

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

True Teacher Accountability

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Once again, our government has got it backwards. Instead of investing billions of dollars to eliminate poor teachers who have already been hired, we need to focus on preventing those teachers who don't have what it takes from being hired in the first place—and making sure those who have the right stuff receive the excellent training and support they deserve.

Although many teacher-training programs have improved recently, most still accept any registered student who applies. This is termed "open enrollment" because it sounds democratic and American, and it brings in a lot of tuition dollars.

Teacher training is a lucrative business. According to a **2007 report** from the National Commission on

Teaching and America's Future, the United States spends \$7.2 billion annually to replace new teachers who quit. Unfortunately, our schools of higher education didn't receive the bailout that many commercial corporations did, so state-supported universities and colleges literally cannot afford to turn away students.

Deans of education and directors of teacher-training programs must be able to afford to say, "No, we're sorry, but you are just not teacher material." They must be encouraged to assess the emotional stability of would-be teachers instead of relying on criminal-background checks. Those checks only reveal past crimes; they do nothing to deter those who haven't been arrested for crimes against children, but who nevertheless should not be permitted near them. Deans and directors of education programs must also be able to afford to say no to emergency credentials for untrained teachers of underserved populations, such as the children of extreme poverty who attend the lowest-performing schools in the nation. If teaching well could be done without proper training, our schools wouldn't be in the mess they are in today.

Effective teaching requires a special kind of education: a solid grounding in liberal arts, specific subject expertise, brain science, teaching theory, child and adolescent psychology, nutrition, English-language acquisition, student-centered instruction, curriculum, and authentic-assessment design. It also demands a special combination of skills: leadership, conflict resolution, time management, creativity, patience, flexibility.

New teachers deserve the best possible environment to hone those skills: limited numbers of different subjects and classes to teach, smaller classes, cooperative students, and solid support from experienced mentors. What they get is usually the opposite: multiple daily lessons to prepare, extracurricular duties, overcrowded and under-equipped classrooms, and ill-behaved

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students. Then they're expected to learn the logistics—creating lesson plans and electronic grade books, differentiating instruction to meet the needs of students with vastly different abilities, negotiating conflicts and violent altercations, dealing with disgruntled parents, deciphering detailed individual education plans for every student who is gifted or has a learning disability, and making sure those unruly students pass that year's standardized tests.

It's no wonder so many new teachers quit during their first five years. They don't quit because of the poor pay or the obnoxious students. They quit because of the bureaucratic mess our schools have become. They quit because they expect to teach, not shuffle endless paperwork, spend weeks of their "free" time learning how to teach to the test, and spend what's left of their personal lives pursuing hour upon hour of professional development that often consists of PowerPoint presentations by Ph.D.s or business professionals who have not spent a single day teaching in a classroom.

Some surveys have shown that one of the primary reasons new teachers quit is lack of support from their administrators, colleagues, and communities. Instead of constant criticism, they deserve encouragement from the teacher in the classroom next door, from the administrators in the front office, from the parents who need to work with and not against them, and from community members who need to wake up and realize that teaching is so much more than babysitting. It's damned hard work. (Imagine teaching one child to learn how to read. Then imagine teaching 20 at a time, half of whom aren't interested in learning.)

Teaching is mentally challenging, emotionally and physically exhausting, and sometimes soul-crushing. Fortunately, on those days when you get it right, teaching is inspiring, energizing, and spiritually uplifting. We owe it to our teachers, to our children, and to our country to approach teacher accountability from a logical and compassionate perspective. We aren't dealing with widgets here. We are dealing with human beings. Children are the untapped potential of our nation's future, and teachers are the facilitators who can tap that potential.

We need to monitor our money carefully and wisely. Money could effect educational reform, but not in the way most people think—especially the people who are distributing the dollars. Overzealous standardized testing, merit pay, and "racing to the top" all waste money. Why?

- Standardized testing cannot accurately assess student learning. There is no standard-issue child. If constant testing worked, student achievement would be soaring, based on the amount of money invested to date.
- Merit pay is a terrible idea for two reasons. First, pitting teachers against each other and paying some more than others undermines our already shaky school system because it isn't fair: There is simply no comparison between teaching poverty-stricken children in a multiethnic inner city and teaching a homogeneous group of middle-class children in a small town, or between teaching an Advanced Placement calculus class and teaching remedial reading at any school. Second, money is not the primary motivator for good teachers. Unlike their corporate counterparts, teachers aren't in it for the money; they're in it for the love of learning. This is something that is difficult for profit-driven people to understand, or to believe. But if money really were the motivation for working, why would capable college graduates choose a profession where they know they are going to be underpaid and required to climb the ladder

very slowly? (Research consistently proves that money is not the most effective motivator, even for poor people.)

- The competitive Race to the Top approach is illogical when applied to education. Teachers are not corporate competitors. They are colleagues. And so they should be. Schools are not competing businesses. We don't want the weak to fail and the strong to succeed. We want the weak to become strong and the strong to set the standard. Teachers must be encouraged to work together across individual schools and districts, across states, and across the nation. They need to provide moral and professional support for one another and share best practices. If our goal is to improve the quality of education throughout the nation, then we need to foster community, not competition, among teachers.

Education dollars need to be spent wisely and logically. We might ask: What works for other countries, the ones who are "kicking American butts" academically? High professional standards for would-be teachers, effective mentoring programs for new teachers, student-centered and brain-based teaching, early literacy programs, nutritious school breakfasts and lunches, ongoing school improvement that involves parents and students, respect for learning, and the judicious use of testing as assessment, not as a weapon used to destroy careers and close schools.

I would be willing to bet my *gigantic* teacher's salary that if we spent our money on those things instead of pitting student against student, student against test, teacher against teacher, school against school, we would see an increase in the quality of teaching, a reduction in dropout rates, a rise in test scores, and improved student learning and behavior—and a huge dent in the annual \$7.2 billion price tag to replace the teachers who have lost their hope and their faith in themselves and in our schools.

LouAnne Johnson is the author of the national bestseller Dangerous Minds (St. Martin's Press, 1992), the novel Muchacho (Knopf, 2009), and several education books, including Teaching Outside the Box: How to Grab Your Students by Their Brains. (Jossey-Bass, 2011). Her website is: www.louannejohnson.com

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