



Viewpoints: California needs to recruit and retain talented teachers

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Teachers continue to be among the hardest hit as California grapples with its worsening budget crisis. Over the past three years, the state has handed out approximately 72,000 pink slips to its teachers – 19,000 of them in March.

With yet another round of severe budget cuts, school districts face no other choice but to once again struggle to save as many teaching jobs as possible. As we focus on the short term, it also behooves us not to lose sight of the larger crisis looming behind our current fiscal challenge: the impending teacher shortage in our state within the next 10 years, the magnitude of which the state has not experienced in decades.

Current budget cuts are slowly stripping us of the infrastructure and capacity to recruit and retain talented teachers in coming years – which has a direct effect on preparing our students to compete in a global economy. Baby boomers will be retiring and projections indicate that student enrollment will spike across the state. And yet we have a workforce of teachers severely thinned by systemic layoffs, a shrinking pipeline of prospective teachers coming into the profession as they choose to take their talent to other industries, and an environment that provides little to no incentive for good teachers to stay in the classroom.

In its annual report released last December, the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning raised a red flag regarding the current state of California's teaching workforce. The number of prospective teachers annually enrolling in teacher preparation programs dropped over a seven-year span from 75,000 to 45,000. One-third of the state's teachers are over 50 years old and are on track for retirement within 10 years. At the same time, student enrollment in public schools across the state will increase by more than 4 percent, meaning more than 230,000 additional students will enter the system. All of these factors combined leave the state with a projected shortage of teachers and no infrastructure in place today to build a robust pipeline.

California must take steps today to prepare itself for tomorrow's challenges. First, we must find a way to ease the regulations governing California's seniority-based system so that it is not the only measure determining whether a teacher remains in the classroom. Coined "quality-blind" by many, our "last in, first out" system embraces seniority over talent, and by doing so, creates a disincentive for our newest educators to remain in the profession and puts California at a greater disadvantage to meet the impending shortage of teachers.

And while the discussion continues as to whether our current seniority model is sustainable, we must develop innovative practices to assist our school districts in keeping as many of their teachers in the classrooms as possible.

During last year's round of layoffs, the California Teacher Corps – a coalition of the state's alternative route to certification programs – partnered with school districts to provide pink-slipped and laid-off teachers retraining to move into the high-need fields of math, science and special education. Through these efforts, 1,500 pink-slipped teachers shifted into high-need teaching positions. While they may decide to ultimately return to general education in the future, this approach ensured that many of our newer teachers, who would have been forced out of the classroom due solely to a lack of seniority, remained in the teaching profession.

While lawmakers continue to debate immediate solutions to prevent deeper cuts, we also need to continue to build a strong talent pipeline for the future by helping teacher preparation programs focus on recruitment. While we have already witnessed the chilling effects of layoffs on the recruitment of teachers, there is a pool of individuals – second-career professionals and other experts in their fields – who want to serve in the classroom. We must reach them before they find another industry to which to devote their skills and talents.

As a society, we cannot underestimate the critical impact that nurturing the recruitment and retention of qualified, talented and passionate teachers will have on our most valuable resources – our children. Only by shifting away from an education system that uses "last in" as the only determinate of who is "first out," adopting innovative ways to keep pink-slipped educators in the teaching profession and investing in recruiting and training potential teachers will we best prepare our students to compete in a global society. If we don't do something about it now, we will be doing the greatest disservice to our next generations.

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