

Problems Facing American Education

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ABSTRACT

There are very few people who would argue about the importance of excellence in education. Problems such as teacher attrition, parental involvement, and student reading ability may hinder progress in education. They are major issues facing American education, and we as educators simply must do everything in our power to conquer them. An education is a valuable and necessary tool, and we must do everything we can to get our students to value their education. Though problems exist in education, there are always positive solutions to bring hope and success.

Introduction

In this day and age, there are very few people who would argue about the importance of excellence in education. An education can open doors to opportunities that would have never been possible were it not for the education and preparation that one received while in school. With the fluctuating economy and uncertain times, it is more important than ever for our nation's children to receive the proper education and training that will allow them to acquire a good job and produce the revenue needed to live. Unfortunately, there are many problems facing our education system today, and several of them are having very negative effects on the quality of the education our students are receiving. It is our duty as educators to try our very best to work through these problems, solve them if at all possible, and still provide our students with the best possible education.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is to discuss some of the problems facing our educational system today. The authors will cite solutions to these problems to help

ensure that students receive a quality education; thus, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Problems Facing Education

Attrition Rate

One such problem that is attacking the education system in America is the alarming attrition rate of teachers. Only those not involved with education at all will argue that it is an easy profession; in actuality, it is a very demanding profession with an often overwhelming amount of pressure and responsibility tied to it. However, it can also be a very rewarding profession. Unfortunately, many teachers simply cannot overcome the burdensome responsibilities well enough to stick with the profession for any length of time. Jalongo and Heider (2006) present staggering statistics in their article, saying that forty-six percent of new teachers in this country quit teaching after five years or less, with that percentage growing to fifty percent in urban areas. Even more shocking is the fact that ninety percent of teachers who are hired in this country are replacements for teachers who have left teaching for some reason other than retirement (p. 379). These kinds of numbers can truly make one's head spin. It is so painful to think that these teachers have invested at least four years of college preparing to do something that they could not even stick with for five years or so. To those of us who are educators, these kinds of numbers are truly frightening.

It is not difficult at all to see why this is a major problem facing our education system today. First of all, the amount of money that it takes to search for and hire new teachers year after year is taking a toll on education budgets that are already stretched to the limit. Kopkowski (2008) comments on the financial burden of hiring new teachers by saying, "Their departure through what researchers call the "revolving door" that's spinning ever faster—the commission estimates teacher attrition has grown by 50 percent over the past 15 years—costs roughly \$7 billion a year, as districts and states recruit, hire, and try to retain new teachers" (p.21). This is a considerable amount of money that could otherwise be used for worthwhile educational expenditures. Putting that money towards textbooks, technology, or other kinds of resources would be so much more beneficial than having to spend it on hiring new teachers year after year. Not only does this teacher turnover take a toll on the educational pocketbook, but it also takes a major toll on our students. Jalongo and Heider (2006) comment on the impact that it has on students saying, "With so many qualified teachers leaving the profession, many students are experiencing substandard education in a considerable number of districts" (p.380). As educators, this is the last thing that we want to hear. It is our job to provide students with a high standard of education, and it is alarming that the attrition rate of teachers is undermining our number one goal.

There are many reasons that the rate of teachers leaving the profession is so high. Anhorn (2008) very concisely sums up some of the major problems in her article when

she says, “Difficult work assignments, inadequate resources, isolation, role conflict, and reality shock are some top reasons for the horrendous attrition statistics with the widespread “sink or swim” attitude that is prevalent in so many schools” (p. 15). For beginning teachers especially, these kinds of problems are almost unbearable. There is no magical “cure-all” for these kinds of problems, but there are steps that can be taken to try to ensure that beginning teachers do not see leaving the profession as their only hope for sanity.

Duck (2007) recommends that one way to avoid the “why new teachers cry” phenomenon is to begin teacher preparation with an introductory foundations class that has a strong experience base embedded in case studies, provides a frame of reference for decision-making, teaches classroom management strategies, and models reflective practices that lead to increased student learning (p. 30). One might think that substantial preparation would aid new teachers in coping when problematic situations arise. Many go into the profession thinking that teaching is going to be a fun, easy job and no more work than acquiring their undergraduate degree; this is simply not the case. While it is true that no amount of preparation will prepare you for the real thing, there are many components such as those presented in the foundations’ course that Duck recommends that could assist in teacher education to help make the transition easier.

