



Leaving Schools or Leaving the Profession: Setting Illinois' Record Straight on New Teacher Attrition

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Executive Summary

For some years now, and in most discussions of new teacher attrition, there has been a general belief that half of all new teachers flee the profession within five years. Policy makers and practitioners are concerned about this apparent “crisis” in the teaching profession because they hear that (a) teachers’ skills improve during their first two to three years of practice, and it seems a waste to lose so many entrants early in their careers, (b) the poorest and highest minority schools uniformly are more likely to have high turnover of new teachers, and (c) the production pipeline from teacher preparation programs is grossly inefficient in meeting the supply needs of our schools. This latter concern takes on added significance because of an anticipated increase in demand for teachers stemming from high retirement rates among an aging teaching force in the United States. But the national evidence backing up some of these claims stems from sample data that are not representative of new teachers at the state level, and which cannot account for teachers who return to teaching after a gap in service.

The success of policies aimed at lowering new teacher attrition or minimizing the impact of attrition on educational inequities depends on accurate information about, and a solid understanding of, the problem itself. Fortunately, Illinois’ State Board of Education has maintained a longitudinal database on who is teaching in Illinois’ public schools since the early 1970s. Through shared data agreements that assure individual confidentiality, the Illinois Education Research Council has analyzed 35 years of teacher data to test whether the nationally received wisdom on new teachers accurately applies to Illinois.

In this report, we show that the story is actually very different in Illinois.

- Our results refute the notion of a profession in crisis—overall, only 27 percent of new teachers leave teaching in Illinois public schools (IPS) and do not return. Furthermore, we cite evidence that new teacher attrition compares favorably with losses from other similar professions. In addition, Chicago Public Schools and other urban areas are recruiting new teachers with stronger academic qualifications than in the past—now on par with other Illinois locales and regions.
- We do find that new teachers leave their initial schools at significantly higher rates and that attrition differs somewhat across schools based on their locale and the characteristics of their students. Overall, more than two out of five (44%) of new entrants leave their initial school within their first two years, and 67 percent leave their initial school within five years. While this average five year attrition rate may seem high, other research indicates that many new college graduates move to a job in a different organization within their first five years, suggesting that teachers’ job mobility is probably not atypical.
- We also find much higher attrition rates in some schools, but contrary to conventional wisdom we show that high-attrition schools exist within every school type category, which suggests that conditions in schools in addition to those related to student body characteristics greatly influence teachers’ decisions to stay or leave.

Implications Of The Study

- 1. The teaching profession in Illinois is not in crisis.** Much like the case in other professions that employ people with similar educational backgrounds, some individuals who try teaching opt to leave within the first few years and do not return. In Illinois, such individuals constitute roughly a quarter of new teachers. Our longitudinal evidence shows that average annual new teacher attrition rates from the profession in Illinois have been fairly constant since the late 1980s, which suggests that across-the-board policies aimed at lowering these rates even further may not have a significant effect.

Given the evidence presented in this study, as well as mounting evidence from other states, *we believe it is misleading and probably harmful to the profession to continue to portray teaching as an occupation from which half of its newcomers flee.* As teacher retirements and more stringent accountability policies increase the demand for high-quality teachers in the coming years, providing accurate information about the profession to administrators and prospective teachers would seem to be a critical first step in a sound recruitment and retention strategy.
- 2. It may be difficult to substantially reduce overall new teacher attrition.** Teachers have lives, too. For a large percentage of teachers, it appears that life circumstances and/or personal choices interrupt their careers or prompt them to make transitions within the profession. For those who leave and return, it is not clear that much can be done in the policy arena to prevent such interruptions. Depending on the length of their break in service, though, some returners likely find the transition back to the classroom challenging. This may be particularly true in recent years given the impact of No Child Left Behind on policies related to student testing, school accountability, and teacher quality. Districts and schools should create programs to encourage and smooth teacher returns to the profession and the classroom.
3. Although we do not see large differences in new teacher attrition across school types, we do find that teachers with strong academic backgrounds are more likely to leave disadvantaged schools within five years. Because such teachers have constituted a small fraction of new teachers in these schools during our study period, their higher school leaving rates do not currently have much impact on the comparative rates that we show across school types. However, **as more academically strong teachers are recruited to disadvantaged schools, we can expect attrition rates in such schools to increase unless other conditions for working and learning also improve.**
- 4. New teacher attrition rates are alarmingly high in some schools in each school type.** State and/or district policies need to focus on specific schools, not just categories of schools based on student characteristics. That is, rather than the oft-used, across-the-board blanket approach to policy solutions, the state and/or districts need(s) to identify individual schools with high levels of new teacher attrition and develop targeted intervention strategies to address those schools' problems.
5. Given that large differences in new teacher attrition occur among schools with similar student characteristics, **school conditions other than those we consider in this study appear to strongly influence new teachers' decisions to stay in a particular school.** Unfortunately, we do not have statewide school-level indicators with which to examine the effects of other aspects of school environments on new teacher attrition in Illinois. Others' research on teacher attrition suggests that salary levels, supportive leadership, student discipline, basic working conditions (including class size, facilities, and availability of textbooks), and teachers' relationships with each other and their principal are important factors influencing teachers' decisions to stay in a school. We suggest conducting a working conditions survey in Illinois to begin to assess teachers' views on school environments.

Key Findings

NEW TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS

The demographics of new teachers are changing.

Recent new Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers are increasingly younger, less racially/ethnically diverse and have stronger academic qualifications than earlier cohorts. But in comparison to other locales, they are still less likely to be 25 or younger (30% compared to 40% or more in 2006) and more likely to be non-white (36% compared to 13% or less). Academically, recent CPS recruits are on par with non-CPS new teachers. Between 1997 and 2006, average ACT composite scores among new CPS teachers increased from 19.8 to 22.1, and the proportion with scores of 25 or more almost doubled, from 16 percent to 30 percent. These findings provide evidence that CPS' efforts to improve the academic qualifications of its new hires are having an impact.

