

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 19, 2009

Published in Print: October 21, 2009

State of Mind

America's teaching corps is made up of three groups with distinct attitudes about their profession, which has implications for policymakers.

By Andrew L. Yarrow

Two out of five of America's 4 million K-12 teachers appear disheartened and disappointed about their jobs, while others express a variety of reasons for contentment with teaching and their current school environments, new research by Public Agenda and Learning Point Associates shows.

The **nationwide study**, "Teaching for a Living: How Teachers See the Profession Today," whose results are being reported here for the first time, offers a comprehensive and nuanced look at how teachers differ in their perspectives on their profession, why they entered teaching, the atmosphere and leadership in their schools, the problems they face, their students and student outcomes, and ideas for reform. Taking a closer look at the nation's teacher corps based on educators' attitudes and motivations for teaching could provide some notable implications for how to identify, retain, and support the most effective teachers, according to the researchers.

This portrait of American teachers, completed by the beginning of the 2009-10 school year, presents a new means for appraising the state of the profession at a time when school reform, approaches to teaching, and student achievement remain high on the nation's agenda. It also comes as billions of economic-stimulus dollars pour into America's schools, in part to ensure that effective teachers are distributed among all schools, and as Congress prepares to consider reauthorization or modification of the No Child Left Behind Act, the nearly 8-year-old—and latest—version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The study was based on a nationwide survey, with more than 100 questions, of nearly 900 teachers. It was jointly conducted by Public Agenda, a New York City-based

[← Back to Story](#)



TEACHING FOR A LIVING: How Teachers See the Profession Today

This report is based on a nationally representative survey of 890 teachers. Data were collected by phone and online between April 16 and June 22, 2009. The margin of error is plus or minus 4.4 percent. For this research, Public Agenda also conducted a cluster analysis, examining the data in terms of how teachers grouped naturally based both on attitudes and demographics.

For more details about the research methodology, visit PublicAgenda.org. Research and analysis were conducted by Jean Johnson, Jon Rochkind, and Amber Ott

nonprofit, nonpartisan research and public-engagement organization, and Learning Point Associates, a nonprofit education research and consulting organization based in Naperville, Ill., that provides direct professional services at the federal, state, and local levels. The work was underwritten by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Joyce Foundation. (Both foundations also provide funding to Editorial Projects in Education, the publisher of *Education Week*.)

Varying Sensibilities

Researchers at Public Agenda conducted a cluster analysis of the survey results, revealing three distinct groups of teachers. Based on their individual characteristics and attitudes about the profession, teachers naturally fell into three broad categories, which the researchers call the “Disheartened,” “Contented,” and “Idealists.”

The view that teaching is “so demanding, it’s a wonder that more people don’t burn out” is remarkably pervasive, particularly among the Disheartened, who are twice as likely as other teachers to agree strongly with that view. Members of that group, which accounts for 40 percent of K-12 teachers in the United States, tend to have been teaching longer and be older than the Idealists. More than half teach in low-income schools. They are more likely to voice high levels of frustration about the school administration, disorder in the classroom, and an undue focus on testing. Only 14 percent rated their principals as “excellent” at supporting them as teachers, and 61 percent cited lack of support from administrators as a major drawback to teaching. Nearly three-quarters cited “discipline and behavior issues” in the classroom, and seven in 10 cited testing as major drawbacks as well.

By contrast, the vast majority of teachers in the Contented group (37 percent of teachers overall) viewed teaching as a lifelong career. Most said their schools are “orderly, safe, and respectful,” and are satisfied with their administrators. Sixty-three percent strongly agreed that “teaching is exactly what I wanted to do,” and roughly three-fourths feel that they have sufficient time to craft good lesson plans. Those teachers tend to be veterans—94 percent have been in the classroom for more than 10 years, a majority have graduate degrees, and about two-thirds are

of Public Agenda.

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Public Agenda and Learning Point Associates

Group Characteristics

Percentage of teachers who are disheartened, contented, and idealists:



DISHEARTENED teachers are more likely to:

- give their principals poor ratings for supporting them as teachers
- express concerns about working conditions, student behavior, and testing

IDEALIST teachers are more likely to:

- say they became teachers to help disadvantaged students
- believe their students’ test scores have increased a lot because of their teaching
- say that good teachers can lead all students to learn, even those from poor families or who have uninvolved parents

CONTENTED teachers are more likely to:

- report excellent working conditions
- be experienced in their profession
- work in middle- or higher-income schools
- believe their students’ test scores have increased a lot because of their teaching

teaching in middle-income or affluent schools.

However, it is the Idealists—23 percent of teachers overall—who voiced the strongest sense of mission about teaching. Nearly nine in 10 Idealists believe that “good teachers can lead all students to learn, even those from poor families or who have uninvolved parents.” Idealists overwhelmingly said that helping underprivileged children improve their prospects motivated them to enter the profession. Forty-two percent said it was “one of the most important” factors in their decision, and another 36 percent said it was a “major” factor. In addition, 54 percent strongly agreed that all their students, “given the right support, can go to college,” the highest percentage among any group. More than half are 32 or younger and teach in elementary schools, and 36 percent said that even though they intend to stay in education, they plan to leave classroom teaching for other jobs in the field.

Although the researchers caution that the teachers’ idealism does not necessarily guarantee that they are more effective teachers than their colleagues, half the Idealists believe their students’ test scores have increased significantly as a result of their teaching, a higher percentage than the other teachers in the survey.

Making a Difference

At a time of intensifying pressure on teachers to produce results and meet a widening range of social and economic needs, why do teachers say they go into the profession? According to the “Teaching for a Living” analysis, the differences among the three groups are highly significant. For example, “putting underprivileged kids on the path to success” is one of the most important reasons that led Idealists to enter the profession, but only 16 percent of the Contented cited it.

