**Addressing the Teacher Shortage Through the View of a Teacher Educator**

Authored by Jessica S. Krim, EdD

*(The opinions expressed below are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of any employer or any single academic institution.)*

While there has always been an ebb and flow of teacher shortages and overages over time as a result of population, trends within generations of students, and enrollment in and support for university educator preparation programs, there are several factors which provide a unique twist to our current iteration of a teacher shortage. From the data detailing the number of teacher (Professional Educator License or PEL) licenses awarded in Illinois from 2018-2021 we see an almost immediate drop in number of PEL’s awarded in the first half of 2019, and this decrease remained steady over the past three years. On the other hand, there has been an opposite and almost equivalent rise in paraprofessional and substitute licensures.

I believe that the factors which may contribute to or influence this teacher shortage include national restructuring trends in academia, impact of remote schooling which was a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the far-right swing of the pendulum in relation to how individuals view work as a concept. I parallel my statements below with questions I am asking myself and others, as an inquiry to contribute to a conversation to examine this phenomena from a variety of perspectives.

There is a national trend at the university level through ‘restructuring’, ‘redesigning’, and ‘enrollment management’ approaches, which may lead to an overall decrease in tenure track faculty and a rise in non-tenure track faculty. While both levels of faculty are important, one is clearly more expensive than the other, especially as tenure track faculty are retained over the years. Could there be a similar push within K-12 schools? Substitute teachers and paraprofessionals are clearly not as expensive as contracted full time faculty. Is this teacher shortage resulting in more profit for schools? Or, is the practice of hiring more substitute teachers resulting in a profit loss?

The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to occur shortly after the immediate decrease in teacher licensure applicants (in Illinois), and there is no doubt that this health crisis required many to rethink their relationship to work (encouraged by employers) as well as their relationship to their identity as a worker. The pandemic caused many to step back and prioritize their health, especially as people perished, world-wide, at alarming rates. Additionally, children were psychologically and cognitively delayed, making the requirements of the teacher’s job more difficult, and their role that much more crucial to the success of students. In our high stakes testing world, goalposts were moved, seeming unachievable to many.

In general, the history of how we relate to work, over time, shows us that our relationship has become less transactional than in the past. Currently, our relationship with work allows us to be conduits for production as we supply the system with human capital, held captive by our unhealthy interpretation that our work makes us who we are as people.

Our relationship to work shifted in the mid-80’s when a wave of Human Resource approaches began to infiltrate the workplace. There was a drive to link people’s idea of ‘teamwork’ and moral identity to their profession, with the underlying expectation that workers would commit more to ‘the cause’ if they were emotionally and personally invested in their employment. While this is a description that we can agree mostly meets criteria of any type of employment, the emotional investment by teachers, I believe, doubled down on the cost to individuals choosing this noble profession. Is it that school systems within our country use this approach to capitalize on the goodwill of teachers to mass produce education at the lowest cost possible? Would a private company be legally permitted to accept a worker spending 60-70 hours at work (or more) for 40 hours of pay?

In addition to these forces named above, I would be remiss if I did not address the elephant in the room – which is the persistent issue of a diversified student body and the occurrence of almost no change over the past ten years to the overwhelming profile of teachers as White, female, Christian, and middle-class. What if the teacher shortage issue could be solved by addressing the whiteness and femaleness of teaching by dismantling the existing systemic barriers and our inherent bias about what a teacher looks like?

Dr. Jessica Krim

Department of Teaching and Learning

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville