

Teacher Retention

How The Courage to Teach responds to the challenge of keeping and sustaining our public school teachers

“Teacher retention has become a national crisis”

The ongoing struggle of schools to retain enough good teachers poses a daunting hurdle to effectively educating our nation’s children. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future observes in their January 2003 report *No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America’s Children*, “The real school staffing problem is teacher retention. Our inability to support high quality teaching in many of our schools is driven not by too few teachers entering the profession, but by too many leaving it for other jobs.” The picture is clear: “Teacher retention has become a national crisis” (p. 8).

Attrition is costly

A recent study in Texas estimated the enormous cost of teacher turnover: \$329 million per year, or at least \$8,000 per teacher (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2000). Above and beyond the fiscal consequences, high rates of turnover harm school environments and student performance (Ingersoll and Smith, 2003).

What can we do to keep good teachers teaching?

Looking at why teachers stay, rather than why they leave, might hold the answer. Teachers stay for some of the same reasons they enter the profession: because of trust, confidence and faith in their students and in their subject matter; an enduring sense of hope and possibility; and the rewards of meaningful relationships and the knowledge that they are making a difference (Nieto, 2003, and Williams, 2003). Linda Darling-Hammond’s review of research on keeping good teachers, published in *Educational Leadership*, May 2003, suggests several remedies including improving working conditions and collegiality and makes note that “good teachers gravitate to schools where they know they will be appreciated and supported in their work” (p. 12).

Research and scholarly opinion on the topic clearly underline strategies that are in immediate grasp of administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in public education, most notably this one: protecting, replenishing, and sustaining the emotional resources of our best educators (Williams, 2003; Sargent, 2003).

Courage to Teach

Courage to Teach (CTT) is a program of quarterly retreats for the personal and professional renewal of public school educators – individuals on whom our society depends for so much but for whom we provide so little encouragement and support. We believe that that caring, competent, and energized teachers are indispensable, and that honoring them and renewing their passion strengthens every effort to improve teaching, learning, and the human connectedness essential to education reform. To help counter alarmingly high rates of turnover in public education, Courage to Teach contributes to sustaining good teachers and educational administrators so that they can do their most inspired work with students.

CTT employs an approach to vocational renewal called *formation*. This approach is rooted in the belief that good teaching flows from the identity and integrity of the teacher. The formation process invites educators to reclaim their own wholeness and passion for teaching, and makes connections between the renewal of a teacher’s spirit and the revitalization of public education.

The retreats bring educators together and use personal stories, reflections on classroom practice, and insights from poets and other writers to explore their teaching with them. The intended – and observable – outcomes for CTT participants are the qualities of presence,

personal engagement, leadership, and community mindedness. The profound effect these outcomes have on student learning and school culture are immeasurable, but independent evaluation has revealed that 100% of participants rated the series as the most valuable professional development they had experienced; 100% said that it altered and improved their classroom practice; 90% said they had developed the habit of reflective practice (shown by research to improve quality of teaching and lead to higher student achievement); 68% said their experience led them to initiate more collegial relationships at their school (shown by research to be related to teacher satisfaction); and 100% believed that teacher formation could lead to enduring and vital improvement in American education.

While professional development opportunities for improving pedagogy, skill, and content are vital, no reform can be effective unless there is a committed and engaged teacher present for students. CTT offers educators a chance to reconnect with who they are at the deepest level, so they can draw on their inner resources to more fully nurture themselves and the young people in their care.

What do participants have to say about Courage to Teach?

When we do this day after day, it takes a toll on our life and strength. This program not only allows, but encourages teachers to revitalize the fountain of their energies.

Elementary school principal, 22 years experience

To be an excellent teacher is to risk burnout at an early stage in one's career. The isolation from other professionals and the constant need to be "on" while teaching can exhaust and deplete a good teacher's inner resources. We simply cannot afford to lose good teachers through negligence of their need to connect with other teachers in ways that are respectful and safe.

High school teacher, 13 years experience

This program instigated a renaissance in my practice of teaching. I remembered my idealistic self. For a profession having difficulty retaining talented people, the importance is obvious.

Middle school teacher, 25 years experience

For More Information about Keeping Good Teachers

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Williams, J. Why great teachers stay. *Educational Leadership* 60, no. 8 (May 2003): 71-74.

For More Information about Courage to Teach

Go to www.teacherformation.org or call the Center for Teacher Formation at 206.855.9140.