

Researcher says newer teachers most likely to be engaged at work

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Conventional wisdom says experienced teachers are often the best teachers, right?

But KU researcher Shane Lopez says it might not be that simple.

According to Lopez, K-12 teachers with less than one year of experience are the most engaged teachers at work, at 35.1 percent, based on [survey data](#). Engagement falls precipitously to 30.9 percent for teachers with one to three years of experience, and it falls further to 27.9 percent for educators with three to five years of experience. Engagement improves slightly for teachers with five to 10 years of experience (30.8 percent) and again for those teaching more than 10 years (31.8) but is still significantly lower than the first-year rate.

"For our nation, this means more than 2.5 million of our 3.7 million K-12 teachers are not bringing their best selves to work every day," said Lopez, a psychologist and professor of the practice in the KU School of Business and senior [scientist](#) for Gallup. "For [parents](#) like me, it means that four of my son's six teachers aren't fully engaged."

Lopez' findings are based on Gallup surveys of more than 7,265 American K-12 teachers, conducted in 2012.

There's some important context to these findings, Lopez explained. First, overall, teachers' engagement ranks high compared with other occupations. In fact, teachers rank No. 4 in engagement on a list of 12

different [occupational categories](#) measured in the survey. Additionally, the pattern of teacher engagement dropping over time is not unique to the teaching profession. In fact, it exists in every non-teaching occupation group surveyed.

But the size of the decline in engagement over time is greater among teachers than in other occupation groups. This is partly because new teachers have higher levels of engagement than new workers in non-teaching jobs. But it also seems to be the result of something specific to the teaching profession that causes teacher engagement rates to fall more dramatically than in other professions, Lopez said.

"The data suggest that teachers rank high in engagement among the 12 occupational groups because they are the most likely of all professions to say that at work, they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day and are more likely to strongly agree with the statement 'there is someone at work who encourages my development,'" Lopez said. "But despite having higher engagement than the national average, teachers are the least likely of all [occupations](#) to say, 'at work my opinions seem to count.' That latter statement could help explain the large [decline](#) in engagement over time."

The engagement findings are based on Americans' assessments of workplace elements with proven linkages to performance outcomes, including productivity, customer service, quality, retention, safety and profit.

Gallup's employee engagement index categorizes workers as engaged, not engaged or actively disengaged. Engaged workers are deeply involved in and enthusiastic about their work and actively contributing to their organization. Those who are not engaged are satisfied with their workplaces but not emotionally connected to them – and these employees are less likely to put in discretionary effort. Those workers

categorized as actively disengaged are emotionally disconnected from their work and workplace, and they jeopardize the performance of their teams.

So what are the implications of these findings? According to Lopez, school leaders should make the most of the relatively higher engagement of today's newest teachers and support these educators throughout their careers to maintain this engagement. School leaders can focus first on selecting talented teachers and drastically improve the environment in which teachers and students [work](#) every day.

"A key choice educational leaders make is who to put in the classroom, which is why hiring and engaging great teachers is a vital step to school success," he said. "Engaged teachers not only challenge students to grow, they also encourage and engage their fellow [teachers](#), building the foundation for great schools."

Provided by University of Kansas

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