

Why Do Teachers Quit?

And why do they stay?

LIZ RIGGS OCT 18 2013, 3:30 PM ET

[inSare](#)

More



Paramount Pictures

Richard Ingersoll taught high-school social studies and algebra in both public and private schools for nearly six years before leaving the profession and getting a Ph.D. in sociology. Now a professor in the University of Pennsylvania's education school, he's spent his career in higher ed searching for answers to one of teaching's most significant problems: teacher turnover.

Teaching, Ingersoll says, "was originally built as this temporary line of work for women before they got their real job—which was raising families, or temporary for men until they moved out of the classroom and became administrators. That was sort of the historical set-up."

Ingersoll extrapolated and then later confirmed that [anywhere between 40 and 50 percent](#) of teachers will leave the classroom within their first five years (that includes the nine and a half percent that leave *before* the end of their first year.) Certainly, all professions have turnover, and some shuffling out the door is good for bringing in young blood and fresh faces. But, turnover in teaching is about [four percent higher than other professions](#).

[Approximately 15.7 percent of teachers](#) leave their posts every year, and 40 percent of teachers who pursue undergraduate degrees in teaching never even enter the classroom at all. With teacher effectiveness a top priority of the education reform movement, the question remains: Why are all these teachers leaving—or not even entering the classroom in the first place?

“One of the big reasons I quit was sort of intangible,” Ingersoll says. “But it’s very real: It’s just a lack of respect,” he says. “Teachers in schools do not call the shots. They have very little say. They’re told what to do; it’s a very disempowered line of work.”

Other teachers—especially the younger ones—are also leaving the classroom for seemingly nebulous reasons. I spoke with nearly a dozen public and private school teachers and former teachers around the country. (I used pseudonyms for the teachers throughout this piece so that they could speak freely.) Many of them cited “personal reasons,” ranging from individual stress levels to work-life balance struggles.

“We are held up to a really high standard for everything,” says Emma, a 26-year-old former teacher at a public school in Kansas who now works for a music education non-profit. “It stems from this sense that teachers aren’t real people, and the only thing that came close to [making me stay] was the kids.”

In my interviews with teachers, the same issues continued to surface. In theory, the classroom hours aren’t bad and the summers are free. But, many young teachers soon realize they must do overwhelming amounts of after-hours work. They pour out emotional energy into their work, which breeds quick exhaustion. And they experience the frustrating uphill battle that comes along with teaching—particularly in low-performing schools.

Related Story



I Almost Quit Teach for America

“What people are asked to do is only the kind of thing that somebody can do for two or three years; you couldn’t sustain that level of intensity throughout a career,” said Thomas Smith, a professor at Vanderbilt University’s education school. He was referring specifically to charter schools, but his sentiment is one that resonates with many beginning teachers in challenging schools. “[It’s] the same way that people might think of investment banking. It’s something that people do for a few years out of college, but if you want to have a family, or you want to have some leisure time, you know, how do you sustain that?”

Joseph is a former Advanced Placement U.S. History teacher who loved his first years in the classroom; after a couple of years, though, he came to a saddening realization about the future of his career.

“I realized that most older men I taught with eventually felt pressured to advance into higher-level administration as their careers progressed in order to better support their family,” he said. “What many of them working in high-need schools told me, however, was that being successful at school directly conflicted with being successful husbands and fathers. While this is certainly true of any occupation, most occupations don’t leave your children asking you, ‘Why do you go to more basketball games of the kids at school than mine?’”

Pay is also an issue that came up in my interviews. A starting teacher salary in the U.S. is [\\$35,672](#).

“What is expected of great teachers and the amount they are paid is shameful,” says Hayley, a former teacher from the Northwest, referring to just one factor in her decision to leave the classroom to work for an ed-tech startup. “Yes, if you love something you should do it regardless of pay, but when you take into consideration the time, the effort, the emotional toll and what teachers are asked to *actually do everyday*, it was painfully

obvious that teaching is not a sustainable job. I really wish it had been.” Hayley taught for three years before finding herself emotionally drained, physically exhausted, and interested in pursuing a career that provided more balance and financial security.

