

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

Teachers are calling it quits. It's time for a reset

Surveys indicate record numbers of teachers will quit their jobs. But COVID didn't create the crisis, they say. It's been building for some time.

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Robin Chenoweth: Maybe you remember a video that came out in May 2020, just a few weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown. It got 20 million views. Parents were trying to teach their children at home, and Google was noticing a spike in education-related searches. How to add fractions, and things like that. In the video, kids are exasperated, parents are speechless. "Mama's tired," one woman says. Fake volcanoes erupt onto the kitchen floor. Kids scream at siblings. Parents do the forehead slap — to themselves, not to their kids.

Google video: "Teachers, I mean, y'all are gifted people.

I thank you so much for what you're doing.

Their investment into our children is beyond what we can even imagine. Appreciate all that you do."

Robin Chenoweth: A caption at the end says to teachers everywhere: "No, really. Like, thank you times infinity." Suddenly the world understood how difficult being a teacher can be. But then, almost as quickly, the world seemed to forget. Because two years later, teachers and other educators are the ones who are exasperated. Here's what they are saying in 2022 on social media:

@annasutter: Last week I quit. I quit my job. I resigned. My last day was on Friday. I have nothing lined up. And that's okay. Because I almost died over that job.

@awalmartparkinglot: I resigned from my teaching position and today was my last day.

@awalmartparkinglot: Making the decision to not be with my students anymore has, like, broken me in ways that I can't describe, or I think I will ever fully recover from.

@awalmartparkinglot: I have been screamed at. I have been told horrifying things.

@adventureswith_jen: The whole system right now is the Titanic. It's going down. Can't do anything about it. Nothing is going to make me stay on that boat.

Robin Chenoweth: That isn't just TikTok hyperbole. Last year, the American Psychological Association conducted an educator survey of almost 15,000 teachers, school psychologists, administrators and school staff. Among the teachers, 49% — almost half — indicated they will quit their jobs before they had planned to. Eric Anderman, a professor of educational

psychology at Ohio State, was among those conducting the study. What's more, the research showed what Anderman calls an "additive" incentive for educators to quit.

Eric Anderman: We already had a perfect storm for teachers to leave with COVID. And then, what our study uncovered is that, in addition to that, there have been these enormous stressors on teachers in terms of various kinds of violence that they've experienced.

Robin Chenoweth: Violence and verbal harassment. Students throwing books and chairs. Parents yelling at teachers during online learning and now in reopened schools. Social media posts that berate educators.

Eric Anderman: Not just teachers, but administrators and school psychologists and all the staff in schools. COVID was already a huge pressure. And then many of them are experiencing various kinds of aggression and harassment from students and from parents and other people. That's just adding to it. And I think a lot of them are saying, it's not worth it anymore.

Robin Chenoweth: Factor in also the school board meetings questioning educators, curriculum and its delivery and legislators mandating what words educators can say. What happened to the goodwill? Did the stress brought on by COVID diminish it, or was it never really there in the first place? Ohio State's Associate Professor of Educational Administration, Karen Beard, is concerned about how teachers are coping.

Karen Beard: Who's taking care of the mental health and well-being of our teachers? There's only so much any one individual can be expected to do. And even aside from the fact that society doesn't give our teaching population the respect they deserve. That's a whole other conversation.

Robin Chenoweth: For this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talked to scholars, plus a dozen teachers across the country, many who felt it was too risky for them to speak on the podcast. But three of those educators did share their stories here: One who quit, one who stayed in his job, and one who left several years ago, and then actually went back into teaching *during the pandemic*. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Kyle Bucklew is our student intern.

Robin Chenoweth: Almost all the teachers we talked to said something that we found surprising: The pandemic itself did not make them quit or think about leaving their jobs. COVID-19 only illuminated the problems that were already there. Kyle Bucklew talked to Anna Sutter, who recently quit her job as a counselor at a large Indiana middle school and then posted a TikTok video that went viral.

Anna Sutter: I chose my own health over the job that I was working in. It was very clear to me that I was in dysfunction, in a dysfunctional environment, within a dysfunctional system. And I had to choose either myself or the job. My mental health was deteriorating for quite a while. I think it was probably two years ago, I would say, when the pandemic hit was when I started noticing a pretty large impact on my own mental health. But it wasn't until my physical health was impacted that I started listening. I had lost a pretty drastic amount of weight. I was no longer able to eat. That's how much anxiety and pressure I was under within that job, within that role and within the education system.

