



## Indiana teacher shortage: Failing our imperative

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September 29, 2015

*“Our country’s worst enemy could not have designed a more effective system for keeping smart, qualified people out of public school teaching and administration.” — Economist John Wenders writing on the subject of public-sector collective bargaining*

Reading recent news reports of “dueling studies” on the teacher shortage, you might assume that a vigorous examination is underway to ensure that the state complies with its constitutional imperative to “impart knowledge and learning” to Indiana youth.

You would be wrong. Neither side, not the Democrat superintendent of public instruction nor the GOP lawmakers, is coming anywhere near the elephant in this room — namely, the Indiana Collective Bargaining Act, a law designed to do little else but create a teacher shortage.

Before we get into that, ask yourself what could be so hard about correcting the supply-demand problem of a teacher shortage. Businesses do it every day.

Indeed, the best-selling author Darcy Olsen solved it for public schools years ago in an article for the Cato Institute: “If a school faces a teacher shortage, let wages increase to attract them. Let schools compete to secure, retain and reward the best teachers. Let schools say sayonara to those unable or unwilling to get the job done.”

The catch, as Olsen concedes, is that a collective-bargaining law won’t allow you to do any of that. Wages are set in lockstep grids pegged to seniority so that schools cannot compete in any meaningful way by rewarding or even retaining the best teachers. And most important in this context, school districts by law cannot dismiss their overpaid and underperforming to increase the number of their skilled and eager.

“Like any other profession, teaching contains individuals who are remarkably talented and others who are remarkable only for their incompetence.” Olsen concluded. “Uniform pay protects the worst at the expense of the best. Why do union leaders support this? Simple self-interest. If every teacher negotiated his or her own salary, there would be no need for union leaders.”

The Indiana Policy Review examined this and more in an issue of its quarterly journal 14 years ago. Both Superintendent Glenda Ritz and her GOP detractors would do well to suspend their posed debate long enough to go over a few of its points:

- A professor of economics at Indiana University estimated that the state would need at least 44,000 new teachers by this time, a historic 75 percent turnover in the professional population. He specifically warned there were not enough students entering the teaching field to meet this demand.

- An award-winning teacher wrote the Indianapolis Star back then to say this: “Large numbers of us sit ready, willing and quite able and yearning for the chance to teach children again. The problem is too much experience.” She went on to explain that collective-bargaining laws prohibited her from negotiating with the school district to teach for a smaller salary than her experience ranking dictated.

- Finally, economists recognize Indiana’s compensation system for teachers as price-fixing, which ultimately causes shortages of products or services — in this case, a shortage of Indiana teachers particularly in the high-demand fields of special education, math and science.

So despite the scare quotes in the headlines, none of this can come as a surprise to the experts in Indianapolis paid to manage our schools or the politicians elected on the promise to save them. The author of our study anticipated a failure of diligence in these two sectors and concluded with a dire prediction:

“A major reason for the mediocrity of Indiana’s public schools can be found in the state’s legal framework with its factory union model, one-deal-fits-all, interchangeable parts compensation system, penalties for the best teachers and rewards for the worst teachers, the chilling effect imposed on management by the constant threat of litigation and the plain futility of it all, the bureaucratic rigidity of job-protection rules and, finally, the shortages of the most desired teachers.”

With the problem identified so long ago, most will find it inexcusable that a generation of bureaucrats and politicians has retired with pensions and gold-toned watches leaving us with this mess. Worse is the realization that it will remain unsolved unless this generation finds the political courage to repeal a ruinous but politically calcified law.

This will require that rarest of human events, a change in civic character in which those in high office begin to worry less about their position and in this case more about imparting that “learning” so purposefully mentioned in our state Constitution — the very justification for their exalted titles, by the way.