

Education Week

Commentary

Cure for Teacher Shortage: Let Teachers Teach

By James Nehring

 [Back to Story](#)

Our public schools face a growing teacher shortage. Results from several rounds of teacher exams in my home state, Massachusetts, suggest that some who wish to enter teaching may lack basic skills, which means the teacher shortage is even deeper than we feared.

What is the solution? "Get tough" measures such as penalizing teacher education programs for low test scores won't swell the ranks of candidates. And signing bonuses will lead only to short-term commitments. To find a real solution, we should ask why so few of our best and brightest college graduates pursue a teaching career in the first place.

Could the sad truth be that teaching in many schools is dull work? Talented people want to work in interesting places, and schools, as a place of work, are rendered more uninteresting every year. The causes are as well known as they are widely ignored.

Thanks to the pile-up of curriculum goals from state bureaucrats, federal bureaucrats, professional associations, and blue-ribbon committees, teachers have less and less room in which to spread their (and their students') creative wings with imaginative lessons and projects. "We must teach to the test" is the mournful refrain I hear from my own children's elementary school teachers and which is becoming an education mantra across schools. Thus, teaching becomes a kind of technician's job, implementing a curriculum designed by others presumably more capable than they. (Would college professors ever submit to curriculum goals imposed from above?)

Consider, too, the number of students a high school teacher must teach: 120? 150? If the essential joy of teaching comes from touching a child's soul, then we are miles from satisfaction, stretched as we are to simply learn all their names by December.

What about time to think and plan with colleagues? Forget it! A teacher's workday is jam-packed with classes, hall duty, homeroom, and just about anything but quiet, reflective time. No wonder our most talented college graduates look elsewhere.

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None of this is news, but guess what? It doesn't have to be this way. I am lucky to work in a public secondary school which, simply by reordering its priorities, even as it operates on less money than most of its public school neighbors, has created an environment in which kids--and their teachers--thrive.

Each year, the faculty of the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Mass., writes its own curriculum. Drawing on our varied backgrounds--the musician, the artist, the historian, the chemist--we weave a complex and compelling fabric of questions and investigations for our students. It makes for an adventurous, yearlong ride in which outcomes emerge in ways that are as interesting for the teachers as they are enlightening for the students. Yes, we pay attention to the various curriculum goals imposed upon us and our students by others ("Render unto Caesar ..."), but we have managed to avoid the Massachusetts testing mania that grips so many of our neighbors, partly because the parents who have chosen to send their children to our school recognize that standardized tests are but one limited measure of growth and learning, and partly because we are a community of thoughtful rebels who resist being told what to think by others--a habit we also encourage in our kids.

As a teacher at Parker, I teach a total of 62 students and I assess the work of just 26. Most days, my teaching partner and I teach a two-hour-long morning class of 25 students and a similar afternoon class. We divide each class for assessment purposes. When I go home at the end of the week, my briefcase holds a thin sheaf of papers which I can take the time to read carefully, twice even, and provide written feedback. It's November as I write this essay, and I'm getting a pretty good handle on just who my students are, their strengths, their needs, their passions.

My day consists mainly of three two-hour periods. I teach for two of them and am unscheduled for the third--every day. Our school's master schedule represents an institutional commitment to teacher planning time. Most days, I use those two hours to meet with my teaching partner or various others to talk about kids, lesson plans, course goals, or schoolwide issues. Sometimes I call parents or confer with students. Or I find a quiet corner and review the current batch of student work. This is valuable time. It's when ideas happen, vital insights about students get shared, and the collaboration and reflective thinking we seek for our students get practiced by their teachers.

How does our school do it? How do we afford a student-teacher ratio unrivaled by other public schools? By a series of deliberate trade-offs: (1) There are no guidance counselors. Instead, each teacher serves as adviser to a dozen students whom she also teaches, drawing on the wisdom of our school psychologist for issues that require particular expertise; (2) We offer few electives. Our students are enrolled in a focused curriculum that integrates the arts, humanities, mathematics, and science and to which all students gain equal exposure. Individual student passions are supported not through elective courses but by the one-to-one connections that teachers who know their students well can forge with each one of them; (3) We don't have a lot of "stuff": few textbooks, ratty furniture, minimal laboratory equipment, and a copy machine built like a Sherman tank. What money we have goes into staffing the school. We should have better resources, but until we do, our priorities are clear.

As a teacher, and as a parent who hopes someday to send his children to this school, I find it a wholly worthwhile set of trade-offs. It makes Parker an inspiring place to learn and an interesting place to teach--so interesting, in fact, that I quit my job last year as principal of the Parker School to return full time to the classroom because I felt I was missing out on the fun. I was right.

If we could launch more schools like this--and we know we can--the teacher shortage would slowly fade as word got out that schools can be imaginative places after all.

James Nehring recently returned to teaching full time after serving as the principal of the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Mass. His most recent book is *The School Within Us*, published by SUNY Press.

Vol. 18, Issue 18, Page 38