Introduction to the cases

The case presented here is drawn from a larger national study investigating the 5-year science teacher retention rates in four U.S. states (New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin). This study has two distinct phases. In the first phase, researchers used publicly available staffing data from 2007–2018 to construct a 5-year retention map for six cohorts of novice science teachers in each state. This approach differs from sample-based retention studies because full data permits our team to map the career trajectories of each individual science teacher for a more comprehensive picture of teacher retention, mobility, and attrition. For example, in sample-based studies, the departure of a teacher at the end of one year might simply be categorized as attrition. In viewing a 6-year trajectory, we were better able to identify teachers who left a position in a given year not simply as attritted, but possibly as having transferred to a different district (mobility) or taken a year off and then returned (such as for parental leave.)

After analyzing individual teachers’ career trajectories, we calculated the 5-year retention rate of newly hired science teachers in each cohort for the years 2007–2012 for each school district. This analysis informed the second phase of the research, in which five districts per state were identified for a more detailed case study on the factors influencing science teacher retention. Districts were sorted initially for higher-than-average rates of retention, and we focused on those in the top 10% in the state. We then attempted to diversify our selection of districts by looking at factors such as school size, location within each state, type of community (urban, rural, suburban,) and relative wealth of the district. We also looked for districts that had hired (and retained) teachers of color and teachers whose teacher education programs had been funded by the National Science Foundation’s Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program, which was created to meet the need for well-prepared STEM teachers in the United States.

The district described here was one of those selected in the state of North Carolina, and a separate NC state teacher policy case study covering the time period of this study is available on the project website. The district name is presented as a pseudonym for purposes of confidentiality. The names and position titles are similarly obscured in this case, and also in the larger study, in order to preserve internal confidentiality as well.

For further information about the study, please visit: http://www.montclair.edu/IMPREST

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The Case of Linnet School District (#NC-03)

Located near several universities and other research institutions in the north-central region of the state, the suburban Linnet School District is centrally situated between the coast and the mountains. With some of the highest property values in the state, both the cost of living and property taxes are significantly above the state average. As will be shown below, this helps to provide schools in the district with significant funds and resources.

Linnet School District has multiple high schools and serves over 10,000 students, with a student to teacher ratio of about 1:12. Reported student enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year by the National Center for Educational Statistics was roughly 65% White, 15% Black, 5% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Asian, and 3% categorized as two races or more. Of the total student population, nearly 80% of students are reported to speak English well at home and nearly 80% of parents have obtained at least a bachelor’s degree. Roughly five percent of families are living below the poverty level, and the majority of families live in single-family homes they own.

The Linnet School District was initially identified for its higher-than-average retention rate of novice science teachers, as it was considered in the top 10% of districts for their retention rates in the state. The district retained 51% of its novice science teachers during our study period of 2007-2017, including one science teacher of color. The research team interviewed 4 individuals in Linnet School District, including three retained science teachers and the Director of the CTE program for the district. The primary goal of the site visit was to better understand the factors that may have influenced teacher retention during the focus period of the study, as well as to also investigate current practices around the mentoring and induction of new science teachers.

Findings

As a result of this site visit and subsequent data analysis, we posit three factors that likely influenced the high novice science teacher retention rate observed in Linnet School District. These are: 1) the benefits of teaching in a “college town”, 2) teaching “interesting” and “invested” students, and 3) working in a supportive environment.

Factor #1: Benefits of teaching in a college town

In a foundational study on educational equity in K-12 school districts located in “college towns,” Maranto and Dean (2015) describe a number of their common features:

…College towns typically have considerable financial resources, so they can afford to serve advantaged and disadvantaged students alike…College towns have vast human resources as well, in recent graduates and the family members of professors and administrators, who may want to teach near the college or university…Third, college towns should be relatively tolerant and inclusive, with political elites making it a public priority to education all children, and not merely their own…Fourth, the large number of
university-based intellectuals in a college town will pressure the school system to maintain quality, as is true of upper-income communities generally…Fifth, to attract new faculty, universities may pressure the local school systems to maintain quality. Finally, the very presence of a college or university may enable schools to partner with higher education, particularly regarding curricula, measurement, and tutoring. (p. 986)

Many of the findings with respect to the first teacher retention factor below resonate strongly with Maranto and Dean’s depiction of school districts in college towns.

