

National service in education
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A conscription for teachers is possibly just what we need to address a persisting shortage

DURING the War of 1812, James Madison and his secretary of war James Monroe unsuccessfully attempted to create a national draft. It was something that Daniel Webster, the legendary senator from Massachusetts, would fiercely oppose. He would — in one of his most eloquent moments — say:

“The administration asserts the right to fill the ranks of the regular army by compulsion... Is this, sir, consistent with the character of a free government? Is this civil liberty? Is this the real character of our Constitution? No, sir, indeed it is not... Where is it written in the Constitution, in what article or section is it contained, that you may take children from their parents, and parents from their children, and compel them to fight the battles of any war, in which the folly or the wickedness of government may engage it?”

“Under what concealment has this power lain hidden, which now for the first time comes forth, with a tremendous and baleful aspect, to trample down and destroy the dearest rights of personal liberty?”

Conscription was always a very interesting notion. The idea of compulsory enlistment for state service has been one of the most divisive public policy endeavours in history. For there are equally strong arguments on both sides.

On the one hand, the draft provides an essential source of manpower for any nation in times of great need. On the other hand, the strongest argument for volunteerism is that the citizens of a democracy should be allowed to vote, so to speak, on the validity of any action.

Conscription has always been based on that age-old conviction that desperate times call for desperate measures.

That there are certain moments in our history that warrant such actions. However illiberal they may appear. However contrary they may run with our ideas of individual freedoms and personal liberty.

We are constantly facing a shortage of teachers. In rural areas. In particular subjects. In vernacular schools. In general.

The government has tried to confront the problem in many ways. They are beginning to recognise graduates from Chinese independent schools.

They have absorbed all untrained temporary teachers as permanent teachers. They have accepted volunteer teachers from overseas.

There are even citizen-led initiatives like Teach For Malaysia — an extraordinary not-for-profit movement that endeavours to take our best and our brightest and get them into our classrooms.

But despite all these efforts, the numbers remain insufficient. The problem still persists.

We are constantly whinging about the state of our schools. We claim that our teachers are overworked and underpaid.

We believe that our education system fails to equip our children with the necessary tools for coping in a hyper-competitive global environment. We moan and we groan but have, so far, failed in providing any practicable solutions.

The problems that we face are complex. Common sense demands that we focus all of our resources to benefit our children. And what better way is there to do that than by ensuring that they have everything they need for a successful schooling life. Because the absence of great teachers shapes your life just as much as their presence.

With that in mind, maybe it's time to revisit a controversial notion. Maybe it's time to take a look at some old ways in trying to address some of our new problems.

Maybe it's time to put our money where our mouth is and tap the capital that is our citizenry. That enduring resource. Because we have the people and we have the skills. All we need is the dedication, the physical personhood, open minds, open hearts and limitless compassion.

So consider this. A peacetime draft. Selective training and service. Not for the military mind you, but for our department of education instead. A conscription for teachers.

Provide the state with powers to conscript citizens and place them as teachers in schools across the nation. It would be for a prescribed time — fixed tours of duty if you will.

Take our best and brightest — our doctors, our lawyers, and our engineers, our artists, our poets, and our writers — put them through intensive teacher training, and put them to work educating our children. It would be national service at its noblest.

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