

Half of Teachers Quit in 5 Years

Working Conditions, Low Salaries Cited

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Jessica Jentis fit the profile of a typical American teacher: She was white, held a master's degree and quit 2 1/2 years after starting her career.

According to a new study from the National Education Association, a teachers union, half of new U.S. teachers are likely to quit within the first five years because of poor working conditions and low salaries.

Jentis, now a stay-at-home mother of three, says that she could not make enough money teaching in Manhattan to pay for her student loans and that dealing with the school bureaucracy was too difficult.

"The kids were wonderful to be with, but the stress of everything that went with it and the low pay did not make it hard to leave," she said. "It's sad because you see a lot of the teachers that are young and gung-ho are ready to leave."

The proportion of new teachers who leave the profession has hovered around 50 percent for decades, said Barry A. Farber, a professor of education and psychology at Columbia University in New York.

The study, which the association released last week ahead of its annual salute to teachers today, also found that the average teacher is a married, 43-year-old white woman who is religious.

Teachers are more educated than ever before, with the proportion of those holding master's degrees increasing to 50 percent from 23 percent since the early 1960s.

Only 6 percent of teachers are African American, and 5 percent are Hispanic, Asian or come from other ethnic groups. Men represent barely a quarter of teachers, which the association says is the lowest level in four decades.

"We must face the fact that although our current teachers are the most educated and most experienced ever, there are still too many teachers leaving the profession too early, not enough people becoming teachers and not enough diversity in the profession," NEA President Reg Weaver said in a statement.

Because of the high dropout rate of younger teachers, there will be plenty of job openings for teachers over the next 10 years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Because education is governed at the state level, programs to retain younger teachers differ from state to state.