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Too many teachers are quitting, experts warn

By Janet Bagnall, Gazette Education Reporter February 11, 2013

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Frustrations for teachers include low social status, relatively low salary levels, the lack of merit pay and a sense of failure, says Jon G. Bradley, associate professor of education at McGill University.

Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier , The Gazette

False allegations of misconduct are one element in a toxic brew of problems driving an extraordinary number of teachers out of the education field, say educational experts.

“Across North America, nearly half of all new teachers leave the field within five years,” said Jon G. Bradley, associate professor of education at McGill University. In Alberta, one of the few provinces to collect data, the figure is 40 per cent within five years. Figures for Quebec were not available, but believed to be similar to the North American average.

The education field is in crisis, said Bradley. “It’s almost as though we’re doing everything in our power to discourage these fully trained, committed people from making teaching a career,” he said. But if the growing incidence of false allegations is the “elephant in the room” that no one wants to talk about, it’s not the only problem. Other frustrations for teachers include low social status, relatively low salary levels, the lack of merit pay and a sense of failure, he said.

“Any other profession that had that kind of turnover would look at working conditions, would look at salaries and other things surrounding the teaching environment,” said Joel Westheimer, university research chair and professor at the University of Ottawa’s faculty of education. “Instead, in education, we bring up talk about testing teachers and linking their pay to the students’ performance. I mean, can you imagine Microsoft suffering a crisis because there were not enough programmers going into the profession and leaving after the first five years? Would (the company’s) response be to increase salaries, recruit better people, change working conditions so that they could work in different places, have free soda and free lunches? Or would it test them?”

Bradley said teachers have been left defenceless in the face of unfair pressures and accusations. “We’re all worried about bullying in schools, but what about parents bullying teachers? What about principals bullying teachers? It’s not a collaborative workplace. We live these lies (in schools), that everybody loves children and therefore we all have to be nice people.” But schools are not nice places, said Bradley. “Learning is hard work,” he said. Students are pushed and challenged and they don’t always want to be.

Parents, teachers and school administrators ideally should all be working together with a clear understanding that “when we turn our children over to a school, we do so on the understanding that they’re doing the best job they can with the resources they have,” said Bradley. Instead, teachers, especially male teachers, are left alone to confront sometimes fantastic allegations.

It is now standard practice to warn teachers to never touch students. British music teachers were told in 2010 by their union not even to reposition pupils’ hands on an instrument. When the British education secretary complained that this directive played to a “culture of fear among adults and children,” the union refused to change it, saying careers had been ruined by false allegations.

The tragedy, said Westheimer, is that at the same time as the first false allegations came out, in the 1980s, so did research showing that children learn better when they feel cared for by their teachers. A U.S. study from 1986 found that in classes where a teacher touched students when congratulating them on results or behaviour, students’ disruptive behaviour dropped by 60 per cent.

Bradley, who has been in education for nearly 45 years, worries that with no “exit interviews” for departing teachers, no one is gathering information on why the field is hemorrhaging its newest recruits.

“It’s not just one thing you can fix,” he said. “It’s a whole series. It’s an attitudinal view of the place of school and the role of teachers in our society. And I don’t think we’re prepared to engage that. That’s what scares me.”

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