lack of school's little influence inadequate time class size
Nearly half of all new teachers leave the job within five years. What’s killing their spirit? How can we get them to stay?

Written by Claudia Graziano
Photography by Mark Wagoner
It was late August four years ago when I sat down at a scratched wooden desk to begin my first teaching position. I was nervous. I knew that the job, if done right, wouldn't be easy. There would be long hours and little pay. But I also hoped that I could inspire kids the way my best teachers had inspired me.

What I didn’t know then was that I wouldn’t make it. Less than a year after facing my first classroom of 32 fidgeting tenth graders, I walked away and never came back—to that classroom or to teaching. I became a statistic.

I entered the teaching profession full of idealism. After years of working as a journalist, covering the frenetic worlds of business and technology, I felt professionally unsatisfied. I spent hours writing about underconceived companies and overpaid CEOs. I spent hours hyping the latest gadgets.

My roommate, a high school math teacher, suggested I sit in on a few of her classes. They were raucous, open, and energetic; I was fascinated. I had always loved language, and I saw teaching as a way to help kids appreciate it—perhaps even love it—as well.

By fall 2001, I made the career switch, completing much of my licensing credential, and was hired to teach tenth-grade English at Sequoia High School, in Redwood City, California, about 20 miles south of San Francisco. By the new year, I was gone.

Leaving So Soon?

Every year, U.S. schools hire more than 200,000 new teachers for that first day of class. By the time summer rolls around, at least 22,000 have quit. Even those who make it beyond the trying first year aren’t likely to stay long: about 30 percent of new teachers flee the profession after just three years, and more than 45 percent leave after five (see charts, below).

What’s more, 37 percent of the education workforce is over 50 and considering retirement, according to the National Education Association. Suddenly, you’ve got a double whammy: tens of thousand of new teachers leaving the profession because they can’t take it anymore, and as many or more retiring.

When teachers drop out, everyone pays. Each teacher who leaves costs a district $11,000 to replace, not including indirect costs related to schools’ lost investment in professional development, curriculum, and school-specific knowledge. At least 15 percent of K–12 teachers either switch schools or leave the profession every year, so the cost to school districts nationwide is staggering—an estimated $5.8 billion.

Students from the lowest-income families suffer the most. Inexperienced teachers (those with less than three years on the job) frequently land in classrooms with the neediest and often the most challenging students. Beginning teachers frequently start their careers at hard-to-staff schools where resources may be scarce—in other words, urban schools—simply because there are more jobs available there.

It’s a recipe for disaster for both teachers and students, says Barnett Berry, president of the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Low-performing schools in high-poverty areas often cannot retain a critical mass of veteran teachers, says Berry. “Not only are teachers who are new to these schools more likely to be underprepared, they’re also more likely to be underqualified.”

The U.S. Department of Education confirms that teacher turnover is highest in public schools where half or more of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches. In California, for example, students in schools with large minority populations are five times more likely to face an “underprepared” teacher (someone working on an emergency credential or outside of the person’s subject area) than are students in schools with low percentages of minority students, according to a study conducted by SRI International and sponsored by the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning in conjunction with California State University and the University of California.

A Frazzling First Year

Teachers quit for several reasons, but the one you’d expect to be at the top of the list—salary—typically isn’t. Even though they start their careers earning roughly $30,000 (and fork out, on average, about $500 of their own
money for instructional supplies), less than 20 percent of teachers who change schools or leave the profession cite salary as their primary job complaint, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

More frequently, the reason is dissatisfaction with administrative support (38 percent) or workplace conditions (32 percent), according to the NCES’s 2001 survey of 8,400 public- and private-school teachers. Poor administrative support, lack of influence within the school system, classroom intrusion, and inadequate time are mentioned more often by teachers leaving low-income schools where working conditions are more stressful; salary is mentioned more often by teachers leaving affluent schools.

Many of these reasons are just euphemisms for one of the profession’s hardest realities: Teaching can exact a considerable emotional toll. I don’t know of any other professionals who have to break up fistfights, as I did, as a matter of course, or who find razor blades left on their chair, or who feel personally responsible because students in tenth-grade English class are reading at the sixth-grade level or lower and are failing hopelessly.

New teachers, however naive and idealistic, often know before they enter the profession that the salaries are paltry, the class sizes large, and the supplies scant. What they don’t know is how little support from parents, school administrators, and colleagues they can expect once the door is closed and the textbooks are opened.

“We don’t put attorneys just out of law school alone on their first case, yet we put new teachers alone in the classroom for their first year and expect them to shoulder the same responsibilities as veteran teachers,” says Kathleen Fulton, director for reintroducing schools for the 21st century at the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future. “Our induction model creates impossibly high expectations.”

