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They both need answers

Attracting and retaining teachers

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Concerns about the supply and quality of teachers are generating new policies in many OECD countries. Here's why.

What is the most important school-related factor in student learning? The answer is teachers. The trouble is the effectiveness of individual teachers and schools varies widely. A critical issue for any country that hopes to keep its education system internationally competitive is how to recruit, retain, develop and nurture a high-quality teaching force.

In 2005, the OECD released *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*, which comprehensively reviewed teacher policies in 25 countries. The report confirmed how prevalent the concern is across nations about the supply

and quality of teachers. The Aspen Institute Education and Society Program, a think tank based in Washington, D.C., collaborated with the OECD to invite about two dozen leading policymakers, researchers and practitioners from eight countries—Australia, Canada, England, Japan, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland and the US—to a seminar in Bellagio, Italy, last autumn. The task was to delve more deeply into key issues raised in the OECD study, and to explore ways to strengthen teaching policies. Each country brought its particular culture, tradition and circumstances, but the participants all shared a common interest in strengthening and restructuring the teaching profession.

Now is the time for such thinking, for as the OECD report notes, in most countries far more new teachers will enter the profession in the next five to ten years than at any time since the 1970s. That new generation of teachers, at least in the US, will look different too. The retiring cohort of teachers entered the profession in the

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late 1960s and early 1970s, when many women and people from ethnic minorities had limited access to other lines of work and were content to stay as classroom teachers, earning relatively modest salaries, for their entire careers.

In contrast, in many countries the incoming generation of teachers has many more job options that probably pay more, have higher status, and provide better working conditions. Also, people no longer look at teaching as a lifelong career. In the US, 30% of new teachers leave within three years. Half are gone within five years. Ironically, studies show that the best and the academically brightest are more likely to leave. At the same time, career changers have been entering teaching from other lines of work, bringing with them heightened expectations.

The competitive labour market in the US and other countries also has heightened concerns about how to attract adequate talent into teaching. Many experts worry that individuals choosing to become teachers are generally less talented, less ambitious, less curious, less diverse demographically, and more risk-averse than the workforce as a whole. As Stefan Wolter, the director of the Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education, put it, to make sure they are getting the best, countries need to consider how their teacher policies affect not only the existing teacher force, but also those with the potential to become teachers.

But that also means focusing on the conditions under which teachers work. As Christopher Spence, the director of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board in Ontario, Canada, noted: "Put a good teacher in a bad system, and the system wins every single time."

Starting out

Consider the case of new teachers. Even countries with rigorous teacher-preparation programmes recognise that new teachers

need extensive support and learning on the job. Research documents that new teachers struggle with similar issues in their first few years in the classroom, including classroom management, dealing with differences among students, assessing student work, motivating students to learn, interacting with colleagues, and communicating with parents. To help teachers cope with these professional demands, countries such as Switzerland, Japan and the US are creating **special induction programmes**.

In Japan, for example, the first year of teaching includes about 90 days of intensive, subsidised training, in and out of school. Each new teacher is assigned an experienced teacher to act as a mentor or guide, and both parties are given reduced teaching responsibilities so they can work together effectively throughout the year. In Switzerland, almost all cantons have induction programmes that novice teachers must complete to be fully certified. For Heinz Rhy, who directs the department of quality assurance for the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, “newcomers face specific problems, and we have to help them get over these problems.”

In the US, Peer Assistance and Review Programs, operated under joint agreements between unions and school districts in such cities as Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo, Ohio, and Rochester, N.Y., are designed, in part, to identify who is likely to be an effective teacher and who is not, and to dismiss or counsel the latter before they receive tenure. New teachers also use this scheme to decide whether teaching really is the right job for them.

Developing a **working environment** that is more conducive to teaching and learning, for example, by matching assignments to skills, and providing a sense of leadership, vocation and teamwork, is also key to increasing teachers’ effectiveness and keeping them in the classroom. In Ontario, Canada’s Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is a major initiative designed to have all students read, write, do math, and comprehend at a high level by age 12. Reducing primary class sizes is part of the strategy, and providing intensive training in how to teach literacy and numeracy effectively is also provided. The

initiative has also increased the number of “lead teachers” in the primary grades, who share best practices with other teachers in their schools.

The common element in all countries is the recognition that good teaching is an intellectual enterprise, in which teachers draw upon knowledge and evidence to solve problems particular to their school. Retaining and supporting effective teachers means making them part of that knowledge-generating enterprise, not just passive recipients of prescriptions handed down from above.

But policies also have to address issues of **teacher pay** and the potential for career growth. According to the OECD report, in the last 20 years, in most countries teachers’ salaries have declined relative to other occupations that require similar levels of education and training. Moreover, in 70%

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of the countries studied, the report found that it takes at least 20 years for lower secondary teachers to move from the bottom to the top of the salary scale, which is long compared with many other professions nowadays.

To help make teaching a more attractive career choice, many countries are creating new roles and responsibilities for teachers that reward their expertise without taking them out of the classroom. Creating a stronger connection between teachers’ contributions and the pay and other rewards they receive will be central in redesigning teaching for the next generation.

Among the countries participating in the Aspen-OECD seminar, Singapore has arguably the most developed career system for teachers, with a performance-based pay plan in place for about a decade. More recently, the government has created three career tracks for teachers: a leadership

track, a specialist track and a teaching track. The “teaching track” caters to the majority of educators, who want to focus on achieving excellence in the classroom. Within that track, teachers can move up from a “senior teacher” to a “master teacher” with their pay rising to reflect both their expertise and additional responsibilities. The track approach helps the school keep the really good teachers in the classroom, says Wong Siew Hoong, the director of schools for the ministry of education.

The US also has promising ingredients for the development of a full-fledged teacher career and compensation system. Nearly 50,000 US teachers have earned recognition from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a voluntary assessment programme that certifies accomplished teachers who have met professional standards. A growing number of states and districts are also experimenting with paying teachers based on their performance.

In today’s knowledge-based global economy, schools and teaching must evolve. While no country can simply transpose the teaching policies of another, “there is tremendous learning to be gained from looking at more comprehensive international examples and cutting-edge states and districts,” argues Arlene Ackerman, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

There is much work to be done, and the examples in the Aspen-OECD work suggest ways the profession might change to help teachers become more effective in the classroom and make teaching a truly competitive career choice. ■

References

- For a longer report on the Aspen-OECD seminar and profiles and analyses of teaching policies in the 8 participating nations, visit the Aspen Institute website at www.aspeninstitute.org/education/teachingpolicy
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