My Thoughts: A teaching profession for my generation

By Jonathan Alfuth

I have a confession: Halfway through my second year of teaching, I was questioning whether teaching was really the right career for me. I was putting in countless hours in my Memphis high school, but my progress as an educator felt much slower than I wanted. My kids were meeting or exceeding their goals on state tests, but I wasn’t seeing much recognition for the work I was doing outside the walls of my classroom. I often found myself asking: Is teaching the lifelong profession for me?

This is a question that young educators across America ask themselves every day. Teachers from the “millennial” generation, those of us in our first handful of years in the classroom, leave our jobs as teachers at an alarming rate (almost half of us will leave by year five). This is a problem, because millennial teachers continue to grow as a percentage of the profession, up by 50 percent from half a decade ago. To halt the exodus, we need to remake the teaching profession to target the needs and desires of my generation.

So what do millennials want in a career? Research suggests that we look for careers that provide upward mobility, offer the opportunity for professional evolution and give regular feedback and recognition of our accomplishments in the workplace.

This ideal stands in stark contrast to the reality of today’s teaching profession. For too many teachers, “professional evolution” is limited to sponsoring after-school clubs or chairing an academic department. Feedback structures remain largely unlinked with our compensation. And advancement too often means leaving the classroom altogether.

All this adds up. A recent report from Third Way shows that only 17 percent of current American undergraduates express strong interest in becoming a K-12 teacher. In fact, education was identified by these undergraduates as a profession for “average” people. This perception drives many of my generation away from even considering teaching. And true or not, those of us who do enter the teaching profession have to live with this stigma, which isn’t easy.
Quite simply, we need to reform the way the profession functions or we may lose an entire generation of teachers.

Doing so isn’t rocket science. First, let’s raise teachers’ starting salaries. A new report from the education nonprofit organization TNTP shows that teachers make 25 percent less at the start of their careers than professionals in comparable fields. As a math teacher, I like to think of this as a simple equation: Lower salary equals lower prestige. If we are to raise the profile of the profession, we need to start by raising its initial level of compensation.

I know firsthand that salary matters. Within my own circle of early-career teachers, I’ve seen several who were lured away to alternative careers because of salary differences. And the evidence is not just anecdotal: The latest Primary Sources survey sponsored by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that 75 percent of teachers believe that salary is very important to retaining good teachers, regardless of years of experience. As TNTP’s report points out, we also need to ensure that compensation for high quality teachers grows quickly over time.

I’m not advocating for inconsistent, one-off performance bonuses, because that won’t fix the problem in the long run. But a promising alternative is coupling annual raises with performance, as gauged by multiple-measure evaluation systems rather than solely using years of experience or academic credentials.

If implemented well, this would ensure that high-quality teachers see consistent salary growth over time. I’m proud to teach in a state that’s leading the way on compensation reform, but policies get us only so far. Districts and charter schools now have to roll out new compensation systems effectively to convince top teachers that the tide is changing.

A second vital component is the creation of professional advancement opportunities for teachers, to show millennials that it’s possible to make a career out of teaching. One way to do this is through career ladders that allow teachers to advance professionally without fully leaving the classroom. Career ladders allow effective teachers to function at different levels at different stages of their careers, and to adopt higher levels of responsibility, influence and compensation — just like highly skilled professionals who advance through other fields.

Obviously, compensation and career pathways aren’t magic bullets for attracting and retaining great teachers — factors like school leadership, school climate, and standards and curriculum reform matter a great deal. But as it stands, a teaching career is the anathema of what many members of my generation are looking for. If we want high-quality, long-term educators, we can’t continue to treat teachers like members of a second-class profession. It’s vital that we take action soon, because the future of public education rests on the shoulders of teachers entering the profession today.

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*Jonathan Alfuth is a secondary math teacher at The Soulsville Charter School in Memphis and a Memphis Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellowship alum.*