

S3 E3: Episode Transcript

ABSENT: Why are Canada's teachers leaving the profession?

Opening

[🎵 OPENING THEME]

HOST: Welcome to the *ABSENT* series, brought to you by the Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF/FCE) Source Podcast. This investigative series uncovers the mystery of our public education crisis.

In this third episode of the *ABSENT* series, we'll explore the teacher retention crisis. We'll begin by debunking the teacher shortage, identifying why teachers are leaving the profession, its consequences, and exploring possible solutions.

To understand the extent of the retention crisis in Canada, you'll hear from teachers who've left the public education system or the profession entirely, as well as teachers who chose to stay to learn more about the impact of the teacher shortage on their day-to-day. Throughout the episode, you'll also hear from experts, ranging from education leaders and researchers.

To respect the confidentiality of teachers and education workers, some testimonials that you will hear are read by voice actors.

This episode is in English. Our next episode will be in French and will be dedicated to « la pénurie de personnel enseignant francophone. »

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

Evidence

[WHAT: Background, defining the issue, conceptualizing “shortage”]

HOST: The teacher retention and recruitment crisis is widespread across the country, making it more urgent than ever. Now, let’s turn to Heidi Yetman, CTF/FCE President, to walk us through what the “teacher shortage” really means and what it looks like across Canada.

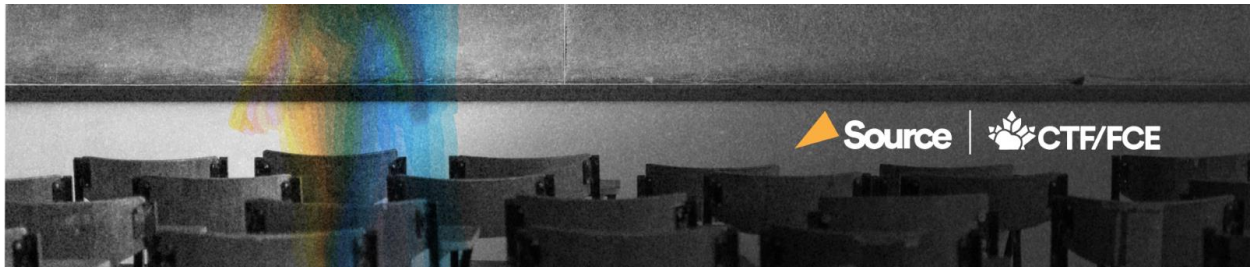
HEIDI YETMAN: The national “teacher shortage” has really become shorthand for what those of us in the profession refer to as the “teacher retention and recruitment crisis”. You see, the issue is far beyond just filling teacher vacancies. It’s a broad and nuanced challenge of keeping the teachers we do have, and attracting new ones to a currently tenuous profession, deeply in need of systemic change.

But why is this a crisis? And why now? In September 2023, weeks into the new school year, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation’s researchers conducted a media scan of over 30 news articles focused on the issues fueling the crisis: from staffing shortages, rising levels of violence, and poor working conditions, to stagnating contract negotiations, and a notable rate of attrition of new teachers. In combination with the rapidly emerging, and troubling, data from researchers at both the CTF/FCE and our member and associate organizations, the picture of the crisis is vivid and pervasive across the country.

The current shortages in Canada are not generally the result of insufficient numbers of potentially qualified teachers. The teachers are there; it’s these rapidly degrading working conditions that lie at the heart of the crisis.

That said, shortages do exist in certain regions, most notably when it comes to French first language teachers, both in Quebec and in minority-language settings like parts of Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick. This shortage also extends to the numbers of qualified French Immersion teachers. A 2021 study lead by [L’Association canadienne des professionnels de l’immersion](#) found that 42% of French immersion schools reported a shortage situation.

Northern and remote school communities also face legitimate shortages, and this is for several adjacent reasons including a lack of adequate housing, and the sheer personal commitment and incentives required to relocate.



All this to say, the teacher retention and recruitment crisis and its associated shortages is a varied and pervasive issue in every part of the country. In the short term, Provincial and Territorial governments need to work with teachers' federations to triage the rates of attrition. In the long term, meaningful, systemic changes need to be not only considered, but seen as essential to rebuilding the foundations of the profession.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

[WHO's leaving the profession?]

HOST: It's clear that the teacher shortage in Canada is a cause for concern. Our recent poll with Abacus Data indicates that $\frac{3}{4}$ of Canadians agree that there is a shortage of teachers. Similarly, a recent study by the Alberta Teachers' Association – the ATA – highlights the rising concerns among Alberta teachers and school leaders.

PHIL MCRAE: ...one in three Alberta teachers are considering leaving the profession, leaving the province of Alberta, or retiring earlier than they had planned.

HOST: That's Dr. Phil McRae, Executive Staff Officer and Associate Coordinator of Government-Research with the ATA. He explains that over the past decade, the ATA has been tracking teachers' plans for the future. And over the past 3 years, they've also conducted exit surveys with educators leaving the profession. They found that teachers' concerns largely stem from the complexities of supporting and providing resources for diverse student needs, managing large class sizes, and a decline in resources, leading to inadequate supports.

PHIL MCRAE: ... So what we have on these bookends, we have teachers entering that don't see themselves long term. We have people in the middle of their careers that are looking at leaving the province or leaving the profession. And then we have those near the end of their career who are looking at early retirement. And all of these populations are planning on doing this two years in advance of their leaving. One of the things that we've learned in our research is that they don't just quit; They actually make a plan, and it's usually about two years in advance.

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HOST: According to CTF/FCE’s 2024 cross-Canada scan of Member Organizations, estimates are suggesting upwards of 30% of teachers in their first five years leave the profession. Although new data is constantly emerging, the narrative is becoming increasingly clear: the teaching profession is inadequately resourced, which leads to difficulties in retaining teachers and meeting staffing needs.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

[Effects of Retention and Recruitment]

HOST: Now that we know what the teacher shortage truly means, let’s dive into its’ underlying causes. Joining us now is Rolf-Carlos Klausener, CTF/FCE Strategic Communications Coordinator, and Dr. Nichole Grant, CTF/FCE Researcher and Policy Analyst. They’re the dynamic team leading the CTF/FCE’s multi-year Pan-Canadian Strategy on Teacher Retention and Recruitment, commonly referred to as “R&R”.

