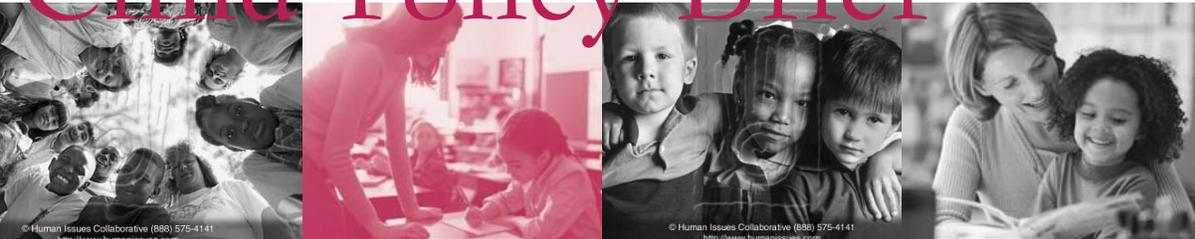


Child Policy Brief



Why Do Young Teachers Leave Teaching?

Issue

Good teachers quit. Each year it happens at a surprising rate. Replacing teachers who leave the field is an expensive burden on our public schools. To improve teacher retention in Georgia, we must first understand why teachers leave. One common explanation is that high-paying, private-sector jobs lure them from the classroom. However, until recently very little evidence existed on this issue.

Georgia's Growing Need for Teachers

During the 2000-2001 school year, Georgia public schools employed about 91,467 teachers in grades K-12. According to projections by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, Georgia will need about 111,000 teachers by the year 2006 – a 22% increase over current levels. Georgia's dramatic population growth, its new accountability reforms, and state-mandated reductions in class sizes all contribute to Georgia's large and growing need for teachers.

Teachers are in demand in other states as well, which only adds to Georgia's challenge. According to 1997 projections by the U.S. Department of Education, substantial increases in the number of school-aged children will create a need for 350,000 new teachers nationally between 1995 and 2007. Georgia must be prepared. Our state must step up efforts not only to attract new teachers, but also to retain those already in the field.

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Where Do Georgia Teachers Go?

Using data from the mid to late 1990s, researchers at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University analyzed the career choices of public school teachers in Georgia during their first six years of teaching. This formative period is the time when teachers are most likely to leave.

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The data strongly indicate that Georgia teachers who leave teaching are not leaving for higher-paying jobs outside education. This is especially true for female teachers, who make up 83% of Georgia's teachers. Only 4.3% of new female teachers who left full-time teaching in the mid or late 1990s took a non-education job in Georgia that paid more than the Georgia minimum teaching salary. For male teachers leaving teaching, the figure was 9.5%.

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It should be noted that the data cover only exiting teachers who remain in Georgia. They do not include cases in which Georgia teachers take higher-paying jobs in other states. Nevertheless, even an extremely conservative estimate suggests that, at most, 5% of new Georgia teachers leave teaching after their first year for a higher-paying job outside education (either in Georgia or elsewhere).

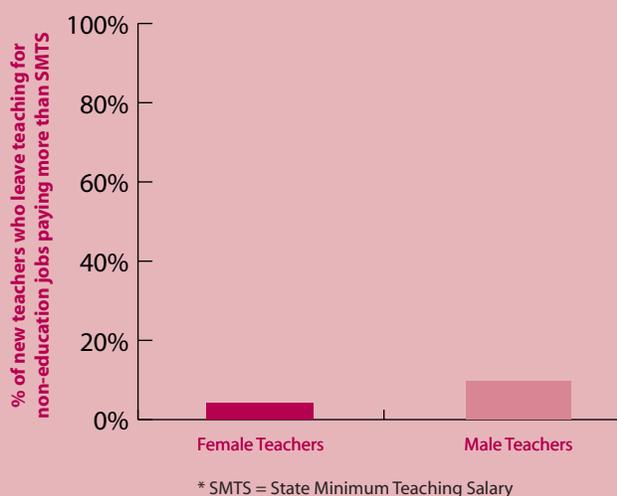
Many Georgia teachers leave the classroom but stay in education. Over 22% of female teachers and about 27% of male teachers who leave take a non-teaching job in public education.

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A statistical model of teacher turnover based on the data suggests that teacher salary is a very weak predictor of whether teachers leave the field, especially females. Although the relationship between salary and decision to leave was stronger for male teachers, the actual impact of salary on the number of teachers leaving the field was still quite small.

Few Young Teachers Leave Teaching for Higher Paying Jobs Outside Education



Reframing Retention

Policy-makers and the public must decide whether teacher attrition rates are too high to tolerate. Although these findings do not remove the need for that decision, they may provide information useful to the debate. For example, they raise the possibility that many exiting teachers may eventually return to teaching (e.g., after their own children reach school-age). Further exploration of this and other questions will provide policymakers with valuable insight. These findings suggest that policy-makers should consider initiatives that are not directly related to teacher pay. For example, schools might find it cost-effective to provide on-site child-care,

since they already have the infrastructure to care for young children. Doing so might give teachers with infants and toddlers the potentially appealing option of working with their own children nearby. Other initiatives such as job-sharing may also be promising.

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These results indicate that the exit decisions of teachers, when viewed as a whole, are not strongly related to teacher wages. However, the data are not specific to the behaviors of certain sub-groups of teachers, such as math/science teachers and teachers with high academic ability. Raising wages may be important for retaining particular types of teachers, recruiting gifted teachers, and luring some former teachers back into the teaching profession. In light of these unknowns, policy-makers should consider carefully whether all future wage increases should be across the board.

In order to design effective teacher retention policies, we must research teachers' reasons for leaving the profession.

Annually, the U.S. spends about \$124 billion of taxpayer money on teacher salaries. Clearly, adequate teacher compensation and the quality of our children's schools are vital to the nation's future. In order to design effective teacher retention policies, we must research teachers' reasons for leaving the profession. Why do young teachers leave and into what fields are they moving? Will better pay keep them in the classrooms? Should we consider other incentives? How many former teachers might be attracted back into the field? How many were a poor fit from the start? Answers to these questions are overdue. Teacher retention is a subject that demands further research if Georgia's public schools are to succeed.

For more information please call Monica Herk (404) 651-1540 at the Child Policy Initiative or see "Where Do Teachers Go?" by Benjamin Scafidi, David L. Sjoquist, and Todd R. Stinebrickner at