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**The Key to Changing the Teaching Profession** Pages 70-74

## Holding on to Gen Y

**Offering a second career stage that values teacher effectiveness can motivate young teachers to stay in the classroom.**

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A district restructuring plan suddenly dismantled the cohesive teaching team in an urban school in which Sarah worked. All first-through third-year teachers—the majority of the school staff—lost their jobs as schools were consolidated. One rash decision had erased the teachers' long hours of planning for the following year. Sarah felt as though the district had yet again treated the teachers as babysitters, rather than professionals. Coincidentally, she had just been invited to apply for a better-paying administrator job. She spent the evening reconsidering her teaching career.

But the very next day, 9-year-old Marcus, who sometimes was disruptive in class, marched up to her and said, "Hey, Ms. Z, if I don't make the NBA, I think I'll become a teacher, like you."

"Why?" Sarah asked, surprised.

"It's the most important job in the world," he explained, "because you teach us to look at things differently, to see solutions to every challenge."

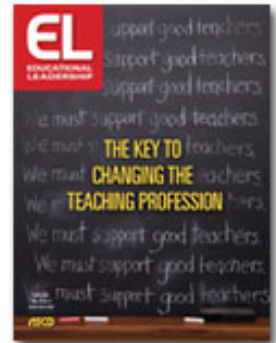
Sarah knew Marcus was right. She was reminded once more why she continued to teach.

### Teachers, Leaders, Advocates

Young teachers like Sarah are torn. More than 200 of them told us similar stories in their applications to the Teach Plus Fellows Policy program. The teachers said that they chose to teach in urban schools for one simple reason—it seemed to be the most direct path to changing the world. Now they worry that they may not remain in the field long enough to change it.

The Teach Plus Policy Fellows program selects small cohorts of early-career teachers in high-poverty schools who want to work on policy issues and become a voice for their generation in the profession. During their two-year stint, fellows study innovative programs and schools, meet regularly with policymakers and researchers, and advocate reforms in their own schools and districts that would help retain teachers like them in the profession.

Many of the program applicants told us that they struggle day to day, year to year, deciding whether and how long to remain in the classroom. They see themselves as leaders, even in the



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early stages of their careers, but they believe that the culture of delayed gratification that governs teaching, in which rewards and opportunities are doled out on the basis of seniority, is a waiting game they are unlikely to play for long. They told us that when they become disheartened, other professional roles—doctors, lawyers, journalists, artists, politicians, and activists—whisper in their ears.

They said they want to see the effects of their work. They like data. They want feedback. Moreover, they want to know that their efforts are part of a larger movement to improve the life chances of children born into poverty. And they want their experiences in the classroom to directly inform education policy.

These young people told us that they're still certain they can change the world. They're just not sure it can happen from the classroom.

## **Experience Counts**

Inherent in these teachers' comments is the desire to find a way to continue teaching. Their description of the profession they seek—one that makes a difference, challenges them, engages them as leaders, and promotes social justice—gives us clear indications about how school leaders can engage enthusiastic young teachers more intentionally and keep them in the field.

Keeping these teachers matters. Ensuring that an effective teacher is in every classroom has become the foremost education policy goal in the United States. Volumes of research have demonstrated that teachers are the most powerful factor in student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Sanders, Saxton, & Horn, 1997). An unprecedented federal investment, *Race to the Top*, that prioritizes a focus on teachers, coupled with major philanthropic investments in teachers by organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is motivating states, districts, and schools to define, identify, and reward teacher effectiveness.

Prioritizing effectiveness acknowledges what every teacher and parent knows: Experience matters. Every teacher, no matter how strong he or she is on the first day in the classroom, faces a steep learning curve in the first few years. Although considerable variation exists in performance, the average teacher is likely to hit his or her stride by year 5 (Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006). Unfortunately for students, more than one-half of teachers leave teaching—especially in urban schools—within 3 to 5 years of beginning the profession (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007).

As baby boomers retire, incentives that reward effective teaching can build stability and longevity within a teaching force that threatens to become a revolving door of itinerant workers. The goal need not be to create a lifetime teacher—that doesn't fit this generation—but rather to make the promising 2-year teacher into a 5- or 10-year one. Building a second career stage that values teacher effectiveness may motivate promising newcomers to set longer-term goals that involve leading from the classroom.

Some prevailing assumptions, however, about why people teach, where they will teach, and how long they will teach exacerbate high attrition and undermine our potential to improve the

retention and distribution of strong teachers in urban areas. We must challenge these assumptions about the teacher workforce now, lest we build an infrastructure that identifies our most promising teachers just as they walk out the door.

## **Why Teachers Teach**

Many people assume that teachers enter the profession primarily driven by a love for children or for their subject matter. This conventional wisdom likely extends back to the one-room schoolhouse.

Of course, great teachers need a love of both their students and subject, but many teachers may be motivated by something else. Applicants to the Policy Fellows program identified a commitment to social justice as their primary impetus to teach. They are passionate about their students and about the material they teach, to be sure. But their love of children might have turned them into child psychologists. And their love of science, rather than bringing them into a low-income high school, might have taken them into a lab.

These teachers chose the classroom as their entry point for wrestling with and influencing larger questions of social policy. To them, their work is about waging the unfinished battles of the civil rights movement and improving the society in which they live.

This clarification has major implications for policy related to teacher quality. Teachers whose primary motivation is a love of children or a love of subject can get those needs met in the current system. District professional development and university coursework can help them cultivate these interests and feed them back into their classroom practice. But is meeting these two needs sufficient for our young teachers entering the field?

