



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

Educator Recruitment and Retention

Maricopa Unified School District Case Study

When looking at an LEA to spotlight with a case study, several factors are taken into consideration:

Why Maricopa Unified School District?



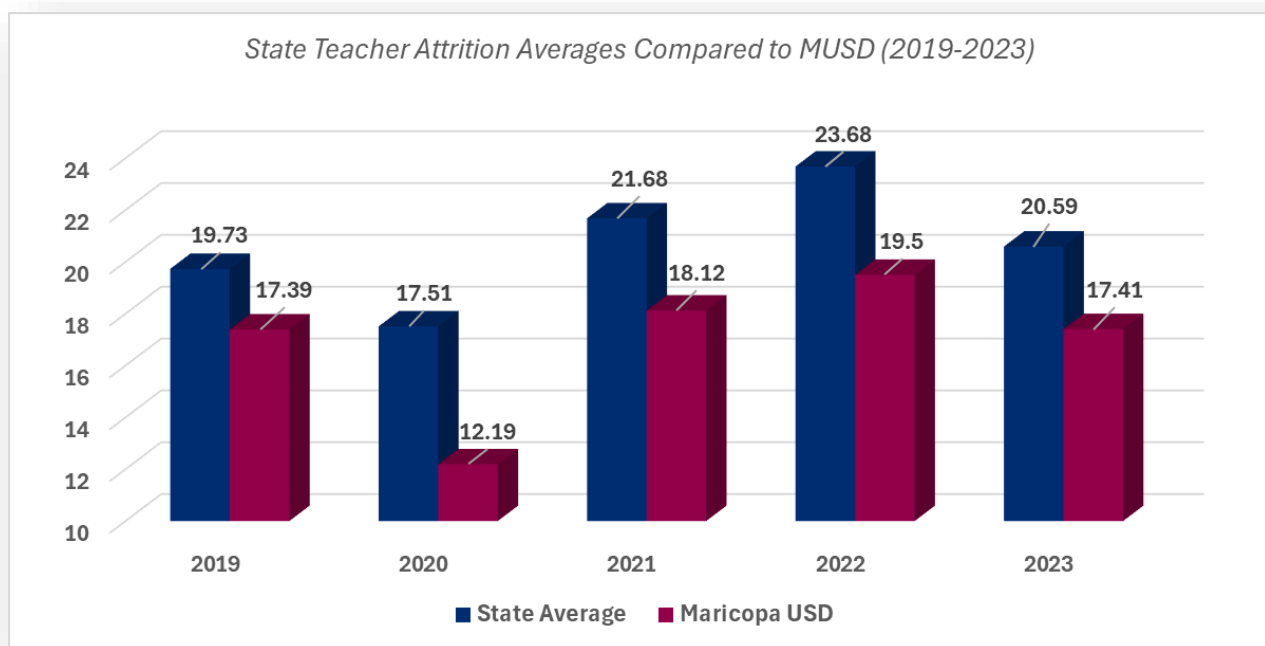
When looking at an LEA to spotlight with a case study, several factors are taken into consideration:

1. Strong educator attrition/retention numbers
2. An ongoing relationship that provides access, sharing, and discovery
3. A true willingness to participate
4. Is there something about the LEA that will provide insight for other LEA's?

[Maricopa Unified School District](#) (MUSD) very definitely met the criteria. The relationship between MUSD dates to a visit conducted on October 27, 2023. The original conversations and planning of the meeting were through Gretchen Brown, Federal, and Academics Programs Director, and then Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services, Sheryl Rednor. This first visit was part of [ADE's Educator Recruitment & Retention](#) introduction of data dashboards that had just gone live. In particular, the Educator Attrition/Retention Dashboard created great interest and additional conversations.

Over the next months and years, conversations and information sharing continued through Gretchen Brown (Director of Academic and Federal Programs), Nathaly Montano (Recruitment and Retention Specialist), and Janel Hildick (Director of Talent Development and Retention), which brought about this Case Study in the fall of 2024.