Rolf, can you tell us more about the strategy?

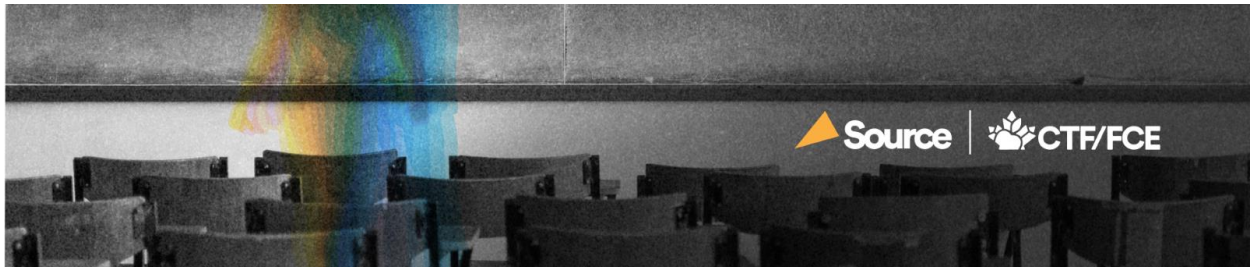
ROLF: Over the first year of this strategy and through multiple consultations with Federation leaders and researchers, like Phil McRae at the Alberta Teachers’ Association and others you have heard from in the ABSENT series, we’ve learned that the underlying causes of R&R are varied and nuanced, but there are roughly four common issues fueling the crisis.

In terms of **retention** specifically, here are the common factors we’ve earmarked as priorities thus far:

- Workload
- Class Size, Complexity/Composition
- Rise of school-based aggression and violence
- Lack of specialized supports

HOST: Okay, so Nichole, can you explain what exactly those factors look like?

NICHOLE: Sure thing. **Workload** is both the sheer amount of tasks an educator is asked to do or be responsible for, but it is also the complexity and variety of those tasks. On the surface we think about teachers in their classrooms, facilitating a lesson, engaging with their students and supporting their learning. But to do so, teachers need time and space to be present with their students in their learning.



Outside and around teaching time, teachers are also required to manage large volumes of administrative tasks, plan lessons, grade, and support extracurricular activities, often outside of regular working hours and from what we've observed there really isn't any consistency in how these growing number of tasks are compensated for, if at all.

Excessive workload is one of the primary reasons for teacher burnout and attrition. In a recent survey in Newfoundland and Labrador, 78 percent of educators and Principals and Vice Principals found the increase in their job demands having a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. This aligns with a recent small scale pilot study on educator mental health the CTF/FCE conducted in 3 provinces where we also found 71% found an increase in job demands negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing. Overall we know 58 % of Canadian education staff feel dissatisfaction with work/life balance, as reported by the International Barometer of Education Staff survey in 2023.

So these stats tell us teachers are really feeling overloaded and its effecting their health. It also means educators are increasingly looking to other professions with less stress and job demands for better work-life balance.

This brings me to our second factor – **class size and complexity**. So, one of the biggest factors in workload is supporting all of the students in your classes in all of their uniqueness in strengths, challenges, and abilities. This is not only about numbers – though some educators have reported upwards to 45 students in their classes in certain locales – it is also about the different supports and needs in a classroom that teachers have to attend to while they teach – that's the complexity part.

Complexity involves factors like cognitive, behavioral, psychosocial, social emotional, spiritual, and physical characteristics in the learning environment. These can be things students and educators bring with them to the classroom, aspects in the classroom environment itself, and what is being taught. And again, much like workload once you put a large class size mixed with increasingly complex needs for each student, the needs and supports educators require to adequately teach their students rises exponentially. And both size and complexity are growing in almost all provinces and

territories. In an ATA pulse research study conducted in December 2023 for instance, nine in ten teachers reported an increase in the complexity and diversity of student needs and 61% of teachers reported larger class sizes compared to last year; of those, 39% reported a class size larger than 30.

These increases do not always come with professional supports: classroom complexity quotas or caps as inconsistently supported in collective agreements across the country and something educators continue to advocate would drastically support a move to a more manageable workload and professional practice.

HOST: I'm really seeing the way these factors are interconnected and make for difficult working conditions.

Okay, so earlier you mentioned four primary issues. Rolf, can you tell us about the two other issues your team has isolated?

ROLF: The third, and most upsetting issue we're seeing is this dramatic rise of **aggression and violence** in schools. The data varies from region to region, but what's clear is that these are not rare occurrences, but a growing and disturbing problem. These incidents come in several forms, from student-to-student violence, aggressive behaviour, and increasingly, student-to-teacher violence. We're talking about teachers going home with bruises, bite marks, and even black eyes. A June 2024 survey from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation reported 1 in 3 teachers having personally had physical force used against them.

In Nova Scotia, teachers have reported a 60% increase in violent incidents in the last 7 years, and over 27,000 incidents last year alone.

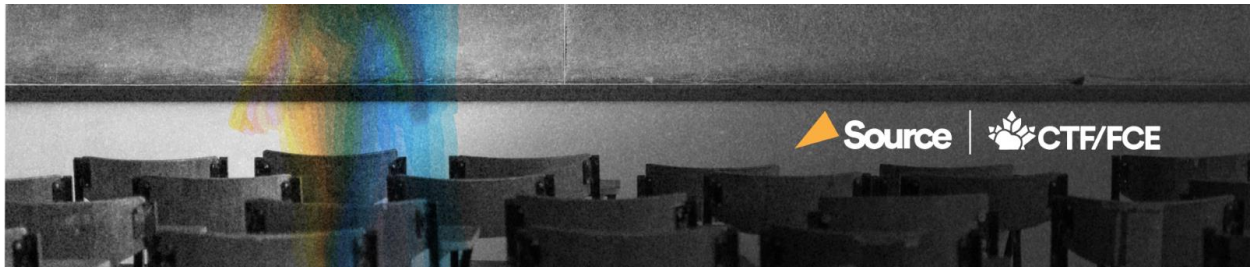
And the public *is* aware. Our polling with ABACUS Data indicates that 86% of Canadians are concerned about the rising levels of violence schools.

