



# BRIEFING ON TEACHER TURNOVER & RETENTION IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

What we know,  
what we don't  
& where to start

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**by Scott Goldstein**

**( Executive Director, EmpowerEd )**

with collaboration and contributions from  
Ben Williams (Capital City PCS)  
Simona Spicciani-Gerhardt (Wilson SHS) &  
Ryan Saunders (Learning Policy Institute)



## **Policy Briefing: Teacher Turnover and Retention in Washington, D.C. April 2019**

### **Context**

Washington, D.C. has among the highest teacher turnover rates of any urban district in the United States. Teacher turnover is extremely costly, damaging to school culture, critical student-teacher relationships, and harms student achievement. EmpowerEd is a DC teacher advocacy organization that works to elevate the voices of diverse DC teacher leaders. For the past two years, EmpowerEd has studied teacher retention, both here and nationally in our work to improve adult culture and retention in DC schools. Our work is driven by the experience of teachers and students in both the traditional public and public charter sectors as well as local and national research. This report seeks to establish a baseline for what we know about teacher retention in D.C. at present, what we do not know and need to know, and our recommendations for a path forward. We hope this report helps inform both those in the policy arena as well as school leaders and teams seeking to improve teacher retention at their individual schools. This is a survey of current research, but is not exhaustive. For those interested in further research and exemplars for implementation, please get in touch with us to continue the dialogue on this critical issue.

### **This Report**

- I. The state of teacher retention in Washington, D.C. Public Schools
- II. Why are teachers leaving?
- III. How does DC track teacher turnover?
- IV. The cost of turnover
- V. What we don't know and need to know
- VI. Recommendations
- VII. Additional Data Appendix

### **I. What is the state of teacher retention in Washington, D.C. public schools?**

Based on a report commissioned by the State Board of Education in 2018, 25% of teachers leave both DC Public Schools and DC Charter Schools annually.<sup>1</sup> That compares to a typical urban district turnover rate of 16-19%. As a system, DCPS loses about 70% of its teachers in five years, compared to a 45% average at 16 urban districts reported in a recent study. Schools in Wards 5 and 8 lose 80% of their teaching staff in five years. DC has also experienced a sharp drop in teachers of color in the past decade. Why does this all matter? There is no debate in the research<sup>2</sup> - teacher turnover harms student achievement<sup>3</sup>, school

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sboe.dc.gov/publication/sboe-teacher-turnover-report-2018>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.winginstitute.org/teacher-retention-turnover-all-research>

<sup>3</sup> [https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/4.full\\_.pdf](https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/4.full_.pdf)

climate<sup>4</sup>, and student relationships that are key to their long-term success.<sup>5</sup> For more, please see our full FAQs on teacher retention in the District linked below.<sup>6</sup>

### *Those numbers seem to indicate a crisis...but what about the “good turnover”?*

Is there such a thing as good turnover? Of course. Every profession and workplace needs new blood and new ideas, and will also have some practitioners serving in positions that are not right for them. In education, we should be especially concerned about teachers who have a determinant effect on the future of our children staying in jobs for which they are not right. That said, many in the corporate world follow the 10% rule (also called the “vitality curve,” famously established by General Electric CEO Jack Welch). The theory is that 20% of your workforce is the most productive, 75% is adequate (and can improve), and 10% should be fired annually.<sup>7</sup> Those who study corporate turnover, such as Gallup, have generally agreed on numbers similar to 10% as a level of healthy turnover.<sup>8</sup> Of course, you only want 10% turnover if all 10% are low performers. Others have suggested turnover as high as 15% annually can be normal, especially in high burnout profession like teaching, nursing, tech and others. However, Washington D.C. currently has a teacher turnover rate of 25% annually across both sectors and approaches 33% in our highest need schools. **That level of churn far surpasses any normal standard- both across all professions and when compared to similar urban education districts in the United States.**

