Inducting Teachers into Learning Communities

Thomas Carroll

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) was founded in 1994 and issued *What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future* in 1996, outlining the principles behind its mantra: that every child would have a competent, caring teacher in a school organized for success within ten years. Well, it's ten years later, and every child doesn't have that. And why? We believe it's because the second part of this mantra was somehow lost along the way. Of course, the provision that every child would have competent, caring teachers is what got incorporated into No Child Left Behind, and what we have in No Child Left Behind is only half the deal. We have a focus on teachers without a comparable focus on building school capacity—on building schools organized for success—and until we put that back into the equation, we're going to continue to lose teachers at an alarming rate.

A History of Preparation

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) showed a huge increase in the number of teachers entering the profession beginning around 1994 and really accelerating for the next five years (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future 2003, 9). Why did this happen? Based on earlier SASS data, NCTAF spoke out in 1994–95, calling for two million teachers in ten years. The good news is that the teacher preparation system in this country really ramped up and started to prepare and turn out huge numbers of new entrants into teaching. The bad news is, it’s ten years later and we’re still saying we need two million teachers. Why? Because teachers are steadily leaving the profession. We’re trying to fill a bucket with a huge hole in the bottom, and we keep pouring them in faster and faster and finding more sources of supply, and all of our energy and all of our resources are rapidly draining away. What we should really be saying is not that we need two million teachers in ten years, but that over the past ten years, we lost more than two million teachers. Over the past

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ten years, we had 2.7 million teachers leave the system. And three out of four of those teachers left for non-retirement reasons. So we should stop saying we need two million teachers and start asking, What can we do to keep tens of thousands of teachers from leaving our classrooms every year?

We prepare far more teachers than we ever hire. In 1999, we had 160,000 newly licensed teachers. We only hired 85,000 of them, and eventually about 10 percent more came into the workforce as delayed entrants (National Center for Education Statistics 2003). We vastly overprepare in terms of the number of teachers we need. There’s a significant overpreparation in elementary education in particular, but this trend extends to teachers across all fields. We are rarely in a situation where more than 60 percent of the teachers that we prepare ever enter the classroom. So if we prepare one hundred teachers, we’re only going to hire sixty of them. Three years later, only forty of them will still be in the classroom; five years later, only thirty-two of them will be left. That’s our yield curve. So if we think that our solution is to find ways to prepare more teachers, how many would we need to prepare in order to solve this problem? NCTAF is basically in the position right now of saying that this country would be a lot better off if we prepared fewer teachers but prepared them better than we do now and then supported them better once they were in the classroom.

**Stabilizing the Workforce**

Part of what NCTAF is trying to do is to help people rethink what the problem is, the real school-staffing crisis. The problem is not that we can’t find enough teachers but that we don’t attract and retain the teachers we need. It’s not that they’re not out there; it’s just that someone else is offering them better working conditions and more rewarding careers. If we can figure out how to create a rewarding career path and a professional environment for teachers to work in, we will be addressing the problem at hand.

If you take the number of teachers we prepare, the number of teachers we hire, and the number of teachers we lose, it’s easy to understand why in every region of the country there’s actually a teacher reserve pool; in fact, throughout the country, there’s more certified teachers that are not in the classroom than are in the classroom. If the whole teaching workforce in this country got up and walked out the door, there’d still be enough certified teachers left to walk in and replace them, and there’d still be some left over. Nick Michelli talked about a maldistribution problem. To me the real maldistribution problem is that the teachers we need are out there; they’re just not staying in the classroom. When
we talk about the problem of turnover, we get some pushback from people who say that turnover isn’t a bad thing, that you need turnover to replace people. We have had school leaders tell us that turnover is good because it keeps costs low, since teachers at the beginning of the pay scale are cheaper than senior teachers. This attitude doesn’t take into consideration some significant issues, namely that high-performing schools are low-turnover schools, and vice versa, and that we won’t close the student achievement gap until we close the teaching-quality gap, and we won’t close the teaching-quality gap until we stabilize the teaching workforce in these schools.

