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Feature Article

Newbie Teacher Bailout: Stopping the School District Talent Leak

As school winds down, many teachers contemplate…consider, anguish about, worry over…changing jobs or "jumping ship" from the teaching profession. For many teachers, this represents the culmination of a stressful year of challenges. For teachers in their first five years of classroom work, this is "par for the course." But, what kind of "course" are new teachers playing? Maybe well manicured fairways; level, slick greens; or……woods, roughs, sand traps, water hazards…or, if conditions are really "bad……coyotes in the woods, roughs designed by Mr. Magoo, sand traps "hopping with fleas" and water hazards slithering with alligators. Teachers leaving the profession in droves are on par with our epidemic student-leaving (dropout) problem. Of course, bureaucratic, one-program solutions miss the fact that school teacher leaving is not a "single problem requiring a one-trick, slight-of-hand solution." Some teachers leave the profession because…

They are inadequate teachers, and efforts to upgrade their skills for three or four years failed to bring their skill set to an acceptable level of performance. (This is a slim number, and these folks are "statistical outliers." Our job here is to discover the reason that these folks entered the teaching profession in the first place.

The teachers' spouse was relocated on their job. This is a "forced move, and no solution is possible.

The teacher took a better paying job in another school district, or the teacher took a job with a school district closer to home. (As gasoline prices skyrocket, this motivation for job relocation will continue to rise and finding employment closer to home becomes imperative.) Again, no solution unless the school district builds gasoline subsidies into its pay scale.

Teachers have families and children. A female teacher staying home to raise their children, or to home school their children because the local public schools are inadequate is a rarity. Teachers cannot afford the luxury of a one-earner household because their meager beginning salary fails to provide a financial safety net. The most likely scenario for this issue is the male teacher that must secure better pay to afford the expenses of medical care and the daily upkeep of the children. The possibility of a solution here, with the current bureaucratic mentality that manages our school districts: near zero

Teachers leave because the urban, inner-city school district is mismanaged, corrupt, inept incongruent or grotesque. This problem cannot be resolved because the management system is in disrepair or collapse, and it will take years of solid leadership to shape up the mess

Teachers leave because the campus principal is so inept, incompetent or emotionally ill that campus morale bottoms out. Or, the principal overstresses on test scores and mounts a campus purge to rid the campus of "low-performing teachers that contribute to minimal campus productivity."

Or, the campus administrator is so dictatorial-authoritarian, flimsy-willed laissez faire, or "politically correct-democratic" that no one supports campus teachers. School system bureaucrats seldom figure out that many of the "teacher problems" that they believe they are addressing are actually symptoms of campus or district administrator ineptitude. Of course, this misfeasance is difficult to discover because campus principals "talk-the-talk"; and campus staff in the know; i.e., teachers, are afraid to talk. Campus principals "butter the political bread" where it counts, i.e., to further their careers. Teacher retention plans seldom identify the principal as the underlying cause of a "teacher-out-migration." And, "chain-of-command pampering& tends to support "upper-lings" (principals and executive staff) in favor of the "underlings (teachers). The chance of a bureaucratic solution to the administrative causes of the teacher-leaving problem: Slim to less-than-slim

Teachers leave because the campus administrators change. And the change of administrators brings in "new blood," brings in new ideas that include new implementation directives and new cliques. Change-resistant teachers (that don't fit in), bail out. The chance that a bureaucratic solution to resolve this teacher-leaving issue: Slim to none

School District Response Some school districts welcome the emigration of teachers because leaving teachers also abandon local leave and local personal days that are funded by the district. In addition, many school districts encourage teachers to retire, sometimes even offering retirement incentives; so that newbie teachers can be hired as substantial salary savings. (And, half of these Newbies will be gone within three to five years.)

However, ridding the teaching profession of Master Teachers serves no interest of the common good. Inner City Teacher Exodus The teacher exodus from Inner City schools drives the teacher leaving number to the heights that they attain. And, this is a source of national shame.

