CHAPTER 7

REDUCING NOVICE TEACHER ATTRITION IN URBAN DISTRICTS

Focusing on the Moving Target

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers constitute the basic manipulable input into the educational process as conducted in schools. Whether it is done in knowledge or in ignorance, the shaping of personnel policies is the shaping of school education. (Bowman, 1973)

Changing and improving schools has become, as Seymour Sarason observes, one of the largest cottage industries in 21st century America. Innumerable strategies for school improvement have been developed and are subject to ongoing experimentation. Yet, as Bowman so aptly notes, educating children is essentially a labor-dependent enterprise, and as such,
school improvement efforts focus on placing qualified teachers in every elementary and secondary classroom.

This chapter summarizes briefly the first component of an ongoing project that explores how many teachers are leaving urban public school districts, in four Midwest states (IL, IN, MN, WI), during their first five years in teaching. This component of the research project analyzes separately four types of novice teachers, those who: (a) taught continuously in the same district all five years ("stayers"), (b) transferred to another school district(s) within a state, but remained in the same state all five years ("movers"), (c) left public school teaching in a state and did not return ("leavers"), and (d) left public school teaching in a state, but returned ("returnees"). The second component of the project consists of gathering statements from five-year veteran teachers concerning their reasons for staying in the profession. Results from the second component will be reported elsewhere. In short, the first component of this research focuses on determining which kinds of teachers are more prone to stay in teaching and the second component seeks to answer why they choose to stay.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Lessons from previous reform experiences suggest that policymakers in the 21st century face a formidable task in devising strategies that will improve the quality of our teaching force. The last two decades of reform were set in motion by commission reports such as A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which sought to rely primarily on state regulatory power, and secondarily on additional financial resources, in a direct attack on schooling problems—including teacher quality. A key assumption underlying this first wave of reform was that teachers should continue to organize their classrooms as they always had done, only do so harder and faster, and with stricter state scrutiny. Evidence quickly surfaced, though, that added bureaucracy and more centralized control did not improve teacher quality or lead to improved student achievement. Work by Darling-Hammond and Wise (1985) and Rosenholtz (1987) suggests that this first approach may have been counterproductive in addressing these issues.

A second reform approach ensued, seeking to reduce bureaucracy and decentralize decision making. Teaching was even more centrally the focus of this “second wave”:

Reforms began to focus on the structure of the teaching occupation and the overall structural features of schools. Thus, teachers’ salaries in many states and districts were raised; teachers were often provided with some additional decision making authority; and, to a lesser extent, opportunities were created that would allow teachers to advance professionally without leaving the classroom (Hirsch, Koppich, & Knapp, 1998, p. 2).

The limited achievements resulting from these efforts to institute reforms such as school-based management and teacher professionalism spurred the current third wave of reform that seeks to increase the available supply of high-quality teachers. Programs such as Troops to Teachers and Teach for America were implemented nationwide to recruit new candidates into teaching. In addition, many states have instituted alternative certification programs to reduce and postpone formal education training and place mid-career professionals into teaching immediately.

Yet, the payoff from such supply-side initiatives could be short-lived if state and local policymakers do not concurrently implement policies to improve the likelihood that these individuals remain in the profession. As John Goodlad observed, “Talk of securing and maintaining a stable corps of outstanding teachers is empty rhetoric unless serious efforts are made to study and remedy the conditions likely to drive out those already recruited” (1983, p. 173).

BACKGROUND

The issue of staffing all classrooms with qualified teachers has received increased attention in recent years due to accumulating research evidence showing that teacher quality (e.g., subject matter knowledge, cognitive ability, selectivity of college attended) is the single most important school factor affecting student achievement. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (1999) report that variations in teacher quality explain at least 7% of student test score differences. While 7% may not seem large, in studies of this nature, this is a large effect.

Another reason teacher supply receives considerable attention is research showing that the career of teaching is characterized by very high mobility (Ingersoll, 1995, 2001; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991). Such high rates of teacher turnover thwart efforts to improve our schools in at least two significant ways. First, research shows that high-performing schools are distinguished by stability, continuity, and cohesion among employees (Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). High rates of teacher turnover can obviously disrupt the stability, continuity, and cohesion of instructors, and thus student performance. In addition, the ability of less effective schools to institutionalize a successful reform effort depends crucially on the continued presence of large numbers of teachers who are knowledgeable about, and committed to, the
change (Fullan, 1991). While schools and districts undergoing reform often seek changes in staffing to align the skills and expertise of the faculty with a new vision and mission, veteran teachers play a vital role in providing continuing assistance to new teachers and administrators. Several studies point to high turnover in a school’s teaching staff as one of the most powerful factors in stifling school improvement efforts (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Huberman & Miles, 1984).

