



Even Pre-Service Teachers Know Administrative Churn is a Pressing Problem

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One evening a week, each fall semester at Pacific Lutheran University, I have the privilege of teaching graduate teacher credential candidates a two-credit course titled “Schools and Society” which is, in essence, an introduction to sociology of education.

I’ve found the pre-service teachers enjoy stepping back from lesson planning and the nuts and bolts of classroom management to think about competing purposes of public schooling in a democracy, the importance of equal educational opportunity, what enables some schools to thrive, why wholesale education reform is so elusive, and what teacher leadership encompasses.

As intelligent, wonderfully idealistic, socially conscious student teachers, they embrace the culminating project — an ethnographic write up of their

internship sites. Working in small, school-alike groups, they carefully observe their mentors’ classrooms and pay attention to interactions in hallways, offices, and extracurricular settings.

They also talk to students, teachers, and administrators about what they perceive to be their schools’ strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In the end, they draw upon their fieldnotes, their evolving educational philosophies, and key concepts from the anthropologists and sociologists they read during the semester to describe and analyze their schools.

They always lead with aspects of their colleagues’ good and hard work, but coding some of their recent papers turns up three negative themes in their analyses. First, they are almost always struck by the glaring cultural gap that results from their mostly white, middle class colleagues and

their poorer, more linguistically and culturally diverse students. “The faculty and staff,” they repeatedly note, “are not representative of the student body.”

This matters, they explain, not just because students of color need role models, but also because too few teachers use culturally relevant teaching methods that successfully engage ethnically diverse students. They often conclude that students of color at their schools are not nearly as well served as they could be with a more diverse, culturally astute faculty.

Second, they are almost always dismayed by the lack of faculty cohesion. They struggle to understand why some teachers participate positively in professional learning communities and others do not. And why some attend and actively participate at meetings and social gatherings and others do not. One reason noticeable “cliques” and/or

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“social divides” matter, they explain, is because students learn best when curriculum is jointly planned and the sum of readings, class activities, and assessments equal more than the individual parts. Sometimes, they also attribute faculty dissension to woefully inconsistent, standardized grading practices. Additionally, they know teaching is a lot more fun and sustainable when friendship prevails.

Despite those recurring challenges, almost intuitively, the candidates know how one especially effective principal or administrative team can tilt the balance towards educational equity and excellence. But they’re quick to note a third negative theme: unrelenting administrative churn, which greatly complicates progress on all of the previous fronts. Last year,

for example, two co-authors explained that at their western Washington high school, “The principal has just started his third year and two assistant principals are in their first year. The final assistant principal is in her second year.” Four administrators, with less than seven years combined experience at a large, struggling, culturally diverse high school.

Another team at a different high school recently wrote, “With half of the administration being new this year, it is understandable that there will be changes and that the teachers may be a little resistant to change.” “However,” they continued, “some of the new policies that the administration has tried to implement show what a huge disconnect there is between

the administration and the staff. For example, since the start of school in the beginning of September, there have been at least three different changes to the attendance policy and how teachers are supposed to be implementing these policies in their classroom.”

Any chance of successfully recruiting and retaining a diverse, culturally proficient staff requires administrators to prioritize it for several years. The same is true for creating a harmonious school culture where faculty know, like, and trust their leader(s); have mutual respect for one another; team effectively; and cheer one another’s successes. Of course, administrative continuity in and of itself doesn’t guarantee succeeding at those things, but it greatly increases the odds of success. Even pre-service teachers in their first semester know that unrelenting administrative turnover makes those improvements nearly impossible. ■

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