entered the teaching profession in 1994 on the heels of what was heralded to be an era of unprecedented teacher shortage. While that may have been true on a national level, in the suburbs of a large metropolis like Chicago, teaching positions were scarce. Yet, even in an area renowned for its bounty of prospective teachers, retaining new teachers proved problematic.

In 1999, I joined the English and Communications Department of Downers Grove North High School. In a department of just 18, I was the twelfth new teacher hired since 1997. By the spring of 2000, over 40% of that number had left the relatively comfortable and privileged suburban school district. Those who remained sometimes joked about the intense pressure that only a few could withstand, but more often they asked themselves and one another the central question that has dominated the national conversation: Why do so many new English teachers leave?

Unrealistic Expectations

For some, the answer may lie in the image of teachers carefully cultivated by Hollywood. For decades, the industry has promoted an unrealistic vision characterized by teachers who become successful despite the systems in which they find themselves, whether they are motivated by personal gain or more altruistic intentions.

The 1994 movie Renaissance Man featured Danny DeVito as Jack Rago, a man who chooses to become an educator to avoid financial ruin. With no training and little support, Rago helps to empower a motley group of US Army recruits whose academic skills are deemed lacking by their commanding officers. By the end of the course Rago teaches, the recruits conduct impromptu performances of Henry V and even pass a rigorous exam. Comedian Jack Black donned the identity of teacher Ned Schneebly in 2003 to earn money to reinvigorate his failing music career in The School of Rock. Much of his students’ subsequent success in musical, not academic, performance was predicated upon the foisting of his personal vision of success on his students despite the scrutiny of an easily befuddled principal.

Closer to home, many English teachers, for instance, cite as sources of inspiration the film portrayals of educators whose personal investment in their students’ lives in and out of the classroom...
have long-lasting effects. Robin Williams’s portrayal of the passionate and charismatic John Keating in 1989’s *Dead Poets Society*, Michelle Pfeiffer’s vision of the fiercely nontraditional army veteran LouAnne Johnson in 1995’s *Dangerous Minds*, and Hilary Swank’s interpretation of the compassionate and dedicated Erin Gruwell in 2007’s *Freedom Writers* are models of teachers who build relationships with students that permanently change lives, again despite the limitations of the educational system(s). Interestingly, the long-term effects of these semifictitious teachers on their students’ lives are carefully omitted from the final film versions audiences enjoy. Otherwise, the ramifications of a young man’s suicide, a young mother’s inattention to her child in an effort to complete schoolwork, or the destruction of a young educator’s personal relationships might become a part of the national conversation about the role of teachers.

Cable network A&E produced the 2010 series *Teach: Tony Danza*, in which the erstwhile television actor was hired to teach at Philadelphia’s Northeast High School. Danza’s single tenth-grade English class proved challenging in terms of daily preparation, student instruction, and classroom management. The series chronicled Danza’s struggles to meet the needs of his 26 students, including his efforts to reach students by volunteering as a football coach and a band assistant. Unlike most new teachers, however, Danza benefited from daily meetings with teaching advisor David Cohn and the cautionary supervision of Principal Linda Carroll.

**An Exacting Reality**

The experiences of Hollywood’s budding teachers contrast sharply with those of the corporeal variety. The latter face a host of demands to which their celluloid counterparts only allude: multiple preparations, in some cases as many as six in one year; instructional assistance that veers sharply from none to a dizzying overabundance; and, finally, uneven preparation for the rigors of teaching more than 100 students each day.

University teacher education programs face a challenge. They must empower preservice teachers as they gain familiarity with and understand the implementation of a wide variety of teaching strategies designed to meet the needs of a widely varying student population while at the same time monitoring prospective teachers’ mastery of content knowledge and their professional dispositions. As an adjunct faculty member of Roosevelt University’s Department of Secondary Education, I have witnessed many of these challenges. Over the past five years, the secondary methods in language arts course I teach has undergone many incarnations. Each year I have reworked the course syllabus, changing core texts (most recently to Kelly Gallagher’s *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4–12*) and redesigning assignments (shifting the unit plan to a Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s *Understanding by Design*–based project) to reflect the constantly shifting educational climate; the syllabus is further adjusted during the semester to meet the needs of the specific preservice teachers enrolled in the course. These needs are as diverse as the student population itself: one prospective educator might request resources on conducting an effective reading workshop while another might...
Why Do New Teachers Leave? How Could They Stay?

Many new teachers with whom I have worked recall that the process of obtaining a student teaching placement was nearly as stressful as that of obtaining their first teaching positions.

