

Teacher turnover in Durham 7th highest in state

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WASHINGTON -- The way U.S. Rep. David Price sees it, No Child Left Behind isn't living up to its name.

America's school children are in danger of being left behind, the Democrat from Chapel Hill says of President Bush's signature education legislation, enacted in 2001 and coming up for renewal this fall.

And to better serve children, Price says, the law must better serve teachers -- especially in the area of curbing teacher turnover.

"We need to identify the challenges and make it something that improves education, and not just something that labels schools as failing," Price said in an interview.

Teacher turnover is no small issue in the Durham Public Schools.

After the 2005-2006 school year, DPS had the seventh-highest percentage of teacher turnover in the state -- losing 442 of its 2,302 teachers.

"We've got to encourage teachers to stay in the classroom," said Price, on leave while in Congress from his job as a Duke University political science professor. "Whether it's supporting their professional development, providing them with the tools to perform their work, or contributing to a more positive work environment, the states and local districts have the awareness to come up with solutions. And at the federal level, we should help spark the innovation."

In May, Price outlined for the House Education and Labor Committee his teacher recruitment and retention proposals for No Child Left Behind. One would give grants to states and schools that develop new ways to retain teachers.

N.C. State University's Kenan Fellows Program is one model Price hopes can be replicated across the country.

During their two-year fellowships, public school teachers work with scientists and researchers to develop unconventional, hands-on projects to spark student interest.

Matthew Sears of Durham's New Tech High School at Hillside High, is a 2006 Kenan fellow. The ninth-grade algebra teacher is working on a math-focused video game.

"It's not just a review game or Jeopardy," Sears said. "It's actually on par with real video games that kids play in their homes. The games themselves are very engaging."

The Durham school system is using a program from the University of California at Santa Cruz to try to stem teacher attrition -- 35 veteran teachers mentor their first- and second-year colleagues.

"That's their full-time job, serving in the neighborhood of 15-18 teachers each," said Fred Williams, DPS executive director of recruitment and retention. "It's like a masters' class in art" -- veteran teachers instructing younger ones how to make assignments interesting.

Williams said that in the two years the program has been in place, there has been a 46 percent reduction in Durham's teacher turnover.

"One thing that is being explored -- this is a strong interest of mine -- is that the federal government is looking into making funds available [to help the mentoring of teachers]," Williams said.

In 2005, Duke University donated \$300,000 to help underwrite the mentoring program.

The American Federation of Teachers, a union representing more than 1.4 million educators nationally, issued a recent report suggesting ways to find and keep teachers in "hard-to-staff" schools.

"We don't have to reinvent the wheel to figure out how to recruit and retain teachers in challenging areas. We can learn from districts that have had success," said Edward McElroy, AFT president.

AFT's recommendations include "establishing and maintaining safe and orderly schools," and "targeting professional development to best address the needs of teachers and staff."

New Tech High's Sears said giving teachers a say in how schools are run would help improve education.

"I need to feel personally that I am valuable to, not just the school, but the school system," Sears said. "I think a lot of teachers get frustrated because we're marginalized. There are administrators that say 'You just do your job, and I'll do everything else.' Our ideas are not welcomed or utilized."

No Child Left Behind and its "trickle-down effects" have harmful effects in the classroom, Sears said.

"In the effort to teach for the tests, students become less and less individualistic, and more and more generic," he said.

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MORE ON TEACHER TURNOVER

N.C. teacher turnover rates 2005-06 school year

-- Durham: 19.2 percent

-- North Carolina: 12.6 percent

-- Highest rate: 25.8 percent (Bertie County)

-- Lowest rate: 2.2 percent (Mitchell County)

Top 10 attrition reasons given by N.C. teachers

2005-06 school year

1. Resigned to teach elsewhere
2. Retirement
3. Family relocation
4. Other/Unknown reason
5. Family responsibility
6. Career change
7. Return to retirement
8. Continue education
9. Failure to obtain/retain license
10. Not rehired after interim contract

Source: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org>