

No Miracles, No Saviors: We are the Ones

By Anthony Cody on March 9, 2009 12:50 PM | 2 Comments | No TrackBacks

I have been writing about teacher turnover in my urban district because I think it is critical that education policy be informed by real on-the-ground data. Numbers alone do not tell the story. Last week we heard from two urban teachers, one in the San Francisco area, and one (in the comments) in Philadelphia, who shared their similar realities and the reasons they will be leaving soon. The portrait they drew is backed up by statistics that show that after three years, 55% of the teachers who start out teaching in Oakland will be gone. **This University of Pennsylvania study just released** points to the fact that if we could successfully deal with the turnover problem, current shortages of math and science teachers would disappear. The problem is not that we produce too few, but that few will stay.

We are at a crossroads in the quest for teacher quality. Diane Ravitch **wrote critically recently** of the tendency to seek miraculous saviors for our schools. If only we could draw our teachers from Ivy League schools, then we would have the best and brightest capable of inspiring our students. And while we're at it, let's weed out the old-timers responsible for the mediocrity that is prevalent. But my experiences tell me that just won't work.

I taught at an urban middle school in Oakland for 18 years. We had the same challenge with teacher turnover that I have described here, and our science department of ten teachers was losing two or three teachers a year. This was about ten years ago, when the state of California still had a nickel to spare, so we got a small grant to support professional development. We set a goal of retaining our teachers. We paired each novice teacher in the science department with a veteran to support and coach them. We held department meetings where we shared curriculum and assessment strategies. We engaged in Lesson Study together, where we would observe one another teach, and then discuss how the students were learning.

When the next school year began, we had retained 100% of our science teachers. These teachers were not all natural geniuses, but they were engaged in a community of learners, and they were growing. We all felt as if we were gaining a better understanding of our students, and we were working across the school to create an atmosphere of seriousness and pride about science. We knew there was a similar need for support across the District, so we used some additional state funding to connect with other teacher leaders at other schools to offer broader support. For two years we led periodic professional development sessions where curriculum and strategies were shared. **(see my old web site here.)** There were even a few beginning teachers who stepped forward and shared with their peers.

But the state funding evaporated six years ago. For a number of reasons, conditions at my school began to resemble those described by the teacher last week. We had a fantastic team at that school, including two NBCTs, but we could not overcome the pressures we faced. Today, just eight years after we managed to retain every teacher, only one teacher from our team of ten is still at that school.

Before we can solve these challenges we have to be clear about what success looks like. Success looks like a team of teachers of a range of experience working together to learn how to meet the needs of their students. That team could have some trailblazers, some stick-in-the-muds, some techno-wizards, some Luddites. That team has the time and money to create quality time to meet and collaborate to create the curriculum and assessments the students can best respond to. They meet and agree to engage in some systemic form of reflective practice such as lesson study or teacher action research. They wrestle with the real challenges and disagreements that arise, and come up with solutions that work across the school. The school has an administration dedicated to preserving the sanctity of the classroom learning environment, with the resources and will to do so. The school has a proactive relationship with parents and the community, so it is clear we are all working as a team to advance the interests of all of our students. The school has a means of communicating what the students are learning, through public displays, student-teacher-parent conferences or school-wide expositions. These are the things that promote pride and a culture of learning at a school, and forge strong connections with parents and the community.

We must also be clear about what is NOT working. It is not working to bring in a revolving cadre of novices, no matter what elevated strata of academia they come from, to teach our students for a two or three year stint and leave. As the baby boomer generation of teachers retires, the proportion of experienced teachers at our urban schools will dwindle further, and we will lose a vital source of wisdom and knowledge. For a learning community to form, there must be a balance between those with experience and the novices. If there are twice as many novices as veterans, the vets are likely to close their doors and let the novices sink or swim. It takes a lot of energy to support a new teacher, and if that teacher is not committed to stay beyond a year or two, that may not feel like a good investment.

It is not working to think we can make up for inexperience and the absence of coherent collaborative professional growth by giving teachers a collection of techniques applied through periodic professional developments performed by outside consultants.

It is not working to pay our teachers poorly. We must pay our teachers enough to make the profession one people can choose without sacrificing their own families. We expect teachers to be compassionate and somewhat altruistic, but we should not have to live in poverty, unable to purchase a home or send our own children to college.

Some of the comments on last week's post focused on possible weaknesses revealed by the teacher's description of her situation. I think it is a mistake to expect perfection from anyone, most especially our new teachers. We **want** them to stay and grow and thrive. A few may intuitively understand how to challenge their students to greatness, how to communicate effectively with parents, and how to garner support from their administrators. But most of us took years to get a handle on these things, and had many mentors along the way that showed us how. We need our new teachers to be engaged in a community that models these practices and supports them as they learn.

We must have some stability and continuity in order to build the kind of collaborative practices that elevate the whole school. This will not come about through any saviors on white horses. Miracles are remarkable due to their rarity. We need something much more common, if more difficult to sustain – investment and hard work. Teachers are already working hard. **We need the investment of resources, and a bit of faith, that, as President Obama asserted last year, we are the ones we have been waiting for.**

What do you think? What does success look like to you? How can we best get there?
