

What Works

Boots on the School Ground: An innovative federal project turns retiring military personnel into teachers

By David Bank

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Strategies, Approaches, Developments

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After 22 years in the U.S. Air Force, Sandra Sessoms-Penny (seated) is now an assistant high school principal in Windsor, Va. Troops to Teachers helped pay for her retraining.

TODAY'S PHYSICS LESSON is about acceleration. At Woodbridge High School in Washington, D.C.'s Virginia suburbs, teacher John Paulson encourages his students to create their own experiments. One tapes a balloon to a plastic bottle, which whizzes across the table. Another launches a paper airplane, which spirals and crashes. To empathize, Paulson shows a video of a test launch of a \$10 million Trident missile that crashed nearly as quickly as the paper airplane.

"I used to be in charge of all of that," says Paulson, who took up teaching after a 30-year Navy career. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, he patrolled the Middle East in a submarine. And during the final days of the Cold War, he served as second-in-command of the Navy's nuclear subs in the Mediterranean.

With thinning gray hair, a short-sleeved yellow shirt, and a blue tie, Paulson is hardly cool. Yet 16- and 17-year-old students respond to his background. Today happens to be his 57th birthday and three students burst into the classroom with a banner declaring "Happy Birthday to the Hottest Teacher Ever!"

Paulson is one of more than 10,000 military veterans who since 1994 have become public school teachers and administrators through a little-known but highly successful program called Troops to Teachers. The program gives retiring officers and enlisted personnel stipends to help cover the costs of getting teaching certificates, as well as bonuses to encourage them to stick with teaching for at least three years. Regional offices then help place the teachers, mostly in low-income, high-need schools.

The federal government isn't usually known as a hotbed of innovation, but Troops to Teachers has become a model for matching untapped resources with unmet needs. Such models have become even more important with 77 million baby boomers beginning to reach retirement age and a growing national need for teachers. In May, Troops to Teachers won a BreakThrough Award from the MetLife Foundation and Civic Ventures as an organization providing meaningful public interest jobs for people over 50. Based on Troops to Teachers' success, the Pentagon has piloted Spouses to Teachers for military wives and husbands, and Congress is considering a Troops to Nurse Teachers program to recruit Army and Navy medical personnel as nurse educators.

The Right Stuff

Troops to Teachers is the brainchild of J.H. "Jack" Hexter, a history professor who himself demonstrated the value of a second career. After he reached Yale's retirement age of 65, Hexter taught for another 15 years at Washington University in St. Louis. He saw the retirement of thousands of soldiers at the end of the Cold War as a golden opportunity to meet the chronic need for public school teachers. After six years of effort, he convinced Sen. John Danforth to include funding for Troops to Teachers in the 1993 defense spending bill – a year before Hexter died.

Part of the Department of Education but run by the Pentagon, Troops to Teachers turns out educators who nearly perfectly match school districts' needs. Four out of five Troops teachers are men, compared to one out of four in the overall pool of new teachers. More than a quarter of the Troops teachers are African-Americans, compared to 9 percent among all new teachers. More than 27 percent teach science or math, and 19 percent are in special education – all fields chronically short of teachers. Black men teaching



math and science in high-need schools – Troops to Teachers represents a trifecta of public policy wins.

The new recruits like their second tours of duty. According to a 2005 survey of more than 1,400 Troops teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Information, 54 percent of Troops teachers rated themselves “very satisfied” with their jobs, compared to 32 percent of all teachers. Fully 85 percent said they expect to be employed in education in five years, compared to 71 percent of all teachers.

Early concerns about putting a crusty sergeant major in front of a classroom proved unfounded. “We have people who have been drill sergeants, but these people aren’t dumb. They know they’re not going to take a bunch of kids and shape them up like in basic training,” says John Gantz, who managed Troops to Teachers for the Pentagon before retiring this year.

Indeed, in another 2005 survey, nine out of 10 principals told researchers at Old Dominion University in Virginia that they considered former service members more effective in classroom instruction and management than other teachers with similar years of teaching experience. Nearly as many said Troops teachers boosted student achievement more than traditionally trained teachers. “We tell administrators what these people bring is their leadership skills,” says Gantz. “In a well-run military unit, you don’t have discipline problems, because you have leadership. Now school administrators say, ‘Send me a few more just like him.’”

Adding It Up

Or a few thousand more. With increased support, Troops to Teachers could make a bigger dent in the need for an estimated 200,000 new teachers each year.

Yet funding for the program has been inconsistent. As the Pentagon’s downsizing ran its course, support for Troops to Teachers also dwindled, and the program nearly died in 1999. That year, Sens. John McCain and Mike DeWine found \$3 million for the program in the federal education budget. In 2002, first lady Laura Bush championed Troops to Teachers, and the program’s funding increased to \$30 million in 2003 as part of the No Child Left Behind legislation. In recent years,

however, funding has fallen back to less than \$15 million.

At the same time, other teacher-recruitment efforts offer better incentives than does Troops to Teachers, which caps total incentives at \$10,000 – \$5,000 for the classes and tests veterans need to get their certification or a bonus of up to \$10,000 for completing three years of service. IBM’s Transition to Teaching program, in contrast, offers subsidies of up to \$15,000 and gives employees up to four months of paid time off to encourage retiring IBM scientists and engineers to become math and science teachers. Qualcomm, Edison International, Chevron, and other corporations have similarly pledged financial support of up to \$15,000 per employee. Chicago’s Academy for Urban School Leadership offers an even richer package: \$30,000 salary for one year, a reduced-rate master’s degree program, and a laptop computer. Math for America recruits high school math teachers in New York City with a \$90,000 bonus, a regular teaching salary, and full tuition for a master’s in education. Both programs demand a five-year commitment.

Education experts say increased incentives for Troops teachers are a good idea, particularly if they are coupled with longer required commitments. Nearly half of all new teachers quit within the first five years, costing districts nearly \$2 billion a year, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education. “I think \$30,000 is nothing if you could keep them for five years,” says Barnett Berry, president of the Center for Teaching Quality in Hillsborough, N.C. Berry says the government could sweeten the offer by keeping veterans on the payroll for the first six months of their teaching careers. “This is exactly the role for government,” he says, “providing even more incentives for these folks to go into teaching.”

The incentives made the difference for Sandra Sessoms-Penny. As she prepared to retire from the Air Force in 1995 as a senior master sergeant, Troops to Teachers helped her earn a master’s degree and become a social studies teacher in rural Virginia. She’s now assistant principal of Windsor High School in Isle of Wight County.

Sessoms-Penny has submitted her Ph.D. dissertation to George Washington University on Troops to Teachers’ role in filling teacher shortages. She says that Troops teachers, older and more experienced, know what they’re getting into, not only in the classroom but also in a chronically underappreciated and underpaid profession.

“In the military, too, you are standing in defense of folks who don’t know you and don’t respect you or what you’re doing,” she says. “And it’s the same thing in the school system. Not everybody supports what you do or how you do it, but you know that it must be done.” □

RETOOLING RETIREES

- Identify unmet need for talent
- Subsidize training and certification
- Make jobs meaningful
- Respect retirees’ knowledge and skills