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Three Rs not enough as schools struggle with teacher retention

by [Clarke Morrison](#), STAFF WRITER published January 9, 2006 6:00 am

Melanie Teague has dreamed about being a teacher since the Saturdays she spent playing school with her teddy bears and imaginary friends.

Now the Western Carolina University elementary education major is a student-teacher at Jonathan Valley Elementary School in Haywood County, on the brink of what she envisions as a lifelong career.

"I loved going to school," said Teague, a senior. "I loved my teachers. I loved the whole idea of school. I can't imagine myself doing anything else."

But only time will tell whether she has the fortitude to persevere in a field where nearly half of new teachers in North Carolina quit by the end of their fifth year. The abysmal retention rate is one of several factors in what education officials say is a looming teacher shortage crisis.

The state will add 300,000 students this decade, creating the need for 1,000 new teachers a year just to keep up with the population growth at the same time that older teachers are retiring in record numbers.

Officials say North Carolina needs about 10,000 new teachers a year, while its university system is only turning out about 3,000 teachers a year. And of those, only about 1,800 actually go to work in the classroom.

A report last year by the N.C. Center for Public Policy, which called the teacher shortage "an impending crisis," also blamed the problem on a high teacher turnover rate in some districts and the need for better pay. The state recorded an average turnover rate of nearly 13 percent last year.

In November Gov. Mike Easley took a step toward addressing the issue by announcing a \$600 pay raise for teachers. Still, North Carolina teachers in 2004-05 earned an average of \$43,313, more than \$4,000 less than the national average.

Some school districts, particularly in poorer areas in the eastern part of the state, have coped by hiring year-round substitute teachers who are only required to have a high school diploma. Last year, about 225,000 North Carolina students were taught by permanent substitute teachers.

That's not happened yet in the western part of the state, where turnover rates are generally lower and workers are attracted to the quality of life, "but I can see it coming," said Bob McGrattan, assistant superintendent for human resources for Asheville City Schools.

"Generally, Asheville has been insulated from the teacher shortage because it's an attractive place for people to live," he said. "We're still getting people who want to move here. But the young people coming out of college, that (applicant) pool has shrunk considerably. Our colleges just don't crank out nearly enough teachers.

"I don't think young people see it as a profession that can offer them a good standard of living. There are lots of other jobs out there that pay more and are seen as less stressful. For those who say (pay) doesn't make a difference, they don't know what they are talking about. Altruism only goes so far."

McGrattan said it's particularly hard to find high school math and science teachers, special education teachers and middle school teachers, "probably because most of our personal memories of middle school are not the greatest."

But while the Asheville district doesn't have as many problems attracting teachers as those in other parts of the state, its turnover rate last year of 16.47 percent is well above the state average. McGrattan attributes that to the transient nature of the city's residents, a large proportion of teachers nearing retirement age and the district's high percentage of poor students.



credit: Steve Dixon/staff photographer

Student-teacher Melanie Teague works with Halaey Lopez, 9, on a science project about light Thursday at Jonathan Valley Elementary School. Teague says she can't imagine doing anything other than teaching, but almost half of new teachers in North Carolina quit by the end of their fifth year.

Turnover rates

Teacher turnover rates in some WNC school systems for 2004-05

- North Carolina average: 12.95 percent
- Asheville City: 16.47 percent
- Buncombe: 9.95 percent
- Cherokee: 6.71 percent
- Graham: 5.94 percent
- Haywood: 11.76 percent
- Henderson: 9 percent
- Jackson: 18.46 percent
- Macon: 9.66 percent
- Madison: 6.25 percent
- McDowell: 13.7 percent
- Mitchell: 6.01 percent
- Polk: 8.56 percent
- Swain: 10.39 percent
- Transylvania: 13.43 percent
- Yancey: 9.76 percent
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“Working in an urban school district is very stressful,” he said. “The students, many of them are very needy, and some of the teachers just get tired. The teacher has to be the mom, the dad, the nurse, the counselor.”

Michael Dougherty, dean of WCU's College of Education and Allied Profession, cites a phenomenon called de-recruitment where young people just aren't encouraged to go into teaching. Many people don't perceive teaching as a real profession in part because it involves such mundane responsibilities as lunch duty, he said.

“We talk about it as a profession, but people don't necessarily perceive it that way,” he said. “Teachers don't have that much voice in what happens to them. They have to do duties that many people consider nonprofessional. Then they are expected to be a counselor and surrogate parent.”

In an effort to help new teachers adjust to the profession and improve the retention rate, Western Carolina recently established the Center for Support of Beginning Teachers. Through the center, WCU faculty will collaborate with beginning teachers, mentors, principals and central office personnel to develop programs to help new teachers. Resources and professional development activities will be tailored to area teachers, said the center's director, Janice Holt.

“We're finding that with support, our teachers will stay,” she said.

Linda Walker, who teaches eighth-grade science at Cane Creek Middle School, said many young teachers get burned out by the increasing paperwork required by the state and federal governments, as well as the high-stakes testing used in recent years to measure school and student performance.

“The stuff we have to keep on each student is getting more and more demanding,” she said. “It kills innovation that some of these newer teachers want to use in their classroom. You don't want to teach to the test, but you know the test is the ultimate goal.”

Walker also believes the teacher shortage can be attributed to more career fields opening up to women. Gone are the days when women were expected to be homemakers, nurses or teachers.

“Women are breaking down barriers in a whole lot of areas,” she said. “My daughter is graduating with a degree in physical therapy, and she's probably going to be making more than me and my husband together.”

Solutions

Education professionals say there are ways to help reduce the teacher shortage:

- Better pay. Other careers that require similar levels of education have considerably higher salaries.
- More support programs such as mentoring to help young teachers adjust to their new careers.
- Less emphasis on high-stakes testing and paperwork that drive away teachers.
- More compensation to retain older teachers who are eligible for retirement.
- More respect by the public for teaching as a profession.

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