

CENTERVIEW

Insight and analysis on
California education policy

AUGUST 2007

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Why Do Teachers Leave?

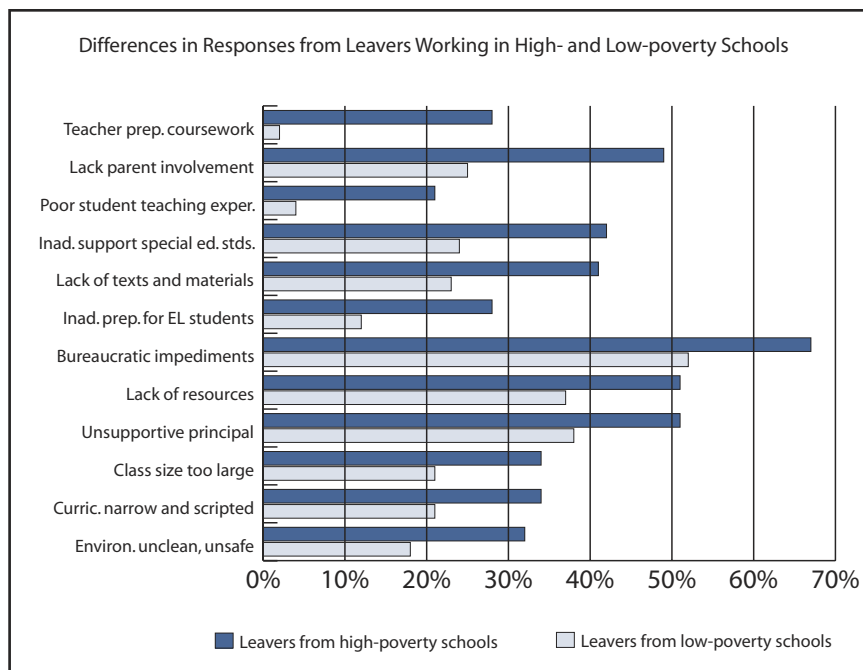
While California has made substantial progress in easing its teacher shortage and reducing the concentration of the least prepared teachers in the lowest achieving schools, the effort to strengthen schools for all students is hampered by the large number of teachers who leave the profession prematurely. Policymakers at the state and local levels need to do a better job of keeping more talented, skilled and experienced teachers in the classroom.

In order to target policy that keeps great teachers in the classroom we might begin with the question: "Why do teachers leave?" Many Californians, or those in education or the policy community, might say that low pay and a lack of respect for the profession fuels high rates of teacher attrition. But new research challenges those assumptions. In *A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn*, Dr. Ken Futernick of the California State University's Center for Teacher Quality finds that "critical problems in the teaching and learning environment are

literally driving teachers from the classroom." While more research on this issue is needed, Futernick's conclusions ring true. We are pleased to share some of his findings in this issue of the CenterView.

Teacher Attrition hits Hardest at Poor Schools

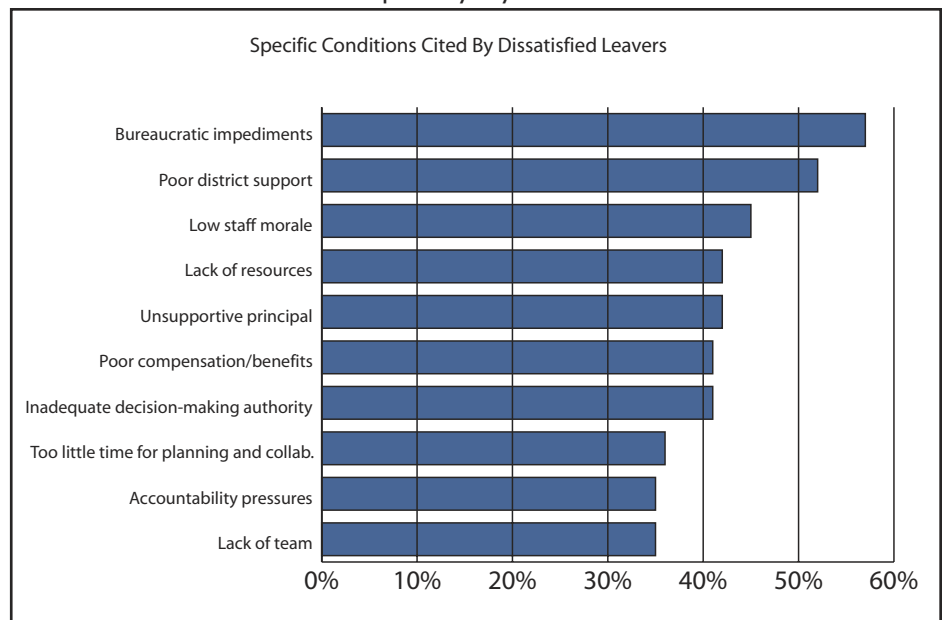
The teacher retention challenge is the most severe among California's low achieving schools—often the same schools that serve low income and minority students. Thirty-three of thirty-five unfavorable teaching conditions were cited more frequently by dissatisfied teachers planning to leave high poverty schools than teachers leaving low poverty schools. Teachers in high poverty schools were more likely to encounter shortages of instructional materials, unsupportive principals, poor support for special education students, disruptive bureaucracies, and unclean and unsafe work environments than their counterparts in more affluent schools. These conditions help explain why so many teachers (10%) transfer away from high poverty schools each year.