HOST: Wow. Those numbers are just staggering. And just a quick aside – if you're interested in learning more about the rise of violence in schools, be sure to check out the [first episode of the ABSENT series](#).

So, what you're saying Rolf, is that these incidents are not only getting more severe, but significantly more frequent?

ROLF: That's exactly right.

HOST: Got it. Now, tell us about the fourth issue.



ROLF: The other main issue we're seeing is a lack of specialized supports. And this relates to Nichole's point about class complexity and composition. So, I think some of us still have this antiquated notion of the one-room school house with a single teacher, apple in hand, scribbling on a blackboard. The obvious reality is that contemporary schools and classrooms are dramatically more complex in their efforts to become more inclusive, and accommodate different learning styles, rates of learning, varied behaviours, and not to mention the ever-evolving tools and digital technologies affecting pedagogy. As such, schools have come to rely on the specialized supports like education assistants, special education teachers, tech personnel, counsellors, and psychologists. For example, a standard elementary public school might have 26 students, four of which with specialized needs, in one class. An education assistant might be assigned to all four students, but naturally can't be in all places at once. If one of those students lives with behavioural issues and is requiring extra support, the other three students feel that lack of direct support. And when an E.A. isn't there to offer that support, the teacher has no choice but to step-in. This is a consistent issue across the country, and as classes balloon in size, and grow in complexity, the lack of specialized supports becomes just that much more essential.

Of course. In addition to these primary four factors, there are a host of other issues contributing to teacher burnout and attrition: lack of administrative supports, limitations of career progression, and most notably a degrading public sentiment not only towards teachers, but the public education system as a whole.

HOST: It's clear that the factors mentioned by Rolf and Nichole are interconnected, and the crisis we're facing is having a domino effect; one issue leads to another, and another. As a result, teacher attrition is not just caused by one challenge or issue, but a combination of factors.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

Testimonials (Segment 1)

[People who have left the profession]

HOST: We asked former teachers from across the country what led them to leave the profession. Here is what they had to say.

Former Secondary School Teacher: *After 19 years of teaching secondary... I'm leaving the profession. I'm no longer happy with my job and feel as though the last two decades of my life's work is being erased by terrible Ministry of Education policies that don't help students or their parents.*

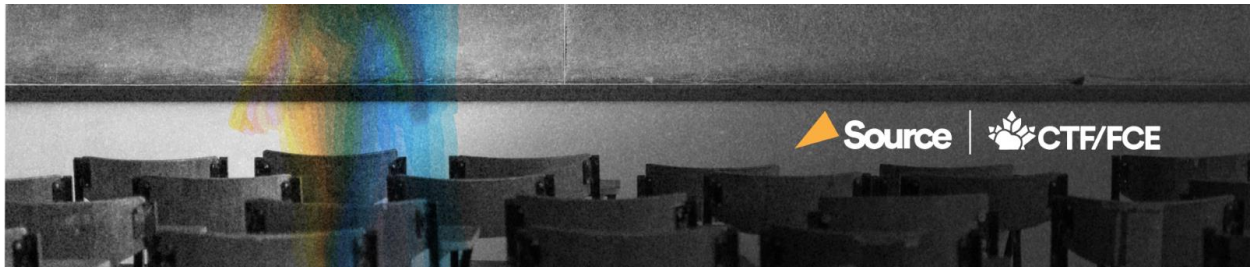
Former Secondary School Teacher 2: *When I was teaching, I would be working nine to 10 hours a day Monday to Friday. And then I would spend several hours on the weekend doing either marking or planning or whatever that was needed. And that was after I had put down some really hard boundaries for myself, just so that I would have a personal life. Having boundaries was, is really hard to do, especially when teachers are also expected to, coach and be part of the school community and do all of these other things that aren't part of the job but are part of the job. And they are important, but it's a big-time suck.*

Former Teacher: *Every Sunday for 13 years, I worked anywhere from 6 to 12 hours, depending on how much I had to get prepped for the upcoming week. It gave me a little bit of anxiety. That's called the Sunday scaries. Like it's so common that's what it's called. I haven't had that at all since I switched roles.*

Occasional Teacher: *For some classes, especially if I teach on call, it's very evident there are some classes still where you look around and you think, this classroom needs more than one teacher, there needs to be more than one adult in the room. Being even in a classroom with 25 students, it feels like you're putting out fires.*

Former teacher: *I fed two students at least throughout the entire year, each year I was teaching. I thought one year, how much money am I actually spending to do my job? And that was a mistake because I counted and it was in the \$10,000 range.*

Former Secondary School Teacher 2: *Unless there are some massive changes in the way that public education is being run and funded so that, class sizes are smaller, there's more support and less complexity within the classroom so that teachers are able to have that work-life balance. I generally, genuinely don't think I'll be returning.*



Former Teacher: *It was constantly a juggling act, trying to figure out who do I help? Where do I put all my attention? And I often joked and said, I wish I could multiply myself and have one to teach and one to handle all the classroom management issues.*

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

Consequences

[Moral distress]

HOST: When too many qualified teachers leave the profession, a crisis is born. This, in turn, fuels an endless loop of teacher burnout. And although teachers always put their students' needs before their own, there comes a time when they don't have the resources or support to meet students' needs, and even the most hopeful teachers have no choice but to leave the profession. Here's Dr. Phil McRae with more on this concept.

