

The Post-Boomer Teacher Crunch

Reframing 'Retention' to Fit the Needs of a New Generation

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Commentary

By Celine Coggins

More than a decade has passed since the first alarms were sounded, warning of the retirement from teaching of the baby boom generation and its likely negative impact on schools. The charge to education leaders then was two-faceted: Recruit a new generation of teachers, and modernize the profession so that these 21st-century workers could be retained throughout their careers.

In the ensuing years, districts, states, and the federal government have made significant investments to streamline entry into the profession. In place of university-monopolized preparation, there is now an array of teacher-training alternatives. Districts nationwide are accelerating hiring and modernizing data systems to take better advantage of the applicant pool. But while we have improved the beginning of the teacher-supply pipeline, we have failed to put a priority on ensuring that substantial numbers of promising novices move into a second stage of teaching.

In many districts, the ability to recruit large quantities of new teachers has muted concern about replacing retirees. And the fact that most departing teachers are replaceable seems to obscure the real loss that occurs as they go: They take experience with them. The instructional leadership and staff stability that experienced teachers provide is more critical to student learning than many think. Succeeding at recruitment cannot outweigh failing at retention.

The cost of teacher attrition has been documented in dollars and in student outcomes. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that teacher turnover costs the nation \$7.3 billion annually. Students of novice teachers achieve at lower levels than those with experienced teachers, and, most important, high-poverty students are far more likely to have novice teachers than low-poverty students. Urban districts, which have often done the best job of improving recruitment, suffer most from the staffing churn.

Conventional wisdom about teachers' career choices has been a convenient excuse for overlooking the potential of

a targeted focus on retention. We operate from the premise that some entrants to the field will teach for a couple of years before pursuing their "real careers," and that the remainder will last a lifetime. This logic dictates that the former group will leave regardless of incentives, and those in the latter group do not need incentives to stay. The problem is that both suppositions are wrong.

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The existence of the "lifetime" teacher can no longer be taken for granted. Harvard University professor Susan Moore Johnson's research clarifies that the average teacher today expects, as her generational peers in other fields do, to take on differing positions and responsibilities throughout her career.

Perhaps a more interesting question is whether there is hope for retaining the promising teachers often dismissed as short-termers. Our work at the Rennie Center, in Cambridge, Mass., is shedding new light on this group. This past fall, we recruited a cohort of high-quality, early-career urban teachers to study teaching policy and become advocates for their generation in the profession.

For every spot in the program, we received five applications, a positive indicator that there is an essentially overlooked population of strong teachers out there, ripe for filling the experience void. Almost all of the applicants had impeccable credentials and demonstrated superior writing ability in essays, making them the type of teachers most likely to improve student learning—and the most likely to leave. What they told us unequivocally is that they want to find a way to outlast their predicted shelf-life.

Prestigious recruitment and training programs such as Teach For America and the Boston Teacher Residency draw talented candidates into teaching with strong, team-based support and training. Yet, just as these teachers become proficient, they lose these cohort-based supports, and

must choose whether to remain within the traditional system. This system, which rarely offers career growth, professional community, or performance-based compensation, implicitly conveys the notion that widespread attrition is accepted and expected.

In this context, the headline from our applicant pool should be a welcome surprise: They don't come in planning to leave; they come in hoping to stay (not forever, but for longer than many assume). The following were primary themes in our applications:

- **Value for teaching.** Most teachers in our pool aspire to formal education leadership, but recognize they will be better leaders if they stay in the classroom long enough to master teaching. They believe that success at teaching is measurable, and takes time to hone. Many have a prescient sense that the direct impact they have on students' lives is something they will not be able to replicate in future jobs, and they are reluctant to give it up.
- **Desire for challenge and growth.** This group of teachers describes the challenges they encountered in their first years of teaching as a positive. They fear that the steep learning curve they experienced as novices will plateau, and are seeking new opportunities to extend it. Yet, they find few. Many assert that the job they desire—a hybrid of teaching and leadership—does not exist.
- **Continually evaluating their professional future.** These teachers see the future as an open question, weighing chances for impact and career growth in the context of friends gaining advancement in other professions and parents eager for a return on their college investment.

In sum, we found strong teachers, sitting on the fence, seeking the next challenge, and hoping it comes in teaching.

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Their voices have led us to conclude that it is time to initiate a dialogue on retention that begins by rethinking our goals for what success could be. For too long the concept of retention has been framed around the fallacy that retention means forever. These teachers' words clarified the great disservice this does to students. Countless students might benefit if we actively sought to make the promising two-year teacher into a five- or 10-year teacher.

The goal of retention efforts should not be creating a "lifetime" teacher. That does not fit this generation, nor will it yield the type of teacher students need, if they are to compete in a knowledge economy.

Reframing retention first requires envisioning the teaching career in smaller increments. Districts must set goals for getting more teachers to year five, and then a subset of those to year 10. Strategies may vary by level of experience. For example, several teachers in our program noted that a more rigorous tenure process, coupled with a pay increase, could renew commitment in years three through five. The years immediately following induction are critical, yet typically ignored.

Reframing retention also means defining a growth trajectory for teachers. Our applicants articulated the importance of reforms—such as expanding instructional leadership, team-based work, and differentiated pay—that are ubiquitous in policy discussions but scarce in schools. It is equally important to consider, though, that teachers who are passionate about raising achievement and closing achievement gaps simply want more information about their progress. Establishing goals and benchmarks on the path to mastery would embed new challenge and purpose in their work.

Finally, creating a system that facilitates continual growth and rewards excellence will necessitate improving teacher evaluation. Current data systems are often insufficient to measure a teacher's contribution to student learning over time. Local evaluation policies must do more to distinguish among more- and less-effective teachers, in order to allow outreach to top performers.

Students suffer because we have low expectations for retaining talented teachers. It is time to find a way for teaching to live up to its potential as a learning profession that challenges and rewards practitioners. If we do not, it is certain that our best teachers will find the growth they seek outside the classroom.



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