ATTRITION FROM THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING

New teachers' commitment to the teaching profession in Illinois has improved substantially since the 1970s and is stronger than conventional wisdom would suggest.

During the 1970s, an average of 56 percent of new teachers from each cohort exited teaching in IPS at some point during their first five years. More recently, we show that an average of 40 percent of new teachers from each cohort leave teaching during the same timeframe. Thus, while the 50 percent new teacher attrition figure that is routinely cited in policy reports and media accounts reflects conditions in teaching in Illinois in the 1970s, it overstates recent patterns of new teacher attrition in the state.

Five-year attrition rates from the profession of teaching exaggerate the degree to which new teachers abandon the profession during their early years because a significant percentage of those who stop out for a year or more eventually return. In this study, we show that about one-third of teachers who leave during their first five years return to teaching in IPS. Once these returners are taken into account, the average net loss of new teachers shrinks to 27 percent. And because

we are unable with our data to track IPS teachers into teaching jobs in private schools and schools in other states, even this 27 percent figure somewhat overstates total attrition from the profession of new teachers in Illinois. Nonetheless, roughly one in four individuals who enter public school teaching in Illinois leaves the profession of teaching during the first five years and does not return to Illinois public schools, not one in two as is commonly believed.

Perhaps most surprising in our analysis of new teacher attrition from the profession is how little the average five-year and return-adjusted attrition rates vary across school type.

We find that between 25 and 30 percent of new teachers leave and do not return to teaching in IPS, regardless of the locale of the school or the characteristics of the students in the school in which they started teaching.

Some have used the oft-cited 50 percent new teacher attrition rate to portray teaching as a profession in crisis. Notwithstanding that the 50 percent number does not account for teacher returns, comparisons of attrition in teaching versus other occupations indicate that **the teaching profession (along with health occupations) tends to be more stable than other occupations employing people with similar educational backgrounds.**

ATTRITION FROM SCHOOLS

For administrators and others concerned about the impact of new teacher attrition on individual schools, attrition from the profession is only one part of the story. At the school level, new teacher attrition rates are substantially higher due to the fact that nearly as many new teachers move to other schools, either within the same district or in other Illinois districts, as leave the profession during their first five years following entry. Although movers have no effect on the teaching profession in the aggregate, they influence schools in exactly the same way as leavers. **Overall, more than two out of five (44%) of new entrants leave their initial school within the first two years, and 67 percent leave their initial school within five years.** While this average

five year attrition rate may seem high, other research indicates that many new college graduates move to a job in a different organization within their first five years, suggesting that teachers' job mobility is probably not atypical.

In addition to the overall attrition rates for Illinois schools, **we find some differences in initial school attrition rates by school type, although they are surprisingly modest given the categorical labeling of disadvantaged schools (i.e., schools with relatively high percentages of minority, low-income, and/or low performing students) as "hard to staff."** For example, among teachers who start in high minority/high low-income schools, 30 percent remain in their initial school after five years versus 37 percent stayers among teachers who begin their careers in low minority/low low-income schools. The largest school-type differences are found across schools with varying student performance levels where 36 percent of new teachers remain in the highest achieving schools through their first five years compared to only 22 percent of new teachers in the lowest performing schools. With the exception of these lowest performing schools, public schools in Illinois retain, on average, about 30 to 35 percent of their new teachers into the sixth year following entry, regardless of where the schools are located or the background characteristics of their students.

The most striking finding in our analysis of new teacher attrition from schools is the tremendous variation in retention rates within each school type, including those that are commonly viewed as providing attractive places for teachers to work. For Illinois as a whole, 10 percent of its schools retain one third or less of their new teachers after two years, and 8 percent or less of their new teachers by their sixth year following entry into the schools. Another 10 percent of Illinois schools retain 79 percent and 57 percent of their new teachers over the same timeframes. Within nearly every school type, at least 10 percent of schools retain a majority of their new teachers over time, whereas another 10 percent of schools are able to retain very few, if any, of their new teachers. Again, Illinois' lowest

performing schools prove to be the exception since even their 90th percentile schools retain less than half of their new hires for more than five years. These results suggest that other conditions in schools apart from readily available indicators like those used in this study have a substantial impact on new teacher attrition from schools.

We show that new Illinois teachers with stronger academic qualifications are more likely to leave their initial schools, especially those who start in disadvantaged schools. But because such teachers have historically constituted a small fraction of new teachers in disadvantaged schools, their higher school leaving rates do not currently have much impact on comparative rates across school types. However, **as more academically strong teachers are recruited to disadvantaged schools, we can expect attrition rates to increase unless other conditions for working and learning also improve.**

NEW TEACHER MOVEMENT

When we compare the academic characteristics of new teachers who leave their initial school to those of new teachers who stay, we show that new Illinois teachers with stronger academic qualifications are more likely to leave the profession, independent of initial school type, or move out of district to what are commonly considered more attractive schools (i.e., schools with lower percentages of low-income, minority, and/or low performing students). New teachers who move to other schools within district tend to have similar or somewhat weaker academic qualifications than those who stay in their initial schools. **It appears, therefore, that out-of-district moves facilitate a sorting process where more academically skilled new teachers who opt to stay in the profession improve their job situations by moving to seemingly more attractive schools in other districts. In contrast, teacher movement within districts appears to create more of a shuffling process, where teachers with similar or lower academic qualifications transition to schools with similar or slightly better characteristics.**