

Teacher Retention

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## Abstract

Causes of teacher attrition have been related to educational trends, personal teacher concerns, institutional culture, low pay, educational background, and other factors just to name a few.

Administration and school-based leadership should regularly seek out and analyze feedback data about trends in teaching efficacy and attrition among their own school communities to combat the growing teacher shortage. While common themes related to teacher job satisfaction and disinterest in the profession may transcend time, this paper will analyze the responses from current teachers and those that have recently left the profession to provide timely discussion topics for institutional improvement.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Teacher attrition has been studied in relation to root causes or based on trends in education to lessen the financial and institutional impacts on the school district as a whole. In the 1980s, researchers like Chapman suggested that causes of teacher attrition could be narrowed down to “(a) the personal characteristics of teachers, (b) the nature of teacher training and early teaching experiences, (c) the degree to which the teacher is socially and professionally integrated into the teaching profession, (d) the satisfaction teachers derive from their careers, and (e) the external environmental influences impinging on the teachers’ career” (pg. 646). As educational initiatives change, causes for teacher attrition may differ slightly as well. This study seeks to aggregate the latest information about teacher satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

In addition to categorical questions about years of experience and whether they have remained in the profession, the survey tool consisted of five main questions which analyzed causes of teacher attrition and retention. These questions were asked in an open-ended format through Google Forms. Teachers known to the research were asked via email and text to respond to the survey. Participants were given the freedom to compose as much or as little in the way of a response from their own workspace. This digital method of survey allowed for teachers to give an unabridged version of their stories, complaints, and triumphs. After aggregating the survey results, topic frequency will be counted to analyze trends among job satisfaction and teacher attrition among the selected participants.

## **Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine root causes of teacher dissatisfaction and potential to leave the profession. In addition to that, this study also set forth to analyze the aspects of teaching that help teachers remain in the profession. This study notably asks teachers that have both stayed in and left the profession of public education.

Survey participants were given open-ended questions so as not to inhibit the true expression of their teaching narrative. Key themes of discussion were based on the frequency of topic discussions as they appeared in the responses to the survey questions.

## **Hypothesis**

Based on the survey methodology used in this descriptive study, there is no hypothesis made by the researcher.

## **Operational Definitions**

This study will use the following terms as defined below:

**Teacher Attrition:** The occurrence of teachers leaving the profession of education

**Topic Frequency:** The number of times which a particular topic was mentioned in a response to the survey question.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Overview**

The problems of teacher attrition and retention have a range of impacts on the school and community which range from student achievement, to increased costs, to the disruption of instruction due to empty classrooms. Guarino, Santibanez, and Daley define the goal of any public school should be to “maintain standards for teaching quality while continuously recruiting bright new teachers and seeking to retain their most effective existing teachers” (2006, pg. 173). This goal is two-fold and addresses both teacher recruitment and retention. This study seeks to analyze the second component of their goal which is to retain quality teachers in the profession. In 1984, Chapman determined that five factors contributed to teacher attrition: “(a) the personal characteristics of teachers, (b) the nature of teacher training and early teaching experiences, (c) the degree to which the teacher is socially and professionally integrated into the teaching profession, (d) the satisfaction teachers derive from their careers, and (e) the external environmental influences impinging on the teachers’ career” (pg. 646). Since Chapman’s 1984 study, more research has been conducted on the causes of attrition and the immediate effects on students and school climate have been studied for the past four decades. By truly understanding the root causes of teacher dissatisfaction and final decision to leave the profession, policy makers can make institutional changes to grow a stable work force and eliminate costs associated with high rates of teacher attrition.

#### **Financial and Institutional Costs of Teacher Attrition**

It would be careless to dive into a study investigating the causes of attrition without discussing some of the costs, both financial and institutional, associated with high rates of

teachers leaving the profession. According to statistics published in Borman and Dowling's study, "attrition costs an employer 30% of the departing employee's salary" (2008, pg. 370). Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, and Felsher in their cost analysis study found that the expenses associated with a teacher leaving the profession included separation costs, recruitment costs, and induction and training costs (2010, pg. 28). In addition to increased financial burden on the school system and subsequently the taxpayers, elevated levels of teacher attrition also directly impact student achievement. Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff found that "teacher turnover has a significant and negative impact on student achievement in both math and ELA. Moreover, teacher turnover is particularly harmful to the achievement of students in schools with large populations of low-performing and Black students (2013, pg. 30). Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff can only speculate as to the exact relationship between teacher turnover and the decline of student achievement, but they conclude that it could be due to the negative effect turnover has on "collegiality and relational trust among faculty; or perhaps turnover results in loss of institutional knowledge among faculty that is critical for supporting student learning" (2013, pg. 30). Thus, studying root causes and underlying conditions which increase the rates of teacher turnover in a system has direct implications on reducing both financial and institutional costs within a school community.

