

Finding, Developing, and Supporting Teachers: Challenges for Today's School Leaders

Ken Mitchell, EdD
Editor

AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice
Winter 2024-25

The Winter 2024-25 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is focused on teachers. The impact of their work can be profound, leaving indelible impressions on generations of students that influence all of society. Their teaching often goes beyond the formal stated curriculum, embedded with tacit lessons on civility, morality, ethics, and fairness - life lessons that can shape character, ideally for the advancement of a civil and just society.

Yet in recent times teachers and school leaders have faced resistance from those opposed to any classroom discussion of topics pertaining to social or emotional development, arguing that these should remain the purview of the parent. Instruction should be bound to the basics, not topics that examine content that can present as ambiguous, requiring critical interrogation and introspection, sometimes in contrast with parental understanding or beliefs.

The assumption of the “stick to the basics” argument is that what “should” be left to the parent is indeed being addressed in the

home, yet this does not always happen. For many students, the school becomes a surrogate for the family. For 10 months out of the year, children and adolescents spend more than half of their waking day in school; relationships develop organically as does learning.

Proactive educators cultivate healthy relationships with students that combine academics with personal, social, and physical development. America's great educator and philosopher John Dewey advanced a timeless ideal that schools should be designed for cultivating thoughtful, critically reflective, and socially engaged individuals rather than recipients of established knowledge (Dewey, 1916).

These are often the most indelible and life-altering lessons. Teaching is important work. Despite their potency for good and their success in serving what has been perhaps the most transformative public education system in history, teachers are too often maligned and undervalued by those who lack understanding of the enormity and complexity of learning and

the relationship of skillful and research-informed teaching to maximize it.

Dufour & Fullan (2013) distinguish how instruction is viewed from the education professionals as being technically sophisticated, perfected through continuous improvement, and guided by judgment that comes from extensive training with a balance of evidence, collegiality, and experience. Skillful teaching is a collective activity that carries great responsibility.

Such a perspective counters the limited and naive view of those who perceive teaching as technically simple—essentially didactic—requiring moderate intellectual ability. They see it as a delivery of content, rather than a construction of meaning through scaffolding and structured social exchanges. It is a dangerous misunderstanding that proposes replacing the constructivist core through instructional technology and remote instruction from which results are presumed to be more easily measured.

Hawkins in City, E. A., Elmore, R., Fiarman, S., & Teitel, L. (2009), refers to “the ‘I’ (the teacher), the ‘thou’ (the student), and the ‘it’ (the content), which is the essential “instructional core.” While the best of leaders from the principal to the superintendent make it their priority to protect this “core,” there are uncertain times and disruptive events when it is the teacher who must preserve the essence of it. And they do.

Today’s schools are perhaps more complex than at any time in our nation’s history due to changing national political dynamics, transformative technologies, and planetary events related to economics, international relations, and climate change. More than ever, school leaders need to find the

most qualified teachers to prepare our students to take on the challenges and uncertainties associated with these changes.

Just as the hiring of the superintendent is the most important responsibility of the school board, school leaders are tasked with hiring the most competent and caring educators. Yet, hiring teachers has become increasingly more challenging.

According to the Learning Policy Institute (2024) at the outset of the 2024 school year, thirty states reported over 41,000 teacher vacancies with a total of over 400,000, either unfilled or filled by teachers uncertified for their assignments.

Interest in entering the profession has lagged and for reasons aside from concerns of low pay. Encouraging and developing the talent of those with such potential to enter this field has become an essential priority for school leaders.

Over the past year, several of our JSP researchers have studied some of these topics. In “Why Texas Teachers Leave the Classroom: A Qualitative Look into Non-retirement Attrition,” the researchers found that teachers in the systems they studied “believe they are overworked and undervalued in a 360-degree space.” They experience pressure to raise student achievement while managing bureaucratic tasks from school and district level leadership, contributing to low morale from being overwhelmed and overworked. This combined with the challenges of working with “disrespectful, threatening, and apathetic students and varying levels and types of parental involvement contribute to higher attrition. Their study serves as a snapshot of why teachers are exiting the profession at greater rates than past generations.

In “Elementary Teacher Planning Time: Finding Innovation through Focused Collaboration,” the researchers studied a district that took measures to understand how to best support teachers’ collaborative learning and planning within the limitations and challenges of the traditional school schedule. Their work generated “actionable steps for the district, an assessment of multiple innovative scheduling ideas, and evidence of the universal value of collaboration in driving change.” A key to successful retention practices is to enhance the professional learning environment. Providing time with colleagues to learn and plan is one way to achieve this.

The next two articles in this issue focus on unique ways to increase the teacher pipeline. In “A Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway in a Rural, Midwest State: Perspectives of Teacher Apprentices,” the authors acknowledged how the national teacher shortage makes it challenging for principals and superintendents to hire certified teachers. They shared a university-educational agency model designed to address this problem via a “teacher apprenticeship pathway (TAP) for 78 paraprofessionals working in the state’s public, non-public, and tribal schools.” The researchers examined the program through the lenses of participants, who were pursuing a pathway to a teaching degree.

In “To Teach or Not to Teach: A Qualitative Study of Pre-Collegiate Grow Your Own Teacher Programs and the Perceptions of Alumni, Current Staff, and Former Staff,” the researcher studied a “grow your own” program designed to “recruit” current middle and high school students to the profession. The qualitative multiple case study explored the use of such programs through the perspectives of

Black and/or Latinx alumni, program staff, and former staff.

The final article offers readers a unique perspective on an under considered aspect of teaching—teacher vocal wellness. In “Raising the Volume on Teacher Vocal Wellness: Perspectives from Practicing School Administrators,” the authors contend that “Teacher voice health is an important but overlooked issue with consequences for educators, students, and schools.” This qualitative study examined how administrators understood teachers’ vocal complaints and relevant policies. Focus groups made up of 18 administrators yielded key insights: 1) Reliance on voice amplification, 2) Attitudes and responses, 3) Perceived impacts on learning, and 4) Proposed interventions.”

Teachers are perhaps the center of the instructional core. Yet, ironically, the profession is least understood and too often disrespected by the public and those seeking to transform education.

The answer to the question, “How hard can it be?” cannot be understood by those who have not done the work or refuse to accept its complexity.

American schools are confronted with the realities of a teacher shortage that cannot be solved by technology, volunteers, or expedited certification.

School systems need smart and curious teachers who enter the profession with dedication to students and a willingness to develop the skills for complex work. Quality learning experiences need qualified teachers. If today’s leaders are unable to find or develop them, our society is in trouble.

References

City, E. A., Elmore, R., Fiarman, S., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education*. Harvard Educational Publishing Group.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.

DuFour, R., & Fullan, M. (2013). *Cultures built to last: systemic PLCs at work*. Bloomington, IN, Solution Tree Press.

Learning Policy Institute. (2024, July 31). State teacher shortages: 2024 update.
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/state-teacher-shortages-vacancy-resource-tool-2024>