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Clint Sabin
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Contact: Clint W. Sabin, 309/556-3181

"The reason there is a shortage of teachers is because there is a shortage of respect for what teachers do."

-Professor Robin Leavitt, Chair of IWU Educational Studies

Who Teaches the Teachers?

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--With the recent debate among local and state school boards about a shortage of teachers in Illinois, educators and lawmakers are wondering what can be done to fix the problem. According to the State Board of Education, 17 percent of the state's teachers will be eligible to retire this year. Over the next three years that number will increase to 47 percent.

On a national level, the problem is just as grim. The Fair Teacher Pay Association, using data compiled from the U.S. Department of Education, American Federation of Teachers and the U.S. Census Bureau, predicts that by the year 2008, the nation will be approximately 30 percent short of the required number of trained teachers needed. Inevitably the question turns to how can Illinois and other states recruit more people into the teaching profession, and how well are teachers being taught to handle the needs of future students?

IWU Philosophy

At Illinois Wesleyan University, the educational studies department's answers to those questions lie in a basic philosophy: The best teachers are the ones who have a liberal arts background; who can be teachers and scholars, not just technicians who teach from pre-packaged tool kits. The IWU Teacher Education Handbook says, "The liberally-educated teacher brings intellectual curiosity and the excitement of his or her disciplinary studies into the classroom."

For many, the question of why they should teach is a tough one. Lynne Seago, a senior English-literature major and educational studies minor from Naperville, Ill. said, "Many potentially amazing teachers shy away from teaching because they don't want to deal with the issues that they would face in the schools today, especially given the fact that a teacher's salary can not begin to compete with that in other fields." They also don't have to deal with the early morning and late nights, bad-tempered youngsters and ill-tempered parents.

Incredibly Rewarding Profession

However, the idea of being an educator will still bring many to the classroom. "Teaching is an incredibly rewarding profession, but also one that takes a lot of time, preparation, and sacrifice...I hope and pray that there will be some quality educational reforms that will change this situation," said Christine Mah, a senior education-studies major from Buffalo Grove, Ill. Kyle Stern, a senior math major from Downers Grove, Ill., who finished his student teaching this past December noted, "It will be a sad day when students go to classrooms with no teacher.

It's also sad to see class sizes so large. I had about 28 students in each of my five math classes. It's hard to reach each student during those 50 minutes."

A big deterrent to qualified teachers is assumed by most to be the lack of pay and prestige associated with the occupation. "Teachers are just as important as doctors and lawyers," Stern said, "yet the compensation is not the same." Susan Bae, a senior educational-studies major from Northbrook, Ill., added, "Most of us desire well-educated and qualified teachers. However, the standards for teacher benefits rarely increase with that desire."

Bill House, a 1988 IWU graduate, who teaches at Southwest School in Evergreen, Ill, said, "When I tell people that I teach, they act as if to say, 'Oh, is that all you do?'" House explained how he has noticed that parents do not respect teachers the way they used to. He used an example that when he was in school, if he had been sent to the principal's office for misbehavior, his biggest concern was how his mother and father would react when he got home. In House's observations, parents now come to school to complain to the principal for scolding their child. "The kids are picking up on that attitude," said House, "and it could lead to even more problems in the future."

Long Hours, Little Pay

Robin Leavitt, associate professor and chair of IWU's educational-studies department, noted that, "It is well-known by those in the trenches that good teachers work long hours for little pay. There is not much advancement opportunity in the role of 'teacher.'" House agreed, adding, "The current teachers that are coming into the field come in knowing they won't get high pay or prestige, so they are the ones that really want to teach well. The problem is not the quality of teachers, but the quantity."

Teacher certification at IWU is unlike most institutions. "It's tough," said Leavitt. "First the student must take the required general-education requirements that are required of all IWU students, in addition to major and minor requirements. They must also pass through our department's rigorous professional curriculum, which includes classes that are mandated by the state Board of Education. The student also must spend a full semester out in the field as a student-teacher." To make it more challenging, the state's board of education routinely changes the requirements for certification, which means universities must adjust their curriculum to match.

Teacher Frustration

Another constant source of frustration for teachers is the rapidly changing testing requirements for students. When asked what Leavitt thought of President George W. Bush's proposals for regular and national standardized tests to hold teachers accountable, she answered, "We try to teach our teachers to be reflective and creative...to shape a program to student needs, but there are so many requirements of teachers to meet standardized tests. It is so discouraging because teachers can't always teach according to the individual student's needs."

When asked what has changed in teaching teachers in the past decade, Leavitt answers that technology is the big boom. "There is an emphasis on being technologically prepared. Teachers need to be able to use it as a teacher, and use it into the classroom."

Student Teaching

The culmination of any teacher-education program is student teaching. Student teaching is where a senior education major is assigned to a mentor in a school district. Many see student teaching as the most important part of the teacher-education process. Seago, who recently returned to IWU after student teaching, said, "The most valuable part of student teaching is definitely having the opportunity to work with the kids." She added, "What I wasn't prepared for was the workload. Student teachers spend all their time with the mentor, including the early 7 a.m. staff meetings and the late 7 p.m. parent/teacher conferences or extra curricular activities. I spent every waking hour either at school or working with students, arranging lesson plans and writing or grading tests."

For IWU, finding the mentors isn't usually a problem. Leavitt said, "I'm very pleased with the mentoring teachers. They do it because of their love and passion for teaching, not for any material reward."

Student teaching also allows the student teachers to go into a more diverse setting in which they perhaps weren't already accustomed. Mah taught first grade in a bilingual Chinese class on the Southside of Chicago. "I went into the experience expecting to face a lot of challenges and difficulties, and it was very eye-opening to work personally with children who lived in poverty, who faced an abusive homelife, had language barriers and who had special education needs." After her semester of student teaching was over, the school hired Mah as a permanent addition to the faculty.

Close Relations with Professors

One of the benefits for educational-studies majors attending IWU is the close relationships created with professors. When student teachers are assigned a mentor in a school district, they also are assigned a supervisor from their college or university to assist them in working with their mentor and adjusting to teaching life. At IWU, these assigned supervisors are the same professors students had for their coursework. This allows for more continuity and support for the student teacher.

Also fairly unique to IWU is the practice for education students to begin their teaching experiences early in their college career, as compared to waiting until their senior year. Even first-year students work with local schools. "This really helps you get a feel for whether or not teaching is for you. I know a lot of people who didn't find that out until they were a senior," said Krista Nicholson, a senior educational-studies major from Franklin Grove, Ill., who just finished her semester student teaching.

Proposals that the Illinois General Assembly may consider this spring include tuition reimbursement for teachers who agree to teach in economically challenged schools. Another idea

that may be considered by the General Assembly is a type of graduated certificate. Teachers would not automatically graduate from a college or university with a full teaching certificate, but instead would have to meet a set of further requirements over 5-10 years before being granted full teaching authorization.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls more than 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. A \$26 million library and a \$6 million student center are under construction.

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