

## Why Great Teachers Stay

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**What can we do to keep good teachers? The reflections of exemplary teachers in North Carolina about their careers in education can offer insights and inform our efforts.**



Concerns about teacher retention have focused on why teachers leave the field. In addition to personal reasons—marriage, relocation, the birth of a child, retirement—studies show that low salaries, difficult working conditions, inadequate preparation, and insufficient support for novice teachers all contribute to the growing number of teachers who don't last beyond the first few years (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hope, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1998). Much less attention has been given to those who stay, especially the best.

We can turn the tables on this lopsided view of teacher attrition and retention by asking some different questions:

- Why do some teachers endure, and even thrive, in the same setting that drives other teachers to opt out or burn out?
- What are the sources of inner strength that sustain teachers through difficult times?
- What are the workplace dynamics that contribute to professional and personal fulfillment and long-lasting success in the classroom?

To shed light on these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 outstanding teachers who had been in the classroom for at least 15 years and an average of more than 23 years (Williams, 2001). Identified by principals and central-office administrators as “beyond good—the best that exist,” these men and women represent four counties in western North Carolina, seven school systems (both public and private), urban and rural communities, and all grades and subjects. These teachers talked with me at length about their lives as teachers and offered both predictable and surprising insights.

At first glance, the 12 teachers appeared to have little in common except their choice of profession. Some had come to North Carolina from other parts of the United States, and others had spent their entire lives in small mountain towns. I can describe them alternately as gregarious and introverted, confident and modest, boisterous and soft-spoken. With interests ranging from pop culture to kite flying, t'ai chi to genealogy, they also represent a variety of theological perspectives and lifestyles.

On closer inspection, however, these teachers share many characteristics. They like to laugh and have fun; they are ravenous learners whose minds are seldom idle; and they are determined, courageous, and resilient, caring so deeply about their work that they swing from exhilaration to despair, depending on the success of their efforts. They don't know one another, but if they were to spend some time together, these teachers would most likely develop a close professional, if not personal, alliance because of the convictions that they share about teaching.

## The Challenge

Without exception, intellectual stimulation is a burning need of the teachers I interviewed. Eagerly embracing the challenges of meeting their students' needs, these teachers describe teaching as a nonstop quest for novelty, variety, and new approaches—an art that offers endless opportunities for creativity and personal expression. Change energizes and refreshes them; they are willing to take risks. They like varying what and how they teach, working with different groups of students each year, and taking on new tasks inside and outside the classroom.

Consistent with the notion that “an act cannot be creative if it is not born of freedom” (Palmer, 1999, p. 9), the teachers all assert that the changes that they embrace are self-imposed—not the work of policymakers and administrators. The reform efforts designed by people outside of the classroom can be demoralizing and discouraging to dedicated teachers, especially when the teachers view these changes as harmful to students. Nonetheless, these teachers have discovered how to work with optimism and determination.

Minds constantly whirring, these teachers are lifelong learners. Preschool teacher Lida Frances<sup>1</sup> says, “I feel like my mind goes in many directions at one time, seeing lots of possibilities.” First grade teacher Nikki Wilder says,

My wheels are always turning. I'm always thinking, reflecting, and planning what to do next and how to do things more effectively.

In addition to classroom challenges, the teachers take graduate courses, engage in personal and professional renewal opportunities, mentor new teachers, teach classes for parents, and immerse themselves in their hobbies and varied interests. The ongoing challenges, the creativity inherent in the teaching process, and the round-the-clock learning are significant forces in the rejuvenation of our best teachers.

## The Reward

Teaching offers opportunities for ongoing feedback. Witnessing students' change and growth, inspiring them to learn, helping them acquire such essential skills as reading, and leading students to believe in themselves—these experiences fuel exemplary teachers and motivate them to continue. M. J. Sims, a high school history teacher, says,

You can see they're frustrated at first, and then suddenly you can see this glow on their faces. Their eyes get a little brighter, and they say, “Gosh, yeah, I got it. I see it.”

Test scores and accolades from parents and administrators can't provide the kind of feedback that good teachers need and want; instead, they look to the students.

The rewards of teaching go far beyond witnessing the daily progress of their students. These educators say that the personal bonds that they form with young people are a kind of spiritual connection that often lasts for years. Libby Morgan, an elementary reading specialist for Title I students, says,

Yes, it's spiritual. It touches my soul—like believing in God and the love of a friend. . . .  
That's a part of being a fulfilled, whole, spiritual person. Teaching certainly satisfies that for me.

