

# Attracting Former Teachers Back to the Profession

*Don't write off teachers who leave the system—many may be willing to come back.*

By Karen DeAngelis, Ph.D.

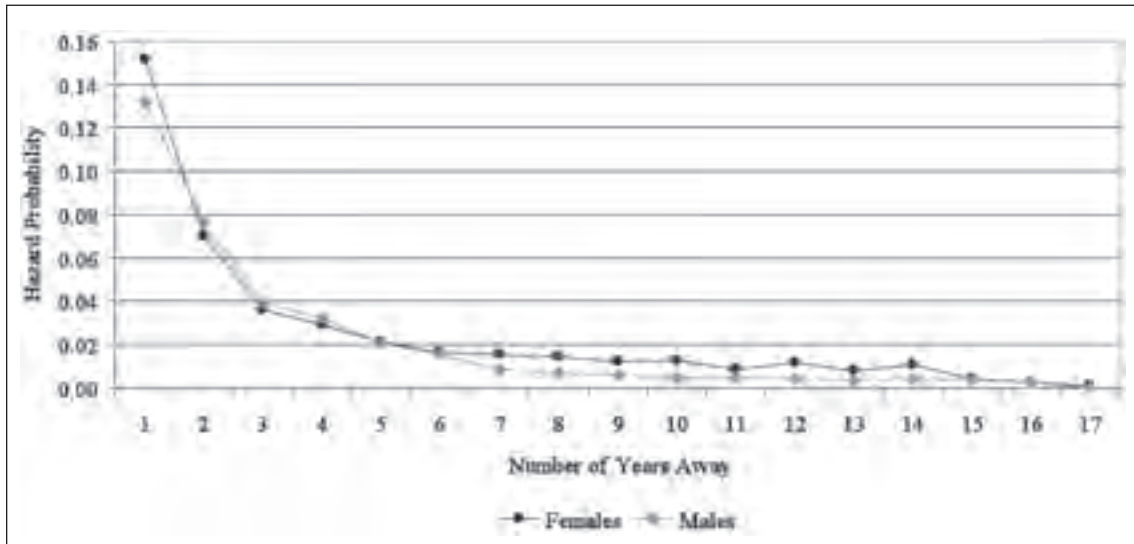


Considerable attention has been paid over the past two decades to the issue of teacher attrition and the efforts schools and districts can make to try to improve teacher retention. Less attention, though, has been given to the finding that many who leave teaching before retirement age do so for reasons other than dissatisfaction with the profession.

In fact, studies show that family commitments/personal reasons are among the most common motivations for leaving, especially by female teachers (Henke, Choy, Chen, Geis, & Alt 1997; Stinebrickner 2002). Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that a substantial

proportion (roughly one-quarter to more than one-third based on available evidence) of those who leave early in their careers eventually come back (Beaudin 1993; DeAngelis 2013; Murnane et al. 1991).

Returning teachers, or reentrants as they are sometimes called, are important to districts and schools for two reasons. First, they play a significant role in teacher supply. National estimates indicate that between 25% and 40% of new hires during the 1980s and 1990s were experienced former teachers (Broughman & Rollefson 2000; Cook & Boe 2007). Second, in contrast to new entrants to teaching, returning teachers bring to their



**Figure 1. Probability of returning to teaching by gender and number of years away**

schools and positions one or more years of prior teaching experience, one of the few measurable attributes of teachers that has been consistently linked to teacher effectiveness.

Until recently, most of what was known about returning teachers was based on data from the 1970s and early 1980s, making the relevance of the findings to today’s schools unclear. However, a couple of studies using longitudinal data from more recent cohorts provide updated evidence regarding the factors associated with former teachers’ decisions to return and, among those who return, where they work.

Together, the findings from existing studies have implications for district and school administrators to consider as they work to staff their schools. I present the most salient ones below.

### Time to Reentry

A consistent finding across existing studies is the short time period between exit and reentry for the majority of former teachers who opt to return (Beaudin 1993; DeAngelis 2013; Grissom & Reininger 2012; Murnane et al. 1991). Generally speaking, the probability of former teachers returning falls sharply the longer they are away from the profession.

