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Chaos In America's Classrooms

Michael Hall

Marines have a calling: "We run toward the sound of chaos." With the war in Afghanistan in the past and the future of U.S. involvement in Iraq still unclear, service members are leaving the military in droves. There is now an entire generation of Global War on Terrorism veterans re-entering civilian society with nowhere to go. Combat arms jobs have little civilian crossover, and many veterans are looking in the mirror and saying, "What's next?" A phrase I said myself as I left the Marine Corps in 2013 was, "I'll never be this cool again."

At the same time, our country is in the middle of an education crisis. Administrators nationwide are in a frantic search for new teachers to lead classrooms every school year. School systems such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg in North Carolina are so desperate for teachers that they have resorted to searching on Craigslist (Dunn, 2015). This is completely unacceptable and an insult to the professional educators who work tirelessly to build the airplanes that are our struggling schools while they are in flight. America needs teachers and our children deserve highly qualified educators.

Our veterans have served our country, and many want to continue serving their country. We as a nation have already invested in our veterans. The G.I. Bill is not a "Thank you for your service," but America's way of helping

her defenders re-adjust to life back home. Veterans possess certain leadership qualities and moral traits that school administrators want, but recruiters may be looking in the wrong direction. The military does not have a patent on core values such as honor, courage, and commitment; every teacher should embody these principles.

If you dig deeper, training veterans to become teachers is almost an obvious answer to a problem plaguing our school systems nationwide. Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are used to doing hard work for little pay, something every teacher can relate to. These same veterans are used to dealing with high stress that teachers experience dealing with students, parents, and even detached administrators who are focused on little more than raising standardized testing scores to ensure their own career security.

Despite possessing qualities that teachers should be emulating, not every veteran is cut out for the job. Those who are not interested in committing to rigorous study in a chosen content area need not apply. Our schools need content experts, not just role models who possess moral fiber. Many veterans join the military after high school because of a lack of interest in higher education. Upon reentering civilian society these same veterans might have trouble cutting the proverbial mustard in the classroom environment. Some give up with schooling completely and waste a beautiful opportunity to fund their education debt free. Other veterans utilize their military training in high need fields such as engineering and computer science to find better paying jobs in the civilian sector. Teaching is not for everyone, but for some it can be a new

lease on life.

There is also the cultural gap between civilian society and the military that is difficult to transcend. Fewer than 1% of Americans serve in the military, and a fraction of this small percentage actually served in combat (Tavernise, 2011). Injuries sustained, both physical and mental, have an effect on social relationships that sometimes cannot be remedied without professional help. Working around children and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are not compatible.

However, PTSD is not a death sentence. PTSD is an injury, not a mental illness. PTSD can be overcome. I believe with the proper procedures in place, such as PTSD screening and counseling for combat veterans who aspire to be teachers, America will have a highly useful resource to fill classrooms. Having a job that is as rewarding as teaching can be the answer to those many sleepless nights that veterans nationwide face as they try to put the pieces back together and figure out how they can continue contributing to America. Schools need "a few good men." Teaching is by no means a "woman's job," but it is female dominated. Schools, especially elementary schools, need positive male role models (Clark, 2014). The Marine Corps prides itself on small unit leadership. Whether one is a corporal leading a fire team or a sergeant major leading a battalion, there is a place for you and your leadership is needed.

The concept of helping veterans transition to becoming teachers is not a new idea. Alternate certification programs like Troops to Teachers allow veterans to become vocational and technical teachers with as little as one

year of college and six years of full-time work experience. The resources are there; our veterans just need help finding them. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) there were over 573,000 unemployed veterans in 2014. With over half a million veterans looking for jobs, the answer to the problem plaguing schools is apparent. Our veterans need jobs, and frankly, they deserve them.

This will not be an easy adjustment for veterans. But as veterans already know, nothing worthwhile comes easy. If you want it, it is there for you. You may have to fight for it, but the prize is a fulfilling and rewarding career that will provide a lifetime of happiness. In order to obtain this new career, proper planning is essential. Service members can start the process of becoming a teacher by registering with Troops to Teachers while still on active duty at ProudtoServeAgain.com. Troops to Teachers offers college advising and will help veterans find teacher training programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Veterans currently using G.I. Bill benefits to complete undergraduate work can become a teacher in as little as a year by completing a Master of Arts in Teaching or Master of Education licensure program. Veterans who may feel that more college is not the right starting place for their career transition might consider alternate routes to certification, depending on their prior education and military service. Troops to Teachers is just one of many alternate routes to certification; other popular options include Teach for America (teachforamerica.org) and the New York City Teaching Fellows (nycteachingfellows.org). Additionally, each state has its own alternate route to

certification that can be accessed via the state's department of education website. For those who have served, our

country needs you now more than ever. The sound of chaos radiates from schools nationwide. Which way will you run?

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About the Author

Michael Hall served in the Marine Corps infantry as an Anti-Tank Missileman with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion 2d Marines from 2009-2013. He has since received a BA in English from Regent University and a MA in Education from the College of William and Mary. Michael is a Teach for America 2016 Hawaii Corps member, where he teaches 7th grade English and Social Studies at Wheeler Middle School.