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Many teachers use job as career step

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MANY students are being taught by a new generation of so-called "switchers" — ambitious teachers who view their job merely as a stepping stone to bigger and better things.

As Australian schools grapple with staff shortages, a Monash University study suggests that more than one in four teachers enter the classroom without any intention of staying more than a few years.

But while state and federal governments are working on changes to keep teachers in the job longer, researchers argue that staff turnover is not always a bad thing.

"I agree we need to be supporting and retaining teachers in the profession, but I do think we also need to consider the question of how long teachers should stay," said the study's co-author, Monash University associate professor Dr Helen Watt.

"Is it really our hope and expectation that these people should have their entire working life as a teacher, or is it in fact renewing, re-energising and revitalising to have people in the system for however long, if they're making a good contribution for the time they are there?"

Since 2002, Dr Watt and her

colleague, Dr Paul Richardson, have been tracking the experiences of more than 1650 teachers, from the time they started a university education course to their early years in the classroom.

Their study has identified three types of teachers: "highly engaged persisters" (those who intend to spend their whole career teaching); "highly engaged switchers" (those who plan to use it as a stepping stone to other areas); and "lower-engaged desisters" (disillusioned teachers who did not want to stay in the profession).

The persisters made up the bulk of the group surveyed (45 per cent), while 27 per cent are switchers and 28 per cent are desisters.

Switchers tended to view their job as a pathway into longer-term careers in a range of other areas, from business and the arts to the police force or academia.

The study comes only months after the Council of Australian Governments promised to lift teaching quality and provide more incentives for people to enter — and stay in — the profession.

Part of that push involves an overhaul of career structures for teachers, with governments expected eventually to introduce performance-based pay to reward top staff.