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What do teachers want?

A Texas instructor outlines what he thinks will improve morale – and ultimately retention
By Donald F. Alford

At the end of each summer, the annual "Education Follies" are under way. School principals scramble to fill all those pesky vacancies caused by the last-minute decision of teachers not to return for the academic year. Teachers arrange classrooms and prepare class rosters, and department heads contact their staff with last-minute news. Meanwhile, a litany of other tasks is in progress.

This ritual dance has become a permanent part of the education landscape because half of all new teachers leave the profession after three to five years, causing a perpetual shortage. Newspapers write editorials, propose possible solutions, and wonder about the viability of the public school system. Legislators, warming up for the next election cycle, make themselves available to media types, issuing prepared statements about preservation and protection of this noble profession.

Opening day is greeted by declarations of the school board, school superintendent and the PTA that this will be "the best year ever." With my colleagues, who also are familiar with the annual festival, I enter the classroom filled with a combination of idealism, realism and fatalism. So many friends are there, yet we are missing fellow teachers from last year.

The worst kept secret in the world is that if even 10 percent of the good teachers who leave every year remained in the classroom, there would soon be a surplus. The problem of low teacher morale underlies all discussions of this complicated issue, but all the proposed answers are generated outside a teacher's influence.

When teachers look at the legislature they see three simultaneous deliberations:

- Hearings to determine why state assessment test scores are not better in some districts and some schools. The usual answer: We need a higher quality teacher.
- Hearings to determine how to keep good teachers. The answer is the same as it was the last session: We need higher pay, limits on the administrative workload, and smaller classrooms.
- Hearings to approve a budget. Usually they discover there is no money for higher salaries, a lower administrative workload, and smaller classes because there is a need for new and better textbooks, facilities support to replace and/or repair old buildings, and/or to develop a new and better assessment system to replace the last new and better assessment system.

With great reluctance, the question of teacher pay raises, a lower administrative workload and smaller classes will be postponed to the next legislative session.

Legislators give themselves an "A" for accomplishment, go home and prepare to revise and extend their remarks in readiness for the next election. Gains from previous legislatures become losses. Funds approved two years ago for special application, such as health insurance, are deleted from the current budget. The urgent need for new facilities becomes, once more, a local issue.

At the same time, the classroom teacher has a new list of reports and record keeping to better monitor the effectiveness of classroom performance as measured by the statewide test.

The call to do more

Good teachers can live with all this electioneering balderdash because it's always been this way. With a grain of salt and a wry sense of humor, they know that their performance will be scrutinized to the most-minute detail and thoroughly documented. They know that all their hard work and planning will be taken for granted by students, parents, and administrators when all is going well. But, they also hear the constant critique that they have to do more.

There is so much hyperbole and sophistry in the press, Congress, state legislatures, and school boards that one could believe that substantial numbers of the staff are lazy, incompetent, and greedy. Everyone at every level apparently knows what he/she wants from a teacher. The unanswered question is, *what does the teacher really want?*

Fortunately, a few state education agencies have conducted in-depth surveys to determine the factors most important in keeping good teachers. The results were, in many instances, surprising. At the website www.teacherquality.com the results of surveys in five states listed the top five working conditions teachers believe are most important:

- Leadership
- Empowerment
- Facilities and resources
- Time
- Professional development

The issue of money was further down the list. Now, no one is foolish enough to turn down more money or to wish that salary is not commensurate with qualifications and workload. Yet there are nonmonetary "fixes" readily available if a new factor can be integrated into the debates about teacher morale and retention and the relationship of principal and teacher.

The referenced survey compared responses by both teachers and principals to the same statements. A reasonable difference in responses should be expected because of differing priorities. But, when asked to agree or disagree with statements evaluating school leadership and work environment, the perception gap was ominous.

- 97% of principals agreed that leadership was an issue being adequately addressed; only 57% of teachers agreed.
- 97% of principals felt that teachers were being empowered; only 57% of teachers agreed.
- 96% of principals believed that teachers were involved in decision making; 51% of teachers agreed.
- 76% of principals believed that there was adequate non-instructional time; 51% of teachers agreed.

The survey went on to cover additional areas with the spread between teacher and principal responses averaging 40%.

The key to improving morale

My experience in an inner-city school was exactly as illustrated by this data. One unsigned survey by teachers was critical of conditions and leadership. After that, all questionnaires were signed and problems "disappeared," but annual turnover was 30% or more. In another district principals reach out and support ideas and recommendations from the faculty. Even though salaries are the lowest in that area, turnover is minimal.

As stated earlier, some disagreements in perception between these two groups should be expected, but the survey indicates a severe disconnect. The conflict between top-down and bottom-up evaluations is always one that requires careful evaluation, or conclusion jumping becomes an Olympic sport. However, it is clear from these surveys involving thousands of teachers that the key to improving morale could be as simple as the relationship with a principal.

Most schools go through the motions of annual teacher satisfaction surveys to evaluate internal conditions. However, almost all require the teacher to sign the evaluation. Honesty and openness are totally dependent on the sound judgment and actions of the principal.

But when 74% of teachers in a Virginia survey disagreed with the statement, "I can speak freely without fear of punishment," as they did in 2005, it should sound alarms in every school district. Are questionnaires/surveys answered honestly, or do they respond to the perceived opinions of those in authority?

My experience is that teachers consult each other before answering, then bow to threats or pressure to assure the originator that all is well. The teachers' perceived consequences of disagreement, usually based on past experience, means that administrators make value judgments based on faulty data.

The solution to this problem is simple: Allow honest answers in a threat-free environment by accepting unsigned and unattributed surveys. This option could be a sound first step in showing support for the harried classroom teacher while gaining insights into those areas where even modest remedial action may create the desired, positive effect. If money is far less important than good leadership and teacher empowerment, administrators owe it to themselves to take a new and different look at their teachers and their classrooms.

With all the top down pressures of standardized tests, No Child Left Behind, the changing nature of the student body, and our culture as a whole, pressures on teachers are enormous. Apparently, recognition of this issue is slowly working its way into public consciousness. The Texas Public Policy Institute, in a January 3, 2001 report, summed up the situation as follows:

"The environments our public school teachers work in have important deficiencies. Moreover, these environments are getting worse. Without substantial improvement in the work environment for our dedicated Texas teachers, increased compensation -- whether pay or health insurance -- will bring little benefit to the state's education system."

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