

## IN MY VIEW

The shortage of teachers in America's classrooms is reaching epidemic proportions. The National Education Association (2003) predicted that nearly one million veteran teachers will retire within the next decade, and reported that the number of classrooms without qualified teachers increases each year. Teacher-quality advocate Linda Darling-Hammond (1998, 6) observed, "the single most important determinant of what students learn is the expertise of the teacher."

Enrollments in teacher-training programs have remained steady since 2000, but the demand for teachers has increased—especially in the fields of mathematics, science, bilingual education, nearly all areas of special education, and computer education (American Association for

Employment in Education [AAEE] 2000). Higher birth rates, smaller class sizes, increased immigration, and the probability that 20 percent of all new teachers will leave the profession within three years of being hired (Henke and Zahn 2001) have made recruiting and retaining enough certified teachers a difficult task.

### Hiring the Unqualified

The teacher shortage is serious, and policy makers seem to be treating its symptoms, not its causes. Some school systems are hiring unqualified teachers, offering bonuses to educators with certificates in selected fields, paying moving expenses and relocation costs, and helping with banking contacts as stopgap measures (AAEE 2000), but they haven't



*David L. Gray is an Associate Professor in the College of Education at the University of South Alabama, where he has been teaching graduate students since 1997. He has worked in secondary schools and served as a principal for 18 years.*



*Agnes E. Smith is an Associate Professor at the University of South Alabama. Previously, she served as principal of a K-8 and an elementary school. Both authors are members of the Omicron Zeta Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.*

# No TEACHER Left Behind

by David L. Gray and  
Agnes E. Smith



questioned the differences in working conditions that induce some teachers to remain in the classroom while others leave after a short time. Darling-

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Hammond (1998) developed her own Letterman-style Top Ten list to improve teacher quality and included recruiting undergraduates, linking resources to the need for certain types of teachers, and an admonition to “Just Say No” to hiring unqualified teachers.

### Feeling like Failures

The AAEE (2000) identified school violence, working conditions, and salaries as the most negative influences on hiring new teachers. One year later, Ingersoll (2001) reported that 27 percent of teachers who transferred from one school or district to another and 25 percent who left the profession did so because they were dissatisfied with one or more of those environmental factors. Johnson and Birkeland (2002, 35) observed, “they often felt like failures, embarrassed that they were unable to cope with the demands of this very complex job as successfully as their more experienced colleagues.”

Teachers who transferred between schools looked for classrooms in which they could be successful. “They left schools where

student disrespect and disruption were viewed as inevitable and moved to schools that had well-established norms about respect, effective discipline systems, and deliberate approaches to parental involvement” (Johnson and Birkeland 2002, 21). They sought administrators who understood the challenges of teaching and created structures of support for the faculty.

A comprehensive strategy to address their concerns is needed before teachers will choose to remain in the classroom. They want better working conditions and opportunities to improve their skills, especially during the first five years. The “sink-or-swim” model of professional development, to which many new teachers are exposed, almost guarantees that their initial classroom venture will be a brief career excursion before they move on. Regardless of years of classroom experience, teachers want an appropriate assignment, a manageable workload, sufficient resources with which to teach, and an orderly work environment as well as advice and support from their colleagues (Johnson and Birkeland 2002).

### Starting Off Right

District policies that guide teacher selection, assignment, and induction should be cornerstones of any strategy to improve recruiting and reduce attrition rates. Johnson and Birkeland (2002) suggested that new faculty receive a well-planned orientation to acquaint them with the district, its policies, and school procedures. They found a large number of teachers who felt mismatched with their schools either because they

accepted the first job offered or were hired at the central office and assigned to schools about which they had no information.

Induction programs should include provisions for mentoring, which pairs novices with experienced teachers who have been trained to offer encouragement, assistance with curriculum planning, advice about lesson plans, and feedback about teaching. Pairing new and veteran teachers makes sense, but only careful planning will give the relationships a chance to succeed. Johnson and Birkeland (2002) reported that some new teachers were matched with mentors from different grades, subjects, and schools, all of which made classroom observation difficult; the exchange of ideas about improving instruction became peripheral to teachers' interactions when they met.

In addition to district and school-level programs, a comprehensive strategy to recruit and retain teachers must include improved salaries. The American Federation of Teachers (2000) identified the gap between teachers' salaries and other professions as a growing concern. Despite increases in educators' salaries of 4.2 percent in 1999 and 4.1 percent in 2000, many college graduates chose other jobs, where average increases during the two-year span were 5.0 percent and 6.0 percent, respectively. Though teachers' salaries improved 20.1 percent between 1994 and 2000, other professions achieved an average increase of 37.4 percent during the same time period.

Improved pay and working conditions are important consi-

derations in attracting and retaining quality teachers, but school administrators also must begin to view careers in teaching differently, recognizing that long-term growth is incremental and requires varying resources. Many principals hold the belief that once hired, a teacher assumes responsibility for acquiring the skills and knowledge to survive and succeed in the classroom. They fail to distinguish the differences in skill levels between a first-year teacher and a ten-year veteran.

### A Professional Journey

Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, and Enz (2000, 2) agreed and "believe that teachers who spend their careers in classrooms have the capacity to maintain excellence for a lifetime." They identified six task-specific phases through which career teachers move during their professional journey: novice, apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, and emeritus. Their Life Cycle Model "presents a vision of good practice based on transferring knowledge and contextual experience" from one phase to the next (Steffy et al. 2000, 5). Administrators must provide opportunities for growth based on the differences between inexperienced and veteran teachers. The Life Cycle Model's premise is that teachers can reach the expert phase within their first five years. Their improvement, derived in part from professional development activities, should not be the result of one-size-fits-all training.

Steffy et al. (2000, 114) also noted, "the teacher-administrator relationship is critical for determining whether the reflection-and-renewal process and the systematic, forward-moving process of development

through phases will be encouraged or impeded in the school." Administrators will create an environment that is attractive to new teachers and encourages veteran faculty to improve their skills when they offer differentiated professional development to meet teachers' needs during each phase of their career.

### Final Thoughts

Teachers don't have to endure administrative indifference to their professional development. They can choose other professions or transfer to schools where principals acknowledge and support the nobility of what they do. Improving working conditions and salaries are helpful steps toward recruiting an adequate number of teachers, but giving them chances to learn and grow as they practice their craft is the best way to retain quality teachers in our nation's classrooms. If we're going to leave no child behind in America's schools, then we must leave no teacher behind either. ■

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