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National College
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Schools and academies

What are we learning about... retaining headteachers

Succession planning Evidence into practice guide

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When do headteachers retire?

Like all members of the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) who joined before 2007, current school leaders' 'normal pension age' is 60. Of course (in common with all scheme members) leaders can continue to work beyond this age and to accrue further pension benefits. Phased retirement options are also possible.

School leaders are able to choose to retire once they reach the age of 55. In doing so, they opt for 'actuarially reduced benefits' from their pension based on salary and length of service.

Early retirement is also possible under other circumstances, subject to specific conditions.

So-called 'premature' retirement can currently take place from the age of 50 at the discretion of an individual's employer. From April 2010, such retirements will not be possible before the age of 55. Premature retirements are usually a result of redundancy or another form of re-organisation.

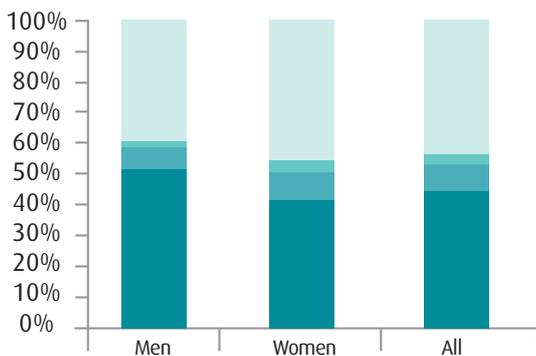
The pension scheme also has provision for 'ill-health' retirements.

In fact, only about 4 in 10 retiring school leaders do so at normal pension age. The other 60 per cent retire early – mostly by choice to take an actuarially reduced pension.

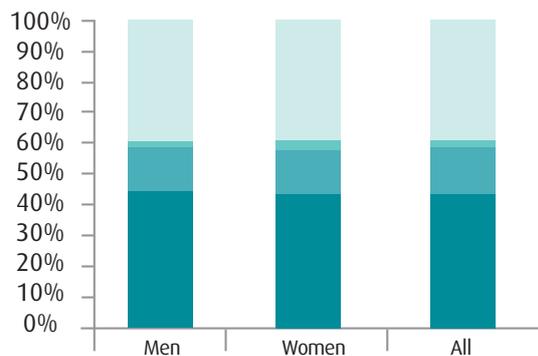
Data¹ on school leader retirements suggest that:

- There have been sharp reductions in ill-health and 'premature' retirements over the last five years. In 2003/4, those categories of retirement accounted for almost 40 per cent of all school leader retirements. In 2007–08, that figure had reduced to less than 15 per cent.
- Whilst the proportion of retiring school leaders staying in post until normal pension age has increased over the last five years, so too has the proportion opting for voluntary early retirement. This apparent contradiction has been possible because of the reductions in ill-health and premature retirements.
- In 2007–08, male school leaders were more likely to retire before normal pension age than female school leaders. This is almost entirely due to differences in retirement decisions amongst primary school leaders, where more than half of men opted to take (early) actuarially reduced pensions.
- In the secondary phase, in 2007–08 there was almost no difference in behaviour between male and female school leaders in terms of retirement options.
- In 2007–08, just over 3,100 school leaders took retirement (data does not identify headteachers separately). Of these, 56 per cent were women. Just under 60 per cent of school leader retirements were from the primary phase.

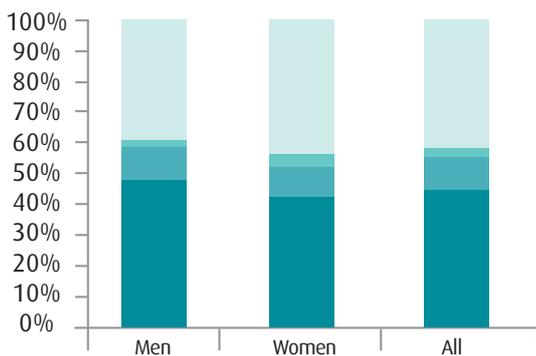
Reasons for retirements, primary and nursery school leaders, 2007-08¹