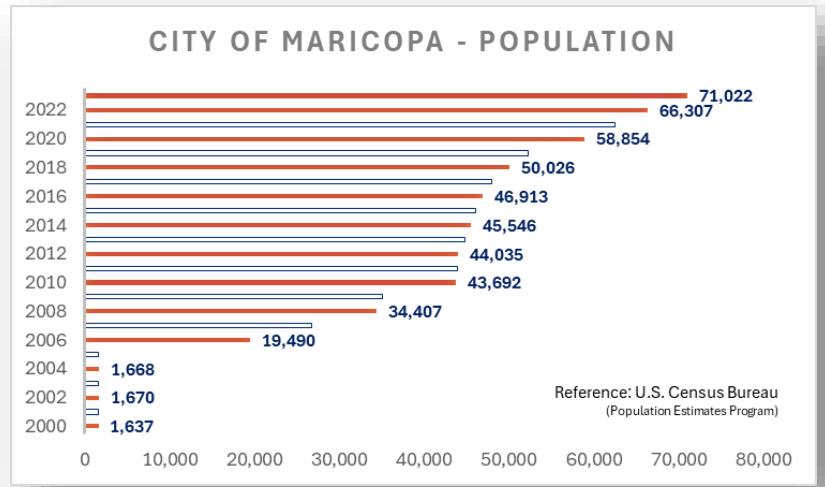
MUSD had strong retention numbers; they are a growing district building a new K-8 school in 2026 and an additional school planned for 2028. Their current staffing numbers utilize international teachers as a significant source of talent in addition to traditional and alternative certification pathways. When the term 'major' is used, international teachers make up over 20% of their current teaching force. Graph 1 below shows the classroom teacher attrition rates for the state of Arizona and MUSD over a 5-year span (2019-2023). The graph includes classroom teachers who left the local education agency (LEA) and those who switched LEAs. Maricopa Unified School District was below the state average for each year shown. [Classroom Teacher Attrition and Retention Dashboard](#)



Graph 1: State Teacher Attrition Averages Compared to MUSD (2019-2023)

Growing and Growing

Before looking at the Maricopa Unified School District and its efforts in educator recruitment and retention, it is important to recognize the growth of the City of Maricopa. According to the United States Census Bureau, as of July 1, 2023, the city of Maricopa had a population of 71,022. Graph 2 demonstrates the growth that Maricopa has experienced from 2000 to 2023.



Graph 2 City of Maricopa Population

To add some perspective, note various population numbers from within Arizona and a few places nationwide.

<u>Cities in Arizona:</u>	<u>Notable Cities around the U.S. with similar populations:</u>
City of Maricopa, AZ = 71,022	Cheyenne, WY = 65,168
Prescott, AZ = 47,757	San Marcos, TX = 71,559
Casa Grande, AZ = 63,743	East Orange, NJ = 69,556
Flagstaff, AZ = 76,586	Portland, ME = 69,104
Yuma, AZ = 100,858	Redondo Beach, CA = 67,749

Maricopa Unified School District Leadership

Superintendent:
Dr. Tracey Lopeman

Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources:
Tom Beckett

Assistant Superintendent of Administrative Services: Tracey Pastor

Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services:
Dr. Nancy Diab Scott

Communications Director:
Mishell Terry

Director of Talent Development and Retention:
Janel Hildick

Chief Financial Officer:
Jacob Harmon

District Numbers and Schools

Number of Students: 9,252 (as of 9/23/24)

Number of Teachers: 494 (as of 9/23/24)

Number of Schools: 10 (+ 1 online school)



MUSD District Office

Elementary (6):

Butterfield Elementary School
 Maricopa Elementary School
 Pima Butte Elementary School
 Saddleback Elementary School
 Santa Cruz Elementary School
 Santa Rosa Elementary School

Middle School (2):

Desert Wind Middle School
 Maricopa Middle School

High School (2)

Desert Sunrise High School
 Maricopa High School

Online School (1)

Maricopa Virtual Academy

Conversations From the Top

In response to continued growth and finding and keeping talent, Maricopa Unified School District Superintendent Dr. Tracey Lopeman states that MUSD remains “solid” in its recruitment and retention efforts.

