

COMMENTARY

Reviving Teaching With 'Professional Capital'

By Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves

The results of the [latest MetLife Survey](#) of the American Teacher confirm what many of us are experiencing and seeing in the depressing descent of the teaching profession. In the past two years, the percentage of teachers surveyed who reported being very satisfied in their jobs has declined sharply, from 59 percent to 44 percent. The number who indicated they were thinking of leaving the profession has jumped from 17 percent to 29 percent. Imagine being a student knowing that every other teacher you encounter is becoming less and less satisfied, and close to one in three would rather be somewhere else.


Without a strong and relentless focus on what we call "professional capital," U.S. policymakers will continue to miss lessons from other countries about how they produce teacher fulfillment and effectiveness, and to misread warning signs here at home as well. We have directly studied, worked with, and worked in other successful countries, and they do not adopt the strategies of rewarding or punishing individual teachers with measures like test-driven, performance-based pay, or concentrate their energies on the extremes of competence with gushing teacher-of-the-year ceremonies or gung-ho proposals to remove the bottom 5 percent of educators from classrooms.

The truth about the more successful countries, such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada, is that they develop the whole profession to the point where students encounter good teachers one after another. They attract and develop the professional capital of all their teachers, in all schools, day after day, year after year.

Capital in any form is an asset that has to be invested, accumulated, and circulated to yield continuous growth and strong returns. In education, short-term and nonrenewable business capital is organized to get quick returns on business investment and to increase immediate returns by lowering that investment. It favors a teaching force that is young, flexible, temporary, inexpensive to train, lacking in pensions, and replaceable wherever possible by technology. Finding and deploying good teachers then becomes about seeking and allocating existing individual human capital—hunting for talented individuals, working them hard, and moving on to others when they get restless or become spent.



—Kali Ciesemier

National Schools and Staffing Survey [data](#)  reveal that the most frequently occurring number of years that American teachers had been in the job was 15 years in 1987-88, between one and five years in 2003-04, and just one year in 2007-08. In other words, there are more teachers in American public schools

today with one year's experience or less than any other group. How would you feel if that were the measure of experience, of accumulated human capital, in your local hospital?

By contrast, professional capital involves a long-term investment to develop human capital (and economic returns) from early childhood to adult life. For high-quality teachers and teaching, this means requiring teachers to be highly committed, thoroughly prepared, continuously developed, properly paid, well networked with each other to maximize their own improvement, and able to make effective judgments together using all their capabilities and experience.

Professional capital has three components: human, social, and decisional. Human capital is about the qualities of individuals. Strangely, though, you can't accumulate much human capital by focusing only on the capital of individuals. Human capital must be complemented by social capital—groups working hard in focused and committed ways to bring about substantial improvements. Social capital can raise individual human capital—a good team, school, or system lifts everyone. But, as we often see in sports, higher individual human capital—a few brilliant stars—does not necessarily improve the overall team.

The third component—decisional capital—involves making decisions in complex situations on innumerable occasions with different problems and cases. It is what professionalism is all about, especially when well-qualified professionals do this together. Like judges, after many years of practice and analyzing that practice and lots of case examples with others, teachers and other professionals know how to assess situations effectively. The evidence helps, but it's never incontrovertible. In teaching as in law, it's the capacity to judge that makes the difference in the end.

When the vast majority of teachers possess the power of professional capital, they become smart and talented, committed and collegial, thoughtful and wise. Their moral purpose is expressed in their relentless, expert-driven pursuit of serving their students and their communities and always learning how to do better. Those few colleagues who persistently fall short of the mark eventually will not be tolerated by peers who see them as letting down their profession and students.

High-performing countries use professional capital in their approach to the teaching profession. They don't pick on, praise, or punish a few individuals. Instead, they get better and better by using a strategy that develops and retains all of their high-quality teachers and moves them all forward together.

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Based on our experience and research in school change and system change in relation to teachers, we have written action guidelines for teachers, school and district leaders, and state and national leaders, both in governments and unions. Here is a sample of what we propose:

- Social capital is more important than individual human capital because it generates human capital faster, among all teachers and for every child. Leaders have immense power with social capital to strengthen their school communities, develop greater trust, and build more effective professional collaboration—to raise the social capital in the school that develops their students' human capital in the future.
- We need to concentrate on moving the entire profession forward instead of obsessing about the extremes in the field by celebrating the stars and dismissing the duds.
- Midcareer (from about eight-years-plus) is where teachers are considered to be at their peak in commitment and enthusiasm, but where they tend to be most overlooked. We need to use pay accelerators (steps up in pay), professional learning incentives, and multiple career paths to invest in keeping most of our teachers in classrooms for four to eight years at least and to take better advantage of their growing decisional capital and expertise.

- Good collegiality—social capital—is supportive and also demanding. Peer-driven change should be about pulling people into exciting changes and sometimes also pushing and nudging them beyond what they perceive as their limits, for their own and their students' benefit.
- There are new and more positive roles for teachers' unions, as agents of changes that benefit students and their members' hunger for success with students, not just as opponents of bad reforms.
- Governments need to demonstrate courage and faith in investing in long-term professional capital among all teachers for everyone's achievement, rather than pursuing short-term business-capital interests that reduce the cost and tenure of teachers, pit them against one another, and replace them with online alternatives in order to get a quick financial return.

Other countries have invested in the professional capital of their teachers, and they and their students are reaping the benefits. The United States, meanwhile, is going down a reverse path. If we don't change direction, the consequences for our society will be catastrophic.

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