### **Organizational and Conditional Characteristics of School and the Role in Teacher Attrition**

In the past, the growing teacher shortage was attributed to the gap created by the Baby Boomer generation retiring and the increased enrollment creating more teaching positions. However, Ingersoll's 2001 study highlighted a shift away from the idea that the teacher shortage was not solely attributed to this specific paradigm shift alone. Instead, he explored the role that organizational characteristics and the conditions of schools play in the phenomenon of the

growing number of empty public school classrooms across America. In particular, he found that a school's sense of community and a shared sense of mission and vision were factors in reducing teacher turnover, though both are present in private school settings which also show the highest rates of teacher turnover. Ingersoll follows up his conclusions by acknowledging the role teacher pay holds over other factors citing private schools as a counterexample. Private schools see a turnover in teachers who identify as having a sense of community and vision but still leave the profession over their dissatisfaction with their pay

### **Personal and Professional Factors of Teacher Attrition**

Many studies have identified and attributed different contributing factors to a teacher's decision to leave the profession. The age of a teacher also impacts which factors are most likely to weigh the most heavily on a teacher attrition. After conducting broad literature study on the topic of teacher retention, Borman and Dowling found that "attrition appears to be influenced by a number of personal and professional factors that are prime to change across the lifespan and career path" (2008, pg. 396). They discuss three overarching factors that contribute to teacher attrition: personal characteristics, characteristics of individual schools, and resources. They mention that the personal demographic descriptors of note that are more likely to result in teacher attrition are "female, White, young, and married and who have a child. As far as educational experience is concerned, they found that teachers without a graduate degree or "have specialized degrees in math or science" are more likely to leave the profession. (2008, pg. 396). In their review of existing research into teacher retention, Borman and Dowling also found that teachers coming from urban and suburban schools, private schools, elementary schools, and schools with a lack of collaboration, teacher networking, and administrative support" are more likely to leave the profession than teachers in other school compositions. They also mentioned

that availability of resources for the classroom also plays a significant role in many studies to teacher satisfaction.

### **Individual School Factors and Working Conditions**

Individual school factors and working conditions seem to be the major contributing factors to teacher attrition. Ladd, in her 2011 study, found that “[v]ariation across schools in working conditions as perceived by teachers is highly predictive of individual teachers’ intentions to leave their current schools” (pg. 255). Ingersoll follows up his conclusions by highlighting the role that teacher pay is the driving force behind teachers who have both a sense of community and mission, yet still decide to leave the profession. One study conducted by Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff, limited their selection only to English teachers and found that the only significant factor in teacher attrition was dissatisfaction with their salary (pg. 48 2008). Kelly and Northop also found that “having a higher salary is associated with greater satisfaction and less burnout” (2015, pg. 648). Kelly concluded that “[t]eachers with higher salaries are less likely to leave a school but only slightly so, and the effect is strongest when a teacher is new to teaching” (2004, pg. 213).

### **The Role of School Leadership in Teacher Satisfaction**

A specific working condition that prior studies have identified as a contributing factor to teacher retention was school leadership. Ingersoll’s 2001 study highlighted a shift away from the idea that the teacher shortage was not solely attributed to the disproportionate relationships between increasing enrollment and teacher retirement. Instead, he explored the role that organizational characteristics and the conditions of schools play in the phenomenon of empty public school classrooms across America. In particular, he found that a school’s sense of community and a shared sense of mission and vision were factors in reducing teacher turnover,

though both are present in private school settings which also show the highest rates of teacher turnover. Ladd also finds that among the working conditions where the dominant condition impacting teacher perceptions and decision to leave their current position is the “perceived quality of school leadership” (pg. 256). Ladd later defines school leadership as “support for teachers...a shared vision, a trusting environment, and effective processes for making group decisions and solving problems” (2011, pg. 256). However, this contradicts an older study from Chapman who concluded that there was “little evidence of a direct relationship between administrator behavior and attrition” (1984, pg. 654). The role of school leadership and a shared sense of mission and vision also seem to be contributing factors to a teacher’s final decision to leave the profession.

