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September 2003

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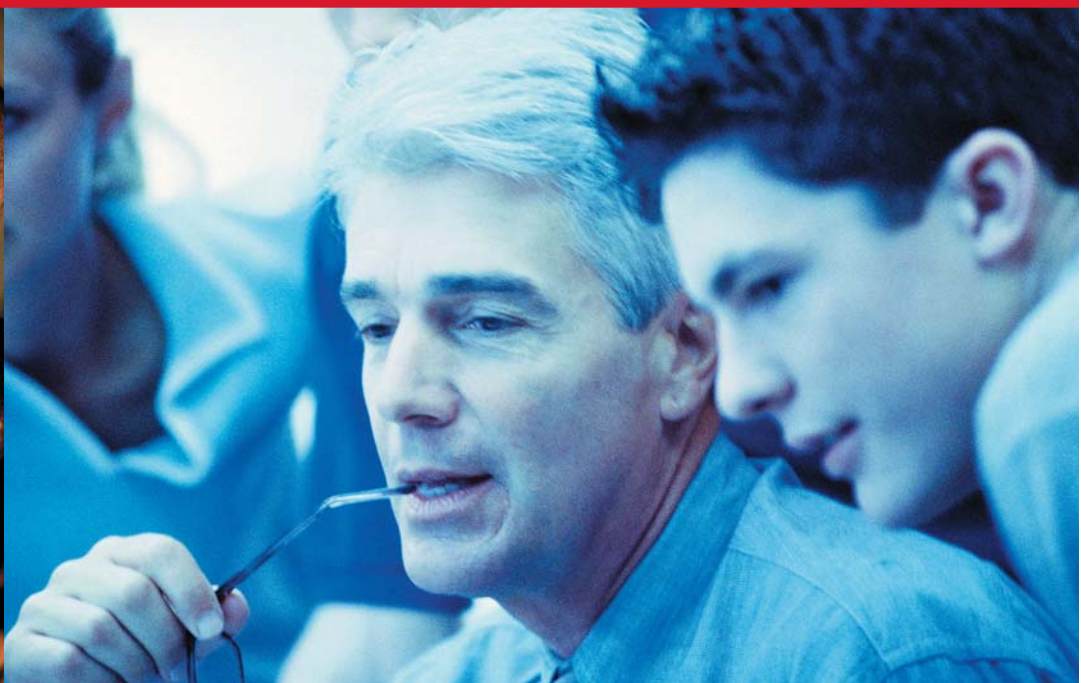
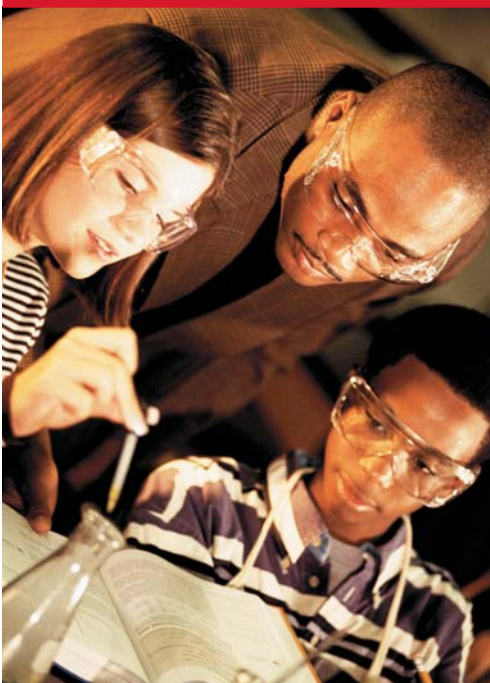
A STUDY OF TEACHER RETENTION IN AMERICA

50 Who Stayed • 50 Who Left

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Exodus: A Study of Teacher Retention in America

50 Who Stayed • 50 Who Left

Sponsored by:

NRTA: AARP's *Educator Community* and Farmers Insurance

Data Collected by:

Qualitative Research Practice

HarrisInteractive, Inc.

Report Prepared by:

AARP Knowledge Management

NRTA: AARP's *Educator Community*

HarrisInteractive, Inc.

AARP

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to making life better for people 50 and over. We provide information and resources; engage in legislative, regulatory and legal advocacy; assist members in serving their communities; and offer a wide range of unique benefits, special products, and services for our members. These include AARP The Magazine, published bimonthly; AARP Bulletin, our monthly newspaper; Segunda Juventud, our quarterly newspaper in Spanish; Live and Learn, our quarterly newsletter for National Retired Teachers Association members; and our Web site, www.aarp.org. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

NRTA

Founded in 1947 by retired educator Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, NRTA: *AARP's Educator Community* (formerly known as the National Retired Teachers Association) is a division of AARP. NRTA members share a commitment to learning, voluntary service, and civic participation. NRTA is the largest national organization that represents the interests of 50+ educators, with a membership of more than one-million active and retired educators and school personnel at the local, state and national level. The NRTA Network includes a national office in Washington, DC, 53 state and city associations, and more than 2,700 local associations. NRTA members are dedicated to continuous educational opportunity, advocacy, and service as a means of safeguarding the economic security, work opportunities, and future well-being of all generations. Visit NRTA's website at www.aarp.org/nrta for more information.

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Based in Los Angeles, California, Farmers now operates in 41 states across the country through the efforts of approximately 18,000 employees. Our agents, independent contractors and independent agents, along with Farmers employees, are responsible for serving more than 15 million customers. This year, we are proud to celebrate our 75th anniversary.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the Study

In July 2003, NRTA: AARP's *Educator Community*, contracted with HarrisInteractive to conduct research on the issue of educator recruitment and retention. In order to better understand the retention and attrition phenomenon, the views and opinions of current and former K-12 teachers were explored. The results from this study will help NRTA, its partners, and others, to more fully understand the dynamics surrounding whether a teacher stays in or leaves the profession. The study may also help NRTA and others work together to retain America's quality educators.

Methodology

Qualitative research was chosen to understand the depth and breadth of information emerging from the range of experiences and perspectives shared by *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers*. Online bulletin boards and telephone interviews were the methods used to collect the qualitative data.

HarrisInteractive used their proprietary online Internet research panel to recruit participants (current and former K-12 teachers) for the NRTA study. An email invitation message was sent to the panel's teacher subgroup. Each person who responded was then called and screened for qualification in the study.

