

Drip, Drip, Drip

Hiring enough teachers to fill America's classrooms is like pouring water into a leaky bucket.

BY SUZANNE WEISS

For many years, it was widely assumed that two converging trends—the aging of the nation's teacher workforce and rising K-12 enrollments—would inevitably lead to severe, widespread and sustained teacher shortages.

But that assumption was called into question by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future back in 1996. The problem wasn't the overall supply of teachers, said the authors of "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future." There was, and would continue to be, a more than adequate number to meet demand. Rather, they said, it was the mismatch between supply and demand in certain subjects and certain school districts that left positions unfilled. And that mismatch was attributable mostly to the large number of teachers leaving their jobs for reasons other than retirement.

Policymakers needed to change the question, the report said, from "How do we find and prepare more teachers?" to "How do we get the good teachers we have recruited, trained and hired to stay in their jobs?"

Today, the commission's report is recognized as having had a profound and lasting impact on the landscape of public education, spawning an array of policy changes, reforms and innovations focused on teaching quality. It also spurred wider, deeper research into teacher supply and demand.

Tackling Teacher Turnover

Among the most influential analyses has been a series of reports, beginning in the early 2000s, by Richard M. Ingersoll of

the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education.

Recruiting new teachers—the dominant policy strategy in many states—isn't enough, Ingersoll said.

"Current policies not only will not solve school staffing problems, but they also

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divert attention from the primary underlying problem—the manner in which schools are managed and teachers are treated," Ingersoll said in his 2001 report "Teacher Turnover, Teacher Shortages and the Organization of Schools."

School staffing problems are neither synonymous with nor primarily due to an insufficient supply of teachers, Ingersoll said. Rather, they result from "excess demand" created by large numbers of teachers leaving their jobs.

Ingersoll described teacher turnover as a multidimensional—and widely misunderstood—phenomenon that takes a variety of

forms: transferring within a district, taking jobs in other districts or states or leaving the profession altogether. Contributing to high turnover are low salaries, student discipline problems, inadequate support from administrators and limited faculty input into school decision making.

Ingersoll's research has also shed light on the changing demographics of America's teaching workforce. While the retirement of baby boomers has had some impact on teacher supply over the past decade, "the graying process has nearly run its course," he wrote in a 2014 analysis. Overtaking it is "an opposite and previously unrecognized trend—'greening,' a vast increase in the proportion of teachers who are beginners."

In the late 1980s, the average teacher was a 15-year veteran—"but flash forward two decades, and the most common teacher is someone in their first year," he said.

Today's teacher workforce is also considerably larger than two decades ago.

In a phenomenon he calls "ballooning," the pre-K-12 teaching workforce has grown an astonishing 48 percent since 1987, far outpacing a 19 percent increase in student enrollment—"an increase that has yet to be explained despite numerous theories," Ingersoll said. Reduced class sizes account for a piece of the growth, he said, as does increased hiring in certain content areas, including elementary enrichment, special education, and middle and secondary math and science.

But these two trends are on a collision course, of sorts, with what Ingersoll and other experts see as growing instability in the workforce.

Already a profession with relatively high turnover rates, teaching has seen a 41 percent increase in the rate of attrition, or departures from the field, over the past two decades. That number is even more troublesome when greening and ballooning are factored in. Beginners have the highest attrition rate, and there are more beginners today than ever.

A study released last year by the Learning Policy Institute found that about 200,000 educators, or 8 percent of the national teacher workforce, move out of the profession each year.

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New Mexico Senator Mimi Stewart

Underpaid and Unhappy

According to the study, two-thirds of teachers who quit cite unhappiness over low salaries, poor working conditions, lack of access to mentoring and professional development, and the pressures of test-based accountability.

Rates of teacher "churn," or overall turnover, vary widely—from Rhode Island's 7.4 percent to Arizona's 23 percent.

