

# Teachers leaving the classroom

■ Low salary, high pressure may be producing shortage of teachers in state, county

By Dee Ann Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER, TOXEY — “I had 3 kids,” he says. “I couldn’t raise them on a teacher’s salary.”

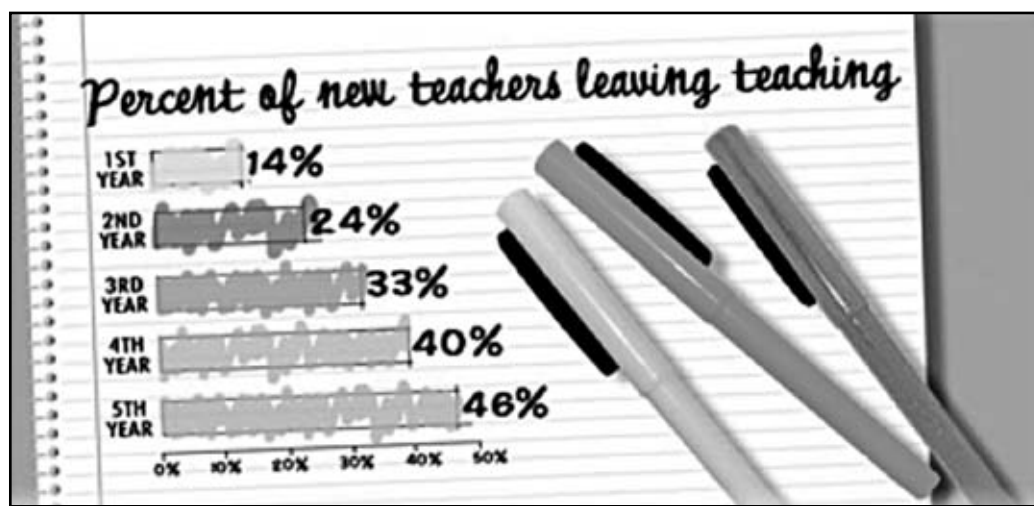
Sixteen years ago, he was a teacher in the Choctaw County School System. It was, he says, a field that he enjoyed, one that allowed him to do what he loved to do — work with children.

But for the past 13 years, Tommy Keeton of Butler has not worked as an educator. Instead, he has been employed in another field altogether — one that pays more than double what he made in the classroom.

Keeton is one of a staggering number of teachers who have opted to leave the classroom, and their ranks are growing to an unprecedented level.

From low salaries to high stress, a growing number of teachers are opting out of the classroom for other forms of employment, and fewer young people are choosing education as a career. According to the National Education Association (NEA) and the Alabama Education Association (AEA), the problem is reaching epidemic proportions.

According to a report by Governor Bob Riley’s Commission on Quality Teaching (GCQT), about 14% of teachers in the United States leave the classroom after the first year. Another 24% leave by the end of the 2nd year, and by the fifth



Courtesy of Alabama Education Association.

year, up to 46% of teachers have opted to leave the field.

By the year 2008, there is expected to be a nationwide deficit of more than 2.5 million teachers.

A recent editorial by District 65 Representative Marc Keahey revealed that the state of Alabama has a significant teacher shortage that is even greater than that of other states.

“Although teacher shortages are occurring nationwide,” Keahey’s statement read, “the problem has grown substantially large in our state. Of 100 school systems that responded to a survey conducted by the Alabama Department of Education, 98 reported that they have a teacher shortage.”

For Keeton, the issue was one of making ends meet as the primary wage-earner for his family. Low salaries are, in fact, one of the primary reasons cited by teachers who have chosen to leave the profession, as well as young people who choose not to go into it at all.

“One thing that didn’t seem right to me,” says Keeton, “was that here you are with your degree teaching a high school kid, and he goes on to graduate and make lot more money than you do.”

Nationally, average teacher salary growth often fails to keep up with inflation. The American Teachers Federation (AFT) reported in 2005 that teachers in the United States earned 18 cents for every new dollar earned in other professions from 1994 to 2004.

For teachers in Alabama, salaries are even lower. In fact, the state’s educators make less than those in most other states. According to the AFT, the state ranks 43rd in the nation in teacher pay, a fact that keeps the state from being able to recruit and keep highly qualified teachers in its public schools.

Even with recent pay raises, Alabama teachers are still significantly below the national average when it comes to salaries. This year, salaries for state-employed teachers registered only a modest increase over the previous year, still lagging behind the inflation rate, according to the 2006 AFT Public Employees Compensation Survey.

According to Keahey, on average, teachers in the state’s public schools earn about \$31,000 annually — a figure that is only \$5,000 higher than that earned by Keeton 16

years ago.

Coupled with the low salary, Keeton says that one of the issues that affect many teachers’ decisions to leave the teaching profession is job insecurity between school years.

“It’s hard to just sit around every summer not knowing if you have a job or not,” he says. “You have to work so long before you get tenure. You need to know you have a job.”

Even with the negative issues associated with his teaching career, Keeton struggled with his decision to leave.

“The mill called me first in 1985,” he recalls. “I said ‘no’. But then they called me again in 1991, and I took the job.”

During the last few years of his employment with the county’s school system, Keeton taught history and P.E. at Choctaw County High School, subjects that typically see less of a turnover than some other subjects. It is particularly difficult to find and retain teachers in subject areas like math and science. According to recent reports by the American Association for Employment in Education, current shortages of licensed teachers are most severe in these subject areas.

That fact has been seen locally in the shortage of math teachers that has plagued CCHS. Over the past few years, the school has struggled to meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals, with math being the subject area most often lacking on assessments. Last year, the school made all AYP goals, including math, and this year is a crucial year for the school to be cleared of its ‘school improvement’ status.

But the lack of math

teachers in the critical junior high grade levels could cause the school more of a struggle in meeting those goals.

According to the AEA, teacher shortages in the coming years could not only be seen in areas traditionally harder to fill like math, but in all areas of instruction — including elementary grades where there has traditionally been no lack of teachers to fill positions.

But the number of teachers who are leaving the classroom is not the only reason for the teacher shortage. A large number of teachers are now approaching retirement. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost half of all elementary and high school teachers were 45 years old or older in 1998. These teachers will become eligible to retire during the next decade.

And when they leave there may not be enough new teachers to replace them. According to the NEA, fewer and fewer young people who are entering college are choosing to pursue teaching as a career. Most are opting for higher paying careers that offer less stress, more opportunities for advancement, and more job security.

Those who do choose education as a career often do so because of what they consider a calling to work with young people. For some, the low salary is offset by what they feel are compensations far greater than monetary gain.

After several years as a teacher, Nina Butler left her classroom at South Choctaw Academy to take a job with the postal service. The new job offered her what she considered better benefits and a chance to move up in position.

But after only a few months on her new job, Butler found herself longing to return to the classroom.

“I thought I was doing the right thing when I left,” she says. “But I just couldn’t stop thinking about my students. I even dreamed about lesson plans and things I wanted to do with my classes.”

After only a short few months’ absence, Butler returned to SCA and resumed her former role.

“I’m back where I

belong,” she says. “I should have never left. I missed it so much.”

But for most former teachers who have left the classroom, the necessity of a bigger paycheck and better benefits often keeps them from returning, even though they still have a desire to work with young people.

“I miss the coaching part of it mostly,” says Keeton. “I did come back and coach awhile as a volunteer.”

Although Keeton left the classroom before the implementation of No Child Left Behind, teachers today cite not only low pay but high stress levels brought on by the increase in assessments and documentation. They also emphasize an inability to show creativity in the classroom because of intense pressure to produce high scores on assessments.

While the numbers of teachers are dwindling, the numbers of students are climbing. In 2000, a record 53 million students entered public schools across the country, and high enrollment numbers have continued since then.

The large numbers of students brings about a double-sided challenge. With more teachers retiring, more leaving the field, and few entering it, classroom sizes are inevitably growing larger, and those larger class sizes are one of the reasons for teacher dissatisfaction in the first place.

In an effort to combat the shortage of teachers in Alabama, Governor Riley recently established the GCQT to recommend ways to continually increase the number of educators in Alabama public schools. Some of the initial recommendations by the commission include Teacher Incentive Pay Pilot Programs, Teacher Preparation and Recruitment Pilot Programs, and Statewide Mentoring Programs.

In particular, the state is promoting the importance of teaching as a career, gearing their efforts toward high school students who soon will be choosing their fields of study. The Alabama Department of Education, along with the AEA, have developed TEACH ALABAMA, an innovative approach to attracting young people to the field of education. The program allows high school students to earn credits for spending time in classrooms while getting hands-on experience in teaching.

Yet the goal is to not only recruit students to become teachers, but to keep those teachers in the state of Alabama. According to Rep. Keahey, to do so is critical to the education of Alabama’s children.

“We must work harder to attract new people to the profession,” Keahey states, “and to keep the quality teachers that we already have; our children’s future depends on it.”

The efforts may be too late to get those who have left the field to return. But, Keeton says, he still has that option, should he decide — like Nina Butler — to go back to the classroom.

“When I made the move, I knew I would still have my degree,” Keeton says. “If I ever decided to go back, I could.”

But, like most other teachers who are leaving to find more money and less stress, with his current salary more than double what he would earn as a teacher, the chances of Keeton returning to the classroom are slim.



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