

The Role of Support in Preventing Emotional Exhaustion of Beginning Teachers and Keeping Them in the Profession

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Abstract

In the context of a five-year NSF sponsored teacher retention and renewal project, a study was conducted to determine (1) the “burn-out” levels of newer teachers working in the project districts and (2) the key items that supported or stressed them as they were socialized into their profession. Most salient findings were that significantly more non-project participants felt emotionally exhausted and stated that they were likely to leave the profession than project participants; **Highest aspect of support is collaboration with colleagues (one of the main features of the project) and project and non-project participants alike gain most satisfaction from making a difference in the lives of the children with whom they work. Though both groups had similar perceptions of the stressors of teaching, the project group had more emotional resources for coping with these stressors.**

Key Words

mathematics; professional development; teacher emotional and intellectual support; teacher stress; teacher burnout

Introduction

The current environment in which teachers work often places them under stress. Teacher stress can be defined as the result of an imbalance between the demands that are placed on them in their schools and classrooms and the resources that the particular teacher has for coping with these demands (Esteve, 2000; Troman & Woods, 2001). To put this more formally teacher stress can be defined as a psychological state in which a teacher perceives and reacts to events or circumstances, whether internal or external, real or imagined, in manner that unduly taxes or exceeds their resources for coping. Early research on teacher stress has indicated that combinations of lack of time to plan, disruptive students, poor work conditions and lack of administrative support a few of the main causes for this stress in teachers (Raschke, 1985, Russell, 1987, Schwab, 1986). These early papers indicate that little is known about what teachers consider to be the assets of teaching and those factors that would support teachers in their times of stress (Raschke, 1985).

In the current political climate in California, the combination of overcrowded classrooms, pressures from high stakes testing, attacks on public education, state accountability pressures and a general lack of respect for the teaching profession on top of these previously reported stressors has put teachers at particularly high risk. Reliance on state standards and pressure to “teach to the test” has taken curricular control away from the classroom teacher with loss of control being a well known

cause of stress. (PUT REFERENCE HERE) Symptoms of stress include anxiety and frustration, impaired performance at the job, and a deterioration of interpersonal relationships (Kyriacou, 2001).

Although it has long been acknowledged that the work that teachers do is often stressful, systematic research on teacher stress has not been forthcoming. A study by Lachman and Diamont (1987) hypothesized that interpersonal relationships, management and school functioning influence teachers turnover intentions. We have found no studies to date that report empirical studies of programs designed to test this hypothesis or indeed systematic studies that report on the effects of teacher development or support programs designed to alleviate stress. Unfortunately, teachers who experience continued stress often start to feel burn-out and burn out leads to leaving the profession (Travers & Cooper, 1996). According to Maslach and Jackson (1981) there are three components of burn-out: *emotional exhaustion*, *depersonalization* and loss of feelings of *personal accomplishment*. Depersonalization is said to occur when a teacher distances herself from her work and from others and views everything from an impersonal level. Emotional exhaustion is when ones emotional resources—ability to deal with stress becomes depleted. And a person with loss of personal accomplishment starts to devalue the work that they do with others and to feel that they are not making a difference.

Project RENEW, the project in which this study is set responds to both the need to better support experienced and newer teachers in the profession and to the need to improve the training and quality of educators who are involved with the teaching of mathematics – a need that has been made

evident in the documented shortage of qualified math teachers at the secondary level, as well as a lack of proper training in math content for elementary school teachers.

In Project RENEW, cohorts of experienced teachers (called Preceptors) from neighboring districts receive intensive professional development and support over a three-year period as they develop and implement strategies to offer intellectual and emotional support to newer teachers in their schools and districts. Together Preceptors and Preceptees (the newer teachers) participate in after-school Mathematics Education Professional Seminars (MEPS), visit each others (as well as other experienced teachers) classrooms to observe, teach model lessons, and reflect on mathematics teaching and learning on a regular basis and meet on a one-to-one basis as needed. Project RENEW differs from other teacher retention programs in that it is content-specific, focusing on the mathematics classroom, that teachers in their first five years of teaching can participate in RENEW (unlike the two year restriction in other programs, and most importantly, that it focuses on building relationships among teachers. In order to build relationships to better support teachers, RENEW uses certain structures that are based on the idea of constructivist listening (Weissglass, 1990).

