



May 2003

The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage

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Recommended Citation

Ingersoll, R., & Smith, T. M. (2003). The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/126

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Reprinted from *Educational Leadership*, Volume 60, Issue 8, May 2003, pages 30-33.

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The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage

Abstract

In recent years, researchers and policymakers have told us again and again that severe teacher shortages confront schools. They point to a dramatic increase in the demand for new teachers resulting from two converging demographic trends: increasing student enrollments and increasing numbers of teachers reaching retirement age. Shortfalls of teachers, they say, are forcing many school systems to lower their standards for teacher quality (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1997).

Comments

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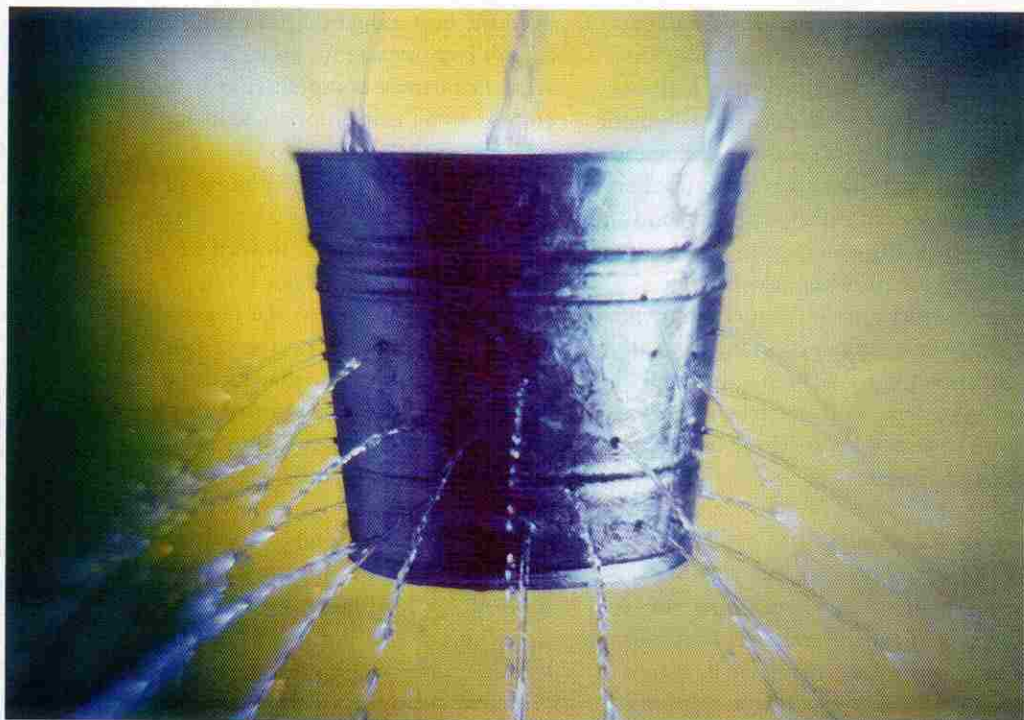
The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage

Loss of new teachers plays a major role in the teacher shortage, but pouring more teachers into the system will not solve the retention problem.

Richard M. Ingersoll and Thomas M. Smith

In recent years, researchers and policy-makers have told us again and again that severe teacher shortages confront schools. They point to a dramatic increase in the demand for new teachers resulting from two converging demographic trends: increasing student enrollments and increasing numbers of teachers reaching retirement age. Shortfalls of teachers, they say, are forcing many school systems to lower their standards for teacher quality (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1997).

Policymakers have often responded to the problem by trying to increase the supply of teachers. States, districts, and schools have instituted a wide range of initiatives to recruit new teachers: career-change programs designed to entice professionals into midcareer switches to teaching; alternative certification programs to allow college graduates to postpone formal education training and



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begin teaching immediately; recruitment of teaching candidates from other countries; and such financial incentives as signing bonuses, student loan forgiveness, housing assistance, and tuition reimbursement (Hirsch, Koppich, & Knapp, 2001). These recruitment efforts are often worthwhile, but, unfor-

tunately, they will not solve the teacher staffing problems that schools face.