PHIL MCRAE: One of the things that we've watched very carefully over the last several years in our research studies, has been the growing issue of something called moral distress. Moral distress in the profession of teaching is when you know what the right thing to do is, but you don't have the supports or the resources or there's institutional constraints. So, you know a student is struggling, but as a teacher or as a school leader in Alberta, you're not able to intervene or meet their needs, because you don't have the time, the resources, the supports or there's structures that prevent you from supporting that child or that youth.

HOST: Similarly, the BC Teachers' Federation reports similar findings. Over the past year, they've surveyed over 5,000 of their members and found that a large number are feeling overwhelmed and short on time. More than 58 per cent of respondents said their workload has increased and 56 per cent said it is at an unmanageable level.

PHIL MCRAE: And what we find with moral distress, is that when people sit in that space for too long, when they're deeply concerned about not being able to do that thing that they got into the profession – which is to really work with young people and

be hopeful for the future – that's when we see a deterioration that leads to people exiting the profession.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

[Unqualified personnel and retirements]

HOST: Amid the rise of teachers exiting the profession, noncertified personnel are filling those gaps in situations where there is no certified teacher available.

Regrettably, 100% of the CTF/FCE's Member and Associate Organizations have indicated that unqualified teachers are holding positions in schools across Canada.

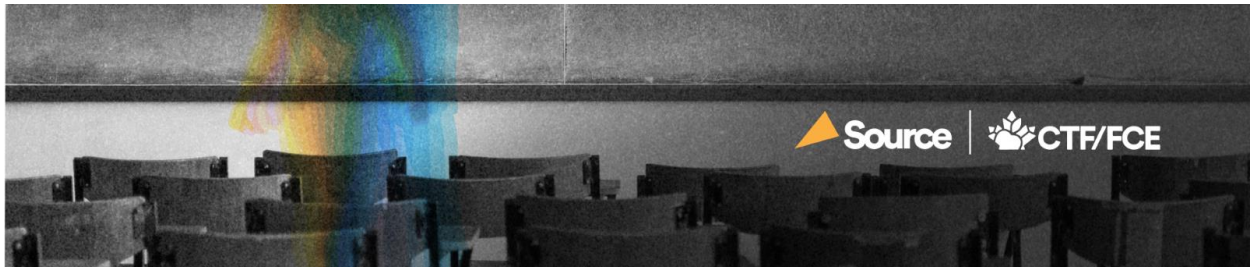
For example, in New Brunswick, there are about 1,100 unqualified and uncertified personnel working with what's referred to as "local permits"; across Canada, this is often called "a letter of permission", which is typically granted by the Ministry of Education and permits the hiring of non-certified teacher in situations where Boards or Districts are unable to find a qualified and certified teacher.

Now, what are the reasons for the increase in uncertified personnel in New Brunswick schools? According to a 2024 report by the University of New Brunswick, around 52 per cent of students who graduate with a Bachelor of Education in New Brunswick do not teach in the province.

On top of that, over the next five years, more than 1,200 teachers in New Brunswick will be eligible for retirement. Peter Lagacy, the President of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA), describes the situation as "alarming" given the current inflow of new teachers. While there isn't an estimate of how many new teachers will be hired in that same period, the NBTA is predicting that New Brunswick's anglophone school system will be short more than 500 teachers when students return to class this fall.

HOST: Here are some testimonials from NBTA members that illustrate this particular issue.

NBTA MEMBER 1: *We need more teachers. We need more certified teachers. A lot of days it feels like we're just trying to put anyone in front of a classroom just so that there's some sort of adult. And in the middle school setting, you really need people who are trained to do that. You need a little bit of a thick skin to put up with these kiddos.*



And then the support in the classroom in terms of EAs, Behavior Intervention Mentors, we just don't have enough of them.

NBTA MEMBER 2: *We're still not being able to fulfill those teacher roles with the amount of people that we need, which makes our classrooms larger and overflowing, and it's just becoming more difficult for teachers to, completely meet the needs of students.*

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

[Francophone teacher shortage]

HOST: While the teacher retention crisis is occurring across publicly funded schools in Canada, there is another parallel crisis occurring in French-language schools. According to CTF/FCE's 2024 BIENNIAL TRACKING SURVEY, 92% of Francophone-Canadians agree that "there is a shortage of teachers in their community" while 71% of Anglophone-Canadians agree with that statement.

For more on this issue, let's hear from Anne Vinet-Roy, CTF/FCE Vice-President and President of L'Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (commonly known as l'AEFO).

Anne Vinet-Roy: Donc, [pour] nous, la pénurie n'a pas seulement commencé au moment de la pandémie. La pénurie continue de s'accroître année après année...

HOST: President Vinet-Roy explains that the Francophone teacher shortage started well before the pandemic and continues to worsen. While teacher vacancies increase, so do uncertified personnel.

Anne Vinet-Roy: En 2015-2016, il y avait environ 150 personnes qui enseignaient dans nos écoles sous des lettres de permission et ce nombre-là est passé à 700 en 2021-2022.

HOST: She explains that the number of uncertified personnel teaching under a letter of permission is 4 times higher than it was 8 years ago. And compared to Anglophones in Ontario, the difference is astronomical.

Anne Vinet-Roy: Alors, ça représente une augmentation beaucoup trop grande au niveau des effectifs pour le personnel enseignant qui n'est pas certifié. Et si on compare avec les anglophones, eux, c'est 0,5 % des effectifs qui travaillent sous des lettres de permission, contrairement aux francophones, il y a plus de 50 % des permissions intérimaires qui sont accordées à des conseils scolaires francophones pour l'embauche d'enseignants qui sont non qualifiés.

HOST: So, what has led to the increase of uncertified personnel in French-language schools across Ontario?

Anne Vinet-Roy: On a des données de l'Ordre des enseignants qui dit que 30 % des diplômés des programmes de formation en langue française ne renouvellent pas leur certificat de qualification après 5 ans.

