How Can We Retain Teachers?

Reg Weaver

Whether you are talking about resources and facilities, parent involvement and closing the gaps, or standardized testing, there is absolutely nothing more important than creating a great public school for every child. And when it comes to the recipe for creating a great public school, we all know that the essential ingredient is a qualified and certified teacher. But as we look around the country today, we know that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain teachers. The National Education Association (NEA) has 2.7 million members, of which 1 million will be eligible for retirement within five years. These gray-haired baby boomers will have given thirty years of service before deciding that it’s time to move on. But then there are those teachers who are leaving with just a small fraction of the veterans’ thirty years under their belts, the ones who leave after only one or three or five years in the classroom. In fact, the sad truth is that one out of every ten new teachers leaves teaching in the first year, while one out of every three leaves within the first three years. And in places that are the hardest to staff—the poor, urban areas where we need good people the most—one out of every two leaves within the first five years.

Now that’s an absolutely devastating percentage. In speaking with a number of teachers, I’ve found that in most instances, teachers want to be in a school where they are going to be well compensated; where the environment is going to be comfortable; and where the students are not “as challenging”—which ultimately draws them toward suburban areas. And so who ends up getting shortchanged? It’s the students in those poor, urban schools, because on top of trying to learn without adequate supplies, they often end up in classrooms without qualified teachers. In many instances, these schools may not be as safe and orderly as we would like them to be, with counselors and parent involvement at a minimum. Kids in these schools get cheated out of America’s dream—for every child to have a great public school.

Reg Weaver is President of the National Education Association in Washington, DC.
Demographics of the Shortage

Beyond the numbers, it is important to look at who these teachers are, because there is a shortage of certain types of teachers who we just cannot afford to ignore, mainly male and minority teachers. In the United States, only one out of every ten public school elementary teachers is male. In addition, for every nine hundred public school children, there is only one African American male teacher. I believe that this nation can—and must—do better. In fact, in the nation today, just 13 percent of teachers are minority, which is a little more than we had twenty or thirty years ago, and among the pool of students in teacher preparation right now, the number of minorities is small. So while the demographics of public school teachers has remained pretty constant over the last few decades, the demographics of students is changing almost daily. Twenty or thirty years ago, 30 percent of our students were minority. Today, minorities make up almost 40 percent of the school population, and with the growing immigrant community, at some point soon we’re going to be well over 50 percent, which makes recruiting and retaining qualified minority teachers more important than ever before.

But even though the need for minority teachers is great, finding and keeping quality teachers is our primary objective, as it relates to educating all children and all students. Beyond merely willing, warm bodies, we need teachers who are properly trained, who are able to pass certification and licensing, and who have access to professional development. The National Urban League’s *State of Black America* (2005) indicates that teachers with less than three years of experience teach in minority schools at twice the rate that they teach in white schools. If minority students are going to excel, we have got to change that statistic. Public schools in minority communities need the most qualified and experienced educators if we are ever going to close the achievement gap.

Tackling Obstacles to Maintaining a Qualified Workforce

Teacher Salaries

Of course, there are all kinds of obstacles confronting people who want to become teachers as well as those who want to stay in the profession. One of these is pay. There are some districts in some states that serve as training grounds for teachers, and because the pay may not be what it should, other districts come in after a year or two and scoop up the very best teachers. These recruiters offer incentives, bonuses, and higher salaries, and guess what? Time and time again, the people who have been working in these districts, receiving the experience, go someplace else. Just by looking at what starting teachers
earn compared to their college classmates who've chosen other professions, it's easy to see why teachers might follow the money. A new accountant might start out making $44,000; a nurse, about $39,000. A new sales rep might be getting $37,000; a new software designer, about $54,000. But new teachers, the ones who are going to help shape the future of this country, will be lucky if they start out at $30,000. We are living in a day when professional basketball stars can earn $245,000 a game; why should we not advocate for teachers to be paid fairly for all of the priceless work that they do?

The NEA has established a goal of raising starting salaries for teachers to $40,000. But when I mention that to our members, they just start laughing. Why? Because many of them think that it is an impossible goal to attain. But we will never be able to get there if we don't try. In NEA's most recent survey of the teaching profession, 37 percent of teachers who were leaving before retirement said it was due to the lack of a reasonable salary. Of those, 43 percent were male, 50 percent minority, and 47 percent thirty years old and under (National Education Association 2003). So the very people we're trying to recruit and retain are not staying because of salary. Why is it that we remain silent? It can be very frustrating to know that something has to be done but find that folks consistently say they can't afford it. Whenever anybody tells me they cannot afford something as it relates to education and teachers, I tell them to go to www.costofwar.com. As of October 2005, this nation has spent more than $203 billion on the war in Iraq. That money could have been used to hire 3,520,908 public school teachers for one year; it could have paid for 26,909,540 children to attend Head Start; it could have provided more than 121,000 children with health insurance. And so I say that we can afford to give teachers the pay that they deserve, which is not just the right thing to do but also the smart thing to do. The overwhelming majority of teachers are worth every single penny and more. And we're not going to be shy about saying it or shy about asking for it, because we know that as starting pay for new teachers begins to rise, veteran teachers will also see their salaries increase, perhaps encouraging them to stay in the profession a little bit longer. Within the NEA, roughly 700 of our 14,000 local affiliates are at $40,000 a year, and so we have a very long way to go. Hawaii recently hit its goal, and the impact was immediate: some teachers who had planned to retire changed their minds when they got their salary increase. So it is clear that pay has an effect on recruiting and retaining teachers.
Working Conditions

