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Teachers challenge: diverse 21st century class

BY MICHAEL HAMILL REMALEY

Imagine you are a first-year teacher standing in front of your class tomorrow on the first day of school. What do you see before you?

If you're picturing a group of 15 to 20 well-behaved children from similar backgrounds with similar abilities and English-language skills, each prepared to absorb your words of wisdom, you are clearly not envisioning the 21st century classroom.

In our idealized vision of the past, most students had two parents at home, and Mom was around to help with homework. Classrooms were filled with children who'd had a similar start in life. Nearly all of them would have learned English from infancy. By junior high or high school, students were "tracked" into groups with similar academic skills. Children with physical and learning disabilities were in special classes or different schools.

Back in those days, parents could be counted on to support pretty much whatever measures teachers and principals took to ensure that classrooms were orderly and that children behaved themselves and paid attention.

That vision doesn't reflect today's reality. Even if you're teaching in a well-funded suburban school, this is what you're likely to see: Well over 20 children who are diverse not

only in terms of racial and ethnic backgrounds and English-language abilities, but also in terms of learning and behavioral skills.

Your classroom might have two Latino students who speak English but struggle with cultural nuance, a refugee from Sudan who is behind grade-level, a Chinese student who is just learning English, an American-born student who has been in and out of foster care and has severe behavior problems, a student with major learning disabilities - and quite possibly 20 other students with huge variations in knowledge, motivation and parental support.

While numbers vary on Long Island from district to district, across the whole of New York State, 24 percent of students speak a language other than English and 6 percent have a disability. Average class size across the state is 23 in high school classrooms and 22 in elementary classrooms.

So back to imagining you're that new teacher. If you have a normal amount of self-doubt, you're probably wondering right about now if your training to deal with all this was up to snuff, or if you'll have adequate support from the school's administrators and your fellow teachers.

The experience of other new teachers should give you pause.

A recent survey of first-year

teachers by **Public Agenda**, along with the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, found that while new teachers were generally very confident about the training they'd received before entering the classroom - on topics like discipline, child cognition and specific subject areas - they felt distinctly unprepared for the diversity they encountered.

It's not that they weren't exposed to training that touched on these subjects. Three-quarters of new teachers said they were taught how to teach in an ethnically diverse student body, and more than 80 percent said their coursework covered teaching students with special needs. But once they were in the classroom, they felt that the training they'd received on diversity was inadequate.

Our study also presented new teachers with a list of 14 proposals to improve teacher quality. The second highest rated was better preparing teachers to meet the needs of a diverse classroom (the highest rated was the perennial favorite, reducing class size, and the most common reason new teachers give for wanting smaller classes is to be able to respond better to the needs of individual students).

The good news is that even though this study suggests that new teachers feel their training

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in handling diverse classrooms and students with special needs was inadequate, most say they are receiving either excellent or good support from other teachers now that they are in the classroom.

And 73 percent say they are getting excellent or good instructional leadership and guidance from their school's administration.

But when you picture yourself standing in front of the classroom on the first day, wouldn't you prefer to feel confident that your training had prepared you for the fidgeting kids before you?

Education leaders responsible for overseeing teacher training should be paying attention to this challenge. Principals should be attentive to new teachers' needs in this area, but training programs especially need to do more.

Teacher training has developed new areas of study that reflect many of the changing conditions in America's classrooms, but programs still need to do more to prepare new teachers to meet the needs of a diverse student body and special needs students.

Michael Hamill Remaley is vice president and director of communications for Public Agenda, a nonpartisan public opinion research and public engagement organization based in New York City.