Kyle Bucklew: You mentioned that the system was dysfunctional. Can you describe that a little bit more?

Anna Sutter: Within your first year, you're like, this is not what I signed up for. This is a lot more stress, a lot more responsibility, a lot more pressure than I expected it to be, without a whole lot of support, or a whole lot of compensation. Everybody says, you know, everybody's first year is difficult; everybody's first year is stressful; it'll get better. So, the analogy that I kind of use is the light at the end of the tunnel. At first, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel, because I was full of energy, full of passion, full of just life for this profession and for the kids. I go into my second year, and it's just as stressful if not more stressful, because there are constant changes. The Department of Education is, is creating these policies and expectations. You're seeing, you know, a lot of bills coming through state houses in regards to restricting more what teachers can and can't teach, what teachers can and can't say, what we can and can't even mention around students. So that happens each year. It gets more and more and more stressful and that light gets dimmer and dimmer and dimmer in that tunnel, because you realize that, I don't even know if there is a light.

Kyle Bucklew: It sounds like that this has been coming for quite some time now. Do you think that COVID was kind of, to follow with the analogies here, the straw that broke the camel's back?

Anna Sutter: I wouldn't necessarily say COVID was the straw that broke the camel's back. But I do think that COVID allowed educators to become aware of exactly what was going on. It allowed, you know, the mask to fall off. It allowed educators to say wait a second, what's going on here? I'm being taken advantage of. And at least it did for me.

Robin Chenoweth: Of course, the pandemic and other events did throw learning into chaos, and not just because kids were learning in a different way. Karen Beard.

Karen Beard: Children are very, very sensitive to their families and the ebbs and flows of the emotions that are happening inside the family. Sometimes it makes them less willing or more resistant to talk about their own anxiety as to not add to the problem in the house. So, they many times will bring it to another adult, and teachers and counselors have in fact been those first responders for students who needed support, especially in psychological ways, emotional ways. What we saw during the pandemic was, that a lot of those social interactions that were not available to children led to greater anxiety and in some cases, we were hearing reports within the first three weeks and month of the pandemic about student depression. And it got even more intense over time.

Robin Chenoweth: Today, teachers and counselors describe more fights in school, many students with chronic anxiety, double and even triple the number suicide attempts among students compared to 2019. Kids can't stay on task, can't stay off their phones. Younger students can't do any experiential learning because they go wild when given even a little latitude. Within schools, teachers have been expected to right the ship, sometimes with little or no training in social emotional learning. The situation is out of control.

Karen Beard: As a society, we really need to decide how we want to move forward in thinking about teaching as a profession. Teachers are called on to do almost virtually the impossible at times. They are not trained to be mental health experts, even though they are many times the first person in contact with a child when there's some mental issues. They do know signs and

have been educated in signs, but it's not their job. They're not skilled and trained to take care of the many, many facets that are a part of child development and family relations. And without the specific support for that, even as we identify as a teacher, being the de facto first responder, we can see the issues. But if we're not supported, or given the training, or have resources available in the building to support families and kids, it really just becomes a frustration, because you see it, but you're helpless to do anything about it. Let's be honest. When you go into a building and you see some of the challenges that teachers face each and every day, and then you find out in the course of the conversation, with a teacher that the child may have a PBIS team or seeing counseling or whatever. But then you come to learn that the counselor's in the building once a week. So, are we really taking care of the mental needs of children, when counseling is limited to such a low availability? I don't think we're serious about taking care of the mental health and well-being of the students.

Robin Chenoweth: Some states have mandated teacher training for social emotional learning. In Ohio and other states, that mandate is unfunded. But even that support is meeting with resistance. Eric Anderman.

Eric Anderman: Teachers are really caught in a true catch 22. They are being told at one level that there are evidence-based practices to promote socio-emotional learning that they can and should use. And on the flip side they're hearing, often from parents, but from others as well, that "No, you shouldn't be doing this." And social media is one of the places where they hear about that. School board meetings also were all over the news in the last year.

