K-12 POLICY

Fighting for Quality and Equality, Too

How State Policymakers Can Ensure the Drive to Improve Teacher Quality Doesn't Just Trickle Down to Poor and Minority Children

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TO THE POINT

- **Produce better information on teacher effectiveness, and place it in the hands of those who need it.**
- **Require teacher evaluations to focus on effectiveness, and require districts to reform hiring and placement practices.**
- **Provide incentives for teachers to work in schools, and ensure equitable access to effective teachers.**

If state leaders invest resources and energy wisely, they don't have to choose between excellence and equity. This paper outlines ten steps state policymakers and school district leaders can take now that hold the promise to make a difference in teacher quality and equitable access to the best teachers for low-income students and students of color.

Fighting for Quality and Equality, Too

How State Policymakers Can Ensure the Drive to Improve Teacher Quality Doesn't Just Trickle Down to Poor and Minority Children

BY CRAIG D. JERALD, KATI HAYCOCK, AND AMY WILKINS

Everyone says the new stimulus package offers state leaders a historic opportunity. But an opportunity for what? Is it an opportunity to make the kinds of general improvements in teaching quality that eventually might trickle down to the students and schools who most need help? Or this time, can we build in fairness from the beginning?

If state leaders invest resources and energy wisely, they don't have to choose between excellence and equity. They can improve overall teacher quality and remedy the shameful inequities in access to the single most valuable resource in education—effective teachers.

But that won't happen by just wishing it would. Policymakers who care about fairness—and about closing the longstanding gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other young Americans—can't wait for trickle-down education reform this time. They have to put equity front and center in the policymaking process.

THE CASE FOR CLOSING THE GAP IN ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

A powerful, growing body of research demonstrates that teacher quality and effectiveness are the most important in-school variables influencing student achievement.[1] Assigning strong teachers to the children who most need them has greater impact than any other approach—including reductions in class size. Teacher quality even overpowers many of the nonschool variables often used to excuse low achievement. Highly effective teachers strongly and positively influence how well their students learn, and ineffective teachers have a devastating impact on student achievement.

Fairness and common sense suggest that to close the achievement gaps separating low-income students and students of color from others, we'd match our strongest teachers with the children who are farthest behind. But we do just the opposite. We disproportionately assign our most vulnerable students to the least able teachers. This pattern repeats in state after state and school district after school district throughout this country. If we are to give low-income students and students of color a fair shot at academic success, we must ensure that these students get their fair share of well-equipped and effective teachers.

Classroom teachers have a far bigger impact on student achievement than any other factor in education, an impact that literally can make or break a student's chances for success.

- A Brookings Institution study found that elementary students assigned to a teacher in the top quartile of effectiveness advanced five percentage points in math in one school year. Meanwhile, students assigned to a teacher in the bottom quartile lost five percentage points.[2]

And those effects accumulate.

- Middle-achieving kids assigned to three strong teachers in a row will perform in the top quarter of their class nationally just three years later. Meanwhile, kids who initially performed at that same level but who are taught by three weak teachers in a row will end up in the bottom quarter of their class nationally.[3]
- Mathematics data from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show how critical teachers can be. Eighth-graders assigned to

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teachers who majored in mathematics in college scored ten points higher than those whose teachers did not major or minor in the subject—a difference the equivalent of roughly a school year's worth of learning.[4]

Even though we pay lip service to the urgent need to close the achievement gap, we tolerate huge disparities in access to strong teachers on every meaningful measure—with devastating results.

Over the course of their schooling, low-income and minority students are much more likely to be assigned to inexperienced, out-of-field, academically weaker, and less effective teachers than are other students.[5]

- Core academic classes in high-poverty secondary schools are twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools to be taught by a teacher with neither a major nor certification in their assigned subject.
- High-minority secondary schools have almost double the percentage of math classes taught by teachers with neither certification nor major than their low-minority counterparts.[6]
- The percentage of first-year teachers at high-minority schools is almost twice as high as the percentage of such teachers at low-minority schools.

Providing low-income and minority students with more effective teachers would deliver huge, immediate learning gains and ultimately close the achievement gap. Here's proof:

- In Chicago, providing a more effective math teacher would boost the learning of a typical African-American ninth grader by 50 percent.[7] Instead of making just one year of growth during the school year, these students can make the equivalent of a year and one-half, helping them to catch up with students who entered with stronger skills.
- In North Carolina, providing a teacher with strong credentials would more than offset the gap in annual learning gains between African-American students whose parents did not go to college and white students whose parents did.[8]
- In Texas, providing low-income elementary school students with highly effective teachers (rather than merely average ones) would close the achievement gap.[9]
- In Los Angeles, "having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row would be enough to close the black-white test-score gap."[10]

Providing poor and minority students with effective teachers also would reduce dropout rates—giving another big boost to state economies.

A 2008 study found that individual teachers have a significant impact on student graduation rates, prompting researchers to conclude that "increasing the ability of urban schools to recruit and retain high-quality teachers has the potential to reduce student dropout rates significantly."[11]

In turn, reducing dropout rates would allow states and communities to reduce spending on social services and reap higher tax revenues. Dropouts are far more likely to become unemployed, receive public assistance, commit crimes, and become incarcerated. They are less likely to receive job-based health insurance and pension plans, and they pay much lower taxes. Each student who does not complete high school costs the public purse an average of $127,000 over his or her lifetime.[12] Experts estimate that California alone sustains more than $46 billion in economic losses for each cohort of high school dropouts.[13]

Providing poor and minority students with more effective teachers would substantially boost their later earnings and fuel economic growth statewide.

