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COMMENTARY

'Gen Y' Teachers Want to Innovate; Education Leaders Lag Behind

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Generation Y teachers, those 20-somethings who connect with their friends via online social-networking sites and live with the world at their fingertips, are inherently going to be incompatible with a stagnant education system that can be painfully isolating and uninspiring. Will the system bend to their will or break their spirit? What does the answer mean for the future of public education in this country?

Whether schools nurture or negate the ideas of Gen Y teachers will be the 21st-century litmus test for their ability to lead in a knowledge-driven, global economy that is growing increasingly, and exponentially, competitive as our students fall dangerously behind. Just as the workplace is learning how to integrate Gen Y professionals on the brink of the biggest labor shortage in history, schools need a lesson in leveraging the next generation of teachers to take learning to the next level.

Generation Y teachers want to create, not conform. They want to color off the page, but are told to teach to the test. They want to work in small groups, but are given unmanageable numbers of students. They want to commune with colleagues online and across the school, but they are confined

to their classrooms and limited to one-on-one teacher mentoring. They are sometimes pressured by peers to maintain the status quo, but they want the power to make a difference. They want financial stability and respect, but the importance of their role is monetarily marginalized. They want to co-teach, job-share, receive bonuses, and try their hand at leadership roles, but unions and politics can be unmovable barriers to work/life balance and optimum job satisfaction. But most important of all, Gen Y teachers want support from their leaders to innovate and inspire their students.

The time is now to start reversing the negative effects that conformity has had on the public school system and begin harnessing the boundless energy of new teachers.

According to a [survey of new teachers](#) commissioned earlier in 2007 by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality and funded by the U.S. Department of Education, most of these teachers say that their creativity is suffocated and that they are surprised more teachers do not burn out. While 22 percent of first-year teachers overall say they plan to leave teaching within the next five years, a full 25 percent of those who rated their administrators' instructional leadership and guidance as "poor" said they plan to leave within two years. Fifty-four percent of respondents said that the lack of support from administrators is a drawback to the profession.

One-fourth of the first-year teachers do not feel that their administrators support them in handling student-discipline problems, and even more say that their leaders do not provide adequate resources, such as textbooks or well-equipped classrooms. Still, new teachers don't put the responsibility solely on the shoulders of administrators; 84 percent believe that making it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers would improve teacher quality overall, and over half of new teachers believe that tying their salary increases to the assessments of principals and colleagues also would be an effective way to improve matters. More than 90 percent of the survey respondents cited more professional-learning opportunities, particularly better preparation to meet the needs of a diverse classroom, as effective ways to increase the quality of education.

Yet, no matter how disenchanting education becomes, most new teachers are not giving up on their dreams of making a difference, and intend to stay in education. A majority of traditionally certified teachers say that they wouldn't want to do anything else, and that they expect to spend more than a decade in the classroom. On the flip side, 56 percent of alternatively trained teachers expect to leave the classroom within five years, but 45 percent anticipate staying in education.

The education system has reached a global-warming level of crisis. The time is now to start reversing the negative effects that conformity has had on the public school system and begin harnessing the boundless energy of new teachers. Too often, teachers are treated like commodities, but they are the architects of America's intellectual capital and should be supported as such. Listening to what new teachers say they need and affording them freedom, resources, and true support will boost innovation and increase the quality of education.

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