

## **The Law of Increasing Returns: A Process for Retaining Teachers – National Recommendations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**In today's challenging educational system, teachers experience burnout faster than a speeding bullet. Why do teachers leave schools? It is incumbent upon school administrators to implement effective programs to attract and keep quality teachers. The purpose of this is to explore the reasons for teacher turnover. The authors explore key issues that challenging schools face as it relates to retaining quality teachers. Included will be the factors that make a difference in whether a teacher will remain on a campus or leave the campus or the profession entirely. The authors recommend a process that can be implemented by principals in an effort to increase the number of teachers returning each year.**

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**T**he challenge of attracting and retaining high quality teachers is intensified with current educational demands of districts and states. In the past, it was often said the best part of teaching is the months of June, July, and August. These months have become a nightmare to many school principals who are charged with hiring during the summer months. Many times teachers decide in August to resign or retire giving

administrators a minimal amount of time to recruit a “highly qualified” teacher for the available positions.

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to explore the reasons for teacher turnover. We look at what research says are the major issues that cause a teacher to leave a campus for purposes of attrition, retirement, or movement to a different campus. We will also discuss researched based strategies that principals can utilize to build staying power among teaches that will cause them to return to a campus year after year.

### **School Reform Efforts Require More Teachers**

Richard Ingersoll (2001, p. 5) reports that “school staffing problems are primarily due to excess demand resulting from a ‘revolving door’—where large numbers of teachers depart their jobs for reasons other than retirement.” While two-thirds of American teachers remained stable in their positions in 2000, more teachers left the teaching profession than had entered it in 1999. Thus, we are losing more teachers than we are recruiting or retaining (Ingersoll, 2001). Research studies have documented this phenomenon in a variety of ways: After five years, nearly 50% of new teachers had left teaching in the state where they began teaching (Southern Regional Education Board, 2001). Teachers change jobs 4% more often than professionals in other careers (Ingersoll, 2002). More than 25% of teachers throughout the nation are age 50 or older, with a median age of 44 (National Teacher Recruitment Clearinghouse, 2003). By 2008, total public and private school enrollment is expected to rise to 54.3 million, an increase of 6% from 1996. Many school reform efforts call for class-size reduction requiring more teachers.

### **Some Reasons Beginning Teachers Leave the Profession**

Why do teachers leave the profession of teaching? The public believes that teachers leave because of low salaries. According to the SREB (2001) report, beginning teachers frequently cite the following reasons for leaving the profession: lack of help with problem solving during critical periods, difficult teaching assignments with expectations to perform like experienced teachers, myriad of responsibilities that require advanced multitasking skills (e.g., balancing extracurricular activity sponsorship, lesson planning, and grading papers; attending faculty meetings; finding instructional resources; maintaining classroom appearance; handling paperwork), extensive time commitment to

a career that encroaches on home and social life, high stress that leads to self-doubt about abilities and lowers self-esteem, inability to meet daily demands (e.g., managing differing ability levels of students, communicating with parents, disciplining students, controlling and sequencing the flow of a lesson), and frustration from assignments to teach difficult students or subjects without adequate preparation.

### **New Teachers Report Little Guidance**

In the Harvard Education Letter (2001) entitled, “Retaining the Next Generation of Teachers: The Importance of School-Based Support,” it was found that new teachers had limited support. New teachers reported receiving little guidance about what to teach or how to teach it. Instead, most described struggling on their own each day to cobble together content and materials, often with no coherent, long-term plan for meeting specific learning objectives. It was also found that meetings with mentors were brief and intermittent. Feedback and suggestions for handling difficult situations and classroom instruction were desired but rarely happened.

### **Teachers Value Principals Who Support Them**

Two studies, conducted fifteen years apart, by Dr. Jan Richards (2005) showed similar results. The data suggests that teachers over the years needed and valued the same kind of support from administrators to make them feel encouraged. The support included principals being encouraging, available, and understanding. Teachers valued principals who supported them with classroom management issues and with parents. Teachers who had unsupportive principals were less confident in their teaching ability. They also became frustrated and angry; therefore, being more prone to leave the campus.

### **Distributed Leadership**

School level factors that contribute to teacher turnover include student discipline problems, lack of faculty input into decision making, and low salaries. In Philadelphia Public Schools in the 1998-1999 school year, almost one in five middle school teachers said they were new to their schools. Other data in the Philadelphia report showed that district teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience were likely to work in safer schools with fewer instructional obstacles and more distributed leadership. The district data also showed that teachers tend to leave schools where students are not

performing well and which serve greater proportions of minority students. Most new teachers in the district never saw their assigned mentor or weren't even assigned a mentor (Watson, 2001).

### **Following the Five Laws of Increasing Teacher Returns**

It is incumbent upon school principals to follow the five laws of increasing teacher returns. If principals put systems in place that address the needs covered in each law, it is estimated that there will be a tremendous reduction in teacher turnover.