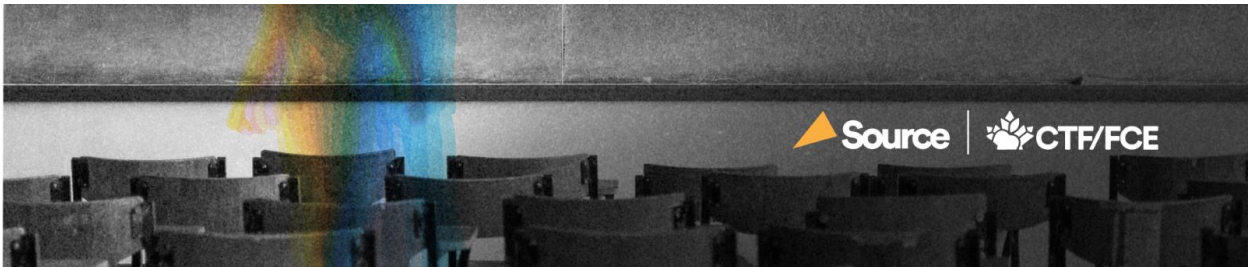
HOST: The body that licenses qualified teachers – the Ontario College of Teachers – reports that 30% of graduates from French-language Education programs do not renew their teaching license after 5 years. This is a clear indication that qualified teachers are leaving the Ontario public education system to teach elsewhere – either in the private system or outside of the province – or worse, they're leaving the profession entirely.

So, what's the key issue here? Moral distress – as mentioned by Dr. Phil McRae earlier in the episode, is this idea of being expected to do more with less, while not having adequate resources to support and meet students' needs.

Anne Vinet-Roy: Alors, malgré le plus grand dévouement du personnel enseignant à un moment donné, ça use tout ça et il y a des limites à ce qu'on peut faire humainement quand on n'a pas les ressources, quand on n'est pas appuyé et quand on nous en demande de plus en plus.

HOST: On top of that, there's an increase in enrolment in the French-language education system in Ontario.

Anne Vinet-Roy: Bien il y a quand même au-delà de tout près de 500 postes qui ne sont pas comblés à chaque année parce qu'on n'a pas assez de personnes qui



complètent la formation en enseignement...Donc, si les effectifs augmentent, mais que le pourcentage de membres ou de personnel enseignant qualifié n'augmente pas, eh bien, il y a un problème.

HOST: President Vinet-Roy explains that right now, the demand is surpassing the supply – the percentage of qualified teachers is not increasing at the same rate as enrolment. Each year, there's an estimated 500 unfilled teaching positions in Ontario's French-language system due to the shortage of qualified teachers.

That said, there's another underlying cause of the French-language teacher shortage.

Anne Vinet-Roy: La pénurie du personnel qualifié n'est pas seulement due à l'augmentation de la demande du système d'éducation de langue française dont on vient de parler, ça découle vraiment des décisions qui ont été prises par le gouvernement au début des années 2010 pour répondre à un enjeu de surplus de main-d'œuvre qu'il y avait dans le système anglophone.

HOST: The shortage of Francophone teachers in Ontario is the result of decisions made by the Ontario government in the early 2010s. The Bachelor of Education program was extended from one year to two years to respond to the surplus in the English-language education workforce.

Anne Vinet-Roy: Le système d'éducation de langue française connaissait un certain équilibre entre l'offre et la demande à ce moment-là, quand le programme de formation à l'enseignement a été prolongé à deux ans, le système francophone souffrait déjà un peu. On avait déjà annoncé cette pénurie-là qui se tramait déjà. Il s'est retrouvé en situation de déséquilibre.

HOST: On the other hand, the French-language education system was experiencing a balance between supply and demand at this time. Yet this unilateral decision resulted in an imbalance in the French-language education system, and actually caused more harm than good.

This illustrates the idea that solutions cannot be a “one size fits all approach”, especially when applying solutions that were primarily aimed at the majority system; what might work for some may not work for all and may actually have an adverse effect. As a result, the Ontario government ignored its obligations to the French-language education system.

It’s also important to note that on a daily basis, l’AEFO members feel the negative impact of the teacher shortage on student learning.

Anne Vinet-Roy: ...les membres de l'AEFO nous le disent constamment. Elles et ils ressentent au quotidien l'impact négatif de la pénurie croissante des enseignantes et des enseignants sur l'apprentissage des élèves. Les élèves francophones, comme tous les autres élèves de l'Ontario, méritent des enseignantes et des enseignants qui sont qualifiés et certifiés en tout temps.

HOST: It’s clear that the situation in the Francophone system is complex and dire. Stay tuned for our next episode – in French – dedicated to this topic entirely.

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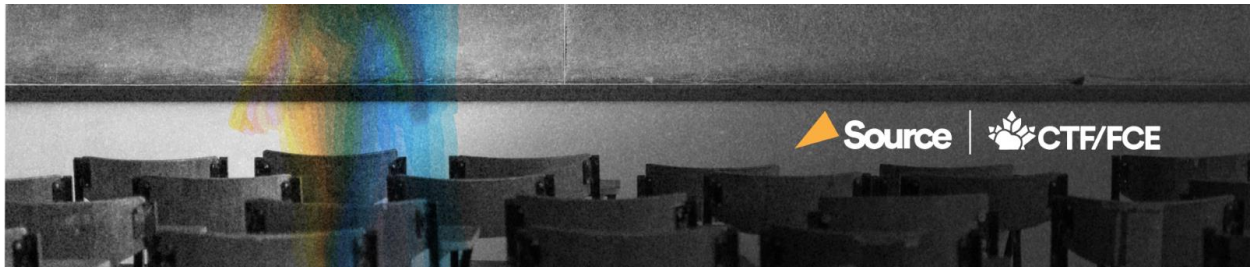
[Global perspective]

HOST: Now Canadian teachers are not alone in this crisis. Let's take a step back and look at this challenge from a global perspective.

