Peter Wozniak left a tenured professorship at Auburn University at Montgomery to teach history at the Montgomery Academy, a private high school in Alabama. Not long after, two of Mr. Wozniak's colleagues followed in his footsteps.

"Had I been an associate professor at a major research university, I probably would not have changed," Mr. Wozniak says. "But when one teaches at a small, regional, community-college type institution, one can be far better off at a high school. The students are capable of a very high level of work."

Mr. Wozniak initially contacted the Montgomery Academy looking for part-time work to supplement his university salary. When the school later offered him a full-time position, he accepted. After 10 years at Auburn, he was fed up with what he saw as a declining quality of students and low pay. "Unbelievably, the high school is paying me more than the university was going to pay me for being chairman of the department," Mr. Wozniak says.

ALSO SEE:

Secondary-school teaching has long been an obvious alternative for humanities Ph.D.'s and A.B.D.'s who don't land the college teaching jobs they want. But increasingly, people with doctorates are viewing elite private-school teaching as a rewarding career in its own right, rather than a watered-down version of college teaching or an undesirable backup plan.

J.D. Bowers, who teaches history at Punahou School in Honolulu, says he became tired of professors complaining that college students didn't know how to write and that it wasn't their responsibility to teach them. An A.B.D. in American history from Indiana University, Mr. Bowers realized that he could make a difference at the secondary level. "When I was a T.A. and visiting professor, I probably made lasting impacts on about four students," he says. "Here I know I've changed the lives of so many more students."

Robert Lauder, head of the upper school at Sidwell Friends School, a Quaker day school in Washington, D.C., says that people with doctorates should realize that "there's a lot out there besides college teaching."

"A lot of our teachers do continue to publish and be involved in their academic disciplines but without the intense pressure you find with college teaching," he says. Sidwell currently employs nine Ph.D.'s out of 58 faculty members in its upper division and is currently seeking an instructor to teach courses in African history and African-American history.

Many Ph.D.'s choose private schools because, unlike public schools, they generally do not require teaching certification. Like Mr. Wozniak, they tend to find jobs in the elite private schools that are academically strong, well financed, and that employ teachers of a variety of faiths.

Independent schools need teachers who can play a variety of roles. Besides classroom teaching, they typically emphasize teacher-run extracurricular activities ranging from sports to theater to environmental activism. Coaching ability is particularly sought after. On the other hand, not everyone has to be a varsity coach.
"The person who's going to get hired is someone who has a good personality -- lively, fun, compassionate," says Jonathan Ball of the teacher recruiting firm Carney Sandoe. "Athletics and fine arts are a plus, but it's more that you need interest and some ability than extensive experience."

The opportunity to interact with students in many arenas (the classroom, the track, the stage, the student newspaper, the class trip to France) and a sense of really making a difference to students' lives are cited over and over again by secondary teachers as reasons why they enjoy the profession.

Barbara Holler Smith left a post at Hebron Academy to complete her Ph.D., but despite a grueling schedule, she enjoyed the job and is considering returning. "I loved the community of adults," she says. "The trust and friendship of the students made up for the long hours and lack of privacy. I remember accompanying the soccer team I coached to a game in October. The Maine leaves were turning their vibrant colors on the hills surrounding the field, and looking up I felt so grateful that this was my job, that I wasn't sitting in an office trying to come up with a clever idea to build an article around."

In some ways, secondary-school teaching differs from college teaching. Ms. Holler Smith cites the need to discipline high-school students as a major difference. And although it is often possible for a teacher to incorporate a specialty into middle- and high-school classes, independent schools are basically hiring generalists. This can be a problem for academics, who tend to be trained exhaustively in specific areas, but the problem is more one of desire than ability.

"Keep in mind that these are 15-year-old kids," advises Will Layman, a seasoned English teacher, jazz-band leader, and head of upper school at the Field School in Washington, D.C. "You don't need an incredibly deep knowledge of an area to teach it effectively. Rather, you have to be prepared to teach well."

It is a mistake to believe that secondary-school curriculum is simply a dumbed-down college curriculum, or that secondary-school students are less capable than college students. Because private schools draw from an elite, well-educated population, most students are already excellent readers, writers, and debaters when they enter middle school.

"The teaching is a lot more illuminating and intellectually interesting than people think," says Mr. Layman. "We've got motivated families, open and creative kids, and the freedom to design classes, order books, and implement innovative ideas."
Research is a different question. Mr. Wozniak says he has published two book reviews and delivered two conference papers in the last year, and the Montgomery Academy does offer research support -- it even paid for Mr. Wozniak to attend a conference in Poland. But this level of continued scholarship is unusual.

Many schools offer some research support, but it is more in the interest of faculty members' keeping engaged with their teaching disciplines than making names for themselves as scholars. This comes as a relief to some, though the lower status associated with being an educator rather than an intellectual can be a problem, particularly after one has devoted years to obtaining a higher degree that is unnecessary for the job.

The starting pay range for someone with an advanced degree and some college-teaching experience is generally in the mid-thirties at a day school, according to estimates from recruiters and teachers, though teachers and administrators emphasize that pay is usually negotiated individually with candidates rather than being dictated by a firm scale.

Boarding-school pay is often lower, but that is more than offset by the fact that life at a boarding school involves very few expenses. Besides receiving health insurance, a generous retirement plan, a paid trimester of sabbatical every seven years, and subsidized university tuition, Ed Denault, a Spanish teacher at the Woodberry Forest School in Virginia, sums up his benefits this way: "Housing is furnished, free, no utilities, no commute, maid service, all meals free, computer free, plus library privileges at a major university."

Experience with adolescents and teenagers is an important preparation for a career in secondary-school teaching, according to several teachers. "The Ph.D. screams, 'I'm qualified to teach this subject,'" says Mr. Layman. "You need to emphasize your investment and interest in kids."

There are several ways to get this experience. Contact schools in your area for substitute or part-time openings, or volunteer to tutor in your subject at a local school. Contact your local recreation department and volunteer to help coach a team. Or look for a job teaching in one of the summer programs run by independent schools. It is also a good idea to document and enrich whatever experience you have in sports, arts, volunteer work, or other extracurricular activities.

Ms. Holler Smith has a different suggestion for people planning an independent-school career, one that should increase both athletic marketability and the all-important stamina: "It's odd advice," she says. "but I would really suggest that you be able to run at least four miles easily before the school year begins."