Education Consumers Foundation

Would Hiring New Teachers Improve Tennessee's Schools?

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Tennessee schools have just received a slap in the face. So have students, parents, taxpayers, and everyone else who has a stake in Tennessee public education.

According to the much-delayed and just-released 2010 school report card, only 34% of K-8 students are proficient in math and only 51% are proficient in reading—down from 90% under the old misleading standards. In theory, schools are supposed to reach 100% by 2014!

A business with this kind of annual report would fire people from top to bottom and bring in new people with fresh ideas.

Would the same thing work in public education?

Probably not.

Even if tenure and all of the rules regarding the dismissal of teachers did not exist, the schools could easily end up with replacements that were not as effective as their predecessors.

Why?

Part of the problem is experience. Most teachers improve somewhat with experience. There is a larger problem, however.

According to Tennessee's report card[1] on the performance of new teachers, many new teachers are not well trained. The report card measures how effective a program's graduates are in lifting student achievement. Students taught by high performers go up roughly 8 percentile ranks per year relative to other students. Students taught by low performers, however, do the opposite. These new teachers are as ineffective as the lowest performing teachers now in service.

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[1] http://tn.gov/sbe/teacherreportcard2010.htm

The largest source of new teachers for hire in Tennessee is the State's nine publicly funded universities, and an alarming number of them are among the lowest performers. For every 10 University of Tennessee and Tennessee Board of Regents graduates who prove to be top-performers, 17 are among the least effective teachers in the state.

By contrast, the independent Teach for America program turns out three low performers for every 10 teachers who are in the top performance category, and they do so with much less training and a lower cost per teacher.

There are other—more statistically precise—ways of comparing teacher preparation programs and they are reported in the above-noted state report card. Their bottom line, however, is essentially the same.

Plainly, something is seriously wrong with Tennessee's teacher preparation programs and the standards that govern them. They are turning out some excellent teachers but they are turning out a much larger number who are producing substandard levels of student learning. Significantly, this pattern of a few excellent and many low performers appears to have been in place for decades.

Tennessee's university-based teacher training programs need more competition from Teach for America and similar alternatives.

See the charts on the next two pages for a side-by-side comparison of Tennessee's largest teacher preparation programs. The colored bars represent the number of high and low performing new teachers in Tennessee's present teacher workforce.