The qualitative sessions were conducted in July and August of 2003. A total of 117 respondents participated in the bulletin board groups and 14 of these respondents further participated in the telephone interviews. The findings reported here are based on four online bulletin board focus groups and 14 telephone interviews conducted with two segments--*Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers*--as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Segment and Characteristics of Study Participants

Segment	Characteristic
Current Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Currently a K-12 teacher○ Have at least 5 years experience, but no more than 10 years○ Plan to remain teaching for at least two more years (at current school or elsewhere)
Former Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Formerly a K-12 teacher○ No more than 5 years experience○ Left the profession for reasons other than planned retirement, health problems, life stage issues (such as pregnancy/maternity leave)

Participants were able to visit the online bulletin board at any time. Each day for four days, new sets of questions related to the research objectives were posted and available for the participants to answer online. AARP and NRTA staff developed the questions based on previous quantitative teacher retention research. Over 6,800 responses were posted to the moderator's questions. This generated hundreds of pages of transcripts and a wealth of information from which the analysis and conclusions were drawn.

KEY FINDINGS

Motivation to Teach

Both *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* are initially motivated to teach by a similar set of reasons:

- Love of and a passion for teaching
- A sense of purpose
- A calling, “destined to be a teacher”
- Role models in the past
- Support and influence of family members
- Early exposure to helping/teaching children
- Desire to “give back”

Respondents say their love for children and their respect for the art and science of teaching are the most important reasons for entering the profession. Many say they always believed that they would eventually become a teacher and feel that teaching is their “purpose” and “calling” in life.

Both *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* say they feel that the profession of teaching is extremely rewarding because it allows an individual to contribute to the lives of young people by helping them learn. They enjoy watching students grow, especially the feelings they have when they are able to break through to a child who may have been struggling in a certain area.

Nature of the Teaching Profession

Teachers, both current and former, communicate that the art and science of teaching is becoming increasingly more complex. There are many disciplines that individuals must master and perform routinely to be an effective teacher. Respondents suggest that a teacher must not only facilitate learning, but also act as:

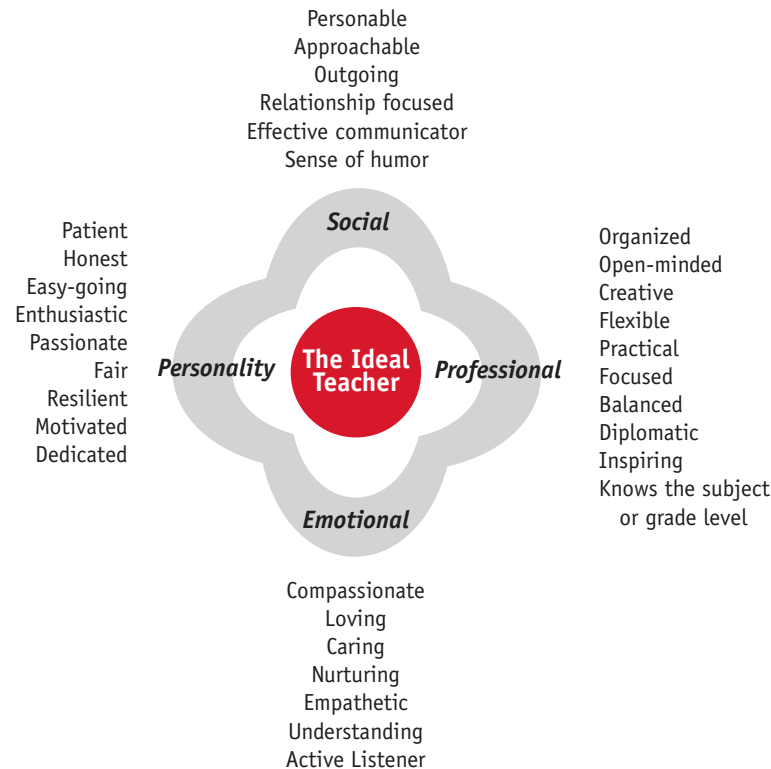
- Motivator
- Counselor
- Nurturer (nurse/parent)
- Social worker
- Role model
- Nutritionist
- Law enforcement officer
- Negotiator

This expansion and complexity of the roles in teaching make it more difficult for educators to stay motivated and satisfied with the profession.

Qualities Conducive to Successful Teaching

The study participants described numerous characteristics that they view as enabling effective teaching. As Figure 2 shows, a model of an “ideal teacher” emerged that integrates four key attribute areas--emotional, professional, social, and personality.

Figure 2. A Model of the Ideal Teacher



Qualities Not Conducive to Teaching

Both *Current* and *Former Teachers* suggest that those who are unsuccessful in the classroom or leave the profession may exemplify certain characteristics counter to teaching in today’s society. These teachers may be:

- Non-conformist
- Unorganized
- Impatient
- Intolerant

- Inflexible
- Too soft
- Easily stressed

Rewards and Challenges That Impact Retention

Both *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* say that the most rewarding moments in their careers have been:

- Seeing the “light-bulb go on,” as in seeing the moment when the student grasps the concept being taught
- Interaction, personal connections with students and having contact beyond high school
- Watching students grow over the years
- Verbal appreciation from parents and administration
- Parents that recognize the achievement of their child

Both *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* report as their least satisfying moments:

- Not reaching students
- Inconsistent and unsupportive colleagues
- Lack of support from administration
- Unmotivated students
- Unmotivated parents
- Lack of societal and community support

The biggest challenges facing *Current Teachers* are:

- Motivating students to learn
- Keeping classroom discipline
- Dealing with parents – justifying discipline
- Managing lesson plans in a short class period
- Keeping lesson plans interesting
- Dealing with school politics and bureaucracy

Former Teachers cite as the major reasons they left the teaching profession:

- Lack of support from administration
- Low pay
- Feeling undervalued and under-appreciated by society and the community
- Impact of fellow teachers who appear narrow-minded
- Lack of parental support
- Lack of resources, budget cuts and high class sizes

Support for Teachers

Existing Support

Nearly all agree, that a formal mentoring, support and training system is needed and would be beneficial for new teachers. But they point out that not all districts have a formal support system for new teachers and initial experiences vary by region and respondent. However, many of the *Current Teachers* mention that they did receive positive initial support from other teachers and mentors.

