

In the long run, we need local teachers

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State Superintendent Paul Pastorek has hired consulting firm McKinsey and Co. to create a recruitment, training and education plan to bolster our Louisiana teaching corps. Pastorek and McKinsey should not have to look far for teachers. State officials should develop talent at home -- from the inside out.

Programs to move local talent into Louisiana's various teacher education programs should head Pastorek's agenda. Since Katrina, teacher salaries have grown, particularly in New Orleans. Working conditions have improved. The lack of a collective bargaining agreement with long-term teacher contracts allows employers to hire the most talented teachers. Every dollar invested in developing the capacity of Louisiana's and New Orleans' human capital is a dollar well spent. All of the necessary conditions are there for a homegrown teacher development program.

Since the storm, our schools have depended heavily on teachers recruited from other states, often lured financial incentives. But bringing in outside talent to fill the ranks of public school teachers is a short-term solution. Imported teachers and administrators are not as likely to stay in the region. And high teacher turnover has an impact on school performance scores -- an impact that's as negative as high student turnover.

People who come to New Orleans to teach primarily as a service obligation, as opposed to a career choice, may decide to leave after their mission is over. We need the brightest, most committed teachers in our most challenged schools. And we need them to stay long-term.

Teaching as a "mission" does fill jobs. It recruits new talent to the field and fulfills a sense of purpose. However, the region needs a stable, long-lasting teaching corps to maximize student improvement. And the fact is, most people want to make careers and raise families near their roots. Unlike homegrown talent, the imports are likely to leave before they become experienced classroom managers.

As a university educator, I am keenly aware of the direct competition from the alternative certification programs endorsed and encouraged by the State Department of Education. These fast-track certification programs benefit transplanted workers.

The state should work alongside colleges and universities to help recruit and train top students from Louisiana as teachers and to help out-of-state students fit in culturally, enabling them to stay here longer.

Our state's colleges and universities are not going away, in good economies or bad. However, these anchor institutions have struggled to capture top talent. Moreover, undergraduate programs have not pumped enough human capital into inner city public schools. This is a national problem that has helped to fuel the growth of Teach for America and other alternative teaching certification programs.

However, in this tough economy, the state has a responsibility to encourage Louisianians to stay here and work. Training and employing homegrown talent should be a priority. Education and health care are the biggest enterprises in the region, yet the state has not aggressively marketed teaching as a viable career.

The state Department of Education as well as colleges and universities also need to recruit talented high school students. For example, why not start more teacher cadet programs at our high performing schools?

The question should not be how we get new teachers. The question is how we get the music, science and sociology majors at our local colleges and universities to consider teaching in their majors.

The state should support or even push Louisiana colleges and universities to answer that question. A sustainable workforce must be trained and developed at home.

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