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VOLUME 7

ISSUE 3

Fall 2009

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Forecast

Emerging issues in public education

Teacher retirements: Education's climate crisis?

By Edwin C. Darden

More babies were born in 2007 than in any year in American history, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. A steady stream of births and waves of both legal and illegal immigrants promise to flood the nation's schools at the same time that many baby boomer teachers retire, prompting many experts to predict a major teacher shortage for public schools. Shortages will be particularly acute in science, math, and other specialty subjects, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (see Fig.1, p. 3). Special education and urban school districts are expected to suffer heavily.

But some analysts have been predicting a U.S. teacher shortage for more than a decade, and it has failed to materialize except in certain subjects and certain locations, such as rural areas. As with global warming, there is a consensus view that there is a serious problem, but naysayers assert that the situation is not dire. How concerned should school boards be?



Gloom and doom

First stop for gloom and doom is an April 2009 study by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, which says in the next four years more than 30 percent of the nation's 3.2 million teachers will likely retire. Before the year 2020, half of the current workforce (1.7 million teachers) will be eligible to retire, the report asserts.

The National Commission report begins with an inflammatory question: "America's schools are about to be hit by the largest teacher retirement wave in history; are we ready?" The text continues, "The traditional teaching career is collapsing at both ends." Higher paying alternatives and flawed preparation drives away youngsters, the report observes, while experienced

teachers "who still have much to contribute" leave their jobs because of "obsolete retirement systems."

The average teacher retirement age is 59. In 18 states and the District of Columbia, more than half of existing teachers are 50 or older. In New York State, the figure is 41 per-

cent. In other words, about four in 10 teachers in New York State will reach the average age of retirement within nine years.

However, teachers' plans about when to retire can vary based on the economy. Currently, the depressed U.S. economy is discouraging teacher retirements because pension funds and private investments are down. Laid off or disgruntled workers are flocking to teaching as an upbeat career. For example, in February 2009, 11,280 people applied for 30 teaching positions in Guilford County, N.C. Amy Holcombe, who oversees the school system's lateral accreditation program, told the *News-Record* newspaper that said she is now seeing applicants with master's degrees and backgrounds in engineering and banking who seek a change after being laid off. "The stories are very moving," she said. "They're high-quality people who maybe have thought about this for a number of years and now want to act on that."

The National Commission report is not swayed by such anecdotes. "We can't recruit our way out of this problem," the authors write. "Wholesale replacement of accomplished veterans with inexperienced beginners is a bad bet."

The report generated a lot of attention in education circles, not only for what it says but for who is saying it. The National Commission is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, advocacy group co-chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley and Ted Sanders, the retired president of the Education Commission of the States. Originally established in 1994 by former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt Jr. and Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, the group has had financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Science Foundation, Texas Instruments and others.

Crying wolf?

Anxiety about teacher retirement trends is not universal. Katherine Merseith, director of the teacher education program at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, said the National Commission's claims are "overestimated" according to *U.S. News & World Report*. "We've heard these clarion calls in the past." She pointed to the teacher shortage in the 1960s followed by a surplus in the 1970s and the shortage again in the 1980s. "It waxes and wanes," Merseith observed.

In 2005, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities issued a policy brief called *The Facts – and Fictions – About Teacher Shortages*. It noted, "The dire predictions of the past 20 years have not come to pass, and the nation has been successful at recruiting more teachers."

According to *The Washington Post*, "In many places, there are more converts to teaching than there are jobs, except in hard-to-fill posts in science, math and special education classes."

But remember that in the story about the boy who cried wolf, the wolf eventually did arrive.

University of Missouri Economist Michael Podgursky was skeptical 10 years ago when the U.S. Department of Education report warned of the need to hire 1.7 million to 2.7 million teachers by 2009. But he is more supportive of the 2009 findings by the National Commission. Podgursky told *The New York Times*, "The authors make a credible case" about the number of teachers who will retire.

Regardless of how severe the retirement trend will be, schools need to prepare. How well prepared is New York State?

Teacher recruiting

A 2008 study by the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI) found that schools in rural, urban, and suburban areas in New York State all have high rates of highly

qualified teachers. Highly qualified is defined as the combination of certification and content knowledge as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act/Elementary-Secondary Education Act.

To maintain and enhance that, New York State created the Teachers of Tomorrow Program in 2000. The statewide initiative is designed to help low-performing schools, but particularly those in the Big Five cities of New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers.

The program provides dollars in six categories: Recruitment Incentives; Science, Mathematics and Bilingual Education Tuition Reimbursement Program; Summer in the City Internships (limited to Big Five); New York State Master Teacher Program (limited to National Board Certified teachers); Teacher Recruitment Tuition Reimbursement Program; and Summer Teacher Training Program (limited to New York City teachers). So far, more than 17,000 teachers have been recruited.

The alternative certification route has won a lot of converts, including President Barack Obama, who proposes to spend \$100 million in the 2010 federal budget so mid-career professionals can teach math and science in struggling schools.

