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Higher pay key to solving teacher shortage

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Susan Carlson
(Submitted photo)

Research says that the quality of teaching is the No. 1 influence on the learning of children and will either advance them or hold them back. The Education Trust, a national research and advocacy organization says, "The caliber of teachers drives student success."

Students who start at the same academic level can end up in very different places academically, the trust says, depending on how well they've been taught. A student with three effective teachers in a row routinely makes significant progress while three weak teachers in a row results in loss of academic ground, sometimes without recovery. There is a growing consensus here in Arizona that teacher talent is the key variable in producing "A" schools present and aspiring.

In 2008, the Arizona Town Hall issued a report entitled, "Who Will Teach our Children?" with the question: "If the teacher in the classroom is the greatest variable in high student achievement, then how can Arizona attract, reward and keep high

quality teachers?" Recommendations followed, including promoting teaching as a distinguished profession and offering professional pay. We've not learned from those recommendations.

Arizona is suffering a teacher crisis. In a recent Arizona School Administrators survey of district administrators, 62 percent said they have teacher openings, and more than 62 percent have teachers leaving already this school year. Respondents said they left because of workload, salary and personal and family reasons.

In rural Arizona, for example, Prescott has lost four teachers and Humboldt has lost 11. In Phoenix, Peoria has 28 certified positions open. In southern Arizona, a just-released survey (available at TucsonValuesTeachers.org) confirmed, according to the Arizona Daily Star in Tucson, what many who pay attention to education already know. Among the findings:

It's difficult work with long hours.

Nearly 60 percent called salary and benefits the cause of dissatisfaction.

Teachers believe they're seen by the public as more akin to child care workers than skilled professionals.

More than one in four respondents said they were "not at all likely" to still be teaching in southern Arizona in five years.

Forty percent of the responding teachers said they would be "not at all likely" to recommend teaching in southern Arizona to others.

Teacher pay is low enough that people take a second job, yet many teachers spend their own money on classroom supplies. The average expense is \$1,142.

While teachers don't enter the profession for the pay, the primary reason for leaving is financial. Anecdotally, a third grade teacher living in a rural community said that her husband could not find employment. They could not live on her teacher salary. Some simply leave without giving two weeks' notice and without concern about losing their Arizona teaching certificates.

Teaching colleges are working hard to reinvent teacher training to enable new teachers to enter the field prepared for the rigor of updated standards. But enrollment at the Arizona State University Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College is declining. At the University of Arizona College of Education, enrollment in some programs decreased so much in recent years that the school closed them. And the impending retirement of many baby boomer teachers is expected to make the teacher shortage even worse.

While substitute teachers are a Godsend to districts needing to fill positions, we know that long-term substitute teachers are not the answer. Competing with neighboring states for teachers is a losing game. The resources

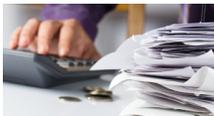
available to create attractive teacher packages for hiring are the same resources drawn on to fix dripping pipes and leaking roofs of old facilities since funding for building renewal disappeared seven years ago. Administrators in the teacher prep programs suggest that the main way to attract more students to the profession is to offer a competitive salary. Low teacher salary makes paying for that college education almost impossible.

Critics say "we can't throw money at the problem" when talking about school funding, and others assume that technology and distance learning will solve the problem. But recruiting and training good teachers does require an investment. Whether facilitating a classroom discussion or guiding the use of technology in a blended learning environment, we must have good teachers working with students to make lessons come to life. Having the resources to be competitive in recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining excellent teachers is imperative. We must ask who we want teaching our children and recognize that there is a required investment, knowing we are competing with other states, as well as other professions, that retirements are increasing and vacancies abound. We must assure that we have highly effective teachers, well trained and capable in front of every child and be willing to do what's needed to ensure the high quality education that we want for all of our children, which, at least in part, takes more money.

— Susan Carlson is executive director of the Arizona Business & Education Coalition.

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