

who will teach?

No issue concerns New England “opinion leaders” more than the quality of public schools. In fact, business, education and government leaders surveyed by the New England Board of Higher Education in 1999 indicated that the single most important thing *higher education* could do to contribute to New England’s economic development would be to improve the quality of local schools.

How? By applying academic expertise to school curricula and instruction, perhaps. By aligning school standards with college admissions policies, maybe. By easing student transitions from secondary school to college, probably. And certainly, by improving pre-service and in-service teacher education.

A wave of teacher retirements is expected just as fewer college-bound students express a preference for teaching careers, and more diverse students reach school age. Former U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley suggested the nation would need more than 2 million new teachers over the next decade. Following are some perspectives on innovations in P-16 and particularly on the profoundly important question: Who will teach?

There is No Shortage of Teachers, Just Skilled Teachers

RICHARD M. FREELAND

We have once again experienced an annual ritual that speaks volumes about the state of our states and, indeed, our republic. As one school year ends, many public school teachers of long standing conclude that it is time to end their careers in education and move on to another profession or to retirement. By mid-summer, reports begin to appear in the local and national media about a looming teacher shortage as school districts anticipate September. By late summer, media coverage of the teacher shortage has taken on a sense of panic *a la* “Mass. schools scrambling to fill teacher vacancies.” The newspapers create the impression that fall will bring rooms full of 13-year-olds left to their own devices. Then comes September, as it always does, and we learn that virtually every teaching job is filled.

This annual rollercoaster ride suggests a few propositions:

First, getting the best teachers with the strongest skills in front of our students is the key not only to giving young people the chance to live full and rewarding lives, but also to improving the economy and the society.

Second, we do not face a “teacher shortage” *per se*, but rather something like a “skills shortage” among those who enlist to serve as teachers.

Third, without a doubt, there exists today sufficient numbers of individuals with the talent, interest,

patience, intellect, character and determination to provide all students with the kind of teaching and nurturing we would want for our own children.

A further proposition: we as a society (we university presidents, we neighborhood residents, we corporate CEOs, we community activists, newspaper publishers, mayors and governors and senators and legislators) are responsible for letting our school districts down, for placing them in the unholy posture of having to “scramble” every year to find the talent they

need to fulfill their responsibilities and to realize our hopes for our children and our communities.

Skills shortage

A new study by Northeastern University’s Center for Labor Market Studies offers the first statistical glimpse into the challenge faced by Massachusetts school districts each year. The Northeastern study found that, come late September, all but a few classrooms in Massachusetts were staffed by a teacher. At the same time, the study found that more than one-quarter of all secondary school teachers hired in Massachusetts last year lacked certification in their primary teaching area. The problem was particularly acute among special education, foreign language and math and science teachers.

The study also anticipates that, over the next five to seven years, this fundamental teacher skills deficit will worsen considerably. An aging teacher workforce combined with new incentives for older teachers to retire means that last year’s comparatively low teacher turnover rate will rise over the next several years. The increased rate of retirement will not only boost quit rates directly but will also increase teacher turnover indirectly as school districts replace experienced teachers with new entrants in the teaching field. These freshly minted teachers are much more likely to leave the teaching profession in the first few years after entry than their older counterparts—further exacerbating the shortage of qualified teachers throughout New England.

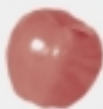
The much discussed teacher shortage is not a clas-

sic labor shortage in which too many jobs chase too few qualified individuals. Rather, our predicament is the result of a recruitment and compensation system designed decades ago which has not kept pace with the contemporary economy. The hidebound set of contracts, rules, customs and professional relationships that may have worked in decades past to enrich our schools are now encumbrances that keep us from placing the teachers we need in front of students.

Is there a shortage of math and science teachers? How could there not be, when most of those men and women who are trained to teach math and science can substantially increase their salaries with a short hop into the private sector where they will surely encounter far better working conditions and greater societal respect for their efforts.

New England can rest on its laurels and revel in past glories. Or we can think anew about the implications of the so-called teacher shortage. Should we take the latter course, we might begin by asking ourselves what kinds of changes in teacher compensation and working conditions it would take to put in front of a class of 13-year-olds a woman or man who has dedicated her or his career to learning and teaching and who is richly equipped to impart to students the knowledge, skills and inspiration they need to make their maximum contribution to our communities.

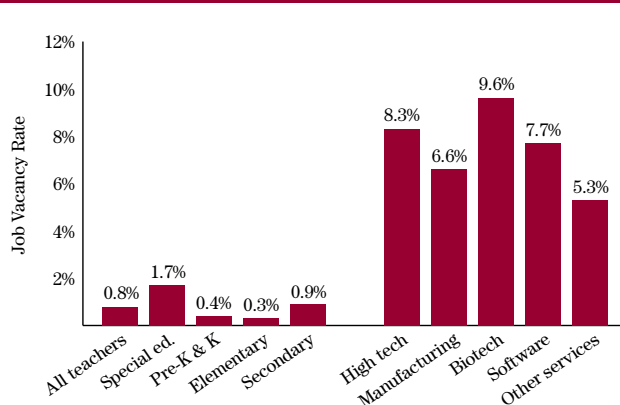
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A Different Kind of Shortage

Job vacancy rates and rising wages are the basic signals of imbalances in most labor markets. But labor shortages in the teaching profession are different, according to a study by Northeastern University’s Center for Labor Market Studies. Shortages reveal themselves through changes in teacher quality, not quantity. Rather than let a teaching job go unfilled, school districts often hire people who lack certification or degrees in the subjects for which they are hired to teach.

**Massachusetts Job Vacancy Rates:
Public Schools vs. Technology-Intensive Industries**



Source: Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies.