

When Teachers Stay, but Only Barely

New research asks whether schools are mistaking reduced hours for retention while experienced teachers quietly head for the exit.



An empty classroom desk piled with papers suggests the workload facing a teacher who has left for the day.

Experienced teachers in publicly funded Scottish schools are leaving, cutting their hours, or stepping away from extra responsibilities before retirement age, according to a Phys.org report on new education research. The study does not describe a sudden wave of resignations so much as a slow wearing down: teachers who wanted to keep teaching but found the job no longer sustainable.

That matters because many school systems talk about teacher shortages mainly as a recruitment problem. In that view, the answer is to bring more graduates into teaching, improve the pipeline, and replace those who leave. The researchers argue that this misses a different problem: the loss of people who already know the work, the school routines, the **curriculum**, and the students. Losing an experienced teacher can mean losing years of professional knowledge, not just one employee.

The research team interviewed 63 teachers who had either left teaching, reduced their hours, or reduced their responsibilities before retirement age. Thirty-six had left altogether, and 27 had cut back. Most had done so within the previous 18 months. On average, they had about 18 years of teaching experience. The researchers excluded people who left for unavoidable reasons, because they wanted to focus on departures that might have been prevented.

One key issue is how school systems count the problem. Administrative data, meaning official workforce records kept by employers or governments, can show that a teacher resigned or changed hours. It usually cannot explain why. A teacher who drops from full-time to part-time may still appear in the system as “retained,” which means kept on staff. But the study suggests that, for some teachers, cutting hours is not a sign that the school has solved the problem. It may be an early stage of leaving.

The researchers found that leaving was rarely abrupt. Among the 36 teachers who left, 25 described dissatisfaction building over months or years. They pointed to rising **workload**, difficult student behavior, and the feeling that school leaders did not hear their concerns. Separately, 25 of the 36 were described as reluctant leavers: people who wanted to stay but felt they could not continue. Some described **exhaustion**, sleep problems, **anxiety**, or a health crisis that required medical help. Sixteen left without another paid job lined up.

That creates a tension over what “**voluntary**” really means. A resignation may be officially voluntary because no one fired the teacher. But if someone leaves because the work has become unmanageable, the word can hide more than it reveals. The policy response would be different if teachers were

leaving mainly for higher pay elsewhere than if they were leaving because the job's daily demands had become harmful. In this study, nearly half of the participants discussed accepting, or expecting, lower earnings after leaving, which suggests pay alone was not the main force pushing them out.

Part-time work shows the same tension. **Flexible** hours can help people stay in a profession they value. A school that lets a teacher reduce hours during a hard period may prevent a resignation. But the researchers found that reduced hours often functioned as a coping strategy, not a thriving strategy. Some teachers used it as a planned exit route while they explored other work or retrained. Others gave up higher-level positions or reduced their schedule simply to make exhaustion manageable.

Leadership also mattered, but not in a simple "good principal, bad principal" way. In a second analysis of 58 teachers outside senior leadership, more than six in 10 described leadership practices that hastened their **withdrawal** from the profession. Only two felt genuinely heard by senior leaders. Some principals found practical ways to accommodate family or health needs and kept teachers longer. But that support often depended on one person's choices and could disappear if leadership changed. Only one of the 32 leavers in that part of the analysis had a formal exit interview, which is a structured conversation meant to learn why someone is leaving.

The study points toward a difficult policy trade-off. Schools may need leaders to have more authority,

training, time, and resources to respond when teachers ask to reduce hours or responsibilities. But leaders themselves may already be stretched, and accommodations can create scheduling and staffing problems. A request to cut back might be a chance to ask what would make the job sustainable. It is also a moment when a school may discover needs it cannot easily meet.

Scotland has promised one form of relief. A national deal reached in March 2026 will eventually cut the time teachers spend in front of a class by 90 minutes a week. But elementary and special education teachers will not see that change until August 2027, and secondary teachers two years later. Who will pay for it is unresolved. Councils estimate the change could cost up to £310 million a year, while Scotland's education secretary told a Holyrood committee, meaning a committee of the Scottish Parliament, that a figure that large was neither accurate nor affordable.