### **Prior Educational Background of Teachers**

Another factor that seems to contribute to teacher attrition is prior educational background. A review of the literature also seems to suggest that teachers from prestigious institutions may find it harder to remain in the profession despite seeming more qualified. Kelly and Northrop found in their longitudinal study that teacher candidates from “highly selective” institutions “have an 85% greater likelihood of leaving the profession than less selective graduates in the first three years of teaching” (2015, pg. 648). They go on to say that for “highly selective graduates in particular, lower levels of career satisfaction appear to play an important role” in the decision to leave the profession.

### **Solutions Proposed by Research**

A few solutions to teacher attrition seem to present themselves after a careful review of the research. Higher pay and effective induction play a key role in helping teachers remain in the profession. Ballou and Podgursky suggest that any comparative success of private schools with

public schools in the way of teacher recruitment and retention can be attributed to the private school advantage which they describe as four factors: “pay flexibility, recruitment of non-certified teachers, staff development through in-service programs and informal mentoring, and authority to dismiss poor teachers” (pg. 410, 1998). The “authority to dismiss” that Ballou and Podgusky mentioned could also be a factor related to effective school leadership discussed earlier. Kelly and Northrop echoed a similar theme when they noted that “both salary and induction programs influence teachers by contributing to their positive affect and self-efficacy” (2015, pg. 649). Bolstering induction programs remain a popularly held solution to teacher attrition in the first years. Ingersoll and Strong found in their review of research that “beginning teachers who participated in some kind of induction had higher satisfaction, commitment, or retention” (2011, pg. 225). Based on this research, teacher pay, school leadership, and mentorship and induction programs directly impact a teacher’s perceptions about their working conditions and decision to leave the profession.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Design**

This study examines the reasons teachers remained or left teaching. The study was conducted using descriptive survey methodology. A convenience sampling method was used for the selection of participants. It should be noted that the teachers who responded to the survey, primarily came from one school as the survey could be easily distributed digitally via email. The researcher collected survey responses digitally from a Google form survey from teachers that have remained in the public education profession and those that have left. The researcher compared survey responses and found trends among teachers so as to inform potential causes of teacher attrition.

#### **Participants**

The selected participants in this student are all public educators in the state of Maryland. All but three of the 33 survey participants teach or have last taught at a high school in Anne Arundel County Maryland.

For the study, all 33 survey responses were analyzed to determine trends among teachers who wished to remain in the profession and those that have left.

#### **Instrument**

The instrument used in this study was a Google Form survey consisting of 5 open-ended response questions and 5 identifying questions. The instrument was developed by the researcher under the supervision of the design advisor. Teachers were given the opportunity to answer the

questions in written form and go into as much detail or as little as possible about their experiences in the profession.

### **Procedure**

The survey was sent out to teachers who were familiar to the researcher or those teachers that could be easily reached via email. Once the survey was sent out to the researcher's email list, survey responses were collected from the volunteer participants. The researcher compared common factors in participants' responses related to strengths of the profession, doubts about the profession, teacher retention services, the view of the teaching profession, and overall experience in the profession. This data was collected at the end of the school year in June 2021.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

This study examines the reasons teachers remained or left teaching. Themes surrounding each teacher's open-ended responses to the survey were aggregated by the researcher based on phrase frequency. The phrase “interact/interacting with students” occurred in three of the 33 responses as an explanation for reasons to remain in the teaching profession. Another common theme found in the responses from both questions one and two referred negatively to teacher pay or opportunities to advance within the profession and remain in the classroom. References to pay, benefits, funding, and salary were mentioned 16 times alone in the responses to questions 1 and 2. In addition to that, teacher workload and pressure to take work home was another central theme in the responses to question 2. As a derivative idea from the discussion of workload, many participants reflected that there are a lot of tasks required of teachers that were “busy work” or useless to their actual ability to teach. These sorts of demands on teachers, the respondents suggest, cause them to question their choice of profession. Other common discussion themes included admin support and overreach, negative perceptions of the teaching profession, autonomy in teaching.