Second, the art of teaching children is a developmental process involving a complex set of skills, many of which can be well honed only on the job. While better pre-service teacher education can begin the process of improving teacher quality, research clearly shows that inexperienced teachers continue to sharpen their skills and become more effective teachers during the first few years in the classroom. The continual need for school districts to hire new, inexperienced teachers to replace teachers who leave after a very short teaching tenure “can only hinder these districts’ efforts to improve the education they provide” (Murnane et al., 1991, p. 65).

Thus, state and local policymakers have come to recognize that efforts to improve elementary and secondary education will depend critically upon our success in attracting, recruiting, and retaining capable people in the teaching profession. Simply put, we cannot have better schools until we have better teachers.

THE PROJECT: TRACKING TEACHER MOBILITY

Previous research into teacher turnover tended to focus solely on those teachers who leave the profession altogether—“leavers” or group (c) referenced in the second paragraph of this chapter (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Heyns, 1988; Murnane, 1987; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1988). As long as an individual remains in teaching, that individual is not included in such studies. Thus, the traditional approach does not differentiate between a teacher who is employed by five different school districts in a state during the first five years in the profession (a “mover”) and a teacher who works in the same district for all five years (a “stayer”). These two teacher career paths have vastly different effects on local school programs, though, because “movers” are indistinguishable—from the perspective of their former employers and former students—from “leavers.”

It is important to note a limitation of this study is that it does not distinguish between teachers who transfer across schools within a district, and those who move from district to district. Such distinction would help inform policy at the school level. For a school, any transfer—be it building-to-building or district-to-district—requires a teacher replacement. In this study, however, we concentrate on district-level impact and look at transfers out of district, out of state, and out of the teaching profession.

We note the decision not to include “movers” in teacher turnover is particularly important in seeking to understand teacher attrition in urban school districts. Previous work by Gritz and Theobald (1995) found that the lone characteristic predicting that a male teacher will be a “leaver” is employment in a school district educating low numbers of poor and minority students. They speculated that teachers choosing to leave such school districts are unlikely to improve their standing by transferring to a more complex school district (i.e., a district with a larger proportion of poverty students). Thus, teachers exiting less complex districts tend to leave the state system entirely (i.e., become “leavers”).

As the data presented in this chapter will show, the situation is quite different for teachers choosing to leave an urban school district. In the urban districts in the four Midwestern states included in this study, the percent of children eligible for free lunch is approximately three times larger than for non-urban districts. Clearly, transferring to a teaching position in a less complex school district (i.e., a district with less poverty) could be tempting to a novice teacher because it might be seen as a chance to work in a less challenging teaching situation. The findings presented in this chapter suggest that “movers” are much more likely to leave urban than non-urban districts. Thus, previous research on teacher turnover has tended to underestimate the actual impact of teacher attrition on urban school districts because it ignored “movers” and focused on only one component of teacher turnover (i.e., “leavers”).

This project follows the lead of Ingersoll (1995) and views teachers moving among school districts ("movers") to be equally important for analysis as those teachers exiting from the profession ("leavers"). The premise underlying this perspective is that, whether those departing are moving to a similar job in another organization or leaving the occupation altogether, their departures similarly impact and are impacted by the organization (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 356). From the perspective of the school, whether a departing teacher is moving to another district or leaving the profession, that individual most likely must be replaced.

The focus on teacher retention within a school district does not, of course, reflect a view that previous research into attrition from the profession is unimportant. Instead, this focus is motivated by a judgment that those decisions most likely to influence teacher retention occur at the district level. Therefore, rather than investigating the behavior of a state’s teachers, this study analyzes the behavior of teachers within a school district.

The second component of this project is an ongoing survey of 1,000 public school teachers who have continuously taught in the same districts for five years ("stayers"). This component will further our understanding of
FINDINGS

Teaching is an occupation that loses many of its newly trained practitioners very early in their careers. As shown in Figure 1, over the five-year period, the cumulative losses of beginning teachers from the school district that hired them was slightly more than 50%, consisting of 23% who moved to different districts and 28% who left teaching altogether. These percentages are consistent with previous national findings (Ingersoll, 1995).