Ideal Support System

Participants suggest that the ideal support system would include:

- Routine (daily) interaction with mentors or other new teachers
- A formal mentoring and support team, consisting of veteran teachers as well as colleagues who are new teachers
- Mentors that really want to help rather than those who are “forced” to do it
- Mentoring that is non-judgmental, constructive and compassionate
- Being paired with a mentor in a specific subject area
- Training regarding the school culture, including expectations of the administration and classroom management (i.e. disciplining students, time management, lesson plan development)
- Support group of teachers to vent with each other and help motivate
- Parents that offer support and guidance

It is important to note that many of the *Former Teachers* say that although regular access to a helpful mentor may have been effective in helping them cope with the realities of teaching, they do not think that this would have dramatically changed their decision to leave the profession. *Former Teachers* say there are other factors within the profession (i.e. administration support, parent/student behavior) that cannot be solved by an effective mentoring program alone.

Ironically, *Former Teachers* say that students are a large part of the reason they left the profession, yet, also the aspect they miss most about teaching. Additionally, they miss:

- The personal connection with students
- Other colleagues, “real relationships”
- The “light going on” with students

Emerging National Issues

Both segments of teachers see the following national issues as emerging in education:

- Budget cuts and lack of resources
- Agendas driven by politics without regard for local needs

- Increase in alternative education (i.e. private schools, charter schools, home schooling)
- Expanding technological capabilities changing the way lessons are taught
- More standardization

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Collectively, respondents recommended actions that they believe would strengthen the retention of qualified teachers.

Areas of Action

1. Encourage and support the relationship and connections between teachers and the administration.
2. Build formal support and mentoring processes for new teachers where not now available.
3. Create on-line forums for beginning and experienced educators to offer each other encouragement and to share resources.
4. Design an on-line journal or a *Why I Teach* newsletter focused on teachers recalling the initial motivations they had for entering the profession to “recharge” and reinvigorate their commitment to the profession.
5. Offer emotional support for new teachers through group discussions or on-line forums with retired educators.
6. Develop programs and public relations efforts that reward, recognize and raise the status of quality teachers in the profession.
7. Foster parent involvement in classrooms and facilitate greater communication with their students’ teachers.
8. Combat negative stereotypes of teachers and help society to understand the contribution that educators make.
9. Reinforce the importance of early childhood education with parents and the larger community so that students begin their schooling ready to learn.
10. Create a central on-line repository of information and aids that will help teachers expand and supplement increasingly limited classroom resources.

Exodus: A Study of Teacher Retention in America

50 Who Stayed • 50 Who Left

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

In July 2003, NRTA: AARP's *Educator Community*, contracted with HarrisInteractive to conduct research on the issue of educator recruitment and retention. In order to better understand the retention and attrition phenomenon, the views and opinions of current and former K-12 teachers were explored. The results from this study will help NRTA, its partners, and others, to more fully understand the dynamics surrounding whether a teacher stays in or leaves the profession. The study may also help NRTA, its members and the network of affiliated associations work together with others to retain America's quality educators.

Methodology

Qualitative research was chosen to understand the depth and breadth of information emerging from the range of experiences and perspectives shared by *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers*. Online bulletin boards and telephone interviews were the methods used to collect the qualitative data.

Online Bulletin Boards

Online bulletin boards are one of several methods used in a virtual, secured focus group site designed and monitored by HarrisInteractive. Recruited respondents are able to visit the site at any time once the research manager assigns passwords. Early each day for approximately four days, new sets of questions focused on the research objectives are posted and available for the participants to answer online.

For the NRTA project, over 6,800 responses were posted to the moderator's questions. This generated hundreds of pages of transcripts, and a wealth of information from which the analysis and conclusions were drawn.

Recruiting for Online Bulletin Boards

Respondents for this study (current and former K-12 teachers) were recruited using HarrisInteractive's proprietary online Internet research panel. An email invitation message was sent to a subgroup panel consisting of 11,000 teachers to which 800 teachers responded. Each person who expressed interest was then called and screened for qualification in the study to select 117 participants.

The online methodology used in the NRTA project allowed exceptional access to research participants from all over the United States. This enabled a mix of current and former teachers, as well as both public and private schools to be included in the study.

The findings reported here are based on four online bulletin board focus groups and 14 telephone interviews conducted with two segments—*Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* as Figure 1 below shows.

Figure 1. Segment and Characteristics of Study Participants

Segment	Characteristic
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The qualitative online sessions were conducted in July and August of 2003. A total of 117 respondents participated in the bulletin board groups and 14 of these participants further participated in the telephone interviews. The groups contained a mix of private and public school teachers and also reflected a mix of age, gender and geographic location.

Designing the Discussion Questions

Based on previous research on teacher attrition and retention, staff in AARP’s Knowledge Management and NRTA developed questions for a moderator guide. HarrisInteractive revised and formatted the guide to adapt it to the online bulletin board environment.

Fielding of the Research: Conducting the Online Bulletin Board

The research manager, a professionally-trained focus group moderator, monitored the responses and probed for more information as appropriate. Participants were also able to see and to react to each others' responses. In addition, a selected number of AARP and NRTA staff were assigned passwords enabling them to observe the posted conversation among participants. After the conclusion of the four-day boards, the transcripts were sent to the clients, AARP and NRTA. The transcripts did not identify who the respondents were.

In-Depth Interviews

A total of 14 research participants were selected to be called for in-depth telephone interviews as a follow up to the bulletin board discussions. Seven of the fourteen were *Current Teachers* and seven were *Former Teachers*. The purpose of the interviews was to gather more detailed information from the respondents about their teaching experiences.

About This Report

This report summarizes findings from the interviews and bulletin boards conducted by HarrisInteractive. It has been prepared from the moderator's notes, a review of the audio recordings and verbatim transcripts of the sessions.

Qualitative research is used to understand the depth and breadth of information as it identifies the range of different experiences for a group. Findings from these segments cannot be projected to more general populations in a statistical sense.

For more information on the online bulletin board methodology and a "screen shot" illustration of the boards, please see Appendix.

FINDINGS

Motivation to Teach

Both *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* suggest that they are motivated to teach by a similar set of factors. The most important reasons they give for entering the profession are their love for children and respect for the art and science of teaching. They say they always believed that they would eventually become a teacher and feel that teaching is their “purpose” and “calling” in life. Many teachers, especially in the *Current Teachers* segment, possess a clear passion for the profession.