Higher pay doesn’t necessarily lead to a better retention rate, though. “[Some] studies suggest that teachers are more interested in working at schools where the conditions of work are good rather than in getting paid more,” Smith, the Vanderbilt professor, said. He pointed to [a study by the Benwood Foundation](#) that offered teachers in Chattanooga large bonuses to go teach in lower-performing schools. The study found that few teachers were willing to move for this kind of offer. (In fact, according to Smith, the initiative had to be reengineered to offer bonuses to teachers already in those schools.)

With the exception of retirement, [studies suggest](#) that there are only a handful of overarching factors that push teachers out the door—family or personal reasons, other career opportunities, salary, administrative support and overall job dissatisfaction. These are largely the same issues that arose in my interviews. Some were wholly unhappy or drained and left in pursuit of another career completely, some wanted more money; some wanted both.

Another study done by the [National Charter School Research Project](#) suggests lack of job security is a factor in teachers’ decision to leave public charters; however, this was not a concern of any charter teacher I spoke with. Most teachers sounded simply frustrated, overworked and underpaid—sentiments that are certainly echoed in the research.

The teacher-turnover problem has a flipside, of course: If 40 to 50 percent of teachers leave the classroom within the first five years their career, that means that 50 to 60 percent of teachers stay. Who are they? Where are they teaching? What is keeping them?

Becky is a retired teacher who taught for nearly 30 years in just about every capacity imaginable. After starting in Chattanooga in a public school, she moved all over the country, teaching in Houston in a low-income school and then Chicago in a wealthy suburb before teaching at a private school in Ohio.

She loved teaching, but even in her years before retirement, she still felt the weight of the work on her constantly.

“When you’re in your early 60s and you’re still coming home with 65 hours of grading over two weeks...that’s very overwhelming. [But] I love working with teenagers. I love the relationships and I love being able to help them.”

This overwhelming desire to help students is a common thread among all the teachers I speak with. They all cared for their students deeply, but even this couldn’t keep teachers like Hayley or Emma in the classroom. Simply put: everything else—the workload, the emotional toll, the low pay—was just too much.

A range of factors influences teacher retention, according to Ingersoll’s research, but he tells me that the way administration deals with both students and teachers has a “huge effect” on teacher satisfaction. He cites this as being one of the potential ways to keep teachers without spending billions of dollars increasing salaries.

“Those schools that do a far better job of managing and coping with and responding to student behavioral issues have far better teacher retention,” he says. And, in both public and private schools, “buildings in which teachers have more say—their voice counts—have distinctly better teacher retention.”

Ingersoll has also done [extensive research](#) on beginning teacher support and found that teachers who have even just two small initiatives in place (working with a mentor and having regular supportive communication with an administrator) are more likely to stay in the classroom.

Based on other education statistics, parental involvement, student achievement and the career entry point for teachers can also impact retention. Parental engagement and high student achievement are [key factors](#). Where these numbers grow, teachers are more satisfied and presumably more likely to stay in the profession. And teachers who sought teaching as their first career are more likely to stay in the classroom in comparison with teachers who entered the profession mid-career.

Regardless of why teachers stay or leave, the revolving door of teacher turnover is a problem that affects students and entire schools. Ingersoll maintains that it doesn’t have to be a problem that continues to spiral out of control; the revolving door can be stopped. And while there are a number of ways to fix it—from increasing salaries to mentoring young teachers—the mindset behind the solution is simple.

“Respected, well-paid lines of work do not have shortages,” Ingersoll says. He adds that he is happy with his new career, but he would still be a high school history teacher had it not been for the lack of respect and low salary he experienced. For a lot of teachers I spoke with, this seems to be the common sentiment: If the overall attractiveness of teaching as a profession gets better, the best teachers will enter the profession, stay, and help increase the effectiveness of schools.

“To improve the quality of teaching,” Ingersoll says, you need to “improve the quality of the teaching job.” And, “If you really improve that job... you would attract good people and you would keep them.”