



A BETTER START FOR TEACHERS

By Rafael Heller | Nov 1, 2021 | Editor's Note

In the spring, it appeared that the nation’s schoolteachers might [steer clear](#) of the Great Resignation, this year’s unprecedented surge in workers choosing to quit rather than stay in stressful or unfulfilling jobs (Barnum, 2021). Since then, however, public education — just like health care, transportation, and other sectors — has been hit by a wave of resignations and retirements, leaving administrators scrambling to find replacements. As a [recent story](#) by AP News puts it, “Now that schools have welcomed students back to classrooms, they face a new challenge: a shortage of teachers and staff the likes of which some districts say they have never seen” (Gecker, 2021).

But, of course, many public schools faced teacher shortages long before the pandemic, and if COVID-19 were to vanish tomorrow, they would continue to struggle with long-simmering problems. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education [estimated](#) that, overall, roughly 8% of teachers leave the profession every year, and attrition rates tend to be significantly higher among teachers with 25 or more years of experience, teachers in their first few years, and teachers working in high-poverty and majority-minority districts. The upshot, as [Christopher Redding and Tuan Nguyen](#) explain in [this month’s Kappan](#), is that many schools have no choice but to keep hiring more and more teachers straight out of preparation programs, to replace not only older veterans who’ve just retired but also the young teachers who were hired as replacements just a couple of years earlier. As a result, the nation’s teachers have become not just younger and younger, on average, but greener and greener, quite often serving in their very first year on the job.

Three decades ago, note Redding and Nguyen, first-year teachers made up 3% of all public school teachers in the U.S. Today, they form the largest cohort in the profession, accounting for 7% of all teachers. To halt the constant churn of novices replacing near novices, Redding and Nguyen argue, school systems will have to learn much more about these teachers’ backgrounds, their teaching assignments, and the specific professional challenges they face, so as to provide them with targeted supports and services that can help them make it through the earliest and most difficult stage of the career. Then, perhaps, more of them will stay in the classroom for 10, 20, or more years.

Another promising strategy, explains [Amaya Garcia in this month’s interview](#), is to invest in grow-your-own programs that help local communities identify their most pressing needs (for more bilingual teachers, say, or special educators, or science teachers) and cultivate local talent to fill those positions, tapping those who already have a strong connection to local students and a long-term stake in the success of local schools. Some grow-your-own programs aim to steer high school and college students into teaching, and others aim to help paraeducators and other school staff become lead teachers. But whatever the source of new teachers, notes Garcia, school districts, states, and the federal government should make it affordable for low-income and nontraditional candidates to earn a teaching license. Within every community, it’s possible to find individuals who have the talent, drive, and commitment to enjoy a long and successful career in education. It’s up to policy makers, says Garcia, to ensure that they face no unnecessary obstacles.

References

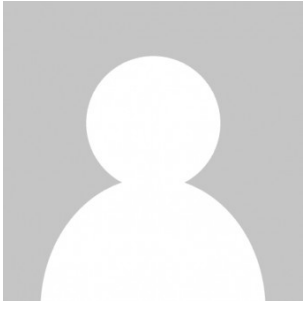
Barnum, M. (2021, Apr. 6). Despite pandemic, there’s little evidence of rising teacher turnover — yet. *Chalkbeat*.

Geckers, J. (2021, Sep. 22). COVID-19 creates dire U.S. shortage of teachers, school staff. *AP News*.

This article appears in the November 2021 issue of *Kappan*, Vol. 103, No. 3, p. 4.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RAFAEL HELLER

Rafael Heller is the former editor-in-chief of *Kappan* magazine.



SHARE: [f](#) [x](#) [p](#) [in](#) [e](#) [p](#)

< PREVIOUS

How have special education students fared during the pandemic?

NEXT >

How school board protest coverage over-emphasizes violence and ideology

RELATED POSTS



Nowhere to go but up
August 26, 2019



The many meanings of good
October 26, 2020



Rock, paper, iPhone
November 6, 2014



Coming to America
December 1, 2015



Phi Delta Kappan, a publication of PDK International, offers timely, relevant, and provocative insights on K-12 education policy, research, curriculum, and professional development. Kappan readers include new and veteran teachers, graduate students, school and district administrators, university faculty members (researchers and teacher educators), and policy makers.

Email: kappan@pdkintl.org
 Membership/Subscriptions: memberservices@pdkintl.org
 Phone: 812-339-1156 OR 800-766-1156
 Fax: 812-339-0018
 Mail: P.O. Box 13090, Arlington, VA 22219
 Submit a manuscript: manuscripts@pdkintl.org
 Permission requests: [Copyright Clearance Center](#)
 Advertising/Sponsorship Opportunities: [Media Kit](#)
Kappan weekly email: [Sign up page](#)