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Teaching Conditions Drive Teachers from the Classroom

Changes That Improve Teacher Retention Are Needed to Resolve Teacher Shortage

(Sacramento) California can ease its critical teacher shortage and encourage teachers to work in hard-to-staff schools by making meaningful improvements to the teaching and learning environment, according to a new study released today by the California State University Center for Teacher Quality.

“Too many teachers leave the profession prematurely – critical problems in the teaching and learning environment are literally driving teachers from the classroom,” said Dr. Ken Futernick, the principal author of the report and the director of K-12 Studies at the CSU Center for Teacher Quality at CSU Sacramento. “If California is going to resolve its teaching shortage and improve instruction for all students we need to make changes that will keep teachers in the classroom and convince some who have left to return.”

The report, *A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn*, cites research showing 22 percent of California teachers leave the profession after their first four years in the classroom. Additionally, 10 percent of teachers transfer away from high poverty schools each year. California spends more than \$455 million each year to recruit, hire, and prepare replacement teachers. The most serious consequence of high teacher turnover is the loss of continuity, experience and expertise that negatively impacts the educational experience of students.

“California’s continuing loss of good teachers is expensive, inefficient and unacceptable,” said Jack O’Connell, State Superintendent of Public Instruction. “Increasing teacher retention is essential to resolving the state’s teacher shortage. If we in California are going to close the achievement gap between our poor and our more affluent students, we must ensure that all students have skilled and knowledgeable teachers with the support and resources necessary to succeed.”

Based on an online survey of nearly 2000 teachers, the report provides new insights into the reasons teachers leave, and offers specific recommendations on what California policymakers and education leaders can do to get more qualified teachers to stay.

According to the survey, dissatisfied teachers who left the profession cited serious problems with their working environment. More than half of these teachers expressed concerns over inadequate supports, such as a lack of time for planning or professional development, and bureaucratic impediments such as classroom interruptions, unnecessary meetings, and too little say over the way their schools are run. Teachers also pointed frequently to a lack of collegiality as a key reason for leaving the classroom.

Teachers also told researchers that compensation was less important than the support they received in their schools. While better compensation matters, teacher retention rates in schools

that are hard to staff are unlikely to improve without specific improvements to the teaching and learning environment.

The survey also included teachers who planned to stay in the classroom. These “stayers” most often pointed to having meaningful input in the decision-making process at their schools and to strong, collaborative relationships with their colleagues. Like their colleagues who left the profession, these teachers also cited the importance of effective “system supports” such as adequate time for planning, and resources for classroom learning materials. When these positive conditions were in place, many “stayers” viewed their compensation as adequate and a reason for staying in the profession.

The report’s findings have significant implications for the state’s hardest-to-staff schools. In schools with high concentrations of poor students, teachers were more likely to encounter shortages of instructional materials, unsupportive principals, poor support for special education students, disruptive bureaucracies, and unclean and unsafe work environments.

“The concerns of teachers about their working environments are serious. The high rates of teacher turnover, particularly in high-poverty schools, should send a clear signal that something in the school environment is not working,” concludes Futernick. “The good news, though, is that many of these problems can be fixed. If we listen to teachers and respond appropriately to their concerns many more teachers will undoubtedly stay in the classroom. If that happens, our students will be the greatest beneficiaries.”

The report contends that meaningful efforts to address concerns in the teaching and learning environment would reduce the overall teacher attrition rate. Annually, close to 18,000 teachers in California leave the profession before reaching retirement age. By cutting teacher attrition by 30 percent, California would prevent over 5,000 teachers from leaving the profession each year. Improvements to the work environment, even without increases in salary, would also encourage teachers who have left teaching to return to the classroom. Furthermore, if the current rate at which teachers re-enter the profession could be increased by 30%, the overall supply of teachers would increase by at least 500 each year. Together these efforts could help California reduce its projected annual teacher shortage by nearly one-third. Teachers would also be less likely to transfer away from hard-to-staff schools.

“The California State University prepares over half of the state’s new teachers and is committed to preparing teachers to succeed with all students,” said CSU Chancellor Charles B. Reed. “But no matter how well prepared new teachers are, few will succeed if they do not have skilled veteran teachers as mentors or work environments that are not conducive to good teaching. Our hope is that this report will spur serious conversations among educators and policymakers about what can be done to improve the teaching and learning environment, especially in schools that serve underprivileged students.”

The report offers a set of recommendations for policy makers and educators to increase teacher retention in California’s K-12 public schools. These include:

- Assess teaching conditions locally and continuously
- Elevate California’s student funding to (at least) adequate levels
- Resolve the bureaucratic conundrum (not all bureaucracies are bad)
- Refocus school leadership on instructional quality and high-quality teaching and learning conditions

- Establish statewide standards for school teaching and learning conditions
- Assess and address specific challenges in retention of special education teachers

A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn is a project of the California State University Center for Teacher Quality at California State Sacramento. California Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell will host a news briefing on Thursday, April 26 at 11.00 a.m. at the California Department of Education to discuss the report's findings. A public in-depth briefing for policy makers, educators and advocates will take place from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the Secretary of State Building at 1500 11th Street in Sacramento. The complete report and summary materials will be available online April 26 at www.calstate.edu/teacherquality/retention. Print copies of the report are also available upon request.

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