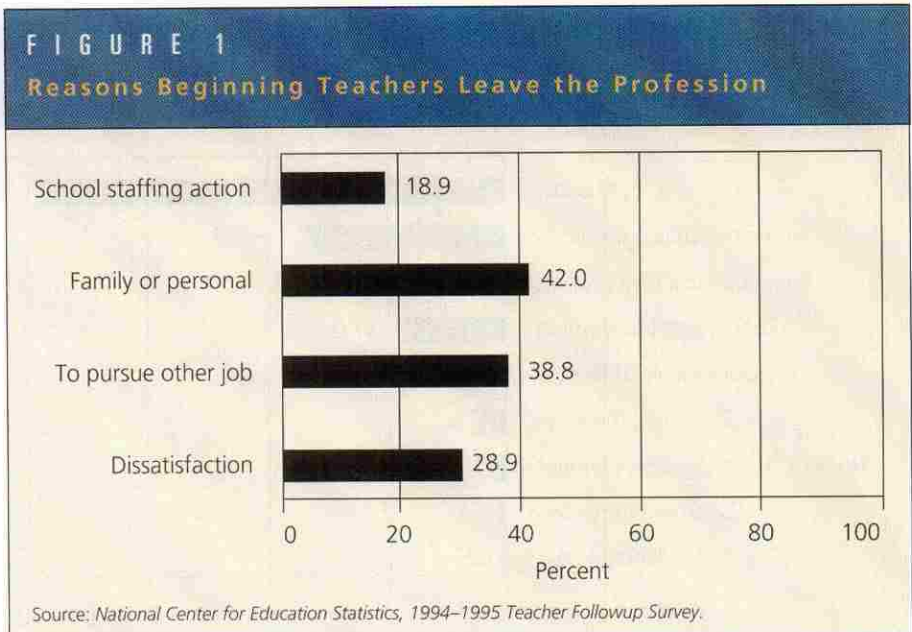
A closer look at the best data available suggests that the conventional wisdom on teacher shortages, although partly correct, also errs in important ways. The demand for teachers has indeed grown. Since 1984, both student

enrollments and teacher retirements have increased (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1997). Substantial numbers of schools with teaching openings have experienced difficulties finding qualified candidates to fill their positions (Ingersoll, 1999). But the data also show that increases in student enrollment and teacher retirements are not the primary causes of the high demand for new teachers and subsequent staffing difficulties. A larger part of the problem is teacher attrition—which is particularly high among teachers in their first few years of service.

Over the past decade, we have undertaken a series of research projects on teacher supply, demand, quality, and shortages using data from the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement, the Teacher Followup Survey (TFS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (Ingersoll, 1999, 2001, 2002; Smith & Ingersoll, 2003). SASS/TFS is the largest and most comprehensive data source available on teachers and on the staffing, occupational, and organizational aspects of schools. Unlike our earlier work, here we focus specifically on beginning teachers and present new data on the reasons behind their attrition.

Understanding Employee Turnover

The teaching occupation suffers from chronic and relatively high annual turnover compared with many other occupations. Total teacher turnover is fairly evenly split between two components: *attrition* (those who leave teaching altogether); and *migration* (those who move to teaching jobs in other schools). Teaching is also a relatively large occupation: It represents 4 percent of the entire civilian work force. There are, for example, more than twice as many K-12 teachers as registered nurses and five times as many teachers as either lawyers or professors



(U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). The sheer size of the teaching force, combined with the relatively high annual turnover rate within the teaching occupation, means that large numbers of employees flow into, between, and out of schools each year.

its high costs, some of which are more apparent than others. Employee turnover has especially serious consequences in workplaces that require extensive interaction among participants and that depend on commitment, continuity, and cohesion among

Data suggest that the roots of the teacher shortage largely reside in the working conditions within schools and districts.