During a discussion with district leadership, Dr. Lopeman shared some detailed thoughts. First, MUSD is breaking ground on a new K-8 school in 2026 and is scheduled to build another in 2028 to keep pace with population increases. She also stated that every avenue is utilized for supply and support in their efforts to keep a qualified teacher in front of their students. This is due to what she describes as a healthy and productive relationship with a supportive school board, and they are continually putting innovative ideas and structures in place. This includes bolstering their induction and mentoring program and investing in international teachers while creating positions that attach directly to retention. Three years ago, the Recruitment and Retention Specialist position was added, and this year, Director of Talent Development and Retention is in place. Lastly, Dr. Lopeman states that in their effort of “every avenue of opportunity being utilized”, as evidenced by the continued use of international teachers, they also added additional programming of “Ed Rising,” and “Grow Your Own Teacher.” (a partnership with Central Arizona College)

It is also important to mention that the district continues to build its leadership capacity through the “Lead Forward” Program, which is part of MUSD’s Grow Your Own initiative. This initiative provides training and support for those who wish to advance their careers beyond the classroom. MUSD also utilizes ASU’s “Next Education Workforce” as a teacher efficacy and retention model.

Two additional district leadership members shared some thoughts as part of this conversation. Mr. Tom Beckett (Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources) and Dr. Nancy Diab Scott (Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services.) Each shared their thoughts on the retention process and the work ahead. Mr. Beckett clearly states that there are “opportunities all around us, and as Dr. Lopeman has stated, there are no boundaries to what we concentrate on...but there are always challenges.”

Dr. Nancy Diab Scott is in her first year as Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services and shares that this is an “exciting” time to be part of this growth opportunity. Her sentiments align directly with Dr. Lopeman and Mr. Beckett in that they share and connect to MUSD’s Vision, “A Community Dedicated to Student Success”.

Process to Product

The ADE Recruitment and Retention unit made two site visits to MUSD, once to demonstrate the new data dashboards that were published and to discuss the unit’s essential *question*, ‘How do we get educators to stay past 3 years?’ Conversations and information continued to transfer between ADE and MUSD. The ERR unit was provided with an opportunity to visit the Maricopa Unified District for a second time for this case study. What followed was a day of conversations, school visits, classroom visits, and interviews with several distinct groups of individuals centered on teacher retention.

In addition to the previously mentioned visit with district leadership, ADE had several other opportunities to visit and sometimes revisit (virtually) very targeted people in MUSD. The visits were arranged with district leadership, district mentors, principals at three schools, and teachers in their first three years of teaching in the district.

Induction and Mentoring

The MUSD induction and mentoring team consists of a very dedicated group that is well-trained and focused on helping teachers. Gretchen Brown, the Director of Federal and Academic Programs, supervises the mentor program. Ms. Brown works with the mentors, collects informational logs and feedback forms, and attends trainings at the AZ K12 Center alongside the group. Ms. Brown also assigns a mentor to all first- through third-year teachers while also working to assign site-based mentors for additional support to new teachers.

Induction/Mentor District Staff:

Janel Hildick - Director of Talent Development and Retention
 Gretchen Brown- Director of Federal and Academic Programs
 Nathaly Montano – Recruitment and Retention Specialist
 Marjorie Stout – District Mentor (Foreign National Teachers)
 Treva Jenkins – District Mentor (Secondary)
 Inez Ramirez – Academic Specialist (Elementary)

The program itself is built around the [Arizona Beginning Teacher Induction Program Standards](#). The mentors are paid from different budget sources: the Arizona New Teacher Support Program Grant, Title II, and the district’s Maintenance and Operations (M&O) budget.