The disagreement is not over whether experienced teachers matter. It is over what kind of system keeps them. Recruiting more teachers may be necessary, but the study argues that it is not enough if the job keeps pushing experienced people toward the door. Reducing classroom time may help, but it may not fix workload, behavior challenges, or whether teachers believe their concerns are taken seriously. The deeper question is whether schools can treat **burnout** signals as warnings to act, rather than as paperwork after someone has already gone.

Written from reporting by Phys.org.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. Should a teacher reducing hours be counted mainly as a retention success or as a warning sign? Defend your answer, and explain what information a school would need before deciding.

A strong answer: A strong answer should weigh the value of flexible work against the risk that official numbers hide burnout and impending resignations.

2. If a school has limited money, should it spend more on recruiting new teachers or on changing conditions for experienced teachers who are close to leaving?

A strong answer: A strong answer should compare short-term staffing needs with the long-term value of experience, continuity, and sustainable working conditions.

3. How much responsibility should individual school leaders carry for teacher burnout if some causes, such as funding and workload rules, are decided above them?

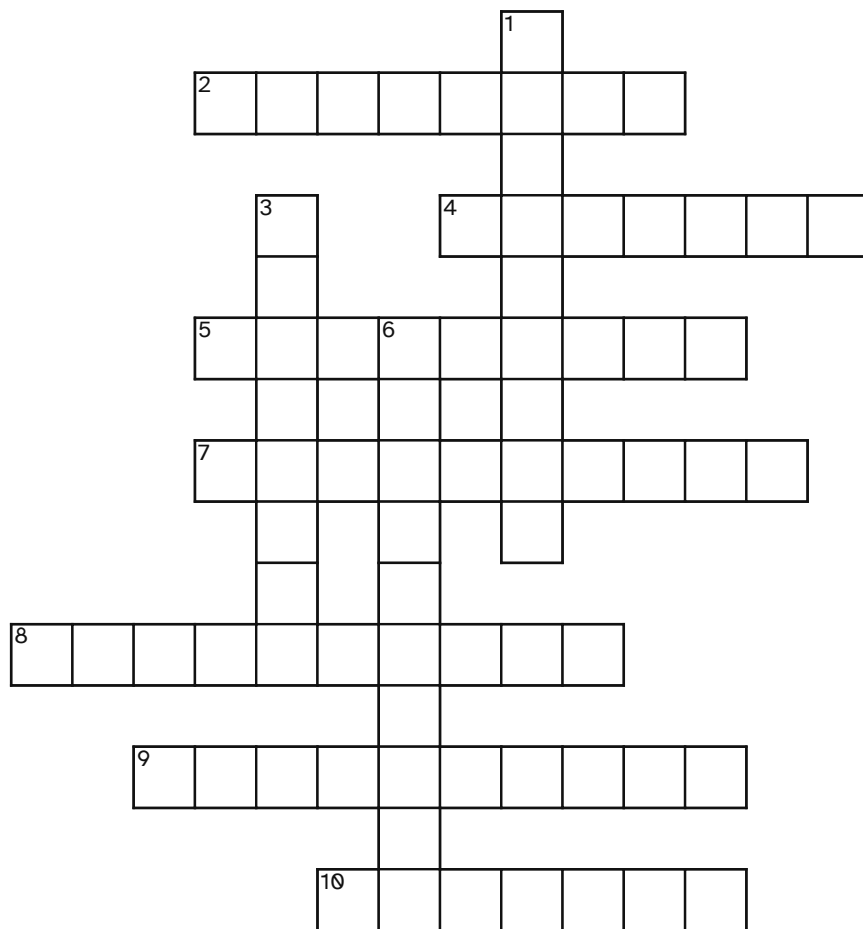
A strong answer: A strong answer should distinguish what principals can influence directly from what requires district, council, or national policy changes.

