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National Survey Finds That Career Changers Who Become Teachers Have Gaps in Preparation, Mentoring

New survey of teachers coming from other jobs/careers debunks stereotypes; raises questions about adequacy of early real-world prep and in-school support

PRINCETON N.J. – February 25, 2010 – A new national survey points to some significant shortfalls in preparation and support for people who change careers to teach, and also debunks some common assumptions about their paths to teaching.

Career Changers in the Classroom: A National Portrait was released today by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. Conducted by Hart Research Associates and funded by MetLife Foundation, the survey finds that the vast majority of career changers—92 percent—pursued teacher education through a university program, and nearly nine in 10 considered their programs to have been excellent overall.

However, when rating their programs' attention to specific classroom needs, preparation for real-world challenges came up short. On a composite index of ratings, more than one-quarter of those surveyed (28 percent) gave their teacher preparation a "C" or better for addressing such classroom issues as dealing with behavioral issues, incorporating standards into the curriculum, and teaching English language learners.

Career Changers in the Classroom also counters stereotypes about career changers as midcareer or second-career executives who take large pay cuts to teach. The survey finds that nearly three in five career changers (57 percent) worked in other jobs for less than ten years before entering the classroom. Two out of three (67 percent) reported that their teaching salaries were the same as or better than their salaries in their previous jobs. Many of these said they were more concerned about other benefits, like loan forgiveness—of interest to 55 percent of those surveyed, but offered to just 31 percent.

"Career changers are entering teaching in booming numbers, which is very good news since they are essential to meeting the goal of putting a qualified teacher in every American classroom," says Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. "They come with remarkably different experiences and backgrounds than traditional teacher candidates—they differ widely even among themselves. This means that universities, school districts, and policymakers will have to develop teacher education programs targeted specifically at this population with a recognition that one size does not fit all. This survey indicates that there is much work to be done in this area."

The survey does suggest that teacher preparation has become more responsive to contemporary realities in the schools, with newer career changers (those in the classroom for six years or less) assigning their programs significantly higher marks on preparation for current classroom challenges. On the other hand, with fewer than half of recent career changers rating their programs above average in such areas as working with classroom technology and use of assessment data, the findings hint that teacher preparation needs to adapt more fully and quickly to today's classrooms and schools.

Career Changers in the Classroom also points to changes needed in the ways K-12 schools and districts support career changers as they enter the classroom. Although 53 percent of career changers in the survey said they had worked with a mentor, many of them reported a relatively minimal mentoring experience. Yet research in the field has clearly established mentoring—or the lack of it—as a key factor in teacher

turnover. The survey findings suggest that a greater focus on mentoring, especially for career changers, can help districts reduce attrition.

“Professionals from other fields are entering teaching in growing numbers and can help fill critical gaps in areas such as math and science,” notes Dennis White, president and CEO of MetLife Foundation. “The responses in this survey tell us how to do a better job of preparing them for the classroom and supporting them when they get there.”

A previous Woodrow Wilson-Hart survey, released in 2008 and also funded by MetLife Foundation, indicated that career changers could be one of the nation’s best hopes to fill an anticipated 1.5 million teaching vacancies during the next decade. That study, *Teaching As a Second Career*, found that 42 percent of college-educated Americans aged 24 to 60 would consider teaching if the right compensation and preparation were offered.

Career Changers in the Classroom offers a series of recommendations for teacher preparation programs, schools and districts, and policymakers. These include the following:

- tailoring programs to adult learners;
- focusing on extensive experience in real-world classrooms throughout the preparation program;
- recognizing and emphasizing the need for preparation to work both with English language learners and with individualized student assessments;
- creating intensive, ongoing mentoring programs for *all* teachers;
- acknowledging the deep and sincere commitment career changers bring to the classroom, in spite of shortfalls in preparation and support; and
- providing the incentives, such as financial aid and well-structured induction, that matter most to career changers.

