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Recruiting Expert Teachers Into Hard-to-Staff Schools

What are the obstacles to pairing the best teachers with the lowest-achieving students? And what would it take to overcome them? Ms. Beardsley surveyed highly qualified teachers in Arizona and urges educational leaders to pay attention to what they have to say.

By Audrey Amrein-Beardsley



WHEN Alcoholics Anonymous was founded, its members devised 12 steps that they believed would help members regain sobriety. The first three steps required them to 1) admit they were powerless over alcohol, 2) believe that a power greater than themselves could restore them to sanity, and 3) turn their will and lives over to the care of God as they understood Him.¹ As victims of

addiction, they surrendered to a higher power to begin the process of recovery.

Educators and the public have followed similar steps, trusting in our leaders to cure the diseases afflicting American education. For the most part we have 1) admitted we are powerless over the current condition of education, 2) conceded that educational leaders can restore to America's public schools some level of sanity, and 3) surrendered our autonomy to those leaders and allowed them to prescribe cures for these conditions.

What is ironic is that the treatment educational leaders continue to prescribe is the epitome of insanity. It is insane to repeat the same behavior in the hope that results will be different next time, but that is what educational leaders continue to do. Though there is virtually no evi-

dence to support the claim that high-stakes tests increase student achievement,² educational leaders continue to insist that high-stakes tests increase student achievement. They justify this claim by evoking the promises implicit in high-stakes tests: order, control, high standards and accountability, illusions of equity, and objectivity.

Educators and the public have allowed educational leaders to hold the keys to reform. Now we must entice educational leaders to rejoin us in our democracy and work with us to enact insightful, data-driven policies to improve student achievement. We must recognize what ails us, learn from our failures, apply logic and common sense, advocate radical policies, and shift

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resources toward reforms that we *know* will work. In the name of equity, we must promote high-quality education first for students who need our help the most — the children tragically “left behind” in spite of the misguided mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Let me hereby issue a double-dog dare to educational leaders and policy makers at every level to do what is right for America’s public school students. We must increase the quality of teachers and the number of expert teachers in hard-to-staff schools because that might be the best solution for raising the historically substandard levels of student achievement in those schools.

RECRUITING EXPERT TEACHERS INTO HARD-TO-STAFF SCHOOLS

America’s most highly qualified teachers are underrepresented in America’s most challenging schools. Across the nation, only about 15% of America’s expert teachers teach in high-poverty, underachieving schools.³ Most expert teachers teach in schools with fewer racial minority students, fewer students from low-income households, and fewer students who are English-language learners. And they teach in schools with smaller than average student/teacher ratios.

Teacher quality is the biggest school-level factor related to the success or failure of students in hard-to-staff schools.⁴ Research aside, simple logic tells us that to improve substandard levels of student achievement, more expert teachers must be recruited to teach in these schools. Common sense tells us that, because these schools are hard to staff, policies must be devised to attract expert teachers to them and then to retain those teachers. In addition, the voices of expert teachers should be heard loud and clear when such policy debates occur.

Expert teachers have three significant characteristics that make it important to include them in discussions of school reform. First, they have significant experience working in schools; this fact alone sets them apart from most educational leaders. Second, they produce gains in student achievement greater than the gains produced by other state-certified teachers.⁵ And third, they have proven that they can promote gains in student achievement greater than the gains realized from most large-scale policies aimed at boosting achievement.⁶ These teachers know how to teach and how to increase student achievement. It is absurd not to listen to them in policy debates about increasing student achievement.

Expert teachers have been officially distinguished and validated as experts, so it is of utmost importance to hear and act on what they have to say about why they do not teach in high-needs schools and what might con-

vince them to do so. To explore these issues, I surveyed the most highly qualified teachers in the state of Arizona to understand their job-related preferences and the policy changes it would take to recruit them into hard-to-staff schools and then to retain them. These teachers included National Board Certified teachers, teachers recognized for having extraordinary success in teaching students in high-needs schools, and teachers named Teacher of the Year or Ambassador of the Year.⁷

THREE INCENTIVES

Teachers reported that the factor most likely to encourage them to teach in a high-needs school would be the quality of the principal. The extent to which the principal would be caring, supportive, open-minded, committed to student learning, knowledgeable, and “highly qualified” mattered most.

Expert teachers urged that principals — like teachers under NCLB — be categorized as highly qualified or not. This would help expert teachers make informed decisions *before* they decided to teach in a hard-to-staff school. A strong majority called for a National Board for Professional Administrator Standards, much like the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This certifying agency would award National Board Administrator Certificates, helping to validate judgments about school principals’ expertise.

The second most persuasive recruitment strategy that teachers mentioned was to offer a higher salary, a promotion, or increased benefits. The teachers said that once they are certified as distinguished, they should be compensated for their expertise regardless of where they teach, but particularly if they teach in a hard-to-staff school.

