

■ FOR SUBSCRIBERS NEWS

'I can't do this anymore.' Why are Ohio teachers leaving the classroom?

[Megan Henry](#) and [Michael Lee](#) The Columbus Dispatch

Published 6:00 a.m. ET Aug. 18, 2022

Jessica Bennett face-planted onto her bedroom carpet. It was May 2020, a few weeks before the school year would end, and she had just finished teaching a class remotely.

“I just remember uncontrollable, whole-body shaking, crying, and howling,” the 41-year-old Bexley resident said. “I had a mental breakdown. Summer couldn’t come quick enough.”

When COVID-19 forced schools into remote learning in March 2020, Bennett was working as an intervention specialist for Bexley Schools at Cassingham Elementary in front of a computer all day with a toddler, preschooler and a third-grader at home.

“I just remember feeling so overwhelmed and the emotions were so raw,” she said.

“I was like, ‘I can’t do this anymore,’” she said.

Bennett is part of an exodus of educators in Ohio and nationwide who have been leaving their jobs since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which magnified many issues in education that were bubbling beneath the surface.

Teachers and the Great Resignation: How our children are affected

With a new school year starting, so many teachers having left the profession could mean fewer teachers to staff classrooms, potentially larger class sizes and fewer course offerings for students. It also can make it harder for teachers to build quality relationships with their students and provide individual attention they may need with their learning.

Back-to-school news: Columbus teachers union closer to striking, college leaders attend anti-hazing summit

School safety, security upgrades: Ohio schools to receive nearly \$47 million in federal and state funds

Bennett said that it was impossible to do her job as an intervention specialist over a computer screen.

“I require — in order to help them move the needle in their learning — seeing them in 3D, even if it’s just the slightest twitch of a cheek muscle to know how they are thinking and feeling to know that their confident in what they're doing and then I can adjust,” she said.

Intervention specialists are bound by law to fulfill a student’s Individualized Educational Plan goals and measure progress.

“How do we make progress? You didn’t make progress because of the pandemic,” Bennett said.

She was hoping she would be able to rejuvenate over the summer, but she ultimately resigned from her job in July 2020 when child care for her youngest daughter fell through.

Fifty-five percent of educators said they were thinking about leaving their profession earlier than they had planned because of the pandemic, according to a January survey from the National Education Association (NEA). That’s almost double the number who felt that way in July 2020.

Who is leaving the teaching profession, and why?

Ohio saw hundreds more teachers resign and retire in 2020 – and about 1,100 more resign and retire in 2021 – compared to 2017, 2018 and 2019, according to the Ohio Department of Education’s Education Management Information System (EMIS), a statewide data collection system for Ohio's primary and secondary education.

2021 had the most teachers resign or retire in the last five years with 121,749; and 2018 had the lowest with 118,476.

Ohio Education Association President Scott DiMauro said there are a lot of pandemic-related reasons for that increase: health and safety concerns, moving to online and hybrid models without much preparation, and large numbers of student and teacher absences, to name a few.

Resignations, however, don't always mean someone is leaving teaching. The Dispatch reached out to multiple teachers who were listed by school districts to have resigned, but instead learned that they had simply transferred to another school district, or in some cases, just a different school in the district.

The data, both statewide and nationally, is still murky as to just how many educators have left the profession for good.

"A lot of the issues that we are seeing exacerbated by the pandemic, they've been there, and the pandemic has laid them bare and made them more visible and more front and center."

Beth Tuckwiller, associate professor of special education and disability studies at George Washington University

While the data is difficult to track, a 2022 American Psychological Association study found that out of around 15,000 school personnel surveyed across the country — including Ohio — more than a third expressed a desire to quit their professions entirely. Another 22% said they wanted to transfer to a different job within education.

Among teachers, the percentage was higher: 43% wanting to quit and 26% wanting to transfer.

The biggest issue among teachers? Burnout. About two-thirds of NEA survey respondents reported it as a "very serious issue" and 90% as "a very serious or somewhat serious issue."

"A lot of the issues that we are seeing exacerbated by the pandemic, they've been there, and the pandemic has laid them bare and made them more visible and more front and center," said Beth Tuckwiller, an associate professor of special education and disability studies at George Washington University.

Other factors for leaving included their own safety related to COVID-19, student mental health, student academic achievement during the pandemic, and community and systemic injustices — such as the Black Lives Matter movement, according to APA.

"They are frustrated, they're tired, they're stressed, and they are ready to leave, and they are looking to leave the profession," said Melissa Cropper, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers.

Former Greater Columbus teacher: 'I wasn't allowed to be honest with my students'

The contentious political climate in some local school districts, coupled with Ohio's lawmakers attempting to make teaching sensitive or difficult topics harder for educators, have pushed some to leave the profession, Cropper said.

Some teachers told APA researchers that they wanted to quit or transfer due to having limited input into COVID-19 policies, the political climate of schools, lack of support from administrators and verbal harassment and threats from parents.

Bills in the Ohio Statehouse affecting curriculum have also made teachers want to leave, Cropper said. House Bill 616 would ban both instruction and materials about sexual orientation and gender identity from kindergarten through third grade in all public and most private schools.

“People feel like they are caught in the crossfires at a time when they feel like they need more support than ever. They feel like they are being undermined and utterly disrespected,” DiMauro said.

That was one reason Ira Cross said he decided to leave teaching.

After eight years of teaching in a handful of different Greater Columbus schools, Cross made a TikTok in June titled “Why I left ...”

“I couldn't really be myself,” Cross said in his TikTok video. “The energy, the honesty, the emotion, the love, the sarcasm, the blackness. I couldn't do any of those things without any repercussions.”

