

Back to the Future: A snapshot survey of retired teachers

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Abstract

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It was the purpose of this study to determine the opinions of Virginia's retired teachers on a variety of issues related to education. Specifically, it was the purpose of this study to survey by mail a selected population of Virginia's retired teachers. All state and local officers of the Virginia Retired Teachers Association were identified as subjects for this research. Those retired teachers that answered the survey indicated that they were satisfied with their life as an educator, and generally stated that they would choose education as a career again knowing what they now know. They also reported that they felt valued and respected by their community, parents, students and administration. Overall there was significant agreement among the respondents. Even with this sense of unity on the majority of issues surveyed, there was disagreement concerning the issues of standardized testing and the need for school reform.

*I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided,
and that is the lamp of experience.
I know of no way of judging of the future
but by the past.*

Patrick Henry

*Time it was, and what a time it was, it was
A time of innocence, a time of confidences
Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph
Preserve your memories; They're all that's left you*

Paul Simon

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Introduction

A review of the literature revealed that American society does not place a high value on its elderly population. Furthermore, little value is placed on the attitudes and beliefs of those that have retired. Specifically for purposes of this study, very little research has been conducted with retired educators. It is a fundamental belief of this work that there is much to learn from those who have spent their career working with children in the schools of the United States.

Purpose of the study

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Methodology

A questionnaire was designed by the researcher to collect demographic data and opinions on a wide range of educational topics from retired teachers in Virginia. The questionnaire consisted of a total of sixty-three items. Of the sixty-three items, fifteen were designed to gather demographic information, and forty-eight were questions to garner opinions. The survey was primarily pencil and paper forced answer format.

Twenty-nine of the questions were forced answer, primarily yes/no questions. Eighteen questions were forced answer and designed to be scored on a five-point Likert scale. One question was open-ended and optional.

A listing of all officers in the Virginia Retired Teachers Association was obtained. A single mailing was made to each state and local officer in Virginia. The mailings included a copy of the questionnaire, which included a cover letter and demographics sheet, and a return envelope.

Findings

A total of two hundred and forty-eight mailings were made. One hundred and forty-three responses were received, for a return rate of fifty-eight percent.

The majority of those responding to the survey were female, white, possessed master's degrees, and had taught primarily in a rural or suburban settings.

Of the forty-seven forced answer questions, thirty-six received better than a sixty percent agreement rate among those returning the survey, twenty-seven questions received a seventy-five percent agreement rate or better, twenty-three questions received an eighty percent agreement rate or better, while fourteen questions received a ninety percent agreement rate or better.

Opinions regarding students

- 93% responded that children of today have more serious problems than the children that were in school when they first became teachers
- 92% responded that children's behavior is worse now than when they began their career

- 82% felt that under certain circumstances it is acceptable to permanently remove students from school
- 80% felt that the attitudes of children changed for the worse through the course of their career
- 62% responded that students should be allowed to drop out of public school before their eighteenth birthday
- 5 % responded that special education students should have a different set of rules and discipline, 57 % said it depends on the classification, 36% said they should not.

Opinions concerning schools

- 94 % responded that public schools should teach sexual education in regard to pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease
- 77 % responded that the teaching of sexual education does not encourage sexual activity among children
- 66% responded that schools should not dispense condoms to students
- 66 % responded that public schools should not be required to offer non-English speaking students an education in their native language
- 54% disagreed completely or somewhat with high states testing such as Virginia's Standards of Learning
- 45% responded that educational needed to be reformed, 42% responded that it did not need to be reformed, 13% did not answer this question
- 43% responded that teacher preparation programs are better now than when they received their training, 33% felt they are worse now
- 39 % responded that schools are better now than when they first started, 34% said they are worse, 21% responded that they are about the same

Opinions concerning their profession

- 88% responded that the rewards of teaching outweighs the disappointments
- 76 % responded that they would advise young people to consider teaching as a career
- 76 % responded that they would choose teaching again as their life's work knowing what the now know
- 38 % responded that they had an unofficial mentor in their career
- 34 % reported experiencing burnout

- 32 % responded that they had substitute taught since they retired
- 8 % responded that they had an official mentor in their career