The United Nations report that:

- by 2030, 7 out of 10 secondary school teachers will need to be replaced, and 44 million more teachers will be needed globally. Europe and North America have the third highest demand for teachers, which will require 4.8 million educators.
- By 2050, there will be a global teacher shortage, and Canada is one of the countries that will require more personnel in its teaching workforce to meet complex student needs.

In response to the growing and alarming global teacher shortage, Education International (or EI for short) – has launched a world-wide campaign, called *Go Public! Fund Education*. EI is a world teacher trade union, representing 32 million educators, and the CTF/FCE is a proud member.



The *Go Public! Fund Education* campaign is an urgent call for governments to invest in public education, a fundamental human right and public good, and to invest more in teachers, the single most important factor in achieving quality education. Together, education unions across the world are joining forces to build quality inclusive public education for all!

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

Testimonials (Segment 2)

[Teachers in the profession but struggling]

HOST: We also talked with Canadian teachers [and education workers] who are struggling in the profession. Here's what they had to share.

Early childhood educator: *Some schools are sharing a mental health worker amongst three or four schools. There is not enough supports going around, period. There's not enough educational assistance.*

Child and Youth Worker: *There are a lot of support staff in our area that never get covered. And so there's 10 or 12, in a school and maybe four away. And so those remainder eight staff in that building have to pick up the slack. There's not enough bodies in the building.*

Secondary Teacher 1: *We have a school of like over 800 kids and one [Child and Youth Worker] for that whole population. You know, they've been harmed by COVID and they need support more than we can give them.*

Secondary Teacher 2: *The general makeup of my class is large. All of my classes tend to be maxed out around 30 students, and in terms of their ability, it's a wide range. So, in the last couple of years, I have a lot of students who have accommodations as those needs are growing with individual education plans and not having the availability of additional support in terms of educational assistance. It has been a significant challenge in ensuring that I have enough time to meet the needs of those students.*

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Resource Teacher: *I love my job to death and I wouldn't do anything different, but I see how it's affecting other people in my school. I'm three years in at my school and I'm senior staff. There's maybe one other person who's been there longer than me. We've had such a crazy rollover. And we've lost so many great teachers. Either to physical violence in the school, knocking teachers out, literally concussing them for months and not bringing them back, and then the PTSD behind all of it. The EAs having to put up with that, the personal care that they're having to maintain without the adequate support and space.*

Secondary Teacher 3: *The support I receive from my colleagues includes instructional resources and emotional support. My fellow teachers are what keep me in the profession at this point.*

Elementary teacher: *Teaching is the profession that produces all others, yet it is hardly valued as such. ... Working conditions are growing worse: from overly large class sizes in overcrowded classrooms to harassment and violence towards staff, from limited resources which force teachers to pay for educational materials to lack of support from district or school administrators, and receiving little to no training and having too few staff to work with students who have special needs, frequently undiagnosed.*

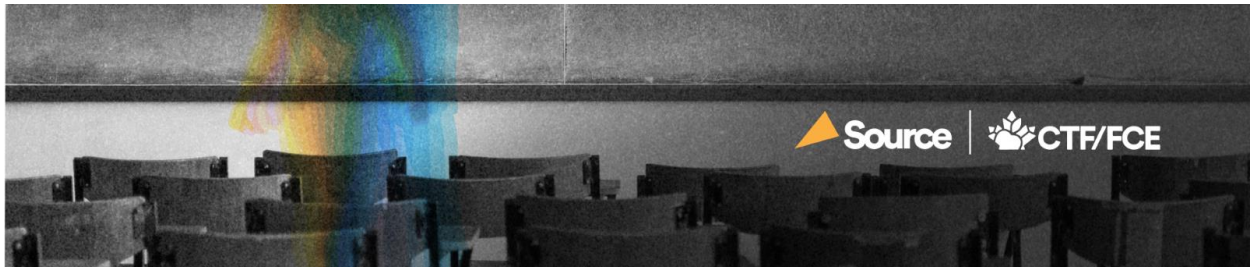
Elementary teacher 2: *My partner teacher has just taken a leave because of the persistent violence by one 6-year-old in her class... The solution was to give the staff member a Kevlar padded jacket and a Kevlar hard hat to wear each day. How does that help?"*

HOST: Overall, these stories highlight the real challenges teachers and education workers in Canada experience every day. It also underscores the importance of finding sustainable solutions to these pressing issues.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

[AD BREAK]

VOICE-ACTOR: We'd like to take a moment to tell you about a podcast that you might find interesting. **HighlightED** is a podcast from the New Brunswick Teachers' Association. It focuses on sharing innovative teaching and learning approaches happening in New Brunswick, trending issues related to public education in New Brunswick and beyond, and much more. Click the link in the episode description to tune in to conversations where teachers' voices are front and center.



[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

Solutions

[Barbara J. Smith's Recommendations]

HOST: To dive deeper into these challenges and explore potential solutions, we turn to Dr. Barbara J. Smith, an author and educator with over 40 years of experience in education and a PhD in curriculum and instruction.

BARBARA SMITH: There's some serious crisis going on in education, and you see it with students, not feeling fulfilled and teachers feeling like they can't do what's being expected. So I really think the profession has been stripped of its dignity long enough, and that's why I wrote the book.

HOST: Barbara's referring to her 2023 book, entitled "[*Teacher Shortages and the Challenge of Retention: Practices That Make School Systems and Cultures More Attractive and Empowering.*](#)" Her book is based on her extensive research and experience in K-12 schools and universities across Canada, the US, and Europe, including public, charter, international, and independent schools.

Given Barbara's experience in the education system, let's hear what Barbara had to say about possible solutions to address and improve the current challenges in the teaching profession.

BARBARA SMITH: Let's be clear, these are professionals. They're coming out of university with degrees. They should be paid on par with what any other professionals would be paid and they're not. It's a lot of other conditions that I think all together are really making it difficult for people to want to be teachers.