#### **Topic Frequency Results from Question #1**

The following chart shows the frequency of responses to question #1 which asks, “What aspects of the teaching profession, specifically teaching in the public school system, are appealing to you and that you believe are the most important in retaining teachers in the profession?”

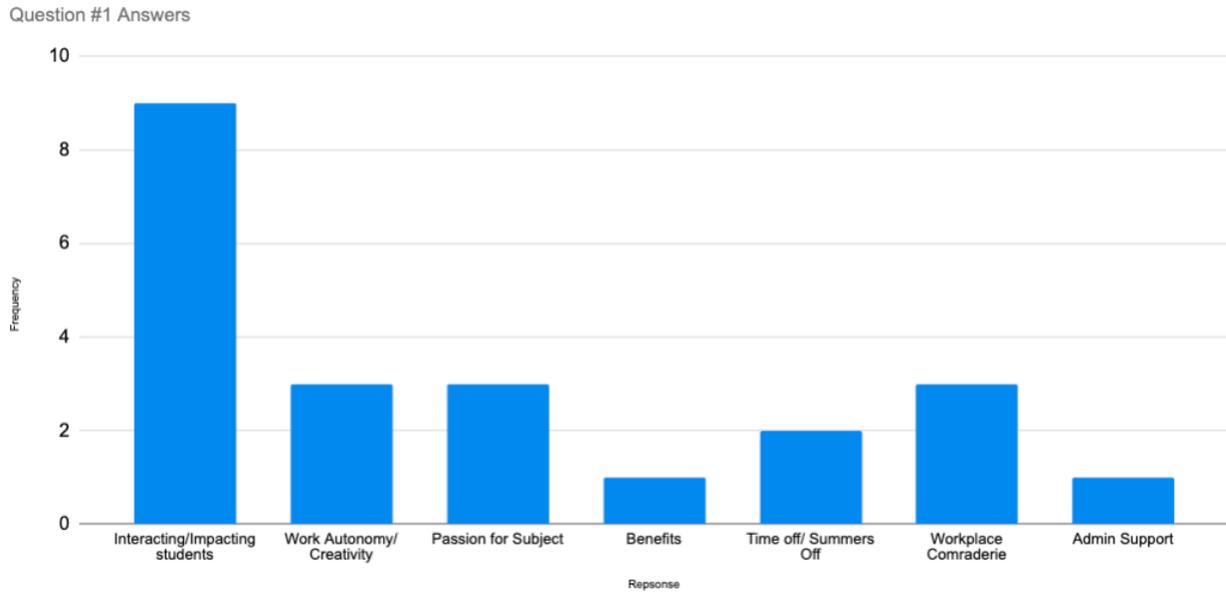


Figure 1

*Bar Graph Showing the Frequency of Theme Among the Responses to Question #1 Related to the Reasons Teachers Remain in the Profession.*

### **Topic Frequency Results from Question #2**

The following chart shows the frequency of responses to question #2 which asks, “What aspects of the teaching profession, specifically teaching in the public school system, cause you to doubt your choice of profession or that you believe have the highest impact on teachers leaving the profession?”

