

Teaching Quality in California: A New Perspective to Guide Policy



This publication represents the professional consensus of an expert panel convened by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning to explore the dimensions of teaching quality. The Center is made up of education professionals, scholars and public policy experts who care deeply about improving the schooling of California's children. The Center was founded in 1995 as a public, nonprofit organization with the purpose of strengthening the capacity of California's teachers for delivering rigorous, well-rounded curriculum and ensuring the continuing intellectual, ethical and social development of all children.

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Introduction: Setting the Policy Stage for Teaching Quality



For over a decade, California educators and policymakers have focused attention on raising student achievement. They have established high standards for what students should know and be able to do, measured achievement gains, and instituted a system of sanctions for those schools that do not show improvement. Further, they have made significant policy changes addressing teacher development in order to attract and keep qualified teachers. Their efforts have begun to pay off, with test scores showing moderate gains. Between 2003 and 2007, the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the California Standards Test increased by eight points in English-language arts from 35 percent to 43 percent, and six points in math from 35 percent to 41 percent. The percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the fifth grade science test increased by 13 points since 2004, the first year the test was given, from 24 percent to 37 percent.¹

Despite this progress, California policymakers and practitioners still face enormous challenges in improving student achievement in our schools. More than 2,000 schools did not meet federal test score targets. Fewer than half the state's students are proficient on California's own standards test. And, the historical gap between Latino and African-American students on one hand and White and Asian students on the other has remained unchanged.

The quality of a student's teacher is the most important determinant of learning after family background

Research has shown that the quality of instruction a student receives can make a real difference in how much he or she learns. In fact, the quality of a student's teacher is the most important determinant of learning after family background.² In light of these findings, the policymaking community is increasingly committed to raising the quality of the teacher workforce with the goal of ensuring that every student has a fully prepared and effective teacher.

California policymakers have made concerted efforts to build a coherent framework for teaching quality that is based on the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTPs). Developed in 1997, the standards were designed to “enable teachers to define and develop their practice.”³ They account for the diversity of students and teachers in California's schools, and “reflect a holistic, developmental view of teaching.”⁴ There are six standards, each of which includes practices teachers should be able to demonstrate and deepen over their career:

1. Engaging and supporting all students in learning
2. Creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning
3. Understanding and organizing subject matter for student learning
4. Planning instruction and designing learning experiences for all students
5. Assessing student learning
6. Developing as a professional educator

With the CSTPs in place, policymakers have put forward a variety of approaches to improve the quality of the teaching workforce; however, policies vary in the extent to which they incorporate or are aligned with the CSTPs. Some explicitly reference the CSTPs, others are independent. Those policies that are aligned with the CSTPs include standards for teacher preparation and induction programs, and design elements to guide professional development. In addition to providing guidance for programs, the policies provide guidance on assessing teaching quality along the teacher development continuum. For example, the state's Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs) and Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) are based on the CSTPs. These efforts have been a major step forward in lending coherence to the state's approach to improving teaching quality, particularly during teacher preparation and first few years in the profession.

At the same time, there are several other policies that do not conform neatly to the state's CSTP-based framework. These include local hiring policies, policies for awarding credits on the teacher salary schedule, and local professional development programs. How these policies define and measure teaching quality varies. Thus, while California has made

noteworthy efforts to build a coherent framework for teaching quality by aligning many of its efforts around a well-regarded set of teaching standards, this consistency does not necessarily span the teacher's career continuum. Particularly for more experienced teachers, messages about teaching quality are highly dependent on local policy, which may or may not offer clarity and consistency.

It is in this context that the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning brought together a panel of experts to explore the issue of teaching quality in California. The panel, composed of classroom teachers, principals, district administrators, local and state teacher association leaders, school board members, teacher support providers, schools of education faculty, and state officials, reviewed research, met with outside experts, and discussed the issue of teaching quality over a 4-month period. Their work was framed by the following set of assumptions that quickly emerged after the first meeting:

- A new, deeper understanding of quality teaching must be reached to provide the base upon which policy and practice is built

- Teachers should be recognized as professionals
- The teaching “surround” (e.g., leadership, materials, facilities, structure of the school day) needs to be addressed
- Inconsistencies in education policies must be addressed
- Support needs to be available all along the teacher development continuum

The panel's work represents a professional consensus regarding the dimensions of teaching quality and the issues that need to be addressed in California to ensure high-quality instruction to all students.