Of course, not all employee turnover is a bad thing. Too little turnover in any organization may indicate stagnancy. Effective organizations usually benefit from a limited degree of turnover, which eliminates low-caliber performers and brings in new blood to facilitate innovation. High levels of employee turnover, however, suggest that an organization has underlying problems; in turn, this high turnover can cause turmoil and lead to problems in how the organization functions (Mobley, 1982; Price, 1977).

Industries and organizations take employee turnover seriously because of

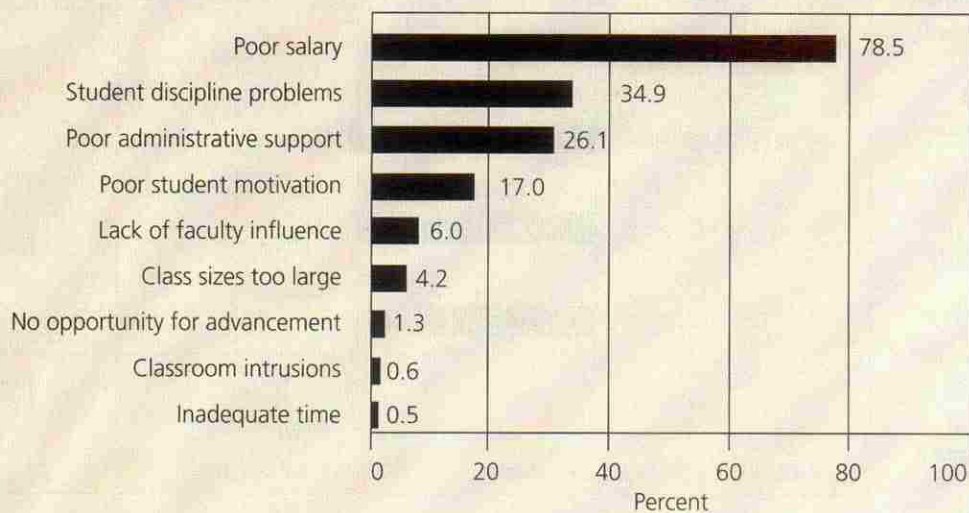
employees. From this perspective, the high turnover of teachers in schools does not simply cause staffing problems but may also harm the school environment and student performance.

Attrition Among Beginning Teachers

The turnover problem, although high for the entire teaching occupation, affects beginning teachers more than others. Teaching has always lost many of its newly trained members early in their careers, long before the retirement years (Johnson & Birkeland, in press; Lortie, 1975; Murnane, Singer, Willett,

FIGURE 2

Reasons Beginning Teachers Who Leave Are Dissatisfied



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 1994–1995 Teacher Followup Survey.

their dissatisfaction, again giving them the option of listing up to three reasons. More than three-fourths linked their quitting to low salaries. But even more of them indicated that one of four different school working conditions was behind their decision to quit: student discipline problems; lack of support from the school administration; poor student motivation; and lack of teacher influence over schoolwide and classroom decision making (see fig. 2).

These findings on dissatisfaction-related attrition are important because they point to “policy-amenable” issues. The conventional wisdom places the roots of the

Kemple, & Olsen, 1991).

We used the SASS/TFS data to provide a rough estimate of the cumulative attrition of beginning teachers in their first several years of teaching. The data suggest that after just five years, between 40 and 50 percent of all beginning teachers have left the profession. Why do beginning teachers leave at such high rates?

Perhaps the best way to discover why employees depart from jobs is to ask them. Many organizations do this through exit interviews. Similarly, the Teacher Followup Survey administered a questionnaire to a national sample of U.S. teachers who had left their teaching jobs the year before. Among other questions, it asked teachers to list the main reasons (up to three) for their departure. For this analysis, we focused on new teachers who left teaching after their first year. Their answers, shown in Figure 1, were revealing.