The Induction Program in MUSD has a 3-year duration. The mentors are fully released in their current capacity. They were all hired through a very rigorous process and their listed caseloads are in line with the recommendations of in the Arizona Beginning Teacher Induction Program Standards.

In 2023 (the latest data point at the time of this case study), there were 73 new teachers in the district, 17 brand-new to teaching, and 69 within the first three years of the program. The mentors are a remarkably effective group of people, as evidenced by the input provided by the teachers and administrators who were interviewed for this case study.

During a group interview, one question was asked: “What is one word or phrase that describes your current position?” The answers were varied; some responses were “Challenging, swimming, staying afloat, inspired, busy, and hopeful”. All the following items are listed

when asked about the initial and ongoing training the mentors received. Each has been through Cognitive Coaching training and participation in the [Arizona K12 Center's](#) Mentoring Institute Advanced Mentoring Program. Two of the members of this team serve as Arizona K12 Center Facilitators. (Treva Jenkins and Inez Ramirez)

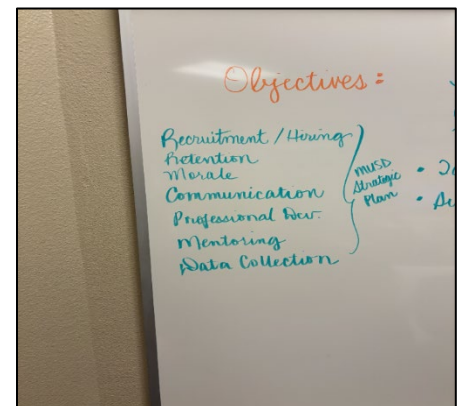
An additional question asked of the group centered on Professional Development (PD) for teachers new to the district and those new to the profession. They share that they meet with teachers during prep times to fit into the mentee's days more efficiently. They also utilize PLT (Professional Learning Teams) on early-release Wednesdays to deliver PD. These meetings alternate between the district and site-based professional development growth offerings. The mentors also share that they have explicit, tailored PD aligned with [New Teacher Center](#) programming, administered in a three-

tiered structure. There is also differentiated professional development for foreign national teachers (teachers who hold an [International Teaching Certificate](#)), a group that makes up a significant portion of their teaching staff. The mentors share that new teachers are granted additional days to their contracts to ensure that all things MUSD are covered. Additionally, in support of the Induction and Mentoring team, MUSD provides an academic coach on each campus who regularly communicates with the administration and the Induction and Mentoring team. Ms. Inez Ramirez is an example of *grow your own* as she came up through the ranks of MUSD. Ms. Treva Jenkins has been a guest speaker at conferences in and around Arizona, and the foreign national teachers have affectionately called Ms. Marjorie Stout, an aunt. Each is different in their pathway to the position, but each shares the team philosophy and readily accepts the challenge of the work.

Director of Talent Development and Retention

After 13 years as a principal in MUSD, Janel Hildick has stepped into a new role. A position that coincides with MUSD leadership's commitment to developing and retaining staff members. This is a first-year position that was developed to refine and grow recruitment and retention efforts. The photograph that appears in this section was taken in Ms. Hildick's office, which lists some very clear objectives/focus for the work that is being addressed. Please note the connection to the MUSD Strategic Plan.

Janel Hildick describes her new position as being exciting and challenging. She lauds the mentoring program, and the people immersed in it as being a crucial piece of their retention system. She states that they are in the process of developing a strategic plan exclusive to Human Resources. She is putting a priority tag on structures to grow leadership opportunities. Ms. Hildick is encouraged by the support of the MUSD leadership, especially about the sustainability of the Induction and Mentoring Program. Superintendent Lopeman said induction and mentoring will remain a priority with school board support. MUSD continues to gather data and make decisions based upon that data. Ms. Hildick also invests much time and energy into classified employees and the recruitment and retention in areas beyond the classroom. She works closely with MUSD leadership in various capacities, including the hiring of leaders. This is an exciting time for MUSD; they are in the process of hiring a principal for the K-8 school that is about to break ground. Ms. Hildick shares that while the growth of Maricopa is not at the explosive level encountered from 2010 to 2020, it is still on the rise and requires ongoing vetting.