It was clear from our interviews with the teachers of Linnet County that their district was well-resourced. One interviewee stated simply, “I mean, this district has a lot of funding.” One of the science teachers we spoke with explained that because the district was “really wealthy,” the teachers had all the necessary supplies, and then some:

It's a very wealthy district. We have a ton of resources as a school. We have a large science budget. We've got about $20,000 for the science department to spend, which means that I don't think we've ever really wanted for anything. Each year we can buy wishlist items that we've all wanted. One of our teachers wanted some electronic sensors for temperature and pressure and all that. And "All right, well we'll spend $6,000 on you this year specifically to get your wishlist items." I got my wishlist items a few years ago, which was a bunch of different skulls for animals. I can do an evolution lab. So we can get all the stuff we need. We emphasize lab work in our school. Really if we require anything, we have the budget to support it.

One of the reasons cited for the district's more than adequate funding was its proximity to universities. The district benefits from tax allocated funds, in comparison to neighboring districts, and has a property tax rate nearly 25% higher than the state average. One consequence of the high cost of living in Linnet was that teachers reported finding it difficult to afford housing within the district boundaries.

Teaching in a college town also meant having parents who worked for the local universities or nearby research facilities, who could make up for any materials that, despite being well-resourced, teachers may have also wanted in the classroom. One teacher explained it like this:

We have a group of parents who, if we don't have equipment, I can always say — My first year there I said, "Oh I really wanted a skeleton but I forgot to order one." And I just sort of mentioned that to the kids like, "Oh, I would love to show this to you on a skeleton but I don't have one." And two days later a parent dropped off a skeleton like, "Oh I got it for you." "Cool, thank you." We've got parents that work in laboratories and we've had a lot of science equipment donated to us a bunch of years ago. We had about
$200,000 worth of science equipment donated from a lab that shut down. So we don't really want anything as a science department.

Being well resourced also meant that the school was able to provide more positions for support staff, such as school counselors. One administrator we interviewed spoke to the possible relationship between school counselors and teacher retention:

The counselor ratio has always been good. To have a social worker at all the schools to deal with other student issues—I think that plays a big part in the retention just to make sure the students are happy, and then all you have to do as a teacher is the content, knowing that the students are supported.

In addition to having one of the highest salaries in the state, Linnet School District has historically offered some of the highest supplements to their teachers. In the state of North Carolina, although there is a statewide salary scale, individual districts are given the authority to pay additional salary supplements as they see fit. This has also been both an incentive for attracting new teachers to the district, as well as a factor for retention. One administrator felt that supplements in the district offered teachers a sense of support. She explained that since supplements continue to increase the longer the teacher remains in the district, supplements offer a teacher’s sense of reward for the “depth of knowledge” they bring to the classroom, something she felt teachers would be hard pressed to find in another district.

One of the programs in Linnet District reported as beneficial to both students and teachers was the biomedical program run by the district’s Career and Technical Education (CTE) offerings. Though very expensive, the CTE Director felt that this was one of the factors that attracted teachers into the district and ultimately kept them teaching until retirement:

I don't have any turnover at all. Well, I take that back last year when somebody retired. So, they're staying with me, and it's really about supply money because it's a project based curriculum. And so, if they have four and five thousand dollars to spend on eyeballs and sheep parts, and do all these dissections and, you know, anything with pipettes. It's just a constant every day. It's some type of project, and they have the funds to really implement good labs, and that means a lot. And actually, I have science teachers wanting to come over to career and technical education because of that, because it is project-based and they're not just talking about biology. They're actually doing the experiments and that type of thing.

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One of the CTE teachers, who previously worked as a teacher in the Linnet district school’s science department, gave us a virtual tour of his classroom and explained how despite the general education program being well-resourced, the CTE program was even more so:

It’s little different from the Science Department, I would say that I have a lot more leeway in terms of the equipment that I can use, and that I could potentially look at obtaining, simply because of the different way it's funded. I mean, this is a computer cart. It's got eighteen MacBook pros in there. These are probably the best in the school. And the screen down there on the wall is a Mondo Pad. It's basically a touchscreen tablet that's about seventy inches. — A couple of years ago, this was a wish list item right here. This is, and an anatomage table, which is basically a virtual cadaver— you can interact with it, it tilts! A neighboring school is actually, I think, getting the full table version, which is basically, you could project the one-to-one scale of the person that's on there. So yeah, things like that, you know, we have access to as a part of these [CTE] courses.