Problems in the Working Environment are Driving Teachers from the Profession

But the problem of poor teacher retention is not limited to those teachers in high poverty schools. According to a recent study conducted by The Public Policy Institute of California, twenty-two percent of new teachers in California leave the profession within their first four years. In addition, dissatisfied teachers in Futernick's study who left the profession cited serious problems with their working environment. More than half of these teachers expressed concerns over inadequate supports, such as a lack of time for planning or professional development, and bureaucratic impediments such as classroom interruptions, unnecessary meetings, and too little say over the way their schools are run. Teachers also pointed frequently to a lack of collegiality as a key reason for leaving the classroom or transferring to another school.

A closer look at teacher responses shines a light on the problems that may be driving teachers from schools. *Bureaucratic impediment* was the factor cited most frequently by dissatisfied teachers as a reason for leaving (57%). Teachers pointed to problems such as excessive paperwork, too many meetings, and frequent classroom interruptions. One teacher said, "I feel as though I teach between the interruptions." Teachers also expressed concern with the emphasis on standardized testing and heightened calls for accountability that place further constraints on teaching. One in four dissatisfied teachers leaving the profession said that an overly scripted and narrow curriculum contributed to their decision to leave.



A Lack of Support

Teachers were also concerned about a lack of administrative support from their school districts. Fifty-two percent of dissatisfied teachers cited poor administrative support as a reason for leaving the profession. These teachers pointed to basic problems such as poor hiring procedures and unresponsive payroll departments, as well as to more complex problems such as inadequate professional development as reasons for leaving. Forty-two percent cited a lack of resources such as not enough textbooks, inadequate technology and a lack of basic supplies.

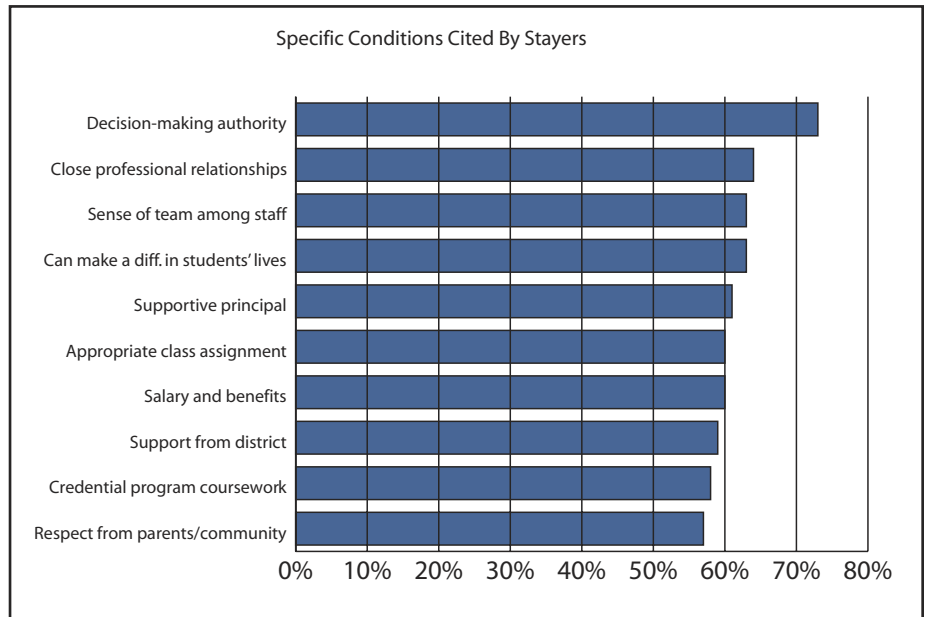
Poor Teacher Retention is Reason for Concern

