TEACHERS IN TURMOIL

A looming crisis is coming to your classrooms

Glenn Cook

Her apartment was packed. Her math students were out for the summer. She was spending as much time as possible with two of her closest friends from college before the moving truck arrived.

Soon, Robin French would be leaving North Carolina and heading back to New Jersey, where she is living with her mom for several months while teaching middle grades at the Horace Mann School in the Bronx. And on this day in mid-July, she was feeling a little melancholy.

"It's strange. You can't put a price tag on the opportunity to return home, but I certainly did not expect to be leaving so soon," says French, who taught for three years at Walt H. Williams High School in Burlington.

French's situation—a young, smart teacher leaving for a better-paying opportunity, in a school with more autonomy and a less rigid evaluation system — is not unique. But her story helps illustrate issues that everyone from administrators to school board members to state legislators is seeing play out across the country.

Teachers are not happy—and they're making their frustrations known. This past spring, they walked out of classrooms in six states to protest years of low pay and poor working conditions. This fall, an unprecedented number are running for seats in their state legislatures and Congress. Add to that a 23 percent decline in the number of people completing teacher preparation programs, and you have a crisis in the making.

"You can debate public, private, charters, vouchers, but if

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no one wants to teach, you can't have school," says Shanna Peeples, the 2015 National Teacher of the Year. "Legislators and policy people have been taking for granted that there's an unending supply of people who want to teach, and that's just not the case. We have to do something."

TEACHERS RUNNING

More than 150 teachers ran in primaries for seats on their state legislatures this year, and almost half will be on the ballot in November. A number of current and former teachers, including Connecticut's Jahana Hayes, are running for Congress.

Hayes, who succeeded Peeples as the National Teacher of the Year in 2016, will be the first African-American woman to represent Connecticut in Congress if she is elected. She is running on a platform that seeks more resources, support, and training for teachers as well as ways to make college tuition more affordable.

Similar platforms are found among other teachers who have entered the political realm. Split almost evenly between Republican and Democrats, the various candidates are unified in their support for improved working conditions in the classroom. They also want to oust legislators who they feel threaten both their day-to-day lives and long-term security.

"Our part-time legislature is always attacking education," says Brianne Solomon, a visual art and dance teacher who is running for the West Virginia House of Delegates. "There are too many bad bills, bad ideas, and too much of 'We'll get to you later.' Some of the hardest-working people in my community were adversely affected by the decisions made in Charleston."

West Virginia was the first state where teachers walked out, leaving their classrooms for two weeks from late February until early March in a unified push for higher pay and relief from health care costs. But, in what should have been a telling teaser, Solomon and the dozen other educators on the November midterm ballot had already filed to run before the strike occurred.

"Any major party candidates had to file before the strike ever happened," says Solomon, who teaches in rural Mason County. "We were already fed up. We were going to run no matter what."

Talk to candidates in almost any state and you'll hear similar stories. Christine Marsh, a high school English teacher in Scottsdale, Arizona, decided to run for the state Senate last year, frustrated by the legislature's refusal to increase educators' pay and restore school funding to pre-recession levels. For her, the "breaking point" was the state's expansion of its education savings accounts program, which allows families to use taxpayer money for tuition at private schools.

In Oklahoma, another walkout state where education funding is down 28 percent over the past decade, fourth-grade teacher Carri Hicks is running for the state Senate. She says legislators are "not only out of touch with what's actually happening in public education, but also unwilling to hear how out of touch they are."

Solomon, who has received additional endorsements in school counseling and administration "because I don't know when the arts are going to be cut," says she was further motivated by a comment an "out of touch" legislator made during the walkout.

"One of the legislators said to me, 'Why don't you just go teach? Leave this to us.' When you're in the bubble of your own classroom, it's easy to think, 'They're probably right. I just need to be grateful for what I have'," she says. "But then you look around and realize that teachers across this state are unhappy, and that the working conditions in Wheeling and Jefferson and Charleston are just as bad as they are in Mason County, and you have to step up. It's time to step up."

JANUS REPERCUSSIONS

In what has already been a memorable 2018 for teachers and labor negotiations, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling could lead to additional unrest. The court, in a 5-4 ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME*, said public sector unions that represent teachers, among others, can no longer collect agency fees from nonmembers.

The ruling, designed to protect employees who oppose their unions' politics, will affect 22 states where public workers had to pay service fees even if they did not join, because they are still covered by collective bargaining agreements. Unions are expected to lose both members and revenue, especially from teachers who are on the lower end of the pay scale.

Marc Terry, chair of the Labor Relations Committee for NSBA's Council of School Attorneys, says some teachers who don't agree with the union's views will become "free riders who get the benefit of the contract without paying anything for it." But the long-term repercussions remain unknown.

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es, but it will take some time to figure out what the prevailing result is there,” says Terry, a partner in a Westborough, Massachusetts, law firm.