New teachers are expected to assume a full schedule of classes, create their own lesson plans, and develop teaching techniques and classroom-management strategies in relative isolation. They are also expected to learn quickly the administrative ins and outs of the job, from taking attendance and communicating with parents to navigating the schools’ computer network and finding the faculty bathrooms. The result: New teachers must weather a frazzling first year that many veterans come to view as a rite of passage. It’s also a recipe for early burnout. Attrition rates for beginning teachers who have not had strong teacher-preparation programs are much higher than for better-prepared colleagues.

“Not a day went by that I didn’t go home and cry,” remembers fourth-grade teacher Sue Manley of her first year. Manley, who graduated from Northwestern University with a master’s degree in education, thought she was well prepared for her first assignment, teaching at a South Side Chicago elementary school. She had completed her student teaching the previous year at a grammar school in the same neighborhood and had spent four months volunteering as a classroom aide at another urban elementary school. Working with experienced teachers while she was still a graduate student and a volunteer had made teaching look easy to Manley.

“Academically, I was prepared. Socially, professionally, and emotionally, I was not.”

Like any new teacher, Manley needed to hone her classroom-management skills, but the pressures of managing a classroom solo for the first time were compounded by the lack of basic resources and administrative support. “We weren’t allowed to use the copy machine [for handouts], so I had to stop at Kinko’s every morning on my way to work,”
A LACK OF SUPPORT, INFLUENCE, AND TIME DRIVES MANY AWAY . . .

Wanted: Better Training

Many educators believe that schools need to completely rethink the way new teachers are trained. “One of the real problems with schools today is that they’re the schools we had yesterday,” says Kathleen Fulton, the director for reinventing schools in the 21st century for the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF). “The existing training and recruitment model doesn’t work for kids or teachers. Collaboration is key to developing good teaching skills, yet we’re not set up for that in today’s classrooms.”

The answer, Fulton says, lies in radical change. She envisions clusters of new teachers working together in the classroom or alongside more-experienced teachers and under the supervision of a national-board-certified teacher.

Progress is being made toward that goal. The NCTAF is developing online learning communities that support novice teachers in rural and urban school districts. Called Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (T-LINC), the project will first target school districts in Washington, Colorado, Texas, and Maine. The idea is to bring together—at least virtually—new teachers, experienced mentors, and faculty members from institutions of higher learning to ensure that educators at all levels participate in the professional-development and mentoring process. —C.G.


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<th>Reason</th>
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<td>Changed residence</td>
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<td>Better salary or benefits</td>
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<td>Dissatisfaction with changes in job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not enough autonomy in class</td>
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<td>Not prepared/do not agree with reforms</td>
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Percentage citing reason

Percentage citing reason

... BUT GOOD TRAINING CAN REDUCE ATTRITION.
Why Teach? We Asked and Were Overwhelmed

As we prepared this story on the alarming dropout rate among K–12 teachers, we decided to go to the source—teachers and others involved in education—and ask them a simple question: Considering the long hours, low pay, and poor support, why stay? In early December, we sent out that email query. The response was overwhelming. In two days, we had 200 responses. In two weeks, we received more than 1,200. We heard from readers in Lake Havasu, Arizona, and London, England; in Frisco, Texas, and San Francisco, California. Current and former teachers lamented their chronically low pay—that was expected—but they also brought up their lack of autonomy, as classroom instruction is increasingly dictated by bureaucratic mandates.

Many, like Deb Methvin, a resource teacher at Silver Springs Elementary School, in Silver Springs, Nevada, spoke of feeling overwhelmed with the enormity of their tasks. “Sometimes there are semesters or a year that make you ask yourself, ‘Why did I go into this profession?’” wrote Methvin. “There are the days when you’re overwhelmed with paperwork, don’t have enough time for planning lessons, need time to collaborate with your peers, have parents that want meeting after meeting and still are never satisfied, and put in a load of overtime that the administration seems to expect but never recognizes with praise or overtime pay.”

Teachers balanced these frustrations with the job’s many upsides, and often expressed the unmatched satisfaction of seeing a student comprehend a difficult concept and the special joy of connecting with a child who has pulled away from most adults. While some of the responses were predictable, others were refreshing and enlightening. Many were deeply moving.

Respondents offered suggestions on how to keep good teachers motivated, commenting on the important role an educator had played in their lives. Wrote Joette Daily, a special education teacher and liaison at Thomas C. Marsh Middle School, in Dallas: “I can really make a difference in the lives of students. I absolutely hated school when I was young. One teacher made a difference for me, and that experience completely changed my life. I remember thinking, ‘She accepts me for who I am and for what I can bring to the class.’ I wanted to be that kind of teacher.”

