

Rethinking the Teacher Quality Challenge

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“Human capital” is quickly becoming the new “site-based management.” While few are sure what it means, everyone craves it, has a model to deliver it, and is quick to tout its restorative powers. It’s trendy and impressive sounding, but too often settles for recycling familiar nostrums or half-baked ideas in the guise of new jargon. Ensuring that “human capital” amounts to more than one more glorified fad requires confronting the full extent of the challenge with honesty and imagination.

Our schools are in a constant, unending race to recruit and then retain some 300,000 teachers annually. Given that U.S. colleges issue a grand total of perhaps 1.5 million four-year diplomas a year across all majors and disciplines, even non-mathematicians can see that our K-12 schools are seeking to recruit about one in five new college graduates into the teaching profession. No wonder shortages are endemic and quality a persistent concern.

It does not have to be this hard. Our massive, three-decade national experiment in class-size reduction has exacerbated the challenge of finding enough effective teachers. There are other options. Researchers Martin West and Ludger Woessmann have pointed out that several nations that perform impressively on international assessments, including South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan, boast average middle-school class sizes of more than 35 students per teacher. That compares to a national student-teacher ratio in the U.S. of less than 16 to 1, and average class sizes in the low to mid-twenties (our class sizes are so much larger than our student-teacher ratio because of how we deploy staff and the amount of non-instructional time built into teacher contracts).

To improve schooling, the U.S. has adopted the peculiar policy of hiring ever more teachers and asking them each to do the same job in roughly the same way. This dilutes the talent pool while spreading training and salaries over ever more bodies. Since the early 1970s, growth in the teaching force has outstripped growth in student enrollment by 50 percent. In this decade, as states overextended their commitments during the real estate boom, the ranks of teachers grew at nearly twice the rate of student enrollment. If policy makers had maintained the same teacher-to-student ratio since the 1970s, we would need one million fewer teachers, training could be focused on a smaller and more able population, and median teacher pay would be about \$80,000 a year.

Trying to retrofit an outdated teaching model is a fool’s errand. Today’s teaching profession is the product of a mid-20th-century labor model that relied on a captive pool of female workers, assumed educators were largely interchangeable, and counted on male principals and superintendents to micromanage a female teaching workforce. Preparation programs were geared to train generalists who operated with little recourse to data or technology. Teaching has clung to these industrial rhythms while professional norms and the larger labor market have changed.

By the 1970s, however, schools could no longer depend on an influx of talented young women, as those who once would have entered teaching began to take jobs in engineering, law, and other male-dominated professions. The likelihood that a new teacher was a woman who

ranked in the top 10 percent of her high school cohort fell by 50 percent between 1964 and 2000. Meanwhile, policy makers and educators were slow to tap new pools of talent; it was not until the late 1980s that they started tinkering with alternative licensure and midcareer recruitment. Even then, they did little to reconfigure professional development, compensation, or career opportunities accordingly.

Even “cutting-edge” proposals typically do not challenge established routines, but instead focus on hiring 300,000 new teachers a year with 22-year-olds who will want to teach into the 2040s. Even the most prominent critiques of teacher preparation typically seem to presume that teacher recruitment—whether it incorporates clinical preparation or whatnot—ought to be geared toward new college graduates gearing up for the same old jobs.

There are smarter, better ways to approach the challenge at hand.

Who should teach?

Recruiting new college graduates for teaching positions made sense 40 years ago, when the typical graduate could expect to hold just five jobs in an entire career. Today’s graduates may hold four jobs by age 30. This early career transience, coupled with the increasing prevalence of midcareer transitions, makes it impractical at best to try to identify future teachers at age 20, fully train them before they enter the profession, and then expect them to remain in teaching jobs for decades. That is a sure-fire recipe for repelling today’s most talented entrants. The composition of the teaching force is changing of its own accord—even in the absence of coherent new strategies to support this shift. In the 1990–91 federal Schools and Staffing Survey, among teachers of grades 9–12, 70 percent had entered the profession by age 25 and just 6 percent had entered after age 35. In the 2003–04 survey, the number who had entered by age 25 was down to 56 percent—while one in six entered the profession after age 35.

Highly effective teaching entails not only the application of research-based methods, but also leadership, content knowledge, life experience, organization, commitment, wisdom, enthusiasm, and applied knowledge (including a practical sense of how schooling can be put to use). The median working adult who transfers laterally into teaching has likely enjoyed more opportunities to develop these qualities and skills than has the average new college graduate.

The population of college-educated workers already well into their first or second career, made comfortable by early success and now open to more rewarding, meaningful, and engaging work, appears to be substantial. One can safely estimate this population to be in the millions. In 2008, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation reported that 42 percent of college-educated Americans aged 24 to 60 would consider becoming a teacher, and would be more likely to do so if they could count on quality training and support and expect to start at salaries of \$50,000 or more. Given current life spans and career trajectories, it is reasonable to imagine that many 35- or 45-year-old entrants might teach for 20 years or more.

It is time to abandon the presumption that new college graduates be the backbone of new teacher recruitment. We should not discourage young entrants or discount the notion that some 22-year-olds are ready to play a valuable role in schools, either for a limited period of time or as careerists. Such recruits should be courted and welcomed. But there are good reasons not to presume that the just-out-of-college-teacher should be the modal recruit.