While we can talk about turnover and attrition in large, global numbers, the turnover and attrition in low-performing schools and schools serving low-income children and children of color is staggering when compared to the averages. While we’re concerned about the student dropout rate in these schools, the teacher dropout rate is actually higher, and you just can’t improve student achievement in those schools until you stabilize the teacher workforce. We’re working in Clark County, Nevada—the fastest-growing school district in the country—where there are thirteen schools with an average teacher tenure of 1.9 years. In South Carolina, there’s been a school adequacy suit going on for decades involving eight rural school districts, and in several of those school districts, the entire teaching workforce turns over every four years. So do we think that teacher turnover matters? Yes, it does, and it matters most to the students who are losing the most. So we’ve got to start thinking about this not only as a problem on the global level but as a problem in the schools that we’re most concerned about—high-priority schools where we’re trying to develop a quality teaching culture.

The Costs of Teacher Turnover

How much does it cost? There have been several analyses done on the costs of teacher turnover, and NCTAF is in the process of doing its own study, working in Chicago; Milwaukee; Granville, North Carolina; and both Jemez Valley and Santa Rosa in New Mexico. We’re looking at big cities, middle-sized cities, and rural areas, trying to calculate the exact cost of teacher turnover. We think that it’s costing well over $5 billion a year—$2.6 billion for the leavers and billions more for the movers. We think that in Granville County, a typical kind of suburban middle-sized district, at least 10 percent of the district’s budget is spent on teacher churn. So if you wonder whether you have the resources, whether you can afford to invest in better teacher induction, think about your state and about 10 percent of your school district’s budget being burned up by churn. Just in terms of dollars, you’re losing at least $12,500 every time you
lose a first-year teacher; if you lose a teacher after the first year, you’re losing half of whatever his or her salary was. So although you may think you can’t afford to invest in induction, you really can’t afford not to.

The Benefits of Retention

Are there benefits to retention? Besides the recouping of huge public investments, retention provides an opportunity for teachers to become more proficient educators. Why? Because what we know about teaching is that beginning teachers are exactly that—beginners. It takes time for them to become proficient, and after three, five, or seven years, they start to become really strong teachers. The proficiency curve and the retention curve work against each other. So in this country, we have hundreds of thousands of teachers who never reach that proficiency level because they don’t stay in the classroom long enough; they leave because they don’t have the support they need to succeed. So the first true loss is that individuals don’t become proficient. The second is that school reforms will fail. School reforms thrive when they sustain true learning communities. Without this continuity and community, all of the investments that we make in school-reform initiatives and school-improvement initiatives—all of that teacher training and curriculum development—go out the door with the teachers when they leave. If we keep them, we can build the continuity, coherence, and community in the schools that we need to create a successful learning environment, resulting in the bottom line: improved student achievement.

How to Improve Retention

First of all, know your turnover and costs. Most districts, and even most states, don’t have a true picture of what their teacher turnover is. And they definitely don’t know how much it’s costing them and where their resources are going. And by knowing your turnover and costs, I mean know them by individual school so that when you know there’s a school in your district that’s not making adequate yearly progress, you also know for how many years the most senior teachers in that school have been there. Then you can track not just student learning outcomes but teaching quality in that school, and you can start to look at how many teachers are first-year teachers; how many teachers are teaching out of their field due to the amount of turnover; and how many teachers are senior, experienced teachers. So start to track and know your turnover so you can relate it to school performance.
Second of all, hire well-prepared teachers, and create a culture of success in your school by providing rewarding careers for them. If we hire well-prepared, eager teachers with tremendous potential, we’ll hopefully not lose them in the first three to five years. But what will happen six, seven, or eight years out, when they are really good—stars, even—and they’re asking themselves, “Now what? Am I going to be doing this same job for the next twenty years?” Those bright young people will be eager to keep growing in their profession, so what will they do next to have a fulfilling career that keeps them in teaching? We need to start looking at developing a career path that is rewarding. Here is what we know: supportive school conditions are essential to a culture of success. Now, salary is one aspect of this, and though it’s clear that salary does matter to teachers, it’s also clear that it’s not the most important thing. Teachers are basically saying, “I’d like to be paid more, but you can’t pay me enough to stay here if you don’t do something about the conditions.” It’s the conditions that are the bottom-line issue, conditions like administrator support, the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues—all of the things that play a role in team building and creating a professional culture in a school. This is about induction into a learning community. Mentoring is a key component of this. As Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found, if you give teachers a sink-or-swim placement, put beginning teachers in the most challenging classroom in the most challenging school with no support, big surprise: you’re going to lose 40 percent of them in the first year. If you give them a teaching “buddy,” you get a little better retention; if you give them a coach, somebody designated to help them with specific problems, you get bigger improvement in retention; but when you give them trained mentors in a professional community, you get dramatic increases in retention. And what you also get is a reduction in the number of people who are leaving versus those who might move to another school. So we know from large data sets that mentoring in the context of a professional community can make a tremendous difference. The problem is that we also know from the data that the number of teachers who get this experience in the United States is about one percent.

