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The Key to Recruiting the Best Teachers Isn't Money. It's Culture.

By Deidra Gammill on December 18, 2014 10:20 AM

This is the third of a five-part conversation on equitable teacher distribution.

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Remember the old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"? Common sense tells us that preventing problems is far better than dealing with the aftermath of poor choices and costly mistakes. So why do current trends in attracting and retaining high quality teachers where they're needed most look more like the pound of cure, not the ounce of prevention so desperately needed?

In a culture permeated by recruitment strategies based on lucrative salaries, perks, and incentives, it's easy to believe that the same approach would work with teachers. But historically, throwing more money at issues in education rarely addresses the root of the problems. Sure, teachers **want to make a fair salary**, one that reflects our level of education, experience and credentials. However, our ounce of prevention is not monetary; it's relational.

Good teachers know that promoting and protecting positive classroom culture is essential to student engagement and learning. Students need to feel valued, heard, and respected if they are going to grow and succeed. Yet many teachers, especially those in low-performing, high poverty districts, rarely experience the positive, collaborative culture that is a hallmark of many high-performing schools. Why the disparity between what we know is best for student success and the experience of these teachers?

While not all teachers join the profession for purely altruistic reasons, for most, the love of teaching and learning outweighs the long hours, poor pay, and public scrutiny. So if salaries, perks, and great parking spots don't influence most educators, what does? What working and cultural conditions must be present to recruit and maintain top teachers at all schools?

A culture of respect, collaborative learning, and a sense of serving something greater than oneself.

My school district is one of the top-performing district in our state. We are no more affluent than our neighbors, nor is our racial or socio-economic makeup different than the districts that surround us. We do have one thing, however, that is missing from many school districts—a culture of respect, common goals, and an emphasis on embedded professional learning that is supported and protected by our administrators, superintendent, and school board. No matter our subject area or level of professional achievement, all teachers know that we provide for one another what we strive to provide for our students: a positive, respectful learning environment. Our district supports us by making embedded professional learning a priority in each school and by providing professional development that addresses us as adult learners.

While many of my students may come from poverty or difficult home situations, the support I receive bolsters my determination to give each student my very best and to confront academic and discipline issues from a proactive standpoint. I don't earn more money than teachers in other districts, and I'd be hard pressed to leave my school simply because I was offered more money or perks.

What keeps me, and many of my highly effective colleagues, committed to our students is not our high-performing status. Our scores are the result of that ounce of prevention; they are not the pound of cure. And this shift in focus makes all the difference. Our district does not preach a doctrine of the almighty test, nor does it take its identity from our scores. My administrators focus on being proactive, examining the root causes of discipline issues or academic difficulties, and providing what students and teachers need most—respect and support.

Schools that want to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers must shift the focus away from the tangible only; money helps, but it does not cure. Teachers thrive in cultures of professional respect and learning. That's something that any district can strive to provide, regardless of resources or size. I choose the culture of my classroom—school administrators have the power to choose the culture of their schools.

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