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Breaking the Class Ceiling

By David Haselkorn

America will need to hire 2 million teachers over the next 10 years because of growing school enrollments and rising teacher retirements. Although the full dimensions of this recruitment challenge have yet to be appreciated nationwide, large urban districts are already feeling the pinch.

In a survey this year of 39 of the country's largest urban districts, 85 percent of the personnel directors responding said they had an "immediate demand" for special education teachers; 69 percent noted an immediate need for science teachers; and an immediate demand for mathematics teachers and bilingual educators was cited by 67 percent and 64 percent, respectively. What is more, virtually all of the responding districts (92 percent) indicated that they had an immediate demand for more teachers of color, reflecting a minority-teacher shortage that is widespread and growing.

Teacher shortages, of course, are not new in American education. In the peak baby boom years they prompted the enactment of the Education Professions Development Act (in 1967), an ambitious effort that spawned such federal programs as the Teacher Corps and the Career Opportunities Program (for paraprofessionals). Despite this legislation's acknowledged impact, however, the current Congress is not likely to find the resources or the will to invest significantly in another comprehensive national program of teacher recruitment and development.

On the other hand, as more educators recognize the urgency (and complexity) of the teacher-recruitment challenges ahead, they are themselves developing innovative ways to expand the pool of prospective teachers and to improve the pipeline into the profession. These efforts include career-exploration projects at the precollegiate level; urban-education service corps; state loan-forgiveness programs; midcareer-transition programs, such as the armed services' Troops to Teachers program or the Peace Corps Fellows program; national public-service campaigns on television and radio; and more.

But one solution to the teacher-recruitment, -development, and -diversity problem may be

even closer at hand. Already in the nation's classrooms, more than 450,000 paraprofessionals are at work, many serving as part of Title I compensatory-education programs and in such critical areas of need as special education and bilingual education. Many of these paraprofessionals work in states (and districts) on the front lines of enrollment growth and demographic change, such as California, New York, Illinois, Texas, or Florida; others take on significant teaching responsibility for just a fraction of the pay regular teachers receive. Twenty percent of Title I aides nationally, for example, provide instruction without a teacher's supervision. In California, two out of every five adults providing bilingual instruction are bilingual aides.

Such "paraeducators" represent an important talent pool for teaching, one that more and more districts are seeking to tap into. A study conducted by the nonprofit group Recruiting New Teachers Inc. on behalf of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund found more than 150 programs--in over 30 states--enrolling some 9,000 paraprofessionals in teacher preparation programs. (See Education Week, April 3, 1996.) Seventy-seven percent of the participants in these programs were individuals of color, compared with a minority composition in the teaching profession as a whole of just 13.5 percent, and a proportion for minorities enrolled in teacher education nationally of 15 percent. Almost half of the paraprofessional programs surveyed had a special education focus (48 percent); almost two-fifths (39 percent) were devoted to bilingual education. And, although the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education concluded in a 1994 study that only one in five students enrolled in regular urban teacher education programs wants to work in urban schools after graduation, three-quarters of these paraeducator-to-teacher programs serve urban school systems where their participants already work and live. Program participants have a far lower attrition rate (7 percent median) than estimates for traditional teacher education candidates, which range from three to 10 times that high.

Beyond identifying and assisting an important pool of new teacher candidates, however, these programs are working to improve teacher preparation itself. Programs that offer classroom aides training to become fully licensed teachers typically include, at a minimum, regular college and university coursework, field-based learning, and summer and weekend courses leading to both baccalaureate and master's degrees. Many of the programs effectively model the very kind of learning that educators say they want for all students, one with a stress on knowledge gained from direct experience, with time for reflection and interaction, and with an emphasis on critical thinking.

These paraprofessional-to-teacher programs also incorporate many of the key elements of adult-learner-centered higher education: credit for life experience, enhanced mentorship and advisement, cohort grouping, flexible scheduling, and financial incentives. They attract highly motivated people already familiar with tough classroom environments and give them tuition assistance, academic advising, and the support they need to succeed in challenging collegiate programs.

