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Second-class teachers

Plight of young educators is pushing Flanders' turnover crisis to new heights

Linda A Thompson

"They graduate with such high expectations and eagerness, but when they're out there on their own, they awake to a brutal reality." As alarming numbers of young teachers find themselves forced to leave the industry, we look at the reasons behind this growing crisis in Flanders' schools.

Last October, Laurien Stuvers learned that the school she had been teaching at for six months wouldn't be hiring her full-time. For Stuvers, the news came as the final straw. Since graduating from the Provincial Hogeschool

Limburg's teaching programme a year earlier, she had sent dozens of application letters, done short stints at two schools and sat home unemployed for a combined total of five months. Worried that she would soon have no income or job, she began applying for non-education positions.

In May, Stuvers took up her current position as an administrative faculty staff member at the University of Hasselt. She says she misses teaching, but is convinced she did what was right for her. "When you're young, it's important to have something steady, to have a salary you can count on," she explains. "In education, you sometimes live in insecurity for two to three months and you never

know what's coming next. I wanted security." Stuvers' story is by no means unique. Young teachers across Flanders are checking out of the education system at alarmingly high rates, crushed by a system that urgently needs more educators but is failing to retain them. According to the education department's 2011 job report, 20% of Flemish secondary-school teachers under 30 leave the profession after less than five years. In Brussels, that number increases to 50%.

Marc Hermans, head of the education department at PXL University College in Hasselt, has seen countless alumni crash and burn. "They graduate with such high expectations

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Second-class teachers

Young educators forced to leave profession in hope of finding job security

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and eagerness, but when they're out there on their own, they awake to a brutal reality," he says. "It's tragic." For Dimokritos Kavadias, a professor in political sciences at the Free University of Brussels (VUB), the turnover comes at not only a human but also an economic one. "Good teachers are crucial to our entire society," he says. "If we really care about our children, if we really care about the future of our society, our first priority should be to attract motivated teachers."

Experts point to a lack of coaching and job security for newcomers as the root causes of the high turnover, and say that finding ways to retain new teachers will be essential to addressing the shortage in Flanders, which is expected to grow to 20,000 across the region by 2020, according to estimates from the education department.

"We're going to see a teacher shortage everywhere in Flanders if we don't do something," says Hermans. "Make no mistake about that."

Repeating patterns

The high turnover in education is hardly a new or exclusively Flemish problem, but the tough job market has pushed the crisis to new heights. Every year, the same pattern more or less repeats itself: Between October and February, school administrators, school associations and Flemish employment and training agency VDAB sound the alarm that they can't find qualified teachers to fill their open vacancies. Encouraged by news reports about the need for qualified teachers, scores of young people enrol in teacher-training programmes in September, confident that a stable, recession-proof job will await them on graduation. Instead, they encounter a starkly different reality. Many of them, for starters, won't find jobs. The VDAB still considers teaching a *knelpuntberoep*, a profession for which employers struggle to find qualified candidates. But that doesn't mean that any teacher anywhere in Flanders can expect to be hired



Students at PXL University College in Hasselt prepare for what they hope will be a long and fulfilling career in teaching

straight out of college like, for instance, IT specialists, technicians or engineers. The picture is a lot muddier in the education job market, with a deep mismatch between the skills new teachers typically offer and what schools actually need.

"We have a surplus of teachers with certain profiles – language teachers, for instance – and a shortage of teachers certified in maths and science," explains Kavadias. "Second, we're seeing an enormous teacher shortage in cities like Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, and a surplus of teachers in residential areas." This helps explain why last year the VDAB reported a 1,500-teacher shortage and in the same breath pointed out that 11,000 teachers were still without jobs at the start of the school year. For the lucky graduates who do find jobs, the picture isn't pretty, either. "There's this image of the teaching profession – you've got your holidays and tenure," explains Kavadias. "But that's just not true for the first three to five years." Newcomers are typically assigned

the toughest classes, work on temporary contracts and often juggle substitute jobs at different schools to arrive at something approaching a full-time schedule. Hermans says it's a shambles. "You have to wait for a temp job. Fine; you go clean someone else's mess for three weeks. Then you're out. Again, you wait. Then you *maybe* get a three-month assignment, but it won't be a full-time contract, more like 80%" he says. "How in God's name is this possible?" The irony is that the job security that newcomers crave and that the education sector has traditionally offered is one of the root causes of principals' inability to offer newcomers more job security. Tenured teachers benefit from flexible leave systems and can be fired only under stringent circumstances. "Once you're permanently appointed, it's very difficult for the school to send you away," says Kavadias. In this zero-sum game, newcomers become second-class teachers who often see their temporary assignments abruptly

end when tenured teachers return from a long absence. That's what happened to Stuvers. One minute, she had a full-time year-long

“There’s this image of teaching – your holidays and tenure – but that’s just not true for the first three to five years”

contract, the next the person she was substituting for returned from what was supposed to be a year-

long leave after just two weeks – leaving her with no option but to accept the 14 hours the school offered by way of compromise.

Hermans says he has seen many of his graduates pursue other career options once they realise how slim their chances at full-time employment in education are. "We are losing our best students," he says, "the ones who see there are other options out there and decide to go work at a bank."

If the situation is dire for new teachers, schools are also greatly affected, and urban schools with large populations of minority children in particular have been on the receiving end. Lieven Lemmens, principal of the small Sint-Karel primary school in the low-income Brussels neighbourhood of Molenbeek, can attest to that.

At one time last year, five of its 12 teachers were on sick leave. At first, members of the school's care team (a psychologist, speech therapist and pedagogue) jumped in. When that didn't suffice, Lemmens divided the teacherless kids among the remaining classes, with class sizes in some cases going up from 22 to 27 children.

Wrong degrees

"The number of applications I see coming in at my school is very limited, quite frankly – especially for the temp assignments," he says. The few responses he did get were from people with the wrong degrees or none at all.

For Lemmens, the high turnover is detrimental to the fundamental quality of teaching on an administration level. The school has to start from scratch with every new teacher – getting them up to speed with everything from the school vision and policies to the schoolwide approach to spelling or language proficiency.

The children, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, are perhaps the biggest victims. "It's frustrating," he says. "Children need structure." Explaining that some of the children had four different teachers last year, he says: "The kids no longer know to what extent they can trust the person in front of them to help them, and to see them through the end of the school year."

Situations like that at Sint-Karel will only become more frequent as Flemish cities begin to feel the effects of a looming population boom for which their schools lack the resources, infrastructure and, of course, staff. But Kavadias says that higher retention rates aren't the silver bullet. Even if schools find ways of reducing the high turnover rate, there will still be a shortage, he says. "It won't set off the retirement wave and the population growth," he says. Resolving the teacher shortage is just the beginning of addressing the problem.

IN SEARCH OF TEACHING TALENT

Some cities have taken matters into their own hands and have launched a campaign to make teaching in urban environments more appealing. In Brussels, the Flemish Community Commission and student services agency Br(ik) launched a promotion campaign featuring famous Brusselers and their children to draw more teachers to Dutch-speaking schools in the city.

In Antwerp, education services agency AgODi, the city of Antwerp and the VDAB joined forces to launch the Onderwijstalent ("education talent") project after reports revealed that

the city would face a 3,500 teacher shortage at just primary-school level by 2020. Project co-ordinator Koen Rutten (*pictured with colleagues*) says it functions as an education clearing house, liaising between job-seekers and schools and pointing potential applicants to vacancies. Their *loopbaantraject*, or career track, was specifically designed to assist new teachers in the first few years in the job. "We make sure that the periods between assignments are as short as possible so that teachers continue working as long as possible," says Rutten.