Many new teachers with whom I have worked recall that the process of obtaining a student teaching placement was nearly as stressful as that of obtaining their first teaching positions. search for methods on reaching students through classical poetry. Moreover, in recent years, the university’s College of Education has greatly expanded its use of electronic portfolios such as TaskStream to not only serve as a means for prospective educators to share unit and/or lesson plans and for faculty members to assess that work, but also as a means for students to establish their understanding and mastery of a recognized set of professional dispositions. These demonstrations are designed to showcase a prospective teacher’s aptitudes in devising instructional plans that directly correlate to student achievement and in working to develop effective interactions with both students and colleagues.

Yet, despite the many teacher preparation programs that have worked diligently to adopt a model of professional growth rooted in current educational theory and practice, a trend has emerged in recent years that underscores the perception of some school districts and cooperating teachers that prospective student teachers have a widely varying degree of preparation both in terms of content-area skill and pedagogical knowledge: a lengthy application process in which preservice teachers must submit a résumé and transcript before enduring an exhaustive interview in which they are asked to demonstrate their knowledge of and ability to implement a wide range of teaching strategies to meet the needs of the school and/or district’s student group. Not surprisingly, many new teachers with whom I have worked recall that the process of obtaining a student teaching placement was nearly as stressful as that of obtaining their first teaching positions.

While developing a constructive and supportive relationship with cooperating teachers is another key element to a successful teacher training program, unfortunately some early-career teachers still recall clinical experiences characterized by openly antagonistic relationships with their cooperating teachers (Carroll et al.). Still another reflected that “I came up with everything on my own” and received no assistance in curriculum development or implementation (Carroll et al.). One teacher recalled that after an exhausting and difficult experience as a student teacher, she persevered in the teaching profession only because of the assurances of new teachers of her acquaintance that “when it’s your own classroom, it . . . [will] be night and day” (Carroll et al.). However, authentic collaboration has increasingly become a fundamental expectation in the practice of teaching, for example, the widespread implementation of the Professional Learning Community model. The ability to collaborate effectively must be fostered by teacher preparation programs in which preservice teachers are paired with cooperating teachers who will support their development (Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez 242–43). Many effective programs utilize techniques such as reciprocal peer coaching, in which "students practice new teaching methodologies, master techniques, utilize shared problem-solving skills, and receive feedback from a peer evaluator" (Trautwein and Ammerman 192). Reflecting on the understandings gained from the peer coaching sessions while continuing to practice a wide variety of techniques in the classroom elevates the model into one that assists preservice teachers in achieving true professional growth (Trautwein and Ammerman 192).

Preservice teachers further highlight the need for “sequential, purposeful, and well-connected field-based assignments to courses in which preservice teachers have authentic opportunities to observe and implement research-based strategies under the supervision of experienced and successful mentors” (Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez 241). An interesting variation on the traditional student teaching experience was recently detailed in Phi Delta Kappan’s “Mapping the Teacher Education Terrain for Novices,” in which the authors explore the results of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor’s teacher education program transformation into an internship model similar to that of the medical field complete with “attending teachers,” “rotations,” and “rounds”; the authors conclude that this shift in philosophy might well represent “a good first step toward drawing the maps teaching interns need” (Bain and Moje 62–65).

Retaining New Teachers

Understanding why teachers leave is of vital importance to the profession as a whole. In “Hold On to Your New Teachers,” Paul M. Hewitt’s discussion of
the growing need for teachers is directly contrasted with the nearly 50% rate of attrition; this contradiction is particularly startling in consideration of the estimated 1.7 to 2.7 million new teachers this nation will need in the next 20 years (12). Moreover, each loss costs a school district thousands of dollars in hiring and training, a fact that cannot be ignored in a climate of fiscal uncertainty (Hewitt 12).

Many new teachers leave their positions because of the dissonance between their expectations of “an extremely high level of success” in their first year of teaching and the frustration they experience in the realities of the high school setting (Hewitt 13). Novice practitioners are required to attend lengthy, often-unpaid orientation sessions that are designed to impart the major expectations of the school and district. Then, upon taking the reins of their own classes, many novice teachers discover they have been assigned some of the most challenging classes with students who likewise fit that categorization (Long 318). New teachers further find themselves quickly enrolled in various building or district training programs, some instructional in nature, others simply managerial, all of which contribute to their overburdening.

Moreover, in this era of strong accountability in the fundamental areas of literacies, English teachers have proven especially vulnerable to succumbing to these pressures (Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff 22–23). Today’s federal mandates require that student achievement is measured in just two academic areas: mathematics and reading. States have the option of requiring testing in other subject areas as well; however, that option is exercised unevenly. In Illinois, for instance, at the secondary level fully one-half of the state’s accountability measure, the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), has been laid at the language arts teacher’s door: student achievement in reading is measured solely on scores earned during a student’s junior year on the reading portion of the ACT test administered on the first day of testing and on the ACT’s Work Keys Reading for Information test given on the second day of testing. The state has also recently adopted measures requiring that teacher evaluation be connected directly to student achievement (Illinois). In this climate, who can evince surprise that these added pressures facing novice English teachers might factor into their decisions to leave the classroom?

