The challenge of retaining beginning teachers, particularly in shortage areas such as special education, math, and science, has long been the focus of both research and special induction programs at universities and in school districts. The difficulty of retaining mid-career teachers, however, has received little attention in comparison. Such teachers—those with six or more years of classroom experience—can face frustrations, question their career choice, and look for growth opportunities outside of the profession. Principals aren’t always equipped with sound strategies to retain such teachers, who typically are at their prime and have much to contribute to their classrooms, their teacher colleagues, and the entire school community.

To implement successful strategies, however, it’s important to understand and recognize the teaching trajectory. According to Ralph Fessler and Judith Christensen, authors of The Teacher Career Cycle, teachers evolve through eight stages: pre-service, induction, competency building, enthusiasm and growth, frustration, stability but stagnation, wind down, and exit. The authors report that teachers in the competency-building stage focus on meeting students’ needs. Those in the level characterized by enthusiasm and growth experience success, experiment with new ideas, and make long-term goals for teaching. In “The Professional Cycle of Teachers” (1989), Michael Huberman calls these the stabilization years.

These researchers agree that the next career stage is the crucial one. At about the seven-year mark, Huberman writes that teachers might take one of two paths: the experimentation/diversification path or the shock-taking/interrogation path. Fessler and Christensen say the frustration stage occurs when teachers question their presence and longevity in the classroom, discovering that they no longer are challenged or stimulated by the daily routine of teaching. Faced with the prospect of many years of boredom with many more years before retirement, some leave the profession in an attempt to find themselves. The following practical suggestions are aimed at addressing the seven-year itch and keeping...
Year Itch
the best and brightest teachers interested, engaged, and connected.

Inside the Classroom

Principals can make several classroom-related opportunities to keep teachers enthusiastic.

Advise and coach. Many teachers have a passion for a hobby or a sport and are eager to share their interest with students. Offer teachers the opportunity to establish student clubs or become advisors to existing clubs that take advantage of their outside interests and expertise—chess, photography, journalism, the environment, pets, dance—nearly any activity will do. Teachers who enjoy a particular sport can become coaches or assistant coaches. Perhaps the presence of a popular teacher on a sports team will encourage more students to participate.

Teach an extra class. Credentialed teachers can often take on an extra class, giving them an opportunity to become proficient in another subject area. Principals can take stock of the credentials teachers hold and ask them if they would like to teach in that subject area. Doing so can remind them of their interest in a content area, alleviate classroom crowding, and prevent the need to hire additional teachers.

Change grade levels. Consider the possibility that teachers may need a grade-level change. By initiating such conversations, principals send the message that it’s acceptable—sometimes even appropriate—to switch teaching assignments.

Teach a new class. Offer teachers the opportunity to teach a new group: parents of your students and other adults. Principals can contact the adult-education department of their district to propose classes that meet the specific needs of their students’ parents or the community at large. Some schools host adult classes in the evenings or late afternoons, soon after dismissal. Teachers can help non-English-speaking adults learn English, low-literate adults become proficient readers, and adults who don’t have a high school diploma earn one or a GED in the

comfort and familiarity of their own school or classroom.

Learn a new skill. Principals can arrange for classes on their campus and offer them to teachers at their school and in the district in such areas as foreign languages, CPR and first aid, and grant-writing, just to name a few. Or principals can collaborate with a local community college or university to bring classes on site that help teachers earn professional development credits they need to renew their teaching credentials.

Trade places. Encourage some teachers to trade classrooms and students for several days a week, while making sure that teachers get time to plan lessons and become familiar with the new demands of a new classroom. This opportunity can also help students transition from one grade level to the next or from the elementary or middle levels to high school—an activity recognized by a growing number of schools. This opportunity is a great way for teachers to stretch their imaginations and enrich their classroom skills and techniques. In addition, both groups of students benefit greatly by the different approaches and experiences of each teacher.

Offer coordinator positions. Many administrators who fill coordinator positions with outside experts can just as easily fill them with current teachers who then serve with “teacher on assignment” status. For example, a special-education teacher who moves into a gifted education coordinator position can help ensure that special education students are part of the gifted identification process. Principals can also consider offering teachers opportunities to serve as coordinators of testing, ESL initiatives, field trips, guest presenters, or schoolwide activities and events. Teachers from the inside already know the student population, parents and siblings, and the community, thus becoming instrumental in helping students make important academic gains.

