

DOCUMENTING THE IMPACT OF A+ SCHOOLS:

Exploring A+ Educator Satisfaction, Resilience, and Retention in Times of Challenge

A+ Schools of North Carolina and the N.C. Arts Council, in partnership with the New Literacies Collaborative at N.C. State University's Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

Study description: We partnered with researchers from NC State University's Friday Institute for Educational Innovation to conduct a mixed-methods study* that explored A+ educator satisfaction, resilience, and retention in times of challenge. Data sources—surveys, school site visits, interviews, observations, and student academic proficiency scores—were analyzed in response to the following research questions:

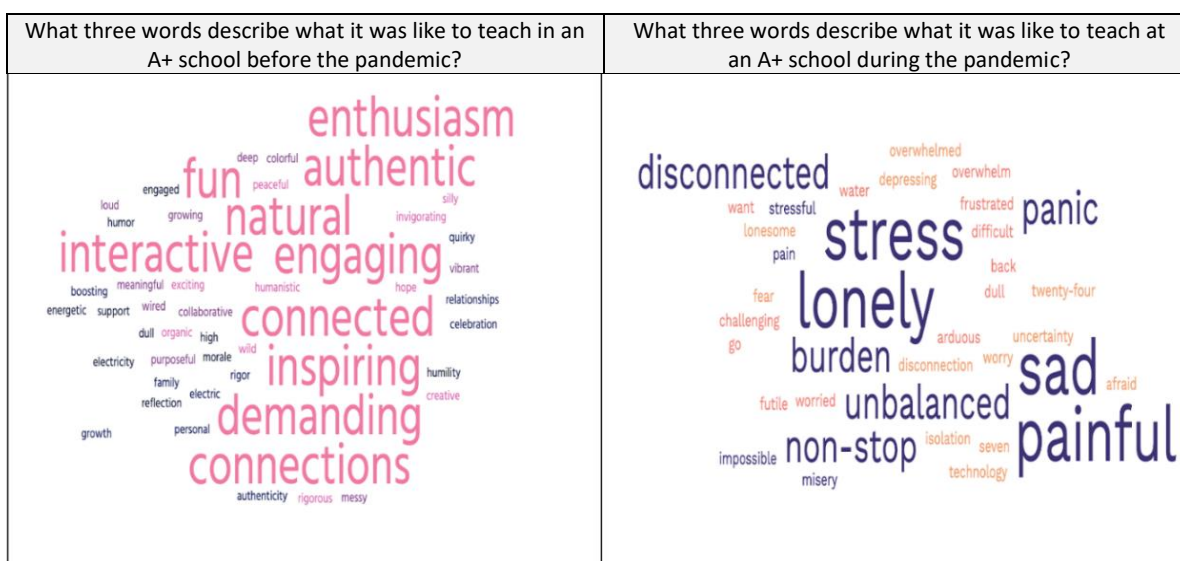
- How have the A+ Essentials¹ helped sustain teachers through the pandemic era?
- Have there been any shifts in previously documented trends in A+ student achievement data over the course of the 2020–2022 school years?

Key finding 1: A+ educators reported prioritizing nonacademic needs and engagement during remote instruction. A+ leaders reported spending most of their time during emergency remote instruction addressing nonacademic student and educator needs. Educators leaned heavily into the ways in which arts and multiple forms of expression nurture a sense of belonging. As a result, some A+ educators emerged with insight into the strengths of their teams and students and a deeper appreciation of them.

Key finding 2: A+ educators reported enjoying the climate at A+ schools. They emphasized feelings of connection and belonging, which they described as setting A+ schools apart from others.

"I do think it was different for my colleagues at other types of schools. Maybe they were more lost even. We were all lost, but I had a 'why.' And I had a team that shared our 'why.' Beyond the kids as a general 'why,' we have here a 'why' and a 'how.'" – A+ educator

A+ educators were asked to cite three words to describe what teaching in an A+ school was like before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The word clouds below highlight their most frequent responses:



*For more information on study methods and data sources, please contact Dr. Sarah Bausell at sbbausel@ncsu.edu.

¹ The A+ Essentials provide the framework for developing a creative culture that supports each school's unique needs. Over time, these eight foundational components transform a school's practice, priorities and identity, building an environment where teachers and students are excited to learn together.

Key finding 3: 2022-2023 teacher retention at N.C. A+ schools was stronger than at non-A+ schools. Educators working at A+ schools before and during the COVID-19 pandemic reported that the promise of returning to “normal” at an A+ school influenced their decisions to stay at their schools and keep teaching. Most A+ schools are situated in LEAs (local education agencies) with moderate or high levels of teacher vacancies. However, in a survey of A+ school leaders, 92% reported school vacancy rates lower than their average LEA vacancy rates for academic year 2022-2023.

Key finding 4: A+ school leaders valued program supports during the academic years 2020-2022. The A+ Schools staff in Raleigh pivoted to meet the changing needs of schools in the A+ network through a variety of supports. School leaders reported that these supports had a positive impact on engagement. Most A+ leaders rated the following resources as “very useful”:



A+ Fellows and
A+ Coordinators



A+ Professional
Development
including the
A+ Talks Series



A+ LiveBinder²

“The A+ Team was so awesome during this time!” – A+ school leader

“I love how they pivoted, and I can’t wait to get back to it in person.” – A+ school leader

Key finding 5: Students in A+ schools fared better in terms of student achievement scores upon their return to face-to-face instruction. Based on a matched case analysis of student proficiency data from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, students at A+ schools in the academic year 2021-2022 achieved, on average, higher levels of proficiency on end-of-year assessments than did students at a matched sample of non-A+ schools.

Looking forward: Educators working in A+ schools reported enthusiasm about the supports that they received, and many reported that working in an A+ school is a meaningful and rewarding experience. Given these promising findings, A+ Schools of North Carolina and the N.C. Arts Council will continue our partnership with researchers from the Friday Institute to explore the influences of the A+ model on teachers’ satisfaction, resilience and retention.

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A+ Schools of North Carolina is a program of the N.C. Arts Council, an agency of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources



² The A+ Live Binder is a comprehensive resource for all things A+. In the A+ LiveBinder, educators and administrators across the A+ network can access key documents, sample lesson plans, A+ logos and other helpful A+ content.