

Education by the Numbers

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Since some people think that everything in education can be reduced to a number, let's follow their lead.

- 76: The percentage of teachers who report that their school's budget decreased in the last year (after the recession officially ended).
- 63: The percentage of teachers who say that their class sizes increased in the last year.
- 16.4 million: The number of children in America living in poverty.
- 64: The percentage of teachers who report that in the last year, the number of students and families needing health and social support services increased.
- 28: The percentage of teachers who say that health or social services have been reduced or eliminated in their schools.
- 50: The approximate percent of teachers who leave the profession within the first five years.
- \$7.3 billion: The cost to American school systems each year as a result of teacher turnover.

Given these discouraging statistics, it came as no surprise recently when the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher reported that teacher satisfaction is at a 20-year low. Nearly a third of teachers said they are likely to leave the profession. No other industry would stand for this massive brain drain.

Classrooms are full of children facing hardships and challenges that teachers strive, but sometimes struggle, to address. Years of budget cuts have stripped schools of programs and personnel, swelling class sizes and requiring teachers to do more with less. Teachers are compelled to focus more on standardized testing and paperwork, as opposed to teaching and differentiating instruction to the needs of their students. They are required to implement policies made without their input, then blamed when the policies fail.

The ability of educators to address these challenges has been increasingly threatened and curtailed. A rogues' gallery of governors across the country has used the mantra of "education reform" as a ruse to

cut budgets and strip teachers of their voice in their profession. Teachers have even been portrayed in the movies as the villains, leading dedicated educators to wonder how they became the bad guys.

Many of the pundits and policymakers who have leveled the most destructive attacks on teachers claim to care about elevating the status and professionalism of teaching. But the data tell the real story: They are shattering teacher morale and making it harder, not easier, to recruit and keep good teachers.

What teachers want are the tools and conditions to meet the needs of their students, especially those with special needs. They want time to collaborate and confer with other teachers, including good training before implementing something new. They want meaningful evaluations that help improve student achievement and teacher practice. They want greater parental involvement.

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Such conditions are commonplace in countries that top international education comparisons. But the United States is going in the wrong direction, as the Survey of the American Teacher and a recent incident in New York City demonstrate. The New York City

Department of Education released teacher data reports that were riddled with errors, and numerous news outlets published the ratings along with the teachers' names. The data, which used the "value-added" model to rank teachers, were based on a series of assumptions about how students would perform on tests in math and English, with a margin of error ranging from 35-53 points. Mayor Bloomberg's administration had agreed not to release the data because they were not ready for prime-time, but it reneged on its commitment.

Teachers who received low ratings on these spurious scorecards—which were not intended to serve as evaluations—have been subjected to humiliation and contempt. One media outlet savaged a woman it dubbed "the city's worst teacher"—a teacher regarded by her colleagues and supervisors as an excellent educator who took on a challenging assignment teaching children who do not speak English; her principal said: "I would put my own children in her class."

Officials allowed the complexity of teaching to be presented in a single, unreliable number. This does nothing to improve teaching and learning, it promotes teaching to the test, and it inflicts incalculable harm on teacher morale, all of which hurt our students.

Policymakers who view education as an algorithm would do well to consider the words of a late, great member of the American Federation of Teachers—Albert Einstein. "Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count," he observed. And "everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted."



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