- Law #1: Recruit teachers who are passionate about and who love children.
- Law #2: Provide new teachers with a highly qualified mentor.
- Law #3: Support teachers with classroom and school concerns.
- Law #4: Train new teachers on their curriculum, teaching strategies, etc.
- Law #5: Empower new teachers by promoting input into decision-making.

### **Recruit Teachers who are Passionate about Teaching and Who Love Children**

Law #1: Recruit teachers who are passionate about teaching and who love children. Statistics show that a large sum of money is expended yearly by school systems to hire new teachers. A Texas Center for Education Research study (Benner, 2000, p. 3) notes that each year "Texas schools spend between \$329 million and \$2.1 billion on recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers each year." The study further states that after three years, 43% of Texas beginning teachers had left the profession, with a turnover cost between \$81 million and \$480 million. Investing in a beginning teacher induction program that encourages beginning teachers to stay in the profession yields returns to the school community financially as well as educationally.

In the book, "The Secret: What great leaders know and do," Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller (2004) talk about good leaders spending time and working diligently to select good people to work in their organizations. Great leaders are always scouting and looking for great people to join their team. Another tip offered in the book is to have more than one interview. This allows both the organization's members and the interviewee a chance to get to know one another. The candidate should be given the opportunity to question the interviewer. A great deal of information can be gathered by the questions a person asks. The interviewer should also try to talk a potential employee out of taking the job. If a candidate can be talked out of taking the job, it is probably better for the organization. It is easier to lose a candidate than a team member. When conducting interviews, school leaders should have in mind the criteria needed to hire new teachers. The leader's vision for the school should play a part in the entire interview and hiring process. Some of the key ideas to consider in the interview are: ability to adapt to the school culture; ability to heed professional advice; ability to work in a team; ability to

work with exceptional students; academic background; attitude to own professional development; classroom management and control; communication skills; content knowledge; dedication; enthusiasm; extracurricular interests; going the extra mile; leadership potential; maturity; skills in developing relationships with children/parents/staff; success on teaching practicum; and teaching skills (Broadley & Broadley, 2004).

Before hiring new teachers, campus leaders should give them the opportunity to showcase their skills in the interview. Have each candidate teach a mini lesson in the interview in their area of expertise. Allow them to come prepared for this part of the interview. This will give the school leader a peek inside of the candidate's planning skills, their knowledge of curriculum and teaching strategies, and their ability to keep the audience engaged.

### **Provide New Teachers with a Highly Qualified Mentor**

Law #2: Provide new teachers with a highly qualified mentor. The second law should go into effect the moment a new teacher is hired. The new teacher should become involved in a campus based induction program that is created to give them support in their daily endeavors. Assigning the right mentor to a new teacher must be given a great deal of thought. If possible, the mentor's teaching assignment should be in the same area as the new teacher. The mentor should radiate a positive air about the school, its students, the community, and curriculum.

According to the National Education Association (NEA), new teachers who participate in induction programs like mentoring are nearly twice as likely to stay in their profession. Some even believe that mentoring programs can cut the dropout rate from roughly 50 to 15 percent during the first five years of teaching (Brown, 2004). According to the SREB (2001) report, "It has been found that quality support and induction programs can have an impact on keeping new teachers in the teaching field." There are many benefits to creating a support system for new teacher aside from the obvious of remaining on a campus for a longer period of time. Mentors assist new teachers with understanding curriculum, lesson planning, becoming familiar with campus policies and procedures, and developing bonds with the school staff. Teachers with this kind of support will most likely remain in their positions longer, leading to a more stable and highly qualified teaching force for the community. Mentors cannot be defined by a set of predetermined characteristics, instead 'mentoring, like good teaching, should be defined by those who will carry it out. Providing direct assistance to the mentee is the most common mentor role (Wildman *et al.*, 1992). Other forms of assistance mentors provide new teachers involve socialization into the school climate as well as emotional and psychological support (Gold, 1996; Wang & Odell, 2002).

The induction process must be well-structured and monitored by campus administrators. The mentoring program should not become an extra burden for the mentor or mentee. In one study, a novice teacher cautions school administrators about

having a mentor program just for the heck of it. Her experience in a mentoring program was more detrimental than helpful to her. Her perception of the mentoring program in which she participated was not favorable, "...the quality of the mentoring program makes all the difference. The mentoring program is just a sham. It would actually drive people out of teaching" (Johannessen & McCann, 2004).

It is necessary to include a strong mentor training piece in the induction program. In order for a mentor to properly assist in developing the mentees skills, they must attend mentor training. Training helps to keep the mentors updated on current ideas and educational theories.