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ANXIETY BURNOUT CURRICULUM EXHAUSTION FLEXIBLE
LEADERSHIP RETENTION VOLUNTARY WITHDRAWAL
WORKLOAD

When Teachers Stay, but Only Barely



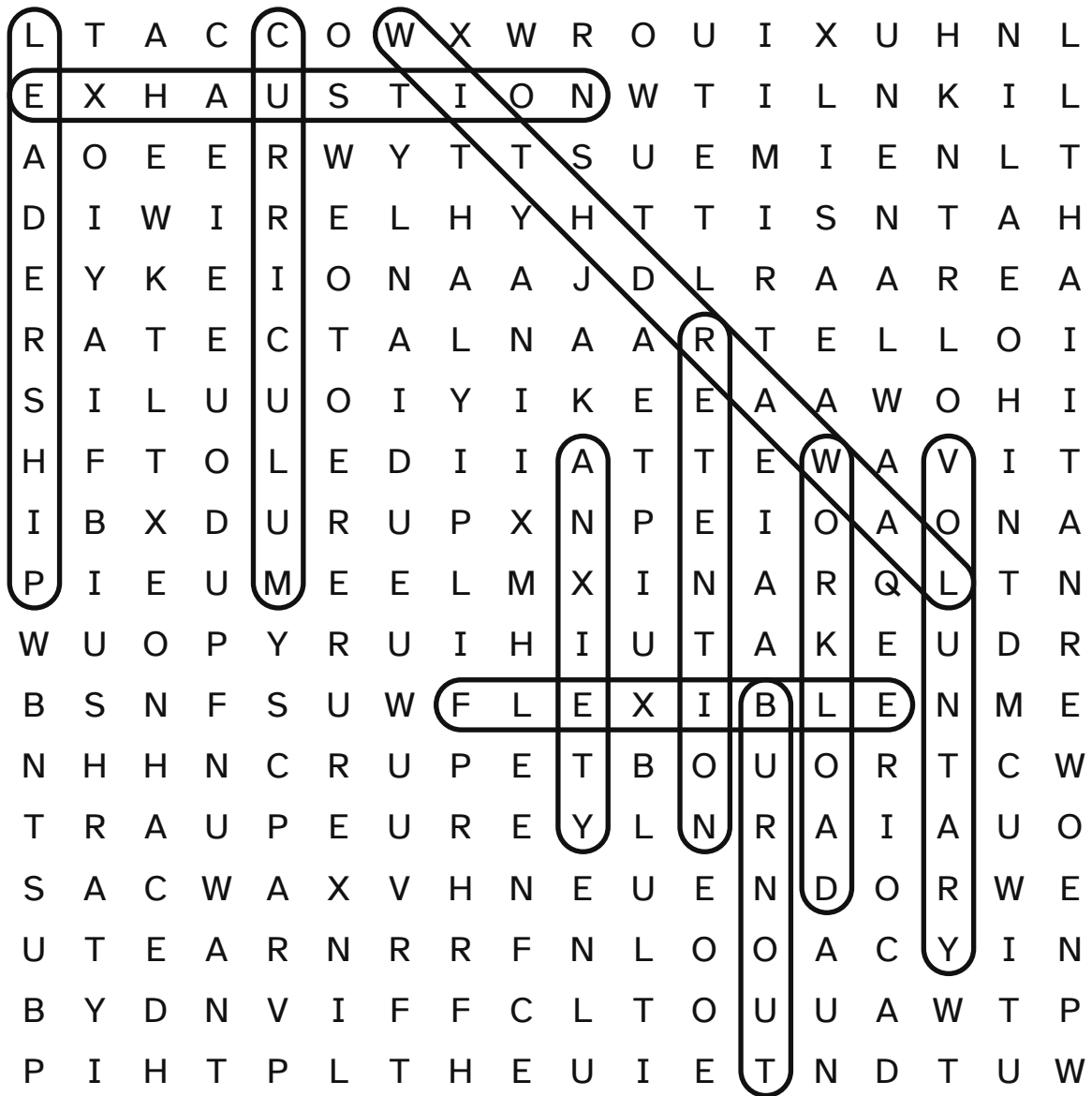
ACROSS

- 2 Total set of tasks and duties expected of one person
- 4 Severe mental and physical depletion from long-term job stress
- 5 School system's success at holding on to employees
- 7 Pulling back from a job, role, or professional field
- 8 Guidance and decisions from people directing a school
- 9 Subjects, lessons, and learning goals taught in a school
- 10 Worry or fear that can affect health and job performance

