

# Teacher resignation letters paint bleak picture of US education

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Michigan State University research found that teachers are resigning largely because of their unhappiness with the education system. Credit: Michigan State University

As teacher resignation letters increasingly go public—and viral—new research indicates teachers are not leaving solely due to low pay and

retirement, but also because of what they see as a broken education system.

In a trio of studies, Michigan State University education expert Alyssa Hadley Dunn and colleagues examined the relatively new phenomenon of teachers posting their resignation letters online. Their findings, which come as many teachers are signing next year's contracts, suggest educators at all grade and experience levels are frustrated and disheartened by a nationwide focus on standardized tests, scripted curriculum and punitive teacher-evaluation systems.

Teacher turnover costs more than \$2.2 billion in the U.S. each year and has been shown to decrease student achievement in the form of reading and math test scores.

"The reasons teachers are leaving the profession has little to do with the reasons most frequently touted by education reformers, such as pay or student behavior," said Dunn, assistant professor of teacher education. "Rather, teachers are leaving largely because oppressive policies and practices are affecting their working conditions and beliefs about themselves and education."

Consider, for example, the open resignation [letter](#) of Boston elementary school teacher Suzi Sluyter, which was posted on a Washington Post blog:

"In this disturbing era of testing and data collection in the public schools," she wrote in part, "I have seen my career transformed into a job that no longer fits my understanding of how children learn and what a teacher ought to do in a classroom to build a healthy, safe, developmentally appropriate environment for learning for each of our children."

Sluyter, who had taught for more than 25 years, concluded the missive: "I did not feel I was leaving my job. I felt then and feel now that my job left me. It is with deep love and a broken heart that I write this letter."

Such feelings of abandonment were common in the resignation letters, the researchers said in one of the studies. That paper, published in the April issue of the journal *Linguistics and Education*, is titled "With regret: The genre of teachers' public resignation letters." Dunn's co-authors were Jennifer VanDerHeide, MSU assistant professor of [teacher education](#), and MSU doctoral student Matthew Deroo.

Another study indicates that by posting their resignation letters online, educators are gaining a voice in the public sphere they didn't have before. That paper, which will appear in the May issue of the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education*, was co-authored by MSU doctoral students Scott Farver, Amy Guenther and Lindsay Wexler.

"All of the teachers' resignation letters and their later interviews [with researchers] attested to the lack of voice and agency that teachers felt in policymaking and implementation," the study says.

Dunn said administrators must allow teachers to engage in the development of curriculum and educational policies so they do not feel like they have no choice but to resign (and then publicly declare it) in order to get their voices heard.

The third study, forthcoming in *Teachers College Record*, suggests the public resignation letters combat the "teacher blame game" and the prevalent narrative of the "bad" [teacher](#). These are common claims—whereby teachers are blamed for school and societal failures—used by conservative education reformers to advance accountability measures to evaluate teachers, Dunn said.

But the resignation letters, rather than painting educators as disinterested and lazy, illustrate their intense emotion. "The letters are filled with emotion, with regret, and with an overarching personal and professional commitment to the best needs of the children," the study says.

Ultimately, Dunn said, policymakers should heed teachers' testimonies and support a move away from efforts to "marketize, capitalize, incentivize and privatize public [education](#), in order to do what is best for children, not for the bottom line."

"In the absence of such moves, teachers' working conditions, and thus students' learning conditions, are likely to remain in jeopardy."

Provided by Michigan State University

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