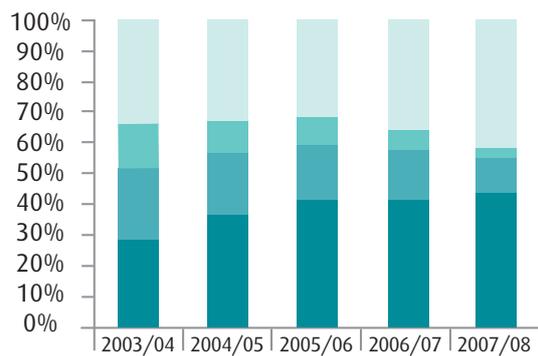
Reasons for retirements, secondary school leaders, 2007-08¹



Reasons for retirements, all school leaders 2007-08¹



Reasons for retirement: all school leaders, 2003-04 to 2007-08^{1,2}



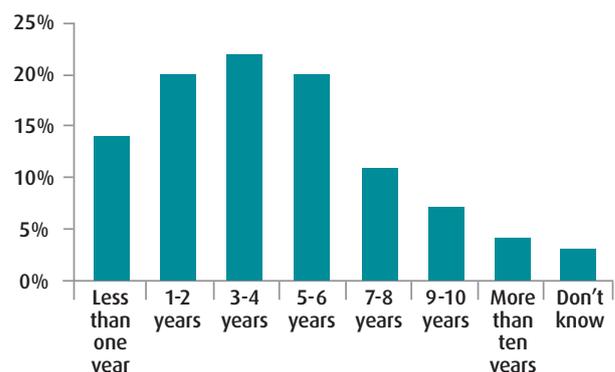
- Age
- Ill-health
- Premature
- Actuarially reduced benefits

Amongst headteachers specifically, research data³ suggests that most expect to retire sooner rather than later. In a recent survey of headteachers over the age of 50, across all phases, over half of those questioned said that they intended to retire within four years. Even allowing for older headteachers for whom this might have been expected, the results suggest most heads have set a goal to leave their post before retirement age.

More information about headteachers' retirement pattern is available in National College's **Evidence Into Practice Guide** [What are we learning about... the school leadership labour market?](#)⁴

Retirement intentions, headteachers aged 50 or more³

In how many years from now do you expect to fully retire as a headteacher?



WHAT IF...

I could retain headteachers for longer?

Retention of a talented leader can often be a less risky – and more cost effective – option than seeking to recruit a new leader. It avoids the direct costs associated with a recruitment process, as well as the disruption that can result if no appointment is made. And it can buy time to develop a deeper pool of leadership talent to ensure a smooth succession in the future.

Although many headteachers express a preference for leaving post early, research suggests that relatively few have translated that ambition into a definitive plan. Qualitative research³ with headteachers aged over 50 suggests that:

- Few have a specific retirement date in mind.
- Very few headteachers discuss their retirement plans with either governors or local authority representatives. This appears to be the result of fears that to do so would destabilise their school and/or adversely affect any final career plans.

Perhaps as a result of the fact that retirement plans are seldom shared, few headteachers report any engagement with specific retention strategies which might offer them an attractive alternative to early retirement.

Indeed, data³ suggests that headteachers are very much open to the idea of remaining in post longer than they initially planned – given a positive alternative. When presented with a variety of potential retention incentives, for example, 86 per cent of heads aged over 50 identified factors which would motivate them to stay in post longer. Even amongst older heads – those aged over 60 – around 70 per cent say they could be motivated to stay longer, given the right incentives.

This suggests that retention interventions can be effective in keeping talented leaders in place – applied at the right time and with sensitivity. Engaged early enough, heads do not appear to have rigid retirement plans and they remain open minded.

Learning from practice: phased retirement

Traditionally, retirement has often been treated as a one-off event, with retirees working full time one day and stopping work completely the next. Whilst this all-or-nothing approach may suit some, it allows retiring heads little room to manage such a significant change in lifestyle.

In this context, phased retirement can be a win-win. For outgoing headteachers, a phased departure enables a managed 'step-down' and a period of adjustment. For governing bodies, it offers an opportunity to retain a talented outgoing head for longer and to manage the handover to a new leader.

There are already practical examples of how this approach has resulted in transitional co-headships, where an incoming (less experienced) headteacher works along side an outgoing headteacher in order to develop into the role.

