
Arizona Republic

Low Pay + Big Classes = Teacher Crisis

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There aren't enough qualified teachers in Arizona to provide a high-quality education for all of Arizona's children. The best-case scenario, presented in a recent Morrison Institute report, is that there is a "delicate balance" between the demand and supply of teachers overall.

This delicate balance disappears when you get down to specifics. In western Arizona, for example, the demand for teachers is expected to run ahead of the supply, and in critical specialties such as special education there are already shortages.

The just-released ASU Education Policy Studies Laboratory report, "Recruiting, Preparing and Retaining High Quality Teachers," synthesizes the research evidence and offers recommendations for addressing the problem over the short and long term.

In the short term, retaining qualified teachers and persuading qualified teachers who have left the profession to return to the classroom is likely to be the most effective approach. New York City has virtually eliminated its teacher shortage by paying teachers higher salaries.

Working conditions also matter a lot. Teachers worth their salt want to make a difference, and they are attracted by smaller classes in which they can get to know their students and tailor their instruction to student needs; by district policies that provide them the autonomy to use their professional expertise effectively; by administrators who are knowledgeable and supportive; and by assessment systems that help improve instruction.

Arizona offers teachers low salaries and large class sizes, along with standards and testing policies that restrict teacher instructional decision-making and impose lots of paperwork. If we are to reduce the severity of teacher shortages in the short term, key elements of current Arizona education policy will have to be changed.

In the long term, the research surveyed in "Recruiting, Preparing and Retaining High Quality Teachers" argues in favor of ASU President Michael Crow's view that the university and its programs should be engaged in the community.

In practice, this means Arizona colleges of education should collaborate with K-12 school districts to develop and strengthen programs to introduce students to teaching as an attractive career choice; collaborate with community colleges to cast a wider net and increase the diversity of the pool of potential teachers; and collaborate with innovative programs within the university to broaden and deepen the experiences of education majors.

At ASU, for example, much could be learned from the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies program. This gem of a program has made ASU a national leader in undergraduate interdisciplinary studies. BIS students with academic specialties as diverse as Spanish and biology are taught to synthesize knowledge from disparate disciplines and apply it in real-world situations through internships in businesses, government agencies, and non-profit organizations.

In other words, BIS students are expected to exhibit many of the skills we would want to see in high-quality teachers: content knowledge, creativity and the ability to apply what they know in real-world situations.

The success of the BIS program underscores the point that in the real world no single skill or approach works in all situations. Good teaching thus reflects not only the talent of a teacher, but also the context within which she or he is teaching.

Consider Jaime Escalante, who gained fame and became the subject of the movie *Stand and Deliver* by teaching advanced placement calculus to a classroom of Latino teens in Los Angeles. When Escalante relocated to Sacramento and taught students from a number of different ethnic groups, he was far less effective.

The moral of this story: Teacher education models should be as diverse as possible. Effective teachers need more than subject matter knowledge. Teachers should have command of a variety of approaches to teaching and the ability to synthesize and apply their knowledge appropriately in different settings.

Collaboration between colleges of education and schools, community colleges and departments within the university is the key to increasing the number and quality of Arizona's teaching corps.

This will be possible, however, only if state policymakers are willing to frame policies that encourage and support colleges of education as they attempt to do so.

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