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Volume 24, Number 77, November 30, 2017

Teacher shortage? How did that happen?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Here's a pretty reliable rule of thumb: When you make it hard to achieve a goal, and then you erode the value of achieving that goal, chances are you're going to reduce the number of people who seek to achieve it. Might this rule at least partly explain the current [teacher shortage in Illinois](#)?

Marcus Albrecht, Uniserv Director for Region 5 (based in Edwardsville) of the Illinois Education Association, thinks so. "Now after three decades of unceasing and unrelenting teacher bashing – suddenly there is a serious shortage of certified teachers in Illinois," Albrecht wrote in an essay on the subject.

"Everyone knew being a teacher was a hard job. Those who entered the profession did so with a sense of idealism, mission, and purpose. But while so called 'education policy experts' made policy about things they knew nothing about, working conditions in the classroom continued to deteriorate."

Such deterioration led to reduced interest in education as a profession. "Enrollment in college teacher education programs has declined. Graduation from teacher preparation programs is down. Teacher retention is low. Mid-career veteran teachers are leaving the profession and are encouraging their college attending children not to go into education and instead to choose a 'real profession' (engineering, nursing, information technology)."

Is all this an exaggeration? It seems not to be. A frequently-cited survey report was [released late last year](#) by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintents of Schools.

"Broadly, 60% of the districts across the state indicated that they had difficulty with staffing positions," the report began. "While 16% had to cancel classes due to shortages of teachers with appropriate qualifications, 76% reported that they had fewer qualified candidates applying for positions in their districts."

Significantly, while 43% of the responding school districts reported that available candidates for teaching positions were "worse" - more poorly prepared for their chosen profession than applicants for teaching jobs in the past. Only 4% saw recent teacher preparation program graduates as "better."

For that and other reasons, the responding school districts reported having to cancel courses or programs and to bring on board teachers who were "not properly Illinois licensed or endorsed" in many areas, especially in special education, math, science, reading/English language arts, general education - and everything else.

So what has caused this reduced interest in the profession of education? Theories abound, but Albrecht is one of us who trace the erosion back to the 1983 Reagan Administration publication of "[A Nation At Risk](#)," a flimsy analysis blaming the then-faltering economy on a "rising tide of mediocrity" in public education.

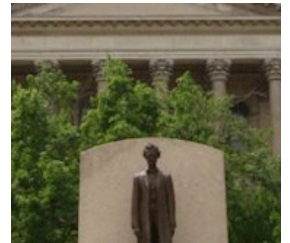
"If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," ANAR declared, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.... [We] seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling."

Reagan then handed the keys to public education to the business community, and corporate leaders have largely assumed control ever since. Briefly, they injected a militant "accountability" system relying on "high-stakes" testing and explicit distrust of teachers to evaluate children and of principals to evaluate teachers.

Vouchers, private school tuition tax breaks, charter schools and other "privatization" options have been promoted as the "competition" that would improve education. Benefits that once lured the "best and brightest" into education despite its generally low pay - tenure and secure pensions - have been eliminated or reduced in value.

Despite corporate and policymaker denigration of teachers, the public's opinion of them has [remained pretty high](#), according to research conducted by [Education Next Foundation](#), a Harvard-based organization that proudly asserts that it "partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points."

It is notable, however, that this year's Education Next survey report found that the general public, and also teachers, saw "ineffective" teachers as making up just 15% and 11% of the total, respectively; those figures far exceed the percentage of ineffective teachers that school principals brought themselves to report.



That is a reality that seems likely to get worse before it gets better, as upper-ranked college students calculate the costs (especially the increasing burden of student loans) versus the benefits of education as a career. And Illinois has been lumped with California, Texas, Florida and New York as [big teacher-shortage states](#).

(The comments of educators and experts presented on the page linked above are particularly interesting. Former Yale professor Roger Schank provided a thought-provoking paragraph, as did Deerfield High School teacher Neil Rigler. The comments and international comparisons on that page are worth viewing.)

I recently enjoyed a conversation with a class of bright young educators who are preparing for futures of leadership by seeking doctoral degrees. It was a perfect opportunity for me to congratulate them on the profession they have chosen and to explain why, in my view, it is an "ennobling" way to make a living.

As a journalist since 1970, I've interacted with practitioners of many professions, so many that I have become able to see a "persona" in most of them. The persona of educators, briefly, is that of a *nurturing protector of children*. Educators do that every day. They help children to grow and, [if necessary, they protect them](#).

In time, *what they do becomes what they are*.

Educators, it's clear to me, are also steeped in truth, more than practitioners of most professions. The children in their custody during the school day need to hear the facts about everything that goes on in the world they have so recently entered. They must be able to rely on that at school if nowhere else.

But there are professions for which truth is not a major part the practitioners' persona. In fact, truth-telling is in some professions a liability. When you must seek an advantage in every contract, you can't just show your hand. To get the most from every deal very often means *rehearsing and acting out deception*.

Eventually, those whose professional success is driven by lies become second-nature liars. Even when it's not necessary for them to fabricate, *they'll do it anyway*. They just can't "turn it off." As you may have gathered from recent analyses, I see significant mendacity-by-reflex in the character of Gov. Bruce Rauner.

He just keeps proving my point. In a recent example, he was shown to have been [a compulsive liar](#) about his maternal grandparents. He keeps on saying they were immigrants, *knowing all the while that they were born in Wisconsin*. He even repeated the falsehood to some media - *after* admitting to other media it is not true.

Somewhere along the line, Rauner came to believe that having immigrant grandparents would be to his advantage, so he just says it is the case. Former governor (current prison inmate) Rod Blagojevich had a similar compulsion to lie, and other public figures - some high-ranking ones - also seem to be chronic liars.

It's not just the lies Rauner tells. It's also the truths he doesn't tell. He shares records that [tell his income](#) (\$188 million in 2015; \$91 million last year), but he refuses to share the schedules that would tell us where all that money comes from. That's a major blind spot that he's imposing on the voters of Illinois.

So what? Aren't all politicians liars? From the campaign ads, you might think so, but that is far from the case. I'm sure most legislators in tight races are embarrassed by some of the ads they must "approve." But in their daily interaction, you can be confident they are being pretty honest. And with good reason.

At the Capitol, a reputation for dishonesty is poison. There are exceptions, of course, but most of the legislators work hard and try to shape good policy for their district constituents. Those who quietly do the heavy lifting are effective because their word is golden at the Capitol, even if it gets strained on the campaign trail.

Why all this concern about lying? Well, we're confronted with it every day, maybe every hour, maybe every minute, in the commercial messages that pour through the ether and into our email inboxes. It is also a fact that, policymakers aside, there's a good bit of embroidery associated with much public communication on policy.

Take, for example, the recent report from [ED CHOICE](#), an advocacy group that is unapologetic about its mission, which is to promote vouchers, tuition tax credits, charter schools and non-public schools. Its recently released report on attitudes of Indiana parents is clearly just [advocacy disguised as research](#).

Breaking news: As the New York Times has reported, the U.S. House voted Wednesday to "[bankrupt graduate students](#)." For anyone seeking a post-graduate credential, this is a very big deal.

Next week: Preview of topics for 2018, discussion of ISNS' future.

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