Like any change, however, such arrangements need careful management. School leaders with first hand experience of transitional co-headships say:

- The arrangements need the whole hearted backing of both the governing body and the school's local authority or diocese. The detail of the practical arrangements needs expert input from HR professionals in particular. Establish absolute clarity over contractual and salary issues at the outset.
- They need careful explanation to parents and staff so that there is complete transparency about roles and responsibilities during the transitional period of co-headship.
- A fixed time limit on the period of transition ensures clarity of expectations on all sides.
- The outgoing headteacher may themselves need some initial development to take on the role of mentor. Being a 'mentor co-head' demands different skills to being a full time headteacher – don't assume an experienced head will have these automatically.
- Prepare clear, written protocols for how the arrangement will work to ensure effective accountability. For example, it may be that the outgoing headteacher is a full member of the governing body with the incoming headteacher an associate governor initially, with the positions reversed later in the transition.
- Set some specific objectives for the period of transition which create a pathway to the future – for example, mandate the incoming head to undertake a detailed analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses and to develop a strategic plan to move the school forward.

Most important of all, the individuals involved must be open to exploring change together. Not every aspect of the arrangement will always work out as originally planned, and the participants need to remain agile in order to flex the co-headship in light of experience.

What influences headteachers' retirement decisions?

The decision about how and when to retire is a highly personal one, influenced by an individual's personal considerations as well as their professional responsibilities. The precise combination of factors which influence that decision are highly dependent on local factors as well as personal circumstances.

That said, research³ provides signposts to the concerns most likely to be uppermost in headteachers' minds when considering retirement decisions. These are summarised below.

Unsurprisingly, factors which appear to drive decisions towards potential early retirement appear to focus on quality of life issues – for example, a desire for more time to focus on personal goals (such as having time to travel) and to leave the demands of headship.

The same research also identified factors which might motivate headteachers to stay longer in post. These focus around their own sense of professional commitment, wanting greater support with workload and seeking fair recognition of their achievements.

The first of these positive motivators – professional commitment – is a key personal driver for headteachers, often based on a strong sense of moral purpose, built over a long period. It is an important factor – but it is hard to influence externally by the time it comes to retirement planning.

However, it is possible to consider practical options to influence other factors – such as supporting a headteacher's workload and considering how best to recognise their achievements.

Factors influencing early retirement decisions: head aged over 50³

Factors which are most likely to contribute to decisions to retire early	Factors which are most likely to motivate headteachers to remain in post
<p>Lack of support: Experienced by heads seeking to manage without an adequate supporting team – mainly in smaller schools, typically primaries.</p>	<p>Strong support: Either from a senior leadership team or wider support networks.</p>
<p>Workload: Leading to a negative impact on personal well-being and/or a poor work/life balance.</p>	<p>Commitment to school: A positive dedication to the school, usually developed over a lengthy period.</p>
<p>Stress: Caused by external pressures eg to implement new initiatives and external accountability targets.</p>	<p>Sense of achievement: Headteachers feeling that they are making a difference to students and the wider community.</p>
<p>Lack of recognition: A perception that achievements are not noticed, and/or existence of a 'blame culture'.</p>	<p>Recognition: Receiving praise for achievements – including recognition through fair pay and reward.</p>

WHAT IF...

I knew what would encourage headteachers to stay on?

Supporting governors

Governors have a central role to play in encouraging talented leaders to stay on. They are often the best placed to engage headteachers in initial discussions about retirement planning – as well as holding the authority for agreeing potential retention incentives for talented leaders.

In fact, research⁷ shows that governors are open to consideration of a wide range of retention incentives for high performing heads, from allowing release time for professional development

to providing additional management support. However, retirement planning is a personal and sensitive issue, and engaging heads in meaningful discussion requires careful management.

National College's toolkit for governors addresses these challenges. It helps governors to consider what they can do to create conditions that encourage experienced leaders to stay in schools or within the wider system.

It is available online at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/governortoolkit

General surveys of headteachers (of all ages) and aspiring heads suggest that the intrinsic rewards of the job are seen as the most important factors which attract candidates to headteacher roles initially: ie the chance to make a difference, contribute to a community, shape the future of a school etc. This is well established in research literature^{5,6}.