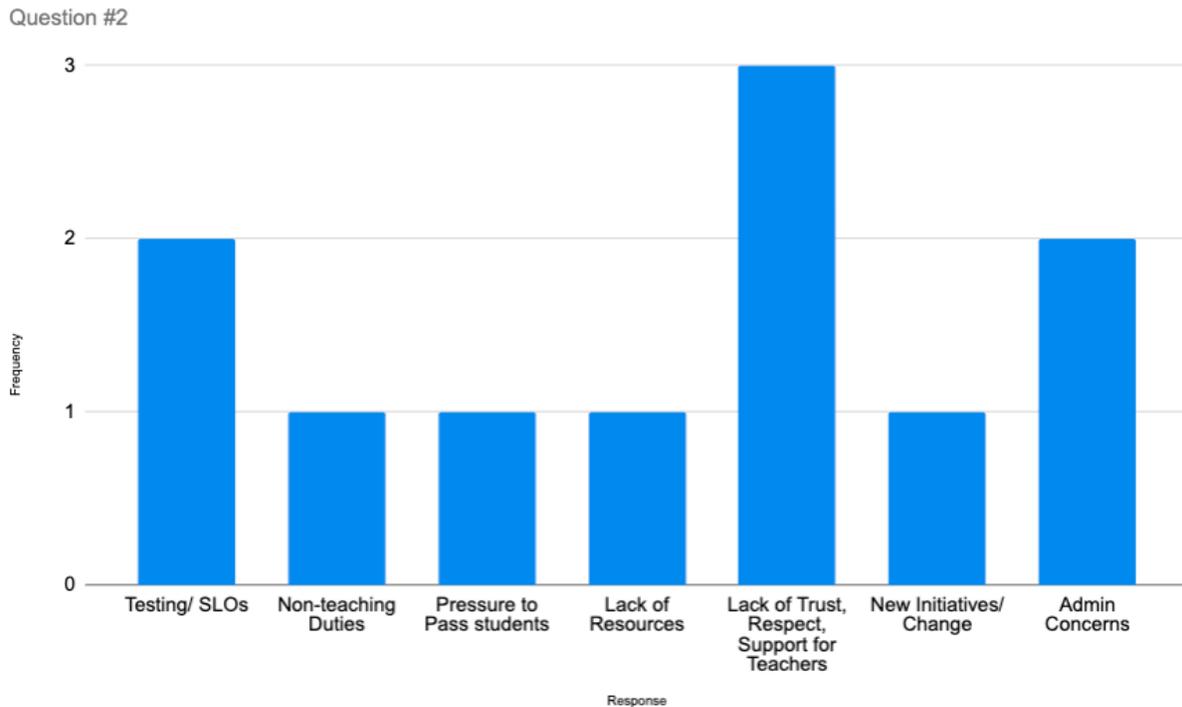


Figure 2

*Bar Graph Showing the Frequency of Theme Among the Responses to Question #2 Related to the Causes of Teacher Attrition.*

### **Topic Frequency Results from Question #3**

The following chart shows the frequency of responses to question #3 which asks, “Describe what teacher retention services and personnel you have directly encountered in your teaching career.

Did you find them effective?”