This policy brief is intended to provide a summary of current research, as well as the panel's definition of and perspective on teaching quality. First, the brief discusses prevailing perspectives on teaching quality and related research. Then, the brief discusses the panel's conclusions regarding the development of a quality-based teacher development system.

Prevailing Perspectives on Teaching Quality



What exactly constitutes high-quality teaching? Generally, there are three schools of thought prevalent in the literature. The first is that good teaching is defined by what teachers bring into the classroom, that is, *teacher characteristics*. The second is that good teaching is defined by what teachers do in the classroom, *teaching practices*. The third definition focuses on what students take out of the classroom, *student learning gains*. Here we explore each of these three perspectives, the relevant research, and the panel's standpoint on them.

Teacher Characteristics

The adherents of focusing on teacher characteristics note that in most professions, standards are set and ways of determining the extent to which these standards are met (e.g., passing a professional exam, obtaining a professional degree) are established. In concert, standards and their measures are meant to ensure a degree of quality. In education, the teaching credential has played this role, along with measures of teachers' content knowledge, intellectual aptitude, and experience. The logic here is that it is difficult to measure quality directly, so indirect measures should be used. In fact, current teacher salary schedules use the proxies of experience and education for rewarding teachers financially.⁵

Many studies have attempted to link specific teacher characteristics to student achievement. Here we summarize what is known about four teacher characteristics: pedagogical training and certification, subject matter knowledge, teacher experience, and verbal and intellectual aptitude.⁶

Certification and pedagogical training. Generally, researchers have come to mixed conclusions about whether teacher certification is sufficient to ensure that teachers are effective in increasing student achievement scores. One exception is high school mathematics, where the positive effect of a certified teacher on high school mathematics achievement has been found when the certification is in mathematics.⁷ At the same time, the research has not supported the conclusion that teacher certification is not important; rather, research on this topic has been largely inconclusive, with a notable exception. A recent study determined that a teacher's experience, test scores, and regular licensure (as opposed to provisional or emergency licenses) all have positive effects on student achievement, with larger effects for math than for reading.⁸

Related, research on pedagogical coursework shows some support for the conclusion that preparation in pedagogy can

contribute significantly to effective teaching.⁹ In particular, courses in how to teach specific subjects and those designed to develop core skills such as classroom management, student assessment, and curriculum development are those that are found to be effective. Research on field experience yields no conclusive findings related to student achievement.

Subject matter knowledge. In the area of teachers' subject matter degrees and coursework, research reviews support the finding that teachers with degrees or coursework in mathematics contribute to high school students learning more math.¹⁰ However, none of the reviews found any reliable conclusions about other subjects or elementary and middle school math students. This lack of evidence does not indicate that teachers' degrees and coursework in other subjects do not contribute to their effectiveness, but rather that existing research has yet to arrive at a conclusive finding either way.

Teacher experience. Most reviews find a clear, positive relationship between teacher experience and student achievement. One study found that teachers with three or fewer years of experience are not as effective as teachers with more years of teaching experience, with new teachers typically being the least effective teachers.¹¹ Other research has found that the benefits of experience continue to rise for more years at the high school level.¹² Another study demonstrated rising benefits until 21 to 27 years of experience, with over half the gain occurring in the first few years of teaching.¹³

Verbal and intellectual aptitude. Research reviews found relatively strong support for the relationship between the selectivity of teachers' undergraduate institutions and the achievement of their students¹⁴ and that this effect is more pronounced for low-income students.¹⁵ Research also found that there is likely a relationship between teachers' test scores (e.g., on the National Teachers Examination, the Texas Examination of Current Administrators and Teachers, and the ACT) and student achievement,¹⁶ and that test scores appear to matter most for at-risk students.¹⁷

Teaching Practices

Beyond teacher characteristics, practitioners as well as researchers emphasize the importance of studying what teachers actually do in the classroom. This is the second perspective on defining teaching quality. Proponents of this perspective argue that research across many fields has converged over the past few decades on a core set of practices that are most

effective over time and in many different settings. Several authors have developed pedagogical principles for educators that are based on thorough analyses of the available research.¹⁸ Five common principles are summarized below.

