

## Book Review / Compte rendu

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*Teacher Shortages and the Challenge of Retention: Practices That Make School Systems and Cultures More Attractive and Empowering* by Barbara J. Smith. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023, 121 pages, hardcover. ISBN: 9781475870824

The challenges of teacher recruitment and retention, often referred to as “teacher shortage,” loom over global public education. Reaching far beyond a lack of qualified applicants, truly examining teacher shortage exposes deep, systemic fractures in an antiquated education system ([Go Public! Fund Education, 2023](#); [Koerber et al., 2023](#); [Mawko, 2023](#)). In their book *Teacher Shortages and the Challenge of Retention: Practices That Make School Systems and Cultures More Attractive and Empowering*, Barbara J. Smith sheds light on the multifaceted challenges of recruitment and retention within K-12 education, placing teachers’ voices at the heart of the exploration. This book focuses primarily on the US landscape, with occasional nods to Canadian and global perspectives, offering a sweeping overview of numerous systemic barriers and proposing innovative solutions to create sustainable, fulfilling environments for educators. Smith’s commitment to revitalizing respect for the teaching profession and attempt to address challenges across a broad range of educational contexts are commendable. However, the book’s ambitious scope often sacrifices depth in addressing core issues, such as the complexity of classroom learning needs and nuanced aspects of fair wages, while entirely overlooking others, like student-on-teacher violence and the increased need for equity and inclusion in supporting minority educators and staff.

My position as a tenured high school music educator recovering from burnout, currently part-time at the high school, along with being sessional lecturer and full-time PhD student in Education, informs this review as I slowly emerge from nearly two decades of overextending myself, working countless unpaid hours to run a successful, innovative music program, driven by a blinding acceptance that ‘this is what the job is,’ only to more recently start questioning the exploitation of teacher’s resilience and passion, leaving me particularly critical of retention issues connected to fair wages and compensation, unrealistic expectations, and work-life balance. Through this lens, I recognize the book’s limitations while praising Smith’s passionate and digestible overview of systemic challenges, centering on teacher empowerment. Limitations aside, Smith offers a helpful starting point for initiating critical conversations about foundational issues in education and the need for systematic reform.

Drawing on decades of research and experience in K-12 schools and universities across Canada, the US, and Europe, Smith invites readers to reimagine schools as places where teachers can thrive rather than merely survive, a sentiment dear to my heart. To move from survive to thrive, *Teacher Shortages and the Challenge of Retention* emphasizes placing teachers at the center of conversations about

retention and systemic change. This theme resonates throughout the book, with 15 chapters addressing a specific barrier through research, educator anecdotes, and thought-provoking discussion questions designed to inspire further conversation and contemplation. Smith's accessible writing style and easy-to-navigate, brief chapters make this book particularly useful for educational leaders and policymakers pressed on time and unaccustomed to reading academic research. Additionally, this approach could engage parents, students, and community members who are invested in strengthening public education.

While this book offers valuable starting points, such as innovative approaches to re-imagining teachers' schedules to allow more preparation time during the workday in chapter 3, it struggles to maintain focus across its wide-ranging topics, glossing over critical themes that deeply impact educators' daily lives. For example, the overwhelming complexity of meeting diverse learning needs, including incorporating individualized educational plans, adaptations, cultural differences, prior learning gaps, social-emotional challenges, and mental health conditions, is underexplored, detracting from the book's potential impact. In chapter 14, Smith discusses teacher health and safety, raising critical points about burnout and systemic reliance on resilience. However, the chapter's primary focus on US-centric concerns, such as gun violence and safely navigating weapons at school, neglects addressing the classroom aggression and behavioural challenges which are increasingly on the rise across Canada. A June 2024 survey from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation reported 1 in 3 teachers having personally had physical force used against them ([Startling OSSTF/FEESO School Violence Survey Results Reveal Need for Emergency Funding, n.d.](#)). Similarly, in Nova Scotia, teachers have reported a 60% increase in violent incidents in the last 7 years and over 27,000 incidents last year alone ([Mawko, 2023](#); CTF Biannual Tracking Survey, 2024). Such alarming statistics highlight the growing prevalence of student-on-teacher violence and abuse, and its omission limits the book's applicability to Canadian educators navigating these realities. While no single resource can address

all relevant topics, one other missed opportunity is the absence in addressing a need to better support educators across intersectional identities through redesigning oppressive systems to foster more inclusive, safe, non-discriminatory working environments, removing structural and institutional barriers faced by minority teacher candidates and staff ([Yip & Xu, n.d.](#)).

