

THE RECESSION AND EDUCATION: Seize New Opportunities!

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The teaching profession has long been thought of as recession proof. Indeed, that may have been one of the reasons why teachers took far lower starting salaries right out of college. Perhaps the greatest common feature of teachers, besides their desire to serve society in a humanitarian way, may be the lack of risk-taking the occupation previously enjoyed.

Often, the greatest risk was having to move from one district to another. Today's economic condition has changed that perception, especially for new teachers. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that between 100,000 to 300,000 teachers could be laid off. That has given rise to legislation, such as that sponsored by Sen. Bob Huff, (R-CA), that would enable a district to essentially bypass seniority as a basis for termination. Thus, new

teachers are swimming in a competitive applicant pool thanks to the recession.

More Educated Teachers

So what is the benefit of this reduced job market? Districts are looking for teachers with a variety of certifications. The benefits to those who stay in school longer include becoming educators who use their additional training to integrate lessons more easily and provide more learning experiences to students. Previously, this was mainly obtained through years of teaching and building a portfolio of ideas, aids, and other resources. Staying in college to gain more certifications can build a more well-rounded teacher. The beneficiaries are both students and teachers. For example, my last student teacher returned school and earned a certification in science. Within weeks, she was hired because she had two qualifica-

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tions, whereas before she was the first to be let go because of her limited usability under No Child Left Behind. So the recession may help new teachers become more complete teachers.

Private school exodus—For parents impacted by the recession, an expensive private school may be the first thing to go. Recipients of these new students are likely public schools. Since most schools are paid by the government based on enrollment, some teaching jobs could be saved as student numbers increase. According to government data, nearly 100,000 students are moving into the public school system.

The recession may also help make school districts more user friendly to parents. Public school districts don't want to lose students; lost revenue forces cuts, which are unpopular with voters. This is an ideal time for school districts to market their public schools to homeschoolers and to those with children in private schools. At least one school district has run advertisements that tout its schools to a foreign country.

Mentoring and tutoring—Extracurricular programs may also be cut due to the recession. Coaches, art and music teachers, and even foreign language courses may be eliminated. This opens up opportunities for teachers to form alternative classes—and to earn extra money. Just as important,

it offers teachers the opportunity to make contacts within the community. Parents may be willing to pay for lessons in tennis, music, or a foreign language for their children. The recession presents a rich opportunity for teachers to work in the community and, most important, for the community to get to know the teachers. This builds stronger support for public schools.

More use of technology—The recession also means reduced funding for support materials. Extra textbooks, remedial workbooks, videos, and such become wish-list items. But this represents an opportunity for teachers to more fully explore technology. Not expensive technology, but good, easy-to-fix and maintain stuff. I recommend schools move to open source software. Open source systems companies such as www.eracks.com can save school districts millions of dollars in user fees. It's time to rethink high-tech recommendations and bid writing that excludes these less expensive options.

Free stuff on the Internet—Another plus for the recession is opening up the Internet for educational purposes on a wider scale. Sites such as www.watchknow.org has editors who help insure that the thousands of free videos available to teachers are of good quality—and there are no registration fees. The recession also offers teachers the opportunity to find

free resources to supplement—even replace—materials that they can no longer afford. For example, my website, www.reacheverychild.com, has 200 features that include free material on everything from copyright regulations to free printables.

Richer retirement options—The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that within the next eight years, 2.8 million teachers will be needed due to larger class sizes and retirements. School districts must come up with better enticements, such as severance packages or paid health care, to get teachers off their books. Some teachers may find they can make more money by retiring, thereby opening the door for new teachers. A side benefit to this exodus are the materials retired educators could donate or sell to new teachers. Imagine buying resources that an educator collected over the years for just a few dollars.

Environmental income—The recession helps the environment and recycling efforts as well. Cans, bottles, papers, and even printing cartridges can be recycled for school funds. At my school, two teachers created a conservation club that harvests recyclables, then sells them for school-related items. Students not only learn the value of recycling, they also become spokespeople at school and home. The recession has even helped the local water district to

work with my school to create a demonstration drought-tolerant garden so the community can see what the plants look like and how they can save water and money.

Better nutrition—Registration for schools' free lunch programs accelerates in a recession. The upside of this is that students will get at least one good meal each school day, something they may not have gotten otherwise. Some schools offer a free breakfast program as well.

Lower drop-out rate—In this bad economy that holds little hope for obtaining a job—especially for those without a high school diploma—students may stay in school longer. As unemployment figures remain high, staying in school may look more attractive to potential dropouts.

More time—The recession also offers time. To save money, many districts are cutting days from the school year. This leaves more time for students and teachers to pursue other activities, such as exercising, traveling, community events, and hobbies. Less time working could also result in reduced stress levels, less drive time, and more time to get things done.

Opportunities abound during this recession. Everything from upgrading skills to buying a house that was previously unaffordable. The bottom line is to take the time, energy, and courage to look for that opening door. ■

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