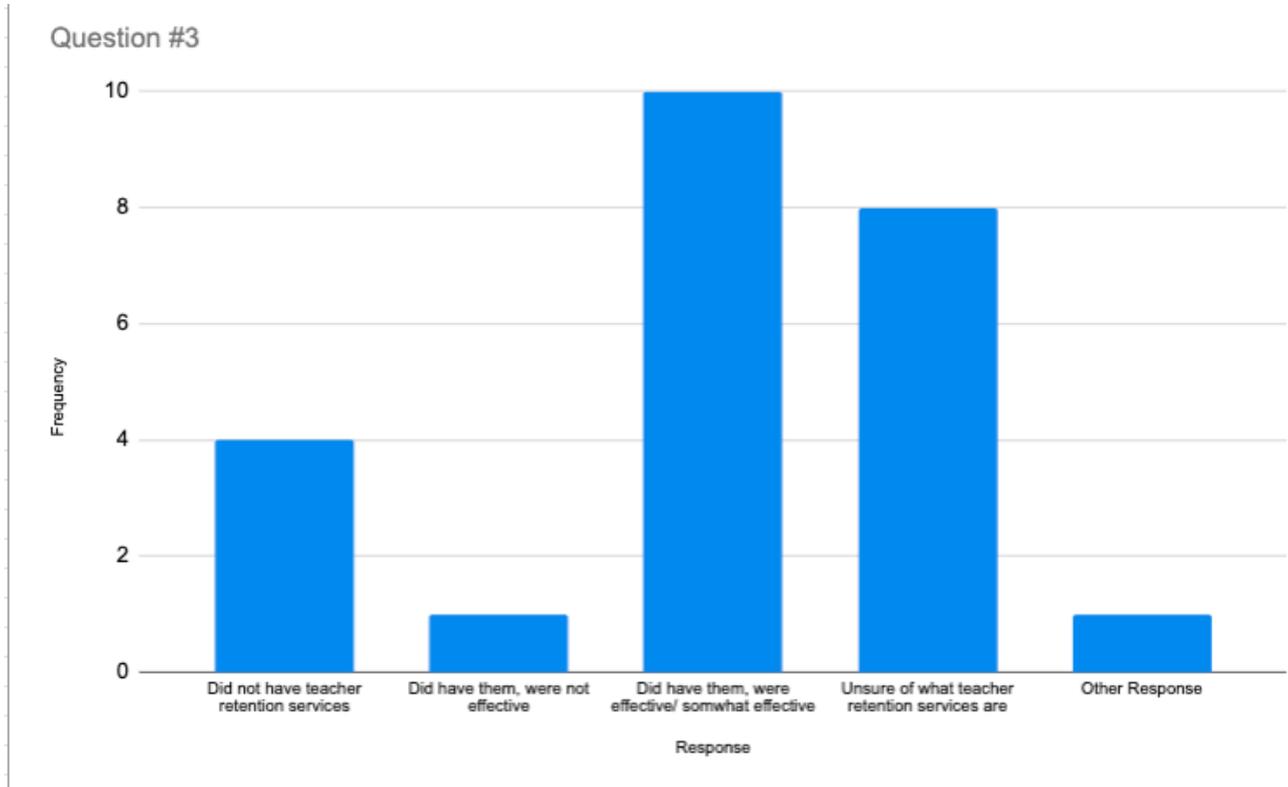


Figure 3

*Bar Graph Showing the Respondents Experience with Teacher Retention Programs as Asked in Question #4 of the Survey Tool.*

### **Topic Frequency Results from Question #4**

The following chart shows the frequency of responses to question #4 which asks, “Do you believe the teaching profession is viewed similarly or differently as other comparable professional fields? What specific programs, systems, or benefits do you believe improve this perception?”

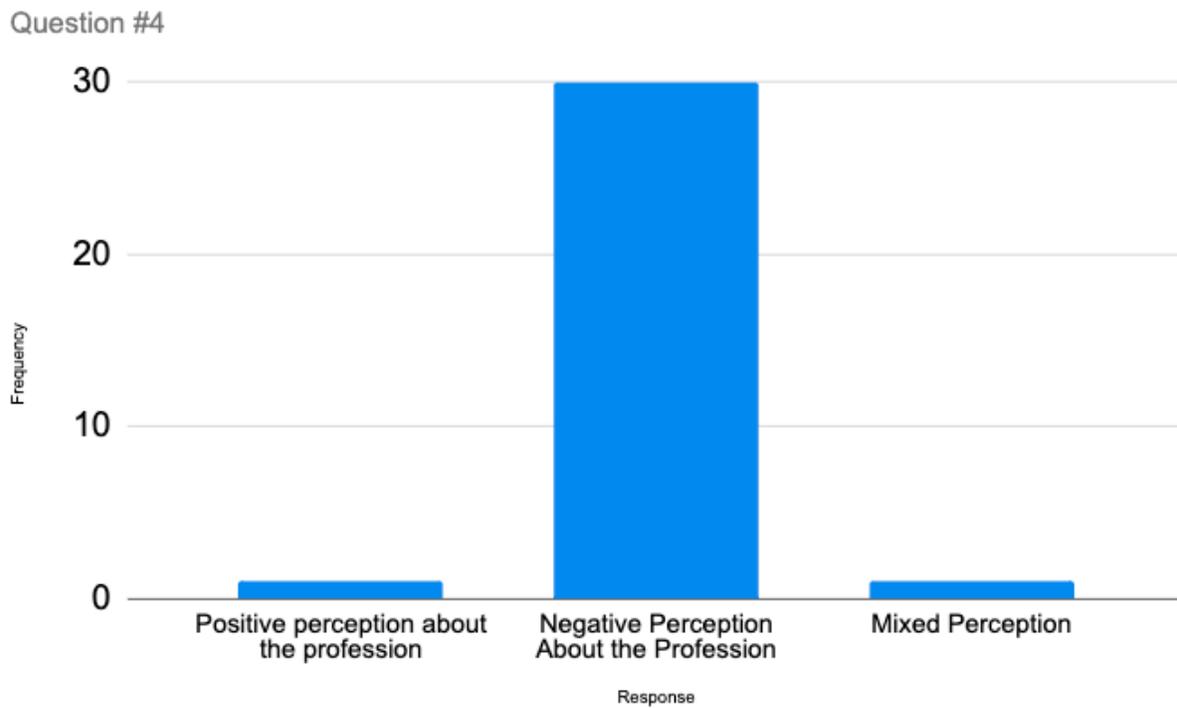


Figure 4

*Bar Graph Showing the Respondents' Perception of the Teaching Profession Against other Licensed Professions as Asked in Question #4 of the Survey Tool.*

