

Preface

I did not intend to write a book about teacher attrition, but the day I heard my friend and colleague Abby was quitting teaching, I was stunned and saddened. See, I'd watched her, smiling down the hallway, welcoming kids and parents, gliding with what seemed like ease, charm, and endless positive energy. She loved teaching. She loved the kids. They adored her and did creative, meaningful, and engaging learning with her.

But it wasn't enough.

Abby quit teaching after two years at our school and took her enthusiasm, boundless energy, creativity, and kindness with her to a job with the State of Vermont. The students were devastated, and as her mentor I felt as though I had failed her.

So I started to read and learn about teacher attrition. I learned that one in three new teachers quit after a mere three years in the profession. And the number grows to 50 percent in some areas after five years (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2003). I started reading teacher blogs and heard similar themes and frustrations from today's new teachers.

This coincided with a tough year for me in teaching. I was not new, as I had been teaching for several years. A perfect storm of difficult parents, a new principal, and a new teaching partner brought many of these issues to the forefront for me.

I started writing about my experiences, and then I started talking to my friends and former colleagues who, like Abby, had quit teaching. I interviewed teachers from across the United States, in rural, urban, and suburban schools. Their words were compelling, vivid, and surprisingly similar. I heard many of the same themes, told in different ways. Their experiences were real, painful, and telling. I knew I had to share them.

Of course, I don't mean to imply that all great teachers quit. I know many master teachers who are still at it, 30 years later. There are thousands of amazing teachers across America educating our nation's youth. Nor do I mean to say that it is only great teachers who quit. But there is some evidence to suggest that the teachers who do make a speedy exit from teaching have a "greater measured ability," according to the Research and Development Institute (Guarino, Santibanez, Daley, & Brewer, 2004). And the one I watched leave our community was most certainly great. So yes, this is mostly subjective, but I would bet that many of the teachers who do move on are exceptional, or have the ability to become so with time and experience.

I do not claim to be an expert on teacher attrition or the current educational literature. I am merely a teacher, who has been working intensely in this field for 10 years. This book is based on my experiences and ideas, and the voices of the many teachers with whom I spoke. I wrote this book late at night after full days of teaching and parenting my two little girls. It was not easy, but I was driven by what I felt was an issue of critical importance in the education of our nation's young people.

After I started to work with Corwin, I began to solicit the experiences of teachers who are still in the field, in addition to those who have stopped teaching. This is critical because there are so many great veteran teachers in America who are still teaching, despite the ever-increasing challenges. They have developed the strategies and support mechanisms that help them make the choice to continue to teach. Their words are needed here to teach us all what great teachers and educational leaders can do to stem the tide of teachers out the door.

This is not meant to be a research-laden, academic book. It is meant to be a fresh, in-the-trenches view of what it is like to teach in America's schools, from the voices of real teachers.

I started gathering responses first on a blog called *Why Great Teachers Quit*. I had developed a short set of questions for former teachers. Without much publicity, I heard from many educators who had left the profession and had many experiences and powerful reflections to share. Then I created the blog *Why Do You Teach?* to hear from veteran teachers. The responses started pouring in from all over the country, from big cities and tiny towns, from New York to California and in between.

Many of the respondents were fellow teachers or friends of current and former colleagues. Some were family members and friends of friends. Others must have found the blogs through a Web search or a teacher forum where I posted a link. In addition to these online communications, I also had numerous phone interviews and face-to-face intensive interviews with current and former teachers from various teaching backgrounds, geographic regions, schools, and experience levels. I heard directly from teachers all across the United States.

Many teachers were not comfortable posting their thoughts on the blogs, even with the use of only their first name. Several teachers e-mailed me their detailed responses, and I was able to engage them in a dialogue about their experiences. I wanted to learn from them as much as I could, so I could personally understand their perspectives, and then glean themes to use and communicate throughout the book. The themes are presented in the book chapters; and they are, of course, overlapping and interconnected. The themes are in no way exhaustive; they are just the issues that came up repeatedly throughout my interviews, often with the most emotion and clarity. These issues are the ones I wanted to explore, to connect with my experience and perspective, and for which it seemed important to offer potential solutions.

