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Teachers Wonder: How Much More Can We Take?

By John Norton

During a recent chat in the Teacher Leaders Network daily online discussion group, it became

apparent that many established, expert teachers who once planned to teach well into their 60s are now rethinking that decision. While some of these frustrated teachers work in challenging urban environments, others teach in suburban and rural schools, in many subjects and grades.

As one teacher after another described working conditions they say are taking the joy out of a profession they care about deeply, a kind of virtual gloom descended on the conversation. "I can hardly stand to read this thread," wrote one high school English teacher. "It sounds so familiar. And I am only 55. Wondering how much more I can take." Other teachers noted that some younger colleagues are also expressing career doubts amid budget cuts, growing class sizes, and increasingly oppressive directives from above.

One theme that recurred again and again is expressed in this comment by an award-winning National Board certified teacher working in an urban middle school:

"I believe a lot of teachers have had enough and are ready to retire, and many will. There aren't enough young people willing to come into teaching, and those who do are statistically unlikely to stay. I fear for the future of our profession and for our children for generations to come. Who will teach them?"

Here are some other brief excerpts from this lengthy, still-continuing dialogue.

Linda launched the discussion:

I came to teaching as a second profession when I was in my 30s. I knew right away it was where I was supposed to be, and I don't regret it for a moment. Even last year, I said I would teach until I was 65 or until they had to remind me where my classroom was as I toddled along with my walker. Retirement was the furthest thing from my mind.

But around the end of last school year, things started to look different. I work in an urban school system in the Southeast. In nearly every district teacher gathering I've been part of this fall, I have heard many highly accomplished, experienced teachers saying the same thing: They were



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checking into the state retirement website to see if/when they are eligible to retire (in spite of their long-standing plan to work for years longer).

My district has had massive teacher layoffs the past two years, with resulting increased class sizes. Layoffs were not based on seniority, degrees or accomplishments, but solely on student test scores and teacher evaluations. Furthermore, the district is proceeding with a pay-for-performance plan, which will go into effect at the latest in 2014. It is not following any kind of best practices research in its structure. Pay would be dependent solely on teacher "effectiveness," which every indication suggests will be based primarily on test scores.

I know that all of this is causing our most experienced, most accomplished, most prepared teachers to rethink their plans for work versus retirement. I also know that absenteeism among teachers is on the rise. At my high-needs schools, most of our teachers are very young, and I am the only nationally certified teacher. We have already had seven teachers resign since school started in August.

I've never before questioned my commitment to teaching the way I am now, and I have never felt so discouraged about the profession in general or the future of my school district or the welfare of and opportunities for our students. I'm not really ready to stop working, but I'm starting to think I've lost heart for teaching. I don't know if I can get it back.

A teacher in California replied:

There are two issues this raises. One is very personal and has to do with your own life path. The other is bigger, which is about why it is that so many experienced teachers are getting ready to throw in the towel much earlier than planned. This will have a lot of repercussions down the line, and I think it could be generations before our schools recover what they are about to lose.

I am getting ready to "retire" from my school district as well, although I will only be 53 years old next June. I have had enough, and I am ready for a change. I am not really sure what will come. But I am ready for a new chapter in my life.

A Michigan teacher offered her bottom line:

I've never thought about retiring. It is so far off my radar, I have never even looked at how much money my plan will give me or the requirements to set the process in place. I've always said I would teach until it isn't fun anymore. To me, that's the bottom line. Each of us has to decide in our own heart whether we still love being there or not.

Linda replied:

That's what I said, too. That I would teach until it was no longer fun. I think what I am feeling is somewhat beyond just being tired because it's November (or name whatever month you'd like). This is a more serious discontent, exhaustion and frustration than I usually feel. And I'm just not alone in this feeling.

I am concerned about what comes after us, and I would like to help the next generation of teachers. I just don't know who that generation will be if things continue as they are now.

A rural teacher in the Deep South wrote:

I am dismayed that so many great veteran teachers are feeling the need to either retire altogether or leave the classroom. I can't remember when teacher morale has been as low as it is now around our state. Teachers are not just November-tired; they are tired of being harassed and unsupported. They are tired of watching their students suffer and having their hands tied when it comes to teaching ethically.

A teacher at a large suburban high school wrote:

Linda, I'm sad that teachers are being treated so poorly in your district. It's probably not comforting to hear that what you're experiencing is happening all over the country, but please know that you are *not* alone. Morale in my district is lower than a frog's belly on mowing day, and I teach in what's considered to be a really good system. Like you and others here, I do wonder what is going to happen to public education in this country. I feel that there is a storm building. I just hope that when it breaks, someone will FINALLY listen and "get it."

A teacher in Los Angeles wrote:

Unfortunately, Linda, I think a lot of what has you discouraged to this point is happening all around the country. Today we got yet another letter from our union asking us to support our classified employees, as the district is apparently ready to cut even deeper. Our classrooms are filthy, and there's been a huge upswing in fights on campus; I'm sure it's because supervision is now almost non-existent. Education truly seems on the edge of disaster.

A 30-year veteran with Teacher of the Year honors wrote to Linda:

I'm feeling so very sad for you and for your school because it's such a loss of energy and commitment when teachers such as yourself are worn down and boxed in until they lose their joy in their work.

Like you, I am beginning to wonder how long I will last. I'd planned on teaching at least until I was 65. Now I'm wondering if I'll make it two more years. It's not the kids. The demographics of our neighborhood have become more challenging, but that's okay. Kids are kids; And these kids need someone to care about them, invest in them, and challenge them. But it's the micromanagement, the factory-laborer mindset, the constant push to do one more duty, attend one more meeting, and follow one more prescriptive plan that is weighing me down and wearing me out.

And at the risk of sounding egotistical and maybe paranoid, I sense that rather than viewing my above-average amount of experience as a teacher leader as an asset to be utilized, my district level administrators seem to perceive it as a problem to be contained. As I watch gifted warhorse educators that I've worked with for over 20 years begin to buckle and the five-to ten-year teachers declare "Not for another 20 years, no way!" and walk out the door, I am deeply concerned about the fate of our profession, our kids, and therefore, the fate of our nation.

A high school science teacher, who retired reluctantly last year, wrote:

I've found a part-time teaching job at a small university that allows me to still work with students. As I talk with my friends working now in the public schools, they echo what many here are saying: new directives daily, the expectation that teachers will cover classes during their "planning periods," more duties, larger classes, lack of respect and appreciation from

administrators, and more. Realizing that they are coming to hate what they're experiencing and seeing the stress on their faces makes me far more content with not being there.

Linda concluded:

I'm going back and forth between being relieved that I am not alone and being disheartened that so many other teacher leaders in my age range are experiencing the nearly identical feelings and questionings that I am.

I never wanted to leave this profession feeling so beat down and so concerned about the future of public schools. I believe we are facing a crisis in public education, but not the one the media or the national policymakers are claiming. In a short time, there will be very few experienced teachers, and new teachers will leave at an even higher rate than they currently are. Talk about low teacher effectiveness.

Isn't it ironic and sad that the most effective teachers (and I am not talking test scores here, I am talking about teachers who foster a love of learning and a joy in discovery and being curious) are the ones being pushed out? I'm worn out, and that is the bottom line.

Are these simply the voices of disillusioned workers, weary after so many years of hard work? Or is something more going on? Please share your own story or perspective below.

John Norton is co-founder of the Teacher Leaders Network. A former education journalist and vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board, he's currently a communications consultant for the Center for Teaching Quality and the Alabama Best Practices Center.

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