HOST: Barbara also mentioned that teachers need more time.

BARBARA SMITH: Everybody's talked about teachers need time and that's like a magic ingredient. But they need time to work with fewer students to help them understand.

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They need time for planning. And I'll use this example in business. If they've got a stewardship meeting and it's one hour, they will spend upward sometimes of three weeks working on that one-hour presentation. And we in our hearts, and certainly when I'm working in graduate work and so on, we say, these are these great expectations. We want you to do that presentation for kids every minute that you're with them, because we know this works and we know this is engaging. We know there won't be as many behavior problems if they get to do something that has purpose. Are they doing something they're going to remember? And you need at least half a day to teach and half a day to plan. If you want quality teaching, quality curriculum, quality learning, that to me is minimum, like a one-to-one ratio. You reduce what the students have to memorize and you actually give teachers time and if they have fewer things to do. They're going to feel a huge difference in terms of a sense of contentment and fulfillment.

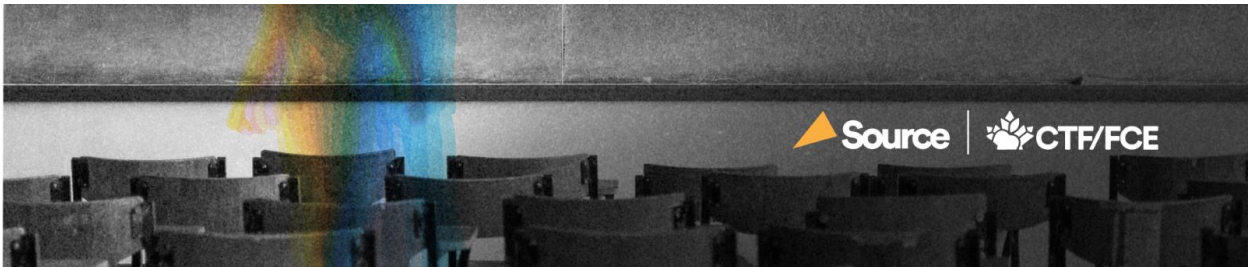
HOST: Barbara also underscored that respect and recognition go hand in hand.

BARBARA SMITH: These are professionals. They're not technicians. They should be honored for assessing the students in their classroom and knowing that what they know is a much richer piece of information and much better base of evidence than what happens. They need to be respected and recognized for their talents. There needs to be some real recognition of what's going on and not just from administrators, but from students and parents and so on, they have to recognize this.

We tend to look inward to make our changes in how to tweak and how to improve the system. But we really should be looking outward at what systems are working, like what's happening over there in Finland. They respect teachers as much as they respect lawyers and doctors and you know, something's going on there. So it's not like you want to adopt the culture. You want to probably adapt some of those good things because there's a huge respect for teachers.

HOST: Barbara goes on to explain that supporting one another and collaboration are key to fostering a sense of fulfillment.

BARBARA SMITH: Teachers need support. So they need the quality resources. And they don't need cookbooks. They need resources that allow them to feel that they can build something. It's like years ago, the Chicken Soup for the Soul Series that came out; when Jack Canfield and his son started working on these, they just had one, but then people were so inspired by the stories, they started writing in more stories. And then there was like 15 or 16 books that they wound up editing. Now, that's what we have to



think about. How do we get that culture back where teachers are really excited to have been proud of part of that particular practice that went on.

HOST: School culture is integral, but the buildings themselves need to also be safe and a conducive learning environment.

BARBARA SMITH: When you see a school falling apart that's telling you that institution in society is not valued. We should have very nice looking schools. I mean, to inspire the kids to be there, parents to be there, and everything else.

HOST: Additional key pieces in the puzzle are quality mentorship and promoting leadership development.

BARBARA SMITH: We don't just want to go and look at them as coaches and then talk to them after, have lunches and so on. There's not enough time. They need real significant time to make real significant changes and improvement happen in the school. So, quality mentorship is important.

We need to help and support teachers to become teacher leaders because when they're leaders, they have a lot more skin in the game and they want to be able to help carve what those changes might be.

HOST: Barbara concludes by explaining the best way to implement these solutions.

BARBARA SMITH: So it's not enough to just do one or two of these things and throw them a bone, that's what it feels like. You need to do them all, and you need to figure out a way to do that. And if there's so many people that aren't in classrooms that are making decisions, then they need to think outside of what's their system that exists. It's not about tweaking it anymore. There's some serious crisis going on in education.

HOST: Barbara wrapped up our discussion by reading the last paragraph of her book.

BARBARA SMITH: Here's what I said: if schools can be redesigned to remove existing barriers, perhaps the path might attract more talent and keep our current assets not

simply in place, but eager to make the profession a more popular option. The hard work of getting more people to say they want to become a teacher is not going to be easy. And even with good intentions that began yesterday, there needs to be a deeper sense of urgency to move the bigger boulders of sameness in school now.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

[Heidi's Proposed Solutions/Drivers of Retention]

HOST: Teacher retention is a complex and nuanced issue which calls for a multifaceted approach and long-term solutions – not band-aids or short-term fixes. CTF/FCE President Yetman offers several approaches to address the issue.

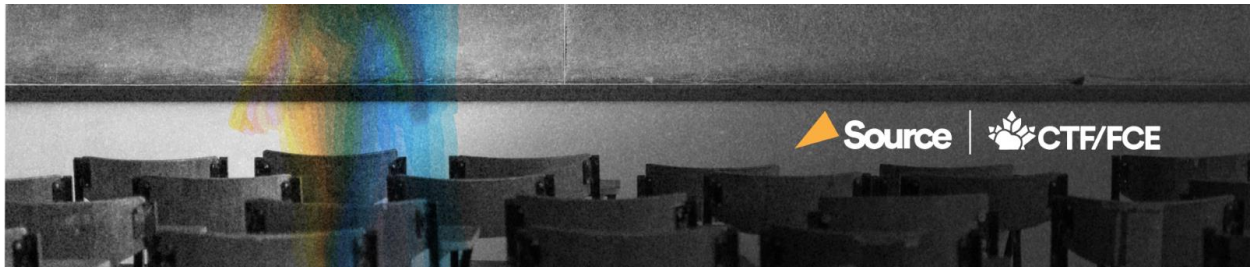
HEIDI YETMAN: Ensuring that schools have adequate resources is a critical factor in retaining teachers. This includes adequate support for the growing complexity of student needs and keeping class sizes at a manageable level.

