

Peter Coleman

Shrinking Pains:

Declining Enrolments, Fiscal Restraint, and Teacher Redundancy

The prospect of enforced staff reductions as a consequence of the financial squeeze that school districts may expect puts them in a crucial dilemma. The "last in, first out" principle for redundancy dismissals will reduce the quality of instruction. Planned staff reductions on the "when-ever in, worst out" principle call for well-planned teacher development, and school districts must establish adequate diagnostic supervision techniques, effective inservice programs, and careful supervisory follow-up. These efforts are likely to be contested by some teacher associations. It is imperative that administrators win these contests, Coleman feels, since the quality of instruction in Canadian education will largely depend on the outcome.

The impact of declining enrolments on school districts has not generally been severe. However, as spending restraints tighten, the interaction of these two factors will cause severe problems, particularly in the area of staffing. This paper will briefly describe the interaction between fiscal restraint and declining enrolments, and some of the probable consequences for school district staffing. Generally the data used is for Manitoba; however most other provinces are likely to share similar experiences.

Up to 1976, in Manitoba at least, it is reasonable to maintain that the impact of declining enrolments had been absorbed rather straightforwardly by simply reducing the pupil-teacher ratio. Between 1971 and 1976, enrolments in Manitoba declined by roughly 7%, and the number of teachers employed rose by 6%. The P.T.R. declined from 20.5:1 to 18.5:1 (MAST, 1971; 1976).

In the same period, education costs have been rising in Manitoba at the rate of 25% per year (MAST, 1971; 1976). Nationally, the trend is similar; between 1973-74 and 1976-77 it is estimated that education spending will have risen from \$1,940 million to \$14,500 million, i.e. at a rate of exactly 25% per annum (Statistics Canada, 1976). These data lend some support to those who argue that our recent inflation has resulted from public spending. Since this spending is not much affected by

unemployment, we can suffer from both unemployment and inflation at the same time. The increasing pressure on local authorities for restraint will be fueled by increasing taxpayer pressure; salaries and wages are controlled, and prices and taxes will necessarily have to reflect this control.

Another associated influence is likely to be felt: declining enrolments mean that fewer and fewer voters are parents of school-aged children; in addition, the average age of the population in Canada is rising. There is little doubt that government spending priorities, as a consequence, will continue to shift away from education.

Enrolments will continue to decline, as has been amply demonstrated by the work of Zsigmond (1976). His data show that elementary enrolments will continue to decline very sharply until 1981, and secondary enrolments will decline rather slowly by comparison until 1989. The regional pictures are similar, except for British Columbia, which shows little decline and some sharp increases during the 1980s. Nationally, elementary enrolments will drop from the 1970 high of 4.2 million to about 3.2 million in the early 1980s. Secondary enrolment will drop from the 1976 high of 1.7 million to 1.4 million in the late 1980s (Statistics Canada, 1976).

The fact that secondary enrolments peaked in 1976 has of course cushioned the shock of declining enrolments. Staff transfers from elementary to secondary positions (on which no data are kept nationally or provincially) have certainly occurred, and such transfers and reductions in the pupil-teacher ratio will continue to be the main techniques for coping with the decline.

The combination of declining enrolments and fiscal restraint will focus the attention of administrators on staffing in the next few years. The balance of this paper will consider three related staffing issues: redundancy as a means of staff reduction, and in particular the legal situation; teacher effectiveness and clinical supervision; and programs for the professional development of teachers.

Dealing with redundancy

The legal situation is unclear in most provinces. In Manitoba there is no tenure law as such, and no case directly involving redundancy has been heard to date. The Public Schools Act seems explicit, however: dealing with the rights of teachers and employers, Section 383 provides that "Nothing in this Part prohibits the closing of a school under Section 291, or a reduction in the size of staff employed by the employer because of a decrease in enrolment or for any other cause." Further, in a 1974 judgment, a Manitoba judge gave an opinion in passing with respect to the reason given for a termination:

When plaintiff was given notice of termination, planning for the next school year had resulted in a projected decline in enrolment. It

is the division's responsibility to determine the number of teachers from time to time required to provide adequate instruction within the division. The evidence indicates the matter of reduction in enrolment was not imaginary and gives no cause to question the validity of the reason on which the school division purported to act (*Kowalchuk v. Rolling River School Division #39*).

Undoubtedly, Manitoba school districts can assume that redundancy is a sufficient cause for terminating a teacher contract. In at least some other provinces it is not. In Saskatchewan, for example, the Teacher Tenure Act specifies the reasons which justify termination:

A notice of termination of contract given by a school board to a teacher shall be in form A and shall state the reasons for the board's action, which may include professional incompetency, neglect of duty, unprofessional conduct, immorality, physical or mental disability and such other cause as in the opinion of the school board renders the teacher unsuitable for teaching service in the position then held by him.

