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## Teacher Can't Teach

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Over the past half-century, the number of pupils in U.S. schools grew by about 50% while the number of teachers nearly tripled. Spending per student rose threefold, too. If the teaching force had simply kept pace with enrollments, school budgets had risen as they did, and nothing else changed, today's average teacher would earn nearly \$100,000, plus generous benefits. We'd have a radically different view of the job and it would attract different sorts of people.

Yes, classes would be larger -- about what they were when I was in school. True, there'd be fewer specialists and supervisors. And we wouldn't have as many instructors for youngsters with "special needs." But teachers would earn twice what they do today (less than \$50,000, on average) and talented college graduates would vie for the relatively few openings in those ranks.

What America has done, these past 50 years, is invest in more teachers rather than better ones, even as countless appealing and lucrative options have opened up for the able women who once poured into public schooling. No wonder teaching salaries have just kept pace with inflation, despite huge increases in education budgets. No wonder the teaching occupation, with blessed exceptions, draws people from the lower ranks of our lesser universities. No wonder there are shortages in key branches of this sprawling profession. When you employ three million people and you don't pay very well, it's hard to keep a field fully staffed, especially in locales (rural communities, tough urban schools) that aren't too enticing and in subjects such as math and science where well-qualified individuals can earn big bucks doing something else.

Why did we triple the size of the teaching work force instead of paying more to a smaller number of stronger people? Three reasons.

First, the seductiveness of smaller classes. Teachers want fewer kids in their classrooms and parents think their children will be better off, despite scant evidence that students learn more in smaller classes, particularly from less able instructors. Second, the institutional interests that benefit from a larger teaching force, above all dues-collecting (and influence-seeking) unions, and colleges of education whose revenues (tuition, state subsidies) and size (all those faculty slots) depend on their enrollments. Third, the social forces pushing schools to treat children differently from one another, creating one set of classes for the gifted, others for children with handicaps, those who want to learn Japanese, who seek full-day kindergarten or who crave more community-service opportunities.

Nobody has resisted. It was not in anyone's interest to keep the teaching ranks sparse, while many interests were served by helping them to swell. Today, we pay the price: lots of money spent on schooling, nearly all of it for salaries, but schooling that, at the end of the day, depends on the knowledge, skills and commitment of teachers who don't earn much and cannot see that they ever will.

Compounding that problem, we make multiple policy blunders. We restrict entry to people "certified" by state bureaucracies, normally after passing through quasi-monopolistic training programs that add little value. Thus an ill-paid vocation also has daunting, yet pointless, barriers to entry. We pay mediocre instructors the same as super-teachers. Though tiny cracks are appearing in the "uniform salary schedule," in general an energized and highly-effective classroom practitioner earns no more than a feckless time-server. We pay no more to high-school physics or math teachers than middle-school gym teachers, though the latter are easy to find while people capable of the former posts are scarce and have plentiful options. We pay no more to those who

take on daunting assignments in tough schools than to those who work with easy kids in leafy suburbs. In fact, we often pay them less.

Instead of recognizing that today's 20-somethings commonly try multiple occupations before settling down (if they ever do), then making imaginative use of those who are game to teach for a few years, we still assume that teaching is a lifelong vocation and lament anyone who exits the classroom for other pursuits. Instead of deploying technology so that gifted teachers reach hundreds of kids while others function more like tutors or aides, we assume that every classroom needs its own Socrates.

Despite all that, and to their great credit, most teachers are decent folks who care about kids and want to help them learn. But turning around U.S. schools and "leaving no child behind" calls for more. It also requires passion, brains, knowledge and technique. Federal law now demands subject-matter mastery. Such qualities are hard to find in vast numbers, however, especially when the job doesn't pay very well. Yet fat across-the-board raises for three million people are a pipe dream. (Adding \$10,000 plus benefits to their pay would add some \$40 billion to school budgets.)

Maybe we can't turn back the clock on the numbers, but surely we can reverse the policy errors. With hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs now turning over each year, at minimum we should insist that new entrants play by different rules that reward effectiveness, deploy smart incentives and suitable technology, compensate them sensibly, and make skillful use of short-termers instead of just wishing they'd stay longer. And this time let's watch what we're doing.