Building on students' prior knowledge. The research literature makes a case for teachers needing a strong understanding of students' content knowledge and skills in order to plan and deliver instruction effectively.¹⁹

Linking goals, assessment, and instruction. Research finds that good teachers base their instruction on specific and ambitious learning goals, frequently use assessments to monitor students' progress towards those goals, and continually adjust their instruction based on what they learn from the assessments.²⁰

Teaching content and critical thinking. Content knowledge and critical thinking skills are central to academic success, and the research literature as a whole suggests that effective teachers focus on both.²¹

Developing language skills. Competency in oral and written language is central to students' academic success. Therefore, a key aspect of any teachers' job is to develop students' language skills, regardless of students' ages or the specific subject matter being taught.²²

Creating a culture of learning. Effective teachers create a classroom culture that promotes learning. Here, students and teachers are engaged in meaningful work together (e.g., students are applying ideas and concepts to tasks relevant to instruction). Of critical importance is the community that is established among students.²³

Teaching as Producing Achievement

The third perspective on defining teaching quality focuses on student outcomes. There are those who eschew measuring "inputs" (i.e., teacher characteristics) or "processes" (i.e., teaching practices) and argue that outcomes are all that matter. From this perspective, the definition of quality teaching is simple: it results in higher student performance, often as measured solely by multiple choice standardized test scores.²⁴ Proponents who focus on outcomes note that a characteristic of strong modern economies are incentives for workers who are more productive. If such an approach works in the private sector, why not transfer it to K-12 schooling? This argument underlies the calls for merit- or performance-based pay based upon the results of standardized tests.²⁵

Simply linking teaching quality solely to student learning gains provides little guidance regarding ways to strengthen the teacher workforce

So which of these three perspectives is correct? Is it characteristics or practices that are more important in defining teaching quality? Or should we focus only on outcomes? Each of these perspectives has its strengths, both intuitive and empirical. That is, each makes sense and is backed by supportive, if not always consistent, research. Yet, each also has its weaknesses. The link between characteristics and learning is more inconsistent than its adherents admit, with findings varying across content areas and grade levels. Defining what effective practices look like in real classrooms with specific populations of students is more difficult than outlining general principles. And simply linking teaching quality solely to student learning gains provides little guidance regarding ways to strengthen the teacher workforce and tends to overlook school and community conditions that impact educational programs.

A large part of the problem is that data systems in most states do not allow analyses that link teacher characteristics or practices to student outcomes. Consequently, studies are limited, with researchers flocking to datasets where analyses are possible (for example, Texas and North Carolina), limiting the generalizability of findings. Research in California is especially weak due to inadequate data on teachers and students. The expert panel, however, found that the lack of good data was less of a problem than the narrowness of these perspectives, each trying to define something as complex and nuanced as good teaching with one or two dimensions. In response, the forum adopted a multifaceted view of teaching quality, described next.

Major Findings of the Forum:

Developing a Quality-Based Teacher Development System



The panel's perspective on teaching quality was consistent with that of Fenstermacher and Richardson, who present a multidimensional framework for assessing quality teaching.²⁶ According to these authors, there are three elements of good teaching: (1) the logical acts of teaching (e.g., activities such as demonstrating, explaining, and correcting), (2) the psychological acts of teaching (e.g., motivating, encouraging, rewarding), and (3) the moral acts of teaching (e.g., exhibiting and fostering honesty, courage, and fairness). This perspective is more complex than the general research on teaching practices reviewed above, with greater emphasis on the psychological and moral dimensions of teaching.

