

Teacher Turnover:

**Innovative New Solutions to
Persistent Issues**

Carlos Espinosa
Re-envisioning Education and Democracy
12/15/05

Introduction

Turnover is a problem that has plagued the teaching profession for many years. Some of the turnover has been the result of retirement or personal reasons (pregnancy, health problems, family moves, etc.), but currently almost fifty percent of teachers leave the profession because of job dissatisfaction or the desire to pursue a better job.¹

According to a National Education Association publication from 1983, many teachers were leaving the profession due to unrealistic expectations, complex school bureaucracies, negative attitudes toward teachers, low salaries, and inadequate facilities (schools).² Similar sentiments are still echoed in 2004, “Of those who leave because of job dissatisfaction, most link their turnover to several key factors: low salaries, lack of support from school administrators, lack of student motivation, student discipline problems, and lack of teacher influence over school decision making.”³

This seemingly un-solvable problem of turnover has resulted in a constant need for qualified teachers to enter into the profession. The response to this has often been an attempt to simply increase the supply of teachers. According to Richard Ingersoll, an associate professor of education and sociology at Philadelphia University, initiatives introduced to recruit new candidates into teaching include federal programs such as “Troops-to-Teachers” and “Teach for America”. In addition, financial incentives including signing bonuses, housing assistance, student loan forgiveness, and tuition reimbursement have been implemented to encourage entrance into the teaching profession. However, Ingersoll argues that policies and incentives such as these are

¹ Ingersoll, pg. 144.

² Swick, Hanley (1983). Teacher Renewal: Revitalization of Classroom Teachers. Washington D.C.: National Education Association. Pg. 3-5.

³ Ingersoll, pg. 145.

dealing with the shortage of qualified teachers in the wrong way. Instead of trying to encourage increased recruitment, Ingersoll says that more attention should be paid to conditions within the profession in order to resolve teacher turnover. He then goes on to suggest that turnover should be dealt with in terms of improving teacher salary, increasing support for beginning teachers, increasing teachers influence in school-wide decision making, and reducing student discipline problems.⁴

This paper will follow Ingersoll's reasoning because his solutions could be potentially implemented very easily at a local level. First, I will address some of the perennial problems that have historically lead to turnover. Second, I will describe Ingersoll's proposed solutions. Finally, I will present recommendations for social advocacy and action in accordance with Ingersoll.

Perennial Problems Leading to Teacher Turnover

Teacher turnover has its roots in the intense stress that many teachers face on a daily basis. The stress is often not "eu-stress", the beneficial/positive type of stress, but "distress", the negative/harmful type of stress. In the book entitled *Job Burnout in Public Education: Symptoms, Causes, and Survival Skills*, Anthony J. Cedoline includes a very thorough discussion of distress faced by teachers. According to the author, distress leads to job burnout which pushes many new teachers out of the profession. Among the mentioned sources of distress are the two following examples:

Control Over One's Destiny - Because of the publicly funded nature of their jobs and the decisions made from above, teachers often have little control over the direction that their profession will take them. Under this topic are such problems as involuntary re-

⁴ Ingersoll, Pg. 145-146.

assignment, discipline/behavioral control, salary, and decision making.

Communication/Feedback - The feedback to teachers is often limited by a shrinking amount of time available to administrators or other teachers, and an often complex and thus inflexible means of evaluation. As a result, it becomes harder and harder for teachers to seek and receive the feedback they often need to monitor their performance.⁵

The above problems from 1982 are also present in Richard Ingersoll's contribution to the 2004 book *Letters to the Next President: What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in Public Education*. In this contribution, Ingersoll identifies four problems in the teaching profession that still lead to turnover. The first, lack of support from school administrators, corresponds to the *communication/feedback* problem identified in the 1980's. The rest, low salaries, lack of influence in school-wide decision making, and student discipline problems, correspond to the *control of one's destiny* problem from the 1980's.⁶ Thus, these issues still hold true, and can perhaps be remedied with more current solutions.

Proposed Solutions to Teacher Turnover

To solve the four perennial problems stated above, Ingersoll discusses four solutions in his 2004 contribution to *Letter to the Next President*: increasing support for beginning teachers, improving teacher salary, increasing teachers influence in school-wide decision making, and reduction of student discipline problems. However, while he considers each to be very important, Ingersoll acknowledges that increasing teacher's salaries can be a daunting task for many reasons. Instead, Ingersoll presents the other three possible solutions as much more practical options.