Put in here the history of constructivist listening and the lack of anything being done about stress in teachers despite the research. Summarize the part of the Constructivist Listening paper on why feelings have been ignored. I think you should say what the structures are that provide the remedy to emotional exhaustion and help in building collegial relationships. Mention the guidelines as well and why they are important.

During the past 5 years we have conducted evaluation studies to test the effects of Project Project RENEW, a 5-year project designed to both retain beginning and experienced teacher's in the profession and to help them implement effective and equitable mathematics practices in their

classrooms, on outcomes for teachers. Our findings indicate that RENEW (1) develops the leadership capacity of experienced teachers such that they are able to incorporate personal supportive relationships into the work that they do with newer teachers as well as becoming change agents for equitable practices in their schools and districts (O'Rode, et al, 2005); (2) meets the self-expressed needs of the newer teachers that is serves in terms of pedagogical content knowledge, such as addressing their need for ideas and materials for hands-on mathematics and emotional and intellectual support within a collegial environment (Hough, et a., 2004); while (3) enabling both experienced and beginning teachers to develop important mathematics content and pedagogy (Hough, et al, 2006, 2007). After two years 97 % of beginning teachers who participated in at least 15 hours of activities per year and 94% of those who participated in at least 10 hours of activities per year were still in the profession.

This article reports findings from an evaluation study designed to explore burn-out and job satisfaction levels of RENEW participating beginning teachers and compare it to that of non-participating teachers, as well as gain insight into factors that these teachers themselves feel contribute to their source of job satisfaction and those which cause them stress.

Methodology

Prospective participants were randomly selected from one of four of the RENEW cases study districts—districts that had been purposefully selected at the beginning of the project. We call these districts District 1, District 2, District 3 and District 4 for convenience. Districts 1 and 4 are large districts (over 16,000 students) in contrast to Districts 2 and 3 that are small districts (under 5,000

students). Districts 1 and 2 differ from Districts 3 and 4 in student populations with regards to ethnicity: District 1: 96.6% students of color; District 2: 92% students of color; District 3 57% students of color; and District 4 34% students of color. Districts 1 and 3 have experienced long-term partnerships with the university in which this project is housed and with other projects led by these particular faculty and educators, the other two districts had not.

From each of these districts 15 beginning teachers who had participated in RENEW for one or more year and 15 beginning teachers (in their first five years of teaching) who had participated in no RENEW activities were sent a questionnaire consisting of *the Maslach Teacher Burnout Inventory* (Maslach, 1996) and a series of RENEW-researcher designed questions. Questionnaires were sent during February 2006 and participants were given a two week period to respond. The *Maslach Inventory* consists of 22 forced choice items that comprise three subscales: *Personal Accomplishment* (PA), *Emotional Exhaustion* (EE) and *Depersonalization* (DP) Examples of items corresponding to each of these are given in Figure 1 below.

Emotional Exhaustion:

I feel burned out from my work.
I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.

Depersonalization:

I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally
I feel students blame me for some of their problems.

Personal Accomplishment:

I deal very effectively with the problems of my students
I feel I am positively influencing other people's lives through my work.

Figure 1. *Example items for the three Burn-Out constructs.*

To gain additional insight in participants feelings of job burnout we asked three additional forced choice items and three open ended items in the *Sources of Teacher Satisfaction and Stress Questionnaire*. This set of questions displayed in figure 2. below.

1. *How long do you plan to remain in teaching?*

- a. As long as I am able.
- b. Until I am eligible for retirement.
- c. Until something better comes along.
- d. I plan to leave teaching.

2. If you could go back to your college days would you choose teaching as a career again?

- a. Certainly
- b. Probably
- c. Chances are about even
- d. Certainly not.

3. Place numbers one to five next to the items on the following list corresponding to their importance as a newer teacher.

- Opportunities for collaboration with other teachers
- Ideas and materials for lessons
- A supportive principal
- Opportunities for continued learning
- A mentor to observe and give feedback.

