
Top-Notch Teachers Are Key to Better Schools

Joanne Jacobs

This selection first appeared in the *San Jose Mercury News* on 3 December 1998. Joanne Jacobs, formerly a columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, is currently working on a book about a Palo Alto charter school.

The student came from a low-income Mexican immigrant family. She grew up in a Los Angeles barrio.

“How did you get to UC–Santa Barbara?” her roommate asked.

“It was my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Menzer,” she replied. Then she wrote a letter of thanks to Diana Menzer.

The student will graduate in June with a degree in Spanish. She’s not sure about a career, except that teaching is out. She doesn’t have it in her to be a teacher, the letter said.

Menzer will retire at the end of the year. Who will replace her?

California schools already can’t find enough qualified people to teach reading in elementary classrooms of 20 students, or to teach math, chemistry, and physics to middle and high school students. With rising enrollments and retirements, we’ll need 250,000 new teachers in the next 10 years.

Furthermore, teachers will need to know more and do more than ever before to help students meet the state’s demanding new academic standards. So we need smart, educated teachers.

“The largest predictor of student achievement is teacher expertise and qualifications,” says Stanford Education Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, who chairs the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future. “It’s not rocket science. What the teacher knows and can do has an effect on what the student will be able to learn.”

Researchers have looked at scores on licensing exams, units of teacher training completed, and whether the teacher has a bachelor’s or master’s degree in the field taught. Consistently, teachers with more education in their subject, and in how to teach, have students with higher achievement scores.

In short, teachers can't teach what they don't know. And they can't teach what they do know until they've learned how to manage a classroom, motivate students, and break down concepts so students with limited English, learning problems, and poor preparation can understand.

Educating teachers—both in subject matter and in teaching strategies—is “the single most effective use of an additional dollar,” Darling-Hammond says, citing research results. It's far more effective than reducing class size.

So what are California's leaders doing? To lengthen the school year by a few days, the Legislature cut time for teacher training.

At the same time, California is pouring money into reducing class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, increasing the demand for elementary teachers, and making it even harder for urban schools to find qualified teachers.

Enthusiasts for class-size reduction point to Tennessee, where lowering class size to 15 raised achievement. But there was no teacher shortage in Tennessee, no need to compromise on teacher quality to put an adult in every classroom.

“Good teachers produce good students” is the motto of the newly created San Francisco-based Endowment for Excellence in Education (e-mail: gates2excellence@hotmail.com).

Director Shoumen Datta envisions offering stipends to math and science graduates to raise entry-level teaching pay to \$36,000 for a bachelor's degree, \$40,000 for a master's. The endowment also would pay to send teachers who never studied what they're teaching back to college to strengthen their understanding of the subject matter.

But, so far, the corporate donations aren't flowing in.

Datta was a university scientist and teacher before working in San Francisco Unified as special assistant to the superintendent. He chaired the task force on math and science education for the National Information Technology Workforce Convocation, and formed Associated Scientists, with Nobel laureate Glenn Seaborg, to develop state science standards.

Knowing how challenging the new standards are, Datta is especially worried about elementary teachers' science mastery. Teaching the parts of a flower and the life cycle of the butterfly won't cut it anymore.

Half of California's math and physical science teachers didn't major or minor in the subject. How can schools hire college graduates with math and science degrees when the booming high-tech economy is of-

fering more money, more recognition, more control over their work? After all, schools don't give stock options.

Money isn't the primary issue, says Datta. He lured talented young scientists into teaching in San Francisco. But frustration with bureaucracy drove them out of the classroom and into high-tech industry.

More important than raising teacher pay is raising teachers' ability to be effective, says Darling-Hammond. "The challenge is to create school environments where teachers can do the job well."

The good news is that Gray Davis, who longs to be California's education governor, has named a former teacher, Gary Hart, as his chief education adviser. After serving in the Legislature, where he chaired the Senate Education Committee, Hart became co-director of the California State University Institute for Education Reform, which has focused on ways to recruit, train, retain, and retrain good teachers.

Hart understands that teacher quality is job one for California schools. He will back credentialing reforms, funding for on-the-job help for new teachers, intensive training for experienced teachers.

The hardest challenge will be to make public schools places where the best and brightest can put their talents to use.

School Unions Shortchange Students

La Rae G. Munk

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"When school children start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of school children." These candid words attributed to the late Al Shanker, longtime president of the American Federation of Teachers, remind us of an important but often-forgotten