⁵ Cedoline, Pg. 95-107.

Support for Beginning Teachers

Ingersoll details his ideas for support of beginning teachers as ranging from “providing adequate amounts of classroom supplies to providing mentors for new teachers.” Ingersoll goes on say that life for beginning teachers has often been described as “sink or swim”.⁷ In fact, 29% of new teachers leave education within the first three years, and 39% leave within the first five years.⁸ Thus, strategies to help schools retain teachers must be enacted immediately, and extended for at least five years.

One of the many ideas of how to support teachers during their beginning years is presented in *The Empowerment of Teachers: Overcoming the Crisis of Confidence*, by Gene Maeroff. He talks about the significance of the CHART (Collaboratives for Humanities and Arts Teaching) program in bringing teachers together. Maeroff says that bringing teachers together helps to curtail isolation stemming from spending a majority of the day in the classroom, and makes teachers feel like they are part of something greater.⁹ This is especially important for beginning educators as connections can be made with more experienced teachers. This idea is echoed by Daniel Heller in *Attracting and Retaining Good Teachers*. He states that “the power of teachers talking to teachers” manifests itself in effective professional development.¹⁰ Thus, creating a program centered around teacher interaction may function to decrease isolation and increase professional development. The result would be a support net that could function to help retain teachers past the five year mark discussed above.

Increasing Teacher’s Influence in School-Wide Decision Making

⁶ Ingersoll, Pg. 145.

⁷ Ingersoll, Pg. 145.

⁸ Heller, Pg. 5.

⁹ Maeroff, Pg. 24.

Within schools teachers often have a very small voice. Ingersoll states that “teachers often have little say in many of the key decisions that affect their work, but they are, nevertheless, increasingly held accountable for the things they do not control.”¹¹ This creates a dilemma for teacher who easily become frustrated with their situation. According to Ryan Gibbs, a public school teacher from Minneapolis, Minnesota, “Teachers need the ability to make more decisions for their own classrooms. One of the most annoying parts of my job is that I don’t have much control...and I know what my students need more than the district does.”¹² As a result, many teachers can easily become disenchanted with their jobs because they often feel as if they cannot “control their own destiny.”

The inability to “control your own destiny” influences how teachers feel about themselves and their career. Often teachers feel as if they are at the mercy of other “important individuals”. According to Gene Maeroff, “Those who see themselves as having less worth than others are not likely to feel a sense of authority about what they do. Any program intended to make teachers more powerful must address the need to raise them up as people and professionals.”¹³ Ingersoll’s assertion that teachers need more influence in decision-making would do just this. Through more influence in decision-making, teacher’s status would rise and they could increase in power within the school. This would compliment their status as professionals, and perhaps give them another reason to stay in teaching.

Reducing Student Discipline Problems

¹⁰ Heller, Pg. 17.

¹¹ Ingersoll, Pg. 145.

¹² Gibbs, Interview on 10/12/04.

¹³ Maeroff, Pg. 19.

Reduction of student discipline problems is another key to absolving the problem to teacher turnover. According to Ingersoll, “many former teachers tell us this [A problem with discipline] is one of the major reasons for their exits...schools that do a better job coping with misbehavior problems have significantly less teacher turnover.”¹⁴ There are many ways schools and teachers cope with misbehavior problems, but one of the most direct is called a “Personal System of Discipline.”

The “Personal System of Discipline” is described by C.M. Charles in *Building Classroom discipline: From Model to Practice*. According to Charles, “Teachers have always developed personal systems of discipline, but until recently they lacked systematic guidance from researcher-specialists in school discipline.”¹⁵ As a result, teachers currently have a stronger informational base from which to base their discipline techniques. To make it work however, teachers need access to this information base. After access is obtained, Charles states that teachers still have “the necessity to build their own personal systems of discipline that they believe best for themselves and the students that they teach.”¹⁶ Therefore, the key to student discipline from this perspective lies not in the information itself, but in *access* to the informational base so that teachers can make their own disciplinary decisions.

Recommendations for Advocacy and Action

Richard Ingersoll’s three proposed solutions to teacher turnover detailed above (support for beginning teachers, increasing decision making influence, and reducing student discipline problems) have been used as a framework in this paper because they

¹⁴ Ingersoll, Pg. 146.

