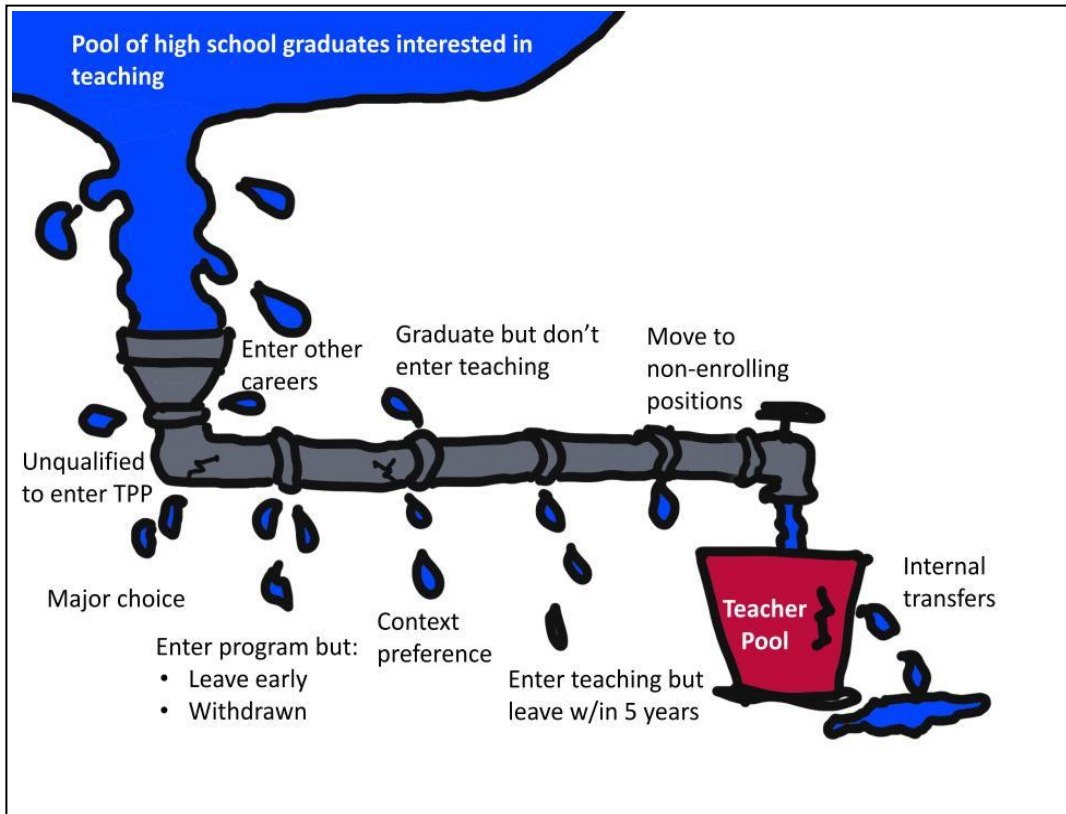


Teacher Shortages and Institutional Responses

IPE/BC Forum, March 7, 2024



IPE/BC was very fortunate to have Dan Laitsch, Dean, SFU Faculty of Education and past IPE/BC chairperson, as the keynote speaker addressing the teacher shortage at our recent AGM and forum. At the outset, Dan invited our many participants in person and online to discuss what we perceived to be the causes of the serious teacher shortage we're experiencing today and what solutions we might propose.

These two questions certainly sparked lively discussion. Many compounding factors were identified as causes of the shortage. In 2002, the government of the day stripped class size and composition clauses from the BC public school teachers collective agreement. When, [in 2016, the Supreme Court of Canada ordered that the provisions be reinstated](#), the urgent search for more teachers was undermined by the fact that there had been no promotion of teaching or recruitment of teachers in the previous years. In fact, potential candidates were discouraged from entering teaching between 2002 and 2016 due to the paucity of vacancies. We know now that teacher recruitment and retention require thorough, long-term planning so that the teachers are available in time to meet the escalating need. We can predict the need for teachers based on population growth and should be planning ahead. When that doesn't happen, as one participant said, there's a hole in the bucket that's draining it much faster than it can be filled.

What else is contributing to the teacher shortage? There was no doubt amongst participants that the worsening working conditions, chronic underfunding, and mounting pressures on teachers are disincentives to entering and staying in the profession. Increasing stress levels and lack of support are resulting in teachers leaving the profession for other pursuits or taking partial leaves of absence to reduce their assignments, in an effort to manage their health and well-being.

The issue of the prolonged [teacher salary scale is also a disincentive to enter teaching](#). It takes a teacher ten years to reach their full salary, despite the fact that beginning teachers and experienced teachers have essentially the same responsibilities. It is an antiquated system which only serves to discourage potential teacher candidates. (As teaching salaries and working conditions are the purview of collective bargaining, this would need to be addressed by the parties at the negotiating table, of course.)

Additionally, the discussion groups felt that, because nearly three quarters of the teaching population in BC are women, this may be an additional reason that the health and well-being of the profession does not get the attention it deserves. While the opposite should be the case, those working with children and youth are not always valued highly enough in our society. Too often, the complexities of the role are not well-understood by the public at large.

Related to this point, is the fact that successive governments, ministers of education and their senior staff have not championed the teaching profession and the role that teachers and public schools play in a thriving democracy. Year after year, when the provincial budget is tabled, the pressing needs in public education are not addressed as they should be and, year after year, the situation gets worse, regardless of who is in government.

In addition to concretely and systematically addressing the deterrents identified above, the forum participants also identified the need for a stable program of induction of teacher candidates into the profession and mentoring of beginning teachers. While some districts and teacher associations in BC have mentoring programs of varying types, there isn't a coherent province-wide approach, despite its being an important consideration in retaining teachers and supporting them in finding the role rewarding. The way that Scotland supports beginning teachers was cited in the discussions. In what's termed the [Teacher Induction Scheme](#), introduced in 2002, Scotland guarantees beginning teachers a year of structured support from an experienced teacher, a reduced timetable, and additional professional development opportunities. And [the national government takes a deep interest in how many teachers have been recruited by each of the local authorities and has allocated recruitment funding to them, in addition to running an active campaign to encourage young people to chose teaching as a career](#).

After guiding the participants to analyze the problems and consider solutions, Dan stressed the need for a systemic response. Using the pipeline image included above, he

explained the importance of looking at where we lose potential and current teachers. Where are the leakage points and what action is needed to address them? Each leakage point requires a clear public policy response and a proactive strategy in order for the teacher shortage to be effectively overcome. There's no doubt that it will take a comprehensive plan of action, concerted and collaborative work, and adequate funding. But, a strong, stable, and well supported public school system is well worth the effort.

Dan's final challenge to our forum participants was to consider what role IPE/BC can play in addressing the teacher shortage. We're pleased to report that we'll be setting up a working committee and looking at ways our organization can play a role in advocating for solutions. We're grateful to Dan for his leadership and for inspiring us to think deeply about this very important issue.