

Educators' Notebook

Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

Teacher Supply and Demand: Forecasting the Weather is Easier

Edward S. Hickcox

Issues surrounding teacher supply and demand are front and centre at the present time. An examination of some of the literature in this area suggests that the problem is not so much a teacher shortage as it is distribution (i.e. matching the teacher to the job). Nationally there is a sufficient supply of teachers. Shortages appear in terms of specific subject areas like Science and Math, and in terms of geographic areas such as northern Manitoba. Short term strategies to deal with the problem probably rest at the local level while long term solutions are the responsibility of government and teacher training institutions working together.

February 2001

Volume 12 Number 2

Edward Hickcox is a retired professor from the Department of Educational Administration, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Currently he holds an Adjunct Professor appointment in the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology, in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba.

Copyright 2001. Sponsored by the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, and the Manitoba Council for Leadership in Education, 1005-401 York Avenue, Winnipeg. May be reprinted without permission providing that credit is given to the sponsors.
Available on the web at www.mcle.ws

Teacher Supply and Demand: Forecasting the Weather is Easier

Introduction

Teacher supply and demand is a hot topic in education in Canada and worldwide. The Internet has 66,000 items listed under the topic. The ERIC System (papers and research reports in education) reports about 500 items since 1992. There are many conferences and forums on the topic, including two fairly recent ones in Manitoba sponsored by MCLE and PDK. Furthermore, newspapers and magazines are full of materials related to the "Coming Teacher Shortage." While I thankfully did not read all of these items, I examined enough to come up with four broad categories of materials.

The largest proportion is regular reports and studies by teacher organizations, including most notably in Canada the Canadian Teachers Federation. The Saskatchewan Teachers Federation produces a particularly detailed and full study (Saskatchewan, 1997). These studies generally report up to date projection information about the future supply of teachers. They are invaluable in the sense of providing relatively accurate numbers in a really confusing field.

The second chunk of literature is provided by government jurisdictions, often in cooperation with teacher organizations. Nova Scotia has an excellent recent analysis of the Atlantic region (Nova Scotia, 2000). Nearly all the provinces do something in this area.

There are only a few relatively independent universities or research organization based studies, especially in Canada. The best, in my view, is by Press and Lawton (1999) but its baseline data is from 1995 so that the specific recommendations are suspect. The general findings, though, seem relevant. Another excellent study is by Crocker (1998) from Memorial University which focuses mainly on Newfoundland.

Finally there are newspapers. The approach taken by the media is to find specific incidences of shortage, report them in full in an anecdotal fashion, supported by selected references to expert opinion. They serve to fuel interest in the topic, but are not particularly relevant from either a research or policy point of view.

Given this rather confused picture, I have chosen to proceed by posing a few questions.

1. Is there a teacher shortage at the present time?

No matter where one looks in the literature, the same general situation is reported. There actually is a teacher surplus, if you look at the broad national supply picture and even the provincial picture. But we have increasing problems of distribution, meaning achieving a match between the teacher applicant and the job. Specifically, the problems are in subject areas like Math, Science and in geographic regions, i.e. northern Manitoba (Manitoba, 1991). The same is true in the United States according to a

leading scholar there, Linda Darling-Hammond. (1997) Thus the Los Angeles School District recruited at the University of Manitoba in January almost exclusively for Science and Math teachers. English and History majors received little attention.

2. Will there be a shortage of teachers in the future?

If nothing intervenes, then we could predict shortages as the pace of early retirements continues with little change on the supply side. But, as Crocker (1998) points out, the economic situation and the institution of various policy initiatives could have an effect. If there is a downturn in the economy which is sustained for any length of time, then we can expect teacher training institutions to be flooded, as they were in the early 90s.

McIntyre (2000) in a perceptive discussion of teacher supply and demand in Ontario took as his unit of analysis the total teaching force, including private school teachers, substitute teachers, teachers on leave and the like. He noted that the supply of reserve teachers, substitutes, people taking a break, and the like, seems to have diminished considerably. In earlier periods of shortage, the dire predictions of disaster really never materialized because of this "reserve" cadre ready to leap into the breach. Ruff (2000) also reports impending shortages in New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom as well as in many U.S. states.

3. Can we raise standards and have enough teachers too?

Many of the items in the serious literature reflect a concern with quality issues, especially in the face of impending shortages. Sedlak (1986), for example, notes that so called "teacher shortages" have been common place throughout the 20th century.