A court ruling on this section maintained that dismissal for redundancy was not possible.

Apart from legal difficulties, redundancy provides another problem for administrators because of the link between redundancy and the seniority issue, the "last in, first out" principle. So prevalent is this principle that American publications on declining enrolments intended for school trustees (NSBA, 1976) and administrators (AASA, 1974) do not even suggest that there is an alternative. Yet if the size of the teacher workforce is to be reduced, clearly the principle of "whenever in, worst out" is a more desirable one, since it would raise the general quality of instruction in the long run.

Naturally, this principle also raises some traditional issues, such as tenure, and supervision and evaluation. In California, the abolition of tenure has been recommended as one response (NSBA, 1976), but that outcome seems unlikely. Attention to supervision and evaluation procedures seems more useful for school district administrations.

A long-term commitment

Teacher associations are unlikely to be able to force the continued employment of teachers without classes, and thus some of their members will be left jobless. Virtually all other unions, in the same situation, have adopted seniority as the principle upon which job security is based. Teacher associations, in Manitoba and elsewhere, are taking the same approach (see MTS, 1975). Yet the long-range consequences of closing off access to the profession to young, well-trained, and energetic people are unpleasant to contemplate.

Both for administrators and for the profession, redundancy approaches to staff reduction have negative consequences. Elsewhere the writer has maintained the desirability of a sustained long-term commitment to the improvement of aggregate teaching effectiveness in a school district (1973). This commitment might consist of four related activities: the first activity, *teacher selection*, contributes to aggregate effectiveness by attempting to eliminate teacher candidates who would be ineffective in practice. The second activity, *teacher assignment*, attempts to improve aggregate effectiveness by improving the match between teachers and assignments. The third activity, *teacher development*, through self-help techniques and more formalized in-service processes, is an important contributor to staff effectiveness, at least potentially. The fourth activity is also a significant contributor to aggregate effectiveness, although not commonly considered as such: it is the *release* of teachers who are relatively ineffective, and for whom the self-help and formal inservice programs have not been useful. Clearly the fourth of these is what is being proposed as the appropriate way of reducing staff under the dual pressures of declining enrolments and fiscal restraints. However, it is the third activity on which the remainder of this paper will focus, because it is crucial to the "worst out" principle being proposed.

There are three serious problems at present with professional development (or in-service) activities provided for teachers. The first derives from the weaknesses of the associated field, pre-service education or teacher training. These have been extensively described in the literature, most recently by Messerli (1977). The main cause of the weakness is certainly inadequate knowledge of the nature of teaching. The general progress of attempts to analyse teaching is reviewed in Morine and Morine (1973). The most recent model on which the necessary systematic investigation could be based is that of Harnischfeger and Wiley (1976). Research specifically on teacher education, which involves "a quest for more dependable knowledge of teaching behaviour — its elements and their influence on pupil learning" (Smith, 1971), has also not been very successful to date.

As a consequence, neither the content nor the conditions for appropriate training programs can be defined. Amongst other resulting difficulties, one is particularly relevant here: inservice and preservice training have rarely been considered as two parts of a training continuum, of which the desired outcome is a fully competent professional.

The preservice teacher education programs offered at universities generally contain three elements. The first deals with curriculum content, that is, the knowledge and concepts which make up the content of what is taught in schools. The second element concerns itself with professional knowledge and attitudes, including such topics as learning theory, child development, testing and measurement and curriculum design. The third area concerns itself with instructional skills and methodologies, particularly such elements as interaction skills and behaviour patterns necessary for efficient functioning in the classroom. (This analysis is based on Smith, 1971.)

One can maintain that some of this preparation can best be done in a faculty of education, and some can best be done in an inservice setting. Borg comments:

“The inservice setting is particularly well suited to instruction in classroom skills” . . . (1970, p. 23); more directly, “The place to learn to be a teacher is in a school” (Spillane and Levenson, 1976, p. 438). Thus one can argue that the practice teaching component in pre-service education is in fact not the final component of preservice education, but the first component of inservice education, and that the responsibility for carrying it out is wrongly located at present in faculties of education.

The constituents of effective teaching

The second problem is consequential. To build adequate professional development programs we need to assess teacher needs, not only *via* self-appraisal, but also *via* an adequately precise diagnostic supervision system, based on defensible data concerning behaviour which makes a difference to student learning. That is, we need to know what constitutes effective teaching.

The current state of our knowledge will perhaps support the following set of propositions:

1. Reliable gains in student learning do occur, on occasion, as a consequence of more effective teaching.
2. The characteristics of this effective teaching can be analyzed in terms of teacher classroom behaviours on certain dimensions.
3. Teacher behaviour on these dimensions can be changed positively.
4. Some inservice programs have demonstrated the ability to change the relevant behaviours.

