

Parents Make Better Teachers

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Charter schools are hiring young educators who only stick around for a few years. Bad move.



Are charter schools failing to realize the value of veteran teachers? Photo by Fuse/Thinkstock

In this week's *New York Times*, [Motoko Rich](#) described how many charter schools are now exclusively hiring teachers and principals in their early 20s who work for just two to three years before leaving education altogether. Instead of deploring this trend, charter programs have embraced a pool of eager, young, and idealistic college graduates, many in or fresh out of Teach for America, who are willing to work long, grueling hours for low pay and with no promise of a sustained career path.

The *Times* focuses on the resulting turnover and inexperience among these educators. [Studies show](#)

that schools with high rates of teacher attrition perform poorly on average and that many educators don't hone their skills until their third year in the classroom or beyond. The *Times* article, however, neglects another downside to charters' emphasis on youthful hiring: Many schools launch with few or no adults on staff who know first-hand what it's like to be a parent.

If you aren't a parent, maybe this won't strike you as odd. It wouldn't have struck me that way more than 20 years ago when I joined Teach for America in the program's first year and taught for three years in New York City's public schools. I was single, childless, and clueless about even the most basic aspects of child-rearing. My students' parents seemed like creatures from another planet, remote and distant from the job I thought I was doing. To the extent I understood family dynamics, it was solely from the perspective of the teenager I'd been just a few years before.

Nearly two decades later, I returned to the classroom, this time as a mother, and have become acutely aware of how being a parent has made me a better teacher. While I still have a reformer's high expectations for my students, I am more flexible about discipline, in part because I'd never want my daughter to be so docile she wouldn't rock the boat. Now when parents approach me with worries or high hopes for the future, I have greater respect for their commingled love and fears. I also have a far stronger sense than I did at 25 that children's lives are not static but instead endlessly fluid. They flow in waves of achievements and setbacks, with their own peculiar weather systems and mysterious currents that can change from week to week and month to year and, in the storms of adolescence, from hour to minute.

While I wouldn't go so far as to say no nonparent can be a great teacher—several of my favorite high school teachers were childfree—I cannot imagine sending my daughter to a school where not a single grown-up in the building has any direct comprehension of the inner workings of adult family life. Schools

need both youthful energy and seasoned wisdom to succeed over the long haul and on a broad scale.

Ryan Hill was also once a young, hard-charging educator, like the kind described in the *Times* article. In 2002, he was the founding principal of TEAM Academy, the first charter school in the Newark, N.J., region operated by KIPP, the national charter chain. Like many of his fellow KIPP trailblazers, Hill, by his own estimate, worked north of 100 hours a week in a profession he regarded as less of a vocation than a crusade.

At the time, he thought of his school like a Silicon Valley startup, which like all new ventures demanded insane hours. "We were a bunch of 25-year-olds," he recalled in a conversation this spring. "We'd be there every day, including on Saturdays and Sundays. We'd have students at the school until 10 o'clock each night—kids who needed a place to do homework or whatever." It was part of the school's ethos and formula for success: longer days and a longer school year. Hill loved the job. "It was hard work, but it was also good work," he said.

But then TEAM expanded, opening more charters in Newark, which Hill oversaw, and were also staffed with idealistic twentysomethings. The inevitable followed soon after: Many of Hill's original teachers got a little older, began to marry, and started families, just as they were blossoming into full flower as educators. Hundred-hour workweeks were no longer feasible. The charter was suddenly confronting issues like maternity leave that, incredibly, it had never faced before.

Unlike some charter proponents, Hill now recognizes the value of his veteran teachers. "Our people who are proven, who are good, are so irreplaceable," he told me. "It was just not an option for us to lose them." Hill says that his attitude isn't always shared or understood by some corporate backers who come "from fast-growth, nonpeople-dependent industries." But in teaching, Hill argues, your people are everything. Which is why he began to offer more flexible hours to top teachers who had become parents. Similarly, the unusual charter where I work in Newark, which is not part of a chain, offers on-site day care to teachers as just one way to help retain talent.

Now a father of two, Hill says parenthood has altered his views of teaching and reform. In years past, when students' parents used to get upset, Hill recounts, "They'd say, 'You don't understand because you don't have kids.' " At the time, Hill dismissed such criticism as a cop-out. "I thought it was a way of disagreeing with me for no reason," he said. "My comeback was, 'Yes, I do have kids; I have 300 of them.' [But] that was stupid. I mean, I loved every single one of my 300 students, but it *is* different, and I knew that but didn't realize how much."

It's a lesson that more reformers would do well to learn.



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