*In the corporate sector  
10 % turnover is considered  
healthy,  
15 % is high.  
DC has 25 % annual  
teacher turnover.*

## II. Why are Teachers Leaving?

Some have argued that D.C.’s turnover is higher than other places because D.C. is a more transient city. These arguments do not hold up. First, even according to the ranking systems that rate D.C. higher than others, D.C.’s transience (meaning those who leave the metro area – and thus the regional job market) is lower than New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> When compared to all cities, including medium-sized cities, D.C. does not make the top ten in terms of transience.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, transience in D.C. is particularly hard to measure. Because most studies of transience here use tax filings from D.C. but not the region as a whole, they fail to capture regional migration.<sup>11</sup> In another jurisdiction, a move from Chicago to the suburb of Evanston, for example, would not be counted as transience, whereas a move from D.C. to Bethesda or Arlington would. Thus, D.C.’s transience is likely over-estimated in many surveys.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ascd.org/publications/researchbrief/v2n19/toc.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/beyond-numbers-how-teacher-turnover-and-shortages-undermine-teacher-student-relationships>

<sup>6</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JDme5\\_rpKTMKEWGaHajb18LzwrQNIj0SdcCi7KWYvRc/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JDme5_rpKTMKEWGaHajb18LzwrQNIj0SdcCi7KWYvRc/edit?usp=sharing)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.inc.com/paul-b-brown/should-you-fire-10-of-your-employees-every-year.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/316/truth-about-turnover.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <https://moneywise.com/a/people-cant-flee-these-us-cities-fast-enough>

<sup>10</sup> <https://smartasset.com/mortgage/the-most-transient-cities-in-america>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2016/01/13/we-need-to-stop-calling-d-c-a-transient-city/>

According to a 2018 report, New York City's annual teacher turnover rate is 18%,<sup>12</sup> compared to 25% in DCPS, despite New York having a higher level of transience. Los Angeles also has higher transience than D.C. While we could not find an overall turnover/retention rate, L.A. Unified School District reported retaining 98% of new teachers in 2016-2017, up from 91% in 2013-2014, thanks in large part to intensive beginning teacher support programs.<sup>13</sup> In short, high teacher turnover is not inevitable due to a relatively high level of transience.

*We do have some data* on why teachers are leaving in D.C. In 2018 Bellwether Education, using data provided by DCPS exit surveys, analyzed the reasons for teacher departures, especially among high performing teachers as measured by the DCPS IMPACT teacher evaluation system.<sup>14</sup> They excluded teachers who said relocation or retirement were their reasons for leaving, or who indicated DCPS could not have done anything to retain them. We should note, anecdotally, that many teachers report their schools losing experienced teachers due to early retirement, especially when school leadership changes, and that relocation is sometimes also an indicator of job dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, with those factors excluded, the study looked at the top reasons that “high performing” teachers left DCPS. The top factors were work/life balance, school leadership, career change, and the desire for leadership opportunities. While many of these are concerns in other “high burnout” professions, they’re not inevitable. **Substantial research and examples from other professions demonstrate the power to change these factors through a concerted approach that elevates the profession and addresses the culture at the root of high turnover.**

The top factors [in teacher departures among high performers] were work/life balance, school leadership, career change and the desire for leadership opportunities.

- Bellwether Education

While the IMPACT teacher evaluation was not cited as the top departure reason for high performers, it was cited as a top three reason by teachers across performance groups, including 29% of effective teachers. Suspicions have long lingered that the IMPACT rating system, whereby teachers and principals are responsible for improving numbers quickly or facing ratings that can quickly lead to job dismissal, is more of a factor than survey results would show. This demonstrates the clear need to prioritize explicit work on improving adult culture and moving towards more effective models of collaboration.

