obligations to be on campus are clearly communicated at the beginning of the year.

Encourage the team not to take grading/work home.

Pay educators for summer planning time.

Offer stipends for additional training days.

What else would you add? \_\_\_\_\_

# Conclusion

The educator workforce has faced consistent challenges, many of which were exacerbated by the pandemic but existed long before it. With greater awareness and advocacy surrounding the unique challenges faced by those in the profession, we can build a diverse, qualified pipeline of future educators and implement equitable policies that prioritize the well-being of our educators and the children in their care.

Like you, we know that teachers are instrumental to program quality and that children learn best when engaging in positive interactions and forming secure relationships with their caregivers. Educators must have the specialized knowledge and skills to provide quality services, as well as the necessary support to do so. Teachstone works alongside you to provide this essential support by refreshing and re-centering staff on the effective interactions that are proven to drive social, emotional, and academic outcomes. Our professional development training opportunities provide meaningful experiences for educators to hone their skills and focus on quality, integrating positive interactions within the required professional learning—and allowing school leaders to retain educators with a culture of empowerment.



**Discover how Teachstone®  
can partner with you  
in creating a positive  
environment for educators  
and children alike.**

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