4. List those parts of your job that give you pleasure or satisfaction. What is it about the item at the top of your list that makes you feel the way you do?

5. List those parts of your job that cause you stress. What specifically about these things make them stressful?

6. As a relatively new member of the teaching profession, what supported you as you became socialized into your field. What hindered you?

Figure 2. *Sources of Teacher Satisfaction and Stress Questionnaire*

Those teachers responding to the questionnaire were given a small stipend (\$25.00) for their participation.

Analysis

The Maslach variables, EE (Emotional Exhaustion), PA (Personal Accomplishment) and DP (Depersonalization) were calculated by summing the responses to items associated with the corresponding subscale. The frequencies of participants scoring in the high, moderate and low ranges on these Maslach variables were calculated and compared between RENEW and Non-RENEW groups using chi-square techniques.

Other forced choice items were similarly compared. The three open-ended items were analyzed using the constant comparative method. (Glasser & Straus, 1967).

Results

We experienced a very low return rate of our questionnaire, 35%, despite the fact that a stipend was offered. This indicated to us that the teachers did not have the time to fill out the questionnaire. However, since we received a comparable number of RENEW and non-RENEW participant responses we were able to continue with our analyses of these data.

Comparison of Maslach Variables

Table 1 and Figures 3, 4 and 5 below display the frequencies and percentages, respectively, of the *Maslach Burnout* variables compared between RENEW and Non-RENEW participants.

Table 1 goes here

Chi square analysis showed significant differences between the RENEW and Non-RENEW groups on the emotional exhaustion (EE) variable ($\chi^2 =$, $p=.05$). The non_RENEW group had a significantly higher level of *Emotional Exhaustion* than the RENEW group.

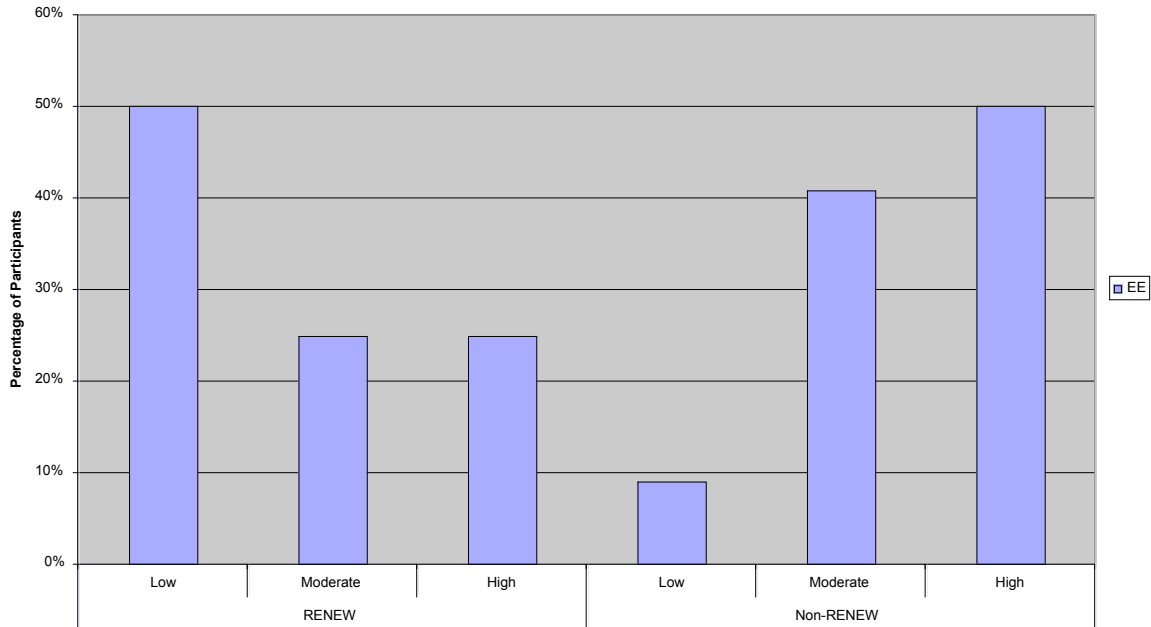


Figure 3. Comparison of RENEW and non-RENEW participants on Levels of Emotional Exhaustion

As can be seen by looking at figure 3, the patterns of levels of EE between groups are opposite. The RENEW group has the greatest number of its participants with low EE (50%) and the lowest number with high EE (25%), whereas the non-RENEW group has the greatest number of its participants (50 %) with high emotional exhaustion and only 9% with low EE. Figures 4 and 5 below show similar patterns between groups in regard to levels of Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment.

