

# Edunomics

*For better teachers, change the incentives*

By VANN PRIME

I am one of the lucky ones. I teach in a school that has many excellent teachers. But for nine years, I've observed the larger public-school system in crisis and the contentious debate that surrounds it: Why is it failing? How can it be fixed?

Education—or, as economists refer to it, “investment in human capital”—is a cornerstone of every model of economic growth: if our children are not well educated, innovation and productivity will wither away. In other words, our long-term collective quality of life depends on the quality of our schools. And, by most measures, they are inadequate to the task. What are we doing wrong?

My view is that many problems in education are economic in nature. By this I don't mean that more funding will solve the problem. I mean that the way we run public education violates virtually every basic tenet of economics. We have constructed a public school system that seems *intentionally* designed to provide the wrong incentives to administrators, teachers, and students.

Take teacher tenure. Job security with few conditions allows teachers to settle, to become lazy and professionally static. Tenure creates a strong disincentive to innovate or work harder. Tenure attracts to the profession security-seekers rather than risk-takers and provides no upward mobility for the ambitious few.

Now imagine a job where one not only cannot get fired, but where one receives *automatic* raises simply by *being* there. Even for the most conscientious teachers, there is no incentive to do more than the minimum, because no matter how hard those teachers work, they cannot be paid more. There are no cash bonuses, no rewards for performance. After working many (truly exhausting) years, few teachers could be faulted for either shifting into a lower gear or moving on.

These are hardly the only disincentives to becoming a teacher. When, at age 37, I started teaching high school, I began, in both salary and rank, as a “first-year” teacher. Despite my having worked in intelligence, diplomacy, and business, I was treated like, and earned essentially the same salary as, a 21-year-old teaching second grade. And, like my first-year peers, I was subject to the seniority system's stubborn adherence to a last-in, first-out policy.

It doesn't take the sharpest imagination to understand why this would be a disastrous way to run an organization. If I were, say, managing a pharmaceutical company, would I pay someone with 15 years of experience in pharmacological



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

research the same salary as the new undergraduate intern simply because they were both new hires? Could I expect the same outcomes from both? The same productivity? Of course not. Then why would I pay them identically or fire the last one hired, regardless of performance? This is nonetheless the norm in public education.

When I first thought about teaching, I called my county school system. I explained my professional background, including graduate degrees in international affairs and, later, in international economics. They told me to apply immediately. Then I found out that, despite my background, according to the state of Maryland I was not qualified to teach history, political science, or economics. Until I completed 29 credit hours of teacher training and became certified, I would be employed as a “long-term substitute,” a job with full hours, low pay, no benefits, and the real possibility of my being released at the end of the year.

State-mandated teacher certifications (backed by No Child Left Behind-based rules) are preventing highly qualified candidates from becoming teachers. I was an all-too-rare exception. At the time, my wife and I were in a secure enough financial position that I could take two years off without any income to become a teacher and then earn around \$45,000 a year once employed. How many experienced professionals, especially those with families, could do that? Why should they have to? I had the academic background and pedagogical skills I needed to be a teacher before expending all that time, money, and effort on a graduate degree in education.

Teacher quality is the key to improving public education in the United States. Nonetheless, we systematically dissuade highly capable people from becoming teachers. If we are to improve our educational system, we must instead create economic incentives that draw the best people to the profession and keep them there.

*Vann Prime teaches Advanced Placement (AP) economics, AP European history, and international relations at Mount Hebron High School in Howard County, Maryland.*