

Laid-off teachers finding options in order to remain teaching

Catherine Kearney

April 22, 2010

For three years, Shannon Rochelle Garibay served as a general education teacher in San Bernardino County before being laid-off last year. Devastated at the thought of leaving the career she loved, Garibay decided to pursue a retraining option with Cal State San Bernardino's alternative certification program. Today, she is teaching in the same school where she previously taught, only now serving special education students.

When California schools handed out pink-slips to more than 26,000 teachers this past March, including many teachers in Garibay's predicament due to education budget cuts, the state once again put itself in jeopardy of losing its newest generation of talented, effective teachers. This is because we have a system, which some have coined "quality-blind," that embraces seniority over talent, or more simply, tenure over performance. The latest round of layoffs not only create a disincentive for good teachers to stay in the profession, but also puts California at a disadvantage as it struggles with a shortage of qualified, well-educated teachers in the important fields of special education, math and science.

While the discussion continues as to whether our current seniority model is sustainable and aligned with the needs of our public school children, we must take immediate steps to provide retraining to pink-slipped teachers to shift them into these in-demand fields. By doing so, we not only address the statewide teacher shortage, but we also ensure that our newest educators remain in our public schools.

The California Teacher Corps, a coalition of the state's alternative teacher certification programs, is working with school districts across California to retrain recently pink-slipped teachers to fill the need for special education, math and science teachers. This strategy ensures that many of our newer and talented teachers who will be forced out of classrooms due solely to their lack of seniority can remain in the teaching profession if they embrace new and relevant skills.

For example, through Cal State San Bernardino's alternative certification program, approximately 50 percent of its new special education teachers were pink-slipped general education teachers. Also, last year in San Joaquin County, 31 special education teaching positions were filled by pink-slipped general education teachers who were retrained. Armed with new skills, these teachers now have the opportunity to serve the nearly 680,000 special education students currently attending a California public school.

Math and science retraining options are also gaining momentum throughout the state. In Kern County, teachers now have the opportunity to shift into the math and science fields due to a new partnership between the Kern County Superintendent of Schools and Cal State Bakersfield's School of Math and Science. These are just a few examples of the partnerships taking place between Teacher Corps programs and school districts across the state. By retraining teachers to shift to these in-demand fields, we are giving them the opportunity to continue to serve the students who need them the most.

Teacher Corps programs are able to immediately meet the needs of school districts because of their ability to create an expedient pathway into the classroom, including retraining fully-credentialed teachers to shift into high-need fields. Building on a teacher's established experience in the classroom, these programs offer enhanced training, as well as coaching and support from veteran educators and content experts. Through the retraining option, teachers are immediately placed into the classroom where they are needed, often teaching in the same school district or even the same school where they previously taught. Many of these same teachers would have likely left the teaching profession altogether, at a time when the state cannot afford to lose its talented educators.

The loss of teachers during these difficult economic times has a chilling effect on the recruitment of future teachers and discourages pink-slipped educators from returning to the teaching profession. We must take bold action today to ensure that we are not only able to recruit a future generation of teachers, but that we are also able to ensure that our most committed and talented teachers like Garibay, who value remaining in the teaching profession and are willing to embrace new training, are in the classrooms where they are most needed.

Catherine Kearney is president of California Teacher Corps.