Our teachers tell us it is not. Today, few opportunities exist for teachers to learn about how their classroom practices connect more broadly to education policy. Those who enter teaching because of their interest in being part of a movement to change the world want opportunities to feel connected to that movement and weigh in on its direction. These opportunities might take the form of seminars, forums with policymakers, or advocacy networks.

For example, teachers in our Policy Fellows program at Teach Plus meet monthly with urban superintendents, state education commissioners, top union officials, and researchers. We also lead a network that informs and engages a larger audience of teachers in policy through a quarterly event series.

This social justice orientation also motivates teachers to seek measurable results. Having better, timelier data on their progress with students is an essential part of maintaining the motivation of these teachers. It is a window through which they can see how they're changing their corner of the world.

Finally, the teacher focused on social justice seeks leadership opportunities that are designed around expanding one's influence. A part-time teacher might serve as an aide to the state legislature's education committee. A full-time teacher might work with her district superintendent on a policy project over the summer. These are the types of roles that will enhance the commitment and engagement of many incoming urban teachers.

## Where Teachers Will Teach

We know that good teaching matters more for student outcomes than any other school-based factor, yet low-income children and children of color are typically the least likely to be taught by our strongest teachers (Peske & Haycock, 2006). To close the achievement gap, we must ensure that effective teachers are available for those children on the losing side of the gap. The lack of policy action by states and districts to create incentives for teaching in high-need schools is evidence of an insidious belief: We assume that experienced, effective teachers have given up on the most challenging schools and, by extension, on the students in them.

This is not the case. The teachers with whom we work see teacher distribution as a solvable problem, and they want to be a part of the solution. One group of Teach Plus teachers developed their own proposal to staff low-performing schools with experienced, effective teachers. It will be piloted in two Boston public schools this fall. These are the core features they advocate:

- *A rigorous selection process.* New, incoming teachers need at least three years urban teaching experience and demonstrated effectiveness of teaching urban students to be hired.
- *A team-based approach to staffing.* Instead of filling individual teaching positions, schools commit to hiring a team of teachers with proven records of success teaching in high-needs schools. Positive change is likely to occur when such teachers make up at least one-third of the staff, a formula that the two schools piloting the program have agreed to strive for.
- *Differentiated pay.* Teachers hired to work in such schools receive a base salary increase of 10 percent. Teachers serving in formal leadership roles will be compensated with supplemental pay or a reduced teaching load. In addition, all teachers are eligible for bonuses if the school meets its schoolwide achievement goals and the teacher meets his or her individual achievement goal. Goals center on student growth as measured by multiple assessments.
- *Distributed leadership.* This begins with a strong principal and frequent collaboration across administration and staff. One teacher might take on a department chair position and receive financial compensation; another might serve as the school's data analyst and receive a reduced class load; a third might hone his or her mastery at teaching, becoming a valued instructional leader (Teach Plus, 2009).

We often blame poor working conditions— an umbrella term that describes everything from the physical school building to the people in it to the availability of resources—for high teacher attrition in challenging urban schools. Poor working conditions in a school and lack of success with students go hand-in-hand. Yet the enormity of reforming *all* working conditions often serves as an excuse for inaction.

Our work with teachers suggests a starting place. Having strong colleagues is the most important variable related to working conditions for the promising early-career teachers in our

programs. The presence or absence of a cohort of effective colleagues will drive many of these teachers' decisions about where to teach and for how long.

## **How Long Teachers Will Teach**

Generation Y teachers who are entering the workforce today expect to have multiple and varied job responsibilities over the course of their careers (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). They're said to be commitment-averse. They routinely ask themselves whether their jobs live up to their high expectations and whether these jobs feel like professional work. If not, transition is an ever-present option.

This descriptor, however, has become an excuse for administrators to accept high teacher attrition. They assume that incoming teachers' desire for career growth means that the teachers intend to seek these opportunities outside the classroom. As new teachers have become more active in expecting and pursuing a career with defined growth stages, human resource departments in schools have continued to operate from a passive stance.

For a great number of teachers, leaving the classroom is *not* the foregone conclusion it appears to be to their employers. It is, in fact, a heart-wrenching decision whose outcome is unknown. Teachers are swayed toward staying or leaving daily by their interactions with students, other teachers, and the system. In sum, their decision to recommit each year is highly subject to influence.

The malleability of teacher commitment, although challenging, is also an opportunity. It suggests that teachers may be receptive to incentives aimed at retaining them. For example, we know that today's teachers are data savvy; they value what data can tell them about their students' achievement—and about how successful they have been as teachers. These qualities suggest that a system that sets high and measurable standards for effective teaching and that helps teachers reach those standards would appeal to them.

Other nations whose students routinely outperform students in the United States, such as Singapore and South Korea, have a tightly coupled system of standards for students and professional development for teachers. Not coincidentally, these nations are also able to attract and retain top performers in teaching (McKinsey & Company, 2006).

Moreover, a system that evaluates teacher effectiveness annually can serve as the basis on which to design professional development, award leadership opportunities, and build a career. Teachers want opportunities to become data analysts, mentors, instructional coaches, and curriculum developers; but they also want to know that those coveted, hybrid roles are going to teachers with the most skill at improving student learning. A transparent, results- and growth-oriented profession that offers its practitioners recognition for their accomplishments appeals to the varied interests of our next generation of teachers.

## **Tracking Good Teaching**

Recognizing teacher effectiveness with students represents a major step on the path to professionalizing teaching. It can create an aligned culture in schools where what we expect of kids—a commitment to continual growth and improvement and regular assessment of progress

—is similar to what we expect of adults.

This is the kind of culture that will motivate our strongest teachers to extend their commitment to teaching by several years. This is the culture in which sustainable improvement is possible.

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