

Senator Carol Liu, Chair
INFORMATIONAL HEARING
California's Teacher Workforce:
Supply/Demand, Recruitment and Retention

January 20, 2016 – 9:00 a.m.

John L. Burton Hearing Room

Panel Discussion: “What do teachers need to be successful in the classroom and enhance their skills over time?”

Comments from Dr. Judy Johnson, Former Executive Director, Cotsen Foundation for the Art of Teaching

Members of this panel are here today to suggest answers to the question, “What do teachers need to be successful in the classroom and enhance their skills over time?” This is the perfect question for us to consider since it acknowledges that if the quality of teaching is to improve and student achievement is to advance as a consequence, teachers who do the daily classroom work will be the ones to make the necessary changes. They should be the focus of our attention. The question also implies that developing successful instruction takes time and we should not expect teachers to boost their performance in an instant, but rather we should assist them in refining and perfecting their craft throughout their careers. Finding out what these teachers need to succeed and giving them tools to enhance their skills are critical steps to take to improve both teaching and learning.

Answers to this essential question can be found in what is working now. One example comes from the last 15 years of professional development sponsored by the Cotsen Foundation for the Art of Teaching. Close to 1,000 teachers in 125 elementary schools have redesigned classroom instruction within 23 California school districts for the benefit of 40,000 children.

What has worked for them is a multi-pronged strategy. The Cotsen foundation and the participating schools focus on excellence in teaching and take the time needed to get it right. These schools and teachers raise the bar on expectations for the quality of teaching they provide children. Teams of the very best teachers within each school choose to build upon their strengths and work together to perfect their craft. They invest a lot of time in professional development, learning with and from colleagues, forming a cadre of expert practitioners within each school community. They also make their teaching public, inviting others to see what works and holding themselves accountable for their classroom performance. The cultures of schools change when classrooms are open and teachers and parents are invited to observe. One result is that learning from colleagues becomes the norm.

Research tells us that 10 to 15 hours of teacher training yearly has no effect on instruction. So a model that works requires more. Teachers in the Art of Teaching fellowship spend about 130 hours annually for two years involved in weekly coaching, studying professional books and education research with other teachers, observing excellent instructors in action at other schools to get new ideas, attending workshops and conferences to learn alternative methods, and practicing in classrooms to select approaches that succeed with students.

Teachers tell us that they learn best from each other. Help comes in the form of weekly coaching from a supportive mentor teacher on the faculty and monthly inquiry into teaching and learning with close colleagues at a school. Eventually these well-trained teachers become leaders helping each school to share the most effective instructional practices.

What works is when school principals and district administrators lead the effort to develop excellence in teaching. School leaders establish the conditions needed for teachers to learn to become the best they can be. They help set the high goals and ensure that teachers have what they need to rise from novice to competent instructor, and then on to exceptional educator. Principals and superintendents are the ones who allocate the resources to organize and support the type of professional learning that helps teachers learn best.

What may be surprising is that entire schools get better when the best teachers lead the effort to improve. By focusing first on the best teachers and building on

their strengths in content and pedagogy, schools benefit as more teachers begin to learn how to help students achieve. Instead of pushing a school up from the bottom by attending only to the needs of the newest teachers or faculty members who are struggling, an approach that works is building a school up from the top. The strongest teachers are eager learners who become teacher leaders. By sharing their growing knowledge and expertise, they help others on the faculty pull up the performance of students throughout a school.

We have many examples in California of classrooms and schools which are succeeding with students. The Art of Teaching is but one of those successes. By looking at which teachers and schools achieve high goals for student learning, we can discover how they became so effective and emulate their approaches to improvement. Evidence across the country suggests these successful schools and districts have many things in common and this includes responding to what teachers need to enhance their craft because teachers are the ones closest to the children and have the most direct influence over student learning. Success is built upon many, if not all, of the eight steps to great teaching summarized below.

Eight Steps to Great Teaching

1. Aspire to excellence
2. Build upon teachers' strengths
3. Provide opportunities to observe great teaching
4. Engage teachers in extensive, effective professional development that includes weekly coaching and mentoring along with training in teaching methods and content
5. Offer resources such as books, videos, computers, lab supplies so that teachers can implement new practices
6. Support faculty collaboration and learning together
7. Make teaching public and open for fellow teachers and parents to see
8. Demonstrate leadership at the school and district by setting high goals for teaching and supporting teachers' learning