

The Intersection of the Teacher Pipeline, Pensions, and Teacher Retention

An NEA Today article, [Survey: Number of Future Teachers Reaches All-time Low](#), discusses a national survey of college freshmen conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles that found that only 4.2% of students entering college plan to major in education. That figure is down from the [historical average of 10%](#). As there is a growing need for teachers, the number of teachers in the pipeline is dwindling.

Though lacking evidence, numerous anti-pension groups argue that public pension plans should be closed so that public schools can attract high quality teachers.

What We Know

When teachers and other public-sector workers have an unbiased choice between a real defined benefit pension and a savings account-based plan, [they overwhelmingly chose a real pension](#). This National Institute for Retirement Security (NIRS) research shows the DB election rates for public workers in states where a choice is offered:



We also know that, once an educator is vested in a pension plan, retention rates increase dramatically. A recent University of California at Berkeley study by Nari Rhee notes: “Early career turnover is a serious policy concern for public education... [Our study](#) confirms that most teachers working in California schools today are here for the long haul, and are better off with a DB pension than with a 401(k)-type plan.” In contrast, Alaska is the only state that does not offer their teachers a pension or Social Security, and the state suffers from very high teacher turnover (particularly in rural areas). Yet, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) – a group that advocates for taking pensions from educators – Alaska is the only state that deserves an “A” on retirement. This only makes sense if you want teaching to evolve into a drive-thru service.

It’s obvious that taking pensions away from future educators only exacerbates the teacher shortage problem; talented young people want financial security as well as a challenging career. Fixing a workforce shortage by cutting any form of compensation isn’t practical.

Where Does That Leave Us?

Young adults considering an education career must weigh teaching’s intrinsic rewards against low and stagnant salaries, the enormous debt burden on college graduates, over-testing, and the constant drumbeat of teacher bashing. The Arnold Foundation and many of the groups it funds, like NCTQ and the Fordham Institute, cannot support their position with valid research. Instead, they rely on ideology, anecdotes, and a small cadre of individuals who always end up opposing teachers’ interests in their “research.”

These efforts to upend retirement policy in public schools appear to be aimed more at transforming the teaching profession into a short-term gig versus attracting quality educators. Since you can’t sell communities on the idea that drive-thru teachers benefit their communities, this seems more like a strategy aimed at achieving an unpopular idea rather than a serious proposal to address the constricting teacher pipeline.

However, the truth remains: Secure pension plans remain a critical component of maintaining a stable, long-term teaching workforce that is firmly rooted in their communities.

To learn more about retirement security, contact the NEA Collective Bargaining and Member Advocacy Department at mhairston@nea.org or dmoon@nea.org.

June 2017