Robin Chenoweth: So, the parents are objecting to them teaching about social-emotional learning? I mean, is this beyond like, the critical race theory? This is something even more that they're getting pushback from parents on.

Eric Anderman: Oh, yeah, some of them are. And I think a lot of people don't necessarily understand the distinctions between some of these terms like culturally responsive teaching, critical race theory, socio-emotional learning. But at the end of the day, there are many out there who are saying that socio-emotional learning should not be something that is done. And I think it's a lack of understanding of what it is. I'm not blaming parents at all, who might say that. I think there probably is a misperception that, oh, they're going to be doing counseling with my kids. And that's, not that's not what it's about in any way, shape or form. But I think just everybody on all sides needs some more gentle educating about what these things are and what they aren't.

Robin Chenoweth: So, some of the teachers I'm talking to say that the kids just are, are checked out. It's almost like they've forgotten how to learn. Do you think that this was happening before COVID hit?

Eric Anderman: Part of it is probably related to the experiences students were having last year. I've spent many, many hours in research that we do, sitting in on Zoom classrooms, Google classrooms. In any given classroom, sometimes two-thirds, three-quarters of the students didn't have their camera turned on. And they didn't have their mic turned on. And you didn't know if they were there, or they weren't there. But much less learning went on last year than probably should have. So, now, talk about a perfect storm, you send these kids back to school, and they have not been learning a lot of what they needed to. And so, some of the things they're learning now may be particularly difficult for them, because they didn't learn what comes before that, so to speak. It's even more reason for them just to check out and to misbehave. Kids are going to misbehave, primarily, when they're not engaged, when they're not interested, when they're

bored, or when they don't understand the work, and they don't feel they're getting the support. So, a lot of them, because of the experience of the last year, probably are more likely to feel that way.

Robin Chenoweth: As difficult as it may be to corral these students back into learning, and as frustrating and maddening as it can be to repeat instructions three times to a kid who won't listen, the educators we spoke to don't blame students — at all. Meet Neil Moore. He has decided to stay in his job teaching Spanish to high-schoolers in Columbus.

Robin Chenoweth: People might have thought that schools, you know, once they reopened, and mask mandates were lifted, that things were going to get back to normal. Do you think they've gotten back to normal?

Neil Moore: Not at all, actually. And one thing I identified with some colleagues early on was, we were remote for, like, three quarters of the year, and completely remote. And we had very little training or support in that. And so, it was an enormous lift, to, like, switch to remote teaching within a district with limited technology to begin with. But we made it work. And it really required us to draw upon so much adrenaline, just to pull off the show, so to speak, that I don't think we ever recovered from that. Summer happened, but everyone was still kind of on eggshells with the pandemic, and what was going to happen with the new year whether we were going back. So, I just think no one has ever had the time to rest and process a lot of the trauma that has been caused.

Robin Chenoweth: Teachers really hadn't dealt with what had happened the year before?

Neil Moore: Yeah, I think people have just been drained. It's a lot to process when you're trying to protect yourself and your family, you're trying to protect your students. In my case, I work with teenagers, I'm trying to understand their situation, because I can't imagine what that would be like, literally. There are new layers to it now. I have to check in on my students' social and emotional needs a lot more, which is probably a good thing. But at the same time, it's.... it's taxing to add that to an already full plate.

Robin Chenoweth: Moore, who is affectionally called Profe Mas by his students, was really good at doing this even before the pandemic. Being relatable. Being curious about students and showing them that he values them as individuals. The fact that he finds it taxing ...is telling. Teachers need more time helping students and less time worrying about paperwork and assessments and so many other things that sap educators' attention and energy.

Neil Moore: More one-on-one opportunities with students would be helpful because it might have a reciprocal effect of helping teachers with their own. That feeling that you're doing a good service for someone. I think that's more powerful than the subject you teach. I always say that I kind of chose to hang my hat on Spanish, but I want to inspire young people to stay curious and interested in things.

Robin Chenoweth: It's springtime, in high school. Kids are aflutter, Moore says, thinking about the spring formal, holding hands in the hallway. Rites of passage that should be commonplace, but just haven't been there for more than two years.

