

Keeping millennials in classrooms requires time and support

By **MARIA FERGUSON**

Supporting rather than bashing teachers will be more effective in attracting and retaining the next generation of teachers.

This past fall, the Center on Education Policy (the organization I head) had the chance to engage with a cohort of education policy students as part of a joint effort with the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University. Our task was to develop an intensive seminar class focused on the federal role in education and the effect of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The idea was to give students a real-world understanding of the reauthorization process for federal education law, as well as the chance to interact with some of the D.C.-based power players who influence education policy and practice.

Designing the class was great fun and a learning experience for all of us at CEP, but the best part was getting

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to know the students. We had doctoral and master's degree students, as well as others who were taking the course to edify their own professional experience. The most striking thing we learned about the students was that many of them had been classroom teachers. As they went around the room introducing themselves, each former teacher told a similar tale: They felt called to teaching, but, after a few years, they became so disillusioned and hopeless that they left the classroom in favor of a career in education policy.

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As someone who has worked in education policy for almost two decades, I am thrilled at the prospect of having these talented young people enter the field. But at the same time I feel remorse about the students and public schools that will have to somehow do with-

out this group of would-be educators. What happened to these young teachers that they abandoned their chosen profession after a few years?

The sad truth is that students are not the only ones opting out these days. Many young people are saying "no thanks" to teaching as a profession. Recent polling data from organizations like Third Way and others reveal that the generation demographically known as millennials has lackluster feelings about teaching. The data bear this out as enrollment numbers for both education schools and the once sought-after Teach for America program are on a downward trajectory. Perhaps the most ominous sign of the profession's ailing health is that many states are now struggling to fill teaching positions. As a generation of veteran teachers moves into retirement, some states are hard-pressed to fill even elementary school teaching positions.

Unproductive rhetoric

There are a couple of key reasons why so many of today's young people are not interested in pursuing teaching as a profession. At the macro level, the last decade has seen the profession hung out to dry by national and lo-

cal leaders. The unproductive rhetoric around high-stakes teacher evaluations based solely on student test scores created a negative discourse about how to improve teacher practice in classrooms. While most Americans agree that teachers and schools should be evaluated for effectiveness (see the 2015 PDK/Gallup Poll), the idea that you would develop policies and systems to identify low-performing teachers and then do nothing to support their improvement is both shortsighted and flat out unfair. Don't we at least owe the teachers a moment of reflection on why they are performing poorly? And is there really no other actor in the public education system who might share some of the responsibility for improving student performance?

Holding only teachers and nobody else within the system accountable for student performance poisons the dream of many young teachers and creates an environment where teaching appears to be a hopeless trap of struggle and blame. Add to that the near constant refrain of how the nation's public schools are failing, and you have just created the world's worst advertising campaign. Most people want to know that if they pursue a career that is

high on challenge and low on salary, they will at least earn the respect of their fellow citizens. That may be true for missionaries, but it certainly isn't the case for teachers.

Inside the schoolhouse, much of the frustration among young teachers rests on two important factors: time and support. Anyone who works in education at the state or local level will tell you that reform efforts often come down from on high with lofty goals and little attention to important details like time and additional support systems. Like two lost souls seeking shelter from a storm, students *and* teachers feel the effect of this oversight.

Time is a precious asset for teachers, but there is never enough of it — for either students or for themselves. Teachers are expected to cover increasingly complex subject matter for a larger and more diverse student population, all the while adhering to a timeline that does not appear to be tethered to any known classroom reality. And while the education community embraces the idea that more and better learning time can improve student performance and school culture, there is less emphasis on more and better time for teachers.

Earlier this year, CEP released a report on states' use of expanded learning time strategies (McMurrer, et al., 2015). Many of the state, district, and school leaders CEP spoke to emphasized that setting aside more time for teachers to collaborate on instructional planning was an important way to improve instructional quality. Some of the district and school leaders even said expanding time for teacher activities was more

effective than increasing instructional time for students.

Knowing that most teachers probably do more and work harder than many of us on any given day, it should not come as a surprise that extra time for planning, collaboration, and professional development pays off for everyone, especially new teachers trying to learn the ropes. The same is true for support and mentoring. Newly minted teachers often find themselves alone in the classroom, overwhelmed by great differences in student ability and the expectations of a rigid accountability system. Throw in some new technology and reams of student data (neither of which are very useful without the time and training required to use it effectively), and it is little wonder why so many of them leave.

The policy solution

It is ironic that so many former and would-be teachers now think policy is the most effective pathway to improving education. After all, aren't policy makers usually responsible for all the mischief? I would like to think that being a classroom teacher, even for just a few years, offers a perspective that could prevent policy making from going awry, but my experience tells me otherwise. Former teachers seem to be mere mortals like the rest of us when it comes to developing effective policy solutions for education. Maybe Richard Elmore, the revered and oft-cited Harvard professor of educational leadership, was right when he said, "I used to think that policy was the solution. And now I think that policy is the problem."

To stem the flow of talented

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young people from the teaching profession, we need first and foremost to stop putting teachers at the epicenter of the nation's public school woes. Our public system of education is large, complex, and involves many, many actors. Everyone involved should share the responsibility, including the public. Like Richard Elmore, I believe classroom teachers can have a far more lasting effect on education than any policy maker ever could. For that reason, anyone who dreams of being a teacher should feel inspired to

try, succeed, and stay a while. The great American poet Langston Hughes once asked: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" If you are asking America's next generation of teachers, the answer is yes, yes it does. **◀**

Reference

McMurrer, J., Frizzell, M., Yoshioka, N., Scott, C., & Ostler, N. (2015). *Expanded learning time: A summary of findings from case studies in four states*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.