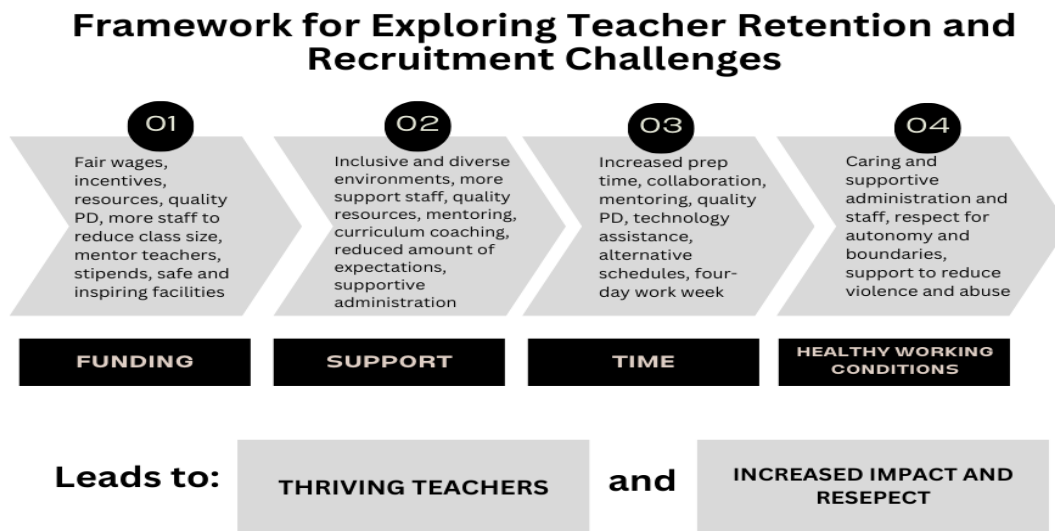
A more focused approach, prioritizing a few critical issues across key themes, could lead to deeper, more actionable insights into the core challenges faced by educators today. For instance, using a framework like the one I've developed, beginning with funding as the foundation for providing necessary support, time, and healthy working conditions, culminating in thriving teachers who experience greater job fulfillment and impact, might better align with educator's needs. This interconnected framework also highlights how increased funding underpins systemic improvements, ultimately elevating the education system and revitalizing respect for the teaching profession. Within such a structure, Smith's advocacy for better pay, including creative incentives and compensating mentor teachers, would integrate as vital components of a robust support system.

*Teacher Shortages and the Challenge of Retention* is a heartfelt and ambitious attempt to address some of education's most pressing challenges. Smith's emphasis on systemic change and respect for teachers is both timely and admirable, and their accessible writing style makes it a helpful starting point for practitioners and policymakers beginning to explore these issues. I envision school administrators selecting relevant chapters from this book to engage thoughtful, action-oriented conversations among school staff, or as previously mentioned, it may serve as a quality overview for education stakeholders of numerous challenges in teaching today, many which are often missed in teacher shortage discourse, such as rearranging teacher's schedules, or the potential impact of compensating teacher mentors who supervise pre-service teachers.

However, by attempting to cover too much ground, the book sacrifices the depth and specificity needed to offer truly actionable solutions, particularly for burned-out educators like me who crave a more discerning and disruptive ap-

**Figure 1**

Alternative framework for presenting challenges in teacher retention and recruitment (Bryson, K., 2025)



proach. For Canadian readers, the book's relevance is uneven, with some ideas aligning well with current research and practice, while others feel too generalized, disjunct, or disconnected from pressing concerns. Future works in this area might benefit from narrowing the focus to a few critical themes or tailoring solutions to specific contexts, such as Canadian school systems, rural education, or urban secondary public schools in the US. Despite these limitations, Smith's work contributes to the ongoing conversation about uncertainty surrounding the future of teaching. Her passion for improving educators' lives is evident throughout, positioning this book as a valuable conversation starter and call to action for deeper, more targeted explorations of making teaching a profession where educators can thrive, not just survive.

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