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At Charter Schools, Short Careers by Choice

By **MOTOKO RICH**

HOUSTON — Tyler Dowdy just started his third year of teaching at YES Prep West, a charter school here. He figures now is a good time to explore his next step, including applying for a supervisory position at the school.

Mr. Dowdy is 24 years old, which might make his restlessness seem premature. But then, his principal is 28. Across YES Prep's 13 schools, teachers have an average of two and a half years of experience.

As tens of millions of pupils across the country begin their school year, charter networks are developing what amounts to a youth cult in which teaching for two to five years is seen as acceptable and, at times, even desirable. Teachers in the nation's traditional public schools have an average of close to 14 years of [experience](#), and public school leaders and policy makers have long made it a priority to reduce teacher turnover.

But with teachers confronting the overhaul of evaluations and tenure as well as looming changes in pension benefits, the small but rapidly growing charter school movement — with schools that are publicly financed but privately operated — is pushing to redefine the arc of a teaching career.

“We have this highly motivated, highly driven work force who are now wondering, ‘O.K., I’ve got this, what’s the next thing?’ ” said Jennifer Hines, senior vice president of people and programs at YES Prep. “There is a certain comfort level that we have with people who are perhaps going to come into YES Prep and not stay forever.”

The notion of a foreshortened teaching career was largely introduced by Teach for America, which places high-achieving college graduates into low-income schools for two years. Today, Teach for America places about a third of its recruits in charter schools.

“Strong schools can withstand the turnover of their teachers,” said Wendy Kopp of Teach for America. “The strongest schools develop their teachers tremendously great in the classroom even in their first and second years.”

[Studies have shown](#) that on average, teacher turnover diminishes student achi



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Advocates who argue that teaching should become more like medicine or law say that while programs like Teach for America fill a need in the short term, educational leaders should be focused on improving training and working environments so that teachers will invest in long careers.

“To become a master plumber you have to work for five years,” said Ronald Thorpe, president of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a [nonprofit group](#) that certifies accomplished teachers. “Shouldn’t we have some kind of analog to that with the people we are entrusting our children to?”

Teachers’ unions and others in the traditional education establishment argue that charter schools are driving teachers away with longer hours and school years, as well as higher workplace demands. (At YES Prep, for example, all teachers are assigned a cellphone to answer any student call for homework assistance until 9 p.m.)

These critics also say that schools and students need stability and that a system of serial short timers is not replicable across thousands of school districts nationwide.

“When you stay in a school or community, you build relationships,” said Andrea Giunta, a senior policy analyst for teacher recruitment, retention and diversity at the [National Education Association](#), the country’s largest teachers’ union.

Baby boomers who went into teaching tended to stay in the profession for decades. But as they have retired, the teaching corps has shifted toward the less experienced. According to an analysis of federal data by Richard M. Ingersoll, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, the proportion of teachers with five or fewer years of experience rose to 28 percent in 2007-8 from 17 percent in 1987-8.

The restless generation of millennials is likely to accelerate the trend. Some charter school leaders say that some experienced teachers grow tired and less effective, and that educators need to embrace the change.

“My take is yes, we do need and want some number of teachers to be ‘lifers,’ for lack of a better word,” said Doug McCurry, a co-chief executive of Achievement First, a nonprofit charter operator with 25 schools in Connecticut, Brooklyn and Providence, R.I., where teachers spend an average of 2.3 years in the classroom. But, he said, he would be happy if “the majority of the teachers that walked in the door gave us five or seven really good teaching years and then went on to do something else.”

Other charter networks have similar career arcs for teachers. At Success Academy Charter

Schools, a chain run by Eva S. Moskowitz, a former New York City councilwoman, the average is about four years in the classroom. **KIPP**, one of the country's best known and largest charter operators, with 141 schools in 20 states, also keeps teachers in classrooms for an average of about four years.

Charter leaders say they are able to sustain rapid turnover in teaching staff because they prepare young recruits and coach them as they progress. At YES Prep, new teachers go through two and a half weeks of training over the summer, learning common disciplinary methods and working with curriculum coordinators to plan lessons.

Novice teachers receive constant feedback from principals and other campus administrators. On a recent morning, Melanie Singleton, a 27-year-old principal at YES Prep Hoffman, which opened in Houston this month with five of its nine teachers in their first year on the job, circulated through classrooms.

Observing two first-year math teachers, she noticed that both were reviewing place values with sixth graders. "We might not be pushing them as rigorously as we can at this point," she said. And when one teacher exhorted her students to give themselves a celebratory chant, Ms. Singleton corrected the teacher's instructions. "I have to interrupt," Ms. Singleton said. "It's two claps and then a sizzle."

Every other week, new teachers meet with instructional coaches for 45-minute sessions. On an afternoon last week, Christopher Reid (experience: four years teaching middle school math) sat down with Alondra Aponte, a first-year art teacher. He praised her for giving students helpful tips for drawing self-portraits and for creating a positive classroom climate.

But he said Ms. Aponte's students should settle into their desks more quickly, and asked her to role-play the beginning of class four times. Mr. Reid offered comments ("You say 'all right' a lot," "walk around the room narrating those who are doing a good job") and helped Ms. Aponte install a time-keeping app on her laptop so she could give students precise deadlines.

Given the increase in applicants who do not plan to spend their lives teaching, even some traditional school districts are beginning to reward teachers for shorter career trajectories. In Washington, for example, Kaya Henderson, the public schools chancellor, said high-performing teachers could be paid \$80,000 by their third year of teaching. (Starting salaries in the district are \$42,000.)

Charter school leaders say similar pay structures could actually persuade their best teachers to stay longer, given that some teachers leave after just a few years because the pay is so low.

YES Prep's performance pay system, introduced last year, is part of what persuaded Craig Brandenburg, a rare long timer with 13 years of experience, to stay on as a math teacher.

"I wanted to feel like I was moving up," said Mr. Brandenburg, a practically ancient 36.

Mr. Dowdy, the 24-year-old teacher who is already thinking beyond the classroom, wants something more, however. "I feel like our generation is always moving onto the next thing," he said, "and always moving onto something bigger and better."