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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Can We Interest You In Teaching?

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Teaching can't compete.

When the economy improves and job prospects multiply, college students turn their attention elsewhere, to professions that promise more money, more independence, more respect.

That was one takeaway from a widely discussed story in The Times on Sunday by Motoko Rich, who charted teacher shortages so severe in certain areas of the country that teachers are being rushed into classrooms with dubious qualifications and before they've earned their teaching credentials.

It's a sad, alarming state of affairs, and it proves that for all our lip service about improving the education of America's children, we've failed to make teaching the draw that it should be, the honor that it must be. Nationally, enrollment in teacher preparation programs dropped by 30 percent between 2010 and 2014, as Rich reported.

To make matters worse, more than 40 percent of the people who *do* go into teaching exit the profession within five years.

How do we make teaching more rewarding, so that it beckons to not only enough college graduates but to a robust share of the very best of them?

Better pay is a must. There's no getting around that. Many teachers in many areas can't hope to buy a house and support a family on their incomes, and college students contemplating careers know that. If those students are taking on debt, teaching isn't likely to provide a timely way to pay it off. The average salary nationally for public school

teachers, *including* those with decades in the classroom, is under \$57,000; starting salaries in some states barely crest \$30,000.

There's also the issue of autonomy.

"The No. 1 thing is giving teachers a voice, a real voice," Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, said to me this week.

Education leaders disagree over how much of a voice and in what. Weingarten emphasizes teacher involvement in policy, and a survey of some 30,000 teachers and other school workers done by the A.F.T. and the Badass Teachers Association in late April showed that one large source of stress was being left out of such decisions.

Others focus on primarily letting teachers chart the day-by-day path to the goals laid out for them, so that they're not just obedient vessels for a one-size-fits-all script. Hold them accountable, but give them discretion.

The political battles over education, along with the shifting vogues about what's best, have left many teachers feeling like pawns and punching bags. And while that's no reason not to implement promising new approaches or to shrink from experimentation, it puts an onus on policy makers and administrators to bring generous measures of training, support and patience to the task.

Teachers crave better opportunities for career growth. Evan Stone, one of the chief executives of Educators 4 Excellence, which represents about 17,000 teachers nationwide, called for "career ladders for teachers to move into specialist roles, master-teacher roles."

"They're worried that they're going to be doing the same thing on Day 1 as they'll be doing 30 years in," he told me.

He also questioned licensing laws that prevent the easy movement of an exemplary teacher from one state to another. Minnesota recently relaxed such requirements; if other states followed suit, it might build a desirable new flexibility into the profession.

Teaching also needs to be endowed with greater prestige. One intriguing line of thought about how to do this is to make the requirements for becoming a teacher more difficult, so that a teaching credential has luster. In the book "The Smartest Kids in the World," Amanda Ripley noted that Finland's teachers are revered in part because they're the survivors of selective screening and rigorous training.

Kate Walsh, the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, told me that in this country, “It’s pretty firmly rooted in college students that education is a fairly easy major.” Too often, it’s also “a major of last resort,” she said.

Dan Brown, a co-director of Educators Rising, which encourages teenagers to contemplate careers in the classroom, said that teaching might be ready for its own Flexner Report, an early 1900s document that revolutionized medical schools and raised the bar for American medicine, contributing to the aura that surrounds physicians today.

He also asked why, in the intensifying political discussions about making college more affordable, there’s not more talk of methods “to recognize and incentivize future public servants,” foremost among them teachers.

There should be. The health of our democracy and the perpetuation of our prosperity depend on teaching no less than they do on Wall Street’s machinations or Silicon Valley’s innovations. So let’s make the classroom a destination as sensible, exciting and fulfilling as any other.

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