The column to the left of each bar shows the number of bottom-quintile teachers per 10 top-quintile teachers produced by each program. At the extremes, Teach for America produces three bottom-quintile teachers per 10 top performers while Tennessee State produces 33 bottom-quintile teachers per 10 top performers.
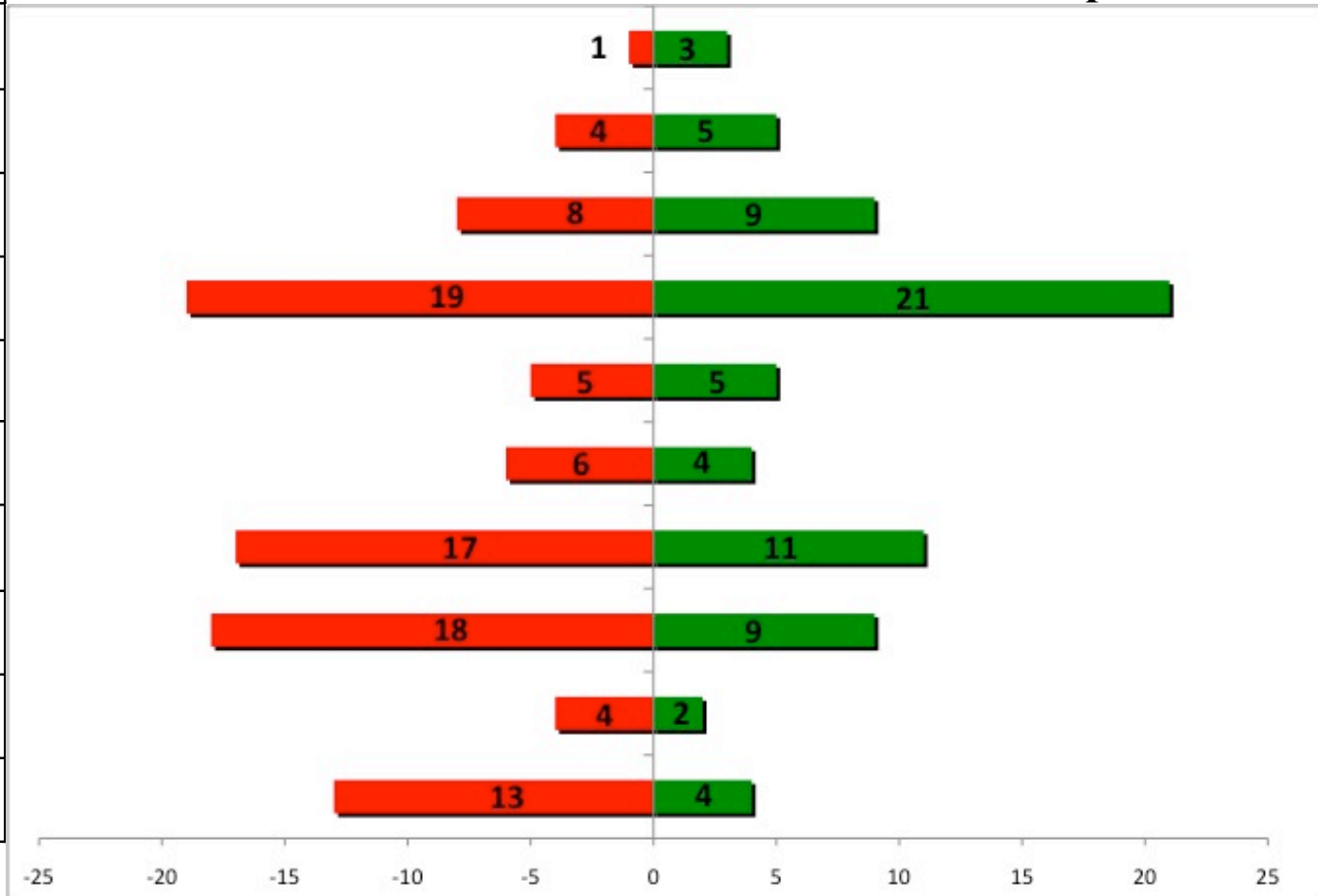
New Teachers
Bottom Quintile vs Top Quintile Performers
MATH

Institution	Number of bottom quintile teachers for every 10 top performers
Teach for America	3
East Tennessee State University	8
Austin Peay State University	9
University Of Memphis	9
UT, Martin	10
UT, Knoxville	15
TN Technological University	15
Middle Tennessee State University	20
UT, Chattanooga	20
Tennessee State University	33

New teachers in Bottom Quintile   **New Teachers in Top Quintile**

Institution	Bottom Quintile	Top Quintile
Teach for America	1	3
East Tennessee State University	4	5
Austin Peay State University	8	9
University Of Memphis	19	21
UT, Martin	5	5
UT, Knoxville	6	4
TN Technological University	17	11
Middle Tennessee State University	18	9
UT, Chattanooga	4	2
Tennessee State University	13	4

New Teachers
Bottom Quintile vs Top Quintile Performers
READING/LANGUAGE ARTS

Institution	Number of bottom quintile teachers for every 10 top performers
Teach for America	3
TN Technological University	12
Middle Tennessee State University	16
UT, Knoxville	16
Austin Peay State University	19
UT, Martin	20
University Of Memphis	24
Tennessee State University	26
East Tennessee State University	28
UT, Chattanooga	*

New Teachers in Bottom Quintile   **New Teachers in Top Quintile**

Institution	Bottom Quintile	Top Quintile
Teach for America	3	10
TN Technological University	21	17
Middle Tennessee State University	19	12
UT, Knoxville	8	5
Austin Peay State University	13	7
UT, Martin	10	5
University Of Memphis	31	13
Tennessee State University	13	5
East Tennessee State University	11	4
UT, Chattanooga	6	0