Darling-Hammond (1998) argues that establishing standards for the profession and paying attention to quality in the classroom leads to more efficient approaches to teacher training and hiring. We should pay attention to the number of trained teachers who don't go into teaching, and to the large number of teachers who do not stay the course. She is fearful of a knee jerk reaction to subject matter and geographic area shortages. She deplores the moves in the early 70s to fast track training programs (the "90 day wonders"). She is concerned about random placement of teachers in classrooms, no matter what their background. She deplores substandard performance.

4. What are some policy issues and some strategies?

Assuming for the moment that the core problem in terms of teacher supply and demand is a distributive one, what are the appropriate positions to take on issues?

A. Improve cumbersome hiring practices.

Darling-Hammond (1998) places responsibility on local jurisdictions to clean up hiring practices. She notes that budget decisions are late in the year. She argues for pension portability, for credentialing portability, and for the maintenance of salary rights when moves are made.

B. Recruit locally and differentially.

There is evidence that teachers tend to want to stay near where their roots are. If we

wish teachers to stay permanently in more remote areas, we need to recruit and train teachers from those areas. At the same time, it is patently clear that current shortage areas in subjects like Math and Science will continue and increase. Consideration should be given to recruiting differentially in the sense of offering special scholarships for future teachers for training in shortage areas, and even offering special incentives in hiring. For sure there are lots of problems with this kind of approach in terms of equality. But the fact is that there are higher rewards over both the long and short run in business and industry for smart students in Math and Science. Darling-Hammond (1997) is very strong on this point, arguing that we simply cannot tolerate hiring substandard teachers in these shortage areas.

C. Organize for retention.

A majority of studies in the area of teacher supply and demand recommend a series of strategies designed to keep teachers in the classroom. In general these are familiar strategies. For example, attention needs to be paid to induction processes for new teachers. There is a huge literature on mentorship, designed to meet problems young teachers have in the first years on the job.

Conclusion

As a personal reaction, I have a sense from looking at a fair amount of this material about supply and demand, that the short term solutions, i.e. retention of teachers, induction, and the like, are the responsibility of local authorities. The anguish of the school principals whose stories appear in the newspapers is real. They are not getting the candidates they need for jobs in specific areas. They need help. In the long term, though, I feel that government in cooperation with the teacher training institutions should mount a concentrated attack on the distribution problem. The long term problems in particular subject areas need to be addressed. This might mean that there will be few goodies for future English and History teachers (painful for me as a former English teacher), but spreading the resources too thin will not solve the problem.

And finally, I find Darling-Hammond's basic position enticing. Set high standards for teachers, i.e. make sure they know the subject matter and know how to teach, hold them to the standards, and the whole profession will become more attractive to more qualified people.

This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture the subtleties and qualifications reflected in the larger works, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- British Columbia Teachers Federation. (December 2000). Teacher supply and demand in British Columbia: a brief to the Government of British Columbia.
- Crocker, Robert. (November, 1998). Teacher supply and demand in Newfoundland and Labrador. St. John's: Newfoundland and Labrador Teacher

Association and the Faculty of Education of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

- Darling-Hammond, Linda. (1997). Doing what matters most: investing in quality teaching. Kutztown, Pa. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. 75 p.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. (1998). How can we ensure a caring, competent, qualified teacher for every child. Paper presented at eh AFT/NEA Conference on Teacher Quality, Washington, D.C.
- MacIntyre, Frank. (October 2000). Teacher recruitment in Ontario to 2010: recruiting in the fast lane. Paper presented at a conference of the Canadian Teachers Federation, Ottawa.
- Manitoba Department of Education and Training. (1991). Teacher supply and demand for the public schools of Manitoba. Report of the Task Force on Supply and Demand.
- Nova Scotia Department of Education. (January 2000). Nova Scotia public education: teacher supply and demand.
- Press, Harold and Lawton, Stephen. (1999). The changing teacher labor market in Canada: patterns and conditions. The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, Vol. XLV No. 2, 154-169.
- Ruff, Wayne. (Nov. 2000). Keeping, attracting, keeping. Workshop for the Manitoba Council for Leadership in Education, South Central Division.
- Saskatchewan Teachers Federation. (1997). Teacher supply and demand: results of a survey of Saskatchewan Directors of Education. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Teachers Federation.

ISSN 1181 - 9480

This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.