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Prepare teachers well, create the conditions for excellence

Linda Darling-Hammond is the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University, where she started the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute and the School Redesign Network. She is former president of the American Educational Research Association and was executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future from 1994 to 2001. Darling-Hammond began her career as a high school English teacher. She was interviewed by Deputy Editorial-Page Editor Linda Lantor Fandel.

Q. U.S. schools tend to have a mix of teachers in terms of effectiveness. Why don't parents, school board members and others insist on a great teacher in every classroom?

A. There are some schools that routinely hire very able teachers. Some schools - with lower salaries, poorer working conditions, or administrators less attentive to quality teaching - have many poor teachers. And most schools have a mix.

Why don't people demand an excellent teacher in every classroom? We have behaved for a very long time as if that is not something to be expected, in contrast to high-achieving nations that have put in place an infrastructure for producing high-quality teaching. We haven't done that. The last attempt at strengthening that infrastructure [in the United States] was in the 1960s and '70s. We have gotten used to this variable quality. At the end of the day, however, every reform depends on having good teachers.

Q. What are the qualities of a great teacher?

A. I'd like to talk about great teachers in two ways. What are the background characteristics that tend to predict better teaching? And what are the practices that good teachers engage in?

Teachers tend to be more effective when they have a strong background in the field they are teaching, and a strong background in how to teach that content, how to make it understandable to other people.

In terms of practices, effective teachers set up active learning situations for students, so kids are applying and using their knowledge. They have a wide repertoire of teaching strategies. They are very attentive to the learning of each individual child. They have strategies to help kids use their strengths to get the learning done.

Q. What sort of support do teachers need to become more effective, from professional development to time for collaboration with colleagues?

A. In most high-achieving countries, teachers have 15 to 25 hours a week where they are planning collaboratively with their colleagues, so they are not just making up lessons at the kitchen table on a Sunday night by themselves.

In Asian countries, like Japan and China, teachers engage in lesson study, where they develop lessons together. One teacher may then teach that lesson, and the others will come to watch it. They'll analyze the student learning; they'll figure out what worked and what didn't. Then they'll fine-tune the lesson further. They create what some researchers have called "polished stones." We need time for teachers to work together, observe each other, problem-solve together. And they need access to expertise about teaching strategies in specific content areas for particular groups of students. That is not what most professional development looks like in the United States.

Q. Do teacher-education programs at colleges and universities need to become more selective about the applicants admitted? And if so, how?

A. Yes, in some cases. There are at least 200 to 300 schools of education that are highly selective

about the academic backgrounds of the candidates and the personal qualities people bring with them. In general, standards have been rising for teachers. The average teacher today is in the top half of his or her college class. Some states are choosing from the top third.

Q. Do teacher-education programs generally prepare future teachers well? Do they do a good job of teaching them how to work with students with different learning styles.

A. Again, it is a variable enterprise. Some places have gotten better and better, and do a very good job now of preparing teachers to work with students who learn in different ways, including students with disabilities and English-language learners. These very high-quality programs are probably a quarter of the teacher-education enterprise. There are others that are pretty good, but they could be a lot better if there were incentives and supports to get them there. And there are some that need to be put out of business.

Q. You advised the Obama campaign on education policy, and continue to advise the new administration. What are your three key recommendations to improve teacher quality?

A. First, ensure that everyone who wants to teach [is] well-prepared.

Second, ensure that salaries are competitive and equitable.

Finally, create the conditions in which teachers can teach well. That means providing the mentoring and collaboration time, the professional development and working conditions that allow teachers to use what they know and to continually get better at their difficult and important work.
