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Editorial Teacher Attrition: An Issue of National Concern

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No matter where you go in your community you are apt to encounter people who used to be teachers. Whereas other occupations speak of "wannabes," the field of teaching is dominated by "used to bes." The following account of a couple who exited the profession offers some insight into the reasons that teachers give for abandoning teaching.

> While visiting friends in Florida I met a married couple who had left careers as high school teachers to start their own house cleaning business. They cheerfully enumerated the advantages of their new job: flexible hours, more time spent together, greater physical fitness, less stress, good salaries/tips, and vacations that were not dictated by the school calendar. True, the couple admitted, they had lost some social status and were no longer working in the profession in which they had invested four years of college study. Yet some of the sources of satisfaction that had eluded them as teachers were accessible to them for the first time. They mentioned such things as the ability to exercise a high level of control over their work and resources, the freedom to select an efficient system of operation, and the luxury of sticking with it. Perhaps most gratifying of all, they now left work behind at the end of the day. Reactions from the pair's former teaching colleagues varied considerably, ranging from those who thought they had lost their minds to those who envied them (Jalongo, Rieg, & Helterbran, 2007, pp. 1–2).

For many years, teacher attrition stories such as this one were dismissed as a natural by-product of the demands of the profession and it often was assumed that those who exited the profession simply were not "teacher material" in the first place. Since the teaching force in the United States is predominantly female, turnover was taken for granted because women frequently left the field to raise families. It is a case of supply and demand. When the supply of teachers is ample replacing teachers is less of a concern; however, when the supply of teachers is inadequate with shortages in some regions of the country and subject areas, teacher attrition begins to generate concern. Consider, for example, these recent statistics:

- Forty-six percent of new teachers nationwide leave the profession within the first five years of service (Ingersoll, 2002a). In urban districts alone, this percentage increases to fifty (Chase, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001).
- Teacher attrition is considerably higher for teachers with emergency certificates, often ranging from 50 to 80% after 2 to 3 years (Johnson, 2006).
- Over 90% of the teachers who are hired in the United States today are replacements for teachers who have left for reasons other than retirement (Ingersoll, 2002b).
- It is estimated that 3.5 million new teachers will need to be hired by 2013 to support increased enrollment in public schools and to replace retiring teachers (Hull, 2004).
- Nearly 540,000 teachers moved to other schools or left the teaching profession in 2000 (Carroll & Fulton, 2004).

Facts and figures such as these beg the question, why? Why are so many bright, enthusiastic, new teachers exiting the profession in record numbers? In Darling-Hammond's (2003) research, the four main reasons for leaving the profession or transferring to another school are: (1) low salaries, (2) unsatisfactory working conditions, (3) inadequate preparation, and (4) lack of mentoring support in the early years. Experienced teachers who resign cite testing and accountability pressures, increased paperwork, negative student attitudes, lack of parental involvement, unresponsive administration, low starting salaries, and the low status of the profession in U.S. society (Tye & O'Brien, 2002).

School districts can no longer afford to be complacent about teachers exiting the profession. The average cost of recruiting, hiring, preparing, and losing a teacher is estimated to be fifty thousand

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dollars (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). In comparison with all other professions, the annual turnover rate for teachers is 6 percent higher, so replacement costs in education are a pervasive problem (Nobscot, 2004). The costs in human capital are considerable as well. Nearly every person who exits the field of teaching in search of greener pastures has invested, at minimum, 4 years of her or his life to earning a teaching degree and meeting the state teacher certification requirements. Although it may be gratifying to see the skills developed in a teacher preparation program translate well into skills required by many other walks of life, it often is poor compensation for the time, effort, and money invested by the individual in becoming a teacher. With so many qualified teachers exiting the profession, many students are experiencing a substandard education in a considerable number of districts. The problem of teacher turnover is particularly acute for early childhood programs outside the public school system; positions in private nursery schools, Head Start, and child care offer notoriously poor salaries and benefits which creates a revolving door in staffing. Simply stated, teacher attrition is disruptive to the education of students. Speaking on behalf of the National Education Association, Chase (2000) contends that "high staff turnover has devastating consequences for children. Research shows that the single most important factor in a child's education is the quality of his or her teachers—and quality depends in large measure upon years of experience" (p. 5).

What does it take to keep experienced, effective teachers? Actually, we know quite a bit about the conditions that encourage them to stay. We know that teachers who did not participate in induction programs (e.g., have an experienced mentor, receive additional training and support) were twice as likely to leave as those who did not (Johnson, 2006). In studies of first-year teachers, several variables contributed to their success: a match between their expectations and the realities of the workplace; evidence of having exerted a positive impact on their students; use of effective strategies to manage their students' behavior; and awareness of the professional culture of the school (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001). Effective schools research is another key to understanding the conditions that encourage teachers to keep teaching. Judith Langer (2002) conducted a five-year study of schools that were effective even though a high proportion of the students would be categorized as "at risk". Interestingly, schools that succeeded despite the odds shared the following characteristics:

- Professionalism is valued
- Teachers have access to professional development resources.
- Teachers are encouraged to function as members of professional communities.
- Teachers participate in meaningful decision-making processes.
- Teachers care about the curriculum and student learning.
- Teachers make the commitment to become lifelong learners (Langer, 2002, p. 1).

Evidently, treating teachers with respect, supporting their professional development, and creating communities of learners in both the student and the teacher populations characterized schools that were successful in promoting high levels of literacy in their students. Research findings such as these make it clear that, when it comes to teacher attrition, the nation needs to move beyond alarming statistics, predicted teacher shortages, and general hand wringing. Attracting and keeping good teachers is an "inside-out" operation, one that requires educational institutions to become better work places and environments that foster professional development.

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