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John Yinger

The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, joyinger@syr.edu

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It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
July 2007

Teacher Attrition in Upstate New York

School quality depends, among other things, on a school's ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers. A recent paper by two of my colleagues and me examines one dimension of this topic, teacher attrition, using data for all teachers who started teaching in Upstate New York between 1985 and 1998.¹

In New York State, 13 percent of elementary school teachers leave their initial school after the first year, and only 48 percent of elementary school teachers are still at their original school after 5 years. These high rates of teacher attrition impose high costs on affected schools, including separation costs (such as exit interviews), hiring costs, vacancy costs (hiring substitutes), and training costs. Moreover, a high attrition rate in a school almost inevitably results in a lower level of teacher experience. New teachers are not as effective as experienced teachers, so high attrition also directly undercuts student performance. Teacher attrition rates are also much higher in high-poverty schools—a fact that contributes to these schools' below-average performance.

The paper by my colleagues and me finds that, after controlling for many other things, teachers in Upstate New York are less likely to leave teaching the more their district pays relative to the salaries of college graduates in the region, and that they are less likely to transfer to another school district the higher the salary schedule in their district relative to others in the county.

The paper also finds that women teachers are considerably more likely to quit teaching if they teach in a school that has a high share of minority students relative to the average share in their district. Similar results are obtained using a measure of poverty instead of minority concentration, which suggests that it

¹ Jan Ondrich, Emily Pas, and John Yinger, "The Determinants of Teacher Attrition in Upstate New York," *Public Finance Review*, Forthcoming.

is concentrated disadvantage, not minority status as such, that leads to higher rates of teacher attrition. The impact of concentrated disadvantage on teacher attrition is large relative to the effect of salary. In fact, salary increases far in excess of 20 percent would be required in most districts to bring attrition rates in the schools with the most concentrated disadvantage down to the rates in the schools with the least concentrated disadvantage.

These findings, which are similar to those obtained by several other scholars, suggest that poor urban districts are unlikely to raise teacher retention in schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantaged students up to the levels in their other schools, let alone raise teacher retention across the board, without additional resources from their state. New York State has some programs to encourage teachers to accept jobs in districts without enough qualified teachers, but the bonuses provided by these programs, which have a maximum of \$3,400, are not sufficient to make much of a difference. Recent increases in New York State's aid to disadvantaged districts also may help, but these increases are insufficient to support salary increases large enough to eliminate the relatively high attrition rates in these districts. Without some creative policy making, in other words, teacher attrition rates in New York State's high-poverty schools and high-poverty districts are likely to remain relatively high for the foreseeable future.