

SUPPORTING AND RETAINING

Supporting and Retaining Good Teachers

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A Calculus teacher, Mr. Peters recently said, "One of these days, I'm going to quit teaching... The sooner the better eh?" (2003). While the statement he made in class was no doubt meant to be humorous, the fact that teachers across the country are leaving America's classrooms in droves is no laughing matter. The revolving-door turnover rate in teaching is high compared to non-teaching occupations and is considered a factor that undermines effective teaching in our schools.

Recent research by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future shows that approximately one-third of new teachers left the profession within their

first three years of teaching and one-half of new teachers left in the first five years of teaching (2003). The attrition rate for professionals who enter teaching through some "alternative" pathways is as high as 60 percent and the turnover rate in low-income urban schools is almost a third higher than it is for teachers in all schools. There are indications that up to 25 percent of those teachers who leave their classroom may return to a different classroom at some time in the future (National Commission of Teaching and America's Future, 2003), but the increased teacher turnover and attrition rates burden our school districts financially and systemically. The high teacher turnover rate reduces the sense of community, stability, and consistency that helps build strong schools; furthermore, constant personnel changes impact student learning.

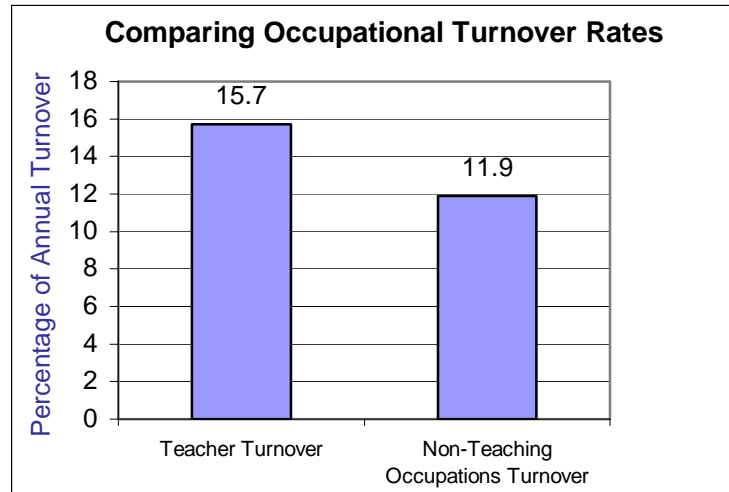


Figure 1. Source: Richard M. Ingersoll, adapted for NCTAF from "The Teacher Shortage: A Case of Wrong Diagnosis and Wrong Prescription," NASSP Bulletin, 86 (June 2002): 16-31.

Seventy percent of the principals surveyed in a 2001 study felt that teachers with prior experience were more knowledgeable about curriculum, assessment, and instruction (Reston). It stands to reason that teachers who know the protocol, layout, colleagues, and expectations of a school will be more self-assured and effective in the classroom. “New teachers thrown into schools with high turnover and limited opportunities for mentoring by accomplished teachers feel ‘lost at sea’” (Kauffmann, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002). If teachers feel lost at sea, imagine the impact inexperienced teachers have on their students. In a study conducted in 1996, “children who had the least effective teachers three years in a row posted academic achievement gains that were 54 percent lower than the gains of children who had the most effective teachers three years in a row” (Rivers, J. & Sanders, W., 1996). If we agree with the premise that experienced teachers are more effective instructors than inexperienced teachers, then clearly our students are paying the ultimate price. Schools districts need to focus on keeping teachers long enough to help them reach levels of competency that are achieved with time and experience.

School administrators need to focus on how many teachers they are losing at the end of the school year and why. While retirement does factor into the number of teachers leaving the profession, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and NCTAF State Partners reports that the combined number of new entrants and re-entrants greatly exceeds the retirement rate (2002). The commission also reported that, “In most cases poor school performance is being driven not by an insufficient supply of teachers, but by extremely high turnover rates that stem from chronic, unaddressed conditions in the schools” (2002). What are the conditions that provoke teachers to walk through that revolving door? Generally speaking teachers leave because of low salaries and because of non-supportive working conditions. While

salary structure is a problem that needs to be dealt with from a contractual viewpoint that involves negotiation and commitment at the school board, teacher union, and community level, it would seem that creating a school environment that supports quality learning is probably best approached starting at the mid-administrative level. School principals and curriculum support personnel need to field issues that relate directly to the support of quality teaching. What conditions should be present to create a supportive teaching environment?