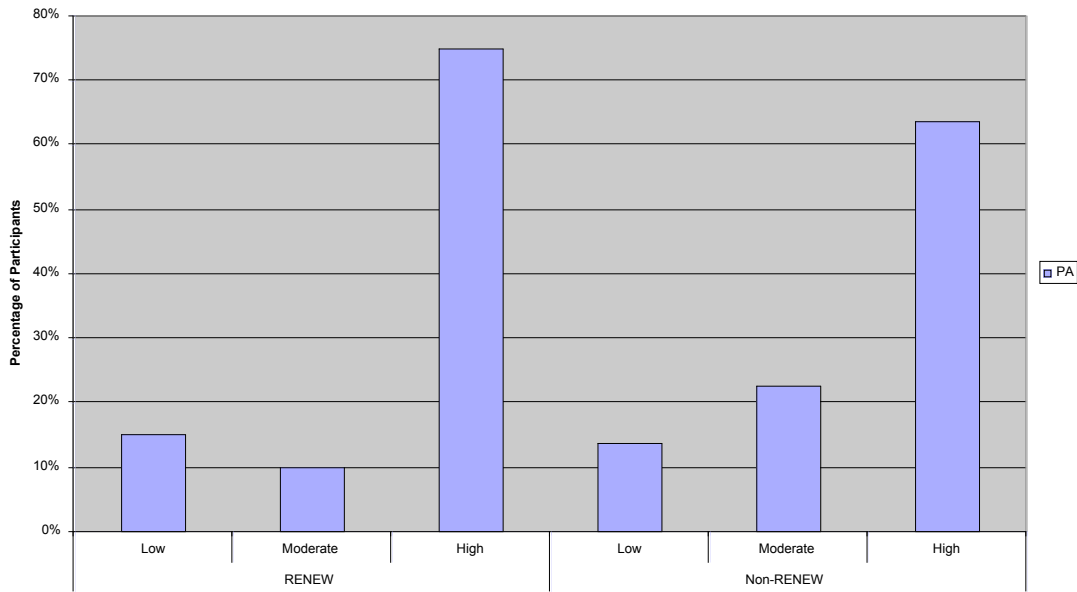


Figure 4. Comparison of RENEW and non-RENEW participants on Levels of Personal Accomplishment.

Seventy-five percent of RENEW and 65% of non-RENEW participants felt high levels of Personal Accomplishment, with only 15% and 14% of these groups, respectively feeling low levels of PA.

Non significant differences were found on this variable.