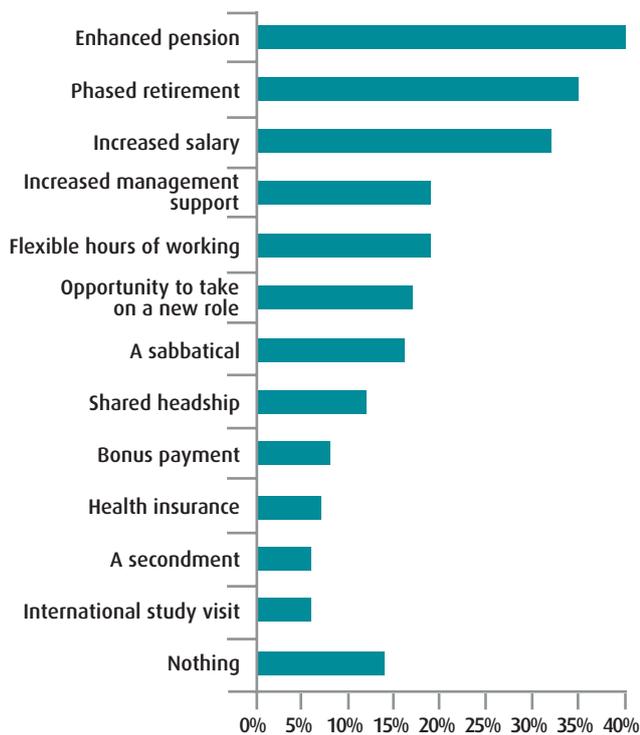
However, the factors which are important for **recruiting** headteachers and motivating them in their day-to-day work may not be the same as those which are important for **retaining** headteachers in their post as they reach the later stages of their career.

In fact, the most recent research³ (sampling the opinion of over 1,500 headteachers aged over 50) suggests that tangible rewards are much more

influential in headteachers' potential retirement decisions. A detailed survey of older heads which focused exclusively on retention, suggests that monetary factors play a significant role in influencing headteachers' end-of-career decisions. When headteachers aged over 50 were offered a straightforward list of potential retention incentives, two of the three factors mentioned most frequently are concerned with remuneration: increased salary and enhanced pension. It may be that monetary incentives are seen as a tangible recognition of achievement as well as providing direct financial benefit. Decisions about headteachers' financial rewards are, of course, a matter for governing bodies.

Attitudes of headteachers aged over 50 to potential retention incentives³

Which, if any, of the following factors do you think would be most likely to motivate you to stay in a headteacher post longer than currently planned?

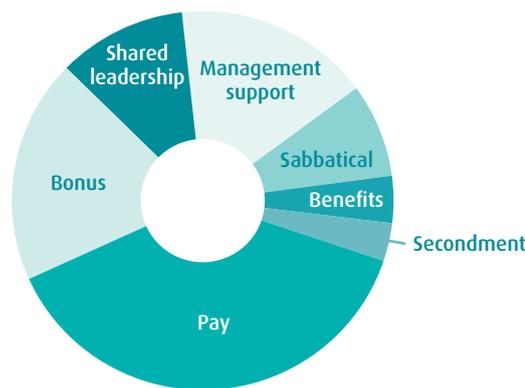


More detailed survey work³ has sought to assess the attractiveness of different potential incentives – both pay-related and non-pay benefits – if offered within an overall package. In other words, how might headteachers weigh the relative attractiveness of one incentive against another if offered in a wide range of flexible combinations?

Two broad themes emerge.

First, in surveys which put broad based packages of incentives to headteachers over 50, monetary rewards were still identified as the factors likely to exert most influence over decisions about retirement. In fact, the research suggests that monetary factors (such as pay and bonuses) are more important to individuals than any other factor as an incentive to stay in post.

Relative importance of potential retention incentives, offered as part of a package to heads aged of over 50³



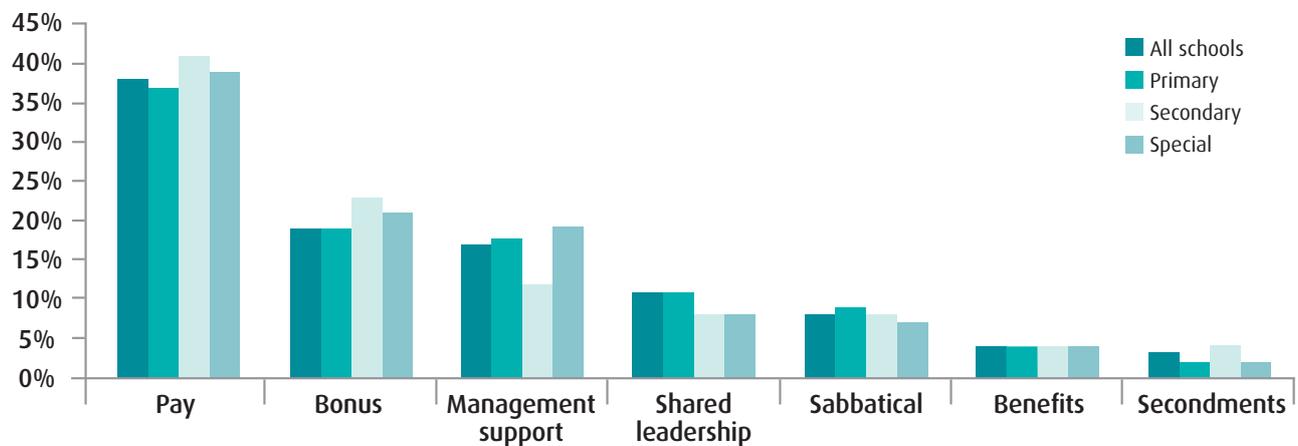
Second, close targeting of incentives is important. Response to incentives differs according to circumstances. Women headteachers respond differently to men, for example, and primary heads' preferences are different to secondary heads in relation to possible incentives to delay planned retirement.