Janel Hildick's Objective Board

MUSD Recruitment and Retention Specialist

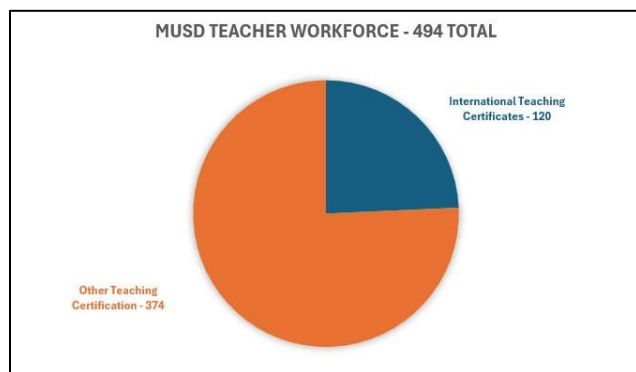
Nathaly Montano joined MUSD 3 years ago. She came from the healthcare industry. She freely shares that the job she was initially hired for has morphed over time. It had to. Beyond the job fairs and recruitment parts of the job, MUSD employs many international teachers, whom it refers to as *foreign national teachers*. Currently, 120 of their teacher workforce hold international certificates. Keeping track of all facets of this group and preparing for the next arrival group and subsequent departures is no small task. During a separate interview with Ms. Montano, she quickly shared two things. One, her absolute reliance on spreadsheets and consistent updating of information; two, her support from Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Tom Beckett. Mr. Beckett, she says, has consistently encouraged her to think outside of the box.

Ms. Montano’s job includes recruiting, onboarding, and student-teacher placements, and she works a great deal with Ms. Marjorie Stout in their efforts to establish the assimilation process for their foreign national teachers. This includes her newfound ‘familiarity’ with Sky Harbor Airport, following through continually on the immigration status of incoming international teachers and current teachers, which includes J1 Visas and H1 B Visa sponsorship. Ms. Montano and MUSD are preparing for the exit of 32 foreign national teachers who are scheduled to return to their home countries at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. This will be a big part of

their story moving forward. It will impact MUSD’s educator attrition numbers, but it is expected and is part of the district’s story. MUSD is currently recruiting from many continents around the world. The Philippines has been a consistent pipeline, and now MUSD is reaching out to Africa, Asia, and South America for additional connections. Countries beyond the Philippines include India, Mexico, and Columbia.

The induction begins long before the school year begins. In the past few years, MUSD has worked with 19 different organizations that place international teachers. Ms. Montano reports that she has reduced that number to five, basing the acceptance of those five organizations on streamlined and effective business practices that produce the best results.

The induction/assimilation process creates communication with the incoming teachers, and systems are in place for each new teaching candidate. The offer letter contains information about MUSD and its schools and students and provides recommendations on the amount of money they may need as “start-up” money. It also includes estimated costs regarding places to live. Ms. Montano believes that MUSD empowers the incoming teachers to understand the process and explains the puzzle pieces like obtaining fingerprint clearance cards and social security considerations. This provides a bit less “sticker shock” upon arriving in Maricopa. The team also offers many opportunities for the foreign national teachers to bond. As part of their community building for these new teachers, there are day trips planned to destinations like the Casa Grande Ruins, and there is a barbeque event that takes place in January or February that is well attended by not only the foreign national teachers, but district personnel, administrators, mentors, and teachers.