Chapter 1 is about standardized testing and its effects. Teachers across the country explain how these high-stakes tests affect their teaching, their students, and the climate of their schools. Working conditions, ranging from violence toward teachers, old buildings, and a lack of time for eating or using the bathroom, are explored in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, expanding expectations for teachers and the devastating effects this can have on the personal and professional lives of teachers is explored. The constant bureaucracy of public schools and its effects on creative and innovative teaching is the focus of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is about the lack of respect for teachers and lagging compensation, two critical issues facing education today. Chapter 6 shares the perspectives of many teachers about difficult parents, and the unique, complex, and challenging situations that arise in schools on a daily basis. Administrators, as school leaders capable of changing the climate and professionalism of a school for better or worse, are the focus of Chapter 7. School boards, with their benefits and drawbacks, and the opportunities and value of teaming with teachers are explored in Chapter 8.

Each of these chapters presents a real-life scenario described to me by an interviewee (or from my personal experience and observations); a discussion of the problem with thoughts from teachers; and a list of practical, applicable recommendations for administrators and teacher leaders. These suggestions are meant to help administrators and teachers make decisions that will improve school life for the entire school community. Next, each chapter has a short section called Words of Wisdom From Veteran Teachers, which draws on the real-life experience of veteran educators and how they handle a particular issue. These suggestions were gleaned from interviews, experience, observation, and reflection. The ideas in this section are meant to be positive, forward thinking, and inspirational to teachers as they deal with these difficult issues. The chapters also share real-world stories of triumph, in Success Stories and in Hope on the Horizon, that came from my research and interviews. These are meant to show how some of these issues are being dealt with right now at the school level, with great success. Most chapters also contain a hopeful section describing why teachers teach: The Silver Lining. All chapters end with an additional resources section to give readers a place to go for more information about a particular topic. In the final chapter, I gather final thoughts for educational leaders, policy makers, and teachers.

During the writing of this book, I began reading current teacher literature that dealt with the recurring themes I was hearing in my interviews. I found many books addressing how important teachers and education are in general, and books that implore teachers and administrators to do this or that. But I rarely found books that addressed the real and pressing concerns of teachers about the state of teaching in America. A few exceptional books did provide insight and empathy for the situations teachers face in schools today. The current teacher literature I cited in this book connects the themes here and, in some cases, provides justification and elaboration in the areas where I make specific recommendations to administrators.

The purpose of this book is to give voice to the legions of hard-working, dedicated teachers across the country and to publicly recognize the challenges they face every day. Many people have no idea what it is like to be a teacher today. There are countless myths and a seemingly unending supply of misinformation about the

teaching profession. Beyond gathering the thoughts of teachers, my goal is for the problems and issues they raise to be brought to the forefront in educational decision making and discussion. We need talented, motivated, and enthusiastic teachers in the classroom. Our current model simply isn't working, with up to 50 percent of teachers leaving the career in five years (NCTAF, 2003). We can and must do better. It is my hope this book will be read by administrators, superintendents, school board members, educational policy makers, teachers, and politicians alike. By bringing up these problems, and some of the possible ways to address them, it is my hope that schools across the country can reflect, plan, and act in a way that improves the lives of teachers and students in America's schools.

These are their experiences, situations, challenges, and shining lights of inspiration straight from America's teachers. We can all learn from them.

All names and geographic regions have been changed to protect the privacy of these former and current teachers. The grade level, years of experience, and type of school they work in (if given) is accurately reported. Many teachers who I interviewed were concerned that they would lose their jobs or their reputations in the schools in which they work, if their honest perceptions were quoted in this book.

In the words of Jonathan Kozol (2007a) in *Letters to a Young Teacher*, we teachers are witnesses. We need to share our experiences in order for people to notice and make changes:

So I come back again to the need for teachers to speak out as witnesses to what they see each day before their eyes, whether they do this in the most restrained and quiet ways at school-wide gatherings or meetings in the districts where they work or in bolder voices at the larger educational conferences and in the education journals and the mainstream media. "Witnessing" is a familiar term among the clergy of progressive and compassionate denominations. As I have said to you before, I think it ought to be the privilege, and the obligation, of our teachers, too. (pp. 193–194)