When asked what strategies might have retained them, the top cited strategies among top performers were more scheduling flexibility and more behavioral support. **High performing teachers of color named more leadership opportunities as the top strategy that would have retained them.**

We also have high rates of principal turnover, with 25% of schools opening the year with a new principal annually. We cannot entirely separate the discussions of teacher and principal turnover, as they are fundamentally linked. The Learning Policy Institute is undertaking a research project with the National Association of Secondary School Principals that highlights the need to focus on a pipeline of quality school leaders that can support quality teachers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://citylimits.org/2018/10/18/will-the-citys-new-schools-contract-reduce-the-unequal-impact-of-teacher-turnover/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://laschoolreport.com/new-teacher-retention-at-a-record-high-lausd-is-keeping-98-percent-of-its-teachers/>

<sup>14</sup> [https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/DCPS%20Retention%20Deck\\_5.7.18\\_FINAL.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/DCPS%20Retention%20Deck_5.7.18_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/NASSP\\_LPI\\_Principal\\_Turnover\\_Research\\_Review\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/NASSP_LPI_Principal_Turnover_Research_Review_REPORT.pdf)

“ ‘How much say does the faculty collectively have?’ And, ‘How much leeway do you have in your classroom over a series of issues?’ It turns out both levels are really important for decisions whether to stay or to part. And what's interesting about this finding [is that] this would not cost money to fix. This is an issue of management.”<sup>1</sup> - Richard Ingersoll, University of Pennsylvania

***There are other factors that are unique to DC:*** a highly politicized system of mayoral control that drives demand for quick success (which can often put counterproductive pressure on principals and teachers alike), two nearly even public school sectors that drive both teacher and student instability (like mid-year transitions) and shorter principal contracts than in many other districts. **But we also should not focus on the local factors and research alone, as it is possible, even likely, DC is simply not doing as good of a job as other urban districts promoting the retention strategies.**

Dr. Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania is one of the top researchers in the country regarding teacher working conditions and the issue of teacher turnover and has produced more substantive research on the topic than any other leading researcher.<sup>16</sup> He believes that lack of voice in teachers' schools and lack of autonomy over their work are

the principal drivers of turnover throughout the country, even where salaries are low. He says “I've worked with these data a lot going back last couple of decades. Where nationally, large samples of teachers are asked, ‘How much say does the faculty collectively have?’ And, ‘How much leeway do you have in your classroom over a series of issues?’ It turns out both levels are really important for decisions whether to stay or to part. And what's interesting about this finding [is that] this would not cost money to fix. This is an issue of management.”<sup>17</sup>

While school demographics and poverty levels are often correlated with high levels of turnover, most researchers believe the relationship in *not* causal. In other words, there are many reasons why people leave high-poverty schools, but the reasons many expect – difficulty teaching students who may be grade levels behind or student behavior concerns – are generally not the top concerns. Instead, it's how schools approach those problems. Ingersoll notes on behavior concerns that what teachers want in an approach is one where administrators “Get the teachers on board. You get everyone together and say, ‘Look, we have this issue. Do we want to have a rule or not? What would it be? How do we want to address it?’ And a decision is collectively made as opposed to being imposed on the faculty.” A 2009 study also found that student characteristics, though predictive of turnover, are not the cause. Rather, a variety of working conditions are the likeliest contributors.<sup>18</sup>

“A 2009 study also found that student characteristics, though predictive of turnover, are not the cause. Rather, a variety of working conditions are the likeliest contributors.”

Because so many of the teachers who leave are teachers in their first five years, Ingersoll has regularly advocated for stronger mentoring programs that are most effective when you free up the time of new teachers to spend time with veteran teachers, get to know them and learn from them. Over-structuring mentorship programs, however, can also be problematic, making it feel like another mandated initiative and lowering a teacher's sense of trust and autonomy – which can contribute to higher turnover. Mentor programs must be structured to support effective relationships. Being an excellent teacher doesn't always translate into being an excellent mentor; many current systems

<sup>16</sup> <https://scholar.gse.upenn.edu/rmi>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/03/30/395322012/the-hidden-costs-of-teacher-turnover>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15327930pje8003\\_4](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15327930pje8003_4)

that identify mentors confuse this. Effective programs must include opportunities for mentors to collaborate with each other and share expertise.