The 68 percent problem

Currently, there are 3.4 million K–12 teachers in the U.S., representing ten percent of the college-educated workforce. It should not surprise that some are far more skilled than others at teaching reading or mentoring at-risk youth. Yet schools casually waste scarce talent by operating on the implicit assumption that most teachers will be similarly adept at everything. In a routine day, a given school's best 4th-grade reading teacher might give lessons in reading for seventy-five or ninety minutes; almost invariably teaching the same number of kids for the same amount of time as the school's worst 4th-grade reading teacher.

Schools require all teachers to devote time and energy to bureaucratic duties, patrolling hallways and cafeterias, taking attendance, and compiling report cards. Indeed, two decades of surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics suggest that teachers spend only about 68 percent of classroom time on instruction related to core academic subjects, with the remainder consumed by administrative tasks, fund-raising, assemblies, socialization, and so forth. If a cardiovascular surgeon spent only half of her time actually aiding patients, and half of that time was spent on issues other than her specialty, we'd consider that wasteful. And if your loved one was being operated on by a mediocre resident while the talented surgeon greeted new hospital admissions, you'd likely raise a ruckus. Yet such routines are taken for granted when it comes to school staffing.

Rewriting the job description

The challenge, in short, is to find ways to “squeeze more juice from the orange” by using support staff, instructional specialization, and technology to ensure that effective educators are devoting more of their time to educating students. There are a number of possible approaches to the problem.

One course of action would entail hiring support staff that have not undergone as much training as teachers and are relatively inexpensive. Assigning administrative and other non-instructional tasks to the support staff would free up teachers to perform the work for which they are best suited. Teachers would be deployed according to their particular talents and focused preparation. Alternatively, rather than continuing to accept the notion that one either is a teacher or is not, schools might embrace hybrid positions to allow talented educators to grow by leveraging their skills in new ways, even as they continue teaching.

K–12 schooling already employs a large number of school-based personnel who are not teachers; support staff (including aides, librarians, guidance counselors, and so forth) account for about 30 percent of school employees. NCES reports that there are more than 600,000 “instructional aides” in K–12 schools, but these employees are not utilized in a fashion that maximizes teacher effectiveness or reallocates teacher responsibilities.

Other professions arrange work patterns much differently. In medicine, a century's worth of gains has been reaped by increasing specialization: the American Medical Association now recognizes 199 specialties. Today there are 5 million medical professionals in the U.S., but just

500,000 physicians. The rest are trained practitioners with complementary talents. In a well-run medical practice, surgeons do not spend time filling out patient charts or negotiating with insurance companies; these responsibilities are left to nurses or support staff.

Such efforts have been largely absent in schooling. One promising exception employs community resources to augment school staff. Boston-based Citizen Schools, for example, provides highly regarded after-school instruction and career-based learning by arranging for local volunteers to work with students on a regular basis. Citizen Schools leverages the expertise of local professionals on a part-time (and cost-free) basis and points to the promise of approaches that do not wholly depend on full-time, career-long staffing. The key is to stop thinking of teaching as an “all-or-nothing” job and to create models that include the support and opportunity for steady part-timers who also have other obligations or complementary jobs.

Today's “people-everywhere” strategy is expensive and limits the available talent pool, as some potentially effective educators may be unwilling to relocate to the communities where they are needed. It imposes a ceiling on the number of schools and districts that can rely on the people and strategies that drive success in these organizations. Increasingly accepted of late is technology's ability to help reimagine that approach, by delivering instructional expertise over vast distances, making it readily available to more students, and enabling customization.

Unfortunately, schools have foundered under a “supplement, not supplant” mind-set in which there has been fierce resistance to fully utilizing cutting-edge innovations. Too often, discussions about the use of computers, web-based delivery, and instructional software fail to consider what needs to be changed in terms of policy, school organization, or within the teaching profession to take full advantage of those tools.

Different pay for different work

Rethinking recruitment assumptions and job descriptions requires new models for salaries and benefits. While the aim should be to create a profession with various roles and specializations, it should not be presumed that differential compensation requires finely graded hierarchies. Even seemingly sophisticated proponents of compensation reform have too often advocated variations on the blunt Pavlovian approach of paying more for higher student test scores. The emphasis has been on giving teachers a bonus for doing well last year, instead of figuring out how to ensure they do even more good next year—and then paying them more because they're going to be even more valuable.

In moving beyond the old step-and-lane pay scale, it's not enough to simply add bonuses atop the existing arrangement. If teachers are tutoring over the web or providing support services, their compensation needs to be reshaped accordingly. Payment might be by the hour, for each student successfully served, or whatever—but it requires systemic redesign that even the most radical of reformers have yet to undertake.

Ultimately, the goal is to rethink the teacher challenges of the 21st century. We have been slowed by habits of mind, culture, and institutional inertia that imagine a future for schools and school districts that embodies today's familiar assumptions. Transformative change begins by forcing ourselves to imagine something beyond the rhythms of the 20th century teaching profession.

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