Another thing that is vitally important to reduce the teacher attrition rate is a more developed support system for beginning teachers. It is preached and preached to us as teachers that we need to be there for our students and support them, but where is our support system? Do we not need the same kinds of things as students? Anhorn (2008) comments on what comprises a successful support system:

These networks need to be comprised of fellow teachers and administrators who understand what new teachers need to survive, as well as teacher education programs that prepare teachers who are ready for the first year and its challenges. Mentoring, orientation, ongoing induction programs, and real-life teacher education preparation are all components of the necessary support system. (p. 19)

Unfortunately, a large number of teachers do not get this kind of support. It is imperative that our administrators and superintendents realize and understand how important it is to support teachers; if not, the devastating numbers that we are seeing now are only going to get worse. Teachers simply must start being more appreciated and valued, or we are not going to have many left. Cochran and Reese (2007) report that teacher attrition rates are the highest in middle school and high school teachers (p. 25). This is in large part probably due to the fact that these teachers get even more responsibilities dumped on them, such as Homecoming, yearbook, prom, or cheerleader sponsor. For a new teacher who already is overwhelmed, these kinds of extra tasks can be too heavy a burden.

It is easy to see why the beginning teacher attrition rate is so high. There is simply so much to do these days, between extracurricular responsibilities and high-stakes testing, it is easy to get overwhelmed. As previously mentioned, there is no magical cure for this problem, but there are certainly things that fellow teachers and administrators can do to

make things much better. In her article, Sitler (2007) sums it up quite nicely when she says,

No one expects the first years of teaching to be easy. No one expects that teaching assignments will never change. But no one expects either that one's first years of teaching will be compromised by administrative systems that make instability and disillusionment routine occurrences rather than exceptions. (p. 22)

This very eloquently describes the situation in which many beginning teachers find themselves, and that simply has to change.

Lack of Parental Involvement

Another problem that is facing American education today, and one which can easily be seen as a reason for the low attrition rate of teachers, is the lack of parental involvement with which most teachers have to deal. Many of us probably remember our parents being very involved with our education, whether they were part of the PTA or just asked about your grades and homework every day when you got home. Unfortunately, today, parental involvement seems to be waning. While there still is a good deal of involvement at the elementary level, middle school and high school teachers report that this is not the case with most of their students. Epstein (2008) comments on this fact when she says,

Educators at all school levels know that successful students—at all ability levels—have families who stay informed and involved in their children's education. Yet many middle level and high school teachers report that the only time they contact families is when students are in trouble. (p. 9)

This is something that teachers have to actively avoid. It is our responsibility to try to involve parents who seem hesitant and reluctant to be a part of their child's education. This is one way that we can start to try to solve this problem.

There is no doubt about the importance of parental involvement. Elish-Piper (2008) makes the following point in her article:

When parents are involved in education, teens typically have higher grade point averages, higher test scores on standardized and classroom assessments, enrollment in more rigorous academic courses, more classes passed, more credits earned toward graduation, and higher graduation rates. (p. 44)

With statistics such as these, we as teachers must do everything in our power to get parents involved. One way to go about this is by first finding out why the parents may not be involved already. Padgett (2006) cites reasons such as scheduling conflicts, lack of transportation, language barriers, and cultural differences as reasons many parents are hesitant to get involved with their child's school. Other parents who may have had a less than enjoyable school experience may be reluctant to set foot back into that atmosphere (p. 45). We must go above and beyond to show these parents that their opinions and thoughts are not only wanted but are valued as well. Long (2007) states in her research that she has found when schools leverage parents' relationships with each other; they can build active networks of parents. By increasing opportunities for parents to be involved, they not only help out those families, but they also help bond the different families in the community (p. 27). It may help some of those reluctant parents to see that there are other parents and families just like theirs in the community, and they may be more apt to participate if they have someone to bond with and make them feel more comfortable. It is our job to help these different parents find each other and to make them all feel like they are an integral part of their child's education.

A new way that many teachers are keeping parents more in the loop is through student information systems (SIS). Bird (2006) talks about the ease and value of these systems. They allow districts to open new lines of communication, providing parents with Internet access anytime to information such as attendance, grades, evaluations, and behavior logs (p. 38). Speaking from experience, these kinds of systems are wonderful for both for the teachers and parents. Due to work schedules, it is often hard for parents to come in for conferences, but it is so nice that they can just get on-line and see how their child is doing.

The last aspect of parental involvement that we as teachers need to help out with is what kind of parental involvement we are actually wanting. It is important that we let parents know that their opinions are important and are valued, but that it is still our classroom. We need to help them see, especially by middle school and high school, that they need to have an open and helpful relationship with their children when it comes to school; it will not be helpful if they are so hard and relentless on their children that they just end up rebelling. According to Urdan, Solek, and Schoenfelder (2007):

When students felt pressured or burdened by parental expectations and demands, their own attitudes about school appeared to suffer. Other students, describing the same parenting behaviors but in a more positive tone (i.e., feeling grateful rather than burdened, supported rather than pressured) discussed the effects on their motivation in more positive terms. These results point to the importance of the subjective quality of students' perceptions about parental influences. It may be that students' perceptions of parental participation and support in their education as either supportive or coercive, or as authoritative vs. authoritarian, may be more important than the actual practices themselves. (p. 17)

