

Inquiring Minds topic – 1 July 2022

Moderator: Doug Cartwright

Why Education Is About To Reach A Crisis Of Epic Proportions

Mark C. Perna Contributor, Forbes Magazine January 4, 2022

Almost half of teachers are thinking about leaving their jobs. Where does that leave America?

We're at a major tipping point in education. According to a recent survey, [48%](#) of teachers admitted that they had considered quitting within the last 30 days. Of that number, 34% said they were thinking about leaving the profession entirely.

Understaffing has plagued schools for years, but it's now reaching epic proportions. At a conference last month, I sat around the table with four superintendents from various parts of the country and asked them, "What percent of teachers quitting would create a cataclysmic drop in your organization's ability to educate young people?" The answers were all shockingly low—with one superintendent answering, "One. One teacher quitting would hurt us in a big way."

Teachers and administrators alike are stressed, overworked and at the end of their rope. After the tremendous pressures of the past two years, they have nothing more to give. They are already giving everything—time, energy, mental wellbeing, and heart. They're beyond tired. They're exhausted. Conditions in the education field have always trended toward demanding, but today they're a recipe for burnout—which [teachers experience almost twice as much](#) as other government employees.

At the same time, teachers are very hard to replace. The specialization and requirements inherent to the field of education make it extremely difficult to expand the talent pool, as other fields are often able to do. It's not sustainable, and as a nation, we're about to feel it.

In order to reach and teach students effectively, teachers must forge a human connection with them. Today's younger generations simply will not move forward in their education and career journey without that connection. This is a non-negotiable; it's just who they are.

The vast majority of teachers truly want to forge that meaningful connection with students. In fact, for many it was the driving force behind their decision to enter the profession. But, understaffed and overworked as they are, many simply have no time to show students that they see, hear, and care about them. Survival mode—where many teachers have lived for the past two years—doesn't allow much room for relationship building.

This creates a vicious cycle. Students aren't performing, so more burdens are placed on teachers to help students hit the mark, thus decreasing teachers' time and bandwidth to forge a human connection with students that is the basis for all learning. Teachers' legs are cut out from under them, yet they're still expected to carry their students across the finish line. It's a gridlock.

What's the fallout of all this burnout and lack of connection? We'll see significant drops in three vital areas:

A drop in young people entering the profession. Teachers and students spend hours every day together—and unfortunately, stress isn't easy to hide. Even teachers that don't actually mention their stress to the class manifest it in a thousand small ways that young people can observe.

The elevated and prolonged levels of teacher stress are warning the next generation not to become teachers. Who wants that kind of life, for that kind of money? Obviously, fewer people entering education will only exacerbate the teacher and substitute shortage for the long term.

The skills gap is going to hit the education field hard. There just won't be enough teachers to go around.

A drop in education quality. As current educators flee the profession and the next generation avoids entering it, we may see class sizes skyrocket—further straining the teachers that remain. Without a healthy student-teacher ratio, the quality of instruction, the individual time spent with each student, and any vestige of a human connection will inevitably drop.

The quality of education will also drop if states, desperate to staff their schools, lower the bar for teacher requirements. Such a move could potentially bring into the classroom “teachers” or substitutes who lack the necessary training and skills to teach effectively. A lower-quality educational experience will hurt not just the students, but soon the workforce and economy in significant ways.

A drop in graduation rates. How long before students, unengaged in school and with no human connection there, realize that there are ways they can succeed without that diploma? The gig economy has a place for them. There's always bitcoin. And no one will question their graduation status if they start their own business.

Skills, rather than diplomas and degrees, are coming to the forefront in the hiring process. Amid our record talent shortage, employers are frantic for workers and are trying to entice them by any and all means: higher wages, sign-on bonuses, flexible work arrangements and more. How long before they relax their requirements to hire workers with the ability to do the job, even if they don't have a high school diploma?

This highly entrepreneurial generation is savvy enough to realize they can start making a living now—and worry about getting their GED later. If they don't feel that human connection at school, they're checking out, and not just mentally. They're not going to stay on a sinking ship.

What to do right now? There's no magic bullet to solve this crisis. There are, however, several things that we can start doing right now to mitigate the worst of it.

- **Take stuff off teachers' plates.** What happens if teachers don't do all the busy work they're supposed to do? What *really* happens? Will it change anything in the classroom experience? In our current climate, it's highly unlikely they'll be fired for not checking all the boxes. So what if we take the busy work away and free teachers to focus solely on the mission-critical tasks. The number-one question that administrators need to be asking themselves is, how can we lighten the load for teachers—effective immediately? What can we take off their plate to give them more time to focus on the all-important task of connecting with students?
- **Stop preaching self-care.** Bubble baths and wine aren't going to cut it. We're beyond self-care. Teachers don't have time for it, and at this point, it just becomes another thing on an already overwhelming to-do list. Teachers need care from others, not just from themselves.
- **Don't expect teachers to "catch students up."** The Covid learning slide is a real and serious problem. But somehow, there has been an expectation that returning to in-person learning would magically solve all of it and bring students right back to their appropriate mastery levels. This puts incredible, even impossible pressure on teachers who are already overburdened with ever-changing policies and demands. Instead, as a nation we need to be realistic about where students are really at—and meet them there. That's the only way we're going to move them forward.
- **Start rebuilding trust.** One key thing to remember is that everything that students need in the way of a human connection, teachers also need. Many times, there is no human connection between administrators and instructors. We need to uncover where trust has been compromised and commit to rebuilding it.
- **Equip teachers for their real work.** Teachers must forge a human connection with students before students will receive what's being taught. This is the real work of education: to awaken the mind and unleash the potential of the student. Connecting on a real level with these young people is the only way to educate them effec-

tively. Without that connection, teaching just becomes white noise. We must give teachers not just more time, but also fresh ideas and tools to connect, engage, and answer why for students.

- **Raise morale, not just salary.** More money is important, but it's not everything. This is actually good news for administrators working within the bounds of ever-tightening budgets. People want to work in an organization where the culture is healthy.

The education crisis isn't a passing problem. At the beginning of the pandemic, most of us assumed that after a short period of upheaval, we'd return to business as usual, like nothing had ever happened. But it's clear today that the genie's out of the bottle. There's no going back.

Leaders in education must heed the warning signs and pivot now to avert the worst of this crisis. Our teachers need us. Let's be there for them.

Questions:

1. In addition to the article's main points, state and local governments are making it harder for teachers to operate independently, passing rules and even laws which make it illegal to deviate from proscribed lesson plans. How do you think these actions figure into prospective and current teachers' professional plans?

2. Is the current trend of giving parental control over book selection, curriculum, and methodology a good thing or a bad thing for the education of our youth?

3. Are recent trends toward school violence and mass shootings on campuses responsible for any erosion of educational standards? If so, how do these incidents affect education?

4. What solutions put forth by the author do you agree or disagree with. Why?

5. Finally, when I taught, I valued two things above all: the interaction with my students and educational freedom. How do you think the restriction of these items "plays" with the current crop of young and potential teachers?