**Putting an End to the Factory-Era Model**

The latest *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* paints a portrait of the kind of teacher who would leave the profession after five years. This teacher is not reaping the rewards of a teaching career because he or she is not valued by his or her supervisor. There’s a lot of personnel stress in the school as well as unrealistic demands; there are novice and minority teachers with concerns about safety; there are frustrations about being able to contribute to society; there is disappointment about compensation, but that’s low on the list. Teachers
are telling us that they lack voice, that they lack control over their environment; they feel that they are in a stand-alone, isolated, unsupported environment. Often new teachers are doing the most challenging jobs of their lives without support. Therefore, the idea we need to rally around is this: It’s time to end the factory-era model of stand-alone teaching in isolated classrooms, as this model underlies all of our problems. NCTAF has put out a new report called *Induction into Learning Communities*, which talks about everything we’ve been able to digest about induction in this country as well as overseas (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future 2005). And the countries we’re competing with, the countries that are always traditionally higher on the scale in terms of student achievement, don’t follow this sink-or-swim, stand-alone teaching model but induct their new teachers systematically into a strong learning community. What we need to do is replace our novice teaching culture, which is essentially characteristic of low-performing schools where we have beginners struggling on their own in their classrooms, trying to figure out what to do. A fair number of these teachers succeed and become veteran teachers in good schools, where they’ve developed a very strong teaching practice. The problem with this, however, is that their teaching practice is their personal practice rather than a professional practice, because they were not put in an environment where they were regularly collaborating with their colleagues to sustain a community focused on building a common knowledge base about what works to improve learning. So in addition to overcoming the novice teaching culture we have in struggling schools, we need to address the veteran teaching culture, for though we may have some truly impressive stars, their practice is a personal practice.

We also need to start rewarding not just outstanding individuals but strong teams and strong learning communities in schools. States say they believe in mentoring, but when it comes down to it, they don’t fund it. The countries that are ahead of us induct teachers into the profession through a structured process, with well-defined roles for everybody in the school. The principal, other teachers, mentors, colleagues—everyone is involved in creating and sustaining an ongoing community and culture in that school. This team creates a collaboratively built, collectively shared knowledge base about how to improve learning. In this country, we value the strong, independent individual, and we celebrate that and we celebrate great teachers and great principals. But there’s another value related to community, by which we realize that together we’re stronger than any of us alone, and that we can do a better job when we’re pulling together. And we’ve got to start to buttress that if we’re going to meet the challenges of teaching and learning in a flat world, which is a collaborative world.
We're losing tens of thousands of teachers a month because we're essentially running factory-era schools in the twenty-first century and teachers are looking for the door. We've got to do away with sink-or-swim placements, closed-door teaching, giving novices the toughest assignments in the class and/or school, single-level teaching licenses, teachers who are thought of as interchangeable cogs: OK, we lose a teacher, no problem; we'll just hire another one. We are living in an environment in which high turnover can no longer be considered the norm—as acceptable operating practice. We need to replace that factory model with professional communities and support; structured induction into those communities; appropriate team assignments, especially for new teachers, so that they are teaching in a team of colleagues from which they can draw on for support; assignments that support professional learning so that the learning is embedded in the work; and tiered licensure, which supports the continued growth and career advancement of teachers over time. And we need to then, through that process, focus on improving retention from beginners through accomplished teachers so that we'll keep those future stars ten years down the road when they find themselves in really exciting, rewarding teaching roles. So we hope you'll join NCTAF as we push forward with our agenda: moving schools from the factory era into the twenty-first century.

References


