

Ensuring Quality Teachers in Every Classroom

Jim Martin, July 12, 2011

It must be the goal of every school, and school system to ensure high quality teachers in every classroom. But how we achieve that goal has become a political football in the press and education reform discussions.

Some choose to address teacher quality by “getting rid of bad teachers” or shifting high quality teachers from school to school like tokens on a board game. There is little evidence that such strategies ever result in enhanced teacher quality. They do increase dissatisfaction with the working environment.

My experience in education suggests that a much more effective approach to the high quality teacher goal is to create a professional working environment that retains outstanding teachers and focuses on the hiring high quality teachers.

To this end I have been pleased with, and want to commend Superintendent Tata’s efforts to hire high quality teachers. And specifically his effort to recruit teachers from under represented groups. If we truly believe that we can close the achievement gap, as I do, certainly there are teachers who have themselves succeeded in crossing that gap. Hiring such teachers who have demonstrated success with respect to this organizational mission is wise institutional practice.

As you discuss assignment of students and teachers to schools, as well classification of schools achievement level, I strongly encourage you to increase the attention given to the professional working environment in which teachers practice. This is critical for both recruitment and retention of professionals.

When I talk to teachers, I am hearing an increasing concern about a more centralized directive of how and what to teach. While a standard course of study is valuable, please remember that the teachers you want to hire and retain are professionals. They are not contract employees. As professionals, they must be in an environment where they can practice their craft. High quality teachers will not be found in, or come to, an overly structured and centralized organizational structure...just like in any other profession.

I also hear concern that “data driven assessment” of teacher performance is turning into undue focus on reading and math end of grade test scores. These are not comprehensive measures of quality. Furthermore, I know of no quality business that evaluates its employees based on a multiple-choice test taken by someone else. There are best practices in personnel evaluation. Teachers, like any other professionals deserve best practices of evaluation.

My challenge to you, particularly those of you who have never been a teacher, is to ask your self, “What would it have taken to make the teaching profession one you would choose for a life career?” By answering that question, you will find the key to getting a high quality teacher in every classroom.