#### **Topic Frequency Results from Question #5**

The following chart shows the frequency of responses related to the second part of question #5 which asks, "If you have remained in the profession, what experiences or thoughts help you when you experience adversity in teaching?"

Question #5

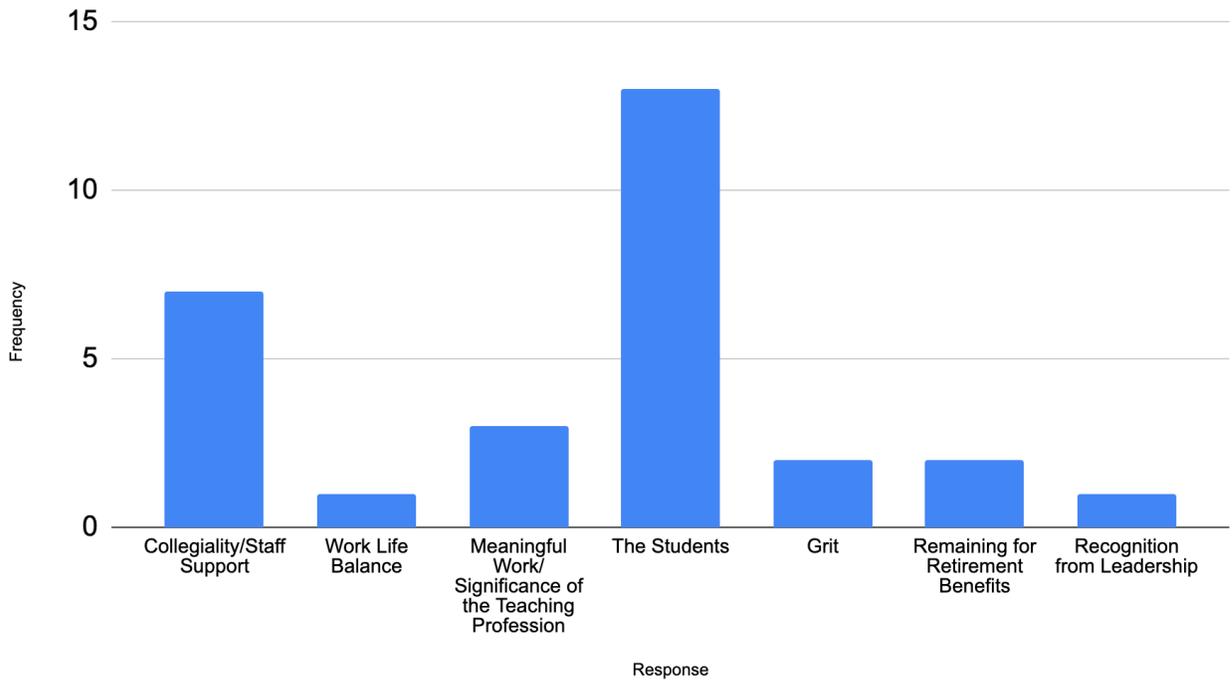


Figure 5

*Bar Graph Showing the Respondents' Fundamental Reasons for Remaining in the Profession s as Asked in Question #5 of the Survey Tool.*

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study examines the reasons teachers remained or left teaching.

#### **Theoretical Consequences**

Based on the data collected in this study, one of the biggest reasons that teachers remain in the profession is the relationships built with students. Other equally important themes to note in teacher retention are autonomy and creativity, passion for the subject being taught, and camaraderie among colleagues. The data also shows that a lack of trust, respect, and support for teachers by those in authority is a leading cause of teacher attrition, followed closely by testing and SLO demands. Under half of survey respondents were aware of or had an effective teacher retention program or service at their school. An overwhelming majority of respondents shared a response in which they felt that the teaching profession is mostly viewed negatively in comparison to other licensed professions. Teachers shared their own ways of remaining in the profession. Many responses related to making their job about their students and making students the focus of their work. Collegiality and fellow staff support also was a common thread when discussing aspects of teaching that keep educators in the profession.

