

Too Much is Out of Teachers' Control

Kansas has fewer people going into education, we lose 42 percent of our educators in the first seven years of practice, and 35 percent of our teachers and 50 percent of our school district leaders are eligible for retirement in the next five years, according to the July report to the State Board of Education by Andy Tompkins, Kansas commissioner of education.

Yes, Kansas has a crisis in recruiting and keeping school personnel. And the problem is even worse in the coastal and Southern states. So why are so many teachers leaving the profession, and why is it harder to recruit the next generation?

These are not good days to be a teacher. One good veteran teacher said it best: "They blame us, don't they?"

When any child fails to pass a proficiency test, the whole blame goes on the teacher. This is tantamount to saying that everyone sent to a hospital will live and every crime will be solved, or else doctors and police officers are failures.

"Accountability" translates directly as "blame." The best of doctors have patients who die, and the best of teachers will have students who fail because in both cases, there are factors beyond their control.

Another big problem is the blizzard of documentation that now dominates classroom teaching, first due to Quality Performance Accreditation and now demanded by the No Child Left Behind law. When I convince bright young biology students to go into teaching because they can convey their understanding and excitement about science to youngsters, some bail out and return to the research track as soon as they hit education course work that trains them in curriculum alignment and teach-to-the-test methodology.

Veteran teachers, from kindergarten to high school, are openly decrying the loss of high-interest and proven course work when they have to narrow their teaching to drill for the assessment tests. Some even say: "If it was like this when I started, I would never have gone into teaching." Meanwhile,

"9-to-5 teachers" who see teaching as just another job may actually welcome being told what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach.

This has already happened in Texas, the leader in de-professionalizing teaching. Texas completely scripted the lessons in many disciplines. And Texas provided the exams. As a result, a massive number of veteran teachers took early retirement. The number of students entering teaching in Texas plummeted.

So far, Kansas standards have served as guidelines and have not dictated curricula (although some Kansas school administrators act as if the state has mandated a curriculum).

If we are to recruit and keep good teachers in the classroom, they must be allowed to keep the decision-making responsibilities of professionals. And they don't deserve blame for student failures that are beyond their control.

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