“I’ve known my whole life that I wanted to be a teacher. It was just a feeling that I had inside that motivated me to go for it.” Current Teacher

Both segments of teachers say they feel that the profession of teaching is extremely rewarding because it allows an individual to contribute to the lives of young people by helping them learn. They say they really enjoy watching students grow, especially the feeling they have when they are able to break through to a child who may have been struggling in a certain area. Whether currently teaching or not, the participants feel that the profession is extremely fulfilling.

“Nothing could be as special as helping young people learn” Former Teacher

“I want to) enhance the lives of others.” Former Teacher

“In college I finally realized that learning was a good thing, and found out that helping kids get to the ‘aha’ moment was a wonderful feeling.” Current Teacher

Some teachers mention that they want to create change and impact “the way people think.” They find that teaching provides them with an opportunity to open the minds of students and parents to new possibilities.

Many respondents say that they were exposed to teaching children at a young age, whether formally (i.e. teaching swimming lessons, coaching sports) or informally (i.e. babysitting, camp counselor, daycare). Others mention that there were teachers who have influenced their lives, typically starting at a young age. Numerous respondents commented on special teachers that were positive role models for them.

“I had a wonderful teacher I wanted to be like.” Former Teacher

Conversely, some respondents say that ineffective teachers motivated them to enter the profession so as to become effective teachers. They do not want students to have to deal with the effects of poor teaching.

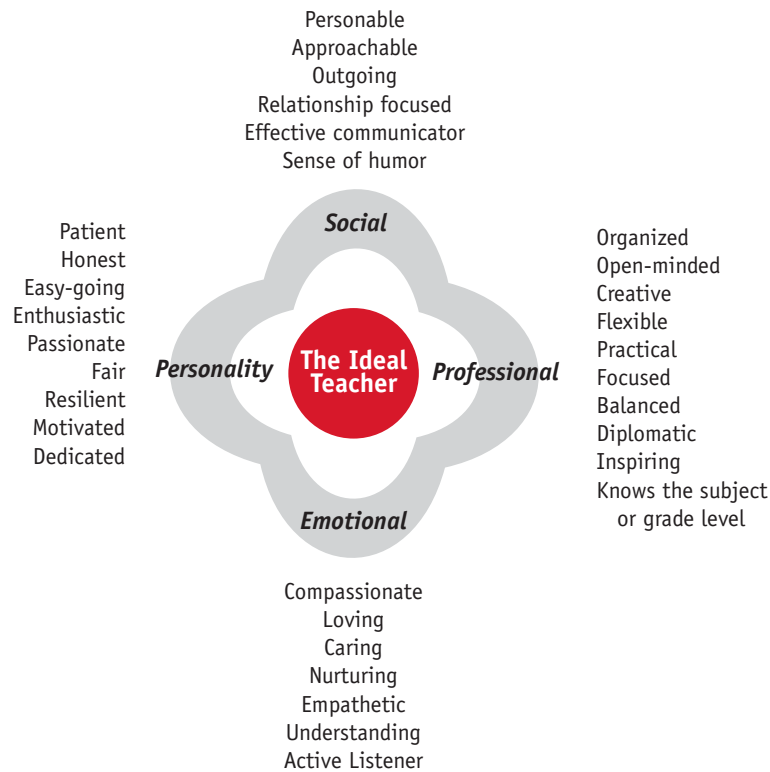
Yet another motivator for entering the teaching profession is the influence and support of friends and family. Teachers often say that their parents or siblings also teach, so the call to the profession was something passed down through the generations. Respondents also

say that family and friends are great at supporting them throughout the school year when various frustrations arise.

Qualities Conducive to Being an Effective Teacher

The study participants described numerous characteristics that they view as enabling effective teaching. As Figure 2 shows, a model of an ideal teacher emerged that integrates four key attribute areas--emotional, professional, social, and personality.

Figure 2. A Model of the Ideal Teacher



Qualities Not Conducive to Teaching

Both *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* suggest that those who are unsuccessful in the classroom or have left the profession may exemplify certain characteristics counter to teaching in today's society. These characteristics include teachers that are:

- Non-conformist
- Unorganized
- Impatient
- Intolerant
- Inflexible
- Too soft
- Easily stressed

Both segments recognize that teaching is a relatively low paying profession, subject to regulation from state and local governments as well as from changing administrations. Many believe that outspoken and autonomous individuals are not always able to deal with the various mandates and regulations.

“...it can be costly to voice your opinion or to disagree.” Former Teacher

Additionally, participants observe that some high achievers may not find the rewards of teaching fulfilling because they are often more emotional than tangible. They suggest that individuals who want more tangible benefits may never find their desired financial or social status in teaching.

Others see that some people are uncomfortable forming relationships. They suggest that this characteristic would be extremely limiting for individuals in the profession because building relationships with children, parents and other teachers is essential to effective teaching.

Rewards that Encourage Retention

Current Teachers and *Former Teachers* alike say that their most rewarding moments occur when a particular student or set of students “gets” the point the teacher is trying to make. All teachers recognize this moment, some refer to it as the instant the “light goes on” or the “aha” moment. Many feel a sense of accomplishment when students learn and demonstrate practical application of the knowledge the teacher has encouraged and facilitated.

“I like being able to take a mind that is empty of a subject and put in piece after piece until it all makes sense to them.” Former Teacher

Some respondents recount that their most memorable moment in their profession is “breaking through to a particular child,” especially when the student has a behavioral or learning challenge.

“(I like) reaching a child who needs you on a personal level.” Former Teacher

For many teachers, the rewards of the profession come from the day-to-day interactions and personal connections they make with students and other teachers. Some mention the first time that a student approached them with a non-school related problem for advice as personally affirming.

Teachers find it especially rewarding when a former student recognizes them in a public space (i.e. mall, parking lot) and relays gratitude. Just “to know that they’ll remember me” or to be told of a job well done is uplifting. Others are content in the knowledge that “you make a difference.” They find the profession fulfilling because they are able to see their individual contributions impact society and students.

*“I love the feeling that I make a difference in the lives... of 300 students a year!”
Former Teacher*

Teachers also experience moments of success when they see improvement in pre-and post testing or as they watch students graduate. Still others mention the many times students make them laugh or how they are able to learn more about themselves through their experience with children.

