

Researcher Skewers Explanations Behind Teacher Shortage

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The idea that shortages of teachers across the nation can be attributed largely to a wave of retirements or to surges in student enrollments is a myth, argues a University of Pennsylvania researcher.

Richard M. Ingersoll, an associate professor of education and sociology at the Philadelphia university, based his conclusion on analyses of federal survey data for more than 50,000 teachers nationwide. He presented his findings here last week during the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

"Yes, it's true student enrollments are going up," Mr. Ingersoll said. "Yes, retirements are going up, and yes, there are school districts out there [that] have trouble finding qualified teachers," he said. "But it's also true that the demand is not due to retirements or growing student enrollment."

Instead, he said, the explanation is unusually high turnover rates among teachers. While the

average, annual turnover rate in most other professions is 11 percent, he found that teachers leave their jobs at a rate of 13.2 percent a year.

Most of that exodus is occurring, Mr. Ingersoll said, within teachers' first five years in the classroom—not toward the end of their careers. The results of his ongoing study were first published in the fall issue of the *American Educational Research Journal*.

According to the data, which come from the federal Schools and Staffing Survey, 29 percent of teachers leave the field after three years on the job, and 39 percent leave after five years. After five years, teacher-exodus rates start to level off.

Private School Hard Hit

The belief that retirement and growing student enrollments explain the current demand for teachers is not the only bit of conventional wisdom that Mr. Ingersoll pricks with his analyses. He also found that private school teachers are leaving the

profession at an even faster rate than public school teachers are—and that's especially true for small private schools.

"Remember, these are the very schools that we've been hearing have such a wonderful sense of community," said Mr. Ingersoll, himself a former private school teacher. "This data suggests that maybe they don't have a sense of community for teachers."

Mr. Ingersoll found, for example, that public school teachers leave the field at a rate of 12.4 percent a year, and that the rate is higher—15.2 percent a year—for teachers in public schools with high concentrations of poor students. For private schools, however, the annual exit rate is 18.9 percent overall, and 22.8 percent at small private schools.

As part of the survey, teachers who left their jobs also were asked a year later why they had departed. The largest group—40 percent from urban public schools and 49 percent from private schools—said they did so for personal reasons, such as deciding to stay home to raise children

or moving out of the area.

Yet substantial numbers of teachers reported that they left either to take another job or because they were dissatisfied with their teaching jobs. Dissatisfaction was the reason cited by 23 percent of the departing urban public school teachers and 34 percent of the teachers from small private schools.

Among that group of dissatisfied teachers, three-quarters of the former private school teachers and roughly one-third of the teachers who quit teaching in poor, urban schools cited low salaries as the reason for their disaffection. Likewise, about one-fifth of the ex-teachers in both groups said lackluster administrative support had caused their frustration.

To a greater degree than private school teachers, former teachers in poor urban schools also said concerns about student motivation and discipline, school safety, and a feeling that faculty members had little influence on what went on in their schools also contributed to their departures.

Mr. Ingersoll said his findings suggest that educators and policymakers may be taking the wrong approach to stem the teacher shortage. Programs like the privately sponsored Teach For America and the federally financed Troops to Teachers initiative are aimed at recruiting more new teachers, rather than working to retain the teachers already working in schools.

"It's like pouring water into a bucket with holes," Mr. Ingersoll said.

Schools might have better luck meeting their demands for teachers, he said, by making improvements in job conditions, such as increasing support for teachers, raising salaries, reducing student misbehavior, and giving faculty members more say in school decisionmaking.

Mr. Ingersoll's data are drawn from surveys conducted in 1994 and 1995. Nevertheless, he said, he does not expect his findings to change when he examines the new data from the latest administration of the federal survey program later this year.