



Meeting the Challenge of Developing the Best American Teachers in a Culturally Diverse World

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More than ever, America's public education system must prepare all of our children to forge futures in a globally networked and interdependent world. In many parts of the country, the pupils themselves come from many different cultures; and in all schools children must be prepared to make their way in a competitive global economy. Highly skilled teachers, culturally and linguistically diverse, are an indispensable resource for our children.

U.S. public education boasts pockets of excellence, but cutbacks in state and local funding hit hard in communities less able to generously fund their own schools. In many places "English only" rules undercut training needed for today's world. Worst of all, reduced respect and compensation for teachers have led to a mass exodus from the profession – especially in less advantaged communities that need the very best teachers. In short, America's commitment to uniformly excellent public education is waning. Of special concern are growing financial, bureaucratic, and cultural barriers to teacher recruitment and retention.

Underpaying Teachers

Excellent teachers make a huge difference for their students financially as well as in many other ways. Highly effective kindergarten instructors, for example, have been shown to boost the expected lifetime incomes of their classes by over \$320,000. But our country is not paying teachers what they are worth. Financial undervaluing of the teaching profession is driving qualified people to find better ways to support their families, and inducing young people to think twice before they choose teaching as a long-term career.

- The best teachers now make 14% less than other kinds of professionals with the same levels of educational attainment.
- Over the next decade, more than half of America's 3.2 million teachers will become eligible for retirement. Yet today's college costs are so high that students face the prospect of 25 years of loan payments from the low pay they can expect if they choose teaching.

The Downsides of Quick Fixes

Teaching is clearly one of the most demanding professions. In addition to subject matter knowledge, teachers and principals necessarily draw on knowledge, skills, and expertise from many disciplines – including human development, organizational management, information technology, cross-cultural communication, linguistics, and, most recently, statistical data analysis. Clearly, a high emphasis must be placed on the preparation of well-qualified teachers. But as teacher recruitment has become more difficult, national policy has focused on sweeping away traditional requirements such as student teaching and university coursework in favor of standardized tests. At the same time, some school systems encourage "fast track" entry into difficult-to-fill teaching posts (for example, recruiting a retired engineer to teach math). Or schools make use of young college graduates who want to teach for two or three years and then move on to other professions. Whatever the advantages of some of these measures, they can also detract from finding long-term solutions.

- Standardized tests have been shown to use norms keyed to the life experiences of U.S. females from the Midwest who speak only English. Too much emphasis on this yardstick can therefore discourage the recruitment of promising candidates from other backgrounds.
- Quick fixes to fill vital positions or tap youthful volunteer energy can short-change long-term teacher development. Tellingly other nations (like Finland, Singapore, and South Korea) with students that outperform U.S. students on international tests have chosen to invest in teacher preparation through

well-funded, extended apprenticeships.

The Need for a Diverse Teacher Corps

Nationwide only 17% of teachers are teachers of color. In most states, the proportion of students of color greatly exceeds the proportion of teachers from such backgrounds. Why does this matter? America's growing numbers of minority youngsters need guidance from role models and authority figures from their own backgrounds. And at the same time, students from all walks of life benefit from the perspectives and training provided by teachers from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Developing and deploying teachers from many backgrounds is vital to make schools more effective in a changing world.

Promising Solutions for Teacher Development

Good models for developing high quality teachers from many backgrounds are available.

- “Grow your own” teacher training programs have been shown to be very effective and cost effective. Often, schools form partnerships with universities to hire students as aides or paraprofessionals. The paid job placement functions as the internship and fieldwork program for the university, and the student-teachers involved are often embedded members of their communities committed to remaining in local schools for their careers.
- Sustained teacher preparation can be partially financed through existing federal loan forgiveness programs for students preparing to teach in critically needed subjects or impoverished communities. But our country also needs to boost its financial commitment. In other nations, teacher preparation at the graduate level is fully funded. Well respected candidates come from the top third of their undergraduate classes in various disciplines, and they are apprenticed for one to three years of on-the-job training under the guidance of master teachers who are recognized and rewarded for mentoring the next generation.

Excellent teachers, culturally and linguistically diverse, are the single most effective resource schools can deploy to foster student success. To better prepare all students for the 21st century, it is high time that America boost its efforts to foster such teachers for all of our schools.

Read more in Flynn Ross, “Newcomers Entering Teaching: The Possibilities of a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Teaching Force,” in *Addressing the Demographic Imperative: Recruiting, Preparing, and Retaining a Diverse and Highly Effective Teaching Force*, edited by Christine Sleeter, La Vonne Neal, and Kevin Kumashiro (Routledge, 2014).