The extraordinary costs associated with the exodus of teachers from California's schools should be a major concern for California's public, policymakers and educators. California spends more than \$455 million each year to recruit, hire and prepare replacement teachers. According to report author Futernick, "The less tangible costs of teacher turnover are nearly incalculable in terms of the negative impact that the churning of teachers and the loss of teacher experience has on the instructional continuity of a school." Futernick goes on to describe a deeper problem: "[E]ven when schools are able to find qualified replacements, sudden and frequent staffing changes create their own problems. The academic

and social environment suffers from a lack of consistency and coherence because new arrivals are unfamiliar with the school's policies, its curriculum and instructional practices, even its students. And when staff members are unfamiliar with one another, it becomes much harder to establish the kind of collaborative, mutually supportive professional environment that exists in most successful schools."

What it Takes to Keep Good Teachers

Futernick writes, "The very fact that so many teachers flee certain types of schools should serve as an unambiguous signal that something about these schools' work environment is wrong and needs to be fixed." But the converse is also true. The reasons teachers stay in teaching provide important insights into what educators and policy-makers can do to improve teacher retention. Satisfied teachers most often pointed to having meaningful input in the decision-making process at their schools and to strong, collaborative relationships with their colleagues. These teachers also cited the importance of effective "system supports" such as adequate time for planning, and resources for classroom learning materials. Many also pointed to effective and supportive principals. When these conditions were in place, teachers often viewed their compensation as adequate and a reason for staying in the profession.



Reasons for Hope

The findings from *A Possible Dream* demonstrate that California's teacher attrition problems can be mitigated. Twenty-eight percent of the "leavers" in the survey said they would consider returning to the classroom if improvements were made to the teaching and learning environment. Twenty-percent of survey respondents currently working in low-poverty schools said they would consider transferring to a high-poverty school if improvements to working conditions were coupled with an increase in compensation.

According to Futernick, "Our findings have enabled us to construct a sound and detailed set of retention strategies that will be especially useful to state and local decision-makers as they wrestle with the teacher shortage in California's public schools. Most important, we believe our teacher retention strategies will, if implemented, have a profound and positive effect on student performance in all types of school settings in California: high-poverty as well as low-poverty, high schools as well as middle and elementary schools, special education as well as general education. That is the possible dream."

The report's detailed recommendations for educators and policymakers include:

- Assessing teaching and learning conditions locally and continually;
- Elevating California's student funding to (at least) adequate levels;
- Making school bureaucracies more efficient and responsive;
- Refocusing school leadership on instructional quality and high-quality teaching and learning conditions;
- Establishing statewide standards for school teaching and learning conditions; and
- Assessing and addressing specific challenges in the retention of special education teachers.

The Center's View

Clearly, California needs to do a better job of keeping our best teachers in the classroom. We agree that to make that happen, we need to ensure that teachers have meaningful input in the decision-making process at their schools, strong, collaborative relationships with their colleagues, adequate support and resources, and less burdensome bureaucracies. They also need effective, supportive principals and school district administrators.

As the report recommends, we must listen carefully to teachers. Assessing teaching conditions regularly at the local level and then using this data when formulating policies and programs aimed at attracting and keeping teachers is a good place to start.

Additionally, if California is going to attract talented people to teaching and keep them in the classroom, there must also be a new focus on strengthening school leadership. California needs to determine the skills, experiences and qualities required for effective school leadership, and foster efforts to ensure that schools attract and retain the leaders needed to develop and sustain high-quality teaching and learning conditions. The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning has recently begun to put into place a new initiative to examine the status of school leadership in California and identify the steps the state can take to make it stronger.

Finally, increasing teacher retention requires recognition that in far too many places, schools remain unnecessarily frustrating places to work. State and local policymakers must focus on making changes to the teaching and learning environments that ensure the student success and render schools more attractive to teaching professionals.

To obtain a copy of *A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn*, please visit the California State University's Center for Teacher Quality at <http://www.calstate.edu/teacherquality/retention>.