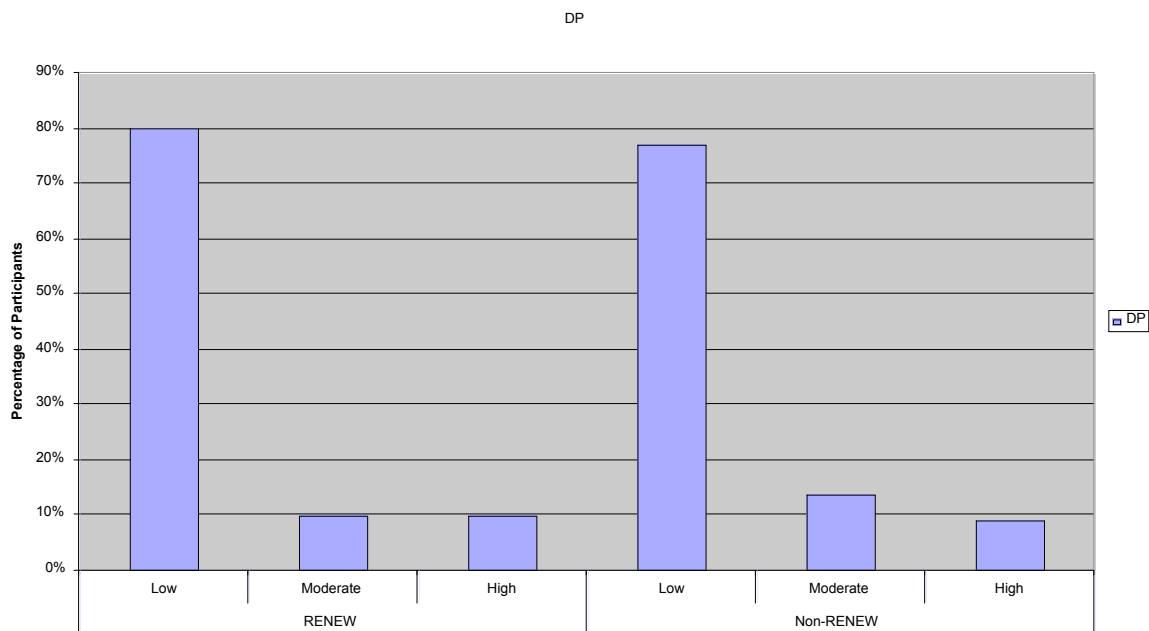


Figure 5. Comparison of RENEW and non-RENEW participants on Levels of Depersonalization.

Most participants in both groups felt low (desirable) levels of depersonalization. Eighty percent of RENEW and 77% of non-RENEW participants felt low levels of DP. Only 10% of RENEW and 9% of non-RENEW participants felt high (undesirable) levels on this variable. Results of comparisons between RENEW and non-RENEW participants on the Maslach variables suggests RENEW alleviates emotional exhaustion in participants. This builds on previous research results that indicate the relationship aspects of the project, in particular the emotional support that is given to beginning teachers from their more experienced mentors as well as from their new teacher peers in the communities built as part of the project. This collegial support, one of the main goals of RENEW, was found to be the most highly ranked source of support indicated in question 3 of the *Sources of Teacher Satisfaction and Stress questionnaire* that asked participants to rank order a list of five sources of support. Table 2 below illustrates the patterns of first and second choice responses

to these rankings. The opportunity to collaborate with colleagues is by far the most sort after form of support for teachers in both RENEW and non-RENEW groups.

Table 2 goes here

Coded responses from the content analysis conducted on question 6: *What supported you as you became socialized into the profession*, verified these findings with 75 % of RENEW and 86% of non-RENEW participants stating that collaboration with colleagues supported them.

Table 3 goes here

The examples below are representative of the RENEW and non-RENEW responses.

All of my colleagues including my principal and a superintendent that believed in me more than I did. (Non-RENEW)

What really helped was talking, sharing, and observing other teachers. Programs like BTSA do NOT work (at least not in my case). I think just being able to communicate with colleagues about day-to day things is extremely helpful. (RENEW).

Project RENEW has been a great place to gain support from other new teachers. Sharing ideas & experiences makes one feel much less emotionally isolated. (RENEW)

The RENEW support from colleagues specifically reference the experience sharing afforded them in the project .

How Long Do You Plan to Stay in the Teaching Profession?

Frequencies of responses to this item are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4 goes here

A chi square analysis showed significant differences between RENEW and Non-RENEW participants on answers to the above question ($\chi^2 = 7.6, p=.05$). Fifty four percent of the non-RENEW group planned to stay in the teaching profession in comparison to 70% of the RENEW group. These differences triangulate the retention figures for RENEW.

Would You Still Choose Teaching As A Career?

Although the non-RENEW group of teachers felt more emotional exhaustion than their RENEW counterparts and were more likely to leave the profession before retirement, both groups responded similarly when asked whether or not they would still choose teaching as a career. Frequencies of responses to this item are displayed in Table 5 below.