### III. How does DC track teacher turnover?

Incompletely. DC Public Schools has not publicly reported annual teacher retention. On the other hand, DCPS has reported their retention of effective and highly effective teachers in recent years, suggesting the numbers are privately tracked. Current DCPS teacher retention rates have been produced by data analyst Mary Levy for many years, who has worked through an arduous process comparing year to year rosters. Those numbers do not account for transfers between schools but only the year to year tally at each individual school. Meanwhile, charter schools do individually report their teacher retention numbers annually as part of their annual reports. The numbers are not, however, audited or independently verified. In recent years, in fact, many have reported numbers that appear to be inaccurate, and in a surprisingly high number of cases, seem to have confused retention and attrition.

In October of 2018 The State Board of Education released their report on teacher retention, the most comprehensive to date that has reported retention in both sectors. The State Board commissioned Mary Levy for the report, so the numbers in this report were arrived at using the same methodology and therefore cannot be used to report on transfers or answer important questions like where teachers are going. DCPS uses an exit survey, which is part of the process of announcing one's resignation from DCPS, but does not publicly report that data. Some charter schools use an exit survey and some do not, but there is no universal exit survey for DC teachers or public reporting on that data.

### IV. The Cost of Turnover

Ingersoll, who has consulted schools on teacher retention for decades, has noted that schools, unlike most businesses, seem to view turnover as cost-free when it's in fact very costly. "There's a tremendous amount of research in business schools on the whole issue of employee turnover. And the corporate sector certainly understands turnover is not cost-free. And there's this one industry that's never been paid attention to, and that's education."

**\$40 Million**  
The estimated cost DC has sunk in turnover related expenses in the past five years- money that could have directly supported school and student growth

The Learning Policy Institute has calculated the cost to a district or LEA of losing one teacher is approximately \$20,000.<sup>19</sup> There are roughly 4,000 teachers in DCPS and nearly as many in the charter sector. With 70% attrition in the last five years, the city (across both districts) has lost nearly \$112,000,000. If we brought DC's turnover down to the national average for urban districts, we'd have spent \$72,000,000 instead. That means DC has wasted nearly \$40,000,000 that could have been used on better development and support for our teachers, investment in community schools, mental health supports for students, wrap around services and community schools, support for ELL and SPED students, and so much more. *At a time when budget cuts at schools through the district are steep, 40 million over five years is nothing to sneeze at. This is a problem worth solving.*

Since teacher retention begins with strong school leadership, we must also reinforce the need for consistency in the principal position. An estimate from the Carnegie Foundation puts the cost of a new principal hire as \$75,000 and highlights the negative impact of

<sup>19</sup> <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/the-cost-of-teacher-turnover>

principal churn, especially on students in low achieving, high need schools.<sup>20</sup> For more on the background of principal retention and key recommendations, explore this research (linked below) from the Learning Policy Institute.<sup>21</sup>

## V. What we don't know and need to know

There are many areas of study that would help us better understand why teachers leave and what we can do to keep them. It would be useful to know:

- Of those leaving, what percent are lead classroom teachers, aides, special education teachers, etc. Currently we have not standardized our definition of teachers.
- How support staff turnover compares to classroom teacher turnover.
- What teacher retention is by subject area.
- How many teachers are leaving mid-year.
- How many teachers are transferring between schools each year and during their careers.
- Which programs are better preparing teachers that stay and perform well over time by tracking teachers based on their teacher training (pipeline).
- Racial demographics by school, in both sectors, and how turnover numbers differ by race, gender, and age, among other factors.
- How common it is for DC teachers to travel between sectors over their career, which way they normally move, and how often teachers move back to the profession.
- If the reasons for leaving DCPS and charter schools are different. And if so, how? What trends emerge?
- When teachers re-locate, how often that is preventable.
- The effect of principal retention on teacher retention and correlations between an individual principal's years at the school and the school's teacher retention rate.
- Correlations between declining budgets, declining enrollments, and teacher loss.