¹⁵ Charles, Pg. 167.

¹⁶ Charles, Pg. 168.

represent plausible initiatives that could easily take place at the local level.

Recommendations for local action in accordance with these solutions will complete the remainder of this paper.

Support for Beginning Teachers

Support for beginning teachers can take many forms including the one described in the previous section: bringing teachers together. However, the implementation of a program that works to reduce isolation need not be too complex. In *Teachers Wanted: Attracting and Retaining Good Teachers*, an extensive framework consisting of countless forms and figures is presented to initiate and maintain interaction between teacher, their colleagues, and principals.¹⁷ However, this strategy conflicts with another factor that leads to teacher burnout: teachers often feel as if they constantly have more to do with less time to do it. After a day of teaching, dealing with discipline problems, improvising for missing supplies, and grading papers, what teacher has the time or piece of mind to fill out more paperwork in an attempt to take part in a complex interaction program?

What would be much more effective than this is 30 minutes of informal meeting time scheduled for beginning teachers. Perhaps if the structure were relaxed, more teachers would see an interaction program as an opportunity or resource rather than as a potential task. The concept is simple, no forms, no analysis, just thirty minutes to relax or express frustrations in a dialogue with another teacher. Maybe this could take place over a coffee, or better yet, beer at the local tavern. How freeing does this sound? How exciting does it sound? Teachers can initiate this process by simply posting a note in the lunchroom and having people sign up for meeting times with certain people.

However, there are a few important problems that can arise with such a relaxed

approach. For one, teachers could decide not to participate. In addition, there may be teachers who need support, but not enough teachers who are willing to give their time to support someone else. This is specifically why it is very important to focus on the flexibility of the program when flyers advertising the program are posted in the teacher areas (lunch rooms, department offices, etc.). The informational flyers could take the form of a carefully crafted marketing campaign that serves to entice teachers to participate. Innovative phrases such as “Need someone to talk to?” or “Stressed!?” could serve as attention getters with straight to the point descriptions of the program below. In any circumstance, it is vitally important that these flyers efficiently convey the concepts of the supportive meetings, and emphasize the informal aspect of the program. If these suggestions are implemented correctly, I’m willing to bet that teachers would much rather take this approach than adhere to a complex interaction program model.

Increasing Teacher’s Influence in School-Wide Decision Making

Increasing teacher’s influence in decision making could be addressed in the informal meetings described above. However, perhaps once a month an administrator would be included in the conversation. The same relaxed model for increased interaction could be implemented, only it could be taken a step further.

As opposed to attending a formal school district board meeting, including school officials in these discussions may provide a means for teachers to express their concerns to administrators in a non-threatening/intimidating environment. If this were to happen, it would be very important for administrators to know that they’re not being invited to a “let’s bash the principal and his/her assistants” meeting where 5 or 6 teachers put the administrator in the hot seat, and fire away with criticisms. If this situation occurred even

¹⁷ Heller, Pg. 30-35, and 59-71.

once, the validity and possibility of this program would be permanently compromised. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the meeting as *informal conversation* where the teacher/administrator ratio is no more than two to one, and ideally one to one. These kinds of ratios may be more productive to fruitful communication. As a direct result, teachers could get their voices better heard and perhaps then have a greater influence in the decisions that affect their classrooms. This program could be implemented with relative ease because it would mirror the program utilized for teacher to teacher interaction.

Student Discipline

Student discipline is a very hard subject to tackle. In addition to parental involvement, administrators are involved, and so are the teachers themselves. Each person may have a different definition of how to correctly discipline a child. Therefore proven strategies must be implemented. As discussed in the previous section about student discipline, *access* to information is key to determining how teachers deal with conflict in their classrooms. Therefore, teachers could be given the information the public thinks they should have. Assuming teachers would first follow district decisions regarding discipline, they could then model their individual discipline designs while consulting the information they receive from student's parents.

Parents can be involved in decisions regarding student's discipline by promoting various information at PTA meetings. This information could be gleaned from a quick search of the internet or from a specific library resource, and presented at a PTA meeting. The information could then be given to teachers by PTA leaders. As a result, it would be relatively easy for parents to get involved and have influence in how their children are

disciplined.