Table 5 goes here

Correlations Between Maslach Variables and Likelihood to Leave the Profession

Bivariate non-parametric correlations (Spearman's Rho) were run among Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Personal Accomplishment and Likelihood to Leave in the Profession. Positive correlations were found between Emotional Exhaustion and Likelihood to leave the Profession (Rho=.32, $p = .05$), Emotional Exhaustion and Likelihood to Choose Teaching as a Profession (Rho=.50, $p = .01$) and Depersonalization and Likelihood to Leave the Profession (Rho=.31, $p = .05$). A negative correlation was found between Personal Accomplishment and Likelihood to Choose Teaching as a Profession.

Sources of Stress versus Sources of Satisfaction

Our constant comparative analysis of responses to question 4 of the Sources of Teacher Satisfaction and Stress showed no differences between groups. The overwhelming message that came through in this data was that teachers, regardless of their burn-out levels, still gained a sense of satisfaction from working with their students. Forty-three of the 44 responses to question 4: *List those parts of your job that give you pleasure or satisfaction. What is it about these things that make you feel as you do?* Mentioned either teaching, learning from or just being part of the lives of students as a source of job satisfaction. Reasons for this satisfaction included: personal feelings of making a difference (sense of teaching efficacy), knowing that the job one is doing is important, feeling appreciated as an individual by the students, and having the personal satisfaction of knowing that one is helping others. Some example responses are given below.

Feeling that I am needed. Feeling important. Helping others. It is what I went into the teaching profession for. I wanted to make a difference and knew I could. (RENEW)

I know that the kids are grateful that I am part of their lives. They appreciate what I do for them. (non-RENEW)

I love knowing that I've helped a student learn and apply something. I feel like my job is important and this student will be a positive influence on society. (RENEW)

When I see my students feel good about themselves and the shine in their eyes about learning something new makes me sooo happy! (non-RENEW)

I love being a part of their lives. I enjoy giving them knowledge & language. I like being a role model. (RENEW)

Other sources of satisfaction that were evident in both RENEW and non-RENEW groups (in order of most prevalent) were:

1. Collegial relationships with other educators (34%)
2. Designing meaningful lessons and activities (20%)
3. Working in a job where there is room for creativity (7%)
4. The flexible schedule (7%)
5. Working with parents (7%)

An additional source that was mentioned by 9% of the RENEW participants was a feeling of collegiality with school and district administrators. We suggest that the close involvement of key district administrators with project RENEW fosters this sense.

What happens in my classroom is as creative as I can make it. I have a principal who trusts me as a professional (I feel fortunate) (RENEW)

Being given leadership roles in my district. (RENEW)

That I am looked up to as a leader by people at my school. (RENEW)

My principal is very supportive of me and has given me many opportunities. (RENEW)

We next analyzed participant responses to question 5, an open-ended question that asked participants to: *List those parts of your job that cause you stress. What specifically about these things make them stressful?* Though small differences in responses between groups existed, overall the group's responses reflected stressors similar to those found in previous research on teacher stress, such as paperwork, lack of time to plan, lack of district support, unmotivated and problems students, relationships with parents. In addition responses reflected stress in both groups from current changes in education such as the consequences of NCLB (continual testing of students) and focus on State content standards that are not inline with National Standards.

Table 6 goes here

Summary of Results

Our analyses have shown that although the sources of stress and satisfaction in both RENEW and non-RENEW teachers is similar: RENEW teachers are more likely to stay in the teaching profession than their non-renew colleagues with significantly fewer RENEW teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion than non-RENEW teachers. Furthermore Emotional exhaustion and likelihood to remain in the teaching profession are significantly correlated.

Discussion

(I'm working on rewording this next maybe you could add a few things Julian)

Although this study is limited by its small sample size, data from it suggest that by offering newer teachers emotional as well as intellectual support in a safe, collegial environment their feelings of burnout are diminished, in particular their levels of emotional exhaustion. Recall that in the definition, teacher stress occurs when a teacher perceives/reacts to events or circumstances in a way that exceed their resources for coping. Although both the RENEW and non-RENEW teachers in this study perceived the stressors in their schools and districts in similar ways the RENEW group had been given more resources for coping with these stressors.

In this climate of accountability, with its high stakes testing and other demands on educators different types of support structures that take into account the added stresses placed on teachers, especially those relatively new to the profession need to be put in place. RENEW is able to respond to teacher needs through the structures.....