DOWN

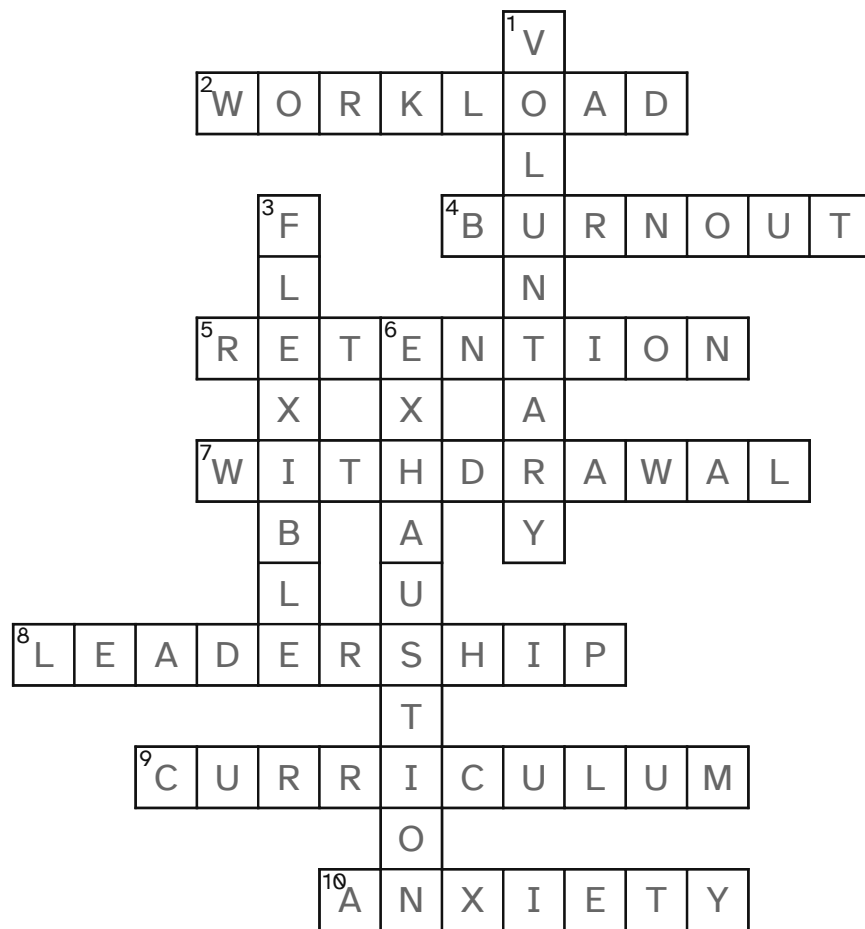
- 1 Done by personal choice rather than force
- 3 Able to change hours or conditions to meet a person's needs
- 6 Extreme tiredness that makes daily duties hard to manage

When Teachers Stay, but Only Barely — answer key



ANXIETY BURNOUT CURRICULUM EXHAUSTION FLEXIBLE
 LEADERSHIP RETENTION VOLUNTARY WITHDRAWAL
 WORKLOAD

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Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Phys.org

“Experienced teachers are quitting or reducing their hours—they're struggling to cope”

Published Sunday, October 25, 2026

Read by us on Monday, October 26, 2026

<https://phys.org/news/2026-10-experienced-teachers-hours-theyre-struggling.html>

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article with a note on each question, a word search, a crossword, and the answer key to both.

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