His teaching career ended in May at Winchester Trail Elementary School in Canal Winchester Schools, where he worked for two years, most recently teaching fifth-grade language arts and social studies.

“I don't want to go back,” the 32-year-old Franklinton resident told The Dispatch. “The only reason I would go back is for the students, and it's not enough of a draw to deal with other things I've dealt with.”

The Youngstown native said he first started thinking about leaving education about three years ago, and said several factors contributed to his decision to leave teaching.

“I felt like I wasn’t allowed to be honest with my students,” Cross said in his TikTok. “I was told to be vulnerable and then ultimately, I was punished for that vulnerability. Politics and education will win every single time and I’m not a politician.”

Cross said he felt pressure about what he could teach in the classroom, especially when he taught about slavery, Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights movement during Black History month.

“Anything I teach that is different or about something that is potentially controversial, I can’t teach that either, so I’m like. ‘What am I supposed to teach these kids?’” he told The Dispatch.

New teachers enter an uncertain field

COVID-19 was also tough on teachers like Cassie Howard, who began their careers during the first year of the pandemic.

She graduated from Ohio State University in spring 2020 and got her first job teaching middle and high school choir in Huron County later that year. However, she ended up leaving her position as choir director at the end of the 2021-22 school year.

“Everyone told me the first year’s the hardest, and so I knew that going in,” Howard said. “And then the pandemic hit, and nobody knew what was going on.”

She remembers how hectic her first few days of teaching were since her school began the 2020 year hybrid and would occasionally switch back and forth from being remote.

While Howard said she had great relationships with the students and her fellow teachers, she decided she couldn’t be in the classroom anymore.

Howard said she largely left for personal reasons — like seeing friends in other fields with higher salaries and personally disagreeing with new laws from Ohio’s Republican-controlled General Assembly like one bill making it easier to arm teachers in school — but also because the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as a new teacher.

She imagined running into frustrations of the typical first-year teacher, but not things like trying to keep her students alive.

“I was genuinely really excited to be a choir director. That was my goal for a long time, and I was given an opportunity,” Howard said. “And then it was kind of crushed by this pandemic

... it was clouded by so much pain and so much stress.”

Where are the teachers going?

Some teachers resigned from one school and moved to another in the same district. Others resigned from one school district and moved to a different one. Some teachers left the classroom yet stayed in education as private tutors. Others are leaving education entirely.

Bennett, the Bexley intervention specialist, continues to be an educator, just not in the traditional classroom setting.

She started a nonprofit company called Mindful Literacy Columbus in 2019, and she also started a tutoring company called Mindful Literacy Practice, where she now works part-time with 15 other tutors.

“I’m able to teach more and I have the luxury to be able to teach to kids’ interests and strengths without having to stick to a timeline or a curriculum,” she said.

Howard, the former choir teacher, is now a private piano and voice teacher in the Greater Columbus area. She said she has not completely closed on returning to teaching, but being a private music teacher is the best thing for her right now.

Cross left education altogether to pursue acting and modeling, which he started doing as a side hustle in 2020.

“I can be me,” he said. “I can show that energy and get that creativity out and be who I am and share thoughts that are personal to me and mean a lot to me.”

The impact on students from more teachers leaving the field

So many teachers leaving the profession could mean potentially larger class sizes, which makes it harder for teachers to build quality relationships with their students, Cropper said.

“We’re seeing increasingly how important those relationships are, how important it is to be able to know your students, to know their learning style, be able to help them on an individual level with the academic problems that they are having,” she said.

Last year, Sarah Short’s kindergarten daughter came home and told her mom that her classroom teacher had to teach their gym class because there was no one else available.

“I felt in that moment like these poor teachers can’t keep doing this, like there’s no possible way that should have happened,” the 39-year-old North Side resident said. “I know there’s no way that sustainable.”

Short's daughter attends Columbus City Schools, but they would consider moving to another district, depending on how this school year goes.

“We are definitely not on the brink of moving and our plan right now is to stick it out at least another year to see how it shakes out,” Short said. “We don’t want to leave Columbus City. We don’t want to leave our neighborhood, but we want to make sure our kid is getting a decent education.”

Her daughter’s class had 27 students last year, but it was a common occurrence to have an extra handful of students in her class if another teacher was out and there wasn’t a substitute available to cover a class – another problem for many school districts.

Short is concerned teachers are being asked to do way too much, which causes her to question the level of education her daughter is receiving.

“It made me wonder if she was getting the same education that she would have gotten two years ago at the same exact school,” she said.

Better teacher pay, more respect, greater support among potential solutions

So how do we fix the great education resignation?

There’s no one-size-fits-all answer, experts say, but better pay, respect, less emphasis on testing, more teacher support and more autonomy in the classroom could all help.

The AFT report identified four areas that need to change to reverse teacher and school staff shortages: climate, culture, conditions and compensation. The report also suggested lowering class sizes, reducing paperwork and diversifying the educator workforce.

The APA study suggests providing more funding to train educators and allowing teachers to participate in the decision-making process when it comes to things like school policies, rather than sidelining them.

“They don’t want to be just told by whomever to do this or do that. They want to have a voice in that,” said Eric Anderman, a task force member for the APA study and a professor at Ohio

He said he hopes people will listen to teachers when they speak up about what they want and what they need.

“So many people are going to teach and do it because they love the kids and want to help the kids learn,” Anderman said.

But he said some educators are saying, “I still want to do that, but I can’t take it anymore. I have to look out for my own physical and mental health, and I’ve just had enough.”

@megankhenry

Mhenry@dispatch.com

@leem386

Mylee@dispatch.com