Neil Moore: There's a lot of things that happen at a subconscious level that I don't know that they're even aware of, as far as being natural, social creatures, and then having that denied at

the time in your life, when that is supposed to be the norm. I think that there was just no script for any of that, or nothing to compare it to. And they have a difficult time connecting back. It's nice to watch them when they're connecting back. But I have more students now who choose to be disengaged and I have to really work extra hard to make them understand that this is important, and this is what we're doing today. It's almost like the classroom experience was a foreign experience for them.

Robin Chenoweth: But this, this is the fulfilling part. Interacting with students is why most teachers go into the profession. And even with their outbursts and anxiety, this is what teachers and educators missed during the lockdown and angsty periods of social distancing. It's why Neil Moore is still a teacher. But that doesn't mean his outlook is all rainbows and roses.

Robin Chenoweth: Have you seen any of the social media? The #TeacherQuitTok?

Neil Moore: Some, yeah, not too much. There's part of me that feels that way every year. It's just a hard job. But yeah, aspects of this experience have pushed me as far as I've ever been to hanging it up.

Robin Chenoweth: Really?

Neil Moore: Yeah, it's been really difficult.

Robin Chenoweth: So, you can understand the sentiment. What aspects?

Neil Moore: In my experience, it has a lot less to do with the kids and their re-acclimation and behavior than it does, really, with just the feeling that you're the glorified babysitter that you always knew you were for society to carry on. And so, we were remote in Columbus for a long time. And teachers took a lot of heat for that. Not every parent was gung-ho about the idea or politician, let alone. Especially in the city, and in our schools, the state of the buildings, the ill repair. Most people, I felt, just didn't have a clue as to what our very real concerns were, I'm thinking like air quality here. And people were talking about getting kids back in school because their mental health is suffering. And that's fine and dandy, but I also want my family to be alive.

Robin Chenoweth: Moore's wife and daughter both have chronic health concerns that put them more at risk for COVID-19. Other teachers told us about similar situations, and their feelings of being expendable.

Robin Chenoweth: As Anna Sutter, the former Indiana school counselor, points out, the ever-changing federal and state standards, evaluations, curriculum changes, professional development — are exhausting, and in some cases, demoralizing.

Neil Moore: We have a more and more convoluted evaluation system. Now it's called OTES 2.0.

Robin Chenoweth: The new Ohio Teacher Evaluation System.

Neil Moore: I was having a conversation with a colleague, actually, who just resigned this past week. We were just noting that it seems like whatever the trend is, it's pushing out the best teachers, whether the intent was to try to safeguard the profession and ensure that there not be people in the classroom who shouldn't. I don't know, but it seems like the end game is that a lot

of really good educators are going to seek other opportunities. Just because of feeling like they're not being treated professionally.

Robin Chenoweth: Educators from Lee County, Florida, to The Dalles, Oregon, to Fairborn, Ohio, told Inspire that teachers in the districts where they work quit midyear. That's unusual, because it's a breach of contract and could result in legal action or losing a teacher's license. Teachers and staff describe being worn out from covering classes when schools can't find substitutes. But whether the "five alarm fire" predicted by the National Education Association — with 55% of teachers quitting — whether that actually happens, and some experts don't think it will, seems moot. Because if even a quarter of that number quit, education will be thrown into even greater chaos. So, what can be done? Not surprisingly, teachers and researchers who were teachers have a lot of ideas. Karen Beard.

Karen Beard: Our normal has really flipped; there is no normal. I do honestly believe within my, my very soul. We're not going back to anything that looks like the normal and we shouldn't because the normal wasn't working. We wouldn't have had the disparities and the inequities that were laid bare before us. There's going to have to be a reset in the way that we're thinking about the way we're schooling.

Robin Chenoweth: Some of Beard's recommendations: Community partnerships would take some of the burden off educators by helping families; online support groups like those formed by teachers during the pandemic, would allow them to collaborate and blow off steam; online counseling for children would open up options for care; more mental health resources for everyone, top down, in the education system would ease burnout in the education system.

Karen Beard: Teacher well-being is a key to student well-being. So, it's the adults that students or children watch for emotional cues and how to respond to situations. And so, when a teacher isn't well, or a parent isn't well, or a parent or teacher is not responding well, that impacts the child's ability to respond. Somebody needs to be attending to our teachers. And we need to be attending not only in their own psychological well-being but also in the resources that they need. When they find things that a child needs, they need to be able to have the resources expediently available to them to address that so they can get back to the work that they're called to do, which is teaching.

