Where Have All The Teachers Gone?

Administrative Support of New Teachers

by
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During my three short years serving as principal of a small elementary school, I have often discovered new areas in which I need to improve my knowledge level, skills, and performance. Recently I have become convinced that I need to do a better job mentoring new teachers, both those new to the profession and new to my school.

The principal's responsibility to support new teachers should be obvious, but I can honestly say it was not discussed much in my administrator preparation courses, nor has it been a major emphasis of administrative staff development since I became a principal. After some research on the subject, I have become convinced that teacher retention could be dramatically improved if principals (1) learned more about the needs of new teachers, and (2) assumed a greater responsibility for the novice teacher's success in that all-important first year.

"Most new teachers leave because of bad training or lousy leadership, 50 percent in seven years," warns Mr. Harper, high school principal on the popular Fox series Boston Public, a weekly show noted for its vivid portrayals of the triumphs and tribulations of an inner city school student body and staff. Obviously, even within the popular media, there is a dawning awareness that the much publicized teacher shortage is, in fact, a crisis of teacher retention.

There is a teacher shortage in our nation occurring because educators are exiting the profession in greater numbers than new recruits are entering. Schools in the United States will need approximately two million new teachers in the next 10 years (Chai-ka, 2000). A few stark facts point to the need to not only attract, but also retain new teachers:

- Brewster and Railback (2001) report that 20 to 30 percent of new teachers leave within the first three years, 9.3 percent in the first year, and 50 percent leave in the fifth year.
- The Baby Boomers are beginning to retire. A recent report of the Teacher Retention Unit of the Chicago Public Schools (2002) found that one-third of American teachers are 50 years old or older.
- Almost four million certified teachers in the United States have chosen not to teach (Carran, et al, 2000, cited in McCreight, 2000).
- Each year approximately 40 percent of newly graduated, certified teachers do not enter the teaching profession (McCreight, 2000).

Recent statistics illustrate just how seriously teacher attrition affects the overall supply of teachers. In 1994 to 1995, nationally about 193,000 teachers entered the profession, yet approximately 213,000 of the 3 million person teaching force exited, which is 110 percent of those just recruited (Ingersoll, 2002). In Texas, my home state, in 2001, 29,000 certified teachers quit teaching, yet by August 2002, only 16,601 newly certified teachers graduated from teacher education programs (State Board of Educator Certification, 2002).

When teachers leave the profession, the turnover in a school or district is costly--in finances, time, and the sacrifice of educational quality. In some rural and urban school districts, administrators may be forced to hire less-qualified teachers, raise class sizes, or use substitutes. Even in districts that attract sufficient applicants, there is an obvious cost to instructional quality if a teaching staff is constantly changing, which frustrates long-term improvement projects that depend on teacher staff development and cooperation.