Personal Characteristics and Turnover

Figure 1 also provides information on the relationship between personal characteristics of teachers and the likelihood that they leave their district. In terms of overall teacher turnover—the sum of the percent of teachers that move between districts and the percent that leave the profession—minority teachers and teachers who enter the profession at age 30 or younger depart at significantly higher rates. Teachers who are 31 or older when they enter the profession and teachers with graduate degrees are significantly less likely to depart. White teachers are also less likely to depart, but this relationship is not as strong as it is for those teachers who enter at an older age or possess a graduate degree.

Impact of Traditional and Enhanced Definitions of Turnover

The results illustrated in Figure 1 emphasize the importance of clearly specifying how "teacher turnover" is to be defined. If we look at the traditional definition of "teacher turnover" (i.e., those teachers who leave the profession altogether), minority teachers are significantly less likely to leave the profession. Researchers have concluded that minority teachers, because they tend to come from lower SES backgrounds, are less occupationally mobile than Whites (Dworkin, 1980; Kemple, 1989). However, the results in Figure 1 show nuanced behavior. While minority teachers are less likely to leave the profession altogether, they are much more likely to transfer among school districts. Theobald and Gritz (1996, p. 21) found that "teachers transfer from their first teaching position to another school dis-
trict when they confront less desirable situations that are amenable to improvement by transferring to a different public school district* and they leave the profession when confronted with "less desirable situations that cannot be improved by moving to another school district." Thus, it appears that minority teachers are more able to improve their situation by transferring to another district than are other teachers. A possible explanation for this result is that high demand for minority teachers provides them with more job options than are available to other teachers.

Another interesting finding in Figure 1 is the lack of a significant difference by gender. Data from the 1960s and 1970s show that turnover rates among females entering teaching was about 30% higher than attrition among men entering at that time. Grissmer and Kirby (1987) explain this result by appealing to the differing "life cycle priorities" of young women and young men and argue that women were more likely to leave teaching because they do so to raise families. These data suggest that, in the late 1990s, this traditional pattern no longer exists in these four states.

The remaining results are consistent with previous research. Greenberg and McCall (1974) found previously that teachers with graduate degrees had lower turnover rates. Several previous studies found that teachers' decisions whether to stay or leave the teaching profession are highly influenced by their age at entry (Bobbitt, Leich, Whitener, & Lynch, 1994; Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Barkanic, & Maislin, 1998).

**Urban Teacher Turnover**

Figure 2 provides the same information for the 3,194 novice teachers hired by urban school districts in 1995–96. Previous research (Darling-Hammond & Green, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1985) has speculated that urban teachers have a higher turnover rate. These data clearly support this finding. Urban teachers—regardless their gender, race, age, or degree status—are significantly more likely to move out of their district than are novice teachers hired by non-urban districts. Yet, urban teachers are no more likely to leave teaching than are non-urban teachers.

This result highlights the importance of including "movers" in an analysis of teacher turnover. The more narrow definition of turnover (i.e., only those who leave the teaching profession) would lead us to conclude that turnover rates are no higher in urban than in non-urban districts. When we include "movers," though, the turnover rates for minority and older teachers are more than 20% higher in urban districts than they are in non-urban districts.

**Subject Area Taught and Turnover**

Among the most important findings in previous research is the influence of academic field on teacher turnover. Ingersoll (2001) reports "although both special education and math/science teachers were more likely to migrate [i.e., move] than other kinds of teachers, neither was more likely to leave teaching altogether" (pp. 519–520). The data in Figure 3, which includes both urban and non-urban teachers, concur with this finding for special educators, but differ substantially for math/science teachers. Novice special educators in these four states are more likely to transfer to another school district, but are not any more likely to leave. As with minority teachers, it may be that high demand for special education teachers provides them with a greater ability to improve their situation by transferring than is available to other teachers.

Figure 3 shows, however, that mathematics teachers—and all science teachers except those in biology—are much more likely to leave teaching
and are less likely to transfer among school districts. A variety of incentives influence the labor market decisions teachers make. One set of incentives is the salary an individual can earn in teaching compared to salaries in alternative occupations. Research has shown that math and science teachers can expect higher salaries in their alternative professions than do other teachers and therefore might be more likely to leave (Murnane et al., 1991). Interestingly, in these four states in the late 1990s, biology teachers were the least likely to leave. Clearly, the alternative career paths available to individuals trained as high school biology teachers—as well as those teaching family consumer science, physical education, and social studies—

differ substantially from those open to individuals trained in physics and chemistry. Why math and science teachers would be more likely to move among schools is subject to further investigation. One possibility may be that the level of subject area expertise needed to meet the certification requirements for physics and chemistry teachers equips them with sufficient skills that these individuals are attractive to non-school employers. Although certification for biology teachers requires subject matter expertise, individuals may still lack the highly sophisticated technical skills—for example, skills required for gene-splicing and DNA mapping—that life-science and drug companies seek.