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation has developed a state-based teaching fellowship for prospective teachers, who receive \$30,000 stipends and intensive clinical preparation at the master’s-degree level. Now offered in three states—Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio—the program recruits career changers as well as college seniors and recent graduates.

Career Changers in the Classroom was based on interviews of 504 teachers conducted in May 2009. To be eligible, interviewees had to be current teachers who had been teaching in public schools for no more than 20 years, and who had held positions in other fields for at least three years before teaching. The margin of error for the survey was 4.4 percentage points. Data were also reported for subgroups with higher margins of error where researchers felt that comparisons might indicate trends in the group, even if they were not statistically significant.

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The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (www.woodrow.org) identifies and develops the best minds for the nation’s most important challenges. In these areas of challenge, the Foundation awards fellowships to enrich human resources, works to improve public policy, and assists organizations and institutions in enhancing practice in the U.S. and abroad.

MetLife Foundation supports education, health, civic and cultural organizations. Education is a major focus of the Foundation, informed by findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. For more information visit www.metlife.org.

Key Observations from *Career Changers in the Classroom*

People who transition to teaching from other jobs/careers (career changers) are an essential part of the education system. During the next decade, the U.S. faces the prospect of losing up to half of its current teachers to retirement, while attrition rates for new teachers continue to climb. Already challenging teacher shortages will only grow worse unless policymakers and educators develop policies and programs that more fully tap the potential of this group.

When it comes to career changers, one size definitely does *not* fit all. While the common picture of a career changer is likely to be a middle-aged or retired executive looking to give back to the community, the reality is more complex. Just under one-third of career changers (30 percent) started teaching when they were 32 or younger, and nearly two-thirds (64 percent) started at age 42 or younger. This means that career changers have different educational and financial needs, and no single policy or program will effectively address all of them.

Teacher pay is not the only issue facing career changers in their decision to teach. Pay clearly is an issue for many prospective teachers. For two-thirds of career changers, the move to teaching resulted in no salary change or a salary increase. Career changers have other needs, however, that require attention. For example, more than half of career changers (55 percent) cite loan forgiveness as an important benefit, but fewer than one-third (31 percent) were offered that benefit.

Career changers feel that their preparation programs are good overall but are not keeping pace with contemporary issues. Nearly nine in ten career changers rate the overall quality of their programs as good or excellent. At the same time, only about one-quarter of career changers gave their programs a “C” or better in preparing them for some of the real world challenges of the classroom, such as dealing with behavioral issues, teaching English language learners, and incorporating standards into the curriculum.

Preparation programs are beginning to catch up, but they need to move faster. Newer career changers (in the classroom for six years or less) assign significantly higher ratings to their programs in terms of preparing them for contemporary challenges. This suggests that universities are making strides in adapting their teacher preparation programs. But when fewer than half of newer career changers say they received above-average preparation for using technology and using assessment data to inform teaching and learning, that is a clear sign that universities need to pick up the pace when it comes to dealing with these issues. Greater recognition is also needed that *all* teachers increasingly require preparation to work with growing populations of students whose first language is not English and who need special individualized attention to help them learn.

University-based teacher preparation programs prepare more career changers to teach than many observers may think, and they must be part of the solution. Nearly all career changers (92 percent) receive their training at a university-based program. With universities continuing to be the primary training provider for career changers, more emphasis needs to be placed on innovative university-based models that produce results. Programs like the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship, which early in its development is already attracting a significant proportion of career changers (six out of every seven Fellows in the first cohort), focus on intensive classroom-based preparation at the master’s level, with ongoing mentoring. These features speak particularly to career changers’ needs.

K-12 schools and districts are not off the hook when it comes to supporting career changers as they enter the classroom. Research has clearly established that mentoring—or the lack of it—is a key factor in teacher turnover. Although 53 percent of career changers said they had worked with a mentor, many of them reported relatively minimal mentoring. School districts are taking steps to improve their mentoring efforts, but these efforts need to be scaled up to prevent an increase in turnover among career changers.