Perceived Professional Satisfaction

- 96 % felt respected and valued by community
- 93 % felt respected and valued by society
- 93 % felt respected and valued by parents and guardians
- 92 % felt respected and valued by their students
- 92 % felt valued by the administration
- 87 % felt that the support they received from administrators was adequate

Legal issues

lawsuits

- 98% responded that they had not been sued in the course of their career
- 75% responded that they felt that the threat of lawsuits had increased significantly throughout the course of their career
- 36% responded that they personally knew someone in the profession that had been sued as an educator

personal safety

- 96% responded that they had never been physically assaulted by a parent or guardian in the course of their career
- 90% responded that they had never been physically assaulted by a student in the course of their career
- 38% responded that they had been verbally assaulted by a parent or guardian in the course of their career
- 32% responded that they had been verbally assaulted by a student in the course of their career

sexual harassment

- 4% responded that they had been sexually harassed at some point in the course of their career

students' right to an education

- 88% responded that public education should be a right with responsibilities, rather than a property right

Opinions concerning society

societal/school relationship

- 94% responded that schools were now responsible for what was once family responsibilities
- 84 % felt that the attitudes of parents changed for the worse through the course of their career
- 75 % felt that the attitudes of society at large changed for the worse through the course of their career
- 55% responded that schools should mirror society at large

funding for public education

- 88% disagreed with the concept of providing public funding for private schools
- 73% disagreed with the concept of vouchers
- 60% felt that schools were inadequately funded

Limitations of the data

The target population for this study was the Virginia Retired Teachers Association. The fact that the officers of the organization were chosen to obtain a sampling of the Virginia Retired Teachers Association there could be problems of generalization. Likewise, it could be argued that problems of generalizability could be found in the fact that the entire sample was from Virginia. However, it can be argued that while this sample may not be a valid sampling of all retired teachers in the United States, it does nonetheless involve one hundred percent of the officers of the Virginia Retired Teachers Association.

The data for the study were collected via mail as a one-shot study. No second mailings were made in an attempt to get the return rate higher than the one mailing rate of fifty-eight percent. A second mailing could have increased the return rate.

The questionnaire used has not been tested for validity and reliability. Simple statistical treatment is relied upon to glean information from the returned surveys.

Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed that there is significant agreement among those that answered the survey. This congruence is similar to other research that has been completed with retired teachers, even though such studies are rare.

One of the most striking aspects of the data collected in the study was the fact that respondents felt very satisfied with their career as educators. Over ninety percent expressed that they felt valued by their community, society, parents and guardians, students, and administrators. An overwhelming majority responded that the rewards of teaching outweighed the disappointments. Over two-thirds said they would recommend teaching as a career to young people.

Very few reported being sued or physically assaulted in the course of their career. Incidents of verbal assault from students and parents/guardians were much higher, but still less than half reported this kind of assault.

Nearly ninety percent agreed that education should be a privilege with responsibility rather than a property right. The vast majority felt that it is acceptable to remove students permanently from public schools under certain circumstances.

Over ninety percent responded that the curriculum of public schools should include sexual education as it relates to pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. However, the majority said that schools should not dispense condoms to students.

Over ninety percent felt that children today have more serious problems than children had when they began their career. More than ninety percent of the respondents felt that schools were currently responsible for things that were once the responsibility of parents. Likewise, over ninety percent said that societal problems are a major influence in the classroom; over two-thirds thought that parents and societies attitude toward public education had changed for the worse; and they reported that children's behavior and attitudes today are worse now, when compared to children that were in school when they began their career.

While showing significant homogeneousness in many of the areas of inquiry the group was divided on several important topics. The group was split, with a slight majority opposing, the idea of high states testing, such as Virginia's Standards of Learning. The group was also fairly evenly divided on the need for school reform and as to the question of whether schools are better now than when they first began their career as a teacher.

The vast majority disagreed with the concept of providing public funding for private schools and vouchers. A majority also expressed that public education was under funded.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It would be wrong to conclude that this research definitively answers all the questions about what retired teachers think and feel about the teaching profession. However, with the shortage of research on retired teachers, this research can serve as a beginning point for future study. This research, complete with literature review and reference page, is under review for publication by the Teacher Educators' Journal.