### Family commitments/personal reasons are among the most common motivations for leaving

A visual example of this is presented in Figure 1, which is based on my own work and shows reentry probabilities by number of years away for cohorts of Illinois teachers spanning the 1987–2006 academic

years (DeAngelis 2013). As the figure indicates, reentrants were most likely to return after a one- or two-year absence and only a small proportion returned after more than five years away.

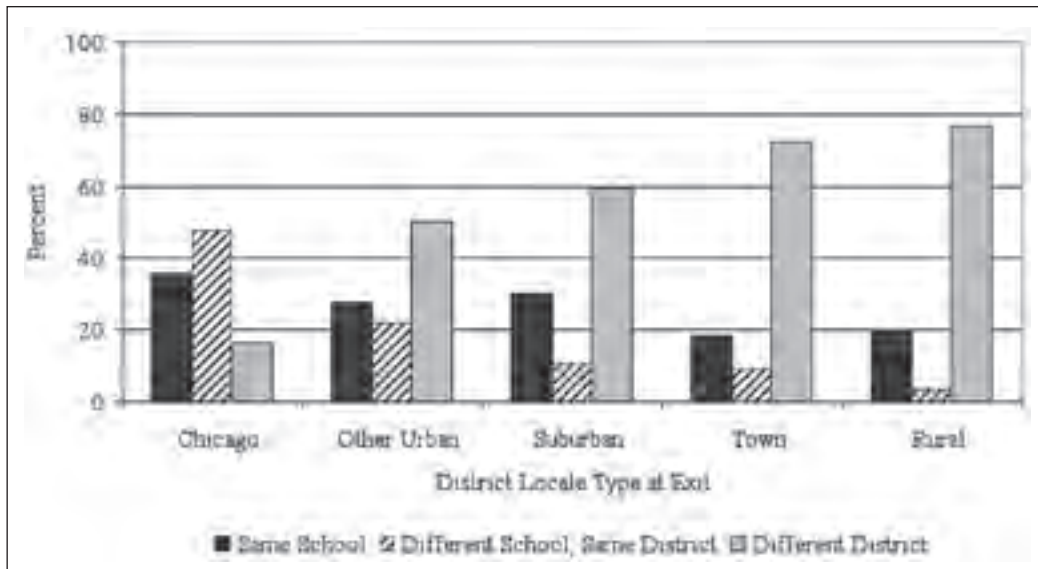
The probabilities in Figure 1 show little difference by gender; however, Grissom and Reininger (2012) reported somewhat greater gender differences with females more likely than males to return, particularly after an extended time away (more than five years), perhaps due to their study’s focus on young, early-career teachers rather than all teachers.

Even so, the results of all of the studies indicate that districts and schools wanting to attract former teachers back to their classrooms ought to target efforts at recent leavers, perhaps by maintaining contact with those teachers, finding a means to keep them informed of opportunities that are available if and when they decide to return, or, depending on the circumstance, even trying to keep them involved in the school or district in some way after they have left.

### Place of Reentry

Only a couple of existing studies were able with their data to examine the districts and schools to which reentrants returned. Perhaps not surprisingly, both studies showed that, among returners, the longer former teachers were away from teaching, the less likely it was the teachers returned to the school or district they left (Beaudin 1995; DeAngelis 2013). More specifically, I found that nearly 60% of reentrants returned to the same school or district after a one-year absence, compared to only 27% and 17% after 5 years and 10 years, respectively.

Similarly, the rate at which reentrants returned to the same school or district depended significantly on the



**Figure 2. Where reentrants returned by district locale type at time of exit**

locale type of the former districts. Those from rural and small town districts were much less likely to return to the same schools or districts than those who left suburban and urban districts (DeAngelis 2013; see Figure 2). This means that the loss of teachers to attrition from the profession is more likely to be permanent for smaller schools and districts outside of urban and suburban areas.

