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High Turnover Plagues Schools

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High turnover plagues schools

By Richard M. Ingersoll

I formerly taught secondary school, first in western Canada and then in the eastern United States, in both public and private schools. At the time, I was struck by how different my Canadian and American teaching experiences were.

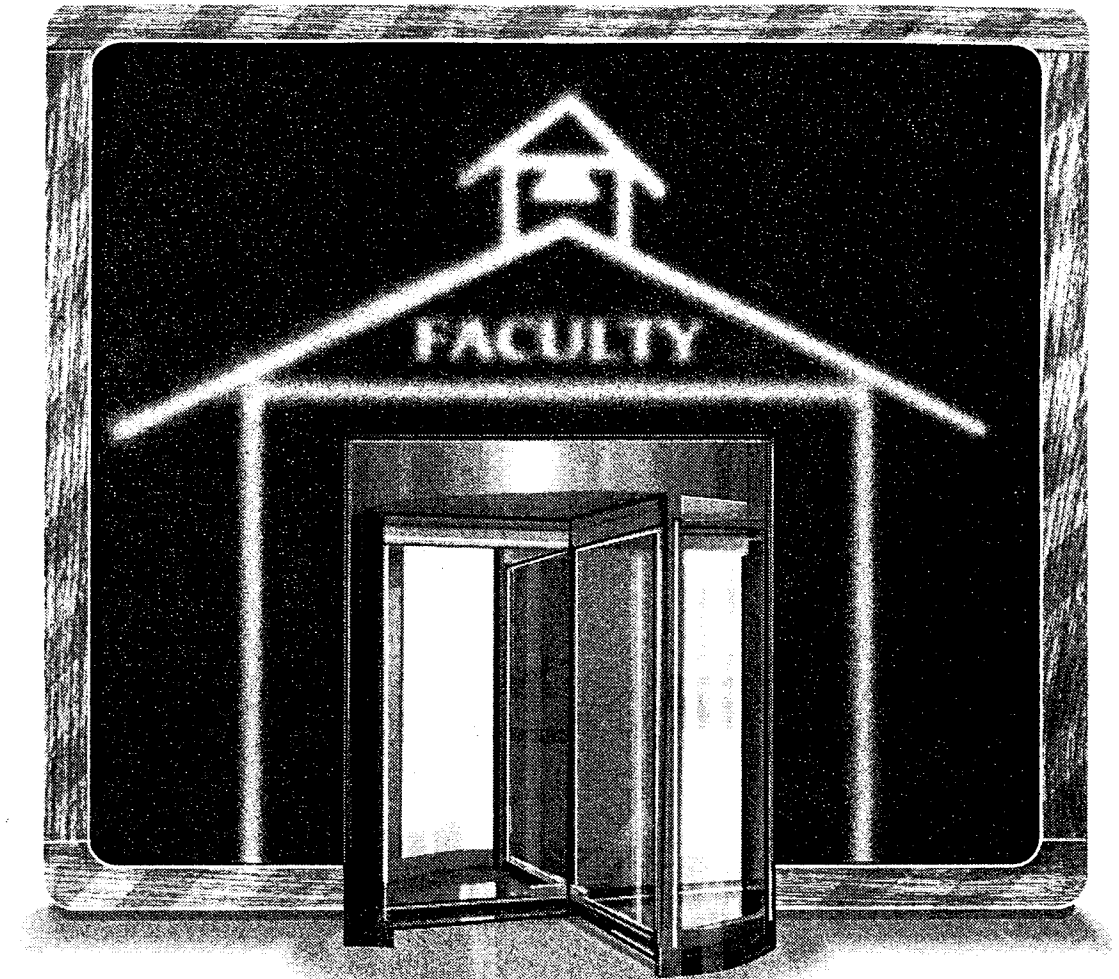
The salary was much better in Canada, but that was not the only difference. The U.S. schools were extraordinarily adversarial places in which to work. Student misbehavior and verbal abuse directed at teachers were everyday facts of life. Teachers in American schools had far less say in how things operated than teachers did in Canada. U.S. school administrators reserved those decisions for themselves, often to the great frustration of their schools' faculty, who had to live with — and often were blamed for — the consequences.

I was reminded of my own experiences when I read the warnings from recent studies and blue-ribbon commissions about a severe national shortage of teachers. These shortfalls, we are told, are due primarily to increasing student enrollment and the retirement of a "graying" teaching force.

The response to this problem has been overwhelming. President Bush made teacher recruitment a major part of his education plan. There also are dozens of state and local initiatives designed to increase the supply of elementary- and secondary-school teachers. Some try to entice skilled people to make midcareer changes into teaching. Others seek to lure the best and brightest recent college graduates to classrooms. Some school districts have taken to recruiting teachers from other countries. A number of states now are offering financial incentives, signing bonuses and housing assistance to their new recruits.

Despite good intentions, these programs will not solve the problem. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the so-called teacher shortage is not mainly due to an inadequate supply of trained teachers. Instead, I found in an in-depth study that the problem is largely due to how quickly many teachers leave their jobs.

Teaching is one of the largest occupations. There are, for example, more than five times as many teachers as either professors or lawyers, and twice as many teachers as nurses, according to Census figures. Teaching also has relatively high rates of turnover.



By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

Compared with an average annual turnover rate of 11% for many other occupations, the most recent national data available tell us that teachers turn over at a rate of 16% per year. The percentage is higher — 20% per year — for teachers in public schools with high concentrations of poor students.

I found in my research that these high rates of turnover have little to do with a graying workforce. In fact, as many as 33% of new hires leave teaching altogether in their first three years, and 46% leave in the first five years. Moreover, the data tell us, the best and brightest are often among the first to leave. The result is very large flows of teaching employees into, through and out of schools. Almost a third of the teaching force is in some kind of job transition each year.

Of course, some teacher turnover is unavoidable and even beneficial: It eliminates low-caliber performers and brings in new blood. But the costs of heavy turnover are high. In the business world, for example, it has long been recognized that high employee-turnover rates mean substantial training and recruitment costs and are both the cause and the effect of productivity problems. Schools, however, have paid little attention to this.

Almost half of all teacher turnover is due to dissatisfaction or teachers seeking better careers. Not surprisingly, more than half of the latter say poor salaries are to blame. But salaries are not the only factor. Less costly solutions include curbing student misbehavior; giving teachers more say in key

school decisions that impact their jobs and providing more support for new teachers. Of the teachers leaving out of dissatisfaction, 43% report that inadequate support from their school administration was a main reason, and about a quarter say student-discipline problems drove them out.

Simply recruiting more teachers will not solve the teacher crisis if large numbers of teachers continue to leave.

The image that comes to mind is refilling a bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. The holes have to be patched first — in this case, by improving the quality of the teaching job.

Richard M. Ingersoll is a University of Pennsylvania associate professor of education and sociology.