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# The Ongoing Struggle of Teacher Retention

Getting experienced educators to work in the highest-need schools requires more than bonus pay.



J Pat Carter / AP

**PAUL BARNWELL** | **MAY 27, 2015** | **EDUCATION**

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Standing in front of my eighth-grade class, my heart palpitated to near-panic-attack speed as I watched second hand of the clock. *Please bell—ring early, I*

prayed. It was my second day of teaching, and some of my middle-school male students were putting me to the test.

In a span of three minutes, the group in room 204 had morphed from contained to out of control. Two boys were shooting dice in the back of the room, and as I instructed them to put their crumpled dollar bills away, several others took off their shoes and began tossing them around like footballs. Before I could react, one boy broke into my supply closet. He snatched handfuls of No. 2 pencils and highlighters and sprinted out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

[This was 2004](#). I was 22 years old and had been placed as a beginning teacher in one of Kentucky's most troubled, underperforming, and dysfunctional middle schools. I had no prior teaching experience, nor had I studied education as an undergraduate. I'd only begun my alternative certification work at the University of Louisville a few months prior, having been recruited by [Teach Kentucky](#). I'd enter the classroom only having completed two graduate courses—I was expected to learn on the fly. I wasn't ready for the stress, the culture shock, or the pressure to increase student reading scores.

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I resigned from the position before Christmas. I hadn't even gotten my certification.

The district in which that middle school is located, [Louisville's Jefferson County Public Schools](#), is one of the nation's largest, serving over 100,000 students in roughly 150 schools. Eighteen of them are labeled "priority schools," meaning they demonstrate exceptionally low student achievement. Unsurprisingly, most of these campuses serve student populations with at least three-fourths of kids on free or reduced-priced meal plans, an indicator of poverty.

For example, Knight Middle School has one of the lowest performance rankings in the district and the highest percentage of teachers with four years of experience or fewer: [80 percent](#) and 84 percent, respectively. Knight ranks in the fifth percentile, according to state metrics. Similar statistics exist at Doss High School, where over 84 percent of students are on free or reduced-price lunch and 71 percent of the teachers have four years of experience or fewer.

The combination of poor performance and limited teacher experience makes it especially difficult for Knight and Doss, and similar schools across the country, to fulfill [strict guidelines](#) under the federal No Child Left Behind law. If Knight and Doss fail to improve reading and math proficiency, among other academic indicators, they are subject to various sanctions. Those include removing the principal, which is what the Kentucky Department of Education [recommended](#) for Doss earlier this month. Replacing teachers is also an option.

Although some educators hit their stride early on in their careers, experience matters in the classroom for both students and teachers. [Recent studies](#) suggest that it takes many educators a decade or even longer to become truly effective in their craft—to efficiently deal with distractions and disruptions, create and implement engaging curriculum, and provide meaningful feedback to students, for example.

The boys from room 204 didn't need me; they needed a veteran teacher with

these aforementioned abilities. And it seems that placing me in a classroom that nearly drove me out of the profession could have been avoided. Here lies one of the most pressing policy challenges facing today's schools: creating equitable teaching and learning conditions for not only students, but for educators, too.

I ended up staying in teaching and now work at Fern Creek High School, another priority school in Jefferson County. Though the school has high needs, I'm fortunate to be surrounded by an effective, veteran staff that supports those newly entering the profession. Only about a third of Fern Creek teachers have four years of experience or fewer—the lowest rate for priority schools in the district.

Across the country, schools that are adjacent to each other and even share the same zip codes often serve vastly different demographic groups from one another. And not all teaching jobs are created equal. Within my own district, for example, I could be working at a magnet school—a public institution that typically has selective admissions. Most students arrive at or above grade level in reading and math, and often have more support at home, whether the reason is financial or because of familial stability. Educators at these types of alternative schools aren't always subject to the same scrutiny and bureaucratic demands as their counterparts at regular public schools. It all comes down to test scores, and it's rare to find a school serving more-advantaged students that has been subject to the same kinds of No Child Left Behind sanctions that Doss High, for example, is undergoing.