Graph 3: Number of Teachers on International Certificate

The last part of the conversation centered on a question for Ms. Montano regarding how many of the foreign national teachers have not completed their contractual commitment to MUSD. Ms. Montano reported that in the

three years in her current position, she has had only one teacher released before the end of their term and four teachers who resigned as they wished to return to their

home countries. This community is solid in its approach to this educator pipeline. It is part of their story, and they continue cultivating the resource.



Pictured: Inez Ramirez (Mentor), Janel Hildick (Director), Phillip Verdugo (Principal), Nathaly Montano (Specialist), Ciara Garcia (Teacher), Treva Jenkins (Mentor), Marjorie Stout (Mentor)

Site/Principal/Teacher Visits

1. *Desert Sunrise High School – Principal Mr. Phillip Verdugo*

Principal Discussion: Phillip Verdugo is in his first year as the principal at Desert Sunrise High School after serving as an assistant principal for 3 years. He has been in education for 13 years. When asked for a word or phrase describing his time as principal at DSHS, he states he is ‘motivated.’ Watching him and listening to him moving around campus, he demonstrates a connection to students and staff. He talks about his position with reverence and shares his belief and expectation of people having a growth mindset. When asked specifically about his new and foreign national teachers, he speaks of being intentional with his time and support, making sure that he is ‘calendar’ing his walkthroughs and visits and not waiting for time to open. He goes on to state that he is consistent with his contact with mentors and academic coaches, as well as with weekly updates. He speaks of sharing the vision of the district and campus and making sure that the people he brings on board are the “right fit.” Retention begins as soon as they come on board, and the support is immediate.

Teachers visited:

- Ciara Garcia: Math (Alg. 1), 1st year teacher
- Meghan Marcum: Science, 2nd year teacher
- Frances Pamintuan: Math (Geometry), 1st year teacher in US, 10 years of experience overall
- Lanie Mae De La Torre: Science, 2nd year teacher in US, 8 years of teaching experience overall

Each of the teachers visited was asked the same six (6) questions, ranging from the best and most challenging parts of the job to who to reach out to if a problem occurs.

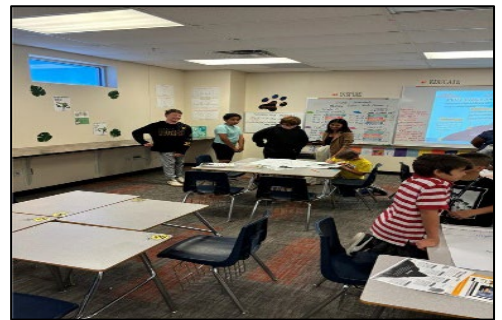
The questions asked of the four teachers interviewed offered insight into the retention process/support. The responses shared about choosing one word or phrase to describe their experience this year were as follows: “life-changing, more familiar, amazing, and fulfilling.” Each of these teachers recognized the necessity of induction, mentoring, and overall support. They praised the specialized support received from their mentors, and that praise extended to the on-site

academic coach and the availability and accessibility of the administration. One teacher said she might not have made it to year 2 without her mentor. There was consistency in response to the amount of scheduled time with their mentors and the professional development that is provided. One time a week, minimum, with a mentor, either in person or virtually. Also, professional development is provided beyond their own site, as they have been given the opportunity to visit other classrooms and receive additional training from outside entities such as the Arizona K12 Center and the [Arizona Department of Education](#). Lastly, when each teacher was asked if they knew where to turn when problems occurred, they all were able to identify the “who” when dealing with specific issues.

...“If it was not for my mentor, I would have probably quit.”