Another federal offering, the Troops to Teachers program, provides a \$5,000 stipend and bonuses for military veterans to re-train as teachers who commit to at least three years in a high-poverty school.

Some states and districts employ other carrots such as loan forgiveness, signing bonuses, moving expenses or annual salary boosts for selected jobs. Subsidized housing is available to teachers in some districts, including Baltimore, Md. and Santa Clara, Calif.

Instructional assistants and substitute teachers are another possibility. Michael Genzuck, a professor at the University of California, told the

Fig. 1

National teacher shortage areas – March 2009

- Art
- Bilingual Education
- Career & Technical Education
- English (Grades 5-9 & 7-12)
- English as a Second Language
- Foreign Languages
- Library & School Media Specialists
- Mathematics (Grades 5-9 & 7-12)
- Physical Education
- Sciences (Grades 5-9 & 7-12)
- Special Education — Bilingual
- Special Education (Grades 5-9 & 7-12)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Policy & Budget Development.

American School Board Journal magazine that paraprofessionals are a “promising source” of prospective teachers. Aides and substitutes also bring natural advantages because they live in the students’ neighborhoods, speak their language and often share racial or ethnic heritage.

Retaining good teachers

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, nearly one-third of new teachers leave within three years of entering the profession – and the numbers are even higher in urban areas. In a typical year, approximately 6 percent of the total workforce leaves teaching.

Surveys repeatedly show that money is not the only motivation for teachers. Instructors crave more independence, greater flexibility and a supportive principal. A survey of 104,000 teachers in North Carolina found that elements like good leadership and an atmosphere of trust and respect caused teachers to stay put. Similar surveys in nine other states yielded comparable results.

“It’s one thing to recruit effective teachers. It is another to create the conditions for them to teach effectively,” said Barnett Berry, founder of the Center for Teaching Quality and convener of the Teacher Leaders Network.

Richard Ingersoll, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, said teachers with greater influence are happier. “If you give teachers more say you’ll have a positive climate and less teacher turnover,” he observed. (See Fig. 2.)

The 2008 Met Life Survey of the American Teacher showed that teacher satisfaction is at the highest level in 25 years. In the 1984 Met Life Survey, about 40 percent of teachers said they were satisfied with their career. In 2008, the number of teachers indicating satisfaction was 62 percent.

Another way to retain good teachers is retirement incentive programs. In some instances, retirement eligible teachers can continue to work, defer their pension into a separate fund, and not continue to pay into the system.

There is good reason to try to keep excellent instructors. The average cost of recruiting, hiring, and preparing a teacher is \$50,000, according to both the National Education Association and the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future.

The National Commission suggests that school districts assemble cross-generational learning teams. “By deploying carefully selected veteran educators in extended careers as learning team leaders and teaching coaches,” the report finds, “schools can build the strong professional learning communities that have been proven to reduce costly attrition rates among new teacher hires.”

In surveys, 70 percent of teachers nearing retirement told the National Commission that they view “retirement as a time to begin a new chapter in life that is more flexible” and said they would stay on, with a less rigid schedule, to help young teachers.

Quest for quality

In this era of accountability, teach-

ers must be qualified to teach their subject matter and able to inspire kids.

In a 2007 presentation to the National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education, Nicholas M. Michelli, a professor at City University of New York’s Graduate Center, told attendees, “We know that the single most important factor in student achievement is the quality of the teacher.”

The National Commission report notes that, “High turnover is a central factor driving the inequitable distribution of quality teaching. The consequences of this turnover are particularly dire for high poverty schools that struggle to close the student achievement gap because they never close the teaching quality gap – they are constantly rebuilding their staff...”

The onus is on school boards to ensure their districts have sophisticated and fair methods of evaluating teachers and making tenure decisions.

“School boards set the standards about the qualifications and qualities teachers need to have,” according to Marilyn P. Morey, a NYSSBA leadership development manager. NYSSBA has prepared workshops on teacher quality and is offering webinars on teacher quality, teacher performance evaluations, and lessons from teacher disciplinary proceedings.

Fig. 2

How to Retain Teachers

Important factors:

- Overall perception of the school being a good place to work and learn
- The effectiveness of the School Improvement Team
- An atmosphere of trust and mutual respect
- The ability of leadership to shield teachers from disruptions

Source: 2008 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey. Used by permission

Preparing a storm shelter

The seriousness of the shortage will vary depending on the school district. Suburban systems that typically pay higher salaries and are viewed as easier workplaces might see only a slight slippage. Rural school districts, urban school districts and locations with low achievement could be hurt more.

School districts do not want to end up scrambling for talent. Desperation means, perhaps, settling for less in teacher quality or having less of an equal hand in contracts talks with teacher unions. Because school boards are blamed or lauded based on student performance, teacher quality ranks high on

the list of must-haves.

There is no single policy solution that can be implemented to protect against potential future teacher shortages. Yet, a package of strategies and priorities that combine recruitment, retention, retirement, paraprofessionals, and more could serve as an ounce of prevention in case the storm arrives full blast.

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