Unfortunately, the executives and administrators of these districts cannot solve the problem because they cannot see that "they are the problem." Who wants to teach in a "low-performing" school? Who comes to such a school with a satchel of enthusiasm and idealism; only to flee, yelping, tail between their legs? The surest way to ensure that 90% of new teachers leave the teaching profession is to place them in a "no-can-do, no-help-for-you" school. These schools that accelerate the profession abandonment rate require a solution that "money cannot buy." The lack of adequate funding may be a problem, but budget shortfalls are not the cause of the instructional and societal catastrophe that these

schools perpetuate. Even the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), focuses its efforts on these school districts. Of course, the NCLB motivation is to show that public education is sub-standard so that our government can fund church schools with tax money. But the plight of the students in these schools is only used to bolster the political case that our public schools are "dens of inefficiency, inept management and absent learning." Unfortunately, teachers are blamed for the problems in management and performance of these school districts, and that is the reason that they are "bailing out." Out of one of those districts and into the suburbs, or out of the profession altogether. Why would a teacher want to "tough it out" with students that need the best teachers when they can show better test results with less work, with less stress and with greater safety. The challenge for those inept school districts is to produce better instructional results, get student behavior under control, pay more (super-much more in the way of incentives) for Master Teachers who will be amply rewarded for taking on these classes. Schools also need to turn the management of campus programs over to teachers, then have school administrators reporting to both teachers and the community. Of course, the communities that need this huge infusion of educational resources have deteriorated taxing ability and low property values. So, these are the districts least able to "do what it takes" to get the instructional job done.

And what does it take? Here are some starters:

Policemen at the doors and Texas "Road House" bouncers in the classrooms, working as Teacher Aides in tranquil moments

Drug-sniffing dogs as mascots stationed at every school entrance way…and periodic, random sweeps of all school facilities at least three times a day

Individual tutoring for every student whose teacher requests one-to-one help

Part-time, during-school and after-school jobs for students in tutoring younger students

Teams of curriculum developers that tailor-make materials for classrooms, groups of students and individual students

Partnerships with local businesses with subsidies for work study students' salaries, so that students earn full

professional pay for the quality work that they do

Anything else that works or fits in to local conditions

Of course, the folks who are in charge of these school systems will continue to blame teachers for substandard student performance, but these folks are the ones that should be leaving, not new teachers. No New News. The clamor for "doing something" about the teacher-leaving problem is decades old and seldom addressed. As "baby boomer" teachers retire, the problem of finding qualified, remaining-in-the-profession teachers will increase. This is because these Master Teachers are providing the only support that most Newbie teachers receive. When Master Teachers leave, they take more "institutional knowledge" with them than Newbie teachers do. When both Master Teachers and Newbie Teachers leave, the school is left "dead in the water" for three to five years. Of course, bringing these Master Teachers back as part-time "teacher support consultants" at lucrative salaries and full benefits (that don't diminish retirement checks) is an obvious, but expensive option. Otherwise, schools will be flooded with a larger crop of Newbie teachers that bail out in three to five years. This will further fuel the mistaken perception that there is a "teacher shortage." Actually, the number of certified teachers in the workforce exceeds the number of teacher job vacancies at any one time. This probably means that certification is an inadequate measure for vetting the folks that enter the teaching profession. This fact leads to the conclusion that the quality of pre-service training is inadequate. But, actually, it is the post-employment support that is inadequate. So, blaming teachers and building strategies to "bring teachers up to snuff" is wrong-headed and off target…even though that seems to be the approach almost every school district with a teacher-leaving problem embarks upon.

These non-functional proposals include… Saving money on teacher support, and spending the money on teacher recruiting and teacher retraining

Miscalculation (and under reporting) teacher turnover costs, including advertising, recruiting, human resources paper work and training

Failing to connect NCLB compliance costs for "low performance" with the teacher-leaving problem