Time after time, respondents thanked us for asking their opinion—something they are rarely asked to share.

Most also deeply believe that, despite the job’s seemingly endless frustrations, teachers play an important role in a democratic society.

Lorien Eck, a visual-arts teacher at John Muir Middle School in South Central Los Angeles, spoke for many when she wrote, “The daily challenges are immense, yet the experience is soul empowering. . . . To see real-time results and evidence of positive change in the lives of young people makes the efforts—despite the pay, the hours, and other drawbacks—all worthwhile.”

Visit www.edutopia.org/teachers to explore more of the responses we received.

Teacher Preparation Reduces Attrition of First-Year Teachers (2000–01)

| Training in selection/use of instructional materials | Training: 14.8% | No training: 20.7%
| Training in child psychology/learning theory | Training: 16.0% | No training: 21.1%
| Observation of other classes | Training: 16.1% | No training: 27.3%
| Feedback on teaching | Training: 13.0% | No training: 25.7%
| Practice teaching | Training: 11.5% | No training: 25.0%

Rate of attrition

Support Systems

There are some effective ways to soften the coarseness of the first year. What made the difference for Manley, for example, was a free two-year induction program sponsored by the University of Chicago’s Center for Urban School Improvement. The New Teachers Network offers first- and second-year teachers at Chicago public schools personalized
ment and online coaching that addresses a variety of issues, from classroom management to curriculum.

Several studies (and common sense) show that good mentoring programs can cut attrition rates by as much as half. Richard Ingersoll, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a respected researcher in the field of education, analyzed statistics from ten studies on mentoring and teacher induction to sort out what works and why.

His analysis, published in the American Educational Research Journal last summer, concludes that new teachers who receive no induction are twice as likely to leave teaching after their first year as those who receive all six of the supports his study identifies. These supports include having a mentor from the same field, collaborating regularly with other teachers in the same subject, and being part of an external network of teachers.

Other successful induction methods include a program called INTIME (Integrating New Technologies into the Methods of Education), which provides teacher candidates with videos of accomplished teachers in the classroom. The teachers in the videos give lessons in a variety of contexts, including multiage classrooms, alternative high schools, special education students, and gifted and talented programs. Such preparation can drastically cut teacher attrition rates. For people who are changing careers to enter teaching, schools like George Washington University offer assistive programs for mid-career entrants, including former military and Peace Corps attendees. One example is the school’s Transition to Teaching Partnership, a collaboration with nearby Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia.

But while mentoring and induction programs for new teachers are a mainstay in most states, not all programs are created equal. Of the 28 states that have state-level teacher-induction programs, only 10 actually provide funding for such programs, as well as mandating them, according to Recruiting New Teachers (RNT), a nonprofit organization that advocates national reform for teacher recruitment and development. That’s a big problem.

“We don’t put attorneys just out of law school alone on their first case, yet we put new teachers alone in the classroom for their first year.”

Funding is critical, because mentors need to be given the time to work closely with new teachers,” says Mildred Hudson, CEO of RNT in Belmont, Massachusetts.

The regimen of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act may help bridge the existing funding gap for some states. The first federal attempt to establish professional criteria for teachers, NCLB appropriates $2.85 billion over the next two years to help school districts recruit, develop, and retain “highly qualified” teachers (i.e., those who meet state certification requirements and demonstrate knowledge in their core subject area, according to NCLB). Indeed, last fall the U.S. Department of Education unveiled a free professional-development Web site for teachers (www.paec.org/teacher2teacher). Targeted mainly at K–8 instructors, the site offers streaming video of workshops conducted by other teachers, as well as supplementary course materials.

In addition, consideration and time must be given to professional development. For instance, seminars and lectures for beginning teachers were offered monthly at Sue Manley’s school, but they were held on weekday evenings. Manley usually felt too busy and worn out after teaching all day to attend them. It’s a situation many new teachers—myself included—encounter. When new teachers aren’t granted release time for professional development, many end up going without. And eventually they just go.

Teachers who tough out the early years are often glad they did. Now in her seventh year of teaching, Manley has herself become a coach and a counselor for new teachers. “My advice is,” she says, “don’t take things personally, be firm, and be calm. And take care of yourself. It does get better.”

Claudia Graziano is a writer based in San Francisco. Write to claudia@claudiagraziano.com.

**Strength in Numbers**

Teachers represent one of the largest workforces in the United States. There are more educators than doctors, nurses, and lawyers combined, and according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. schools employ 3.5 million K–12 teachers. The education industry employs roughly 12.5 million people—slightly fewer than health care, the largest employment sector in the country. —C.G.