The National Academy of Science summarized decades of research and identified four fundamental elements that need to be in place to support learning: a learner-centered focus, a strong knowledge base, emphasis on assessment, and a sense of community (2003).

Administrators can best address the identified elements by developing a strong internal professional development plan that includes strategies for improving students' learning over time. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) synthesized years of research and studied several examples of successful practice to develop staff development standards that encompass context, process, and content (National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development, 2001).

Contextual standards encompass the development of learning communities, involve strong leadership and require resources that support adult learning and collaboration. Developing a learning community involves providing opportunities for professional learning based on collaboration rather than required workshop attendance. Teachers that meet on a regular basis (more than once a week or once a month) have time to create joint lesson plans and to problem solve. Team members involved in these smaller, focused communities take collective responsibility for their learning and that of their students and take turns observing one another in the classroom. Members of the team identify areas of need, seek and attend workshops based on

those needs, and invite outside consultants to assist them in acquiring skills and knowledge.

These types of learning communities or learning teams are particularly helpful to new teachers, as natural mentoring tends to occur in the collaborative environment and daily issues that occur in the classroom can be addressed sooner rather than later.

Leadership in learning communities can come from all ranks of the organization and should include community members, administrators, support staff, board trustees as well as teachers. Skillful leaders are cognizant of the organization's culture; clear in their own values as they pertain to the organization, and work to establish structures that support ongoing professional learning and continuous improvement. Practically speaking, it is also important that these leaders work to assure that annual calendars, employee contracts, and daily schedules provide adequate time that allows frequent opportunities for collaboration and learning.

There seems to be a general belief that sending new teachers to conferences and workshops will improve learning communities, however, best practice dictates that the bulk of staff training is most effective when it takes place as part of the school day with coaches (like curriculum or technology specialists) available in house. In a perfect world funding resources should also be used to provide stipends to lead teachers who are willing to serve as official mentors or members of training cadres. Schools in New York have started to establish formal mentorship program to conform to the regulations established by the State Commissioner of Education but an informal investigation of several districts in the SCT BOCES region indicates that most regional districts cannot afford to fund mentorship programs, though district representatives were quick to attest that the programs were in place voluntarily.

Good staff development practices also support processes that use data to evaluate student learning as well as data from various sources. Staff development leaders should try to design

staff development elements for seminal and comprehensive purposes and must decide what types of evidence will be used as indicators of successful staff development practice. Data should also be used to indicate the impact of staff development on teacher practice and student learning.

As staff development trainers seek to find a focus for professional learning opportunities in their schools they must be aware and resistant to “fad” speakers or trendy concepts. It is imperative that teachers and administrators take time to methodically study research claims that are made by advocates of a particular approach to instructional improvement or school-wide reform. Pilot studies should play an important role in the full-scale implementation process of any new approach to learning. In tough economic times leaders cannot afford to completely “buy” into any broad-reaching programs or incentives that could prove ineffective later.

Staff developers must also be skillful in the application of various adult-learning strategies as well. Adult learners are busy and are often open to technology-implemented training that allows self-pacing. Discussion boards, video tapes, and e-mail collaboration may be effectively used as tools for collaboration as long as “real-time” collaboration is also made available. New teachers who are often raising young children and working on advanced degrees are particularly open to technology-rich learning opportunities. Staff development leaders should be careful not to let the technology isolate teachers (particularly new teachers)...technology should not replace collegiality.

The NSDC advocates that school districts dedicate at least ten percent of their budgets to staff development and that at least 25 percent of an educator’s work time be devoted to learning and collaboration with colleagues (2001). These recommendations are clearly not being met in the SCT BOCES region where staff development budgets hover in the one percent range and teacher time is premium; planning periods in several schools do not coincide with peers that

teach similar age groups or similar curriculum. These facts were disheartening and the financial horizon looks bleak. Not surprisingly, many of the schools also have a high teacher turnover rate.

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