Attributing the teacher-leaving problem to problems inherent in the sub-standard teachers that were hired. A Targeted Teacher Retention Strategy. What school district need to do instead is provide for teacher empowerment, teacher job security, teacher morale (from being valued, participatory problem-solvers), and from providing whatever help the new teacher needs. Of course, the first step is for the school district to realize that there is a problem. The second step is to realize that the problem lies with the school district executive and management staff, not the new teachers. The third step is to decide to spend money that would be wasted on the teacher-leaving cycle, and become proactive. This means spending the wasted money on teacher support before it is "poured down the rat hole" of advertising, recruitment, paperwork and indoctrination of the replacement teacher. Unfortunately, costs for replacing teachers remain hidden, while the costs associated with retaining teachers (although absent) seem glaring and excessive. Again, wrong-headed thinking by executive and management (bureaucratic) types contributes to this myth that teachers are to blame. Unfortunately too, solutions require funding for support programs that cross campus and departmental jurisdictions. Solutions require creativity, shared problem-solving, shared decision-making, flexible action plans, and test-as-you-make-progress action steps. There are too few school damaged school districts that can turn the corner, and implement a change strategy that will salvage the next crop (cohort, battalion) of teachers. And, teachers approaching this challenge are like foot soldiers charging into a reinforced line of enemy pillboxes. Expect to take casualties. Realizing the Teacher-Leaving is a Symptom. Wholesale teacher-leaving of the profession is a symptom, not the problem. And this

is a symptom of our school systems' stagnation with bureaucracy and with the factory-based Industrial Age school model. Of course, everyone who signs on as a teacher wants to succeed. And these folks know that teaching is one of those occupations that pays back plenty (in non-monetary ways) in personal satisfaction, self-development and positive emotional well being. Teachers can consider themselves blessed by their relationships with students. But, the working environment holds negative "slings and arrows" that fate most new teachers to an early exit from the profession, often blaming themselves for a miserable situation that just wasn't their fault. Sadder and wiser, teachers who jump off the school district "mule train" find themselves looking back at all the potential that never was. Real Support for New Teachers School districts are lulled into a false sense of security because, for most teaching jobs (except Math, Science and Special Education), there are more applicants than there are jobs. Of course, many of these applicants are the same folks who are bailing out from one "frying pan district" to take a job in a "what they hope is a greener grass pasture," but is actually a "deep fryer or a roaster." Rather than low pay, it is the lack of teacher support by supervisors and administrators that fails the new teacher. And, the cause of supervisor and management support is, the folks "can't, won't, don't know how" to fund what is required to help teachers. Sidebar Teaching is often considered a self-funded profession. US teachers spend an estimated \$1 billion USD each year to acquire the resources and materials that the school districts that they work for fail to provide. This is another face of our national teacher-support disgrace. But, how are school districts to offer support that makes a difference in the working lives of teachers? These support programs would require flexibility, the employment of additional tiers of professional support staff, and less administrators. These support programs would require less bureaucratic administrators and supervisors; but many more "action-taking, can-do, no excuse leaders" who accept accountability. Real support also erases departmental lines of jurisdiction. Especially when the problem is the campus administrator. Teachers must feel free (of retribution) to get inept supervisors removed, and removed quickly. However, the current "chain of command" practice of school district executives supporting faulty supervisors in the district's "Administrators' Club" torpedoes teacher support efforts at removing administrative causes of teachers leaving the profession. And outside researchers seldom finger campus administrators as the cause of so many teachers (new teachers and long-time veterans) seeking employment elsewhere. Poor campus administrators sink many teaching careers. The reluctance of researchers to expose the raw nerve of campus pain and discontent (terrible administrators) means that school districts (and the public that funds them) receive less-than accurate evaluation data about the teacher-leaving issue. This leads to the (traditional, most parroted) misperception that the problem lies with teachers. Sidebar Paradoxes of a just plain bogus issue? There are more trained and certified teachers in the job force outside teaching. Most of the teachers that leave the profession within five years received positive teacher evaluations. What does this mean? Anecdotal evidence, observation and candid discussion with teachers reveals that inept and incompetent campus administrators are a major cause of teachers leaving the profession. Unfortunately, it is safe to predict that teachers will continue to be blamed as the cause of this symptom. Hard-Hitting, "Tell-it-like-it-is" Analysis It's time for hard-hitting, tell-it-like-it-is analysis to "get to the bottom," or is that "get to the top?" of the teacher-leaving issue. Blaming teachers for the "whole kit and kaboodle" distracts us from examining the real causes of early and mass teacher-leaving (especially during their first three to five years of service). A practical and realistic problem-solving approach might be to...

Identify new teacher support models

Identify sources of additional revenue and funding

Implement these models with enough funding and enough testing to ensure success

Document the approach and share successes with other school districts

Of course, nothing is more difficult for outsiders to detect than administrator indifference (or sabotage) of an improvement project. What would happen as soon as the model project begins to identify... The need to ramp up huge amounts of additional funding?

