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The key to success

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The conventional wisdom is that the nation is suffering from a shortage of well-qualified teachers. Many of us in the teacher preparation business take the slightly different view that too many of the qualified, certified teachers are not teaching. The questions for the nation are - why not? What can we do to keep good teachers in our urban classrooms?

The nation's children cannot get a good education without certified, highly qualified teachers. There are too many classrooms in which the teacher is uncertified, or is a long-term substitute, or lacks a college major in the subject. The situation in high poverty schools is worse than in more affluent communities. In urban and poor rural areas there is an immediate crisis. In some cases classrooms have gone from using untrained substitute teachers to unqualified substitutes for months at a time. The critical areas locally, like those nationally, are math, science, special education, and English as a second language. Recruitment in these areas is just as difficult at the university as it is in the schools.

One thing that will not work is to indiscriminately throw more money at the problem. People will not stay in bad teaching jobs for good money. We cannot buy our way into long lasting teachers, we will have to earn them - the old-fashioned way - by creating positive environments at all levels of their training and development. In a recent article in the Phi Delta Kappan, the authors argue that more resources are not the cure for flawed processes. The recruiting and retaining of urban teachers is a process that begins in the schools and continues through at least the first five years of teaching.

That process needs fixing.

Surveys of teacher education students show that they are passionate about their love of children and their wish to impact children's lives. They are idealists and change-the-world types. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, about 10 percent of college freshmen consider education as at least a possible career during some part of their college experience. A talent pool this size provides plenty of raw material for the nation's schools, so how can we take advantage of the inclinations of these young people?

There are at least six stages in our development of teachers at The University of Alabama at Birmingham. For teachers to be successful in high-stress urban environments, it is not enough just to hire them. Successful teaching is difficult to accomplish in any situation, but it is even more so when poverty is a factor.

Our program for urban teachers begins with strong development of the candidate's own academic skills. This begins in high school (for some, much earlier). When students are well-prepared for college level work, and see good teaching in their academic subjects, they are more likely to see teaching as an option.

Second, our candidates understand the importance of culture and its relationship to learning

patterns and behaviors.

Learning is not just about the math (for example). It is also about the context in which the mathematics appears, in the cultural styles of the students and their families. Candidates learn how to negotiate these things for every student, but especially for students from different cultural and economic settings than their own. Much of this knowledge and training, theory and practice, must come from the schools in partnership with the university. Candidates must become reflective, life-long learners themselves.

Third, candidates gain the skills and practice to be effective learning coaches.

This is not about testing, it is about learning. And it is about thinking about the learning one is doing and making choices and decisions using the knowledge one is gaining. When our teachers use good methodology to focus on student learning, their work demonstrates their purpose.

Fourth, candidates have ongoing, high-quality internships in successful school settings with high-performing teachers.

This happens in partnerships between the university and the schools. If successful settings do not exist, the university must work with the schools to create them through professional development, through close collaboration in the teacher preparation programs, and through involvement of the community in informing the work of both the schools and the university.

Fifth, the induction of teachers into their careers must reflect what we know about the developmental progression of candidates from novices to proficient teachers to highly advanced professionals. Our induction process is another process that we share with the schools.

Sixth, the schools themselves must be places to work that are attractive, inviting, and supporting.

It is not about the beauty of the buildings, but rather about the beauty of the programs. Candidates must be supported personally and professionally at every level of their development. Their professors and school supervisors must be encouraging, yet hold them to high standards of knowledge and performance. Their support, properly given, leads to a lifetime of quality teaching. Good schools are the breeding grounds for the next generation of teachers.

Teachers and principals have to hold themselves to the highest professional standards if they are to help retain the new generation of teachers. They have to create an atmosphere of high performance and ongoing job-embedded professional development focused on the daily work teachers have to accomplish.

A recent study published in the American Economics Review suggests that urban teachers who score the highest on general knowledge exams also have high rates of leaving the profession early. Highly qualified teachers need a work environment that reflects their personal high levels of achievement.

Instead of seeing urban systems now being a national train wreck with revolving doors, bringing young teachers in and watching them leave as soon as they can get a job elsewhere, we have a commitment to work hand-in-hand with our schools in a collaborative two-way partnership constantly improving the schools and improving the training.

It is happening here. It is happening now. And it is exciting. Michael J. Froning, Ed.D., is dean of the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Education. His e-mail address is mfroning@uab.edu.