Educators Without Borders

Addressing New England's teacher shortages

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Schools throughout New England face a common problem: a shortage of teachers who are fully qualified to teach science, mathematics, special education, bilingual education, foreign languages and English. Shortages are expected to spread soon to other teaching fields due to a second common problem: New England has the oldest teaching force of any region in the country. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCATF) recently estimated that in 2008-09, at least half of the working teachers in each New England state are age 50 or older: Specifically, 50% of the teaching force in Rhode Island is over age 50; 53% in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut; 55% in Vermont; and 56% in Maine. Consequently, an enormous percentage of the region's teaching force will retire within the coming years.

To address current and future teacher shortages, many New England states have established alternative, and typically faster, routes into the profession. Maine has developed Regional Teacher Development Centers that provide, among other services, support and guidance to individuals seeking to become licensed via nontraditional means. Massachusetts implemented its "Bonus Teacher" program, which provided $20,000 bonuses to high-achieving individuals who taught after an intensive six-week summer training program. In fall 2009, Rhode Island will launch a similar fast-track initiative, the Rhode Island Teaching Fellows (RITF). Managed by the New Teacher Project, the same organization that managed the Massachusetts Bonus Teacher initiative, the RITF will also put individuals in charge of classrooms following a six-week summer program.

There are two problems, however, with relying on fast-track programs to respond to teacher shortages. First, because teachers leave their profession faster than most other professionals, especially early in their careers, teacher shortages are caused more by high rates of attrition than by low rates of supply. University of Pennsylvania professor of education and sociology Richard Ingersoll has compared responding to teacher shortages by accelerating teacher preparation to pouring water into a leaky bucket. Attempts to fill the bucket are doomed unless and until policymakers repair the holes. Ingersoll recommends multiple ways of addressing this situation, beginning with providing more support to beginning teachers who, historically, have been left on their own to sink or swim—and far too many of them sink.

The other problem with fast-track teacher preparation programs is that they aggravate the already excessively high rates of teacher attrition. For example, between 1999 and 2004, 15% of Massachusetts' Bonus Teachers left the classroom after one year, 31% after two years, and 44% after three years. Attrition rates were even higher for those individuals who worked in high-need urban areas, where 28% left teaching or migrated to a non-high-need district after one year, 38% after two years, and a stunning 55% after three years. These attrition rates far exceed national attrition rates for traditionally trained teachers. The Bay State's much heralded fast-track into teaching turned into a fast track *out* of teaching.

What should policymakers do to address the regional teacher shortage? First, to reduce teacher attrition, policymakers should consider adopting an innovation recently proposed by the NCTAF: forming school-based "Learning Teams" composed of novice, veteran and semi-retired teachers who would work collaboratively on improving student learning. This approach would have at least three benefits. First, it would provide new teachers with the kind of support that is likely to reduce teacher attrition. Second, it would soften the coming loss of older teachers to retirement by giving them a way to exit the profession gradually. Third, Learning Teams would provide a collective focus on student learning in ways that occur too rarely in schools today.

To address the supply side of the teacher shortage problem, policymakers should consider nurturing another source of teachers they have often overlooked: individuals who prepare to teach in one state but then move to another. An analysis of the Title II database—the federal government's collection of national education data—shows that, between 1999 and 2007, 24% of all initial teaching licenses issued in the U.S. were awarded to individuals who prepared to teach in other states.

How successful are the New England states at recruiting teachers from other states? It varies dramatically. Between 2002 and 2007, New Hampshire issued 44% of its initial licenses to individuals who completed teacher-preparation programs in other states, Rhode Island 34%, Connecticut 34%, and Vermont 26%. By contrast, Maine issued only 15% of its initial licenses to teachers from other states, and Massachusetts issued just 10%.

Two factors, both related to teacher licensure testing, appear to contribute to the wide differences

noted above. First, testing programs vary across the New England states, with the most idiosyncratic being Massachusetts, which uses a unique set of tests, the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure, made by the Evaluation Systems group of the international media company, Pearson. The five other states use the Praxis series of licensure tests, made by the Educational Testing Service, which have been adopted by more than 40 states (and are offered in every state in the union). However, the five New England states that use the Praxis exams do not always require the same tests. For example, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont each require individuals seeking an elementary license to take the same exam; but Maine and Rhode Island each require a second, different exam. Connecticut requires two other tests.

The second factor that impacts the extent to which states attract teachers from other states is whether they accept other licensure tests. Connecticut, Massachusetts and Maine do not accept any other state's licensure tests, but New Hampshire and Rhode Island do.

It is not an accident that New Hampshire, which has both a nationally available test (Praxis) and a flexible policy toward other states' tests, issued 44% of its initial licenses to teachers from other states. Nor is it an accident that Massachusetts, which has both a unique licensure test and an inflexible policy toward other states' tests, issued just 10% of its initial license to teachers from other states. Indeed, only three other states in the country issued a lower percentage of initial licenses to out-of-state teachers: Oklahoma 8%, Indiana 9%, and Arkansas 10%.

New England's policymakers should address their shared, regional problems with shared, regional responses. A regional approach toward licensure testing might begin with each New England state agreeing to accept one another's licensure test, or better yet, adopting a common set of licensure tests. A regional approach to implementing Learning Teams might begin with the formation of a consortium of universities to oversee a regionwide study of multiple ways of implementing this and other innovations.

Working together on a range of shared problems such as disparate student achievement presents a way for policymakers to improve education, but at a reduced cost, by pooling scarce resources to address common issues. Given the current gloomy fiscal status of all state budgets, now is an opportune time for increased regional cooperation.

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