Another fact standing in the way is working conditions. Recently I had a chance to sit down and talk with officials from Denver regarding a new teacher pay plan—ProComp—which was recently implemented in the region. ProComp rewards teachers for professional accomplishments and links pay to the instructional goals of the district. While this is a positive step in pay reform, it's important not to let it steer us away from the real issue, which is how people are treated. You can pay the teachers all you want, but if you don't treat them with the respect that they deserve, and if you don't give them the opportunity to participate in policy development, it's not going to make any difference. Being a classroom teacher for a number of years myself, I can tell you that how you are treated makes a difference in terms of whether you want to come in and whether you want to stay in. And the one thing that I constantly hear is how principals in too many instances make it difficult for teachers to be successful. And that's one of the issues that the superintendent in Denver is going to face. If we are really serious about recruiting and retaining people in the profession, we need to begin talking about how we can do better. Currently there are problems involving complex school bureaucracies for hiring and placement. In addition, the requirements of No Child Left Behind are hindering our ability to be creative in our classrooms and keeping us from reaching out to kids as individuals. The results of one high-stakes test should not be used to determine the future of a child. Then there's the issue of resources with No Child Left Behind. Section 9527A of the law says, "Nothing in this act shall be construed to mandate a state or subdivision thereof to spend any funds or incur any cost not paid for under this act." To me that section says that if the federal government is going to regulate, it has a responsibility to compensate. And since it doesn't seem as though it did, the NEA sued the government in April of 2005, on behalf of the states and the school districts. And on October 19, 2005, the oral arguments were heard in Michigan (Pontiac v. U.S. DoE). The judge has indicated that in three weeks he should have a decision ready to be rendered.

Program Implementation

Apart from calling for higher pay and turning up the heat on No Child Left Behind, the NEA has developed a wide range of programs designed to recruit and retain an ethnically diverse workforce. In 2005, we launched a historic partnership with the Tom Joyner foundation. For those of you who haven't heard of him, Tom Joyner is perhaps the most widely recognized African American disc jockey in the country. He has a huge listening audience and therefore tremendous influence in the African American community. Tom's
concern was that there were too many unprepared teachers going into schools where children had high needs, particularly minority kids. And so when he heard that the NEA was also concerned about doing something about recruiting and retaining qualified minority teachers, Tom called and we struck up a partnership for a grant program. Tom gave about $700,000 and identified seven historically black universities. Grant applications have been pouring in. We have done so well that Tom is putting an additional $1,000,000 in and has identified ten more black colleges in which prospective teachers can enroll to become truly qualified to go into these classrooms. We also provide grants for our affiliates, which use the money to recruit at school career conferences to help education support professionals come into the teaching profession.

**Keeping Our Standards High**

This is a huge challenge, but it is a challenge that all of us must meet with commitment, persistence, and creativity. One thing is clear: we will not agree to lower standards to solve the problem. We are looking for folks with more than a bachelor’s degree. It is not acceptable for people to feel as though they can come into the profession just because they think they want to or because somebody else thinks they want to. That’s just like saying anybody can become a surgeon as long as he or she likes to cut. We must pave the way for more teachers, but we can never open the door to lower standards. Teachers are professionals and, as such, we must remain true to ourselves and true to the children who we serve. The credibility of every educator is damaged when one educator is unprofessional, unprepared, and unwilling. And so when I look to the left of me and when I look to the right, I want to see teachers who care, teachers who are prepared, and teachers who are willing. And if they’re not, I have an obligation to try to help them, and if they’re still not, I have an obligation to point them away from teaching. We can no longer allow our profession and our students to suffer because of people who don’t care.

Somebody once said, “Children do not care what you know until they know that you care.” When I was in Denver, I joined a teacher with a bullhorn as she went out to playground duty. When it was time for lunch, she gave me the bullhorn so I could call class 203 to line up. When the kids came over, I started
talking with them, and they were really receptive. When kids can see that you care, that you take an interest, it doesn’t matter how long you’ve known them. Finally I asked if I could join them for lunch. They walked me downstairs to the cafeteria. I started talking to the people serving the food, thanking them and telling them that they were greatly appreciated. Many school personnel in ancillary positions, such as cooks, custodians, or secretaries, don’t often hear things like that, but these people can be some of the biggest supporters of public education if we treat them right. And so I went behind the counter and served the kids for a while, and then went back to the seating area because the class 203 kids had saved me a place at their table. As I sat talking and laughing with them, kids from other classes started coming over as well, to join in the conversation. Then the assistant principal came over, as well as the other teachers. Now this is relationship building. As simple as it was, little things like this really help create an environment conducive to good teaching and learning, and I encourage you to create those kinds of environments, because when you do, teachers who experience them will want to stay. I know that there are plenty of people out there who care about helping kids imagine a bright future and getting them on the road to success, and I know that we can find more. But once we do, we have got to work together to give them the pay and benefits that they deserve, and the working conditions that will help them do their best. That is NEA's goal, and I know that by working together, we can certainly reach that goal.

References