But Fenstermacher and Richardson go further, noting that more is needed than just good teaching practices for student learning to occur. They argue that there also must be (1) learner willingness and effort, (2) supportive social surround, and (3) an opportunity to teach and learn. In other words, teaching practice cannot be discussed outside of the real context within which it takes place.

Building on this review of the literature and research, the Forum reached five overarching conclusions, each of which is presented in the following sections.

Moving from a pencil and paper definition of teaching quality to one that is operational in schools and classrooms across the state is the next challenge education leadership and policymakers must face.

A New, Deeper Understanding of Quality Teaching is Needed

With Fenstermacher and Richardson's broader perspective of teaching quality in mind, the Forum members developed a new definition of teaching quality:

A New Definition of Teaching Quality

High-quality teaching occurs when teachers come to the classroom with a rich toolkit of craft knowledge and skills that they utilize following a set of effective practices, and which lead, over time, to student learning. High quality teaching occurs in a supportive environment where teachers work as part of a professional community within a workplace that fosters continuous learning on the part of children and adults.

Moving from a pencil and paper definition of teaching quality to one that is operational in schools and classrooms across the state is the next challenge education leadership and policymakers must face. Forum members encourage California's educational policy community to use this more comprehensive definition as the basis for developing a quality-based teacher development system.

Teachers Should Be Recognized as Professionals

Professionals are characterized by a high level of skill and knowledge achieved through the adherence to high standards, rigorous training, formal qualification, and continuous learning. However, the view of teachers as professionals with specialized skills and knowledge has lost credence. In order to strengthen the quality of the workforce, the notion of the professional teacher and the attendant expectations that denote a profession must be reintroduced into every aspect of teaching.

The panel members believe that many of the shortcomings of current teacher policy result from a lack of recognition of teachers as professionals. One noted example is the increased use of scripted curricula and related professional development for all teachers regardless of knowledge or experience. Particularly for accomplished veterans, the use of such curricula precludes teachers from using their subject matter knowledge, skills, and judgment within the context of the classroom. In fact, one of the inconsistencies of teacher

While teachers are losing autonomy in their classrooms, they increasingly are being held accountable for narrow measures of student performance

development policy is that high quality preparation programs generally promote teaching based on knowledge and skill, an approach that clashes with the elements of the policy system that pushes scripted curricula and requires teachers to suspend their professional judgments. The panel argued that state policy should help build teachers' skills and knowledge rather than try to compensate for poorly trained, ineffective, and unsupported teachers through "teacher-proofing" curriculum and instruction. Rather than relying on textbooks to translate educational research into instructional strategies, policy should set expectations for teachers to read, understand, and translate research-based strategies into their classroom practices.

The other side of this coin is that while teachers are losing autonomy in their classrooms, they increasingly are being held accountable for narrow measures of student performance. This situation contrasts with other professions in which professionals are held accountable for their work but also have a reasonable degree of autonomy to make reasonable judgments. The panel argued that teaching should be grounded in a professional code of ethics and include a balance between authority and accountability.

The Teaching "Surround" Needs to Be Addressed

Another indispensable aspect of treating teachers as professionals relates to the conditions under which they are working. Teachers, like other professionals, improve their practice based on opportunities to develop, reflect, collaborate, review, observe, and evaluate. Yet, often there is no time built into the structures of schooling for teachers to work together in professional communities on curriculum, instruction, and school improvement efforts. Similarly, there is little time for planning lessons, assessing student work, and reflecting on practice.

In addition to time and professional community, quality teaching is supported by strong leadership. Teachers are able to do their best when they are supported by their principals, assessed by those who understand curriculum and instruction and have the training to make reliable evaluations, and provided opportunities for professional development that is relevant to the teacher's needs in promoting student learning outcomes.

Other school conditions that contribute to and make possible quality teaching include adequate facilities, the availability of equipment and supplies, and student willingness and readiness to learn.

