

EducationNews.org

An Interview with Catherine Kearney: Finding Teachers for California

Michael F. Shaughnessy - August 25, 2009
Senior Columnist EducationNews.org
Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico

1) I understand that on Aug 20th, you released a report about the need for more teachers in California. Could you tell us how this came about?

California's teacher workforce will soon face historic challenges. Over the next decade, teacher retirement rates will increase exponentially, and California will experience a critical shortage of high-quality teachers, especially in the fields of math, science and special education. Districts in the Central Valley and Inland Empire are projected to experience a 53 and 58 percent increase respectively. Although some counties will experience declining enrollment over the next decade, no county will escape teacher retirements and the imminent need for more teachers.

In order to ready California for this impending teacher shortage, the California Teacher Corps is forming with the goal of placing 100,000 highly-qualified teachers in our public schools by 2020. We are a new statewide organization that represents alternative certification programs that are uniting to focus on placing second-career professionals and other content experts in classrooms.

2) How severe is the teacher shortage in California?

Estimates show that as baby boomers reach retirement age over the next decade, teacher retirement rates will increase exponentially. According to a 2008 WestEd report, approximately 8,000 California teachers will retire each year over the coming years. Additionally, research has shown that nationally, close to half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years. As a result, the state will experience a critical shortage of high-quality teachers, especially in the fields of math, science and special education.

Recruiting the best teachers for our children is a challenging topic given recent teacher lay-offs across the state. However, despite the current economic situation, we will experience this severe shortage of teachers in the coming decade and we must take steps now to ready ourselves for this inevitability. The California Teacher Corps is poised to meet these challenges.

3) I have heard that there is no teacher shortage, but rather a shortage of math, science, foreign language teachers- True or False?

California will face a shortage of math, science and special education teachers. As the state's public schools struggle with this shortage, alternative certification programs are providing qualified teachers in these critical subject areas. Last year, 50 percent of California's math teachers came out of alternative certification programs. There are countless second-career professionals who are interested in the teaching profession, but who are unaware that our programs provide a viable route.

The California Teacher Corps hopes to reach these teachers and place them in the underserved schools that need them.

4) Further I have heard that there is no teacher shortage, but rather a shortage of special education teachers to work with students with disabilities, handicaps and special needs. True or False?

There continues to be a shortage of special education teachers across all disabilities, including unique regional needs across California for special education teachers. The California Teacher Corps will work to alleviate this shortage by recruiting professionals who might not otherwise enter the classroom, but who bring with them the experience and qualities we need in special education teachers.

For example, Martina Espinosa has been teaching special education for six years in Orange County. She originally went to law school to pursue public interest law and become a children's advocate. However, her desire to be a teacher was too strong and she found that teaching was a natural fit. Knowing there was a need for special education teachers in her community, she entered an alternative certification program and is advocating for children today, just in a different way.

5) What about the cost of living in California? I know the Governor advertises and says "You'll be back", but I am hesitant to visit California due to the costs of food, lodging, travel and the like. Will your endeavors address this issue?

California is a wonderful state with much to offer, and that includes its great teachers. Our organization is focusing on bringing the best and brightest teachers into California public schools. Last year, we successfully placed 8,000 highly-qualified teachers into the classroom. We want to do this and much more. Our programs are attracting more males and underrepresented minorities to the teaching profession. They are attracting individuals who are looking for a more fulfilling career and who want to be in the classroom. The California Teacher Corps is about serving our communities, and most importantly, serving our children.

6) Now, tell us a bit about this "alternative certification" program that you have or are proposing?

For more than two decades, alternative certification programs have been increasing the pool of talented, committed and diverse teachers in California's public schools. Over the last six years, nearly 50,000 teachers have participated in alternate route programs and

are serving in our public schools today. California alternative certification programs provide rigorous training that enables prospective teachers with both established professional experience and deep content expertise to teach in our public schools while concurrently continuing with coursework towards their teaching credentials.

7) What kind of data are you looking at in terms of “success “ of your program?

Our goal is to place 100,000 highly-qualified teachers in California public schools by 2020. Our ‘success’ is really about California’s children. When we are able to match the best teachers with the students who need them most, we know that it is the students who are benefiting. Every child deserves the right teacher in their classroom.

8) How much funding have you gotten and where have you gotten it from?

The California Teacher Corps is a nonprofit membership organization, with support coming from our members. We are a relatively new organization and would welcome additional support and funding from both private sector and philanthropic organizations.

9) What have I neglected to ask?

Our teachers are our brightest stars. These are professionals who were looking to make a long-term commitment to teaching for the greater good of our children. They are former lawyers, athletes, bilingual teaching assistants, and bankers, and much more, who all decided to pursue their dream of teaching.

One such example is James Ybarra, who served in the military for 23 years as a U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer and aviation instructor. During a tour in El Salvador, Ybarra landed his helicopter in a remote area and was surrounded by hundreds of El Salvadoran school children. As soon as they knew he could speak Spanish, Ybarra was bombarded with questions from how does a helicopter fly to what’s life like in the Army. It was the first time he realized that teaching was what he wanted to do when he retired. Today, Ybarra teaches English and History to students with limited English proficiency in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Another example is Kyle Sires, who is a special education teacher for Turlock High School. Prior to becoming a teacher, Kyle played professional indoor football. After playing a couple years, he switched careers to pursue another passion of his – special education. Having a half brother who was severely handicapped, Kyle was familiar with children with special needs. Today, Kyle has been recognized for his tremendous work with severely disabled students – all wheelchair-bound and most non-communicative – by being awarded the “Outstanding Special Education Teacher” award from the National Association of Special Education Teachers.

And lastly, there is Mary Osteen, who was a paralegal for 20 years before deciding that she needed to be in the classroom. Mary now teaches English, Drama and Digital Media

in Sacramento. Mary's creative and innovative approach led her to design and implement a middle school forensics team; produce and direct the school's first Black History Month celebrations; develop the school's first character education program; and most recently launched a live, middle school television news broadcast—the first and only of its kind in Sacramento City Unified School District.

10) Do you have a web site where interested others can get more information?

For more information about our teachers and alternative certification programs throughout the state, visit the California Teacher Corps at www.cateachercorps.org.