In right-to-work states, where unions are smaller and often politically weaker because they can’t collect agency fees, some analysts suggest you will see more walkouts, because many collective bargaining agreements today have costly penalties that prevent strikes.

In states that are considered union-friendly, Terry sees the potential for legislation that will allow organized labor to provide fewer or no services to those who refuse to pay dues. Massachusetts legislators already have proposed such a bill, and Terry says it’s likely others will be introduced this fall.

From a school attorney’s standpoint, Terry sees potential danger for districts if union lawyers are not involved in labor issues.

“I’ve had the misfortune of dealing with cases where teachers were involved in a discipline issue, they fired the union, and chose to go their own way with an attorney who didn’t do labor law,” he says. “That was a nightmare and very difficult to manage.”

WORKING CONDITIONS

Long hours. Low pay. Eroding or stagnant benefits. Not enough money for supplies. Scripted curriculums tied to evaluations. Labor unrest. When put in those terms, it’s no surprise that the number of college students interested in teaching has declined dramatically, or that the majority of those who leave the profession are dissatisfied with the job.

“The rigid systems that are in place have to be adjusted and become more flexible so you can bring more teachers into the workforce,” says Mandy Manning, the Spokane, Washington, educator who is traveling the country as the 2018 National Teacher of the Year. “The fact that teachers are having to go into deep debt to get a good job is counterproductive. How can you contribute to the economy if you’re in such deep debt?”

The 23 percent decline in the completion rate for teacher preparation programs between 2007-08 and 2015-16, a number reported by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education in August, does not come as a shock to veteran educators.

Manning, who teaches English and math to teenage refugees at Joel E. Ferris High School, says she still has almost $40,000 in student debt at age 42. “That’s crazy,” she says. “But a lot of areas require a master’s degree to be a teacher, or to get a living wage so you can sustain being a teacher. If you’re going to require that, then you need to treat teachers with a level of professionalism and have them be actively involved in practices that directly involve the classroom.”

After her year as national teacher of the year, Peeples returned to her Amarillo, Texas, school district and moved into the central office. There, she attended a meeting she found “horrifying.”

“Our human resources director was telling us that out of 10,000 incoming freshmen at West Texas A&M, only 67 chose to go into the college of education,” she says, her voice rising as she tells the story. “This is a flagship teaching college and my alma mater, one that has been a pipeline of teachers to Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico for decades. That’s when it became personal for me.”

Now in the second year of the doctoral program at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, Peeples says foremost on her mind is a way to improve the profession so that young teachers like French will stick with it.

“We’ve got to bring teachers to the table for real, and bring them as equal partners,” she says. “I’ve never seen so much responsibility heaped on a person with so little say in what happens. It’s too easy for them to look at other places

and think, 'I'm not going to be treated like this.' We need teachers more than they need us, at this point."

NOT SUSTAINABLE

French, a fourth-generation educator, did not plan to pursue teaching as a career.

"For the longest time, I remember going in during the summers with my mom and thinking how fun it was, but I wanted to follow my own path," says French, who moved to North Carolina to attend Elon University. "It wasn't until my sophomore year, when I started tutoring kids in math in a third-grade classroom and thought it was so cool, that I started thinking about it."

She switched majors, stayed in school a fifth year, and received a bachelor's degree in math with a concentration in secondary education. With the help of her math professor, she received a scholarship, but still has debt of between $20,000 and $30,000. A first-year teacher in North Carolina makes $35,000 annually.

After graduating in 2015, French landed the math job at Williams, where she had done her student teaching. In her first year she taught three different classes, including one she had never taught before.

"Learning how to teach a new curriculum is exhausting," she says, quick to note that she was supported by her department chair and other veteran teachers. "Knowing how to do something and knowing how to teach someone to do something are two different things. It was overwhelming a lot of days."

Like many educators, French worked a seasonal job between her first and second year as a teacher, then worked on curriculum reviews for the Alamance-Burlington School District the following summer. She also worked as a coach to make ends meet, while grading papers at home until late at night.

"As a young teacher, I could make it work," she says. "I don't think that would be sustainable for 30 years, and it would be very challenging if and when I have a family on my own because you're working so much more than you're getting compensated for. Some weeks I was working 50 to 60 hours a week, and I know some teachers who worked more.

"There is a lot of wear and tear. Teaching is incredibly demanding. Don't get me wrong: It's incredibly rewarding too, but trying to figure out the work-life balance is an ongoing process."

As she prepared for the move, French remained grateful to the teachers and administrators in North Carolina. But by living at home and working in New York City, she won't have to take on extracurricular duties or a summer job, which will allow her to adjust to teaching eighth- and ninth-graders.

"I think I have a lot of opportunities to grow, and I'm going to continue to develop and evolve over time," she says. "Where that takes me, I have no idea, but right now I'm in it for the long haul. I am in it."

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