

Teacher shortages reflect turmoil in education

By Jim Nowlan

The teacher shortages popping up around the country, especially in poor rural as well as troubled urban districts, probably reflect the consequences of turmoil that has beset education since the scathing “A Nation at Risk” report in 1983 that declared American public schools were failing.

A recent survey by the Illinois association of regional education superintendents found that 60 percent of reporting school districts had staffing difficulties this past year and 16 percent had to cancel classes due to shortages of qualified teachers.

My rural district has had a deuce of a time finding a Spanish teacher and has resorted to an online offering to provide its single foreign language. Industrial arts, agriculture and “home ec” slots are also hard to fill in rural areas, while bilingual and special ed teachers are hard to come by in urban districts.

The situation will get worse. Enrollment in teacher ed programs nationally has dropped from 691,000 in 2009 to 451,000 in 2014.

Illinois State University in Normal has always been a major producer of teachers. ISU administrator Ameer Adkins reports that graduation of newly minted teachers at her university has declined from 1,000 in 2009 to 750 this past year, and that similar reductions are the case across the 55 teacher ed programs in Illinois.

Prosperous suburban schools with good teacher pay, often averaging \$100,000 (\$110,000 for New Trier High faculty in Winnetka), will have few problems finding faculty.

But Downstate rural districts, where average (not starting) pay ranges from \$38,000 to \$58,000, are many times scraping the bottom of the barrel for teachers, often coming up empty.

Modest pay and recently trimmed pension benefits in Illinois for teachers, who must now work until 68 before pension eligibility, are probably factors in college student decisions to turn away from teaching.

Yet I think the never-ending turmoil in education also contributes to the downturn in teacher aspirants.

The business community has for decades been beating on teachers, their unions and administrators for falling way behind Finland and Shanghai in student test scores.

Under this pressure, public policy wonks in ivied towers, often without classroom experience, have been churning out reforms *du jour*, rarely asking teachers in the trenches for their input.

In recent years, Illinois education leaders have foisted three or more testing regimens, one after another, on teachers. Teachers find it hard to keep up with what is expected of them and of how they will be evaluated.

[While derided by outsiders as apparently inept, teachers are on the other had expected to be combinations of inspirational instructors, social workers, often almost substitute parents.]

Teachers say: Give us, as in Finland, Shanghai and Winnetka, children from stable families who set and support high expectations for their children, provide them hearty breakfasts, and maybe even come to parent-teacher conferences now and then. Do that and we will do just fine by your children.

I talked recently with eight active or recently retired teachers I respect. Would they recommend teaching as a career for their children?

Most said No, even though they mostly found their teaching careers rewarding.

The lament I heard most often was that of “pressure to teach to the standardized tests,” which takes the zest out of teaching, the teachers said.

Next came the frustration over an apparent lack of discipline of children in many homes, which is reflected by unruliness in the classroom.

Then there is the lack of parental support. One teacher told me only 20 percent of his pupils’ parents came to parent-teacher conferences—and they are, you guessed it, the parents whose children are doing just fine.

Others said teaching could be a good career, but not in Illinois, where state budget problems put pensions and future pay boosts in peril.

If teachers themselves aren’t talking up their profession to the next generation, is it any wonder fewer young people are pursuing careers?

So, with the pipeline of young, new teachers narrowing, what can be done to supplement the teacher corps?

National Louis University, based in Chicago and its suburbs, has been a leader in certifying “career changers” for teaching, helping create a new pipeline of 350 additional teachers annually.

National Louis offers a popular master of arts in teaching (MAT) for those who, say, retire early from their professions as accountants, engineers, lawyers and want to try their hand at teaching young people.

MAT students can keep working as they take coursework in evenings and on weekends over 18 months to two years. [In some cases, where demand for teachers is great, a career

changer can go into the classroom immediately with “alternative certification,” backed by strong supervision, as he or she also pursues the MAT coursework.]

And, of course, national and state policymakers can also reduce what I call the turmoil in teaching, by cutting back on testing and the reforms *du jour*.