We asked this teacher if he would elaborate on the difference in funding between the CTE program and the regular Science Departments in the schools. He replied:

We're allocated certain number of months of employment for staff. So, if we don't, use that employment, right? So, If there's basically not teachers for using up those months of employment, then that can get converted into funds. And so, it's basically kind of like an extra, an extra source of income, and that's where I think most of the funding for these things come from in the year. If you don't use it, you're going to lose it! So, we find places to spend the money.

This CTE teacher explained that overall, the equipment in the CTE department is newer than the equipment in the Science Department. He gave the example of spectrophotometers, stating, “some of the spectrophotometers that I have here are a couple of years old, and the ones in the Science Department when I was there, were probably from the nineties.” He also told us that many of the teachers in the science department will borrow equipment from the CTE department, because it is newer and in better condition.

Factor #2: Teaching “interesting” and “invested” students

It was clear from the teachers we spoke with that they felt they worked with a “population of students who, in general, want to learn and are interested in school and enthusiastic about school.” Although the teachers we spoke to attributed much of the student characteristics to being students of university parents, we felt that the quality of students should be a distinct factor for retention in Linnet District. One teacher explained that students of university parents tended to come to school with more background knowledge than the average
student. This was especially evident when it came to student’s taking his upper-level science courses.

The kids that come in, a lot of their parents are professors at the universities nearby. — So we have a lot of parents that work at those labs. So, a lot of our kids come in with pretty serious science backgrounds, which means that when you teach an upper level science course like I do, you can move a little bit faster than maybe you would. When I taught in [previous school district], I had to move a lot more slowly because the kids didn't have this huge science background that just about all of our kids have. Of course it's not every single last kid, but because most of the students don't require intensive help, you can help those other students with one on one that need that help because their parents don't have a science background or whatever.

Due to the student performance, the district has become well known for its academics, and one teacher described students as “very high functioning.” Most students are competing to have the highest GPA, and take as many AP courses as they possibly can. “Every student, every parent expects to have multiple AP courses. So, they have a 6.0 GPA at the time they graduate, and they'll take as many AP courses as possible.”

One teacher linked the pressure of performing well academically to student behavior, saying “when you have that kind of pressure, you don't have discipline problems.” Another teacher pointed out that Linnet School District, “has that climate, for better or worse, that students feel pressured to perform academically.”

When we asked the science teachers if this same culture permeated the rest of the subject areas in the district, they explained that the students also “write really well” and that “reading their lab reports is great!” He went on to say:

The history department, I don't know. Maybe. I mean they have a lot, every book that they could want, they get guest speakers to come in fairly frequently to talk about historical events, parents support. There's a teacher at our school that does a lecture series for the parents and that's well attended by the parents as well. He does it in his own time and evenings and he'll do it for a few weeks, a couple of nights a week. And those are well attended. The arts departments, we have two or three kilns in the pottery room. We have a dedicated pottery room, we have an illustration room, we have an art history teacher, that's all he teaches. So, the arts are really well supported as well. There's a lot of artists in the area as well. Yeah. World languages. Well, we don't have German anymore, but we did have German for a while. We've got a Latin program, Spanish, French, and Japanese. We had a Chinese program in the district that was supported all the way through. But now I think it's just K-8. — We have a lot of kids that travel in the summer that do summer programs. Our language department is really involved with making sure
that kids are having the opportunity to go abroad and actually use the language that they've been learning.

One teacher, who had no intention of remaining in the district as long as he has, expressed that one of the biggest factors was simply liking the kids. This sentiment was shared by his colleague. “I genuinely like our students. I think our students are really interesting kids.” For this teacher, having a “high-caliber” student meant that he could have meaningful and thought-provoking conversations with them.

I think that I’ve had over the years a number of students that just come to hang out during lunch chat about, "Hey, I read this article," or "I watched this movie and this thing happened, do you think something like that could really..." The kids think about stuff. They don't just allow things to wash over them. They bring a lot to the classroom. I get interesting questions every single day. I get questions where I go, "You know what? I don't know." And there's a little place I have carved out on my board where I write their questions. I'm like, "I don't know. I'm going to look that up, find that, let's learn something new." And there are things that I never even thought about. "Why is that? That I don't know. Let's find that out."

