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Illinois teachers under stress

By Jim Nowlan

Most of us have fond recollections of a favorite teacher(s) who sparked our interest in learning. Since the last half of the 19th Century public school teachers have been the bedrock of American society.

In recent decades, however, teachers have become the punching bags (at least teachers feel that way) for elites, parents and all who lament the state of American education.

The policy elites feel a need to put teachers into strait-jackets of teaching to high-stakes tests. Parents are too quick to blame the teacher rather than their child for any behavior problems, and state school agencies are burying the teachers in paperwork for their data-driven analysts.

And we all lament (as we always have) why Johnny can't read or write.

So I recently gathered six area teachers who are experienced and respected. The six teach everything from math to foreign languages; they have 161 total years of classroom experience. Their rural districts enroll anywhere from 35-70 percent low-income students.

Since teachers are rarely asked by elites what they think, I asked them, "What do you think about American education?"

The answers were not all what I expected.

"Eliminate tenure," said one, to the positive nodding of heads from all the others.

"We all know teachers who shouldn't be in the classroom," he said. "Yet my district board is told it will cost \$300,000 to fire a teacher, and we can't afford that, so the teachers stay."

The teachers I visited with sure don't want at-will firings by a new school board or superintendent. Instead, they say, there should be a process for coaching, mentoring, maybe encouraging departure, and firing when necessary.

“School district boundaries should be eliminated,” said a science teacher. “Let students enroll in any district that seems the best fit, as they can in Iowa. Some administrators become complacent, knowing they have a captive audience.”

Teaching to the test frustrates these teachers.

“Teaching is a creative art,” declared another science teacher. “There are different ways to reach and turn on the lights for each student. Don't suppress that creativity with so much emphasis on teaching to the test.”

The teachers could also use more help from the parents. Attendance at parent-teacher conferences is good in elementary school, said one, yet poor at the high school level.

“Maybe at the high school level, many parents feel they can't help their children,” she observed.

The teacher went on to note, however, that she once taught at Geneseo High, a bedroom community for many Quad-Cities executives. And all the parents, with their high expectations for success, turned out.

“But we can't do anything about the social world in which our school is embedded,” noted a math teacher from a 40 percent low-income district. “We have to do the best we can for the community and school we are in.”

Much is coming down at once onto the heads of Illinois teachers. Over recent years, there has been a series of changing standards—the Illinois Goals Assessment Program; Illinois Learning Standards, No Child Left Behind, and now, the Common Core.

The teachers didn't seem opposed to the new, supposedly higher standards of the Common Core. But they wonder when it will stop, that is, will this be just another fad handed down from on high, replaced by something else in a few years?

At the same time that teachers are implementing and teaching to the Common Core standards, they are also to undergo a new evaluation process. Student performance plays a part in the evaluation.

The evaluations should be more rigorous and useful than those in the past that found every teacher a satisfactory or superior performer.

These evaluations also come with consequences, and could result in the termination of a teacher.

“So there is a lot of frustration and anxiety, even fear, as teachers see all this coming down. For example, how do you evaluate the test performance on the Common Core of a high schooler who did not have the new Common Core standards in junior high?”

All this in a context in which teacher compensation is being cut in Illinois as a result of smaller pensions and a requirement that they teach until 67, instead of 55 or so, to collect it.

Would you encourage your child to go into teaching? “Generally, yes, but in Illinois, no,” said a foreign language teacher.

Change has been churning Illinois education for at least three decades now. Teachers are becoming worn down by change. They want some stability. And they would like some respect for their profession.