

The Principal

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The Sad Case of the Declining Teacher

What can a principal do about a declining teacher? I mean one who's been around a while but isn't getting any better or one who was good once but now is showing the effects of age, disappointment, or poor health. This problem is real for most principals, yet I've never read anything about it or gotten any advice from my colleagues. The principals I know ignore declining teachers, hoping they will soon go away, which they often do since they are as unhappy as their principals. I guess this is one of those skeletons in our closet that we don't talk about publicly because we are not ready or able to do anything about them.

The problem exists because school systems, unlike businesses, have little flexibility. The structure of schools is such that teachers must teach or get out. There is no place for them to hide and no way to protect children from them. And if a teacher leaves a job after many years, he or she has little chance of getting another one in education.

Nevertheless, historic rigidity in the system is no excuse for inaction. How can we continue to look the other way while taxpayers support mediocrity, good young teachers can't find jobs, and children are being hurt? If nothing else touches us, this last fact should; our responsibility is to educate all children to the limits of their ability. What excuse can there be for not doing it when we have the means?

Within the hands of principals are some stopgap measures, which, modest as they are, are better than nothing. Within the power of school districts—and the unions—are a few permanent solutions. Principals need to take action to dilute the weaknesses and bolster the strengths of declining teachers. First, they should get them out of primary grade classrooms, where for most children the die is cast on educational success or failure. Then principals can team them with good teachers who will not only share their ideas and strategies with them but will also help to keep them in line. In addition, they can screen class lists to make sure that

all at-risk kids go to strong teachers. Parents won't like it, and other teachers won't like it, but no matter; it is the children who count. Principals can encourage declining teachers to retire early, reduce their contracts, or change careers.

Along with any of the above, the principal can bestow favors on a declining teacher: praise, prestige, time. If he was once a good teacher, the chances are that his life has gone sour; and a little personal attention from the principal may help to sweeten it again.

School districts can make space for declining teachers by easing the restrictions that keep them in the classroom full time. Some restructuring of the work force will, of course, be necessary, and that will take union cooperation. Districts could move some teachers to desk jobs in the central office or in schools. They could staff schools more generously so that teachers could team, with some working on materials, records, and tutoring rather than teaching all day. They could foster job-sharing and other part-time arrangements.

But the best solution would be for districts to offer early retirement plans attractive enough for a declining teacher to leave gracefully by starting a small business, taking a part-time job, or living modestly without working. Although the initial costs might be high, they would soon even out when balanced against the lower salaries of young teachers. Even if costs were to remain high, however, they would still not equal the price we are paying by keeping declining teachers in our classrooms. □

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INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

American Library Association	79	National Staff Development Council	89
ASVAB	9	National Training Center	51
Book It!	47	Outcomes Associates	91
Computer Curriculum Corporation	C-2	The Psychological Corporation	C-4
Excel, Inc.	75	Readup	86
Halton Board of Education	37	Taylor and Francis	67
Illinois Renewal Institute	66, 85	Teachers College	90, 91
Information Age Education	46	Charles C. Thomas Publisher	80
Learning Research Associates	15	TIP Publications	56
Merrill Publishing Company	C-3	University of Massachusetts	93
Midwest Publications	22	Wicat Systems	76-77
C. V. Mosby Company	95	Wilcox and Follett Book Company	81
National Curriculum Study Institutes	23	Zaner-Bloser	41

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