Research results are complex, but in general terms, male heads show the most positive response to potential financial incentives whilst primary heads show the most positive response to increased management support to ease workload. This illustrates the importance of providing incentives which are tailored to the personal needs of the individual.

Summary of relative attractiveness of potential retention incentives, as part of an overall package to headteachers aged over 50³

	Potential retention incentive		
	Increased pay	Improved management support	Phased retirements/ shared leadership
Most attractive to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - male headteachers - secondary headteachers already on salary spine point over 30 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - female headteachers - primary headteachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - headteachers planning to retire in 3-6 years - female headteachers

Relative weighting of potential retention incentives, as part of an overall package for headteachers aged over 50, by phase³



What non-pay benefits are attractive?

Research has tested headteachers' reaction to a range of practical non-pay benefits which could potentially form part of a retention package offered by governing bodies under existing terms of pay and conditions³.

After monetary benefits, the most attractive incentives for headteachers to stay in post are

those which have a direct positive impact on work/life balance. Again, research results show that response to these potential incentives (offered as part of a flexible package) varies according to a headteachers' context. Reaction to the incentives tested are summarised in the table.

Summary of potential non-pay retention incentives: In rank order according of relative attractiveness to headteachers over 50³

Rank	Potential incentive	Most attractive to...	Options
1	Additional management support	Most headteachers report feeling well supported. Those most responsive to the concept of additional management support are headteachers of primary schools and small schools and female headteachers (regardless of phase).	The nature of support sought (and offered) will depend entirely on individual and local circumstances. Based on survey responses, potential options which may prove attractive are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investment in top team development to provide more effective senior leadership team support. - Development of School Business Manager roles - possibly across more than one school. - Investment in personal assistant/office manager roles.
2	Shared leadership	Primary heads and female heads.	Research found positive support for shared headship models as a means for allowing an existing head greater flexibility by freeing their time. This might enable heads to refresh their outlook by working on projects beyond their own school, or simply to work less through a phased retirement option.

Rank	Potential incentive	Most attractive to...	Options
3	Sabbaticals and secondments	Sabbaticals are seen as more attractive than secondments – the latter appear to have very limited impact as a retention incentive. Male primary teachers expressed greatest interest in sabbaticals; female headteachers expressed least interest.	Research showed that the idea of a shorter sabbatical (up to 6 months) was more attractive than a long sabbatical (12 months). Shorter sabbaticals are, clearly, also more cost effective. However, although more popular than secondments, sabbaticals do not appear to be a major retention incentive for many heads. They are likely to be a targeted intervention for individual headteachers who have a special interest in pursuing them.
4	Other benefits	Rated poorly by all groups.	Non-pay benefits such as: health insurance, health club memberships, travel expenses, lease cars etc appear to hold little appeal as potential retention incentives. Weighed against other potential factors, these score poorly with headteachers aged over 50.

WHAT IF... I tailored retention packages to the individual?

Research data indicates:

- Retirement plans are seldom discussed by headteachers with either their governing bodies or their local authority or diocese.
- Although many heads express a general expectation to leave before normal pension age, fewer have formed specific plans for doing so.
- Most talented headteachers could be persuaded to stay longer in post, given the right incentives which are relevant to their personal circumstances.

This suggests that an active retention strategy which is both closely targeted and personalised to individuals' needs can make a difference. The following table sets out four key questions for establishing the framework for a local retention strategy.