Inconsistency in Education Policies Must Be Addressed

Panel members were concerned about particular policies that were inconsistent or disconnected from one another. The first, mentioned earlier, is the clash between the "teacher as

An Example Code of Ethics for Educators

Educators in some states have adopted a code of ethics to frame the teaching profession. New York's code covers a range of characteristics, including advancing the foundations of a learning community, collaborating with parents and colleagues, and demonstrating commitment to learning for students as well as teachers.

New York State Code of Ethics for Educators²⁷ states the following:

- Educators nurture the intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and civic potential of each student.
- Educators create, support, and maintain challenging learning environments for all.
- Educators commit to their own learning in order to develop their practice.
- Educators collaborate with colleagues and other professionals in the interest of student learning.
- Educators collaborate with parents and community, building trust and respecting confidentiality.
- Educators advance the intellectual and ethical foundation of the learning community.

What is reasonable to expect from a teacher at each stage in the career continuum? If we expect teachers to solve all of society's problems, burnout will be the result. If we expect nothing less than robotic implementation of curricula, we risk losing our best and brightest educators. Teaching, and our expectations for it, must be challenging but not impossible, sustainable but not heroic.

professional” orientation and the “teacher as implementer” approach associated with scripted curricula. The second concern is the inability to use information collected at various assessment points along the teaching continuum for purposes of strengthening practice. Specifically, due to an implementation date of July 1, 2008, there is not yet a strong link between the Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA), which provides authentic data on a prospective teacher’s performance, and the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program (BTSA), which provides support for new teachers. When fully implemented, the TPA data could be used to craft individualized induction support for new teachers. But because teacher preparation and induction programs have traditionally operated independently, systems to measure and support teaching quality have not built on one another. Further, the tension between BTSA as formative support for new teachers and the summative nature of teacher tenure decisions, which take place simultaneously, is difficult to reconcile. In each case, teachers are caught between contradictory messages from the policy system, which leads to inconsistent assessments of teaching quality and can stymie improvement in practice.

Support Needs to Be Available All Along the Teacher Development Continuum

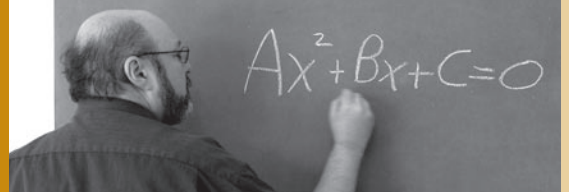
California education policy explicitly recognizes a “learning to teach continuum,” that calls for a functional *system* of teacher preparation, induction, and professional development based on the assumption that learning to teach is an ongoing process. Panel members lauded the policy focus on beginning teachers, noting that novice teachers need a great deal of support. At the same time, they noted that the overwhelming policy focus on teachers in their early years fails to recognize that the vast majority of teachers are experienced. The panel was concerned that much less attention has been paid to effective professional development for experienced teachers. Such development needs to include opportunities to develop

and renew deep subject matter knowledge, with attention to both intellectual work and development of usable lessons and practices. This work can benefit from problem-solving, inquiry, reflection, feedback, collaboration, and follow-up. Panel members noted that such work needs to be built into the daily lives of teachers, which are already full of responsibilities, rather than being weekend and after school add-ons. This approach is consistent with the focus on teacher professionalism discussed above.

The panel also noted that teacher professional growth needs to include differentiated career opportunities. Because of the lack of opportunities to assume different roles as individuals mature in the profession, typical career paths have teachers doing the same thing on the first and last day of their careers. The roles of teachers need to be more evolutionary, perhaps with specialized domains of expertise that more experienced teachers could develop.

Finally, panel members stressed the need for reasonable expectations for teachers. Demands on teachers need to move from the “heroic” to the “sustainable.” What is reasonable to expect from a teacher at each stage in the career continuum? If we expect teachers to solve all of society’s problems, burnout will be the result. If we expect nothing less than robotic implementation of curricula, we risk losing our best and brightest educators. Teaching, and our expectations for it, must be challenging but not impossible, sustainable but not heroic.

