

News

American Education: "D minus" and Going South

By ERIC SCHURENBERG, The Fiscal Times on Sep 09, 2010

Of all the things to hope for in America, public education reform seems to be the most, well, audacious. As a nation, we have been aware of the system's failings at least since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* a couple decades ago, and reform has gone nowhere — but not for lack of spending. Although our inflation-adjusted outlay on education has doubled, the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that 17-year-olds today are no better educated than those in the early 1970s.

None of this bodes well for our ability to compete globally in what some are calling the "knowledge economy" — particularly when you realize that by 2050, half the new entrants into the U.S. workforce will be drawn from that underachieving group. "Too many people in the U.S. don't seem to understand that our competitive future as a nation depends on our kids' educational preparation," says New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein in an exclusive interview with The Fiscal Times. "The rest of the world, meanwhile, clearly does get it."

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And yet, there is, arguably, a clear way to fix the system. Over the past decade, researchers have built up overwhelming evidence that the way to improve education is by improving the people delivering it. In other words, by raising the quality of the 3.1 million teachers in America. True, reformers have seized on other bright ideas over the years—chief among them reducing classroom sizes — but this may be the real deal.

"It's intuitively appealing that students would learn more in smaller classes, but it didn't happen, even though class sizes are down 40 percent from the peak," says Matthew Ladner, vice president for research at the conservative-leaning Goldwater Institute. "The research suggests that teacher quality is 10 to 20 times more powerful than average class size."

In a 2006 study of Los Angeles teachers by the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution, top-quartile teachers improved their students' test ranking by 5 percentile points; bottom quartile teachers lowered theirs by 5 points. To put that 10-point spread in perspective, having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher would be enough to close the performance gap between black students and white students within four years. "Without the right people standing in front of the classroom," the Brookings researchers conclude, "school reform is a futile exercise."

So what's stopping us? "The status quo has enormous defenders," says Klein. "And they're not irrational. If I'm a teacher with 20 years of seniority, why wouldn't I favor a system that has been designed to benefit me?" The kids who need education reform the most don't vote, don't make campaign contributions and have very little choice. "Local education is a monopoly provider," Klein says, "and like all monopolies, it is run for the benefit of the provider — that

is, the adults, not the children.

Economics teaches that monopolies eventually collapse under the weight of their own lack of competitiveness. It may not be too far-fetched to hope that meaningful change could happen in this decade. One reason is the momentum building behind the idea that reform — and therefore success for the country at large — lies in improving the teacher corps. "Who actually enters the teaching profession has never been part of the debate before," says Paul Kihn, a McKinsey principle and co-author of a soon-to-be-published study on teacher quality. "That has changed."

The Obama Administration's Race to the Top program, for example, is in the midst of awarding \$4 billion to school systems, in large measure as incentives to reform how they recruit and evaluate teachers. On the cultural front, a movie called "Waiting for Superman"— due to be released on September 24th, promises to dramatize public education's failure just as "An Inconvenient Truth" did for global warming. (In fact, the movies share the same director, Davis Guggenheim.)

The second reason is demographics. In the next decade, about half of U.S. teachers will become eligible for retirement. The turnover of such a large portion of the teaching staff presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to recruit top college graduates and draw in experienced professionals looking to make a career change.

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Some things will have to change, though, to make teaching attractive to such candidates. But those changes don't need to be especially wrenching or expensive. Here's what we need to do:

Pay for performance: American teachers are somewhat underpaid compared to those in more successful countries. Salaries average just under 80 percent of GDP per capita, compared to 100 percent in Singapore, for example. But even more important to teacher candidates is a sense that they will be rewarded for outstanding work and have a clear path of career advancement. Until now, teachers' unions have insisted on pay raises to all teachers equally across the board, regardless of merit, a process that rewards seniority above results.

Improve working conditions and school leadership: Teachers must believe they're working in a safe and professional environment under a supportive and competent principal. In the McKinsey study, experienced teachers strongly agreed that these two conditions would help school systems retain top teachers. To the surprise of the McKinsey researchers, top college candidates agreed. "The most surprising thing we found was that improving these two factors more than doubled the number of top college grads who said they'd consider working at a high-poverty school," says McKinsey's Paul Kihn, one of the survey's authors. "That's before we said anything about salary. Throw in a higher salary and up to 70 percent of college grads said they'd consider a teaching career."

Reduce barriers to entry: Up to now, most efforts to improve teacher quality focused on encouraging more certification, which had the predictable effect of reducing the pool of teachers. A Brookings Institution survey, however, found that certification did nothing to improve performance; in fact, in math, teachers with a BA in education actually had a negative impact on student achievement. About the only thing that certification requirements accomplish is to freeze out otherwise willing teachers, particularly career changers. "Right now, Bill Gates wouldn't be allowed to teach computer science in most states," says Ladner. "That makes no sense."

None of these initiatives will sit well with teachers' unions, of course. But even the unions can't argue with a coming wave of teacher retirements, and in the end, with self-preservation. "You have to understand that we are in a race between our education system and the demands of a technology-oriented global economy," says Klein. "And we are losing the race."

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