As new teachers leave the profession in vast numbers, principals and school districts search for methods of retaining them. This study looks closely at the policies of schools and districts which have higher retention rates, discerning what each school or district is doing to support new teachers.

The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at Harvard University has explored various questions relating to new teachers’ experiences in a longitudinal study of fifty first-year and second-year teachers that dates back to 1999. In the summer of 2001, researchers interviewed their sample group again, after two years of teaching, “seeking to learn whether they had decided to stay in their schools, move to new schools, or to leave public school teaching, and why they made the choices they did.” They identified 13 teachers who were both satisfied with the profession of teaching and their individual schools. These thirteen novice teachers identified four keys to helping insure success for new teachers: new teacher novice status, a supportive professional culture, curricular guidance and resources, and school-wide conditions that support learning.

The first key to the success of novice teachers suggests that new teachers be offered novice status. The tasks of organizing a classroom, developing classroom management strategies, assessing student needs, and planning and implementing correct curricula can be overwhelming to novice teachers. Additionally, teachers are often given workloads that ask them to juggle over one hundred students, numerous course preparations, extracurricular duties, and the preparation of the next day’s lessons. Bestowing the status of novice on a new teacher reduces his/her teaching load and minimizes the amount of required administrative duties. Novice status requires a significant financial commitment on the part of the school district. As a result, teachers, administrators, and school staff work, instead, to implement alternative methods of recognizing and appreciating the status and dilemmas of new teachers.

The second key to retaining new teachers is the creation of a supportive professional culture. Several case studies identify supportive environments as ones in which “teachers share ideas and ideas,” where a novice has the opportunity to go to a veteran teacher and say “It’s not working. I need help.” This professional culture is stimulated by common planning times among novices and veterans, structured observation requirements, and veterans who are carefully prepared for their new roles as mentors. Ultimately, it is crucial that a faculty “create paths for exchanging information, sharing views, offering aid, and developing new ideas” that will enhance the experiences of novice teachers.

Access to curricular guidance and resources is the next key, as novice teachers very often struggle with the question of what to teach. While the issue of teacher autonomy and curricular guidance often arises, novices report an appreciation for having resources to draw upon while they struggle with an often overwhelming first year. Simply put, “If you want to help a new teacher get off to a good start, don’t make him feel like he has to reinvent the wheel.”

The final key identified in this study was the creation of school-wide conditions that support student learning. As novices struggle to balance the various aspects of becoming effective teachers, they find it helpful when schools convey consistent and clear school-wide practices. Such practices, including discipline, grading policies, and daily schedules expectations, provide novices a baseline on which to rest their own classroom judgments and policies. Knowing that the other teachers, novice and veteran, will uphold the same school-wide practices assists and supports the novice teacher.

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