Teachers reported that having students who were “interesting” and “invested” also provided a bulwark to teacher burnout. One teacher compared his experience working in Linnet to his prior school district:

Yeah, they're just interesting. They're really invested. My last school district I was at was with at-risk students, I liked a lot of those kids. A lot of those kids were fantastic and I still keep in touch with a lot of them. And a lot of them were just... I mean, I burned out. I was absolutely burned out. And that school had a revolving door of teachers. — But yeah, that school, those kids are coming in with a lot of home problems. And I burned out quickly. It was like two years and my wife and I were like, "Oh, do we want to stay here?" I was like, "I can't stay here. I can't stay at this school. I am done.

After coming to Linnet, that same teacher realized that he had carried with him his classroom management style. He explained that during his first-year teaching, his informal mentor came into his classroom asking why he was yelling. He replied: “I wasn't yelling, I was just talking loudly.” His informal mentor pointed out that in the Linnet School District, what he was doing was considered yelling. He continued, “And now I look back 14 years ago and I couldn't be that teacher again. I lost that fear long ago, thankfully in that first year.” He pointed out that his school was one of the districts “newcomer schools,” where students who were new to the U.S. attended and received services as English learners. He also noted that in Linnet there were indeed students who struggled with homelessness or drug abuse, but that working with such students
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was not overwhelming. “When you just have a couple of students who are dealing with those issues,” he said, “you don't burn out.”

Factor #3: Working in a supportive environment

One main reason the Linnet teachers cited for staying was their colleagues. One teacher told us throughout her career she has considered leaving, that the number one thing that kept her there was her colleagues. She attributed the support she received from her colleagues, beginning in her first year at Linnet, as her main reason for staying. “I came in here and they basically handed me a thumb drive with every file they've ever used on it, and helped me with everything they could.” This teacher recognized that not every teacher finds this level of support amongst their colleagues. “There are places where new teachers show up and they are just told to figure it out and not given support in that way.” In her experience, her colleagues go above and beyond to share materials with one another. “Everybody who does anything relevant to what you're doing just gives you every piece of material they've ever used, and points out things that might work and things that might not. You know you don't have to start from scratch.” She compared working at Linnet to her experience teaching at the college level, where “nobody gave me anything. I just had to stand up in front of a bunch of people and talk with no preparation.”

The other teachers we spoke to told us that having a supportive department was a “big factor”, and echoed the willingness of everyone to share materials with one another. “So, everybody was willing to help and share resources which I know is not necessarily the case in all schools. Relying on your coworkers was definitely a big one [reason for retention].” For one teacher, it was more than just being able to share materials, he felt that he was welcomed into a community, and even learned how to be a better science educator.

When I came in, the other biology teachers were actually chemistry teachers and they'd never taught biology. This teacher was like, he had been teaching for 20 years at that point it was like, "Let's meet a couple times a week, talk about what you're going to do." And he let me in on that. And it was just great having that support…He was just really good at making sure that we understood why we were teaching particular things. Up to that point, I think I'd really been just teaching biology as just the stamp collecting way, right? Here's this fact and here's that fact and here's that fact. And having him there and him... Yeah, I feel like it was the first time I had a really good mentor as a high school science teacher. In grad school, my major professor was a fantastic professor and taught me about how to lecture and all of that. But this guy really helped me to put all of these different facets of biology together for my students. And so, it was just great working with him and all the other guys that... It was all four guys. We were all teaching biology at the time and they were just really fun to work with and we worked together really well and it was just nice having this sense of community.
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The relationships described to us amongst colleagues extended beyond professionalism into genuine friendship. For one teacher, being friends both in and outside of the school building contributed to a sense of working in a positive environment:

I've hung around because I like the people I work with. There's a bunch of us who've been there for a long time and I like all of them. We're actually friends outside of school. We come over for dinner, we go to their house. Our kids are friends. I'm friends with people in other departments as well. I feel like we have a lot of really good people in the building that are also really welcoming.