Most states report having difficulty hiring qualified teachers in several fields. Those include math (47 states and the District of Columbia), special education (46 states and D.C.), science (43 states), world languages (40 states and D.C.), career and technical education (32 states), English-language learning (32 states) and art/music/dance (28 states), according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Teacher shortages vary by state, the policy institute's report found. Those with lower salaries and poorer conditions have larger shortages. And the shortages affect children unequally. U.S. Office of Civil Rights data show that children of color are about four times more likely to be assigned uncertified teachers. Low-income students, English learners and students with disabilities are also more likely to be taught by underqualified teachers than other students.

In New Mexico, which has the nation's second-highest teacher turnover rate, legislators have struggled to stem the tide, says Senator Mimi Stewart (D), a retired teacher and vice chair of the Senate Education Committee.

A major problem, Stewart says, is the state's teacher evaluation system, which she describes as "harsh," inflexible and involving "so much paperwork that it takes the joy out of teach-



Senator
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The Best in the World

Troubled that most state education systems are falling dangerously behind their global counterparts, a group of 28 legislators, staff and NCSL education policy experts studied the 10 countries with world-class education systems and released a report, "No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State."

The group found that teachers in the 10 nations with the best-performing students are in a class by themselves. Their students regularly score at the very top of an international survey of 15-year-olds' knowledge of math, science and reading. Young people in the United States, by contrast, score somewhere in the middle of the 65 countries participating.

At the core of these countries' education systems is the conviction that world-class teachers are essential to a world-class instructional system. They share the following characteristics that are seldom found in the U.S.

Rigorous Preparation. Teachers are considered nation builders, so acceptance into teacher preparation programs in prestigious research universities is very competitive. Candidates are often recruited from the top one-fourth of high school graduates and must pass a rigorous entrance exam. These countries require mastery of the subjects to be taught and often include clinical practice. They offer no alternate route to licensure except through the preparation program.

Thorough Induction. New teachers in high-performing countries serve apprenticeships with officially designated master teachers.

Career Ladders. Teachers in high-performing countries play a variety of roles in schools, including leadership. And they are rewarded for their unique skills.

Professional Work Environment. In some countries teachers spend only 35 percent of their time teaching; the rest of their time is spent working in teams developing or improving lessons, observing and critiquing classes, and working with struggling students.

High-Quality School Leaders. School principals are carefully selected and receive similar training in curriculum, instruction and school administration. They interact regularly with their teachers.

Good Compensation. In these countries, teachers are expected to be the best in the world and typically earn pay similar to that of engineers and accountants. Some countries have pay scales tied to career ladders that recognize various teaching roles, leadership responsibilities and subject mastery.

World-Class Instruction. All top-performing countries have developed internationally benchmarked standards that specify what students should know and be able to do in language arts, math and science. The benchmarks include high-level cognitive skills, ethical behavior, framing and completing tasks, teamwork, and leadership. The curriculum is based on these standards and specifies the order in which concepts should be taught. Assessments to determine whether students have mastered material are typically essay-based and scored by humans, so they cost more than assessments used in the U.S.

The report, which discusses more than teacher policy, can be found at nctl.org.

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But the Democratic-controlled Legislature has been at odds for the past six years with Governor Susana Martinez (R), who "vetoes pretty much every bill we pass," Stewart says. Even minor modifications to the system have been rejected by the Martinez administration, she says.

Recently, Martinez vetoed a bill, passed with overwhelming support in both houses last year, that would have allowed teachers to take more than three days of annual sick leave without being penalized on performance evaluations. An attempt to override the veto fell just short of the required votes.

Another problem for New Mexico teachers, Stewart says, is low starting salaries—\$31,960, well under the \$36,141 national average.

"You hear these stories about teachers leaving and going into Texas and other places," she says. "We're running them right out of the state."

Not only are teachers moving across state lines for greener pastures, but dissatisfaction is driving an exodus of teachers out of the profession itself. Until we can find a way to increase the support and compensation teachers need and, most agree, deserve, the bucket will just keep leaking. ■