Teachers who are officially designated as expert teachers might be given signing bonuses to teach in hard-to-staff schools. For example, Georgia gives \$10,000 signing bonuses to expert teachers who move to high-needs schools. The bonus is given once but is added to their base salary, which continues to benefit them progressively over time.⁸

Third, teachers stated that knowing that other teachers at a school are caring, unified, knowledgeable, committed to children, hold high expectations, believe all students can learn, and are experts themselves would be a significant incentive for moving to a high-needs school. That is, expert teachers want to work with other experts, especially when they are facing such challenging tasks.

Expert teachers have strong desires to work with other highly qualified teachers, but they also aspire to

work as field-based teacher educators with inexperienced teachers. Many teachers reported that they have long yearned for opportunities to help other teachers professionally and are very frustrated by limited prospects of doing so. In fact, many of the expert teachers who are no longer classroom teachers stated that a chief reason they left the profession was to satisfy their desire to have a greater impact on education. Many of these teachers took administrative or specialist positions at schools, districts, or state education agencies. This is unfortunate because the last thing we want to do is give expert teachers reasons to leave classroom teaching.

Other significant concerns that expert teachers hold about moving to high-needs schools include the challenges they would face; student behavior, discipline, and motivation; parent involvement; the overall culture and environment of the school; and the distance between the school and their home. Of lowest significance is school safety or the safety of the neighborhood in which the school is located. Teachers who have taught in a high-needs school indicated high levels of satisfaction with the overall school environment, the safety of the school in which they taught, and the safety of the neighborhood.

THREE OBSTACLES

When asked to name the factor most likely to discourage them from teaching in a high-needs school, teachers named the potential for working under a controlling, uncaring, ineffective, and unsupportive principal. Thus the quality of the principal at a high-needs school is the most significant factor expert teachers would consider before taking a position in a hard-to-staff school.

Second, teachers stated that a lack of compensation could prevent them from making such a move. The loss of salary and benefits resulting from switching districts, especially in exchange for harder work and increased responsibility, was of great concern when these teachers contemplated this possibility. Current salary and seniority policies, for example, effectively prevent teachers who want to teach in high-needs schools from doing so. When changing school districts, teachers usually lose a significant portion of their salary because they are not typically compensated for their full years of teaching experience or expertise. If expert teachers were provided monetary incentives or bonuses to offset these losses, or if policies were enacted to allow teachers to transfer positions across districts without taking significant hits to income and benefits, interdistrict

transfer would be more likely and more frequent.

Third, even though teachers said they were not concerned about a state's label for a school based on standardized test scores and prior levels of measured student achievement, they were apprehensive that struggling schools might force teachers to teach to the tests, driving curriculum and instruction in directions that leave no room for teacher expertise and creativity. They feared they would lose opportunities to teach in the ways they know work best for student learning. They were concerned that an overreliance on tests would deprofessionalize them as teachers, alienate them from their expertise by regulating their every action in the classroom, and even cause them to compromise their professional and ethical principles.

Expert teachers say that they value state standards but do not agree that they and their students should be held accountable on the basis of standardized test scores alone. This is especially pertinent given that these teachers' students post some of the highest test scores in the country.⁹ It is not that they fear being held responsible for meeting high standards; they simply disagree with the measures by which they and their students are being judged. They believe that standardized and high-stakes tests have stymied student learning, and they fear that if they were to teach in a school in which these tests mattered most, they would suffer from some degree of professional atrophy.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Finally, expert teachers were asked to nominate policies that they believed would help increase student achievement in high-needs schools. Participants' responses were categorized, distilled into the following policy initiatives, and ranked in order from most- to least-often mentioned.

1. *Place expert principals in high-needs schools.* These teachers know that placing an expert teacher into a high-needs classroom will improve student learning, and they believe the same will occur if an expert principal is the school's leader. A National Board for Professional Administrator Standards or similar entity could help validate and certify expert administrators.

2. *Salaries, incentives, and signing bonuses should be offered to expert teachers to entice them to teach in high-needs schools.* Incentives should be equitably distributed based on teachers' awards, degrees, experience, and other qualifications related to teacher expertise, and the incentives should reflect the levels of student need found in the schools. In addition, district and state policies that would permit, not prevent, interdistrict transfers

must be devised so that expert teachers are encouraged to transfer to another district to teach in a high-needs school.

3. *Encourage and allow time for the best teachers in high-needs schools to mentor and collaborate with other teachers.* Expert teachers want to work with less-qualified and less-experienced teachers to help them become better at what they do, but they are frustrated by limited opportunities to do so.