## VI. Recommendations

- A universal teacher exit survey used by all DC Public and Public Charter Schools and administered by OSSE or the State Board of Education with publicly shared data
- Extensive research that dives into the reasons why teachers *do* stay to report on what is working in certain DC school contexts
- Implementing more authentic teacher leadership opportunities, especially for teachers of color, that do not involve leaving the classroom
- Implementing teacher-led professional development models and distributive leadership
- Working to build positive, sustainable adult culture through explicit work to build school leader-to-teacher relationships
- Implementing principal professional development to supporting positive working conditions for staff
- Moving toward more holistic teacher growth and evaluation systems that focus on teacher growth and development and that provide more autonomy to proven teachers.
- Exploring and implementing flexible scheduling and part-time teaching options, especially for veteran teachers
- Carefully designed mentorship programs that pair veteran teachers and new teachers in authentic learning spaces. This requires a holistic approach that 1) provides new teachers with a reasonable, lower-prep course-load; 2) provides new teachers additional time for the mentoring relationship

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.carnegie.org/news/articles/the-high-cost-of-principal-turnover/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/NASSP\\_LPI\\_Principal\\_Turnover\\_Research\\_Review\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/NASSP_LPI_Principal_Turnover_Research_Review_REPORT.pdf)

and/or collaboration with colleagues who teach the same subject; 3) provides veteran teachers a reduced course-load to make real time to participate; 4) is well marketed as a leadership opportunity, with thorough screening; and lastly, 5) properly supports and *compensates* the veteran teachers. This should not be tagged on to pre-existing responsibilities, but be its own role. If it is just tagged on, it will not happen with fidelity.

- Consideration that incentive programs for public servants be extended to teachers, including housing stipends, expanded loan forgiveness, sabbaticals, etc.

For more information contact [scott@weareempowered.org](mailto:scott@weareempowered.org)

For specific examples of teacher-led professional development models, holistic teacher growth and evaluation systems, successful principal professional development and more, check out the resources available from the Learning Policy Institute (<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/>).

## VII. **ADDITIONAL DATA APPENDIX - A few highlights beyond those to which we refer and link in the briefing above.**

1. Change in teachers of color- Washington D.C. compared

Source: Albert Shanker Institute Report on the State of Teacher Diversity.

[http://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/shanker/files/The State of Teacher Diversity\\_0.pdf](http://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/shanker/files/The%20State%20of%20Teacher%20Diversity_0.pdf)

**CON-2: CHANGES IN SHARES OF THE TEACHING FORCE IN ALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY**

CITY	SECTOR (duration of data)	WHITE TEACHERS	BLACK TEACHERS	HISPANIC TEACHERS
BOSTON	DISTRICT (10 years)	+0.3	-3.1	+1.0
	CHARTER (4 years)	+1.8	-1.0	-0.8
CHICAGO	DISTRICT (9 Years)	+4.2	-10.9	+3.8
	CHARTER (3 years)	+1.7	-2.5	-0.3
CLEVELAND	DISTRICT (11 years)	-1.4	-1.3	+1.0
	CHARTER (11 years)	+18.7	-18.2	-0.7
LOS ANGELES	DISTRICT (9 years)	-6.6	-2.4	+7.1
	CHARTER (9 years)	12.8	-1.2	+13.0
NEW ORLEANS	CITYWIDE (10 years)	+19.8	-24.2	+2.0
NEW YORK CITY	DISTRICT (10 years)	+0.2	-3.1	+0.7
	CHARTER (2 years)	-4.7	-1.3	+0.2
PHILADELPHIA	DISTRICT (11 years)	+4.2	-9.5	-0.1
	CHARTER (5 years)	+6.9	-7.7	+1.2
SAN FRANCISCO	DISTRICT (9 years)	-5.0	-1.6	+3.0
WASHINGTON, D.C.*	CITYWIDE (8 years)	+23.0	-27.5	+3.1

\*As noted in the city profile, these Washington, D.C., figures are based on the U.S. Department of Education SASS study, since we were unable to obtain data from D.C. state and city agencies.

