



How to Fix America's Teacher Shortage

Flynn Ross, University of Southern Maine

In the United States, education is touted as the great equalizer, the economic engine in a 21st century information economy, and the key to a functioning democracy. Yet the nation's policies undermine this potential by creating a growing shortage of teachers. High quality teachers are at the center of transformational learning experiences. Nations that have coherent systems to strengthen the teaching force are reaping the rewards and surging past the United States in academic achievement, rates of high school graduation, college completion, and workforce development. Without enough good teachers, the United States is falling behind.

The National Teacher Shortage

The teacher shortage is happening because of several converging trends: more students entering school, fewer recruits to the teaching profession, and more teachers leaving. This convergence is especially evident in math, science, special education, and world languages.

Forecasters expect three million more pre-K-12 students in the next decade, yet nationwide enrollments in teacher preparation programs decreased by thirty-five percent from 2009 to 2014. What is more, as too few new teachers are trained, many are leaving. The teacher annual attrition rate of 8% in the United States is more than twice the annual rate in high performing countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada. Replacing teachers who leave the profession is estimated to cost as much as \$2.2 billion annually nationwide.

Attempted quick fixes often exacerbate problems. Relaxing preparation standards has allowed unprepared teachers to enter American classrooms; and many recent steps have created tremendous churn in the profession, with some public schools facing an annual 60% turnover in staffing. In fact, a 2012 report on charter schools reveals that some have 60% to 74% teacher turnover in a year.

Multi-faceted efforts are needed to address this crisis – including programs to recruit, prepare, and retain high quality teachers.

Recruitment

Teaching must once again be a more attractive profession with competitive wages, housing and childcare supports that allow teachers to live where they work, raise a family, and pay back student loans. Teachers as professionals must be recognized for the contributions of their public service – through public awards like the Teachers of the Year, Fulbright scholarships, McArthur grants, and other public/private partnerships. There must be open pathways into the profession for mid-career occupants of other professions – through

programs such as high-quality one-year Masters of Arts in Teaching programs, Troops to Teachers programs, and residency programs that allow for learning on the job with strong mentoring and support.

Preparation

For those who are well prepared, teaching is a multi-faceted, demanding, and potentially rewarding profession. High quality preparation is essential if new teachers are to have sufficient skills and avoid being so overwhelmed that they leave within a year or two. Preparation takes time and financial resources.

- Better support for teachers in training can be offered through expansion of the federal forgivable student loan programs – with the best supports offered to candidates for teaching positions in high-need fields and locations.
- Programs that have helped in hard to staff rural and urban school districts include “Grow Your Own” programs that allow community members to provide classroom support for teachers and, in some cases, become newly certified teachers.

Certification requirements must be comprehensive in order to prepare teachers for the age range of students they instruct. Teachers need to understand the findings of current learning and brain based research, even as they also master subject-matter content, literacy and technological skills, and interpersonal and cultural understandings. Individually and collectively, teachers must learn to collaborate and continually upgrade their skills through reflection and self-correction. Teaching may be an ancient profession, but modern pedagogical research and tools can help teachers move steadily toward the best ways to educate every child.

Retention

Finally, U.S. school districts needs to do a better job of retaining effective teachers by creating reasonable job expectations and supports to help them meet the complex pedagogical and social demands they face. Teachers in the United States spend significantly more of their day directly dealing with students than do teachers in high performing nations. In those countries, teachers have more time for planning, collaboration, and providing quality feedback to one another and to the students they instruct. All such endeavors improve student learning and make teaching a more gratifying profession.

The Way Forward

TeachStrong is a broad national coalition supporting steps to enrich the teaching profession. Drawing from the best research evidence, this alliance of otherwise competing organizations supports initiatives through the Every Student Succeeds Act to modernize the teaching profession in the United States.

A vibrant democracy requires informed, critical thinkers – not just well prepared workers to develop the economy, but also citizens able to judge the accuracy of the information they receive from multiple sources and knowledgeable about how to get involved in the democratic process. Effective public schools are essential for all groups and communities – and they, in turn, require an abundant supply of well-prepared, committed teachers. America needs to join the ranks of nations that understand the importance of excellence in teacher recruitment and retention.