4. *Encourage and allow time for teachers and principals to share in teaching, learning, and leadership responsibilities.* Expert teachers want to take on increased and shared leadership roles within their schools and, again, are very frustrated by limited opportunities to do so.

5. *Guarantee expert teachers adequate support staff, resources, and access to technology.* Expert teachers feel strongly about the relationship between personal and public resources and their effectiveness as teachers. When they imagined teaching in high-needs schools, they became concerned about meeting the resource and technology needs of their students and about the personal commitments they would have to make to effectively promote their students' learning. In short, they would need generous guarantees of sustained resource support from the system before taking on the daunting responsibility of serving schoolchildren most in need.

CONCLUSION

The fourth step in the process of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous is to make a *searching and fearless* moral inventory of oneself.¹⁰ For the sake of democracy and America's future, we must persuade our educational leaders and policy makers to make a similar searching and fearless moral inventory of their actions and themselves.

First, they must make a searching inventory of the failed policies undermining education and perpetuating this madness, policies they themselves enacted. Second, they must make a fearless moral inventory of themselves as politicians representing the people. In particular, they should listen to the expert teachers who know firsthand how to increase student learning and achievement. These teachers have proven their worth. It is imperative that we hear and implement their recommendations. Third, educational leaders must be willing to embrace radical reforms, uncomfortable as that will be.

Because students in high-needs schools have often been taught by underqualified teachers for a number of years, radical policies will be required to enable these students to escape from the cycle of failure too often accepted within these schools. We must entice Ameri-

ca's best teachers to teach America's most difficult-to-teach students, and we must keep them secure in their positions once they have made the commitment to do so. Technical-rational, top-down reforms have gotten us nowhere, and only fresh and radical reforms will help us recover student learning.

1. Alcoholics Anonymous, "The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous," available at www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/en_information_aa.cfm?PageID=17&SubPage=68.

2. Audrey L. Amrein and David C. Berliner, "High-Stakes Testing, Uncertainty, and Student Learning," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 28 March 2002, available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n18>; and Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, "High-Stakes Tests," in Neil J. Salkind, ed., *Encyclopedia of Measurement and Statistics* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2006).

3. Linda Darling-Hammond, "Inequality and Access to Knowledge," in James A. Banks, ed., *The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1995); Dan Goldhaber, David Perry, and Emily Anthony, *NBPTS Certification: Who Applies and What Factors Are Associated with Success?* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2003), available at www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410656_NBPTSCertification.pdf; and Daniel Humphrey, Julia Koppich, and Heather Hough, "Sharing the Wealth: National Board Certified Teachers and the Students Who Need Them Most," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 3 March 2005, available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n18>.

4. Barbara Nye, Spyros Konstantopoulos, and Larry V. Hedges, "How Large Are Teacher Effects?," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Winter 2004, pp. 237-57; and Anita Summers and Barbara Wolfe, "Do Schools Make a Difference?," *American Economic Review*, vol. 67, 1977, pp. 639-52.

5. See, for example, Linda Cavalluzzo, *Is National Board Certification an Effective Signal of Teacher Quality?* (Alexandria, Va.: CNA Corporation, 2004), available at www.cna.org/documents/CavalluzzoStudy.pdf; Dan Goldhaber and Emily Anthony, *Can Teacher Quality Be Effectively Assessed? National Board Certification as a Signal of Effective Teaching* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2004), available at www.crpe.org/workingpapers/pdf/NBPTSquality_report.pdf; and Leslie Vandevoort, Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, and David C. Berliner, "National Board Certified Teachers and Their Students' Achievement," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 September 2004, available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v12n46>.

6. Ibid. See also Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges, op. cit.; and S. Paul Wright, Sandra P. Horn, and William L. Sanders, "Teacher and Classroom Context Effects on Student Achievement: Implications for Teacher Evaluation," *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, April 1997, pp. 57-67.

7. Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, "The Retention and Recruitment of Expert Teachers in High-Needs Schools," paper prepared for the Keep Expanding Effective Practices grant to the Arizona Education Association. Of the expert teachers who were identified throughout the state of Arizona and invited to participate, 43% (89/207) completed the Web survey. Statistics verified that the sample of respondents fairly represented the larger population of expert teachers from which the sample came. Only teachers who were externally validated as expert teachers by at least one of the three largest organizations that serve this function in the state were included in this study.

8. Barnett Berry and Tammy King, *Recruiting and Retaining National Board Certified Teachers for Hard-to-Staff, Low-Performing Schools: Silver Bullets or Smart Solutions* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2005), available at www.teachingquality.org.

9. See, for example, Cavalluzzo, op. cit.; Goldhaber and Anthony, op. cit.; and Vandevoort, Amrein-Beardsley, and Berliner, op. cit.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous, op. cit.

