

What Teachers Need

Research into why teachers leave the profession is helping lawmakers craft better policies to hold onto them.



BY MICHELLE EXSTROM

Todd Allen, a young, enthusiastic special education teacher, was living his lifelong dream of working in an urban school. In his first three years, he was optimistic about his career. He felt he was making a difference in the lives of his students.

But after his fourth year of teaching, things changed. Allen became disillusioned by the ever-mounting federal and state administrative requirements for special education and the disappearance of aides. He left his hard-to-staff position and went into fifth grade general education.

Dustin Kramer faced similar frustration. He was a middle school social studies teacher in his rural home town, but after seven years grew frustrated with a disengaged principal who rarely visited his classroom and made

little effort to enforce appropriate student behavior. He felt a similar lack of support from his superintendent. He often worked late hours and questioned whether it was all worth only \$37,000 per year. Kramer ended up leaving teaching to try his hand as a financial adviser.

While frustrated employees often look for new jobs, teachers are of particular concern because new and veteran teachers are leaving in large numbers, and many older teachers will soon be retiring.

“Teacher turnover is not cost free. We have long recognized this in the private sector, and now we need to recognize this in the public education sector as well,” says Richard Ingersoll, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. “There are significant costs associated with recruiting, inducting, mentoring and training new hires.”

Researchers have long conducted national studies to understand why teachers leave the profession. A new effort, however, is

focusing on studies at the state and district level that lawmakers say is giving them new insights into why teachers quit.

At least 10 states have made these efforts in the last two years and have found some surprises, including that low salaries are not the top reason teachers leave.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Ingersoll has reported that about one-third of new teachers leave the classroom within the first three years, and as many as half leave after just five years. And a new report from the National Commission on Teacher and America’s Future predicts that as many as 50 percent will retire over the upcoming decade. School districts all over the country struggle, in particular, to get and keep math, science and special education teachers.

Using a national survey of school personnel conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000-2001, Ingersoll found several factors for dissatisfied teachers: too little

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CENTER SEEKS BEST POLICIES FOR TEACHERS

preparation time, heavy teaching load, poor salary and benefits, and a lack of say in factors that affect teaching and student achievement. Other researches found similar results.

“Most of these results are pretty common sense,” says Ingersoll. “Nothing is really too surprising. This confirms what we all might guess.”

State lawmakers, however, wanted more specific information about why teachers were leaving jobs in their states.

In 2002, North Carolina policymakers became the first to design a survey to ask educators about their working conditions, under the direction of Governor Mike Easley and the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission. The survey was sent out to every licensed public school educator in the state. In spring 2008, North Carolina repeated the survey for the fourth time, with 87 percent of the state’s educators completing it and making school-specific data available for every one of the state’s traditional public schools.

“We knew we had a teacher shortage and didn’t fully understand why we couldn’t get enough teachers or keep the ones we had,” says Representative Maggie Jeffus, a retired educator and strong supporter of the survey.

Jeffus thinks the survey gave lawmakers a better handle on how to hold onto teachers.

North Carolina Representative Rick Glazier admits he was skeptical. He had concerns about the integrity of the data and thought the survey might be more about PR than substance. But now he’s a believer. “Information is what legislators operate on, and this is great currency for us.”

OTHER STATES JOIN IN

Other states have created their own studies as well. In partnership with the National Education Association and Eric Hirsch of the New Teacher Center, six states and one district—Alabama, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, West Virginia and the Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia—

While concern about the loss of good teachers is emerging as a top concern for lawmakers, a group in California has been grappling with the issue since the late 1980s.

The New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz, Calif., has primarily focused its work on developing policies and programs for strong mentoring and induction programs to support beginning teachers. Research shows that a high-quality program improves the quality of teaching and retention rates among teachers in their first few years.

To complement this work, the center also is now focusing on teaching and learning conditions. They believe healthy teaching and learning conditions are building blocks for an environment where teachers and students can reach their full potential.

They are working with one of the top experts in the country on this issue, Eric Hirsch, to survey teachers about their working conditions and to analyze the results for recommendations to state and local policymakers. Since this partnership began in 2007, 10 states and one school district have embarked on this effort.