Yet, there is also strong evidence that many of these new teachers might choose to remain in the classroom, provided that an environment conducive to their growth is fostered. Focused, well-supported new teacher induction programs have proven their efficacy by accelerating the “effectiveness of new teachers, fast-tracking their progress to exemplary teachers with the ability to positively impact student achievement” (Moir 16). These induction programs incorporate a wider variety of collaborative instructional supports than ever before, including mentors, learning teams, and literacy coaches. Katharine Burn, Trevor Mutton, and Hazel Hagger assert that “the role of coaches” in particular “is crucial . . . [and] needed in the context of participants’ working environments, with the coaches not merely observing and providing feedback on participants’ teaching, but organising a range of [instructional techniques]” in “Strengthening and Sustaining Professional Learning in the Second Year of Teaching” (656). In “Not Another Trend: Secondary-Level Literacy Coaching,” Patricia Gross describes coaching as a “reciprocal learning process that is meant to foster teacher independence and flexible thinking” (134). One of the individual coaching model’s greatest strengths lies in its fundamental principle of intervention and assistance based on each teacher’s needs and not on a more uniform approach (Gross 136).

The increasingly common use of the Professional Learning Community model has been a boon to novice educators. This model allows new practitioners to work in concert with veteran staff members to more precisely focus their efforts on determining what practice(s) is and is not successful in the classroom; the conversations that proceed are centered on student learning and the practices that best support it (Routman 58). These conversations enable all teachers, novice or veteran, to improve their practice over the course of the experience (Yost, Vogel, and Liang 430).

Developing supportive and constructive relationships between new practitioners and mentor teachers is also of vital importance. The role of effective mentors is complex: they must “be skilled
at articulating teaching strategies, analyzing evidence, and supporting teacher growth every day (Hanson 80). To accomplish these tasks, mentors and protégés are obligated to hold regular meetings during the already-hectic school year, participate in frank discussions about students and instruction, and maintain an understanding of school culture and associated expectations. The work of each partnership possesses the potential to empower novice teachers to become “problem solvers, innovators, and leaders within the school community”; the more invested in achieving a school’s goals a new teacher feels, the more likely she or he will return to further expand on that mission (Long 324).

**Coming Back Next Year?**

The 2011–12 academic year marked an anniversary of sorts for the Downers Grove North High School English and Communications Department: it celebrated its 20th new teacher hired since 2001. Over the past decade, more than ten veteran teachers retired and the number of faculty members increased; the department further expanded when the school incorporated reading specialist and literacy coach—teacher feels, the more likely she or he will return to near 85%. The changes to this single suburban high school district’s teacher induction program had great results in just a few short years. Would that Hollywood might cast its net a bit wider when searching for its next blockbuster. I’m certain that *The Adventures of a Second-Year Teacher* would draw record crowds.

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Elaine Simos has taught in various public school settings, from urban to alternative to suburban. Currently, she teaches junior- and senior-level English students and functions as a literacy coach, working with colleagues from various content areas at Downers Grove North High School, in addition to her work with preservice teachers at Roosevelt University. Email her at esimos@csd99.org.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “A Significant Influence: Describing an Important Teacher in Your Life,” students write a tribute to a teacher, someone who has taught them an important lesson that they still remember. The personal essays that students write for this lesson are then published in a class collection. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/significant-influence-describing-important-824.html

Questions

Can I get a drink?  
Yes.

Can’t I just do it this way?  
Yes.

Will you stay and help me?  
Yes.

Do you think I’ll be able to get it?  
If yes.

Can I take a piss?  
Yes.

Why do they have to be like that all the time?  

Will it ever change?  

Can I change seats, please?  
Yes.

Alcoholism  
is it handed down?  
Hereditary?  
Genetically?  

Why are they handed life and I’m stuck stuck in that house no matter no matter how hard my parents work how hard I work?  
Will it ever change?

Should I tell?  
How can I make this work?

Can I take a piss?  
Yes.

—Greg Overman

Greg Overman has taught secondary English in rural Ohio for four years and currently resides in Bozeman, Montana where he teaches middle school language arts, high school English, and drama at Three Forks High School. When he is not teaching, reading, or writing he spends his time driving through the mountains of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington with total disregard to direction and fuel economy. Email him at governor@threeforks.k12.mt.us.

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