This chart illustrates two problems: 1) Washington, D.C. has experienced a larger drop in black teachers than any comparable city measured, and 2) Washington, D.C. still does not track and report official teacher demographic data. If we care about it, we should count it.

2. Most teachers who have left DCPS over the past five years have been those rated effective or highly effective – 53% of those who have left, total.

Source: From the D.C. State Board of Education Report on Teacher Retention (2018)

**Table 10: Numbers and Percentages of DCPS Classroom Teachers Leaving DCPS by Final IMPACT Rating SY 2012-13 to SY 2016-17**

Final IMPACT Rating	Left 2013	Left 2014	Left 2015	Left 2016	Left 2017	5 year total	% of 5 year total
Ineffective	38	52	46	50	79	265	9%
Minimally Effective	85	86	77	81	107	436	14%
Developing	137	108	182	148	133	708	23%
Effective	217	223	236	205	218	1,099	35%
Highly Effective	94	123	130	137	123	607	19%
Total	571	592	671	621	660	3,115	100%

Total Percentage of teachers lost ineffective or minimally effective- 23 %

Total percentage of teachers lost that were rated effective or highly effective- 53 %

19

While many have pointed to DCPS’s rate of retaining its effective and highly effective teachers, which annually clocks in close to 90%, we have done a poor job keeping effective and highly effective teachers in the three-to-five-year range, with over 1,700 such teachers leaving in the past five years.

3. Top performers want part-time and family leave options

Source: Bellwether Education Report on DCPS Exit Survey Data

[https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/DCPS Retention Deck\\_5.7.18\\_FINAL.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/DCPS%20Retention%20Deck_5.7.18_FINAL.pdf)

To high performers, “schedule flexibility” mostly meant part-time and leave options to spend time with family

Work/Life Balance

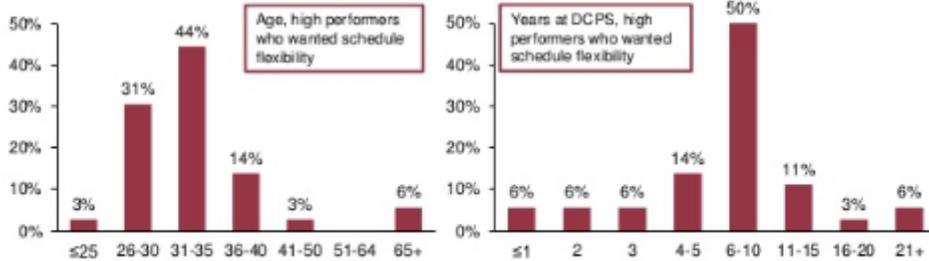
About half the text responses from high-performing teachers who wanted “more schedule flexibility” referred to **more part-time and leave options to spend time with family**. (N=18)

“I would have really appreciated a **longer-term leave option** or the ability to work in a more flexible position for a year while my child is young”

“I was really hoping to have a job with more flexibility or a **part-time position** so I could spend more time with my family while my kids are young”

“After the birth of my daughter this school year, [...] DCPS would not allow me to be away for **more than the 16 weeks**”

Teachers in their **early thirties / with 6-10 years experience at DCPS** were the largest group of high performers who wanted schedule flexibility. (N=36)



\* Not counting retiring/relocating teachers

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30

It is not uncommon for the teaching profession to lose great teachers when they start a family, but it is not inevitable. Schools districts around the country and schools here in DC have implemented flexible teacher scheduling, allowing teachers to teach 80% time, half-time or take sabbaticals as strategies to retain experienced teachers.

For more information contact [scott@weareempowered.org](mailto:scott@weareempowered.org)