But there is an overarching reason to support these programs that goes beyond their importance to teacher education and teacher recruitment. They offer an important lesson to

the nation on the value of investments in people, higher education, and workplace-opportunity programs. To a country mired in an acrimonious debate over affirmative action, they are a reminder of both the artificial limits sometimes placed on human potential and the explosion of productivity that often results from only a minimal investment in developing people's capacities.

Paraeducators multiply the human-development investment placed in them. An evaluator for one of the paraprofessional programs Recruiting New Teachers studied--the Navajo Nation/Ford Foundation Teacher Education Program--estimated that graduates increase their individual lifetime earnings by an average of \$282,683. That represents a 10-fold increase over the per-participant cost of the program. But even this impressive calculus leaves out the impact these teachers will have on the children they teach for years to come, as well as the enhanced contributions they will make as role models for their own families and communities and the part they will play in the expansion of America's overall human-resource base.

Such multiplier effects aside, who is better equipped to reach the children our education system has repeatedly failed than well-prepared former classroom paraprofessionals? They have overcome obstacles and adversity in their own lives to reach higher. And, in the process, they have returned something to their communities. It is easy to become beguiled by the notion that the "best and brightest" we want for teaching must be a top-of-the-bell-curve cognitive elite from prestigious ivory tower institutions. But these programs turn such thinking on its head. Their graduates demonstrate that many of teaching's next, best, and brightest generation are literally right in front of our eyes--classroom understudies who could become stars if we invested in their future--and ours.

There are tens of thousands of dedicated, caring men and women who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the classrooms where they are most needed. But too many are being held back by a class ceiling that artificially limits their contributions to America's schools, children, and their own pursuit of the American Dream. Whether it's the rigid roles of classroom authority that limit paraprofessionals' developing expertise and advancement, or the invisible ceilings of opportunity that keep far too many talented individuals in low-wage jobs, the subtle barriers to achievement of the class ceiling are limiting the potential (and contributions) of tens of thousands of Americans at a time when the nation can't afford to waste a single person's skills or talents.

Other barriers could keep paraprofessionals out of the teacher pipeline. For one thing, the future of paraeducator-to-teacher programs is far from secure. Backlash over affirmative action could limit the chances of scale-up funding for even the most successful of these programs. The cascading impact of state and federal budget cuts also will be felt. One half of all programs Recruiting New Teachers surveyed were forced to turn qualified candidates away for lack of funding; one-third for lack of space. Many programs acknowledged that their funding was at risk and asked how public support could be marshaled to preserve them.

Indeed, today's climate of political opinion suggests that if para programs are seen solely as

minority-recruitment vehicles, they may be vulnerable to social and political pressures outside their control. On the other hand, if paraprofessional-to-teacher programs can become more widely recognized as the models of enhanced teacher preparation, improved induction, extended clinical experience, and a redesigned career continuum they are; if they can be understood as ultimately a cost-effective investment in teacher development because of their significantly strengthened retention rates; if they can be allowed to demonstrate their success with students over the long term--in short, if they can be viewed as investments in teacher quality as well as teacher diversity--they might not only survive but thrive.

In the final analysis, only if there is a public willing to support such programs will these promising avenues to an adequate teacher corps be protected from the funding instability that led to the demise of similar programs in the 1970s--programs that received far more federal funds (nearly \$130 million over seven years) than this current crop of "grow your own" pathways to teaching.

Perhaps the most persuasive argument for public support comes from the testimony of graduates of these programs. Barbara Gordon Cobb, the first graduate of Connecticut's Teaching Opportunities for Paraprofessionals Programs, or TOPS, explains her philosophy in simple but profoundly relevant terms. And her words exemplify the commitment that is the driving force behind her journey to the classroom and those of thousands of other paraprofessional colleagues around the country:

"Teaching is a 24-hour job," Ms. Cobb says. "You have to feel it, you have to have it in your heart. That's what makes the difference. It doesn't matter how high your grades were in college if you don't believe that each child is worth all the effort you can put into the job. ... I treat and teach my students the way I expect my grandchildren to be treated and taught. I give and expect nothing less."

Could we possibly ask more for teaching--or America's future--than this?

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