

Teachers need supportive environment

By John Florez

The answer is so simple and it comes from the teachers. When teachers love teaching, they instill the love of learning. It is such an uncomplicated formula, yet our policy-makers don't get it. It is important if we are to prepare students for jobs yet to be created in the "flat world" Thomas Friedman of the New York Times describes. And if the United States is to succeed, our schools must prepare students to be life-long learners. That requires having teachers who instill the love of learning in every child.

Teachers entering the profession do so because of a passion to change the world - one student at a time. Yet, when it comes to trying to improve our schools, we fail to involve the teachers - "front-line workers" - who help determine the future of our children. They know how to motivate students, but all too often are ignored.

Policy-makers keep trying to fix education while pouring more money into an outdated system. Recently, the Utah State Board of Education and the Board of Regents conducted an "Educator Supply and Demand Study" to determine how to meet the growing student enrollment over the next 20 years. It recommended increasing enrollment of students in colleges of education and to have teachers, with families, return to the profession.

Last week, the Board of Education received a follow-up report from its Educator Quality Task Force which recommended recruitment, bonuses and mentoring for new teachers, differential pay, a principal-teacher ratio and continued advocating for class-size reduction.

The studies show that how you pose the problem defines the solution. Both studies miss the gist of the problem. It's not one of supply, rather one of keeping teachers. The first study found that many who graduate from colleges of education never enter the profession, and of those who do, many leave within the first five years. So what we have is a "hemorrhaging" problem, not a supply problem.

Now here is a sample of what the teachers on the front-line say about keeping teachers:

"During my career . . . I have seen education deteriorate as far as being a desirable career. Teachers are no longer supported in the classroom by the parents, administrators and the legislature . . . teachers are going non-stop with duties that take all of the time and

are not even allowed bathroom breaks. Any other work place that functioned in this manner would be under investigation for violations of work standards."

"I . . . have discouraged family members from going into teaching. I personally don't care about a big raise . . . I would just be happy for a class of 23 where I could make a big difference."

"It matters not so much what you teach me to do as a teacher as what fire burns in my teacher heart . . . After a difficult year of testing and changing and feeling that nothing I did was enough, I made a decision last spring. I decided to teach 'happy.' If I can't do that then I must stop teaching."

"I love teaching and I love the students and if I wasn't so close to retirement I would be out. A student teacher from our school quit last year . . . The students wouldn't work, when she phoned the parents they swore at her and the principal didn't do an awful lot to back her up. She was the top . . . as far as student teachers go . . . this year we phoned to see if she wouldn't try again at our school. The reply, "Thank you . . . I have a job now with great opportunities to grow and a great working environment."

What this shows is a disparity between what policy-makers and the front-line teachers see as the problem. Policy-makers see it as one of recruitment, mentoring and pay. The front-line teachers see it as the oppressive work environment where they are not supported and respected, and where they discourage their loved ones from entering the profession.

Policy-makers should take a lesson from successful corporations. They listen to their employees and create a working environment where they are valued, respected, and provided the support and resources to do their job.

Likewise, if we want to prepare our students to succeed in today's ever-changing world, they will need more than a teacher proficient in a subject - rather they need one who will teach the love of learning. To do that we will need to create an environment where teachers are eager to come to work and, as one teacher said, "(with) what fire burns in my teacher heart."