

The Teacher Shortage in America: Pressing Concerns

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ABSTRACT

The teacher shortage in America's public schools in the last two decades has caused much concern in both political and educational arenas. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), 8% of teachers changed professions during the 2003-04 school year and another 8% transferred to a different school. Every year these figures continue to grow and the reasons for teachers leaving the profession are mounting. It is vitally important for school administrators to find innovative, effective ways to deal with the impact of the teacher shortage. Comprehensive induction programs and the utilization of mentor teachers are discussed as ways to combat the attrition rates for new teachers; however, no one-size-fits-all approach has been identified.

Introduction

Over the past two decades concerns have been repeatedly voiced regarding the alarming shortage of teachers in America's public schools. The teacher shortage has clearly had a detrimental impact on the quality of education students receive and has been prominently addressed by both political and educational leaders. Explanations for the teacher deficit are often attributed to a growing student population and an aging teacher work-force. While these two factors are clearly a part of the equation, other more influential factors have contributed to this pressing concern. A policy brief released in 2007 by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) identifies teacher attrition as a significant factor in today's teacher shortage.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is to identify attrition factors that significantly impact teacher shortages. Effective ways to combat teachers leaving the profession will be discussed.

Attrition Factors

The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) recently reported that 8% of teachers changed professions during the 2003-04 school year and another 8% transferred to a different school. Kopkowski (2008), in *NEA Today*, recently delineated several reasons why teachers leave the profession. Reasons included testing and accountability mandates from federal legislation like “No Child Left Behind”, too little support, student discipline, underfunded programs, lack of influence and respect, and insufficient pay.

Ingersoll and Smith (2003) reported that younger, less experienced teachers are leaving the profession within the first five years at an alarming attrition rate of over 40%. This disturbing trend shows no signs of abating and gives rise to trepidation if teacher retention practices do not become more effective. The authors cite four primary reasons reported by young teachers who left the field: school staffing actions, such as layoffs and school closings, family or personal factors, pursuit of another job, or job dissatisfaction.

The costs related to teacher attrition, whether measured in dollars and cents or otherwise are substantial. The NCTAF (2007) report estimates teacher attrition costs of over \$7 billion each year in America’s public schools. This figure encompasses all aspects of finding, employing, and preparing new teachers to replace those who have left. Measuring the costs of teacher attrition in relation to the academic progress of public school students is much more difficult to assess, but no less significant. Low income and low achieving schools experience high teacher turnover rates. Oftentimes teachers hired to replace those who have left are young, inexperienced, and may not be the most effective with high-need students.

A closer look at the myriad of attrition factors reveals a complex situation that makes it difficult to arrive at a simple, straightforward solution. One contributing factor is the teaching field of the individual in question. Special Education as a field has historically suffered from high rates of attrition, especially in categories serving students with significant needs, such as seriously emotionally disturbed. The settings new teachers find themselves starting out in may prove to be a confounding variable. Rural, urban, or inner city school settings present differing challenges and are oftentimes cited as reasons for leaving the profession (Leech, 2008; McKinney, Berry, Dickerson, Campbell-Whately, 2007). Salary inadequacies and content specific teaching fields combine to influence attrition rates for secondary math and science teachers. Some find better salaries make it impossible to say “no” to the overtures of other professional

opportunities in the private sector (Leech, 2008). Attrition occurs in some situations where teachers are unable to strike a satisfactory balance between work and home life. Difficulties arranging affordable child care on a beginning teacher's salary, increasing time demands outside the classroom pertaining to testing initiatives, and feeling disenfranchised about the lack of control teachers exert over school policies may adversely affect job satisfaction reported by teachers. All of these are potential factors that may lead teachers to abandon the profession and seek employment elsewhere.

Effective Ways to Combat Teacher Attrition

It is vitally important that school administrators find innovative, effective ways to combat the deleterious impact of teachers leaving the profession. The negative impact of teacher attrition, both financially and academically, is taking a major toll on the quality of education America's children and youth are receiving. One straightforward component in an overall solution would be to increase teacher's salaries, but as Ingersoll and Smith (2003) noted the costs may be prohibitive, given the large number of teachers in the workforce. Billingsley (2003) encourages improved working conditions for special education teachers as a means of improving teacher retention. The support of administrators and opportunities for professional growth is imperative. McKinney, et al. (2007) state that retention in high poverty schools will be improved if administrators recruit teachers possessing specific traits. Individuals in the McKinney, et al. study who met the profile of being more successful and able to persevere in urban areas affected by high poverty included the older, more experienced teacher, as well as teachers who were African American.

To be successful in addressing a problem of this size and magnitude, fragmented, isolated responses will not be effective. A NCTAF (2007) policy brief entitled "The High Cost of Teacher Turnover" provides a more detailed comprehensive framework for increasing teacher retention rates. Key components of an in-depth induction program should include increasing the new teacher's knowledge base, welcoming new teachers into a school setting that enhances the long-term professional development of the entire faculty, and encouraging productive communication between members of the school community to focus efforts and improve practices.

Common elements of comprehensive induction programs for beginning teachers include mentoring, social support from supervisory personnel, and opportunities for shared planning with peers (NCTAF 2007). According to data provided by Ingersoll and Smith (2003), the utilization of mentors is a critical factor in teacher retention. Implicit with this approach is that greater outcomes will arrive from models that utilize full-time mentors recognized as master teachers. A related approach would be to have novice teachers serve a one year apprenticeship under the supervision of a mentor teacher.

Adequate social support from supervisory personnel begins with the building principal. A climate of collaboration between administrators, instructional support personnel and teachers must be prevalent in order to allow new teachers to feel

comfortable about seeking assistance as they embark on teaching careers. Kopkowski (2008) alludes to the shortcomings of the “sink or swim” approach long utilized with beginning teachers. Today’s novice teachers are much more likely to benefit from practices that make them feel connected to their peers. This connectedness is enhanced by school leaders who work to ingrain a collaborative culture in their schools through practices such as shared decision-making, common planning periods and long-range professional development targeted at experienced teachers, mentors and new teachers as well.

Concluding Remarks

Induction programs should be developed with the make-up of the school or school district in mind. No one-size-fits-all approach should be implemented. Thoughtful consideration of demographic factors, relevant data pertaining to factors that have influenced prior teacher attrition, and incorporating induction strategies that have proven effective in similar settings can help in the development of an approach that has a greater chance of improving teacher retention.

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