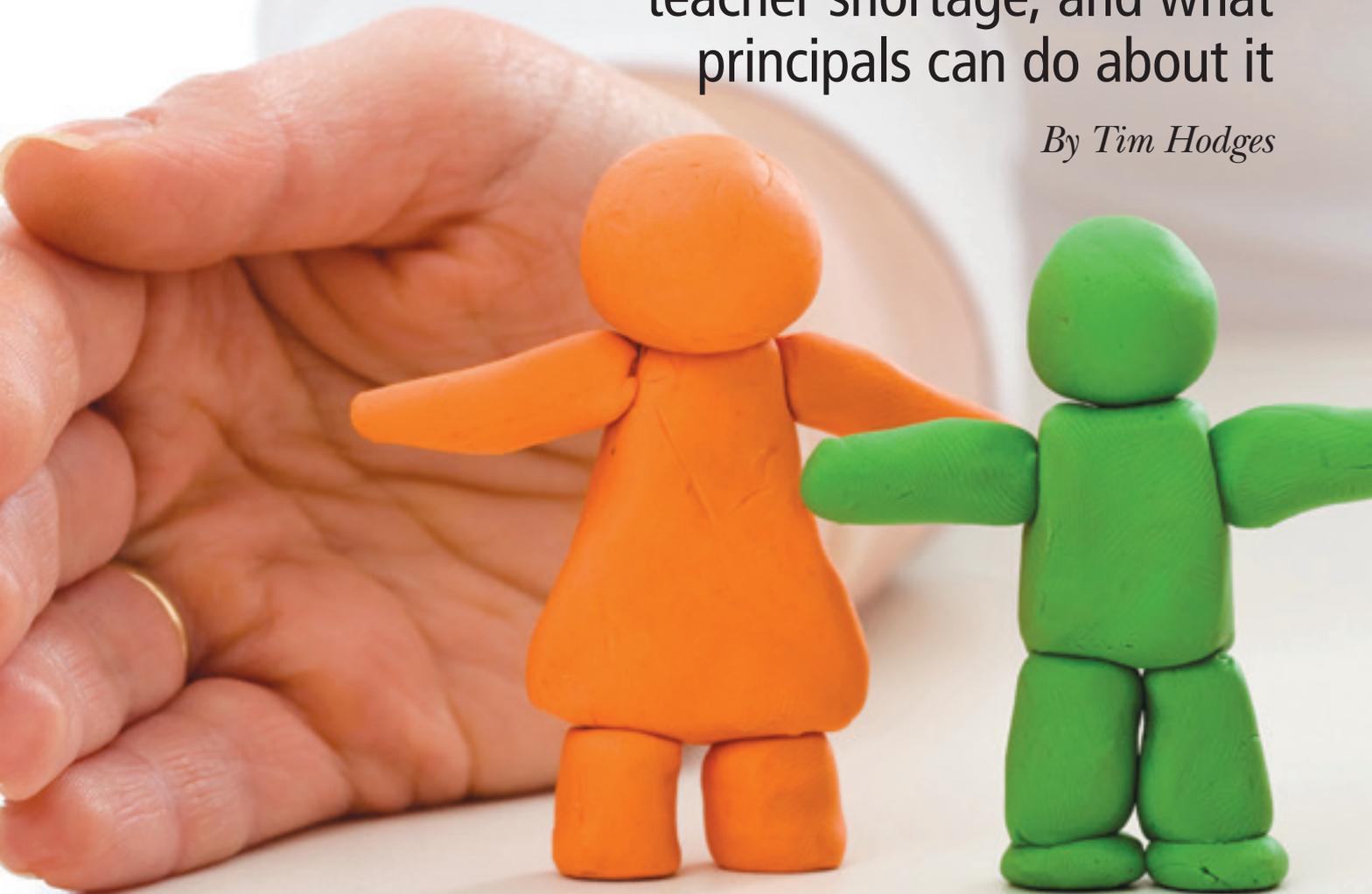


The Primary Problem

Why there's a growing
teacher shortage, and what
principals can do about it

By Tim Hodges



Each summer, Gallup surveys the nation's school superintendents to collect their opinions on a range of topics. One thing we usually ask district leaders to identify is the issues they anticipate will be a challenge for their district in the year ahead. And every year, certain topics rise to the top of the list.

This year's top challenges again included budget shortfalls and issues such as the effects of poverty on student learning and improving the performance of underprepared students. But the No. 1 challenge identified on this year's poll was new, and it debuted at the top of the list. Sixty-one percent of superintendents "strongly agreed" that "recruiting and retaining talented teachers" would be a challenge for their district.

All of us have heard about the national teacher shortage, and many of us have experienced it in our own districts. Several factors have converged

to create the current shortage. In some ways, the issue is as simple as the basic supply-demand curve. For at least a decade, the supply of teachers has been in decline. Fewer teachers are entering teacher preparation programs, with a decline from more than 700,000 enrollments in 2010 to fewer than 500,000 in recent years. While a higher percentage of teachers who enroll in teacher preparation programs complete them, this sharp decline has put a strain on the supply of new teachers entering the market.

