

New Teacher Support— Held Hostage by Accountability

Written by the MetLife Fellows in the Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI)

Words 555

As the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) junta turns up the heat on its hostile takeover of public instruction and the power pundits sharpen up their verbiage for the upcoming voucher wars, many states seem ill-prepared to meet the challenge of teacher retention. Enshrouded in a banner of monochromatic standards and unfunded mandates, the statehouse seems rigidly fixed as thousands of first and second year teachers quietly tiptoe away.

Perhaps we shouldn't worry. After all, with Washington's new standards for "highly qualified teachers" up and running, anyone who can pass a content specific multiple-choice exam will bear the federal stamp of excellence. So much for inspiration, classroom management skills, and content specific pedagogy. Teachers of tomorrow will be of an assembly line uniformity that would have made Henry Ford blush.

Every autumn, all over the country, new college grads unlock their classroom doors for the first time in preparation for public instruction. They congratulate themselves on selecting a career devoid of ethical compromise while shunning the siren charms of big business vice. Yet these harbingers of literacy, hope, and pluralism are not long for public service. As many as fifty percent leave in the first three years. Why?

Inadequate support for new teachers. Most states offer little more than a one-day orientation. Occasionally, schools identify a veteran teacher as the site mentor but, lacking regular release time from the classroom, these mentors can provide little more than a smile in the mailroom. To its credit, California has been working for years to stave off the annual mass desertion of new teachers to the private sector. Created in 1994, the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program (BTSA) was originally designed to meet the practical and pedagogical needs of first and second year teachers by providing

mentor support, peer observation, and collaboration, as well as help to understand the site culture and the realities of classroom teaching. But, BTSA has recently been transformed by the public cry for standards and better-trained teachers into yet another hurdle for new teachers who often struggle with the least desirable classes, unwanted adjunct duties, no fixed classroom, and interminable hours of lesson planning and grading. Now BTSA requires that new teachers fulfill rigorous coursework and a self-reflection portfolio on their own time. The reason for the change is accountability. Put frankly, it is easier to show a bang-for-the-buck if new teachers fill up a box with artifacts than if they spend an hour a day seeking support or clarification through professional conversation with colleagues.

What must be done? If we agree that the loss of so many well-prepared but inexperienced teachers—as well as the loss of many billions of public dollars spent annually in support of teacher education—is unacceptable, then we must radically redesign our ways of inducting new teachers. State representatives must design new teacher support programs to provide practical assistance instead of bureaucratic red tape. All new teachers must be paired up with willing and capable mentor teachers. New teachers and mentors alike must be freed from classroom responsibility on a regular basis to invest time in peer observation and coaching as well as informal conversation.

Contact your local boards of education and principals to find out how they are introducing new teachers into your schools and communities. A good teacher is a terrible thing to waste.