Hirsch and the New Teacher Center believe this work will lead states to important teaching reform.

“It’s not just about finding the right people to staff our nation’s classrooms, but providing them with teaching conditions that allow them to do their best work,” he says. “Positive teaching conditions, where educators are supported and empowered, are essential to creating schools where teachers want to work and students thrive.”

developed and distributed their own surveys in 2008. They heard back from more than 350,000 educators at almost 10,000 schools. And Colorado, Maryland and Vermont surveyed educators this year.

The short online surveys are tailored to individual states and districts to ensure their relevance with current initiatives and priorities. Yet there are standard questions in all the surveys to allow for comparisons. The survey results are used to improve schools, never to punish them.

“Teachers now feel a part of the process,” says Glazier. “This survey allows them to be heard and provide input, but preserves their anonymity.”

Kansas Senator John Vratil agrees. “It’s always important for any employer to seek feedback from employees about what improvements need to be made and what improves morale.”

EDUCATORS ARE TEACHING LAWMAKERS

Educators have consistently indicated that

they need:

- ◆ Supportive school leadership
- ◆ Engaged community and parents
- ◆ A safe environment
- ◆ Sufficient facilities
- ◆ Enough time to plan and collaborate
- ◆ High-quality professional development
- ◆ An atmosphere of trust and respect
- ◆ Effective school improvement teams
- ◆ Appropriate assignments and workload.

When these needs are met, research shows teachers stay and students achieve at higher levels. And when these needs are not met, teachers leave more often and student scores are low.

In Alabama, teachers also reported that these factors, more than high salaries, influenced their decision to work in a low-performing school.

These results indicate school success and educator satisfaction cannot always be measured by counting computers, class sizes, calendar days and salaries. It’s more about the quality of the work environment.

“With our results, we’ll be able to pick



REPRESENTATIVE
MAGGIE JEFFUS
NORTH CAROLINA



REPRESENTATIVE
RICK GLAZIER
NORTH CAROLINA



SENATOR
JOHN VRATIL
KANSAS



REPRESENTATIVE
MICHAEL MERRIFIELD
COLORADO

low-hanging fruit that we might not otherwise have known would make such a difference,” says Colorado Representative Michael Merrifield, an educator for 30 years. “We might even address these challenges with a minimal fiscal impact.”

In most states, the survey also has given state and local policymakers the opportunity to work together toward a common reform agenda. At the state level, legislators, teacher associations, agency leaders and the governor have used the results to support stronger, more effective education policy, improve current programs, and provide information to support future school initiatives. The survey data also have provided an important opportunity for local district and building leaders

to identify strengths and areas for improvement and create plans to meet their special needs.

In North Carolina, the four surveys have led policymakers to support strong school leaders and better working conditions. They’ve identified teacher recruitment and retention as a key problem they need to solve. They also put more effort into principal and teacher preparation programs, and evaluations for principals that include working conditions.

Jeffus also sponsored legislation to require schools to carve out more free time for teachers to plan and collaborate.

Glazier says the data gave legislators a new perspective.

“This helps us to understand that teacher retention isn’t all about the money,” he says, “and highlights noneconomic issues that we can address—issues that we intuitively may know, but teachers now confirm.”

Vratil is less optimistic, however, about the effect in Kansas. He believes the survey results were less surprising and have not led to much change in teacher policy.

INFORMATION A PRIORITY

Despite budget restraints, many state legislators feel that getting this kind of information is too important not to fund the surveys. The Colorado General Assembly funded the surveys while repealing most other education reforms passed during the 2008 session.

“This survey will help policymakers without education experience to understand the challenges in the classroom—how difficult it really is and how unneeded and unnecessary mandates affect the teachers,” Merrifield says. “This is an opportunity to open some eyes.”

The North Carolina legislature is facing a similar debate over future studies of working conditions. With a severe budget shortfall, some argue that money for future surveys should be cut. Glazier has made strong arguments, however, for maintaining funding.

“For a relatively small investment of \$215,000 every other year, this gives us school-level detail, and gives teachers the opportunity to be heard,” he says. “This is a great investment that just makes sense. There’s really no downside.”



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