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Lowering Teacher Attrition Rates through Collegiality

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Since large numbers of teachers leave the teaching profession to go to work in other fields each year, it is vital to ask ourselves several pertinent questions as to why this is happening. Why are so many qualified teachers leaving the teaching profession? What are the affects of high teacher attrition rates on the public school system? What must be done to lower teacher attrition rates and retain new teachers? Schools must find ways to reduce teacher attrition in order to maintain high quality education for students.

According to Project Lead, funded by the Helen Devitt Jones Foundation (n . d.), 50% of all certified public school teachers permanently leave the teaching profession before the end of their fifth year of teaching. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates the national cost of replacing outgoing teachers to be $2.2 billion annually (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Such a high teacher attrition rate is not only expensive to the nation's public school system, it is also detrimental to student achievement. Continually rising teacher attrition also causes many schools across the country to be staffed with a large number of less qualified teachers at the beginning of each new school year (Futernick, 2007). As teacher attrition rates worsen annually, students across the United States face less-experienced and less-effective teachers nearly every year throughout their primary education. Incoming teachers are often not as successful compared to more experienced teachers in raising student achievement, student test scores, and school standards. According to Futernick, newer teachers are also less likely to take part in leadership roles and policy making than are more experienced teachers.

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine why teacher attrition rates are high and continue to rise annually. Many different factors have been found to cause attrition, such as: heavy workloads, low salaries, large class sizes, lack of administrative support, lack of parental involvement, feelings of little or no appreciation and student discipline problems (Croasmun, Hampton, & Herrmann, 1997). According to Project Lead, 50% of outgoing teachers cite a sense of isolation from colleagues and administrators as a main reason for leaving (Helen Devitt Jones Foundation, n.d.). This finding is consistent with another study conducted by Gonzalas (1995). Who also found a major cause of teacher attrition to be lack of positive interaction with colleagues and strong feelings of isolation. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005), 52% of leaving teachers also cited a lack of involvement in and influence over school policy. Additionally, 65% also blamed heavy workloads as a factor which determined their decision to leave the teaching profession permanently. Many of these problems cited by teachers could be alleviated, or possibly even solved, by first highlighting and then practicing collegiality.

Collegiality exists in schools where teachers work together in a transparent, supportive, caring and encouraging atmosphere to help each other succeed (Keedy, 1991). Teachers can collaborate together on such things as meeting goals and objectives, setting standards, improving student achievement and implementing a discipline plan. They can also work together on any areas of difficulty, or areas they would like to improve upon, either as individual teachers or as a whole learning community. Teachers can overcome common inhibitors of collegiality, such as separate planning times, classrooms and break times (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). In turn, this breaks down the feelings

of isolation, and lack of positive interaction with peers cited by so many teachers as reasons for attrition. Nias (1998) explained how teachers need to feel by saying,

We found that teachers wanted their colleagues to be sensitive to their emotional

needs, to respond with empathy, sympathy, and, occasionally, wise counseling.

They were deeply appreciative of opportunities to talk, to share the sense of worthlessness and failure, to relax, and above all to laugh (Nias, 1998, p.1260).

According to Jarzabowski (2002), true collegiality creates a sense of inter-dependence, "community" and "community achievement". Sergiovanni stated, "What makes two people colleagues is common membership in a community, commitment to a common cause, shared professional values, and a shared professional heritage. Without the common base, there can be no meaningful collegiality" (Meredith 2000, p.6).

Collegiality also stimulates teachers to be risk-takers and to feel comfortable and confident enough to participate in leadership roles outside their classrooms. Teachers who participate in policy making feel less frustrated and powerless. They know their voice and opinions are vital to the success of the school and are given importance by other teachers and administrators. Teachers are able to lighten their individual workloads when they collaborate together in planning, assessment and even instruction (Jarzabowski, 2002). This sense of team-work and open sharing of ideas helps newer, less-experienced teachers build-on their strengths and develop the ability to turn their weaknesses into strengths. An environment rich in collegiality is one where:

Individuals feel free to express their emotions, negative and positive, to admit to

failure and weakness, to voice resentment and frustration, to demonstrate affection.

By contrast, a culture of individualism tends to increase emotional stress for its

members by fostering an illusion that others are coping and that one's own fears

are born of a unique incompetence; by requiring individuals to pretend to feelings

they do not own; by failing to promote the habit of day-to-day communication

so that small interpersonal or professional differences build up into major

problems (Nias et al., 1998, p. 235).

Collegiality among teachers positively influences student achievement. Students behave better in class and have a clearer understanding of expectations and achievement when they see teachers working together and presenting an image of coherence and unity (Inger, 1993). Students come to understand that their teachers work together for their benefit, and genuinely care about their needs and success. Nias et al. (1998) expressed this by saying,

The welfare of children is intimately bound up with the well-being of the

adults who worked with them. If the latter did not feel accepted as people

in the staffroom, they would not be fully at ease in the classroom. Besides,

it is philosophically inconsistent to treat children as 'whole' and 'individual'

but to ignore the personhood of their teachers (p. 1262).

Schools which have good collaboration among teachers and a strong atmosphere of

collegiality retain teachers better and have lower attrition rates than other schools. Research conducted on attrition rates of beginning teachers, by the Rand Organization, came to the conclusion that, "Schools that provided mentoring and induction programs, particularly those related to collegial support, had lower rates of turnover among beginning teachers" (Guarino et al., 2004, p. 6). California State University conducted a study throughout California's public schools to learn what influences teachers' decisions to leave or stay in the teaching profession. The study indicated the majority of outgoing teachers cited a strong sense of individuality, absence of team work, and absence of team spirit in their schools. In contrast, returning teachers spoke of the value of positive peer relationships (Futernick, 2007); indicating collegiality is the most important factor in preventing teacher attrition.

Good collegiality has many positive affects on teachers, students and learning communities. By causing teachers to feel safe, respected, valued and part of a team, collegiality helps prevent teachers from feeling "burned-out", which leads to attrition within schools. Collegiality frees, encourages and empowers teachers to focus on personal development, their students' achievements and on meeting higher goals and standards. It is imperative for schools across the United States to improve collegiality and collaboration among teachers. This would lower teacher attrition rates, retain experienced teachers and raise the overall quality of our educational system. Krisko (2001) says, "For successful school improvement, collegial relationships must be established which can only be accomplished by the development of healthy learning communities of collaborative leaders and learners."

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