#### **Threats to Validity**

The participants in this study, which utilized the convenience sampling method, mostly represented one school and one school district, except for two participants. Issues central only to this specific school may not represent larger themes of teacher retention in the public school system in America. In addition to this, of the 33 participants in the study, 30 respondents had not yet left the profession. A yet unanalyzed core difference between stayers and leavers may have

an impact on their self-reported survey results. One final consideration that should be noted is that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic where teachers taught in unprecedented circumstances whether it was asynchronous virtual learning, synchronous virtual learning, or hybrid instruction. All three teachers identifying themselves as having left the profession had done so during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all of the responses shared were universal to the profession of teaching and there was no significance reported in the paradigm shift to virtual and hybrid instruction during the current year.

### **Connections to Previous Studies**

While this study focused less on specific teacher background data and more on recurring topics of discussion related to struggles and support in education collectively, Borman and Dowling (2008) found that causes for teacher attrition changes depending on the age and career length of the teacher, and thus, trends could be found based on those statistics. Similarly to Ingersoll's 2001 study, the school community, specifically camaraderie among teachers, was found to be crucial in a teacher's final decision to stay in or leave the profession. Just as in Kelly and Northop's 2015 study, teacher salary and induction programs play a significant role in the conversation surrounding those remaining in the profession. Salary remains a quantitative way to measure teaching up to other licensed professions, and when it is less than comparable, questions of respectability and appreciation result. Induction programs, as referenced in this study, seem to have positively influenced those that were part of such a program. Echoes from Ladd's 2011 study which noted how the importance of a supportive administration and school-based leadership positively affected teachers' perceptions of remaining in the profession was also found to be true in this study. After burnout due to a grueling workload and low pay, a lack of trust and

support for teachers and admin concerns composed the most reasons that teachers in this study had questioned their profession.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study merely discusses common themes across current and former teachers of many different ages and content areas in the high school profession. However, prior experiences and educational background no doubt play a role in a teacher's perception of the profession and their expectations of support. A future study may also wish to continue the work of Kelly and Northrop (2015) in analyzing the role that prestigious universities play in later job satisfaction in the teaching profession. Generational differences among teachers' satisfaction in the profession could also be analyzed after the educational paradigm shift to the highly technological virtual and hybrid learning environments in 2020 and 2021. Lastly, a direct analysis between teacher perceptions about their profession and their students' perceptions about their teachers would be one way to tie this study back to what this study points to as the root of teacher efficacy---students and their success.

### **Conclusions**

As education evolves, so do the reasons for teacher dissatisfaction. It is important to frequently monitor trending discussion topics surrounding teacher attrition for school and district leadership to quickly respond. Such quick analysis and response are necessary to maintain and foster a thriving workforce. Not surprising were the responses surrounding unsatisfactory teacher pay, especially regarding hours worked outside of the classroom. Duties unrelated to the immediate concerns of their students seem to overload the workday, forcing teachers to take their work home. Perhaps, merit pay or some other form of compensation for those teachers excelling would promote teacher efficacy. This study also found that when meetings, professional

development, testing, and SLOs become removed from the direct needs of students, teachers start to question their choice of profession. Administration must stay anchored in the needs of teachers and students to make meaningful professional opportunities for educators. Support and respect from administration was also a point worth noting in this study. Many respondents mentioned feeling unsupported by their school-based leadership and that their expectations almost worked directly against their efforts to improve instruction for their students. Politics, personalities, and data points become more important than the face-to-face instruction that teachers experience daily. At the core of this student, a resounding focus on students remains both the reason to remain in the profession and the encouragement to press onward during adversity. Teachers remain in the profession if they feel that their efforts directly impact the lives of their students and that they are respected amongst their colleagues, leadership, and students. Future teacher retention programs or training may wish to focus on these themes as a way of strengthening their own teaching workforce.

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