Conclusion



This policy brief brings together empirical research with the voices of experts who are thinking of teaching quality in their everyday lives, including teachers striving for excellence and professionals trying to develop and support teachers. Several themes emerged from the convergence of these perspectives.

- Statements about teaching quality should be based on good measures rather than on ad hoc assumptions. It is important to use sound data as the basis for analyzing teaching quality and strengthening practice.
- Teaching is too complex to be reduced to a single input or output. Similarly, efforts to support teaching quality are too complex to be reduced to a quick fix. Attention needs to be paid to all aspects that support quality teaching—the teaching surround—including leadership, materials, facilities, and structure of the school day, among others.
- Policy changes needed to build and support quality teaching require attention to all segments of the system. However, policymakers cannot address the segments in isolation. Systemic change will require purposeful connections so that segments of the system work together and enhance one another rather than contradict one another.
- Teaching quality should be approached from a positive, rather than a negative, standpoint. Mirroring the assumptions that all students can learn if provided the right conditions, including quality teaching, policymakers need to create programs built on the assumption that all teachers can provide quality teaching if provided the appropriate supports and differentiated opportunities.

The task for the state’s educational leaders is to implement fully a *teacher development system* that ensures consistent quality and effectiveness of instruction. This undertaking will involve strengthening and connecting the various independent components of the current teacher development continuum into a system that is capable of developing and supporting quality teaching. The system will take time to develop and will require more than simply rearranging existing requirements. Rather, the system must be flexible, dynamic, and capable of learning. At the heart of such a system would be sound, reliable data used wisely by all parties to inform policy and strengthen practice. Though ambitious in scope, creation of such a system will improve teaching quality and advance student learning.

The task for the state’s educational leaders is to implement fully a teacher development system that ensures consistent quality and effectiveness of instruction.

- ¹ California Department of Education, 2007.
- ² Hanushek, 1992; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 1998, 2004; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders & Rivers, 1996.
- ³ California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and California Department of Education, 1997, p. 1.
- ⁴ California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and California Department of Education, 1997, p. 1.
- ⁵ Wechsler, Tiffany-Morales, Campbell, Humphrey, Kim, Shields, & Wang, 2007.
- ⁶ Our summary is based on a number of reviews of the relevant literature as well as our own review of more recent studies (Allen, 2003; Rice, 2003; and Wayne & Youngs, 2003).
- ⁷ Rice, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003.
- ⁸ Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007.
- ⁹ Allen, 2003.
- ¹⁰ Wayne & Youngs, 2003.
- ¹¹ Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2004.
- ¹² Rice, 2003.
- ¹³ Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007.
- ¹⁴ Rice, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003.
- ¹⁵ Rice, 2003.
- ¹⁶ Rice, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003.
- ¹⁷ Rice, 2003.
- ¹⁸ Danielson, 2007; Estrada, 2005; National Research Council, 1999a; Resnick, 1999; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988.
- ¹⁹ National Research Council, 1999a, 1999b.
- ²⁰ Danielson, 2007; Resnick, 1999.
- ²¹ National Research Council, 1999b; Palincsar & Brown, 1982; Resnick, 1999.
- ²² Tharp, et al., 2000.
- ²³ Brown & Campione, 1994; Danielson, 2007; National Research Council, 1999a.
- ²⁴ Podgursky & Springer, 2006.
- ²⁵ Finn, 2005.
- ²⁶ Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2000, 2005.
- ²⁷ New York State Department of Education Office of Higher Education, n.d.

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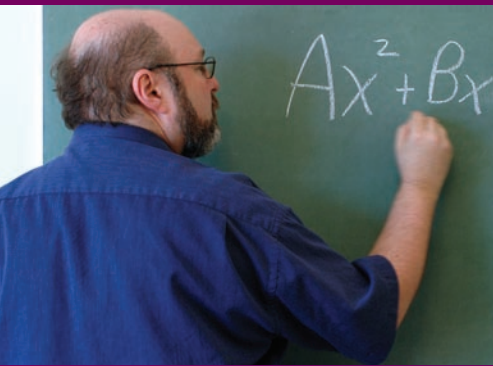
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