

## WHY VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE TEACHERS LEAVE THE PROFESSION: A COMPARISON OF PERCEPTIONS

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During the past three decades, over two dozen studies have been conducted on why vocational agriculture teachers leave the profession. The methodology used in these studies has been to ask former teachers why they left teaching. One possible problem with this type of research methodology is that former teachers may be reluctant to admit the "real" reasons for leaving the profession. As an example, a teacher who left the profession because he/she had poor classroom control might not be willing to admit this.

A study was conducted in Indiana in an effort to determine the extent to which former teachers were being candid in citing reasons for leaving the profession. In this study, three different groups of people were asked why vo-ag teachers left teaching: former vocational agriculture teachers, high school principals who had a vocational agriculture teacher leave, and the vo-ag teachers who replaced the departing teacher. The findings have been interpreted from the standpoint of a former vocational school administrator and former teacher of vocational agriculture.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purposes of the study were:

1. to identify the factors which contributed to the departure of vocational agriculture teachers from the profession in Indiana, according to the perceptions of three different groups of people, and
2. to determine the extent to which there is agreement and disagreement among the three groups.

### *Methodology*

All vocational agriculture teachers who had taught in Indiana between 1973 and 1977, but were no longer teaching high school vocational agriculture, were the primary population for this study. The teachers who replaced the departed teachers and the principals of the high schools in which the vacancies occurred were the secondary population for the study.

A questionnaire was used to determine why teachers left the profession. Forty-six possible reasons for leaving teaching were listed on the instrument, with instructions to rate each item on a 1-5 scale. The instrument was a modification of one Knight (1976) had developed earlier. The questionnaire was mailed to former teachers, principals, and replacement teachers.

The response rate was between 50 and 60 percent for each of the three groups. Difficulty in obtaining correct addresses for former teachers who were from out-of-state contributed to the lower than desired rate. A five percent sample of non-respondents was contacted either personally or by telephone to verify that the non-respondents did not constitute a different population than respondents. The researchers were satisfied that there were basically no differences between respondents and non-respondents.

#### *Why Teachers Leave: As Perceived by Former Teachers*

The highest ranking factor given by former teachers as to why they left teaching was "long hours." This was followed closely by "had students in class who should not be in vocational agriculture" and "long range occupational goal was something different than teaching vocational agriculture." The fourth and fifth reasons given by teachers related to "long hours." These are "inadequate salary" and "too many required extra curricular activities." The sixth factor according to former teachers was "inadequate administrative support and backing on decisions." The top fifteen factors are listed in Table 1.

#### *Why Teachers Leave: As Perceived by Principals*

The major reason given by principals as to why teachers left the profession was "long range occupational goal was something different than teaching vocational agriculture." Following distantly in second was "inadequate salary," with "long hours" being rated third. The next three reasons given by the principals revolve around the students. "Was unable to get students to learn as desired" was rated fourth while "disliked disciplining students" and "disliked student attitudes" rated fifth and sixth, respectively. The top fifteen reasons as rated by principals are presented in Table 2.

#### *Why Teachers Leave: As Perceived by Present Teachers*

The present vocational agriculture teacher agreed with the principals on "long range occupational goal was something different than teaching vocational agriculture" as the number one reason

Table 1

PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE  
TEACHERS AS TO WHY THEY LEFT TEACHING

(N = 57)

Rank	Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1.	Long hours	3.14	1.37
2.	Had students in class who should not be in vocational agriculture	3.05	1.51
3.	Long range occupational goal was something different than teaching vocational agriculture	3.00	1.49
4.	Inadequate salary	2.93	1.53
5.	Too many required extracurricular activities	2.84	1.46
6.	Inadequate administrative support and backing on decisions	2.81	1.49
7.	Too many evening responsibilities	2.72	1.31
8.	Inadequate advancement opportunities	2.67	1.39
9.	Students lacked interest	2.63	1.46
10.	Too much preparation time required for classroom teaching	2.60	1.22
11.	Disliked student attitudes	2.60	1.40
12.	Inadequate administrative trust	2.60	1.61
13.	Students were difficult to discipline	2.37	1.45
14.	Was unable to get students to learn as desired	2.32	1.45
15.	Inadequate facilities	2.32	1.45

Table 2

PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AS TO WHY  
VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE TEACHERS LEFT TEACHING

(N = 61)

Rank	Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1.	Long range occupational goal was something different than teaching	3.74	1.33
2.	Inadequate salary	2.57	1.09
3.	Long hours	2.46	1.20
4.	Was unable to get students to learn as desired	2.42	1.27
5.	Disliked disciplining students	2.36	1.33
6.	Disliked student attitudes	2.21	1.28
7.	Too many evening responsibilities	2.19	1.10
8.	Had students in class who should not have been in vocational agriculture	2.16	1.15
9.	Disliked teaching certain subjects in vocational agriculture	2.14	1.19
10.	Students lacked interest	2.11	1.22
11.	Too much preparation time required for classroom teaching	2.05	1.04
12.	Students were difficult to discipline	2.04	1.25
13.	Too many required extracurricular activities	2.00	.99
14.	Inadequate advancement opportunities	1.96	1.08
15.	Felt inadequate to teach certain subjects	1.89	1.05

for teachers leaving. Second on the present teachers list was "long hours." The third reason the past teacher left according to the present teacher was "had students in class who should not have been in vocational agriculture." "Inadequate salary" was rated fourth while "was unable to get students to learn as desired" was fifth. The fifteen highest items as rated by present teachers are presented in Table 3.