“Getting to know kids... Getting to see America through their new eyes and seeing that our own perspectives are often so skewed or incomplete...” Former Teacher

A few *Current Teachers* suggest that the ongoing challenge of helping ever-changing students is the reward.

*“I like the constant challenge of trying to find better ways to help students learn.”
Current Teacher*

Barriers to Retention

Participants in both segments identified a number of barriers to retention, including:

Lack of respect and community support. Many teachers relate that society in general has a negative image of teachers. They say that, oftentimes, society does not value the work they do and that this is reflected in low teacher salaries and lack of educational funding. Many express the concern that low pay is a major barrier to retaining gifted teachers and does not entice exceptional individuals into the profession.

Lack of administration support and increased bureaucracy. Respondents believe a strong and healthy administration is one of the major keys to retaining teachers. Teachers observe that when this is not the case it becomes a major source of frustration and the reason many leave the profession. They say that an administration that inflexibly mandates curricula, discourages teacher interaction, and supports parents over teachers is particularly detrimental to a teacher’s spirit. Respondents feel that this type of environment limits the creativity of the individual teacher and forces them to learn the politics of the system rather than spending time truly helping kids learn.

Unsupportive and unmotivated colleagues. Teachers suggest that their co-workers and educational colleagues are extremely important in their professional development. Because teaching is an exceptionally stressful profession, they say that many need a way to vent frustrations to their co-workers. Additionally, teachers want to be able to bounce ideas off colleagues and to find sources for advice and guidance in their beginning years.

Many respondents voiced that teaching is an art that relies heavily on relationships and connections, not only with students but also with colleagues. If co-workers are unsupportive or unmotivated, they believe the teaching environment is adversely affected. This results in teachers feeling stifled and unfulfilled.

Lack of resources. Teachers are frustrated by the lack of resources due to budget cuts and believe this situation has eliminated needed positions and other teaching opportunities. The result is an unstable work environment that many participants say is a deterrent to successful teaching.

Unmotivated Students. The attitudes of actual students can also be a source of frustration for respondents. Some feel a sense of failure if they are unable to motivate a child. Many mention that “not reaching students” is the most disappointing part of their job.

“The least satisfying part of my job is working with kids who don’t care about an education.” Current Teacher

Pressures of classroom management and discipline. Many teachers cite various classroom stresses as a major cause of general frustration and/or leaving the profession. Many teachers report trouble disciplining students. Participants also say that some administrations do not fully support the discipline needs of the teacher and often side with the student over the teacher. This lack of support erodes the amount of control a teacher has in the classroom. Because some teachers are unable to enforce any type of effective discipline, they must learn to live with disruptions.

Testing requirements. Teachers can also be frustrated by testing requirements. Many do not feel that all tests are an accurate representation of student learning. They also suggest that the capabilities of students vary year by year, so it should be expected that results will naturally have some variance. Respondents say that the pressure to have positive test results can be stressful and often leads to low teacher morale. Even so, they say it is not usually reason enough to leave the profession.

Lack of support from parents. Another concern respondents expressed is the lack of support from many parents. Teachers say that conflicts with parents about teaching methods and attitudes concerning the behavior of their children create frustration. Some suggest that certain parents are unsupportive of teachers because there is not enough interest in the educational well-being of their children. Respondents also comment that lack of support from parents can emerge when a child misbehaves or fails and parents then believe it is a reflection of their parenting. This leads to the parent feeling defensive and inhibits constructive communication with the teacher about the child’s performance.

Challenges

Challenges for *Current Teachers* and *Former Teachers* are very similar. However, *Current Teachers* seem to have a better support structure in their administration and more outlets for their frustrations. Additionally, they appear to cope with the stresses better than *Former Teachers*.

Numerous respondents cite as their biggest challenge being able to motivate students to learn on a daily basis. They also are challenged by the need to plan innovative and creative ways to stimulate learning. Both segments agree that dealing with large class

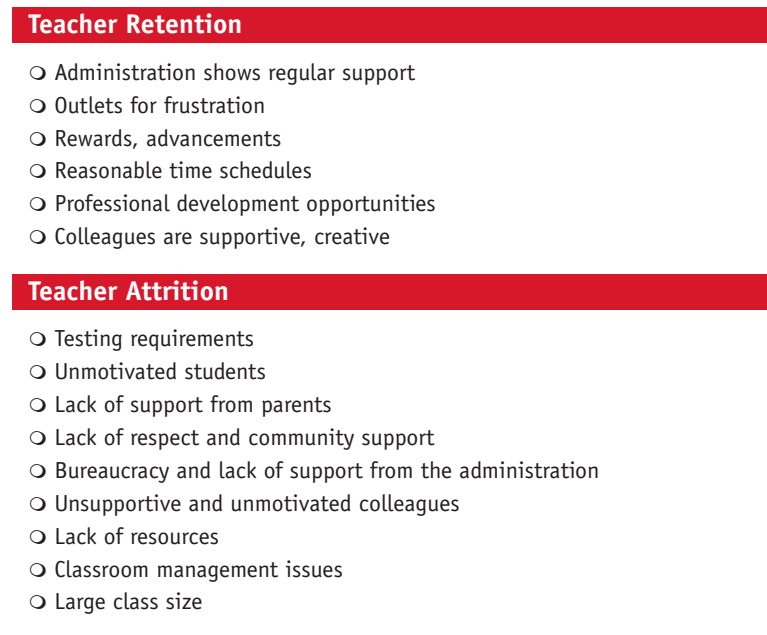
sizes that result from poor funding is very difficult. They say that funding issues diminish the availability of resources to use in the classroom (i.e. books, supplies.) Most report that they personally pay for many needed supplies.

Participants suggest that dealing with the politics and culture of a school system can be challenging. They say that every teacher needs to learn the “process” of how to get things done in a school and that, initially, this can be difficult. Without this knowledge, efforts to implement new ideas, seek support for discipline problems, find solutions for children with special needs, and secure necessary resources for the classroom will run into barriers. They also comment that it is often tough dealing “*with the rigidity of the system.*”

Staying positive and motivated is another challenge that teachers face, especially in a school where co-workers are not supportive. Some feel isolated when they do not have a colleague to go to with their frustrations and problems. This can be especially hard when moving from one school to another because they have to form new relationships in a different district.