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What the struggling schools are likely lacking, however, is a large cadre of new, inexperienced teachers, like me in 2004. A 2010 report released by The Education Trust, a national advocacy nonprofit, found that in cities and small towns in the U.S., new teachers are assigned to high-poverty schools at nearly twice the rate as those at low-poverty schools. And not only are students in poor schools more likely to have new teachers, they are also disproportionately likely to have a core class—such as English or math—led by an educator who lacks a teaching certification or a college major in the subject he or she is teaching.

High-poverty schools, according to Harvard research, also tend to struggle with employee instability. Meanwhile, a widely-cited 2004 study found that high-poverty public schools—especially those in urban areas—on average lost a fifth of their faculty annually. Some of the schools serving America's neediest children lose over half of their teaching staff every five years. Although researchers have debated attrition rates, high-poverty schools unequivocally deal with much higher teacher turnover than do more affluent ones. The turnover is expensive, too, costing school districts as much as \$2 billion annually.

The odds of me thriving and staying at my first school were miniscule, as were my students' chances of actually learning given that I could hardly structure a 50-minute lesson plan or keep them in their seats. How can school districts expect to increase student literacy skills without breaking the paradigm of placing the most inexperienced teachers in the toughest schools? How can more veteran educators be encouraged to take on positions like my first-year

placement, where they'd work primarily with students on subsidized meals and falling behind in proficiency expectations and would be surrounded by dozens of younger and less-experienced teachers?

One of the most common strategies is combat pay: Offering extra compensation to high-quality teachers who voluntarily transfer to difficult schools. But in a 2011 Center for American Progress [report](#) examining strategies for hiring—and retaining—quality teachers, the co-authors Frank Adamson and Linda Darling-Hammond found that such tactics have fallen flat. For example, in 2004, Palm Beach, Florida, eliminated a \$7,500 annual stipend it offered to teachers who agreed to work in high-needs schools after few of them took the offer, according to the report. The researchers also cite the failure of Dallas's offer of \$6,000 to accomplished teachers who moved to challenging schools. Little research supports combat pay as an effective tool.

Linking teacher salaries to their students' test scores, whether they have national certification, and any local leadership duties they take up are also destined to flop. No matter the compensation scheme, these strategies fail to acknowledge the impact of school culture and climate on work satisfaction—which often takes precedence over pay for experienced teachers. After all, thousands of teachers opt to work in private schools for [far less compensation](#), largely because conditions tend to be more favorable for teachers.

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I recently spoke with Harvard's Susan Moore-Johnson, who directs [The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers](#). Her team's recent study of six high-poverty, high-achieving schools in a large urban district found that several factors strongly influence teacher satisfaction: the provision of ample time to collaborate during the school day, strong and supportive principals, and a common vision that's shared and executed by teachers and staff. Retention, she said, "essentially it comes down to whether schools can provide the conditions they need to succeed in teaching."

I asked several of my public-school teaching colleagues from around the country—from New Hampshire to Washington—what it would take for them to voluntarily switch to the neediest schools in their regions. Julie Hiltz, an educator in Hillsborough County, Florida, with nearly 13 years of teaching experience, told me that the following would need to be in place: The ability to make local decisions, professional development designed and led in-house, more time for collaboration, and smaller class sizes, among other factors. Unfortunately, current guidelines for struggling schools under No Child Left Behind often disenfranchise administrators and staff.

Lauren Christensen, a social-studies teacher in the Waltham, Massachusetts, with six years of experience, currently works in a low-poverty school. I asked her if she'd voluntarily transfer to a high-poverty school in her area. "Maybe, she said, "but I would need to know that the whole school would be supported with a long-term commitment [from decision-makers]. I think the pressure of standard assessments and the stress put on educators to turn 'failing' schools around

immediately might be too much to overcome.”

When I think back to my first year, I’m no longer bitter. I’m now completing my 11th year as a teacher; I mentor new educators and advocate for better support and working conditions. But unless those resources are in place, I wouldn’t voluntarily work in another struggling school.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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