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Posted Sunday March 16, 2008

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### Job-switchers find rewards in teaching

Main benefit is making an impact on students

By [George Basler](#)  
Press & Sun-Bulletin

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Diana Drew loved the glamour, glitz and salary of her job, in which she helped relocate top executives to foreign countries.

But something was missing. "Working with executives got old after awhile," she said. So six years ago, she made the decision to begin teaching -- a choice she's never regretted despite the pay cut and demands of going back to college to earn and keep her teaching certifications.

"Even though it's hard to look on the bright side at times, the lasting personal reward is clear. You see a spark go off in a kid's head and say 'I did that,'" said Drew, 29, who teaches Spanish at Susquehanna Valley High School.

Drew is an example of someone who's turned to teaching after working in another career. Some make the move looking for job security at a time of downsizing in the private sector. Others are attracted by what they call the very personal rewards of having an impact in young people's lives.

Their track record in the classroom is a mixed one, said Cindy Buss, educational recruiter and regional certification officer at the Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

Five years ago, when local high technology firms were downsizing, some workers with math and technology backgrounds looked to make the move into teaching, Buss remembered. Some were successful, but some floundered because while they had academic knowledge, they lacked other prerequisites to teach, such as the ability to relate to students, she said.

"I've seen people crash and burn," Buss said. "In teaching, you have to have the calling. You need a desire to make a difference in a child's life."

#### Making the move

People who switch careers are becoming a more common part of the teaching force, said Emily Feistritzer, president of the Center for Education Information, a private research organization in Washington, D.C.

Her organization estimates about one-third of all new teachers are entering the profession through an alternative certification route and about half of these candidates are switching careers. This is especially true in subjects of math, science and special education, and in large urban areas and small rural areas, Feistritzer said.

But Buss said she's seen the number of people switching careers in Broome and Tioga decline from five years ago, partly because economic conditions have changed.

"I used to get a half-dozen calls a week," she said. "Now, I very rarely get a call."

The traditional path for a mid-career switch is go back to college to take education courses, required to gain initial teaching certification. For a person with a bachelor's degree, the commitment is normally less than four years because teacher education programs will give credit for previous college courses.

Still, it can be a sacrifice. While she got into the classroom under a temporary license, Drew took a 40 percent pay cut and worked a second job while going to college to earn certification.

The tuition was expensive, but the biggest sacrifice was the time commitment since all the coursework was at night, said Jeffrey Horn, a science teacher at Vestal Middle School who became a teacher after working in a laboratory in biotechnology. He thinks his wife made even more of a sacrifice since she was home with two children in pre-school.

But the payoff was worth it, he said. He enjoys teaching more than his previous career, and "it certainly doesn't hurt that I have a regular work schedule," Horn said.

#### Emotional reward

Several Southern Tier teachers who successfully made the move agreed motivation was a key to their success.

"People who come in and say 'I'll have my summers off and leave by 3 p.m.' are living in a delusion," Drew emphasized.

For their part, the teachers said they switched careers because they wanted a job that was more important and emotionally rewarding than what they were doing before.

An example of this is Mary Emm, 50, a fifth-grade teacher in the Chenango Forks Central School District, who worked as a waitress and bartender before going back to school 10 years ago to become a teacher.

"I wanted a more meaningful career, something where I was contributing more than I was contributing," she said.



CHUCK HAUPT / Press & Sun-Bulletin

Spanish teacher Diana Drew goes over sentences with her students at Susquehanna Valley High School. She was in international business before becoming a teacher six years ago.

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Studies have shown career switchers are no better and no worse in the classroom than those who have followed the traditional route into teaching, Feistritzer said.

But some career switchers feel they bring an added perspective to the classroom. "I was better prepared," Emm said. "I had been a mother. I had established my priorities."

Judith Hawkins, 47, an English teacher at Owego Free Academy for seven years, said she uses marketing techniques she learned in the insurance industry when she teaches. She's always working to "market" or sell the content to her students, she said.

Hawkins said she gets to touch people's lives in a way few professions do. But she remembers a couple of other teachers from local industry who didn't last because they had problems relating to students. "They wanted kids to sit down and be quiet and not be teenagers," she said.

Teaching might not be as adventurous as his former job as a researcher, said Steve Bingley, 39, who teaches science at Owego Free Academy. But the satisfaction of getting to see "light bulbs go off" when students grasp a concept is a big selling point, he said.

As for herself, Drew remembers being scared to death when she first began teaching. It was about halfway through her first year at Susquehanna Valley High when she realized she had made the right decision. What convinced her was the satisfaction she felt interacting with the students. The job "makes me feel good about myself," she said.

**STORYCHAT** 

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