Respondents view these rewards and challenges as influencing teacher retention and attrition as Figure 3 depicts.

Figure 3. Factors That Influence Teacher Attrition and Retention



Reasons for Leaving the Profession

Teachers that have left the profession cite a variety of reasons for their decision. They say that the low pay, lack of administrative support, impact of teachers with negative attitudes, frustrations associated with trying to motivate apathetic students and the general

lack of respect (from the administration, students, parents and society) are all major causes of their departure.

“Everyone knows it is one of the most important fields of society, but actions do not follow suit with this knowledge.” Former Teacher

“Teachers quit primarily because they have a conflict with or lack of support from other members of the faculty, staff or administration.” Former Teacher

“Their (teachers) accomplishments are never celebrated.” Former Teacher

“Long hours, short supplies, no support or recognition, low pay for a job you’re doing and large classrooms with a few undisciplined children make for a miserable professional life.” Former Teacher

Secondarily, *Former Teachers* add the following causes for leaving the profession:

- Lack of recognizable encouragement or rewards
- High stress, burnout
- No opportunities for advancement
- Long class hours, day too long
- Too much reliance on standardized testing
- Expectation to participate in extracurricular activities (i.e. coaching, tutoring, various meetings)

Figure 4. Reasons for Leaving the Teaching Profession

Long Hours, Low Pay, Lack of Resources, Standardized testing, Stress

Parents

Lack of support, respect and involvement

Administration

Lack of recognition, advancement opportunities, expectations for outside classroom involvement

Students

Discipline problems
Lack of respect

Building Support for Teachers

The existing support structures and processes for teachers are vastly different across school districts. Individuals who have stayed in the profession are much more positive about the initial support they received. Those who have left the profession are more likely to view their early experiences as negative.

Many *Current Teachers* report having formal systems for mentoring and evaluating new teachers. Often a new teacher is paired with a mentor within a given discipline and attends professional development workshops.

“They (new teachers) need ideas on what types of procedures to follow to discipline, requesting supplies, grading systems, etc. They also just need someone to vent to at the end of each day... to share their successes with and vocalize their frustrations. Often it just needs to be an ear, not an advice column.” *Current Teacher*

In contrast, *Former Teachers* say they lacked strong support from the administration when they first started teaching and did not know the politics and processes for getting things done in the school. And like students, say respondents, each new teacher has different needs and requires help with different professional and emotional areas.

“A lot of times you just need someone that will listen to you that understands.”
Former Teacher

“Nobody knows better than a fellow teacher what you’re going through.”
Former Teacher

Respondents believe that support should include regular, daily interaction with a mentor. They suggest that a mentor should be:

- A constructive evaluator as well as someone with whom to talk--one who can listen and help
- Concerned, compassionate, and helpful rather than “judgmental”
- Offering ideas rather than only pointing out problems
- Teachers within a similar specialty or subject area

Teachers feel strongly that a mentor should volunteer for the role rather than be forced by the administration. Some have experienced mentors who were required to be in the role and find they are less likely to be truly concerned with the development of the new teacher.

The administration is viewed as key to the development of a new teacher. Respondents feel administrative support should encourage independence and personal development opportunities to experiment with their own style or teaching methods .

Respondents think that the ideal “support system“ would provide help regarding:

- Time management training
- Sample lesson plans
- Discipline solutions
- Culture training
- After-school seminars

“(New teachers need) tips on how to organize your room, classroom management, new ideas/methods, interpreting district office memos, how to check your voicemail, how to maintain your sanity.” Current Teacher

Other respondents think that the ideal support system would provide after-school seminars or workshops on:

- Effective methods for keeping an orderly classroom
- How to handle medical emergencies
- How to deal with students or parents that lose control

It is felt by respondents that first time teachers should not be forced to take extracurricular jobs (i.e. coaching, committees) as this extra responsibility is often overwhelming.

Another suggestion from study participants is to provide a localized handbook. This manual could communicate who, within a specific school, teachers can access for support, questions about procedures on how to procure supplies and materials and an explanation of discipline policies.

Ideal Support

Respondents say that an ideal support person would be:

- Compassionate
- Calm
- Open-minded
- Relaxed
- Observant
- Honest
- Non-judgmental
- Experienced
- Creative
- Confident
- An effective listener
- Flexible

Respondents think that ideal support programs would provide:

- A daily debrief to “go over the successful and not so successful moments of the day.”
- Help creating tests, developing lesson plans and suggesting innovative teaching techniques
- A pair of veteran teaching partners (some say this is called “Team Teaching”)
- Suggestions on time management and discipline
- Access to fellow new teachers to bond and share similar experiences
- Opportunities to observe other teachers

“I learned so much by watching and imitating... then I would try some of the things that I saw... it was a tremendous help to see others in action.” Current Teacher

Impact of Effective Mentoring

Teachers who have left the profession suggest that having an effective mentoring program would help them cope with the strains of teaching and develop more proactive ways to combat their frustrations. However, they do not believe that mentoring alone would have changed their decision to leave the profession. Moreover, while *Former Teachers* say that mentoring would have made them feel less “ostracized and helpless,” they think that only a multi-faceted and overall strong support structure would have impacted their decision to leave.

“A strong support structure may have kept me from even the thought of leaving. But that support structure would include better administration and alternative programs. A mentor alone may not have been enough.” Former Teacher

What Former Teachers Miss about Teaching

Individuals who have left the teaching profession say they primarily miss the connections they made with students and their colleagues. *Former Teachers* also say they continue to feel responsible for the well-being of students and miss the positive moments experienced with them.

“The students are the best part of teaching.” Former Teacher

“I miss the real relationships you make with students when you see them everyday.” Former Teacher

“(I miss) hearing the laughter of children, not being creative on a daily basis, that feeling when a lesson gets its point across and the child understands and they have that glow on their face and you know that you put the knowledge there.” Former Teacher

Incentive to Return

In order for *Former Teachers* to consider returning to the teaching profession, they suggest the following changes:

- Increased pay
- More autonomy (curriculum and discipline), less interference from administration
- Positive and focused contact with parents and the administration
- Tangible rewards and recognition programs
- Full time aid or part time volunteer help to deal with large classes
- Fewer standardized tests
- More adult continuing education

National Issues Related to Education

Both segments of teachers think that government involvement and the impact of various political agendas are some of the major issues affecting the profession today. For example, they think that public policy does not always reflect, and decision-makers do not understand, the issues that educators face. Teachers also believe that adequate dollars are not appropriated for education.

