

World Teachers' Day – Opinion

Excellence in teaching starts with back-to-basics training

The day should be used to highlight the significance of the profession as well as removing red tape for teachers to focus on what they do best: teaching

World Teacher's Day is a powerful medium for sustaining awareness of the contribution that teachers make to developing individuals and growing great nations.

But teachers themselves would prefer to be celebrated every day – by having the freedom to focus on giving their best to their learners without being restricted by regulation and red tape, methodologies dictated from the top down, difficult working environments and meagre salaries.

Obstacles

Most teachers want to do their jobs well, and more often than not it's the obstacles that stand in their way that are driving great teachers away from the profession. They want to work in well-equipped classrooms that are not overcrowded; they want to have access to good resources; they want to be empowered by regular opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge in their respective fields; and new teachers entering the profession want an inclusive system of accreditation based on qualifications and merit, not on narrow SACE requirements. Above all, teachers deserve to

enjoy dignity and respect in the classroom as well as in their communities and have their value acknowledged in the salaries that they earn.

Given all these challenges, principals are hard-pressed to attract top teaching talent to their schools. Their task is made doubly difficult when potentially excellent teachers have to be turned away because their qualifications don't meet SACE criteria, or when those with the "right" credentials turn out to have had inadequate training.

Internship

At United Church Schools we have taken a strategic approach to securing the kinds of teachers we need by introducing our own internships. Our trainee teachers are appointed for a three- or four-year internship. They work in the classroom daily and are mentored by our senior teachers. At the same time they enrol for distance learning teaching degrees, either at Unisa or the University of the North West. We pay for their studies and their books, and we pay them a stipend. In return for this opportunity, these young teachers are required to remain in service at our school for a period after they

have qualified. The greatest advantage of this approach is that we can take back control of the quality of their training.

At our school we have developed a back-to-basics methodology of teaching in which all our teachers are fully trained. For instance, at the Foundation Phase our curriculum includes formal lessons in handwriting, phonics, spelling and reading; basic arithmetic starts with number recognition and counting, and our learners are taught their times table. When our interns are exposed to this methodology, they get first-hand experience of sound teaching methods that will enable them to excel as teachers in the future. The internship system is proving to be a highly effective solution for ensuring that our teacher trainees receive ample practical experience; indeed I believe that our interns are getting a better grounding than was provided by the old South African Colleges of Education that were misguidedly closed down and are now so sorely missed.

Ideal model

Based on our experience at United Church Schools, I would strongly



Helenne Ulster. Photo: Supplied

advocate that government-funded bursaries for teacher training follow the same model, namely to provide for a package that requires an internship along with part-time tertiary studies and covers the cost of tuition, study materials and a monthly stipend. This may well be the best route

to attracting committed young talent back into the teaching profession.

Helenne Ulster is the principal of United Church Schools, an independent low-fee-paying school based in Yeoville, Johannesburg. To find out more visit www.unitedchurchschools.co.za

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