By investing in these essential resources, schools can create an environment where teachers feel supported and empowered to deliver high-quality education. Improving the physical conditions of schools, such as maintaining facilities and ensuring safe and healthy classrooms, also contributes to a positive working environment that encourages teachers to stay.

Teachers' collective voices are crucial in advocating for the necessary, systemic changes that are urgently needed, especially as the profession continues to evolve.

In Saskatchewan for example, teachers have been working without a contract since August of last year. Frustration has been mounting, leading to job actions beginning in January. When we say "job actions", we're talking about temporary but meaningful actions such as rotating strikes, withdrawal from extracurricular activities, and a halt-to-noon supervision duties. And to be clear, teachers rarely want to use these kinds of protest actions: they want to be in the classroom.

Building a strong sense of community among teachers is essential for retention. Schools can foster this by creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate, share best practices, and support one another. Professional learning communities, peer mentoring programs, and regular team-building activities can help build these kinds of supportive networks – but first, teachers need the time and space for these opportunities. And they need it built into their schedules, not added to their already heavy workloads.



When teachers feel connected and supported by their colleagues, they're more likely to remain committed to their profession.

In addition to that, we need to make sure that teachers can use their professional judgment and have autonomy to do the things that they know are the right things to do, and feel confident that they'll be supported by school boards, the government, and the community, including parents.

The Council of Ministers of Education Canada, or CMEC as they're often referred to, should consider the recommendations made by the United Nations' High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession. Released earlier this year, they outlined six core imperatives, covering dignity, humanity, diversity, equity and inclusion, quality, innovation and leadership and sustainability. They are not shy in highlighting that teacher shortages are being experienced worldwide. The teaching profession needs to be valued and respected. This requires decent working conditions, competitive wages, space for teacher voice in decision-making and opportunities for development and innovation.

Engaging with international experts and adopting global best practices can help inform and improve provincial and territorial policies. These collaborations can lead to more effective strategies for addressing the crisis we're facing and ensuring that Canada's publicly funded, public education system remains robust, respected, and thriving.

[Sources of Hope and Next Steps]

HOST: Teaching is an incredibly rewarding and fulfilling profession. Not losing sight of that is something that Dr. Phil McRae reminds us of.

PHIL MCRAE: One of the things that we've done in our research agenda in Alberta that I would encourage all of us to take a look at is, what are the sources of hope for teachers? And when you look at that, students are the source of hope always, right? When teachers are working with students, they love their job. It's the bureaucracy on top of it. It's the lack of support [that] really undermines their confidence in, and their interest in

staying in the profession. So I think we need to look at the sources of hope for teachers and school leaders, and we need to look at the challenges of hope.

HOST: Phil also outlines what needs to happen to keep teachers in the classroom, as well as the broader impacts of this crisis on society.

PHIL MCRAE: So while we want to make sure that we create conditions to keep them retained, and we want to recruit strong candidates into the profession, we also have to take a very close look at why they're exiting, how fast they're exiting, because once that cascading crisis begins, it's very difficult to slow it down.

And when you don't have teachers in schools, you don't have that high quality professional education, the community starts to pay attention, they start to really notice who's in front of their students, and we need to really bolster the support for a strong profession, because that's what's given Canada, and Alberta in my case, success over time, because we've had a very equitable system that has allowed you to come from all different socioeconomic backgrounds, and find success, because it was something that prepared you for the future, being a citizen and the future workforce. So I think this is a broader concern for society and in a war for global talent teachers who are highly skilled are one of the groups that we want to keep in the profession.

[🎵 TRANSITION MUSIC]

Outro

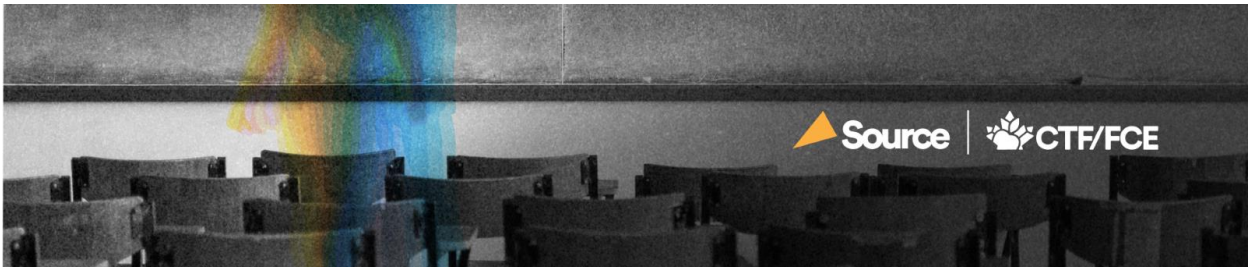
HOST: Thanks for tuning in to our third episode of the *ABSENT* series.

We have learned about the true extent of the teacher retention crisis and its impact on teachers through research and first-hand accounts. Check out the shows notes for links to resources mentioned throughout the episode and to learn more.

Thank you for joining us as we gathered evidence to paint a picture of what's missing and explored possible solutions to restoring Canada's public education system. We'll see you next time.

[CREDITS]

ABSENT is a production of the Source podcast, which is produced by the Canadian Teachers' Federation in Ottawa, on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe People.



This episode was written, produced, and engineered by Bo-Ning Gao from Carleton University's School of Journalism, with CTF/FCE's Rolf-Carlos Klausener, and myself, Julieanna Mawko.

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