### *A Comparison of the Rankings*

In comparing the rankings of the three groups, both agreement and disagreement were found. All three groups had long hours, inadequate salary, and different long range occupational goals in their top four ratings. Both present and past teachers indicated students in class who should not be in vocational agriculture was a major factor, while principals rated this item eighth. The principal and present teacher generally agreed the past teacher was unable to get students to learn as desired, while past teachers did not perceive this as an important factor. Past teachers and administrators were in disagreement over the importance of administrative support in the teachers leaving. Principals alone perceived disciplining students as a reason for the teacher leaving.

### *Interpretation of Findings*

#### *The Findings as Interpreted by a School Administrator\**

Those vocational agriculture teachers who left the profession listed some very interesting reasons for their departure. The most pressing reason, "long hours," combined with the fourth reason, "inadequate salary," is a particularly telling combination. This may very well be the limiting factor to the number of well-qualified capable young teachers who are attracted to teaching. Unfortunately, there is little that school administrators can do about this in light of the growing taxpayer distaste for government spending and the present financial situations in most school districts.

Another set of reasons why teachers left the profession formed an interesting combination. These reasons were "had students in class who should not be in vocational agriculture," "students lacked interest," "disliked student attitudes," "students were difficult to discipline," and "unable to get students to learn as desired." Of the top fifteen reasons given, these

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\*This section was prepared by the junior author and a vocational school administrator, William G. Camp.

Table 3

PERCEPTIONS OF VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE TEACHERS  
WHO REPLACED DEPARTING TEACHERS AS TO WHY  
THE DEPARTING TEACHER LEFT TEACHING

(N = 57)

Rank	Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1.	Long range occupational goal was something different than teaching vocational agriculture	3.37	1.29
2.	Long hours	3.20	1.34
3.	Had students in class who should not have been in vocational agriculture	3.11	1.19
4.	Inadequate salary	3.04	1.52
5.	Was unable to get students to learn as desired	2.94	1.47
6.	Too many required extracurricular activities	2.93	1.37
7.	Too many evening responsibilities	2.91	1.18
8.	Inadequate advancement opportunities	2.83	1.28
9.	Too much time required for FFA activities	2.79	1.43
10.	Students lacked interest	2.78	1.34
11.	Disliked student attitudes	2.78	1.36
12.	Inadequate administrative support and backing on decisions	2.71	1.54
13.	Too much preparation time required for classroom teaching	2.70	1.22
14.	Inadequate facilities	2.69	1.54
15.	Inadequate administrative trust	2.58	1.43

five directly refer to the handling of students. This combination of concerns, one may suspect, is probably the real reason many teachers leave the profession. On the question of administrative support, backing, and trust, the vocational agriculture teacher must begin to recognize the inescapable fact that the school was not set up solely to support the agriculture department. All the other school programs are not simply satellites in orbit around vocational agriculture. The vocational agriculture teacher should learn to be more of a team player and less of a lone wolf in the school pack. An administrative policy or decision which goes against the vocational agriculture department may be based on the concept of the greatest good for the largest number of youngsters. If a teacher expects administrative support for his program, he must be prepared to offer a supportable program. If he expects administrative backing for his decisions, he must first establish a track record for making sound decisions. If he expects to be trusted by the school administration, he must concentrate on deserving that trust by being a productive, loyal faculty member. If that means taking on some "extracurricular" and "evening" activities, he must be prepared to do so without constant whining and complaining.

#### *The Findings as Interpreted by a Teacher Educator\**

While there was some agreement in the perceptions of the three groups as to why teachers leave teaching, the weakness of the agreement and the disagreement on other items should be of concern to the education profession.

All three groups ranked long hours and inadequate salary as important reasons for leaving the profession. However, principals did not rate long hours and inadequate salary as having a great impact on the person leaving. Is it possible that administrators are not aware of what the vo-ag teacher does? If this is the case, then professional organizations and the teachers themselves need to develop methods for informing the administration of what they are doing.

Perhaps it is time we carefully analyzed the work load of vo-ag teachers. Should we consider requiring less of vo-ag teachers? This is something the profession needs to look at.

Both present and past teachers indicated students were enrolled in vocational agriculture who did not belong. Here again improved communication may help the situation. Guidance counselors need to

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\*This section was prepared by the senior author and a former teacher, Gary E. Moore.

be made aware of the purpose of vocational agriculture and the type of student who should be in vo-ag. If vocational programs are to be accountable then students without career objectives in agriculture should not be placed in vocational agriculture.

Deficiencies in teaching may be a major reason for teachers leaving. Both principals and present teachers indicated this was an important factor. In an effort to reduce the teacher shortage we may be placing people in the classroom who do not belong there. The fact that the former teachers did not indicate this as a major factor in their leaving tends to indicate that more than one data source is needed in studies on the teacher shortage. A teacher may not admit that he/she can't get students to learn and will give conventional reasons for leaving the profession.

It was discovered that many people enter teaching who plan to teach for only a few years. Increased recruitment efforts are needed to compensate for this trend.

### *Conclusions*

There are no simple answers to the question of why vocational agriculture teachers leave the profession. It appears that improving communication, re-examination of teacher workload, and increased recruitment efforts may help. By comparing the perceptions of more than one group additional insight is gained. Additional research is recommended using more than one data source.

### *Reference*

Knight, James A. *Reasons Teachers of Agriculture Leave the Profession*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Columbus: The Ohio State University, 1976.

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## AG DIVISION RESEARCH MEETING

The sixth annual Agricultural Education Research Meeting is scheduled for November 30, 1979, in Anaheim, California, with Ronald A. Brown of Mississippi State University serving as chairman. The meeting will be held in conjunction with the Convention of the American Vocational Association and will convene in the Balboa Room of the Disneyland Hotel, with registration beginning at 8:00 a.m. Make plans now to attend this important meeting!