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In My Opinion

OPPORTUNITIES IN HARD TIMES

Professional journals of education and science have been describing and bemoaning the surplus of teachers and scientists flooding the American market. Unemployment within any group of people is always disturbing, but when it strikes at a long-favored group in our society, such as science teachers, the gloom is far-reaching. Unemployment is a chief topic of conversation at professional meetings, at faculty meetings, and in discussions with college undergraduates who are completing biology majors.

The National Education Association and the National Science Foundation have recently published reports that indicate this surplus is going to continue for at least the next decade. If we couple these reports with the changes in public attitudes towards science, school-bond approvals, and increased property taxes, we start to see a not-so-pleasant future for science education.

Most of the published reports describing this unfortunate situation seem to center on the role of the federal government, the state governments, or the general public in solving these problems. The more realistic solutions must come from science teachers and the professional societies they support.

As advisors we have an obligation to identify the teacher-surplus problem for those students interested in becoming research scientists or science teachers. More students should be prepared to take teaching positions in foreign countries or to become technicians or teacher aides until regular teaching positions become available. The medical profession is still in short supply in many professional and paraprofessional categories.

Due to the present freeze on wages and salaries, and with few signs of a quick thaw, the time seems right for professional organizations in education to move toward improving working conditions. Professional organizations—NABT, NSTA, AIBS, AAAS, AAUP, NEA, AFT—should all tackle the problems of the crowded classroom. It is my firm belief that the maximum class-size should be 24 students and that no teacher should be expected to teach more than 96 students in a single quarter or semester. We must move to assure each teacher a minimum of three hours' preparation time within an eight-hour day. Teacher's aides are still scarce in our schools and colleges; salaries for aides are ridiculously inadequate; and aides are poorly trained.

While moving to improve conditions for learning, these same professional organizations must reexamine the tenure system, which forces schools and colleges to retain inferior faculty. These organizations should also establish procedures to encourage early retirement and should strengthen the sabbatical-year program at all levels.

Conditions are right to improve science education. If we fail in our part of the bargain, society will certainly turn its back on us.

The Editor