Some teachers also cited administrative reasons for staying. One teacher spoke about a change that took place around 2012, in the middle of our study period. He told us that when he first started working at the school, it was typical for newer teachers to be given the more difficult classes, often with “underperforming students.” He described it as being “at the bottom of the poll.” However, around 2012, there was a change in the department to rotate classes amongst everyone. “Basically, each teacher would have an upper level class and a lower level class, because otherwise, you're getting teachers that are going to get burned out.” He felt that this was a contributing factor to teacher retention particularly in his school. Another teacher told us the Human Resources department “does a good job,” in offering support to staff and faculty members.

Other teachers talked about the support of the principal, noting his regular presence in classrooms. One teacher said, “[The principal] just sort of chit chats with the kids, with me, and it's just a nice positive working environment at the school.” When we spoke with the director of the CTE program, she shared many of the efforts she and her department take to support the teachers in the district.

With our team, we try to make sure we build a relationship with those teachers. When we know somebody’s husband is in the hospital, we can send them a note. Adding that personal touch and building that relationship, it means a lot. So, when we have Teacher Appreciation Day here, our district does a flower and breakfast for all the teachers, and then I'll send a little note to the CTE teachers with a lottery ticket. It's just one lottery ticket. But the note reads: ‘Thanks a million for all you do.’, Whatever, million, or whatever it's worth…. Just little touches to make them feel like I see, I know you're out there. I know you're struggling, but we're here to help. I think that makes a difference too.

When I asked the CTE director if she felt that she was the only one holding this sentiment of care for the teachers, or if she felt it was more of a culture amongst the administration, she told us that it “has a lot to do with the leadership here.” She gave the example of the district paying teachers to give up their planning periods, because they were short staffed and having difficulties finding substitute teachers over the last few due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
So if you have to give it, they teach five periods. They have two planning periods. If you give up one of your planning periods, we're going to pay you forty-five dollars an hour. You just keep track. We'll keep track of how many times you're doing that this year.

Unfortunately, she did tell us that they were no longer doing that this year because the funding ran out, and voiced her concern for the need to keep supporting teachers through stressful circumstances.

Although not every teacher being interviewed voiced administrative support as a reason for staying in the district of Linnet, one teacher pointed out that through the years they have had different experiences with the different administrations. Currently, he told us that the administration seems to be willing to “work with teachers right as far as the direction that we wanted the school to go, and how to improve the school, and are open to feedback from the teachers.” Another teacher suggested that he was given even though much of his curriculum, as an AP teacher, was already prepared, “as long as you're getting results, as long as the kids and the families feel like the kids are getting an education, this administration is not going to complain about it at all. They give us a lot of leeway to just do your job.”

Mentoring and Induction

It was evident that the Linnet School District provided multiple forms of support to their novice teachers. According to the CTE director, teachers are more than just supported, they are “surrounded by love.” The human resources department is responsible for a significant portion of the new teacher support including assigning a district mentor for three years. According to one of the retained science teachers:

Your first two years you get a direct mentor that you can go to and talk to, and it happened to be somebody that I was teaching the same course with, so that was helpful. And I think the third year that they transition to more like a buddy thing. So the person you can go to. But they're not as involved.

In the Linnet School District, mentors are selected and paired by the administration in the individual schools, and receive roughly $100 dollars per hour, as well as mentor training, from the district. According to one of the retained teachers who served as a mentor, the training was provided from the district and took place over a period of two days. Mentors were also expected to attend “refresher” training if the state policies regarding new teacher support changed. They explained that mentors were required to meet with their mentees at least once a month, and were not always assigned to teachers of the same content area.

In addition to a mentor, the district also assigned new teachers with an “advocate.” The CTE director served as an advocate and described for us some of the actions she took to support the new teachers assigned to her:
Once a month we are to give them ten dollars or something and touch base with them. So whether I bought them lottery tickets or breakfast, or whatever it was, to touch base. How are things going? Let me just give you a little something. ‘I'm thinking about you’ note or something.

The department of Human Resources was also responsible for the new teacher induction program, which takes place over a three day period before the first day of school for all new teachers and ongoing professional learning opportunities and support groups once per month during the school year.

