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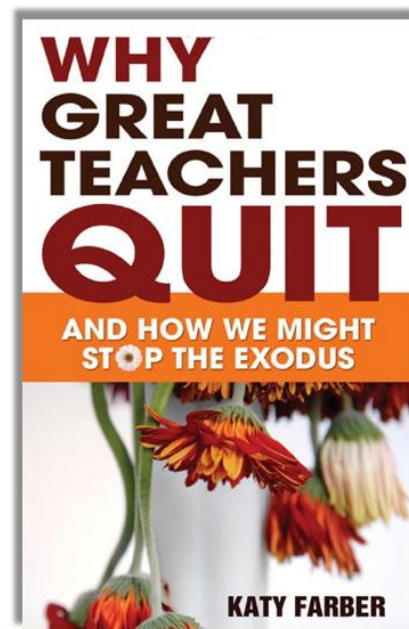
Farber, Katy (2010) *Why Great Teachers Quit: And How We Might Stop the Exodus*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

If teachers, parents, school boards, administrators, community members, and lawmakers can listen to each other and work on this problem together, we can lessen the tide of teacher attrition, ultimately improving the learning and working environment in schools for everyone. (p. 156)

Those are the final words of this new book by Katy Farber. Depending on what statistics you use, we lose up to 30% of new teachers in the first three years, up to 50% in the first five. Some clearly should not have been teachers in the first place. But others bring the passion, knowledge and, at least potentially, the skill we need for all of our students. Some of those we lose early in their career are already great teachers, others are potentially so. The



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reasons that cost us these teachers also cost us those later in their careers, who all recognize are great.

This book can help us begin to address the problem.

Katy Farber was mentoring another teacher at her school in Vermont when that teacher quit after only two years. She was stunned. Her mentee was enthusiastic, creative, and the kids loved her. Farber decided to study the issue of teacher attrition, why we lose so many so early, and in the process began hearing consistent messages from teachers across the country. This was also at a point in her own professional career that potentially represented a cross-roads for her:

A perfect storm of difficult parents, a new principal, and a new teaching partner brought many of these issues to the forefront for me (p. xiii)

This book is something you can choose to sit down and read through, but the design makes it clear that there are other approaches you can take. After the various introductory materials, there are eight chapters, followed by a brief set of Final Thoughts by the author, a list of references, and an index. Each of the eight chapters focuses on a specific area that is a source of tension and possible disillusionment for teachers. In order, these are

1. Standardized Testing
2. Working Conditions in Today's Schools
3. Ever-Higher Expectations
4. Bureaucracy
5. Respect and Compensation
6. Parents
7. Administrators
8. School Boards

Each chapter presents a real-life scenario, drawn from Farber's contacts with teachers through conversations, posts on blogs, emails, and other forms of communication. The scenarios are followed by discussions containing thoughts from additional teachers, as well as a list of suggestions Farber describes as "practicable, applicable recommendations for administrators and teacher leaders" (p. xvi).

It is fair to say that while there is no one single reason causing teachers to leave the profession, a large number of the reasons that influence them, and which Farber explores in this book, could be generally classified as experiencing a lack of respect. That lack of respect applies to skill, knowledge, work conditions, salary, treatment by administrators, and treatment by parents.

Let's focus on working conditions for a moment. Teachers have far less flexibility for things like bodily functions and meals than do most menial workers. There are also issues with unhealthy buildings, use of toxic substances to clean. There are real issues of safety. Imagine you have a college degree. Now imagine you may have to go three hours without being able to take a bathroom break, or that you may have a lunch period as short as 15-20 minutes to yourself. That is the real world of conditions for many teachers.

Or consider this. A significant proportion of teachers, particularly at the elementary level, are female. If they are starting families, and wish to breast feed an infant, is there any provision for a teacher to express milk during the school day? Or is our solution going to be that we are going to exclude nursing mothers from being in the classroom, even though we might thereby diminish the pool of highly qualified and effective teachers?

