

International Perspectives Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Introduction | This paper is part of a series on education reforms and is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the current reform efforts in the United States. We hope this work will encourage educators and other stakeholders to spend more time reviewing domestic and international educational research, dig deeply into the real drivers of school improvement and student achievement, and work to reclaim the promise of public education to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed.

Background

Many news outlets have pushed the idea that individuals who go into teaching in the United States are not of the same quality as those who choose to be teachers in other countries. An often-quoted McKinsey & Company study found that high-performing school systems around the world recruit their teachers from the top third of college graduates. However, this data is true only for a unique set of three countries.

In using Finland, South Korea and Singapore for comparison, McKinsey chose three systems that support the development and retention of teachers in ways that allow them to select teachers from the top third of graduates.¹ The cost of college to potential teachers in Finland and Singapore is virtually nothing, and the cost of higher education in South Korea is significantly less than in the United States. Teachers in all three countries are paid relatively higher salaries than teachers

in the United States. In fact, South Korean teachers rank between doctors and engineers in terms of salary potential.

Another important factor in attracting young people to the teaching profession is how teachers are supported once on the job. A recent list of the 10 best countries in which to be a teacher included Singapore, Finland and South Korea, but did not include the United States. The most recent MetLife survey revealed the lowest job satisfaction response from American teachers in the 25 years of the survey. Teachers' satisfaction in the United States is affected by their perceptions about the school's budget, student achievement data and time for professional development. Perceptions matter also in Singapore, Finland and South Korea, where teaching is viewed as a prestigious field with support from government leadership.



The Inconvenient Truth

The inconvenient truth about teacher recruitment and retention is that support (in terms of both compensation and development) remains one of the biggest hurdles to attracting high-performing candidates into teaching. The debt American college students incur, combined with the low salaries of a career in teaching, means that many young people cannot afford to become teachers. The inability to pay down college debt is a contributing factor to the high turnover rate of teachers in the United States—a rate that is staggeringly high compared with those of other well-developed countries.

The ability to pay bills and raise a family is critically important, but teachers will say the most important factor for retention is not salary, but rather a supportive school environment and high-quality working conditions. In other words, higher salaries may help recruit more graduates into teaching, but once on the job, teachers quickly understand the importance of a supportive teaching environment.

Support comes from two areas. First, prospective teachers need high-quality preparation programs that prepare them for today's classrooms. When most other countries are working to increase the quality and rigor of their teaching preparation programs, recent legislation and reforms in the United States have actually reduced the qualifications to be a teacher. There are also more alternative ways to become a teacher in the United States than ever before, and many of these programs are not of high quality. When most successful educational systems around the world are increasing the amount of teacher preparation that is done in actual classrooms with highly skilled mentors, some high-profile programs in the United States pride themselves on their ability to develop teachers in six weeks or less.

Second, teachers need ongoing support throughout their careers to grow and to enhance their instructional

skills. Once in the classroom, many teachers find their working environment is not conducive to making teaching a rewarding profession. High-performing teachers want time to collaborate with other teachers to perfect their lessons. And they want principals who provide supportive and learning-focused school environments, and school policies that treat them as respected professionals. Unfortunately, many of the current reform efforts fail to meaningfully address these professional needs. In some cases, reforms are actually designed and implemented in ways that undermine these needs.

Reclaiming the Promise

Research from the world's high-performing school systems is clear. If we are going to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in the United States, we must:

- *Reduce the amount of college debt of new teachers.*
- *Increase the rigor and relevance of teacher preparation with a special emphasis on student teaching.*
- *Pay teacher salaries that allow them to pay off college debt.*
- *Increase the support teachers get throughout their careers, focusing on the early years of teaching.*
- *Provide teachers with collaborative time to work with colleagues.*

Recruitment and retention programs that have tried to address these issues have been random acts, Band-Aids on gushing wounds. Unless lawmakers, policymakers and other stakeholders see these concepts as components of an interwoven, overlapping system, we will continue to see unrelated, isolated efforts that make short-term headlines but don't improve schools over the long haul.

1. "Closing the Talent Gap: Attracting and Retaining Top-Third Graduates to Careers in Teaching," McKinsey & Company, September 2010.

It's time to reclaim the promise of public education—not as it is today or as it was in the past, but as it can be—to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed. We have a vision that works, but we need everyone's help: educators, parents, students, civic leaders and community members. Only by working together can we reclaim the promise of public education.

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