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COMMENTARY

Mid-career Entrants to Teaching

Who They Are and How They May, or May Not, Change Teaching

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For the past two decades, mid-career entrants—teachers who enter the classroom after working in another field—have been at the center of proposals to avert national shortages of teachers and raise student achievement by bringing individuals with specialized content knowledge into schools. Further, policymakers have asserted that mid-career entrants might help fill hard-to-staff vacancies (e.g., secondary mathematics and science) in urban schools and reduce racial and gender imbalances between U.S. teachers and students. Given mid-career entrants' perceived potential to address these concerns, in the mid-1980s, state departments of education, school districts, foundations, and universities began launching numerous initiatives aimed at recruiting mid-career entrants to teaching. These initiatives were largely created without information about mid-career entrants that could inform their design and implementation. Without this data, policymakers, practitioners and researchers had little information to help form reasonable expectations about what mid-career entrants might contribute and what supports they might need.

In a this study, co-author Susan Moore Johnson and I use data from six administrations of the nationalSchools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to assess mid-career entrants' potential to staff public schools, diversify teaching, and fill vacancies in high-need subjects. We find that mid-career entrants comprise a larger proportion of the new teacher workforce than many may realize. Between 1988 and 2004, the percentage of mid-career entrants among first-year teachers nearly doubled, from 20% to 39%, before decreasing slightly to 37% in 2008. Mid-career entrants were more likely than first-career entrants to be male and from minority backgrounds; however, they have not reduced the gender imbalance among first-year teachers nationally, and they appear to be only partially responsible for introducing more racial diversity into the teaching force. Interestingly, most mid-career entrants secured assignments in elementary rather than secondary classrooms.

Our findings have a number of implications. First, mid-career entrants' increasing presence in teaching should alert policymakers to their potential to help alleviate the current predicted national teacher shortage. However, the large percentage that secures positions in elementary schools calls into question the expectation that mid-career entrants will be the answer to filling vacancies in secondary mathematics and science. Policymakers appear to have overestimated mid-career entrants' interest in working with their subjects and underestimated the incentives required to attract mathematics and science professionals to teaching. Our results suggest that recruiting more mid-career entrants will not, in itself, substantially alter the demographic composition of the national teacher workforce. Accomplishing this objective will require deliberately recruiting more men and individuals from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds to teaching.

Given the large numbers of mid-career entrants entering teaching, it seems critical to tailor school-based induction to accommodate their needs. Mid-career entrants' experience working with their subjects in real-world settings may mean that they need less support strengthening their subject area expertise. Further, their older average age (36) may mean that they are less fazed than their first-career counterparts by being held accountable for results or managing contentious parents. However, if mid-

career entrants continue, or become increasingly likely, to enter teaching through fast-track programs that have limited field-based practice teaching, they may need additional support with the practical aspects of teaching, such as classroom management.

Mid-career entrants' increasing presence in teaching may have additional staffing implications if they remain in teaching longer than their first-career counterparts. However, schools may not be tapping mid-career entrants' extensive professional skill set. Mid-career entrants possess practical skills that schools could harness to, for example, strengthen their technological infrastructure, secure funds from external sources, or enhance relationships with local businesses and community organizations. Schools may need to engage these talents to keep mid-career entrants invested in their work for the longer-term.

For the full study, see William H. Marinell and Susan Moore Johnson, Midcareer Entrants to Teaching: Who They Are and How They May, or May Not, Change Teaching, Educational Policy November 2014 vol. 28 no. 6 743-779.

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