Additional national educational issues cited include:

- Budget cuts
- Standardized tests
- Lack of resources
- Overcrowded classes
- Discipline problems
- Safety

“Too many important programs are being cut.” Current Teacher

Change in the Next 50 Years

Current *Teachers* and *Former Teachers* believe that the biggest change in the next 50 years will be the influence of alternative education. They think more students and parents will turn to private schools, charter schools and home-schooling to meet the educational needs of their children.

Respondents suggest that learning will be more personalized, especially with the influence of technology. They think technology and computer based education will lead to more distance learning. Additionally, they predict that the influence of technology will change the way that individual teachers plan their lessons. Some expressed the need that teachers should better understand how computers can aid in education and provide practical ways to expand learning in their curriculum. In turn, they also think teachers themselves must become more familiar with computers.

Both segments forecast that the role of teaching will shift from “lecturing” to “facilitating.”

Some respondents think that the demand for teachers will increase as the population grows. Some also think that the demand for vocational education will increase as students prepare for highly specialized jobs in the future.

Role of the Experienced Educator

Respondents reacted very favorably to the notion of peer support from retired teachers and think that any type of formal recognition and mentoring programs would be helpful. For example, they think that NRTA's experienced educators would add value by:

- Encouraging retired teachers to act as mentors for new teachers
- Sharing their wealth of knowledge, techniques and insights
- Making sure that teacher's rights are supported
- Volunteering in the classroom
- Providing workshops backed by experience
- Working with legislatures to develop policy and legislation
- Helping teachers establish effective curriculum (help with complex or completely new concepts)
- Supporting the autonomy of teachers

"I went on Teachers Net... and there were a lot of retired teachers on there that had great ideas. It was really nice to be able to bounce ideas off of them and just talk to them about whatever was going on, whether it was something great or something that was frustrating or a new idea or anything. It was just nice to be able to talk to them." Former Teacher

"Watching out for teachers' rights within districts and helping to make sure that teachers are being treated properly (would be helpful)." Former Teacher

Differences in Segments

Overall, there are few differences between the two segments. Both recognize a similar set of challenges and motivations, but the *Current Teachers* segment, although recognizing several problems, think that the emotional rewards are worth the stress.

Current Teachers appear to view difficult students as a challenge rather than a problem. They are resilient and passionate about finding ways to break through to difficult students.

Current Teachers seem to have received more positive emotional and professional support in their initial year of teaching. They also have a more pronounced connection with fellow teachers and a much better relationship with their administration than the *Former Teacher* segment.

While *Former Teachers* say that increased emphasis on standardized testing contributed to their frustration on the job, it was not the main reason behind their decision to leave. Also a few *Former Teachers* seem somewhat negative about the teaching profession in general. Many are self-described "over-achievers" and were disillusioned by the politics and bureaucracy of the system.

Definition of Success

Teachers define success in different terms. Many think that success is achieved with a well run, disciplined classroom, while others think it simply is realized with a smile.

*“I think I am successful when I walk out and end each day with a smile.”
Current Teacher*

However, for others, success is sustaining flexibility on the job while maintaining passion and creativity in the classroom. For most, success is truly caring for and making a difference in the lives of their students.

“If you don’t love the job – and if you don’t love the subject you teach, it doesn’t matter how good you think you are... the kids know who cares about them and who has a passion for their subjects. A successful teacher is one that doesn’t have to profess any of these things – but every kid that walks into the classroom knows them.” Current Teacher

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Collectively, respondents recommended actions that they believe would strengthen the retention of qualified teachers.

Areas of Actions

1. Encourage and support the relationship and connections between teachers and the administration.

A major cause reported as impacting low teacher retention is an ineffective relationship with the administration and the perceived lack of support from it. Respondents felt that greater effort should be focused on encouraging the connection between administration and teachers. Of particular concern is creating an environment to openly discuss the needs and opportunities that could lead to positive outcomes for both.

2. Build formal support and mentoring processes for new teachers where not now available.

For new teachers in districts without a formal support program, an effective mentoring process should be established and include:

- Daily dialog with volunteer mentors in a similar subject area
- Mentoring that is uplifting and constructive rather than judgmental
- Sample lessons plans and help in classroom management
- Access to other new teachers to share experiences
- A trusting relationship between parents and teachers

3. Create on-line forums for beginning and experienced educators to offer encouragement and to share resources.

Another recommendation is to encourage efforts that would provide an online forum for teachers to vent their frustrations and encourage each other within the profession. This venue might feature resources as:

- Innovative teaching techniques
- Discipline tips
- Sample lesson plans
- Links to informational websites and relevant seminars
- A capacity to channel innovation and new ideas
- Advocacy initiatives that would lead to necessary educational reforms
- Access to individuals that specialize in grief counseling and other subject-specific therapy needs
- Peer support and other means to share the successes, challenges, and experiences of teaching

4. Design an on-line journal or a *Why I Teach* newsletter focused on teachers' recalling the initial motivations they had for entering the profession and to "recharge" and reinvigorate their commitment to the profession.

Some respondents say they keep a daily journal that they often refer to when they are frustrated or when they need to recall techniques that have worked in the past. Others focus on "why I teach" to remind them of their original motivations when they are "down." Participants suggest compiling a national online- journal for teachers or a *Why I Teach* newsletter to re-charge teachers.

5. Offer emotional support for new teachers through group discussions or on-line forums with retired educators.

Many participants spoke to a need to be supported emotionally in the early years of teaching.

"In the beginning years it's very overwhelming... You just don't know how tough it's going to be. And in the first few years you definitely need a lot more emotional support than -- I mean of course, you need it all through your life but definitely in the first few years." Current Teacher

"Maybe having just some kind of chat room where teachers could go in and vent would be good." Current Teacher

6. Develop programs and public relations efforts that reward, recognize and raise the status of quality teachers in the profession.

The need for recognition, support and respect for the profession elicited suggestions for an aggressive public relations campaign, i.e., as placing articles or weekly columns in local newspapers. The campaign would promote the accomplishments and contributions of select teachers. Also recommended was the sponsoring or implementing of "teacher appreciation days."