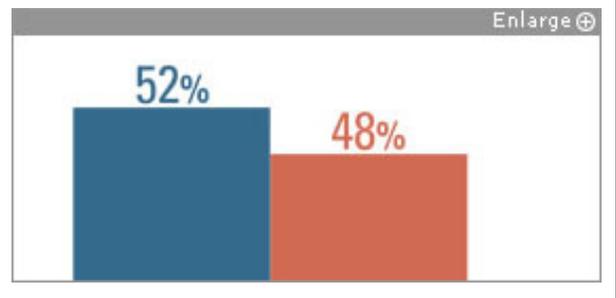
As a Denver 5th grade teacher interviewed for the project said: “Good teachers don’t join for the money or bonuses. They join because they want to make a difference.”

A considerable degree of bitterness characterized the Disheartened in comparison to the other groups: Twice as many spoke of likely burnout as did the Contented and Idealists. Only two-fifths strongly agreed that “there is nothing I’d rather be doing” than teaching, compared with nearly two-thirds of the Contented and nearly half the Idealists.

According to the survey, student-behavior problems and a lack of a supportive administration are major issues feeding discontent among teachers, alongside the perception of low pay. The groups differ considerably on working conditions and support from principals and other administrators. The

Age Differences

Teachers’ attitudes about their profession vary based on age.



Degree of Confidence

The percent of teachers who strongly agree that all their students, with the right support, can go to college varies among the groups.

54% idealists

30% contented

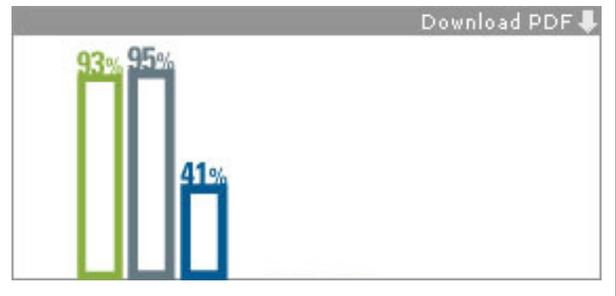
39% disheartened

Contented were more than twice as likely as the Disheartened (76 percent vs. 28 percent) to say that their schools are orderly and safe, and that teachers, administrators, and students respect each other. Likewise, the Contented and the Idealists were four times as likely as the Disheartened to give their principals “excellent” ratings when it comes to supporting them as teachers.

Perceived lack of administrator support, discipline problems, class size, low pay, and lack of prestige loomed as much larger negatives for the Disheartened. Student-behavior problems were seen as major drawbacks to teaching for nearly three-fourths of the Disheartened compared with one-fourth of the Idealists and two in five of the Contented, although student discipline clearly was an issue that concerned many teachers. Low salaries and “little prestige” were not top issues, but the Disheartened were much more likely to mention both as major drawbacks to teaching. For example, 53 percent cited low pay, compared with 26 percent of the Contented and 31 percent of the Idealists.

How Teachers Rate Their Profession

Educators shared their opinions about their principals, their schools, their students, and teaching in general.



Beliefs about their students and student potential also differed notably, with conceivably significant implications for efforts to reshape the profession. A 22-percentage-point difference separated the Idealists and the Disheartened (88 percent to 66 percent) in their faith that good teachers can make a difference in student learning. Idealists strongly believe that teachers shape student effort (75 percent), whereas just 50 percent of the Disheartened believe that. Only one-third of the more disillusioned teachers were very confident in their students’ learning abilities, compared with nearly half among the other groups (48 percent of the Contented and 45 percent of the Idealists).

Those feelings about teaching, schools, and students influenced perceptions of what steps would be most helpful in improving teacher effectiveness. The Disheartened were more likely to mention higher pay (56 percent, compared with 47 percent of Idealists and 44 percent of the Contented) and removing students with severe behavior problems from the classroom (76 percent of the Disheartened, compared with 55 percent of Idealists and 67 percent of the Contented). The Disheartened (70 percent) and the Idealists (69 percent) were more likely than the Contented (60 percent) to mention smaller class sizes as a very effective way of improving teaching.

Policy Implications

The characteristics and specific views of each group raise important questions for the field. Are the Idealists the best prospects for high-needs schools and for reinvigorating the profession, and what do school leaders need to do to retain them in the field? Given the Idealists’ passion for improving their students’ lives, how can administrators ensure that they have the skills and support to fulfill that goal? More than a third of Idealists voiced a desire to move eventually into other jobs in education. How does the field respond to those aspirations? The Disheartened pose a different challenge. Some may be ill-fitted to the job and ready to move on, but how should the field encourage and support their transition? Others may be good teachers trapped in dysfunctional schools and, in the right

environment, might change their views and become Idealists. While those teachers may be helping their students despite the teachers' bleak outlook, the researchers point out that it would be hard to believe that those Disheartened teachers are as effective as they could be given their own reports about their situation.

Jean Johnson, the executive vice president of Public Agenda and the director of its Education Insights division, notes that an earlier study with superintendents and principals showed that administrators can fall into two categories: "Copers," whose main focus is successfully completing the work of each day, and "Transformers," who aim to change the schools they manage.

"One key question from this study is the degree to which the most idealistic teachers could be Transformers, effectively helping struggling students become eager and accomplished learners," Ms. Johnson said. "Then there are questions about the Disheartened teachers, who generally fall into the coping category. Could good school leadership and better support re-energize them," she said, "or would it be better for some portion of them and their students if they found another line of work?"

Andrew Yarrow is a vice president of Public Agenda and the director of its Washington office.

Vol. 29, Issue 08, Pages 21-23