However, what happens if the discipline guidelines agreed on by the parents do not line up with the recommendations of the district? The potential conflict could be very frustrating for teachers who would be pulled in one direction by parents, and in another direction by administrators. A solution to this could be sending the PTA ideas to an administrator for approval before passing it on to teachers. If the administrator has any significant objections, he or she can meet with the PTA to resolve the conflict. This would take the burden off the teacher, and take him or her out of the sticky situation of being between the parents and the administrators. If such a procedure were followed, there could be less conflict and more compromise resulting in a better situation for all parties involved.

Conclusion

Teacher turnover is the result of many different factors. However, contrary to popular knowledge, much turnover does not happen because of retirement or personal reasons, it is the result of job dissatisfaction. Job dissatisfaction in the teaching profession could be due to many different factors, but as shown in this paper, it often centers about the distress that teachers experience on a daily basis. There are infinite forms of distress that could be faced, but two types in particular have been problems since at least the 1980's: *Control Over One's Destiny* and *Communication/Feedback*. These problems need to be dealt with in order to retain more teachers in the profession. Richard Ingersoll proposes three suggestions solutions to deal with these issues: increasing support for beginning teachers, increasing teacher's influence in decision making, and reducing student discipline problems. Perhaps if these solutions were implemented according to

the informal and easy action plans presented in this paper, we would see a decrease in the shortage of qualified teachers nationwide.

Annotated bibliography

Charles, C.M. (1989). Building Classroom Discipline: From Models to Practice. White Plains, New York: Longman Inc.

In Building Classroom Discipline, Charles details several popular “systems” of discipline, and then asserts that teachers should use these ideas to create their own systems unique to their situation. This book helped frame this essay’s approach to discipline problems. It is a good source for those wishing to find more background to this essay’s assertion that *access* to information, not the information itself, is the solution to discipline problems.

Cedoline, A. J. (1982). Job Burnout in Public Education: Symptoms, Causes, and Survival Skills. New York: Teachers College Press.

In Job Burnout in Public Education, Anthony Cedoline discusses in depth the factors leading to teacher burnout in the early 1980's. He first defines what leads to burnout for both teachers and administration, and then details ways to combat the burnout. This book was useful in this essay because it provided me with information about problems defined in the 1980's that are still issues today according to Richard Ingersoll.

Glickman, C. (2002) Leadership for Learning: How to Help Teachers Succeed. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

In Leadership for Learning, Glickman talks about various complex ways to help teachers succeed. In many ways it is similar to Teacher Wanted. The combination of the complex solutions in both of these books was a strong factor in this essay's assertion that an informal simplified approach to improving teacher success is the best route to take.

Heller, D. (2004). Teachers Wanted: Attracting and Retaining Good Teachers. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

In Teachers Wanted, Heller describes how to maintain interaction between teachers, principals, and their colleagues. Their solution is very detailed and complete, but perhaps too meticulous. Various forms and frameworks are presented that would take a lot of time to complete. This essay presented Heller's approach as too complex, and instead opted for a more informal solution to teacher turnover. This book gives a good background as to why this essay suggested the solutions it did.

Ingersoll, R. (2004). Revolving Doors and Leaky Buckets. In C. Glickman (Ed.) Letters to the Next Presidents: What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in Public Education (pp. 141-147). New York: Teachers College Press.

Ingersoll's section talks about what presently leads to high levels of turnover in the teaching profession. His essay is short, but to the point. His arguments and proposed solutions formed the frame work of this paper. This source is strongly recommended for those who desire to learn about the background of this essay.

Maeroff, G. (1988). The Empowerment of Teachers: Overcoming the Crisis of Confidence. New York: Teachers College Press.

In The Empowerment of Teachers, Gene Maeroff offers various insights into improving the daily work of teachers. In specific he writes about how respect for teachers is essential for them to gain the confidence they need to teach effectively. He also writes about the positive energy that is produced when teachers have confidence. This book was useful in this essay because it spoke in depth about support for beginning teachers.

Other Sources

Clarizo, H. (1971). Toward Positive Classroom Discipline. New York. John Wiley and Sons Inc.

Williamson, B. (1998) A First-Year Teacher's Guidebook: An Educational Recipe Book for Success. Sacramento: Dynamic Teaching Company.