The impact of academic field on being a “mover” is also quite striking. Physical education teachers are the most likely to move and physics teachers are the least likely to move. To return to the reasoning discussed earlier for minority teachers and special educators, it appears that physical education teachers are able to improve their situation by transferring, while physics teachers cannot. The second component of this study should provide more definitive evidence, but anecdotal reports suggest that because physical education teachers are much more likely to be coaches, a transfer to another school district allows them to “move up the ladder” in a way that is not available to physics teachers—especially if the less desirable situation facing the physics teacher is relatively low pay compared to what she or he could earn outside of the teaching profession. Few school districts pay teachers in high-wage academic fields more than they pay teachers in low-wage fields.

Figure 4 provides the same information on the influence of academic field on the turnover rates of 3,194 novice teachers hired by urban school districts in 1995–96. As before, the more narrow definition of turnover that excludes “movers” would suggest that attrition among urban teachers is no higher than among non-urban teachers. However, when “movers” are included, special educators, business teachers, foreign language teachers, and math teachers have significantly higher turnover rates in urban districts than they do in non-urban settings.
Lastly, state and local policymakers should think in terms of increasing or decreasing the magnitude of these incentives as they formulate policies to lower rates of turnover, and ultimately, improve student performance. As John Dewey observed nearly a century ago, “All other reforms are conditioned upon reform in the quality and character of those who engage in the teaching profession” (1908, p. 194).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence presented in this report suggests that the current focus on addressing supply-and-demand issues through macro-level, statewide initiatives such as Teach for America, mandatory mentorship programs, and generic alternative certification programs may be misplaced. While each of these initiatives may be important for solving other problems facing the teaching profession, they are not well suited for addressing the micro-level supply-and-demand issues facing urban districts. Consistent with prior empirical research (Gritz & Theobald, 1995; Ingersoll, 1995, 2001; Theobald & Gritz, 1996), the data show that Midwest schools face excess demand for new teachers caused by teacher turnover rates in the first five years that exceed 50%. For urban districts, turnover rates in the first five years are nearly 60%. Therefore, rather than outlining policy recommendations for a state’s teachers, this section seeks to influence the behavior of teachers within school districts.

The focus on increasing teacher supply is likely to prove inadequate—especially for poorer and more complex districts, such as urban school districts, that are rarely on the receiving end of teacher transfers—if new teachers brought into the profession continue to move and leave in such large numbers. Thus, state policies need also—if not primarily—to address this issue from the demand-side by decreasing turnover rather than focusing solely on the supply-side.

Options for addressing these factors include:

1. Providing higher funding to school districts with more disadvantaged students. What is most striking in the survey responses is the utter lack of comments about “difficult kids” or “discipline problems.” What the surveys focus on instead is the difficulty in remaining altruistic in the face of a perceived lack of resources in some districts for providing smaller classes and the personal attention children need.

2. Creating an external context in all school districts that is supportive of novice teachers and their work. Survey results suggest that novice teachers find their colleagues and school-level principals very sup-
portive. However, the next layer of interactions—those involving parents and superintendents are much more varied. In a sizable number of school districts there appears to be a mismatch between the goals and aspirations of those in the school and those most closely involved with, but outside, the school. States might review the superintendent and teacher preparation programs in their state universities to ensure that potential teachers and superintendents are well prepared to work in urban and poor rural districts. They might also launch education programs for parents in urban and poor rural districts that seek to provide them with the tools to be supportive of their children’s education.

3. Specifying desired learning outcomes with sufficient restraint for classroom teachers to have a reasonable say as well. The novice teachers surveyed in this report are well satisfied with the autonomy they currently have. As they move to implement new federal legislation, states must be cognizant of the extreme importance that teachers place on the freedom to make their own decisions regarding what is taught, and instructional approaches used.

4. Providing pay premiums for novice teachers in high attrition districts (i.e., compensating differentials). The goal of this salary premium is to allow these districts to compete better for the best new teachers.

Despite decades of court-ordered funding remedies, the most needy children in America continue to be concentrated in schools without a corresponding concentration of the resources necessary to meet those children’s needs (Kantor & Brenzel, 1992; Kozol, 1991). The purpose of this chapter has been to document teacher turnover in urban school districts in four Midwest states and examine closely the role of school characteristics and conditions in this teacher movement. Much of this current labor market activity may actually be amplifying, rather than minimizing, the educational advantages that better off students receive as a result of their families’ social position.

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