## Finding the Flow

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) uses the metaphor of *flow* to convey “the sense of effortless action” that people “feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives” (p. 29). For an individual to experience flow, he or she needs clear goals, skills to meet the level of challenge, and immediate feedback. When these conditions exist, people often become fully invested in an activity, lose their self-consciousness, and pursue the activity both for the sake of doing a job well and for the pleasure it brings them.

For the teachers I interviewed, the classroom is a good place to achieve a state of flow. Lida Frances, for example, says,

I am passionate about this . . . and so yes, it's a job and I need the money, but it really is something that I love. It's a vocation.

In addition to running, rock climbing, and other challenging physical pursuits, people often experience flow through creative activity—designing a building, weaving a tapestry, or sculpting a statue. But the added challenge of working with human beings places teachers' work in a different sphere of creative activity, one with very high stakes. Working

with young people gives teachers a strong sense of purpose; some refer to it as a “sacred calling.” They believe that they are doing what they are meant to do.

## Connectedness and Autonomy

The work of teachers is both solitary and communal. Many are on their own in the classroom without the support or counsel of other professionals, taking total responsibility for actions that could determine the fate of their students. These teachers appear to thrive on this autonomy because it allows them to express their individual creativity.

These same teachers say, however, that satisfying relationships and a sense of community are inextricably intertwined with good teaching and job satisfaction. Yet, for some of them, workplace relationships are not always reliable, and so they look to students, family, and friends for feelings of connection.

Strong needs for autonomy occasionally interfere with the ability of some outstanding teachers to develop satisfying relationships with colleagues and administrators. In fact, these teachers say that classroom autonomy is at the top of their list of requirements for ideal working conditions. They want “to be left alone to teach the way I want,” to make decisions regarding their students and their classrooms, and to work with administrators who view them as the experts in their subjects or grades.

They don't want to be told what to teach and how to teach it; canned programs and attempts to standardize instruction are often stifling. Nonetheless, they do want their principals' support, encouragement, and appreciation—especially words like “Take it and go with it!” All 12 teachers have experienced less-than-ideal circumstances with school administrators, but they remain enthusiastic about teaching as long as they can function independently in their classrooms.

In some circumstances, the desire for individuality and creativity is stronger than the need to connect with other teachers. About half of the 12 teachers say that good relationships with colleagues are essential, whereas the other half say that even though they value these relationships and work hard to develop them, they sometimes find them difficult to achieve. Lida Frances, for example, stresses the importance of collegial relationships but points out that being required to work with partners sometimes dampens her enthusiasm:

I get bored because we are doing the same thing. “Oh, *this* is this week, and this is what we *always* do during *this* week.” I love my colleagues. At the same time, there are just times that I wish I didn't have to deal with anybody else.

Taking a stand on tough issues and achieving status in the wider community can also take a toll on collegial relationships, according to kindergarten teacher Susan Sherry. She believes that her coworkers are jealous of her favored status among parents and other professionals in the district. Similarly, middle school teacher Carol Poe has taken a firm stand against tracking and the school's homework policies, and she's aware that her colleagues don't always share her convictions. She is comfortable with her positions, however, even though they have cost her some collegial support. She believes that her coworkers respect her honesty and commitment, and she values their respect more than their friendship.

Although these teachers say that relationships and feelings of community are of great importance, they agree that when professional relationships are in conflict with their needs and commitment to students, they look elsewhere for meaningful connections. Recognition of the delicate balance between autonomy and connectedness might be one key to understanding how to keep good teachers.

## Resiliency and Fragility

During my interviews, I was impressed with the 12 teachers' courage, resiliency, flexibility, and hopefulness. They all say that flexibility has been crucial to their longevity and is an acquired skill; it has not come naturally. Most are very concerned about current trends in education and the direction that new testing policies and accountability programs

will take them, yet they have learned to live with what they perceive to be beyond their control. Carol Poe says that she has decided to focus on good teaching and the kind of instruction that she knows, from her years of experience, will inspire young people. Her refusal to engage in extensive test preparation has made her colleagues nervous, but she believes that her students will be able to perform just as well on the tests, if not better, because she is doing what she believes is right for them. Despite frustrations and fears for their students, the teachers are hopeful. They also have a sense of humor. The “gift of laughter,” as one of them put it, has helped sustain them.