Key questions	Developing a response
<p>Do we know who we need to retain?</p>	<p>The answer to this question may come from both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ intelligence. Hard data from HR records will reveal, for example, those schools with headteachers aged over 50 who may be considering retirement options currently or in the foreseeable future. Soft intelligence – for example from school improvement advisers – may also help identify talented headteachers’ intentions and motivations around retirement planning and how they might be supported best.</p>
<p>Do we know what incentives we are able to offer?</p>	<p>This guide outlines possible retention incentives. Not all of these will be an option for every area – and there may be other options which could be considered. Some potential incentives are best developed at a system-level (for example, arrangements for secondments or sabbaticals) or between groups of schools working together (for example, sharing a school business manager to ease workload pressures). Others – such as financial incentives – are matters for individual governing bodies.</p>
<p>Do we know which incentives are likely to have the greatest impact?</p>	<p>Research data underlines the importance of tailoring incentives to individual’s needs. This means having good intelligence on what local leaders are likely to find attractive in order to invest in interventions that will make difference. It may mean engaging a group of heads themselves to test ideas for incentives, and/or having a means for discussing retention directly with individual school leaders.</p>
<p>Do we have a process for engaging heads in conversations about retention?</p>	<p>Research shows that few heads are ever engaged in discussions about retirement and retention. Effective engagement on such sensitive issues demands both a high degree of professionalism and skill. It also requires the conversation to enable a ‘win-win’ outcome between the participants ie enabling heads to plan their retirement more effectively and governors to succession plan.</p> <p>Tactics might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Offering high quality retirement planning advice to heads, which includes information on phased retirements etc. – Nominating a very senior local authority or diocesan officer to lead individual retention conversations. – Providing specific training for chairs of governors to enable them to have effective retention conversations.

Useful additional information

Pension flexibilities	<p>To enable shared headship to work with phased retirement.</p> <p>Individuals are able to access up to 75 per cent of pension while undertaking a reduced amount of work (for which they can draw up to 75 per cent of salary).</p>	<p>www.teacherpensions.co.uk Employer helpline: 0845 300 3756 Teachers' pensions helpline: 0845 606 6166 Or see the DVD What do you want to do when you leave school? which illustrates pension flexibilities in practice, including a case study on phased retirement. The DVD can be viewed online at: www.teachernet.gov.uk/pensions.</p>
School Business Managers	<p>To provide additional management support.</p>	<p>www.nationalcollege.org.uk/sbm</p>
Different patterns of leadership	<p>To enable shared responsibility to reduce headteacher workload.</p>	<p>www.nationalcollege.org.uk/modelsofleadership</p>

Sources

Sources	
<p>1 DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2008, School Workforce in England, January (revised), London, DCSF</p>	<p>5 PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) and DfES (Department for Education and Skills), 2007, Independent Study Into School Leadership, London, PwC for DfES</p>
<p>2 DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2007, School Workforce in England, London, DCSF and Database of Teacher Records and Pensioner Statistical System (PENSTATS), London, DCSF</p>	<p>6 Mori, 2005, Follow-Up Research into the State Of School Leadership in England, London, Mori Social Research Institute</p>
<p>3 Ipsos Mori, 2008, Increasing Headteacher Retention (for National College), unpublished</p>	<p>7 PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers), May 2008, Governor Research – Overview of Findings, PwC for National College</p>
<p>4 National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (National College), April 2008, What are we learning about...recruiting school leaders?, Nottingham, National College</p>	

Evidence into practice guide

What are we learning about... retaining headteachers

About this guide

This guide examines what we know about the factors which influence the career decisions of headteachers in the later stages of their career. Although the information may be of interest to individual school leaders, it will be most useful to governing bodies and people who work across groups of schools in local authorities, dioceses and other local partnerships to secure enough high calibre school leaders.

The guide asks three key questions:

- When do school leaders retire?
- What influences headteachers' decision to retire?
- What wider incentives improve retention?

The guide explores some of the facts and figures to help succession planners develop their own answers to these questions and brings together key intelligence to inform local strategy.

A range of additional online resources, which include more case studies and practical tools, are available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/successionplanning

Evidence into practice guides

This is one in a series of guides that share intelligence and insights into the leadership succession challenge facing schools.

Guides currently available can be downloaded from: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/aboutus/publications-atoz.htm

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Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk
www.nationalcollege.org.uk