Farber offers thoughtful comments from teachers on all the topics she covers. Because the impact of testing is perhaps the most covered of these, I will not explore the valuable material she offers on that topic. But we should not avoid exploring the related topic of ever-higher expectations. Even without the imposition of such higher expectations, responsible teachers already feel crushed by the demands on the time they have. Increasingly, the demands "are not directly related to teaching students" which as Farber notes, is often the main motivation for teachers to be in the classroom. She also writes:

This state of affairs is exhausting and dispiriting. Many teachers shared that they simply don't have enough time to do everything that they feel they should be doing. And it is eroding their personal and professional lives. (p. 44)

The advice offered by veteran teachers is to set limits, as one experience suggests to no more than 9 hours of school-related work daily. Yet this can create conflicts for those really dedicated to their students. If, for example, I were to limit my workday to 9 hours, of which 7.5 were in school, how could I conceivably read and correct papers from the vast majority of my 192 students in order for those corrections to be part of a meaningful learning experience? Do I limit the amount of work I assign in order to keep up with it? Do I shortchange the feedback to which my students are entitled? Do I allow the responsibilities of effective teaching to consume time that should be available for things outside of my school responsibilities? None of the three choices is truly acceptable, yet in reality for many teachers such are the options from which they can choose. Choices like this are just one example of the pressures that many good teachers experience, and that can help drive them from the profession.

Hopefully by now you have a sense that that book will connect you with the real experience of real teachers. The structure provides not merely their reactions, but a context from which those reactions flow, as well as material that can help ameliorate some of the problems that are contributing to our losing some of the teachers we really want to keep.

Just that justifies purchasing the book as a valuable reference tool. But that is not all one gets from this book. The final four pages of text, 153-156, are under the title of “Afterward: Final Thoughts” and these pages bring together final conclusions from the wealth of material Farber has provided. There are three sections, titled respectively, Why Teachers Teach,: To Educational Leaders, Policy Makers and Politicians; and To Teachers. In the first, Farber tells that most teachers look beyond the challenges discussed in the book.

They tend to be idealists. They strive constantly to improve their teaching, public education, and the lives of their students. It is our responsibility as citizens, educational leaders, parents, and politicians to support them in doing so. (p. 153)

In the 2nd, directed to those who are not teachers but have a great influence on education, Farber offers 4 points, the last of which is this:

Elevate the dialogue about public education by infusing your comments, thoughts, and ideas about education with respect for the hard work that teachers are doing in America. As you may have noticed from this book and several others like it, teaching is no easy task. Before making broad and sweeping pronouncements about education, think how your comments will forward the goals of educating children and supporting teachers. (p. 155)

Speaking as a teacher, were the public dialogue about education more respectful about teachers, we would likely be less resentful of others who do not understand the task of teaching and seek to impose “solutions” without regard to the real welfare of the students who are our primary concern.

Farber concludes with words directed towards teachers. You have already read, at the very beginning of this review, her final words. In this final portion of the book she refers to words by Jonathan Kozol about making the classroom “a better and more joyful place than when [the students] entered it” (from his *Letters to a Young Teacher*). Kozol also reminds us that we cannot let our concern for professional decorum overwhelm and suppress our very human need to reach out to and comfort our students. Farber concludes her quoting of Kozol with words from p. 208 of that book directed to teachers: “A battle is beginning for the soul of education, and they must be its ultimate defenders.”

Farber wants teachers to remember why we got into education, to reconnect with our beliefs, use those to fuel our energy. Or as she puts in the final sentence of her penultimate paragraph on p. 156: “Remember your core beliefs about life, learning, and teaching, and then let them guide and refresh you.”

For public education to properly serve our students and our society, we must focus on quality teachers. They are the most important in-school factor. We certainly do not

want to discourage the best of them, to continue to see them leave the profession out of frustration.

This is a book by a teacher, with words of teachers, about teachers, and about the challenges they face. It can remind those of us who do teach why we do so, not only to reconnect us with our core beliefs, but also to motivate us to speak up beyond our individual classrooms on behalf of the well-being of our students and the ultimate success of public schools.

The book is also something that others concerned with education should read with care, if for no other reason that no meaningful improvement in public education can occur without a solid and continuing cadre of dedicated and committed and highly skilled teachers. Insofar as politicians, policy makers and others ignore that, they will undermine the possibilities of any meaningful reform.

We can no longer continue the ongoing loss of skilled teachers. It costs too much financially. It costs even more in lost learning and benefits to our society.

I highly recommend that anyone concerned about the future of public education read and absorb this book. That would be a good start towards turning our discussions about educational policy in directions less destructive of the core of skilled teachers we have but we are losing.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views about the potential impact of the Bush administration's*



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