



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Why aren't teachers valued more?

Recently, I had the privilege to attend the 5th annual International Summit on the Teaching Profession in Banff, Canada. I was part of a U.S. delegation comprised of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, teacher union representatives, classroom teachers (including a teacher from Spencer County, KY), chief state school officers from North Carolina and Nebraska and support staff from U.S. Department of Education.

The international summits began in New York City and have expanded each year as their location has moved around the world. The primary focus of the summits has been to bring countries together to highlight key issues to enhance the teaching profession and take actions to address issues.

This year, one of the many interesting presentations came from Andreas Schleicher, who works at the Organization for Economic Collaboration and Development (OECD). Andreas is one of the world's leading experts on education issues and he always has excellent presentations that are loaded with great information and policy recommendations. His presentation was based on a recent report from OECD titled [Schools for 21st Century Learners: Strong Leaders, Confident Teachers, and Innovative Approaches](#).

One chart showed teacher perceptions of the value their society places on the teaching profession. It was no surprise to see that many Asian countries, Finland and several other European countries had the highest percentage of teachers saying that their society valued the teaching profession. One of the lowest countries in the survey was the United States. Why do U.S. teachers believe that our society does not value the teaching profession?

Recently, I spoke to the annual Kentucky Education Association Delegate Assembly and I offered a couple of reasons as to why teachers in this country do not think that the U.S. society values the teaching profession.

- 1. Over emphasis on testing** – the U.S is the only country in the world that seems totally fixated on annual testing. The U.S is fixated on using student test scores to evaluate teachers. The media reports are constantly focused on the singular issue of rankings on test scores and too many of our policy leaders “blame” teachers for poor academic performance of students in poverty.
- 2. Lack of teacher voice and leadership** – throughout the recent international summit, a key theme emerged: that we must engage teachers in decision making and provide opportunities for teacher leadership in our schools without teachers having to completely give up teaching. Most of our international competitors have been working on career pathways for a number of years. In the U.S., we have always focused on years of experience and postgraduate degrees for teacher pay increases rather than focus on teacher performance and leadership roles.
- 3. Working Conditions** –it comes as no surprise that teachers do not believe society values the teaching profession given working conditions survey results in areas like school leadership, professional development, time, resources, community support and facilities.
- 4. Teacher pay** – in many countries starting teacher pay is similar to what comparable professions pay. In the US, starting teacher pay is well below what a starting engineer would receive.

- 5. Selectivity of teacher candidates** – for years, the public has been bombarded with the concept that our teacher training programs are not recruiting from the best and brightest high school graduates. Countries like Singapore, Finland and South Korea are pointed to as examples of teacher training programs that recruit from the top 10 percent of high school graduates. An interesting slide in the presentation showed that this is not necessarily the case. This is an area that will need more research.

As I look forward to my retirement after 43 years in education, I am very concerned about the public's perception of public schools and even more concerned that teachers in the U.S. do not feel that the public values the teaching profession. If policy leaders at the local, state and national level do not address teacher perceptions in this area, we will have extreme difficulty in the future recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers.

In the coming months, Kentucky will receive the 2015 results from the TELL Kentucky working conditions survey. Kentucky has the highest percentage of teacher respondents of any state in the nation. Using the results from this survey to address key policy issues during the 2016 session of the General Assembly could go a long way in addressing teacher concerns about the value the public puts on the teaching profession.

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