

1983  
Dad

# Want Better Teachers? Raise Pay, Stop Classroom Violence

**A well-known educator says that a vital part of the effort to improve the quality of instruction in our schools depends on the public—including a willingness to spend more.**

**Q Mr. Shanker, why are teachers under so much fire now?**

**A** Not so long ago, many people in the general public were uneducated. Teachers were among the educated elite. But very quickly we've educated so many of our people that the gap between the general public and the teacher is no longer there. That makes teachers easier to criticize.

Also, we no longer have an elite student body, and we're not educating the masses as well as we used to educate the few. What teachers can do with children who are relatively advantaged is very different from what can be done with the kids who used to be pushed out of school. To some extent, teachers are blamed for that.

In addition, it is getting more difficult to find teachers of acceptable or high quality.

**Q What makes that so difficult?**

**A** A big part of it is the money—or lack of it. If somebody is asked to go into teaching at \$12,000 a year but can become a trainee for some business at \$20,000, you're not going to get very many candidates.

Also, 30 years ago about the highest profession that most women could aspire to was teaching. Now all sorts of other professions have opened up to them.

**Q How can better students be attracted to a teaching career?**

**A** The economic incentives have to be improved. You also have to solve the problem of violence and disruption. A person who is primarily interested in mathematics or Shakespeare loves that subject and feels that it is important enough to spend a lifetime imparting this knowledge to others. That person does not want to spend his or her time telling Johnny to put away his knife or to stop shrieking.

In many schools a teacher cannot get satisfaction from the job because of a small percentage of students who are sick, who are violent, who are not learning. Instead they are preventing other children from learning and are driving out competent and capable teachers.

A good teacher does not want to be a policeman, a psychiatrist or a jailer. The schools must come to grips with this.

**Q What about improving the teaching environment?**

**A** A lot of corporations are talking about "quality circles"—increasing productivity by increasing the participation and happiness of all who are involved. Schools have to develop in that direction, too.

In schools today, teachers are very often treated pretty much the way the children are. If they're absent for a day, they're asked to bring a doctor's note. Most people with intellectual self-respect and some accomplishment are not going to thrive in an atmosphere like that. Schools have to make teachers an equal partner in the educational endeavor.

**Q How do you define a competent teacher?**

**A** A teacher should have a relatively high level of literacy and should be competent in his or her own subject matter. Everyone who enters teaching ought to be tested on those skills. There also must be performance characteristics related to the interaction between teacher and students, but

those have to be observed by people over a period of time.

There ought to be an internship period similar to what a doctor goes through. This should be done in a regular school setting over a two or three-year period of time in which the new person gets a good deal of help and is able to try out different things. It also ought to be a time after which, if the person isn't really good, you can say, "Goodbye—this is not for you."

**Q What are the characteristics of an excellent teacher?**

**A** The excellent teacher is a great artist. Greatness implies a certain creativity. Probably most adults have had at least one or two teachers who would have inspired them to come back to classes even on Saturday or Sunday.



WARREN K. LEFFLER—USNEWS

But you can't have all of your teachers at that level any more than you can expect every singer to be a Pavarotti. There's nothing wrong with being competent. Most teachers *are* competent, and what we need to do now is constantly to raise that level a bit. If we can do that, our schools will be in pretty good shape.

**Q Would it help to pay higher salaries to the best teachers?**

**A** If we could find a scheme that rewarded merit on some measurable and commonly accepted basis, there'd be nothing wrong with it. But wherever this has been tried, the majority of colleagues became demoralized because they felt it was not the meritorious person who was being rewarded. The money was being used to accomplish other purposes.

**Q Would it raise educational standards to pay more to teachers in fields where there is a shortage, such as math or science?**

**A** How much more are you going to pay them? Are you going to pay \$1,000 or \$2,000 more to a college graduate normally starting at \$11,000 or \$12,000? Industry will pay a science major \$24,000. Do I hear anybody bidding \$24,000? No.

Suppose that next year we have a shortage of English or kindergarten teachers. Will the public say: "Well, math and science are superior subjects. So when they're in short supply, we'll pay extra money. But anybody can teach English or kindergarten." Then you begin to teach children that it's not as important to learn English, that it's not as important to be able to understand or work with children who are younger.

**Q What can be done to improve or fire incompetent teachers presently in the classroom?**

**A** With people who are not making it, you first give them all the help you can. Then you do what any other employer does: You build a case against them. Tenure doesn't mean you keep your job. It just means that the boss has to go before somebody and give a reason for removing you. If you've got a good reason, there's no judge in the world who's going to uphold that teacher's right to stay there.

It is also important to stimulate teachers constantly. Teachers are locked up with children for almost their entire lives. They spend very little time with their colleagues. We need to develop ways for teachers to have a chance to read great literature, to discuss ideas, to be in an adult environment where they are respected by others. Getting excited about something and learning something new will generate the kind of enthusiasm we need to make teaching a really desirable profession again. □