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. *Example items for the three burn-out constructs.*

Figure 2. *Sources of Teacher Satisfaction and Stress Questionnaire*

Figure 3. *Comparison of RENEW and non-RENEW participants on Levels of Emotional Exhaustion.*

Figure 4. *Comparison of RENEW and non-RENEW participants on Levels of Personal Accomplishment.*

Figure 5. *Comparison of RENEW and non-RENEW participants on Levels of Depersonalization.*

Tables

Table 1. *Frequencies for RENEW and Non-RENEW participants on the Maslach Burnout variables*

	RENEW (N=20)			Non-RENEW (N=22)		
	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
Emotional Exhaustion	10	5	5	2	9	11
Personal Accomplishment	3	2	15	3	5	14
Depersonalization	16	2	2	17	3	2

Table 2. *Number and Percentages of RENEW and Non-RENEW Participants That Ranked as First or Second Choice of Highest Each Aspects of Teacher Support.*

	RENEW		Non RENEW	
	First Cho	Second Choice	First Choice	Second Choice
Collaboration with colleagues	12(60%)	5(25%)	11 (50%)	6(27%)
Ideas and materials	3(15%)	4(20%)	4 (18%)	3(14%)
Supportive Principal	3(15%)	3(15%)	4(18%)	7 (31%)
Continued Learning		3(15%)		3(14%)

Table 3. *Number and Percentage of Participants Writing About Categories of “support”.*

	RENEW	Non RENEW
Collaborating with colleagues	15(75%)	19(86%)
Continued learning/Professional development	9(45%)	3(13%)
Supportive principal & administration	8(40%)	10 (45%)
Ideas & materials	2(10%)	(1) 4%

Table 4. *Number and Percentages of Responses to: How Long do you Plan to Stay in the Teaching Profession?*

	RENEW (N=20)		NonRENEW (N=22)	
		Cummulative %		Cummulative %
As long as I am able	11 (55%)		8 (36%)	
Until retirement	3 (15%)	70%	4(18%)	54%
Until something better comes along	2 (10%)	80%	10 (45%)	99%
I plan to leave teaching	3* (15%)	100%	1 (4%)	100%

*These three responses were qualified by explaining that the teachers planned to leave the profession to start a family.

Table 5. *Number and Percentages of Responses to the Likelihood of Remaining in the Profession*

	RENEW (N=20)	Cummulative %	Non- RENEW (N=22)	Cummulative %
Certainly	11 (55%)		7 (32%)	
Probably	4 (20%)	75%	8 (36%)	68%
Chances are about even	5 (25%)	100%	6 (27%)	95%
Certainly Not	0		1 (5%)	100%

Table 6. *Responses and Their Frequencies to Question 5.*

	<i>Example response</i>	RENEW	Non-RENEW
<i>Paperwork and grading</i>	<i>Too many papers, not enough time to organize, superfluous tasks-paperwork, admin.</i>	5 (25%)	10 (45%)
<i>Lack of time to plan</i>	<i>Meetings, committees/extra responsibilities, so many of these that take away my ability to plan my teaching.</i>	2 (10%)	6 (28%)
<i>Lack of support from district</i>	<i>Change of schedule-from above (admin), no notice before change.</i>	2 (10%)	5 (23%)
<i>Standardized Testing</i>	<i>I feel stress that my students must do well on a test in order to be acknowledged as succeeding in school. I think this is stressful because it is hard to quantify a student's success in the classroom with just a number.</i>	2 (10%)	6 (27%)
<i>Focusing on Standards</i>	<i>Being required to devote time to teaching to standards that some K students are not ready for and that may be developmentally</i>	6 (30%)	4 (18%)

<i>Student</i>	<i>inappropriate for students at this level.</i>	5 (25%)	5 (23%)
<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Dealing with unmotivated students who do not care if they pass or fail or show up.</i>		
<i>Student Discipline</i>	<i>When students misbehave, it is stressful to manage</i>	4 (20%)	2 (10%)
<i>Parents</i>	<i>Unsupportive/critical parents</i>	4 (20%)	