EDUCATION WEEK

Getting Off the "More Great Teachers" Treadmill

By Frederick M. Hess

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Today, *Ed Week* posted a new piece by Olivia Meeks, Greg Gunn, and yours truly. Originally titled, "Maybe a Square Peg Will Do," the piece critiques endless efforts to find or prepare 3.4 million superhero teachers, and instead suggests spending a lot more time reshaping teaching so that it makes the fullest use of the talent that we actually have. In this post, I want to provide a bit more context for our thinking, and I'll follow-up on the implications of one-size-fits-all compensation tomorrow--then I'm going to turn the rest of this week over to Olivia and Greg (as a lot of you are probably already hearing more than you probably care to from me over at *Ed Week*'s sister blog "Rick Hess Straight Up."

Our schools are in a constant, unending race to recruit and then retain some 200,000 to 300,000 teachers every year. Given that U.S. colleges issue perhaps 1.4 million four-year diplomas a year, schools are seeking to bring nearly one out of seven (or perhaps out of five!) new graduates into the teaching profession. No wonder shortages are endemic and quality a persistent concern.

It does not have to be this hard. Our massive, three-decade national experiment in class-size reduction has exacerbated the challenge of finding enough effective teachers. There are other options. Researchers Martin West and Ludger Woessmann have pointed out that several nations that perform impressively on international assessments, including South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan, boast average middle-school class sizes of more than 35 students per teacher.

To improve schooling, the U.S. has adopted the peculiar policy of hiring ever more teachers and asking them each to do the same job in roughly the same way. This dilutes the talent pool while spreading training and salaries over ever more bodies. As Chester Finn wryly observed in ***Troublemaker***, the U.S. has opted to "invest in many more teachers rather than abler ones.... No wonder teaching salaries have barely kept pace with inflation, despite escalating education budgets." Since the early 1970s, growth in the teaching force has outstripped growth in student enrollment by 50 percent. In this decade, as states overextended their commitments during the real estate boom, the ranks of teachers grew at nearly twice the rate of student enrollment. If policymakers had maintained the same overall teacher-to-student ratio since the 1970s, we would need 1 million fewer teachers, training could be focused on a smaller and more able population, and average teacher pay would be close to $75,000 per year.

Even without the constraint of limits on class size, trying to retrofit an outdated model of teaching is a fool's errand. Today's teaching profession is the product of a mid-20th-century labor model that relied on a captive pool of female workers, assumed educators were largely interchangeable, and counted on male principals and superintendents to micromanage a female teaching workforce. Preparation programs were geared to train generalists who operated with little recourse to data or technology. Teaching has clung to these industrial rhythms while professional norms and the larger labor market have changed.

By the 1970s, though, schools could no longer depend on an influx of talented young women, as those who once would have entered teaching began to take jobs in engineering and law. The likelihood that a new teacher was a woman who ranked in the top 10 percent of her high school cohort fell by 50 percent between 1964 and 2000. Meanwhile, policymakers and educators were slow to tap new pools of talent; it was not until the late 1980s that they started tinkering with alternative licensure and midcareer recruitment. Even then, they did little to reconfigure professional development, compensation, or career opportunities accordingly.

Even "cutting-edge" proposals typically do not challenge established routines, but instead focus on filling that 250,000-per-year quota with talented 22-year-olds who want to teach into the 2040s. Perhaps the most widely discussed critique of teacher preparation of the past decade--the hotly debated 2006 study by the National Center for Policy Analysis, *Educating School Teachers*--simply presumed that teacher recruitment ought to be geared toward new college graduates who would complete beefed-up versions of familiar training programs before being cleared to enter the same old jobs. Absent was any reconsideration of who should be teaching or any inclination to question the design of the enterprise.

There are smarter, better ways to approach the challenge at hand: expand the hiring pool; staff schools in ways that squeeze more value out of talented teachers; reconfigure the teaching job so that teachers spend more time doing the things where they make the biggest difference; and use technology to make it easier for teachers to be highly effective. These are the kinds of changes that can make talk of "human capital" more than just empty jargon, and those are the kinds of ideas we float in our piece.

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