7. Foster parent involvement in classrooms and facilitate greater communications with their students' teachers.

Teachers share their desire for parents to become more engaged in the life of their classrooms and to have greater contact with their children's teachers. They also expressed need for communication when a teacher is doing a positive job.

"So, for the people who do truly value teachers as educators rather than looking at them as providers of free day care, the more they speak up and show that they appreciate teachers by just saying things like, 'you're doing wonders for my child, you've helped my child so much...' (the better it will be). Helping out in classrooms with groups during group work or working with kids one-on-one, having kids read to them or giving them extra help that they need, things like that,...having parents and community members visible and heard is probably the most rewarding thing that teachers can get." Former Teacher

8. Combat negative stereotypes of teachers and help society to understand the contribution that educators make.

Current Teachers and *Former Teachers* call upon citizens and parents to consider ways to combat the negative stereotype of teachers. They express the need to educate society about the “good” that teachers do.

9. Reinforce the importance of early childhood education with parents and the larger community so that students begin their schooling ready to learn.

Many teachers point out that early childhood education is a crucial point of development in a child’s life. They believe parents and community members need to be educated about the importance of the first five years of a child’s development before they enter school, and more importantly, to actively take part in preparing their children for school.

“The first five years before teachers ever see kids is when they learn most of their social skills and most of their behavioral processes,...and getting those mindsets locked in is before any teacher sees a kid. And society needs to look at that and realize that society and parents and neighborhoods need to take on that responsibility, and let the schools reinforce it, but that they need to enforce it at home.” Former Teacher

10. Create a central on-line repository of information and aids that will help teachers expand and supplement increasingly limited classroom resources.

Respondents suggest as one solution, the creation of a central online site that includes information about available grants based on geographic location and special needs. Limited funds available for classroom resources and supplies has become a reality due to state and district budget cuts. It is believed that the site could contain information regarding sources for low cost classroom supplies, fieldtrip opportunities, and public and private funding.

APPENDIX

About Online Bulletin Boards

The methodology used in the NRTA project takes full advantage of the online environment and allows for exceptional access for research participants from all over the United States. It was especially appropriate for this project in order to secure a mixed representation of teachers, ex-teachers and public/private schools. For the NRTA project, over 6,800 responses were posted to the moderator's questions. This generated hundreds of pages of transcripts, and a wealth of information from which to draw out the analysis and conclusions.


In addition to being more cost effective than traditional focus groups, online bulletin board groups have the following advantages:

- **Respondent Convenience:** In an online focus group, respondents can participate from anywhere that they have Internet access. This is especially appealing to respondents for whom time is at a premium, because they do not have to travel to a focus group facility. It has been our experience that the greater convenience offered allows for much easier recruiting and also allows for a more rigorous selection process.
- **Geographic Diversity:** As with the convenience benefit, the fact that participants can be recruited from across the US and internationally, allows for much easier recruiting. Additionally, online focus groups can include participants from smaller cities, towns, and municipalities who normally would not have the chance to participate in a face-to-face group.
- **More Honest Feedback:** Online focus groups offer an environment in which participants can respond more honestly, since they are anonymous and less bound by social constraints that may be present in a face-to-face group. For these reasons, it is much harder for one individual to dominate an online group, or for a "group think" contagion to emerge.
- **Client Convenience:** Online groups are very convenient for clients who, like respondents, may participate as observers from anywhere that they have Internet access. As a result, time and money are saved. In addition, the fact that Harris Interactive project staff does not have to travel also results in a significant cost savings for clients.

**SAMPLE SCREEN SHOT:
NRTA ONLINE BULLETIN BOARDS**

Moderator: Blue

Respondents: Black


Thanks For Joining Us

3. Day Three Dialo

- [2.6](#) 26
- [2.7](#) 23
- [2.8](#)
- [2.9](#)
- [2.10](#)

4. Day Four Last D

- [4.1](#)
- [4.2](#)
- [4.3](#)
- [4.4](#)
- [4.5](#) 38
- [4.6](#) 27
- [4.7](#) 33

3.2. **Reply Nan:** Many of you have mentioned this, but thinking about your first years of teaching, are there any ways in which an experienced educator could have helped you? How much time, and in what settings, would an experienced educator need to give to a new teacher? Thu 12:15 am

3.2.1. **Reply Scott M:** In my first year, my primary mentor could have done so much more had she been able to sit down with me and walk through the teaching methods in use at our school and make a few suggestions about how to implement these methods in a practical manner. I think a good mentor should at least spend an hour after school in the classroom once every week or 2 reviewing lesson plans, the success and failures in the classroom and any special issues that came up. A few unofficial observations without the stress of formal documentation and personal reviews of these observations would also help. Thu 12:38 am

3.2.2. **Reply Leah O:** Experienced educators could have, and did, help in figuring out how to pull together the required curriculum items into ways that fit into the year. Well, it never really fits, but they can help with cramming in as much of it as can be crammed and in letting you see that even they can't fit everything in. Being willing to spend the time to help is the key factor in being helpful. Sharing ideas, in both directions, is good and helpful for everyone. Thu 2:50 am

3.2.3. **Reply Carmen S:** I think minimally spending time on a weekly basis with an experienced educator could potentially help. I'd like to see a mentor program where there is a sense of confidentiality, hands on resources and ideas exchange, but mostly someone to lend an ear and LISTEN to the new teacher's issues. I think the time given would be up to the individual's needs, and the setting could be both in and out of the classroom. Thu 5:55 am

3.2.4. **Reply Nadine J:** I think I would have liked to observe a veteran teacher in her classroom to find out techniques and helpful hints that I could use. I think the first half of the school year meeting once a week at a minimum would be helpful. Thu 8:41 am

3.2.5. **Reply Christina F:** There is no doubt that an experienced teacher would have been a great help. But it needs to be ongoing and a substantial amount of time. Thu 9:35 am

3.2.6. **Reply Rebecca M:** In some ways I think experienced teachers offer invaluable insights to new teachers. I think classroom observations are a must. On the other hand, new teachers must find their own way and develop a style that suits their personality. Simply mimicking another teacher doesn't work. Thu 9:35 am

3.2.7. **Reply Christine P:** I would have liked to have a specific person to go to if I had a question about things. I always went to the people in my department, but sometimes I'd be told different things by different people. I think it would have helped to have