2. Desert Wind Middle School - Principal Ms. Aidan Balt

Principal Discussion: Aidan Balt has been in education for 15 years and is in her 5th year as an administrator. During a conversation during this visit, Principal Balt stated that her staff is made up of 45% Foreign National Teachers, 32% that are new to Desert Wind, and 10% are new to the profession. Ms. Balt states that this is the first year that staffing decisions were in her hands, and she recognizes the value of what she calls ‘proactive’ hiring. This includes what she describes as “what teachers need, not just from the district but site-based considerations that can be identified by a shared responsibility through the use of leadership teams and mentor support.” She has a vision that includes the teaming approach, as evidenced by her participation in ASU’s Education Workforce teaming model. Ms. Balt relies on the efforts of Marjorie Stout (district mentor), and she has also made sure to calendar specific bi-weekly meetings that go beyond ‘check-ins’ to maintain open lines of communication that provide opportunities to pivot when required to do so. She stresses throughout the interview that true participation in hiring, being present, and understanding what is needed is all about vision.



Classroom at Desert Wind Middle School

Teachers visited:

- Christopher ‘Paolo’ Manlapaz: 8th Grade ELA, 1st year teaching in US, 11th year of overall teaching experience
- Yricka Ursal: 6th Grade ELA, 3rd year teaching in US, 4th year of overall teaching experience

During the interviews with two teachers at Desert Wind Middle School, there were consistent responses to the questions. When asked to describe their experience with one word or phrase, one stated that this year has been a “breath of fresh air,” and the other spoke of ‘beautiful growth.’ The best part of their jobs was described in very comforting ways: “the student work...the work represents true products of perseverance,” and “students knew that I cared and that I wanted to be there.” Both teachers stated that student behavior was the most challenging part of their jobs. Each recognized the cultural differences and had to work on plans with their mentors and administrators. Regarding contact time with their mentors, both were united in the thought that they had regularly scheduled meetings and very much appreciated the ‘24/7’ approach offered by Ms. Marjorie Stout. The assistance and guidance received from administrators were described as providing strategies and resources to empower them to improve. “Real-life practices”, not just theories, were offered and could be used immediately. Lastly, when asked whether they knew where to go for assistance when problems occurred, each identified where they should turn for behavior, academics, and parent communications when needed. They shared that systems were in place to assist them.

3. *Maricopa Elementary School - Principal Dr. Jennifer Robinson*

Principal Discussion: Dr. Jennifer Robinson

Dr. Robinson uses the word “intentional” to describe her work at Maricopa Elementary School this year. Dr. Robinson states that her communication and visits with Elementary Education level mentor Inez Ramirez are scheduled weekly on campus. Dr. Robinson states that the level of participation in the induction/mentoring process is a clear awareness of when meetings occur, and that there is a front-loading process in which the administrators are consulted for input.

Regarding teacher retention, Dr. Robinson reiterates what other administrators shared in this interview process...the “right fit” is integral to creating and maintaining the culture of a truly diverse campus. She coins the term “with-it-ness” to describe what she looks for when hiring and chooses to invite potential teachers in to teach a lesson. She states the level of contact with her teachers is extremely “intentional.” She and her leadership team are very visible and supportive. PLT (Professional Learning Team) meetings are more important than ever before. [Project Momentum](#) has provided additional opportunities for planning and data-connected discussions.



Maricopa Elementary School

Teachers visited:

- Gretchen Laniba: 3rd Grade, 2nd year teaching in the US, 11 years of teaching experience overall
- Charity Junsay: 4th Grade, 2nd year teaching in US, 10 years of teaching experience overall
- Frances Nawala: 5th Grade ELA and SS, 3rd year teacher
- Shaun Jones: 5th Grade Math and Science, 2nd year teacher