Although the teachers talked to me about times when they had been at their absolute best, they were honest about the darker days, about periods of depression and anxiety—times when they were unsure whether their inner resources could sustain them in their careers. One of the most surprising revelations was that all of these teachers—chosen in part because of their longevity—had seriously considered leaving the field at various points in their careers. Eight of them had actually quit and returned, half of those for personal or family reasons. In stark contrast to their apparent resilience, the teachers showed a degree of fragility and had experienced occasional periods in their careers when their emotional resources were depleted. Gary Chapin, a middle school teacher, put it this way:

It's just an up and down kind of thing. Joyous times, really difficult times, times with great energy, times of great exhaustion.

The tough times for those I interviewed were most often connected to difficult years with students, especially with disciplinary issues. When strong student-teacher relationships and good teaching cannot address students' behavioral challenges, these exemplary teachers are more susceptible to fatigue and feelings of inadequacy. Because they care so deeply and their sense of purpose is closely tied to being teachers, they tend to internalize disciplinary challenges as personal failures, or at least as a lack of effectiveness. These feelings are painful for people who have experienced extraordinary success during most of their careers.

On the bright side, the teachers appear to know what it takes to replenish personal resources when the classroom is not providing this sustenance. They speak about needing time for rest and reflection, or simply needing a change of scenery. Sometimes, a summer to rest and pursue their personal passions is all that they need for rejuvenation. But they also seem conscious of the need for ongoing, year-round renewal, which they find through exercise, nature, music, hobbies, and faith communities. The most powerful professional renewal opportunities that they named were those that immersed them in intense learning experiences and reflection, such as self-styled sabbaticals and weeklong retreats.

## What We Can Do

Most assume that teacher attrition and retention are two sides of the same coin and that removing factors associated with attrition will automatically improve retention. Yet many teachers are affected by the same conditions that contribute to their colleagues leaving the profession but choose to stay. Their reasons provide rich insights into how effective teachers view their profession, and administrators and policymakers should take notice.

These 12 long-term, exemplary teachers credit talented administrators with setting the right mix of challenge and support that enables schools to become joyful, creative, productive places. They believe that a good principal can both appreciate individual creativity and lead a school community to share clear goals and high standards. Effective principals value these teachers as individuals, take seriously and support their ideas for innovations, and trust them to do their jobs conscientiously without a great deal of oversight.

Despite their concerns about forced collegiality and standardization, the exemplary teachers were equally clear about their need to be members of a learning community in which they have time to collaborate with, learn from, and support their colleagues. They believe that a good leader leads—and teaches—by example, involving faculty members in creative activities that help them develop strategies, envision possibilities, and create opportunities for learning that will challenge, stimulate, and satisfy the most creative minds.

Our current system of education and the ways in which we construct schools are often not designed to meet teachers' needs for creativity and connectedness. Of course, students are and should be the center of the discourse related to teaching. For teachers to fully address the intellectual and emotional needs of their students, however, they must have energy and hope, as well as professional knowledge and interpersonal skills. Without some understanding of how to help our best teachers renew their enthusiasm, the students and our schools will surely suffer.

What keeps really great teachers in the classroom? If you ask them, they will not mention salary, benefits, working conditions, power, or prestige. These 12 exemplary teachers say that they have been able to fulfill strong personal needs for autonomy and creativity in their classrooms, and their rewards are meaningful relationships and the knowledge that they are making a difference in the lives of their students. For these teachers, doing work that feels good goes hand in hand with doing good work. These exemplary teachers are resourceful individuals who are recharged by the sparks that leap between the creative art of teaching and heart-to-heart connections with others.

The renewal of outstanding teachers, so vital to their continued enthusiasm and commitment, is a spiritual issue. Teachers are engaged in a life-changing activity, a fact that sustains them in both the good and bad times of their careers. In a time of public disillusionment with education and increasing demands on teachers, discourse among educators and policymakers about the emotional and spiritual needs of teachers is an urgent necessity. An understanding of the ways in which teachers sustain their energy for and love of teaching can help us rethink approaches to professional development, with a greater focus on protecting and replenishing the emotional resources of our best educators.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The names of all teachers mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

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