A Perfect Storm

America's economic and political leaders should be concerned about the state of teacher recruitment and retention. A major teacher shortage has been predicted, and Mr. Budig relates how the College Board's Center for Innovative Thought proposes to bring greater prestige to the teaching profession.

BY GENE A. BUDIG

Those people who are entrusted with the economic and social future of the United States should be unnerved about what is happening — and not happening — in the essential areas of teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention. The nation's citizens, business leaders, and politicians have been warned repeatedly about an impending disaster, a "perfect storm" that is brewing, and yet their responses have been temperate and, at times, even dismissive.

The facts related to this developing storm are many, and they are indisputable and profoundly troubling. Any realistic inventory would include the following:

• America employs about 2.9 million teachers, and schools will have to hire at least two million new teachers in the coming decade in order to handle enrollment increases, teacher retirements, turnover, and career changes.
• Nearly half of the new K-12 teachers will leave the profession within five years.
• Teaching in America's K-12 schools is one of the nation's lowest-paid professions at the entry level, and it is common for teachers with five or 10 years of experience to earn less than recent graduates who have embarked on other careers.
• In the country's middle schools, more than 20% of math teachers and more than 40% of physical science teachers are teaching "out of field" or without some necessary qualifications.
• Inner-city communities and rural areas are experiencing the greatest challenges in recruiting high-quality
teachers for their classrooms.

- Certain countries (including China and India) that are principal threats to our economic supremacy accord teachers far greater respect, recognition, and encouragement than does the U.S. Yet economists agree that, if America is to be globally competitive in the coming years, we must retain an intellectual edge.

Mindful of such sobering facts and of the fundamental importance of America’s ability to continue to lead internationally, the College Board’s Center for Innovative Thought, whose members include prominent academic, business, and political leaders, spent more than a year examining the matter of teacher supply and demand. Center members and a support staff of respected education professionals reviewed all of the major studies of the past decade, debated countless directions and possible options, and came up with a six-part plan, which is detailed in *Teachers and the Uncertain American Future*. A number of specific recommendations buttress each of the six elements of what amounts to a “new compact” between America and its teachers.

**SALARIES FOR THE REAL WORLD**

Schools must pay teachers salaries for the real world. What that means is increasing salary expenditures for teachers by an average of 15% to 20% now — and by 50% within the foreseeable future. Our report calls for the creation of a “Teachers’ Trust” that would fund a general salary increase for all teachers as well as targeted increases to support teachers in disciplines experiencing shortages, teachers in challenging schools, and teachers who are making exemplary contributions to the profession. This Teachers’ Trust would hold funds from the federal government — perhaps raised through a tax on windfall profits — along with matching funds from state and local governments and even monies from the private sector.

While creating the trust would clearly require legislation, it would be a historic reaffirmation of the importance of education to the U.S. It is naive and dangerous for America to think it can skimp on salaries and still attract the best young minds to teaching.

**A PREFERRED PROFESSION**

Teaching always ranks high when judged against other professions. A 1999 poll by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Public Relations Society of America Foundation found teachers’ credibility among the public to be second only to that of Supreme Court justices. However, a recent Public Agenda survey, *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why*, showed that a majority of college graduates who do not enter teaching believe teachers do not feel adequately respected and appreciated.

How do we go about seeing to it that teaching becomes a “preferred profession”? We can take a number of steps, beginning with improving the working conditions of teachers, implementing some kind of advancement within the career (perhaps along the lines of New Mexico’s three-tiered licensure system), and creating communities of learning within schools and school districts. China, India, and Japan are moving swiftly to address these and other areas of fundamental need. Every state here should be developing and funding mentoring programs that would provide...
novice teachers with access to the experience and wisdom of more seasoned peers. Even in the short term, such programs would clearly have an early impact both on the quality of instruction and on the retention of teachers.

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS INTO TEACHING

The Center for Innovative Thought dropped a heavy oar into rough waters with its call for the creation of multiple pathways into teaching. The group recommended a cease-fire in the war between traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs, so that high-quality preparation around substance and practice becomes the norm in all preparation programs, whether offered by colleges and universities, by school districts, or by nonprofit organizations.

Students deserve teachers who know their subjects, understand students and their learning needs, and have developed the skills essential to make learning come alive. Despite significant improvements, the current system of teacher preparation does not meet all the nation’s well-documented needs. Out-of-field teaching in secondary schools and the difficulties of staffing at some schools have become chronic realities and underscore the complexity of the challenge.

The center’s report notes, “Although research on the impact of different types of teacher education programs does not provide clear evidence of the superiority of any particular program type (e.g., four-year versus five-year, traditional versus alternative), it does suggest that program components, such as clear and consistent vision of teaching and learning, are related to teacher quality and student achievement.” Research demonstrates that, under the right conditions, “strategies used in teacher education programs, such as case studies and teaching portfolios,” can have a positive effect on students. But some alternatives, such as Teach for America, though that initiative remains small and far from perfect, provide able and enthusiastic (if inexperienced) novice teachers for some difficult school settings.

CLOSING THE DIVERSITY GAP

In calling for an immediate closing of the diversity gap, the center’s report recommends abandoning the expectation that the diversity of the teaching force will take care of itself. Institutions of higher learning must mount intense and targeted recruitment programs to attract minority students. One component of these programs must be generous financial aid and eventual loan forgiveness tied to years of service.

Despite the impressive progress the nation has made in advancing the civil rights agenda, equal opportunity remains only a promise to many. Increasing the numbers of minority teachers must become a far greater part of the fulfillment of this aged promise. Without question, the educational achievement gap will be easier to remedy if the diversity gap in the teaching force is addressed in a forceful and constructive manner.

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE TEACHING

The center called for an early fix to the crisis in mathematics and science teaching, recommending incentive programs to increase by 50% the number of young people entering careers in math, science, and engineering (including mathematics and science teaching). America must expand its pool of technically trained talent by vastly improving K-12 mathematics and science education.

There are no inexpensive solutions here. The United States must sustain its commitment to long-term basic research while developing, recruiting, and retaining top students, scientists, and engineers from America and abroad. The bottom line is that the U.S. must ensure that it remains a premier place for innovation in the world. Only then will it be positioned to be a continuing force for good internationally.

INVEST NOW OR PAY LATER?

The center argues that America must invest for success now, rather than pay for failure later. Through the proposed national Teachers’ Trust, the reforms discussed here can be funded. A fiercely competitive global economy, powered by intellect and innovation, demands the very best from us, and especially from our young men and women. Few will debate this premise, but the resolve of politicians and taxpayers alike grows weaker when the actual costs are addressed. But progress has never been cheap, and the challenge for America has never been greater than it is today. Never.

Teaching is a massive human enterprise, whose training needs dwarf those of the military. The costs are huge, but the nation can no longer rely on altruism. The funds that go toward the creation of a first-class teaching force are investments, not expenses. And the nation cannot afford not to invest in the profession. Teachers matter.