The incompetence, misfeasance, or malfeasance of principal and administrators; and a need for personnel changes in those positions?

Past, stupid administrative decisions, edicts, policies and "innovations" and other catastrophes that are currently being covered up?

Under-the-rug sweeping" and "around the lawsuit dancing" in dealing with criminal behaviors of teachers and principals?

New models must reject the traditional belief that pre-service teachers require better career counseling so that they learn that they are not "cut out" to be teachers before entering the rigors of classroom work. (There should not be any "rigors," and if these really exist, teachers should receive lucrative "hazardous duty pay" incentives.) Sidebar If there is more work than a teacher can perform during a normal eight hour workday, then the management answer is clear, "hire more staff!" No other requirement is reasonable. For example, if paperwork and useless documentation is really required, then hire secretaries that perform that work for teachers. And, make those secretaries accountable to those teachers. For example, teachers hire and fire their own secretaries, without the interference of the campus administration. Another option: Pay teachers overtime pay for any work over eight hours per day/ 40 hours per week. Of course, is the "instant solution" because, if school district administrators had to pay teachers for the "Mickey Mouse" work that they require, hours of non-essential, trivial tasks would disappear instantly from their directives. If anyone can show that data analysis improves instruction in any way, then the district could hire data entry clerks, statisticians and computer programmers to process that data and deliver updated dashboards that indicate precise, high-priority strategies that are identified by the data. But, there are a number of factors that will likely maintain the status quo, and maintain a lack of teacher support.

These include: Teaching remains an activity of supervisor and colleague isolation, and a lack of meaningful collaborative opportunities

Joint (dual relationship roles) for supervisors (supervisor, evaluator, coach, confidant) hampers honest communication between supervisors and teachers. (Teachers are reluctant to reveal real issues and shortcomings to the person that will evaluate them.)

The academic and theoretical content of in-service programs relates more to the philosophy of campus administrators than to teachers' real needs. Teachers require specific, rather than theoretical answers. The Streamlined Solution To focus upon the real causes of teacher-leaving, school boards could implement strategies that make top level executives and administrators accountable for the problem (since their actions are a major cause of the problem). Tangible ways to get school district executives and administrators to pay attention to their culpability in the teacher-leaving problem would be to

Reduce their pay

Shorten their contract year

Reduce their rank or position level

Open their personnel evaluation to community observation, rather than the current, behind-closed-doors method of employment action

Summary The cost of recruiting, hiring, and training teachers should be reported to the community along side the actual expenditures for teacher support. This will highlight the fact that "failing to support teachers"

actually costs the district more than the absent support would have cost (if support had been provided). Non School District Teacher-Leaving Issues As gasoline costs skyrocket, more teachers will choose employment that is closer to their home unless

Four-Day Work Weeks are implemented (Parents and Community Members will object because the cost of child care and babysitting would drive many parents into bankruptcy)

Driving-Distance Stipends are provided for new teacher that cannot afford to commute otherwise

Business as Usual Clearly the "Business as Usual" strategy of letting new teachers flounder is too expensive for our school districts.

This is true in the sense that the cost of our students leaving (dropouts) is too costly for our society to bear. Maybe it is time to sound the alarm and address the real issue, i.e., bureaucratic inefficiency, teacher "unimplemented" Industrial

Age management models and "Top-Down" Chains of Command. It's time to show our communities the actual cost of teachers leaving the profession, its time to hold school district executives and administrators accountable (because these folks seem to be the major cause of the problem), and its time to own up to the responsibility of funding our

schools at a level that compensates our teachers in a far more lucrative way. Besides providing real-time, confidential, and answer-focused support for our teachers, it is time to come to grips with the major myth that allows school district

managers to place the blame on teacher-leaving upon teachers. That myth, that "Teachers receive such rewards from their interactions with students that teachers should be glad to work long extra (extra long) hours without additional

compensation" needs to die a quick and ignominious death. An accurate antidote for blaming teachers, "If school district executives, administrators and managers were doing their jobs, teachers would not be forced to work huge numbers of

hours without compensation." And new teachers would receive the support they need to build solid skill sets and become the Master Teachers that they are capable of becoming.

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