About 19 percent of these beginners who left teaching said that they did so as a result of a school staffing action, such as a cutback, layoff, termination,

school reorganization, or school closing. Another 42 percent cited personal reasons, including pregnancy, child rearing, health problems, and family moves.

Around 39 percent said that they left to pursue a better job or another career, and about 29 percent said that dissatis-

teacher shortage outside schools, within larger demographic trends. By contrast, these data suggest that the roots of the teacher shortage largely reside in the working conditions within schools and districts. These two explanations for the teacher shortage point to different prescriptions for fixing the problem.

The sheer size of the teaching force, combined with the relatively high annual turnover rate within the teaching occupation, means that large numbers of employees flow into, between, and out of schools each year.

faction with teaching as a career or with their specific job was a main reason. These final two reasons—pursuit of another job and dissatisfaction—

together play a major role in about two-thirds of all beginning teacher attrition. The survey asked the 29 percent who listed job dissatisfaction as a major reason for leaving about the source of

What Can Schools Do?

The data on new teacher attrition suggest that efforts to recruit more teachers—which have been the focus of much policy—will not, by themselves, solve the staffing problems plaguing schools. The solution must also include teacher retention. In short, recruiting more teachers will not solve the teacher

crisis if 40–50 percent of these teachers leave in a few short years. The image that comes to mind is that of a bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not do any good if we

SASS/TFS show that mentoring does make a difference (see fig. 3).

Plugging holes through these kinds of changes will not be easy. But the good news, from the perspective of this analysis, is that schools are not simply the

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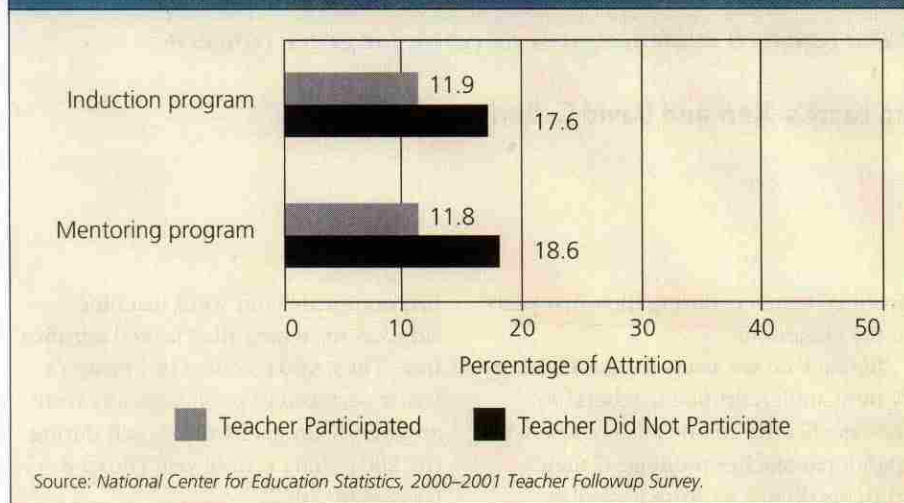
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FIGURE 3

Attrition of Beginning Teachers After First Year



do not patch the holes first.

Although the data confirm that raising teacher salaries offers one effective way to plug these holes, this strategy would be expensive, especially given the sheer size of the teacher population. The working conditions identified by new teachers as factors in their decision to leave teaching—lack of administrative support, poor student discipline and student motivation, and lack of participation in decision making—may offer a more effective focus for improvement efforts (Ingersoll, 2003).

Increasing support from school administrators for new teachers, for example, might range from providing enough classroom supplies to providing mentors. Mentors are especially crucial. Life for beginning teachers has traditionally been described as a sink-or-swim proposition. Indeed, data from

victims of inexorable demographic trends. The management and organization of schools play a significant role in the genesis of school staffing problems but can also play a significant role in their solution. Improving teachers' working conditions would contribute to lower rates of new teacher turnover, thereby diminishing school staffing problems and improving the performance of schools. ■

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