Four teachers from Maricopa Elementary School were interviewed. Words or phrases to describe their experience were as follows: “Better than last year,” “full of learning and development as a teacher,” “Growth, engagement, and specificity,” and “refreshing.” It is an interesting mix of terms and phrases, but all positive. When asked about the best part of their jobs, they all spoke about students who were progressing and growing. When answering the question about the most challenging part of the job, two stated student behaviors/classroom management; one spoke about adapting to a new culture, and one shared about trying to separate the workday from home life to try to balance. The level of support they have received is also consistent in the responses. An hour a week with their mentor and ample opportunities for professional development. That professional development was listed as peer observations, peer collaboration, and the chance to get training and resources from outside entities such as the Arizona K12 Center. When it came to the role that campus leadership plays in their development, this group was in unison when describing the efforts of Dr. Robinson. “Supportive, informative, and helpful” were a few of the descriptors used, as well as the number of visits and the timely, professional feedback that was provided was mentioned. Lastly, when asked about the systems in place when challenges arise, each teacher was able to point out who they should reach out to for particular types of issues.

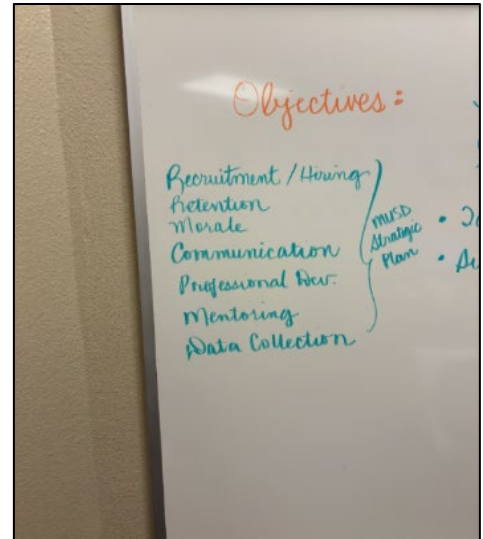
Next Steps

In a recent interview with Janel Hildick, she was very open about what she wants to do moving forward. Many items are on the table, including hiring a principal for the newest school being erected. Ms. Hildick works diligently with her group on teacher retention and delves into the classified employee area to ensure those employees are getting the training and support they need to improve and stay in the district. Ms. Hildick's experience as a principal in MUSD for many years allows her insight into what initiatives are important for current administrators and job expectations. She is sensitive to that and prioritizes accordingly. She also states that the talented academic coaches and mentors she has in place will continue to receive the support and training necessary to meet the challenges of retaining teachers in today's competitive work environment. She envisions hiring another mentor to keep up with the support needed to

help teachers new to the profession and any teachers who may need assistance.

Meeting people "where they are" is a topic discussed regularly, not only with certified employees but also with all employees. Ms. Hildick is examining the increasing support for classified employees, which will include more training and, perhaps, somewhere down the road, a mentor exclusive to classified employees. Employee retention is everywhere and is an all-the-time proposition.

As mentioned in this study, many foreign national teachers in MUSD will ultimately require ongoing development and alterations. The J1 Visa and the sponsorship of the H1 B Visa are costly in the short term, but the systems in place and the amount of monitoring of those systems are an investment in keeping qualified teachers in front of students. Ms. Hildick also shares that in the bigger picture, a retention plan is on the horizon. A plan that maps out specific goals with clear success criteria and appropriate timelines. This would lead to consistency and transparency, allowing everyone to know what, when, and how to follow the focus/objectives posted in Ms. Hildick's office. The photograph is applied here for a second time as it serves as a 'blueprint' for what a retention plan will ultimately contain.



Janel Hildick's Objective Board

Closing

Maricopa Unified School District continually recognizes challenges. As it has progressed, it has foreseen situations and responded accordingly. MUSD is telling its unique story, considering growth and expansion as part of its regular regimen.

Teacher attrition numbers for MUSD have been below the state average, as evidenced by Graph 1. Considering that at the end of the 2024 -25 school year, 32 foreign national teachers are expected to exit their teaching workforce. This will have a significant impact on their classroom teacher attrition numbers. The difference is that they know about this departure and plan to fill those vacancies. This is their reality, a reality that they are prepared to meet head-on. Maricopa Unified School District has continued to put systems and people in place to follow data and make the necessary adjustments.