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## The Ghost of Teacher Shortages Past...

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Here's something I've been struggling to understand of late. What makes the prospect of a teacher shortage such an immediately compelling narrative, capable of spreading with all the speed of a brush fire?

With almost no real data--because neither states nor the federal government collect the data that's really needed to pronounce the onset of a teacher shortage--we witness the press, school districts, state school boards, and even the US Congress all concluding we are in the throes of a full blown national crisis.

At the root of this crisis was a random New York Times news story published two summers ago in which eight school districts reported in August that they were having a tough time filling positions (though all but two ultimately started the year just fine). Whoosh! Overnight the teacher shortage became real.

That early rumbling was then steadily fed by news stories that teacher preparation programs were facing unprecedented enrollment drops. Whoosh! Nobody thought it important to mention that teacher preparation programs had for years been graduating twice as many teachers as are needed.

Get this. Over the last 30 years, programs have graduated between 175,000 and 300,000 teachers each year, yet consistently school districts have only hired somewhere between 60,000 to 140,000, with about 95,000 being the most recent number.

The blaze reached new heights last week with a new report from Learning Policy Institute, producing a scary chart that shows an ever widening gap between teacher supply and demand over the next nine years. While I would not characterize LPI's supply and demand projections as irresponsible or even without some merit, they were predicated on glass-half-empty assumptions that economist Dan Goldhaber rightfully questioned in this 74 editorial. (It's also worth mentioning Mike Antonucci's reminder of the report's déjà-vu qualities given that LPI is led by Linda Darling-Hammond.)

Let's make this simple. Simply by tweaking just one of the assumptions made by LPI, the results are altogether different. For example, if we project that the class size average of student to teacher is 16.1 to 1 (which, importantly, *it is currently*) rather than LPI's estimate of 15.3 to 1, voila! The shortage disappears *entirely*.

Anyone basing predictions on the available data needs to be transparent about the limitations and assumptions baked into the analysis-which I would argue LPI was not- and be clear that if anything changes (such as class size, or slower than expected student population growth, or a renewed interest in teaching following the end of the Great Recession), their predictions will shift dramatically.

The systems to report whether districts are facing a shortage exist in a small number of states (data is recent but not in real time) and not at the federal level at all. Contrast this to the reporting on the health of the American economy, which is done routinely with mountains of real-time data at the federal, state, and business levels. Even then, no one would declare a depression based on years-old data and rough hiring projections a decade from now. But somehow doing exactly this is ok for teacher shortages.

What I find so frustrating about all of this is that we do actually have a long standing, *huge* problem with teacher supply and demand - one that not only gets lost in the current rhetoric but that is, believe it or not, actually ill served by what could be a drummed up crisis.

Let me explain this apparent contradiction in my logic.

For 30 years nearly every district in the nation has struggled to find enough secondary science and math teachers. Also and for just as long, rural and urban districts have been unable to tap into a reliable and stable source of new teachers, putting band aids like Teach For America on the problem.

One of the answers is to pay such teachers more than other teachers are paid, but most districts continue to reject that solution because it is untenable with their unions. For STEM teachers we could ramp up the availability of part-time teaching positions, but again few districts and states embrace this option--also because unions worry that districts will begin replacing full-time employees and their costly benefits with part-timers.

For even longer than those shortages have been so problematic, school districts have been awash with applicants for elementary teaching positions. That's because teacher prep programs don't see it as their job to tell their incoming candidates that they can't all major in elementary ed, that they'll need to consider another teaching field like special ed or ELL where there is real need. The problem is that higher ed accepts no responsibility for aligning teacher production with district demand. Given that those teacher prep programs can't operate without state approval, states could conceivably impose limits on production in some areas.

All of these workable solutions to address the dearth of secondary STEM teachers are not on the agenda of those who declare the nation to be in throes of a teacher shortage. While the LPI report mentions differential pay in passing, it is drowned out by a flood of other recommendations such as across-the-board pay increases--which, let's be perfectly clear, may be great for the teaching

profession writ large, but will do nothing to persuade someone to take a harder teaching job versus a less hard one if the pay is the same. Other solutions, such as increasing the supply of qualified teachers through such pathways as more residency models and retention strategies such as mentoring, induction, and better working conditions are, I would go so far as to say, almost beside the point.

I'm inspired by what can happen when districts just start working smarter. No district in the country faced worse shortages than Clark County, Nevada. Faced with a staggering 1,000 teacher vacancies at the start of the 2015-16 school year, few would have expected that just one year later the district would have begun the school year with nearly 700 fewer vacancies.

How did they do this? They got smart about recruiting. The district negotiated a higher starting salary for new teachers. With great success, their interim Chief Human Capital Officer Mike Gentry targeted potential applicants in areas with notoriously high costs of living, including Chicago, California, New York, and Pennsylvania. The team made a real effort to *market* the benefits of working in Clark County schools; Gentry estimates that more than two million people have seen advertisements for the district on Facebook and other social media platforms. Finally, as the Las Vegas Sun reports, state efforts to ease certification requirements and improve certification reciprocity have supported the work of the Clark County team. This is an approach eminently employable elsewhere.

The fall out of faux teacher shortages is of tremendous consequence. They routinely result in both states and school districts lowering standards for who is licensed and hired. But more importantly, and perhaps deliberately, they serve to distract us from fixing the chronic and persistent misalignment of teacher supply and demand.

— Kate Walsh

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