Consider leadership roles. Mid-career teachers are prime candidates for leadership positions. Because of their

Summer Programs and Institutes

Principals and teachers can find a world of summer programs, institutes, and workshops to attend for professional development, and it’s not too early to begin planning for 2010. The following are just a few of the opportunities available. To find others, simply search the Internet using the phrase “summer workshops for elementary educators.”

The National Endowment for the Humanities offers seminars and institutes that range from two to six weeks and are held in various locations throughout the country and overseas. www.neh.gov

The National Gallery of Art offers six-day institutes; gallery managers make efforts to select educators from various regions of the country. www.nga.gov/education/teacinstr.htm

NASA Education offers several programs for educators and students. One program seeks Teacher Ambassadors for the Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland. Financial aid is provided. http://education.nasa.gov/home/index.html

Ashland University provides free one-week institutes for social studies teachers throughout the country. Meals and housing are provided and each teacher receives a stipend. http://teachingamericanhistory.org/institutes

The University of New Hampshire offers workshops specifically designed to improve teaching in math, science, and engineering. http://leitzelcenter.unh.edu/events.html
mastery of teaching and youthful vigor, most will be able to maintain their teaching load while accepting additional responsibilities. Appropriate leadership positions include school-based opportunities such as serving as mentor teachers or department chairs. They also might include some external opportunities such as serving on advisory committees important to the community—women’s and health centers, hospitals, colleges and universities, and religious organizations. For example, teachers who work with at-risk students might offer training for fire and police department personnel to help them recognize and effectively respond to at-risk or special-education students. Such training is sorely needed in many communities to help protect the public, maintain the integrity of an investigation, and respect the needs of individuals.

Teach workshops. As previously noted, mid-career teachers typically have excellent teaching and classroom skills that deserve to be shared. Offer them paid opportunities to present workshops for other teachers in their building or district. Encourage them to share strategies that work in classroom management, attention-span issues, and modality-specific instruction to name a few areas. Encourage mid-career teachers to offer the workshop at a district or regional conference by helping to fund their travel expenses.

Write teachers’ guides. While teachers are often told what to teach, they aren’t always given good guidance about how to do so effectively. Ask mid-career teachers to help new teachers by writing and publishing teachers’ guides that align with both state standards and those at the district level. Ask the teachers to provide tried-and-true suggestions on how to teach the standards and include a list of resources. Remind mid-career teachers that by helping new teachers gain knowledge and expertise, their sphere of teaching influence extends to the novice teachers’ students.

Outside the Classroom
Principals also can help mid-career teachers shake the seven-year itch by making them aware of opportunities outside of the classroom and the school building.

Travel and learn. There are numerous summer workshops, seminars, and institutes of varying length specifically designed for teachers. The National Endowment for the Humanities, for example, teachers who work with at-risk students might offer training for fire and police department personnel to help them recognize and effectively respond to at-risk or special-education students. Such training is sorely needed in many communities to help protect the public, maintain the integrity of an investigation, and respect the needs of individuals.

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Reach out to career consultants. Wise principals acknowledge that mid-career teachers are struggling with career decisions. Ignoring the often obvious signs that a highly experienced teacher may leave the profession is counter-productive, to say the least. Principals can sometimes help by bringing career counselors into the building to specifically address mid-career teachers’ boredom and frustrations and offer them alternatives. Of course, the principal should meet with the career counselor prior to bringing him or her into the building.

It is likely that mid-career teachers can expect to feel the boredom of that seven-year itch and will start to question their longevity in the classroom. Take steps to address it and keep these teachers where they are needed most—with students.

Through unique opportunities at school or outside of school, teachers can discover new interests, nurture new or revitalized talents, and engage in novel social or business ventures. Keeping their energies channeled in adventuresome directions will allow these mid-career teachers to remain mentally stimulated in the classroom—and will keep principals’ summers free from interviewing and hiring another teacher!

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Example, offers a series of programs just for teachers on such topics as literature, architecture, history, religion, and creativity. Even better, the program provides funding for travel, housing, and meals. Make sure teachers know about such opportunities and encourage them to apply for them. (See sidebar on page 20 for information about a few of these opportunities.)

Export expertise. Principals can help teachers learn a new language or polish their second-language skills by hosting educational programs in another country. A school district in Albemarle County, Virginia, for example, enables its Spanish teachers to take non-Spanish-speaking colleagues to Guatemala to study Spanish and learn about another culture. The district pays for much of the travel expenses. When school districts offer to offset some of the travel costs, they can retain experienced teachers who gain deeper proficiency in a second—or third—language.
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