What this means is that no matter how good the parents' intentions, if they seem to be overly critical or overbearing, they are more than likely going to have a negative

effect on their child's education. We need to help parents see that they need to be concerned and supportive but still do it in a way that mirrors their true intentions. Elish-Piper (2008) comments on the kind of relationship that is beneficial at the middle and high school levels:

An important consideration for parent involvement in middle and high schools is the process of identity development which takes place during adolescence. [...] Due to this important developmental process, effective parent involvement efforts at the middle and high school levels must look different than typical approaches used in the elementary school. Once students approach adolescence, effective parent involvement shifts from the "parent as teacher or tutor" role to "parent as coach, mentor, or supporter" role. (p. 45)

Only when we truly get through to parents and make them realize how important they are to their child's success in acquiring an education will we really see the resulting positive changes. In a world where there is so much to influence and drag down our students, we need our parents, more than ever, to keep our students on track. Also, whether they will admit it or not, most students will appreciate the fact that their parents want to be involved in their education.

Reading Epidemic

The final problem is that of the reading epidemic facing American education. It is a well-known fact that a large majority of our nation's students are not reading on grade level, and this can have devastating effects on their education. Boling and Evans (2008) report that more than eight million American students cannot read or comprehend what they read even at a basic level. They go on to say that more than seven thousand students drop out of school each day because they lack the literacy skills needed to be successful (p. 59). These numbers are absolutely staggering. It is bad enough that so many students cannot read and comprehend on grade level, but the fact that it is leading to so many dropouts is truly disturbing. It is understandable, however. Watching students struggle through basic words that they should have mastered years ago is indeed a hard thing to experience.

Oftentimes, teachers get fooled into thinking that students who can read aloud well also comprehend everything that they read, and this is simply not the case. Massey (2007) comments on this problem:

With the increased emphasis on phonics in the primary grades, many students are becoming excellent word callers, while lacking in comprehension skills. As these students reach the intermediate grades,

they may struggle to transition from word calling to text comprehension.
(p. 656)

This definitely is a problem, and it shows why we as teachers need to pay extra attention to the actual comprehension ability of our students. However, this task cannot be left up to Language Arts and reading teachers only; there is simply no way that they can grapple with this problem by themselves. Silverman (2006) calls on other content teachers to help out with this problem, saying that they also can assist struggling readers by structuring activities that will boost student performance in reading. She goes on to explain how reading instruction is a responsibility shared by all teachers, regardless of grade level or content area (p. 71). It is so very true that this is a shared responsibility because there is simply no content area in which students are not required to read.

There are many things that we as teachers can do to help out struggling readers that go beyond basic phonics and comprehension activities. First of all, we need to get the parents involved in their child's reading activities. The positive effects of parental involvement also extend to the reading parameter as well. Ediger (2008) talks about the importance of parental input relative to reading, saying that parents may be able to suggest what particular skills with which their child needs help. They may have noticed something at home while listening to their child read that will help the teacher diagnose the problem and begin to help the child (p. 47). Any input that parents could give us that would help out with their child's reading problems would be so helpful. It is such a hard thing to fully diagnose reading problems within the confines of an hour-long class; any outside help only makes matters easier.

The fact that other content area teachers need to help out with reading comprehension simply cannot be ignored. Kirschenbaum (2006) presents a very interesting way for all content area teachers to improve reading comprehension, and that is through the use of color. He explains that neuroscientists today are finding out that using colorful ink and/or visuals creates a powerful learning stimulus. They have found that when we read in black and white, many regions of our brain shut down, but it seems that color has the opposite effect (p. 48). It is not hard at all to believe that students would be more captivated by a colorful page than just a boring black and white one. So, one way that we as teachers might go about trying to improve comprehension is by making what we are reading more visually appealing in one way or another.

Finally, one of the most important things that can be done to help out with the growing number of students who cannot read properly is to have more extensive training for teachers. Menzies, Mahadavi, and Lewis (2008) focus on this fact in their article:

In essence, effective reading instruction is predicated on educators skillfully negotiating the knowledge and management demands that "balanced" reading instruction requires. Without an understanding of the components of effective reading instruction, teachers may not have the skills necessary to prevent reading failure for at-risk students. (p. 67)

Not all teaching programs educate future teachers in the fundamentals of reading instruction. Many teachers, through no fault of their own, do not know what to look for as

warning signs that their students are not reading on level. It is important that all content areas and grade levels educate their teachers on these aspects of reading. As discussed earlier, reading interventions are a collaborative process, and all teachers need to have the necessary tools.

Concluding Remarks

There is no denying the fact that poor reading abilities, as well as the other problems mentioned here, are not going to go away over night. They are major issues facing American education, and we as educators simply must do everything in our power to conquer them. An education is such a valuable and necessary tool, and we must do everything we can to get our students to value their education.

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