Robin Chenoweth: Kineta Sanford did find well-being in teaching, but not the way you might expect. She had worked for two years as a high school English teacher in Dayton, Ohio, right out of college.

Kineta Sanford: And at that point, I decided that I was going to step away from teaching. And at the time, I actually thought I was going to leave teaching forever. And I really had this mindset of, I'm never looking back, I'm going to do something different with my life.

Robin Chenoweth: What made you decide to leave the profession?

Kineta Sanford: The word, 'burnout' comes to mind. My first year was really hard. And I know, the first year of teaching is hard for everyone. But it was very hard on me, both emotionally, it was really hard on me physically. My blood pressure was up. I had tension headaches, just about every day. I really felt like my life was just being stressed out.

Robin Chenoweth: So, she quit and went to work for an insurance call center.

Kineta Sanford: I know, for a lot of people, that'd be a nightmare job, because you have to talk to strangers all day on the phone, and deal with their problems. But it was super easy. Like, I just couldn't believe that I got to go there, put in my time, leave. And we weren't even allowed to take work home because it's confidential with insurance, and you have people's personal information, all that, so you can't even take it home. They won't even let you take it home.

Robin Chenoweth: No more night grading. No jumping through hoops for her five-year professional license. No more evaluations or not having the administration back her up in disciplinary issues. She worked the new job for several months and then took a position at a housing nonprofit. She found her footing in the non-educational world.

Kineta Sanford Two: My boss was really, really good at saying, "Okay, we're going to stop working right now. Let's go home. We've done a lot this week. Let's go home." And she was really upfront about, "Yeah, I used to try to work myself to death, and I realized that can't pour from an empty cup." She very much supported all of us in making sure that we were well taken care of. So, I learned how to express that I needed to take some time or to take a break or take something off of my plate. And so over the last couple of years, I've really decided I'm not going to say yes to anything that I really want to say no to. If I'm saying, 'yes', it's a real, 'Yes'.

Robin Chenoweth: That's not exactly a skill Sanford learned in her teaching program. But it became very powerful when, in 2021, the superintendent from her local district approached her about a teaching position.

Kineta Sanford: I figured if I try again; maybe I can do things differently. Or maybe I can find a place where they don't expect me to kill myself trying to do everything. And, so, I figured I'd try and if it didn't work out, I would, I would lay it down and just not come back. But I'm really glad I tried.

Robin Chenoweth: So, it's interesting to me when they were all running, running, running away, you were running into the burning, into the fire, weren't you? Fifty-five percent of educators say that they want to leave the profession. You've been there; you did that. And now you've gone back to it, even in the middle of a pandemic. Do you think maybe some of these teachers will come back the way you did?

Kineta Sanford: I think that some people, honestly, it might be good for people to leave and come back. Maybe not financially, or professionally. But personally, for me, I got to think about what I wanted my teaching career to look like. What do I want to get out of this? What am I actually doing this for? And I knew that spirit alone was not going to sustain my teaching.

Robin Chenoweth: She's a member of the teachers' union which actively advocates for teacher rights. She found a district that supports her instead of working against her. Her new principal truly advocates for self-care. Most importantly, Sanford has changed. She leaves school most days at 4:30. She's no longer pouring from an empty cup. And that makes her a better teacher, and much happier than she was in her first position. Back then, she says, she couldn't advocate for herself.

Kineta Sanford: I didn't know how to deal with everything else. And I didn't know how to ask for more help if I needed it. And I didn't know how to push back if I was trying to set a boundary. So, I thought to myself, "How could this be different?" And I wouldn't have been able to do that

without leaving. I get why some people are afraid to leave, you know, or feel like if they leave, they never come back because it would be hard to come back. But I felt called. I wonder sometimes what would have happened if I would have stayed longer. Would I have left forever? Would I have been completely burned to the point where I never want to step foot in a classroom again? So, as much as I like to think that at the time, I was closing the door, I kind of left it ajar.

Several courses will focus on educator stress at the College of Education and Human Ecology's Summer Institute, June 6 through July 30. Check out courses on Embodied Self-Care for Educators and Reigniting your passion for teaching, among others. See summerinstitute.ehe.osu.edu for details.

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