The induction process not only helps the new teacher, but it also causes the master teacher to grow. It provides them with opportunities for leadership and rewards for giving to others. Most times the collaborative relationship that is formed helps to reenergize the master teacher in the teaching profession. Data suggest that having various duties encourages these mentors to better understand the complexity of schooling, which increases their leadership potential and gives them more confidence. Also, mentoring is somewhat developmental; it must be learned by engaging in it and needs to be consistently supported (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). Through interactions with mentees, mentors are stimulated both emotionally as well as intellectually. They enjoy sharing their expertise and seeing the mentees succeed. One of the most common outcomes mentors attribute to the mentor-mentee relationship is the chance for self-reflection. As mentors assume various roles, they are placed in situations where they become 'critically reflective' (Zachary, 2000).

### **Support Teachers with Classroom and School Concerns**

Law #3: Support teachers with classroom and school concerns. Beyond mentor support, new teachers must feel as though they are being supported by their principal and other staff on campus. In their article, "Why do new teachers cry?" Johannessen and McCann (2004) advise that those who train teachers and support their professional development should focus on two areas: alleviating a potentially demoralizing workload and developing positive relationships with students. The first year of teaching is critical, and the proactive supports that teacher training and mentoring programs can provide to help novice teachers overcome challenges will increase the likelihood that new teachers will remain in the teaching profession.

Laws number two and three build on one another. For example, the mentoring program can only be successful with the proper support from the principal. One of the principal's most important roles in the school is to retain and develop new teachers. This can be done with the creation of a supportive working environment for all staff especially the new staff. Teachers value principals who: respect and value teachers as professionals, have an open door policy—they are accessible, available, willing to listen, are fair, honest, and trustworthy, support teachers with parents, and are supportive of teachers in matters of student discipline (Richards, 2006). The principal must provide the

mentor access to the protégés classroom and assure the protégé equal access to the mentor's class. Special schedules can be developed that provide the mentor and protégé time in their day to visit and collaborate (Watkins, 2005).

### **Train New Teachers on Curriculum and Teaching Strategies**

Law #4: Train new teachers on their curriculum, teaching strategies. The principal must support the staff engaged in action research and study groups. The administrator does this by providing staff development that offers a background and a process to their research and study. Staff development can come from experience presenters who follow up with the study groups and action research projects after any initial instruction (Watkins, 2005). As often as possible, the principal should show his commitment to staff development by being a participant in the training. This not only shows commitment but it also builds a stronger relationship with the new teachers.

State education agencies and local school systems have found that using technology has made it easier to deliver professional development consistently to their new staff. With current attrition rates hovering near 50 percent in the first three years of teachers' careers, there is no overstating the importance of creating a support network for new teachers. That's why many schools rely on eLearning applications to not only deliver professional development, but to aid the building of a professional community. Regional and local professional communities employ these tools to exchange ideas, curricula, and best practices, and to conduct mentoring programs to encourage teacher retention and furnish ongoing support. The technology can be used to support broad, open-forum discussions, as well as private teacher-to-mentor or teacher-to-supervisor communication. Teachers can now connect at any time with other teachers, peers, and mentors anywhere. This helps to eliminate the traditional sense of isolation that many new teachers feel (Pittinsky, 2005).

### **Empower New Teachers**

Law #5: Empower new teachers. New teachers who feel empowered as part of the decision making team of the campus are more willing to remain in the teaching field. Those teachers who are supported in their long-term career planning and who are able to move upward in the school stay longer in the field of education. Currently, many teachers leave the profession to work in other related school improvement industries because the opportunities are not given to them in the school. Schools should allow experienced teachers to move to different kinds of work which best utilize their capabilities, and be willing to experiment with organizational structures to create these opportunities. Retention and a sense of collegiality would benefit it far more if this work was spread among a larger number of practitioners (Wilkins, 2003).

A crucial element in teacher retention is the responsibility of the principals to build leadership capacity. In the idea of shared leadership, principals delegate some of their decision making responsibilities to other individuals or groups on the campus. This immediately promotes buy-in from teachers and enhances their relationship with the principal producing a trustworthy and collaborative environment, which in essence increases teacher retention rates. Graham (1996) believes that to thrive in a collegial setting it is important for a teacher “to be an active influence on the school culture rather than a passive bystander.” When teachers assume leadership positions in effecting school change, they assert their roles as experts on the school’s culture. Teachers, who claim a voice in moving toward organizational goals, increase their commitment to the district and enhance their job satisfaction. Creating a culture of learning and involving teachers in strategic decision making is crucial (Martin and Kragler, 1999). In striving to enhance collegiality collaborative efforts prove invaluable. Teachers who work together toward a mutual goal feel a shared investment in their efforts (Weasmer & Woods, 2004). When teachers feel invested in any project or effort, their satisfaction with the job increases, therefore, increasing the possibility of them returning to the campus.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, the five laws of increasing returns can be used as a guideline for campus, district, and state administrators as their challenges increase in the area of maintaining highly qualified staffs in their schools. Following these five laws will help increase retention rates and decrease teacher mobility and attrition rates. Recommendations are for districts to train current and new administrators in providing a school culture that incorporates these five laws.

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