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Abstract
Few educational issues receive more attention than the need to ensure that all elementary and secondary classrooms are staffed with qualified teachers.

A rash of studies, commissions and national reports announce that we are on the precipice of a severe teacher shortage. These shortfalls, we are told, are due primarily to two demographic trends - increasing student enrollment and the retirement of a graying teaching force.

Comments
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Holes in the Teacher Supply Bucket

BY RICHARD M. INGERSOLL

Few educational issues receive more attention than the need to ensure that all elementary and secondary classrooms are staffed with qualified teachers.

A rash of studies, commissions and national reports announce that we are on the precipice of a severe teacher shortage. These shortfalls, we are told, are due primarily to two demographic trends—increasing student enrollment and the retirement of a graying teaching force.

In response, dozens of initiatives to increase the supply of available teachers and to lure the best and brightest to the field have been started by an array of governmental and nongovernmental organizations, including Troops-to-Teachers and Teach for America. In addition, alternative licensing programs in some states now ease entry into teaching, while financial incentives, such as signing bonuses, student loan forgiveness, housing assistance and tuition reimbursement, have been instituted to aid teacher recruitment.

Teacher Turnover

Over the past decade I have used the best national data available to look closely at issues of teacher supply, demand and quality. The story the data tell is provocative. Problems of teacher quality and quantity are, indeed, among the most important issues in schools, but they also are among the least understood. And because most current reforms do not address key sources of staffing problems, they will not work.

Consistent with the conventional wisdom on teacher shortages, the data show that demand for teachers has increased steadily. Over the past two decades, student enrollment has increased, most schools have had teacher job openings, and the size of the elementary and secondary teaching workforce has increased.

More important, the data document that substantial numbers of schools have experienced difficulties finding qualified candidates to fill openings. However, the data also indicate that most of the demand for new teachers is not driven by student enrollment or teacher retirement, but from pre-retirement teacher turnover.

Indeed, the data support the image of a revolving door, portraying an occupation in which there are relatively large flows in, through and out of schools. Compared to most other occupations, teaching has a relatively high turnover rate. It is also an occupation that loses many of its newly trained members early in their careers. In fact, as many as 39 percent leave teaching altogether in the first five years due to job dissatisfaction or the desire to seek better jobs or other careers, making the overall amount of turnover accounted for by retirement relatively minor.

Four factors stand out as important to the high rates of turnover: low salaries, lack of support from school administration, student discipline problems and lack of teacher input into school decision making.

Retaining Staff

The data show that the source of the problem is not shortages—in the sense of a supply-side deficit, but rather demand-side excess resulting from high turnover. This has significant implications—it means that solutions must focus less on recruitment and more on retention. States such as California, where class-size reductions have strained the supply of new teachers, pose exceptions. But just the same, California, like other states, must pay more attention to retaining the experienced teachers they have.

In short, recruiting more teachers will not solve the teacher crisis if large numbers of such teachers then leave. The image that comes to mind is a bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not be the answer if the holes are not first patched.

Of course, some teacher turnover is unavoidable and even beneficial. Indeed, effective businesses usually both promote and benefit from a limited degree of employee turnover by eliminating low-caliber performers and bringing in new blood. Moreover, teacher turnover has the added benefit of keeping down salary costs by replacing senior teachers with less-expensive beginners.

But high levels of teacher turnover are not cost free. Among those who study employee turnover in business organizations, it has long been recognized that high rates of employee departure incur substantial training and recruitment costs and are both cause and effect of productivity problems.

All of this argues that schools are not simply victims of inexorable demographic trends and that there is a significant role for the management of schools in both the genesis of and solution to school staffing problems. The data suggest that improvements in the conditions of the teaching job, such as increased support for teachers, increased teacher salaries, reduction of student misbehavior and enhanced faculty input into school decision making, would all contribute to lower rates of turnover. This, in turn, would diminish school staffing problems and ultimately contribute to better school performance.

While the data suggest these changes would be beneficial, they do not imply they will be easily achieved. Indeed, it may be that because such reforms are considered too costly they often have been overlooked.

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