To the extent that the temporary loss of teachers is less costly to schools and districts in terms of their ability to recoup some of their initial investments associated with orientation, induction, and professional development, as well as the human capital benefits associated with teacher experience, these results also suggest that some schools and districts bear greater financial and educational costs from teacher attrition than others.

## Providing information about upcoming job opportunities may be effective.

Among the former teachers who reentered the profession in a different district, those who exited urban districts were most likely to return to a different locale type, most often suburban districts. The majority of those who exited suburban districts, in contrast, typically returned to a different suburban district. The return destinations of returners who exited town and rural districts were more mixed, although only a minority of those returners ended up in districts of the same locale type (DeAngelis 2013). Together, it appears from these results that where former teachers reenter the profession depends in part on job availability at the time of reentry and in part on reentrants' preferences regarding where to teach. Again, this suggests that providing information

about upcoming job opportunities may be effective at attracting at least some former teachers back.

## Other Factors Associated with Reentry

Existing studies identify a number of personal and work-related characteristics associated with former teachers' decisions to return. Here, I focus on two that seem most amenable to district policy intervention and encourage interested readers to consult the references for additional information.

Grissom and Reininger (2012) revealed that family commitments, as indicated by the presence of young children, continue to play an important role in teachers' exit and reentry behaviors, although only for females. Male teachers' behaviors, in contrast, were unaffected by family characteristics. Given their finding that females were more likely than males to return to teaching, district policies aimed at serving the needs of former teachers with young children, such as onsite childcare or job sharing for those who prefer to work part-time, may help districts attract those teachers back to their classrooms (Grissom & Reininger 2012). At the same time, their findings indicate that different strategies will be needed to attract male leavers back to the profession.

Multiple studies in this area also have found that teachers (regardless of gender) who earned higher salaries at the time of exit, controlling for other factors that affect teacher pay, were more likely to return not only to the profession (Beaudin 1993; Grissom & Reininger 2012), but also to their original district (DeAngelis, 2013).

This finding coincides with and builds on ample evidence from the teacher recruitment and retention literature showing the importance of salaries for teacher labor market decisions (for a review, see Guarino, Santibanez,

& Daley 2006). Moreover, it provides support for district policies focused on improving salaries during teachers' early years in the profession when they are most likely to make long-term decisions regarding their careers in teaching.

## Final Comment

Recent studies continue to identify reentrants as a viable and valuable source of teacher supply, particularly when one considers the potentially greater skills that experienced teachers bring to the classroom. I highlighted herein evidence regarding returning teachers that districts and schools might use to craft policies and/or programs to attract former teachers back to their classrooms. I urge district and school administrators also to consider what type of supports such hires might need upon reentry to ease their transition back.

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## Results for 2013 NAEP Mathematics and Reading Assessments

Results from the 2013 NAEP assessments show fourth graders and eighth graders making progress in mathematics and reading.

Nationally representative samples of more than 376,000 fourth graders and 341,000 eighth graders were assessed in either mathematics or reading in 2013. Results are reported for public and private school students in the nation, and for public school students in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools.

- Average mathematics scores for fourth graders and eighth graders in 2013 were 1 point higher than in 2011, and 28 and 22 points higher respectively in comparison to the first assessment year in 1990.
- Hispanic students made gains in mathematics from 2011 to 2013 at both grades 4 and 8.
- Fourth grade and eighth grade female students scored higher in mathematics in 2013 than in 2011, but the scores for fourth grade and eighth grade male students did not change significantly over the same period.
- The average reading score for eighth graders was 2 points higher in 2013 than in 2011, but the score for fourth graders did not change significantly from 2011. Reading scores were higher in 2013 than in 1992 at both grades.
- White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander eighth graders scored higher in reading in 2013 than in 2011.
- Both male and female eighth-graders scored higher in reading in 2013 than in 2011.
- Public school students in Tennessee, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools scored higher in 2013 than in 2011 in both subjects and grades.
- Mathematics scores were higher in 2013 than in 2011 at both grades in Hawaii, Tennessee, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools.
- Reading scores were higher in 2013 than in 2011 at both grades in Iowa, Tennessee, Washington, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools.

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