The demand side of the equation isn't helping. Student enrollment in public schools has been increasing steadily. Many states have enacted legislation limiting class size, which exacerbates the need for teachers. Finally, demographic shifts and market pressures have accelerated retirements and given teachers other reasons to leave the profession.





The Best Teachers Care

So, we know that there is a teacher shortage, and we understand why. But how can we recruit and retain talented teachers? To answer that question, take a moment to recall the best teacher you've ever known. It might be a teacher in the school you currently lead or even a teacher with whom you worked in the past. Once you've identified that exemplary teacher, consider what makes that person so special. What one word best describes it?

Nearly every week, I meet with educators, and almost every time I ask them to do this exercise, there's a consistent theme. We don't often think of the best teacher as the one with the most years of experience or the most prestigious degree or certification. We almost always fondly remember their excellence in terms of how they made us *feel*. The word most often mentioned is that they "care" about us.

This isn't new—it's been a consistent theme for decades. In the early 1970s, Donald Clifton and his team of researchers set out to accomplish a clear mission: "Our greatest contribution is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows and feels like a real human being." That could be the tagline for most of today's efforts surrounding a positive school culture, approaching the needs of the whole child, or addressing students' social-emotional needs. While it is not a new idea, it is time to refocus our efforts on what we've always known to be true.

Tapping Into Talent

Recruiting and selecting talented teachers is a difficult job that requires heroic efforts on the part of principals and other leaders who ultimately make the hiring decisions. It's tempting to focus on the profile of teacher applicants

and prioritize teaching experience, advanced degrees, and additional certifications. These factors are easy to measure, and although they certainly have some value, we often place more emphasis on them than on the talent of the teacher.

Teaching excellence requires a certain level of knowledge and skills, but it starts with whether a teacher has talents similar to those of other great educators. Gallup defines talent as a "naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied." Every person has talent, but different roles require different talents. The best teachers have three key talent dimensions in common:

- 1. Achievement drive.** This is the motivation to enable students to succeed in the classroom. Great teachers have an intrinsic motivation that drives them to ensure that their students win.
- 2. Classroom structure and planning.** This is the balance of innovation and discipline. Great teachers are thoughtful and creative and establish a sense of order, creating an engaging environment that works for their students.
- 3. Student and parent relationships.** Relationships are the key to student success as well as parent engagement. Great teachers know this and possess the talent to build positive relationships throughout their constituency.

These talents don't always come through clearly in a résumé, on a transcript, or in a letter of recommendation. Structured interview questions can help school leaders identify whether teacher candidates have the potential—the talent—to be the teachers our students need for the future.



EARLY ASSESSMENT

Teachers who scored in the top quartile on a pre-employment talent assessment were 2.5 times more likely to be recognized as top performers by their principals.



Measuring Teacher Value

Evidence illustrates the value of teacher talent. Recent Gallup research says that teachers with top-quartile talent were 2.8 times more likely to be engaged than teachers who score in the bottom half of the applicant pool. Teachers who scored in the top quartile on a pre-employment talent assessment were 2.5 times more likely to be recognized as top performers by their principals. Finally, teachers who scored in the top half of the assessment were 1.65 times more likely to receive a “highly effective” value-added model rating than teachers who scored in the bottom half. Simply put, talented teachers are more engaged, more likely to be evaluated favorably, and more likely to have students who grow and achieve academically.

We offer six strategies to address the teacher shortage:

1. **Study your district’s hiring processes and successes.** What are your best sources of great candidates? What is the return on investment (ROI) from each of your recruiting strategies?
2. **Start early and grow your own.** Recent research suggests that as many as 60 percent of today’s classroom teachers are employed in a school within 20 miles of the high school from which they graduated. So while recruiting teacher applicants nationally can have value, the majority of your efforts should be focused locally, planting a seed with current students who might grow into top applicants in the future.
3. **Prioritize natural teaching talent.** Review your hiring processes and ensure that each of the criteria you use to make a selection links to the future performance of the teacher. If you look only at advanced degrees, experience, and certifications, it

might be time to focus more intently on measures that matter.

4. **Hire for the district as well as the school.** Most districts value the opinion of the local principal, as they should. The principal-teacher relationship is a key factor in teacher retention, but principals and teachers aren’t likely to work together at the same schools throughout their careers. Create consistency in hiring across the district to ensure that teachers can be successful with or without the principal who initially hired them.
5. **Create a great place to work.** Employee engagement is a leading predictor of teacher retention. Measuring and creating a culture of employee engagement helps ensure that your best teachers don’t leave and create another vacancy to fill.
6. **Develop the strengths of each educator throughout their career.** A recent Gallup study found that career advancement was the most common job-related reason that caused teachers to voluntarily leave the classroom. That doesn’t necessarily mean they wanted to be promoted out of the role, but rather to advance within it. Great schools create classroom heroes in ways that improve teacher retention.

The national teacher shortage is a major challenge, but it doesn’t have to define us. Principals who put these strategies to work will be well-positioned to recruit and retain the talented teachers who ensure our students succeed. **P**

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