The teacher behaviours important in effective teaching are beginning to emerge. Recent reviews of research agree, in general (Rosen-shine & Furst, 1971; Gage, 1972). The list used here is from the first citation, which concludes

of all the variables which have been investigated in process-product studies to date, five variables have strong support from correlational studies . . . The five variables which yielded the strongest relationships with measures of student achievement are: clarity, variability, enthusiasm, task orientation and/or business-like behaviour, and student opportunity to learn. (Rosen-shine & Furst, 1971, p. 54).

“Student opportunity to learn” is both vitally important and difficult to assess. Recent international assessments have confirmed its importance (Purves and Levine, 1975), and in particular that of the instructional time component, which is central to the Harnischfeger and Wiley model (1976). An empirical study of actual time of instruction, however, having shown this to add up to only 92 minutes of instruction during a 300-minute school day (Conant, 1973), this particular cor-

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relate of achievement will doubtless become a major topic of public debate.

The other dimensions of teacher behaviour, clarity, variability, enthusiasm, and task orientation, are more relevant here. They can apparently be reliably measured by students and observers, using such instruments as the Stanford Teacher Competence Appraisal Guide (Gage and Associates, 1971). A locally-developed student rating form can also be used to provide reliable data.

There is, furthermore, some evidence that programs which focus on some of these variables can change teacher behaviour (Roberson, 1969; Strickler, 1972; Wilson, 1972; Borg et al, 1970), and also affect positively student learning. Thus some at least of the research groundwork for a serious attempt to improve instruction *via* professional development at the school district level does now exist.

Demonstrating professional growth

The third problem is that of resources, of several kinds. Expertise in the area of professional development is perhaps the most important, and least available. Anyone capable of helping teachers improve their teaching is likely to be employed in the professional development arm of teachers' associations or in a university, and these employers offer benefits not easily matched by school districts. Almost equally important is teacher time, which must be either donated by teachers, bought by districts, or obtained by some combination of the two. The third, and it is the common denominator as usual, is money.

In recent years the most common institutional response to these resource problems has been the teacher centre. However, teacher centres have to date only demonstrated their ability to be responsive to the needs of their clientele, the teachers. A wide variety of professional development needs-assessment devices are in use, but virtually all are based on the assumption that teachers can identify their own needs. But school districts, who are generally paying the bill for teacher centres, must be able to see some connection between the work of teacher centres and the improvement of instruction.

More specifically, teacher centres must be responsive to needs of teachers that have been identified *via* the supervision and evaluation process. In the context of staff reductions, teacher centres must provide an opportunity for teachers to demonstrate capacity for professional growth. This may take the form of providing retraining for new assignments, or simply of opportunities to improve existing practice.

Given adequate professional development opportunities of these kinds, via a teacher centre or similar serious effort to provide inservice training, the "whenever in, worst out" principle is defensible. "Worst" then means that the teacher has demonstrated little or no interest in or

capacity for professional growth. This is certainly a better basis for release than years of employment with a given employer. Even from the perspective of teachers' associations, this is presumably acceptable; "professionalism", in the field of education, surely must include some commitment to growth and development.

In the next few years, administrators in school districts will in very many cases be faced with a critical choice as they deal with the problem of staff reduction: the principle of "whenever in, worst out" may be attacked by some teachers' associations, since their leaders are often teachers with some seniority in the district, and hence a vested interest in the "last in, first out" basis for staff reduction. Major negotiations efforts will be directed at installing the seniority approach in contracts.

Should the associations win this struggle many of the best-trained, most energetic, and most capable young teachers will disappear from our schools. Since experience does not generally relate positively to effectiveness (see for example Guthrie, 1970, and Smith, 1972) but training does, the quality of instruction will inevitably decline. Costs will also rise: experience is an expensive teacher characteristic, since on many salary schedules, six years of experience adds 40% or more to a teacher's salary.

The alternative is certainly difficult: adequate supervision techniques and effective inservice programs will be essential prerequisites to winning the tenure cases which will inevitably result. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that the great body of written advice to administrators resulting from the declining enrolments issue avoids this aspect of the staffing problem almost entirely.

To summarize the argument: declining enrolments, in a climate of fiscal restraint, will force staff reductions. Redundancy reductions, based on the "last in, first out" principle, are less desirable than a careful supervision and development system. In such a system, the "whenever in, worst out" principle should rule. This will be strongly resisted by some teachers' associations, but it is arguably consistent with professional values. More importantly, it is likely to improve the quality of instruction and the cost-effectiveness of the educational enterprise. These are important objectives, justifying serious efforts by administrators to adopt a selective approach to staff reductions.

NOTE

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