One of the retained teachers recalled what this meeting looked like over 14 years ago:

When you get there, when you're new to the district, there's two days of new teacher stuff. But a lot of that is, "Here's how you enroll in your healthcare, here's how you get your dental care, here's your badge." One of the days is really just this, fill out the paperwork and get that stuff. — It was just this crash course of, "Here's what our parents are like, here's this, here's that, here's that. —I wouldn't say that it was terribly helpful.

In addition to having a mentor, an advocate, and an induction program, each school was also assigned a coach. Coaches typically were former teachers in the district who took on the role of coaching full time. One of the retained teachers described the role of the coach like this:

They were basically a district level person that would be able to go around, to newer teachers mostly but not necessarily, and be able to observe them and just offer them help as far as any development that they needed. Whether it be with the teaching aspect itself for developing ideas, right lessons, and that sort of thing. And there were different levels. So there was a secondary one. There was a middle school one, and there was an elementary school position.

The CTE director also described specific onboarding they do for CTE teachers either new to teaching or new to the program, which differed from the regular science department in the district. The CTE program meets with teachers in the first week of school and then holds a follow up meeting after one month, ‘Okay, You were on information overload when you started. Now that you've been in the classroom for three weeks, what questions do you have?’

When speaking with one of the retained science teachers in the district, she expressed that she met with her official mentor weekly, and followed a structured format. However, she shared that much of the mentoring that she valued most came from an informal mentor.
The mentor that wasn't my official mentor he retired, he was always there to listen to what happened and advise me, I mean more than advising, just sympathize say what his own experiences have been and offer whatever help that he could.

She shared with us that although the two mentoring styles were different, she valued them both in her first years of teaching, stating that both forms of mentorship contributed to her retention, stating they “helped me grow as a teacher and feel more comfortable and less likely to quit.” She also received informal mentorship from one of the administrators in her school, who she felt “helped her along the way.” This administrator offered support without evaluation, something she described as being simply for her own good to improve as a teacher.

One retained science teacher shared that although she attended the new teacher meetings, she “rarely found it useful.” Another teacher expressed a similar sentiment regarding the induction program, telling us that he found the meetings to be “more of a chore.” He too felt most of his support came informally from individuals within his school.

Because those are the individuals that you're seeing consistently and more often. The district folks that we would have to meet with, we knew they were there. But it doesn't feel like somebody you're gonna go to, because they seem more detached than the people that you're working with at the school.

This same teacher reported his PLC [professional learning community] meetings as a source of support.

Yeah, they do a lot of meetings about curriculum. They'll meet once a week to talk about curriculum. What are we doing this week? What labs are we doing? What do we need to get set up? They get things set up together and then they just carve some time out to talk about students that they've identified as needing extra help. And so, "What has worked out this week that you've done with them? What sort of problems are they still having? What sort of problems are you still having with them?" It's just... they've figured it out. That PLC, it's a biology PLC and a chemistry PLC. They're really good.

**Conclusion**

It was evident in the Linnet School District that being well-funded not only meant sufficient salaries, but also more than sufficient supplies within the classroom and the school as a whole to support student learning. Teachers were able to provide project-based learning with state-of-the-art equipment, which benefitted both students and teachers. Teachers were also supported by parents of students, especially those working at the university. Parents employed by universities provided additional resources for teachers as well as provided science learning at home, allowing teachers to more quickly through the curriculum. Teachers also saw their colleagues as more than just fellow teachers, but as friends, and cited their supportive work
environment as a major reason for staying in the district. Although the district of Linnet offered multiple forms of support for both new and retained teachers, it was evident that for the teachers we spoke with, it was the informal mentorship that they found to be most valuable. One teacher summed it up nicely:

One of the other teachers who taught in another district that was rough, she and I have talked a lot. She's like, "Yeah, this is a sweet school. We got a ton of resources. We got great kids, we got great families, we got kind of everything here." She had that perspective at the other school district that didn't have those sorts of resources and those sorts of supports and you sort of realize that really helps out. It really makes your job much easier when you know that if your student is struggling, you're going to be able to contact a parent. If you need something, you can get it. If you need help, you can go across the hall and you can talk to another teacher and get that sort of help. She and I have talked a lot about it. Yeah, I'm trying to think of... Yeah. That's the people I'm friends with. We all like each other. We enjoy one another's company and I'm going to be really sad. I'm the youngest of the five of us and they're all going to retire before me and I'm going to be very sad when they do it one by one.

References