



NOWHERE TO GO BUT UP

By Rafael Heller | Aug 26, 2019 | Editor's Note

Here at PDK headquarters, we were startled and stunned by the results of last year's poll: For the first time since 1969, when we began surveying Americans on their attitudes toward the public schools, the majority of respondents (54%) said they would not want their children to become teachers.

How could this be? For half a century, our polling data had assured us that whatever the challenges facing K-12 education, teaching remained a desirable career. As recently as 2011, nearly 70% of poll respondents said it would be a good option for their own children. So, what should we make of the fact that so many Americans have changed their minds?

The results of the 2019 PDK Poll only heighten the sense of alarm. This year's poll suggests that it's not just ordinary Americans who've soured on teaching as a career; a majority of teachers themselves (55%) would advise their children to choose another profession, and roughly half say they've seriously considered quitting in recent years, largely due to frustrations over low salaries (cited by 60% of teachers) and low funding for their schools and districts (75%).

Of course, the poll can't tell us what to expect in the future. Given how few Americans now view teaching as a desirable career (and given that enrollments in teacher preparation programs have declined sharply in many parts of the country), it's tempting to predict a coming wave of teacher shortages. However, a 2018 report from Richard Ingersoll and colleagues (drawing on three decades of data from the U.S. Department of Education) offers a timely reminder of just how complicated the profession's demographics really are.

Contrary to expectations, they found that the size of the K-12 teaching force has ballooned since the 1980s (far outpacing gains in student enrollment), and whatever people think about teaching as a career choice, it continues to expand even today. Meanwhile, the profession has become both grayer and greener — compared to the 1980s, today's teaching force includes disproportionate numbers of older veterans and younger novices, while mid-career teachers have become relatively scarce. Further, while the teaching force has become much more racially diverse than in past decades, it has also become more female-dominated than ever before (from 67% of teachers in 1980 to roughly 77% today). Their findings, in short, include a mix of the predictable and the surprising, the dire and the hopeful, the good and the bad, suggesting that the teaching profession is both sick and in great health.

What, then, should we make of this year's findings from the PDK Poll?

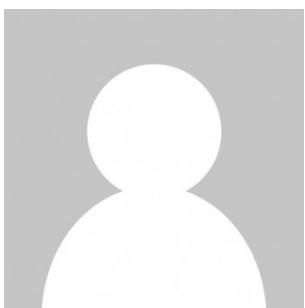
Personally, I'm torn: On one hand, and just like last year, I find myself shocked by the data, wondering how we've reached a point where not even half of practicing teachers would want their own children to follow in their professional footsteps.

On the other hand, it's comforting to realize that scary predictions about the teaching force are always only half-true, at most. The fact is that we don't know how things will look in five years, much less 25, which is why we're dedicating the March 2020 issue of this magazine to questions about our desired goals for the teaching profession — to the extent that we can shape our future workforce, what kind of workforce do we aspire to create? For now, we can strive, at least, to ensure that teacher morale falls no further. If we've reached a point where not even our teachers would want to become teachers, then there's nowhere to go but up.

Reference

Ingersoll, R., Merrill, E., Stuckey, D., & Collins, G. (2018). *Seven trends: The transformation of the teaching force*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

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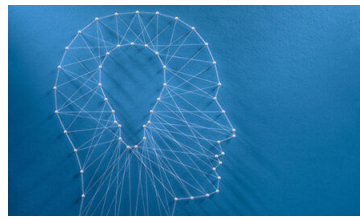
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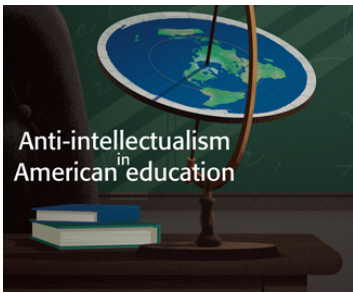
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