More learning equals more earning for individuals and society alike. All else being equal, students who graduate from high school with higher math scores than their peers have 12 percent higher earnings ten years later.[14] America's huge achievement gaps "impose on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession," according to a report by McKinsey & Company. If the United States had managed to close the racial achievement gap over the past 15 years, its gross domestic product would have been $310 billion to $525 billion higher last year.[15]

For too long, policymakers have considered the problem of who teaches where too difficult to tackle. But a variety of successful initiatives have proved such assumptions are wrong. For example, New York State and New York City have shown that a combination of tough, targeted, and intensive state and district policies can dramatically shrink teacher quality gaps and improve student achievement. New York need not be the exception. Other states and districts can make progress using strategies like the ones described in this report.[16]

Here are ten steps state policymakers and school district leaders can take now that hold the promise to make a difference in teacher quality and equity:

STEP 1. PRODUCE BETTER INFORMATION ON TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

The first step to providing vulnerable students with stronger teachers is to build the data systems that will help education leaders identify their most effective teachers. One way a good data system can help identify the best teachers is by providing information on how much students grow academically under the watch of different teachers—that is, how much value individual teachers add to student learning. While growth in performance on state assessments shouldn't be the only measure of teacher effectiveness, it remains the best and most objective measure of teacher impact. That is why the Obama Administration has insisted that to be eligible for funds in the Race to the Top competition, states must tear down the "walls" that prevent them from linking teacher and student data.

So what, specifically, should state policymakers do?

- Make sure the state's longitudinal data systems link teachers to all of the students they teach and that no policies bar such linkages.
- Require that local officials verify the data on which teachers are teaching which students. Valid data are essential for producing accurate "value added" information on teachers—that is, information that shows how much each teacher's students grow in relation both to their past performance and to similar students taught by other teachers.
- Require the state education agency to produce value added data on teachers who teach in tested grade levels and subjects and to use at least two years of growth data. Policymakers should not rely solely on within-district teacher data; they also should consider teacher data across districts statewide. The reason is that when teachers are compared only with those in their own district, differences in teacher quality (which can be quite large) will not be as apparent as they would if teachers were compared across districts.

STEP 2. REQUIRE CLEAR PUBLIC REPORTS ON TEACHER QUALITY AND EQUITY

Once data systems are in place to help identify strong, weak, and average teachers, it is important to understand exactly where particular teachers teach—and why. Also, because no reliable data exist on the effectiveness of many teachers—including new teachers and those who teach in untested subjects or grades—it's important to examine patterns in where new, out-of-field, or unqualified teachers are teaching. It's also important to consider trends in other factors that affect student learning, such as teacher turnover and teacher attendance. This will help education leaders and the public understand whether—and where—teacher quality is improving and whether all children are benefiting from those improvements.

In looking at these analyses, ask whether patterns vary by district. Are some types of children (low-achieving or low-income students, for example) assigned to disproportionate shares of effective or ineffective teachers? Why might such patterns exist?

What specifically can state policymakers do to assure that such analyses take place?

Require the state education agency to produce for each school district at least every two years a "Teacher Quality and Equity Dashboard."

These dashboards should include key indicators on the teacher force and compare district data with those for the state as a whole. Creating such indicators requires answering the following questions:

- What proportion of the district's teachers fall into each of three categories—high effectiveness (top quartile of the state's teachers), average effectiveness (middle two quartiles of the state's teachers), and low effectiveness (bottom quartile of the state's teachers). Do those patterns vary between high poverty and low-poverty schools, high-minority and low-minority schools, and high-performing and low performing schools? Is the proportion of effective teachers growing and the proportion of ineffective teachers shrinking? Ask the same questions at the district level—are all districts getting their fair share of effective teachers?
- What proportion of the district's secondary school classes are being taught by out-of-field teachers?[17] What proportion of the district's teachers have less than one year of experience? Is there a pattern in teacher turnover? Do those rates vary by a school's degree of poverty or level of minority enrollment or performance?
- How many vacancies did the district have, and by when were these filled? How many classrooms are led by long-term substitutes?
- How many days of instruction did teachers miss? Did these differ across different types of schools?
- How many teachers received professional develop-

ment that they believed was high quality and helpful in their efforts to improve student achievement? How many received constructive evaluations of their teaching? How many first-year teachers received frequent and formal mentoring, coaching, or both?
- How many teachers got an unsatisfactory or a needs improvement rating? How many were dismissed? Did these numbers vary by type of school?

Require the state education agency to conduct an analysis of the data in these dashboards—again, not less than every two years—and report its findings to the public.

Turning these analyses into a tool for greater quality and equity requires the analysis to examine differences:

- by district and geographic region;
- by the racial, economic, and language status;
- by the initial achievement level of students;
- by racial or poverty concentrations in schools (that is, "high poverty" and "low poverty");
- by school accountability status (such as "low performing"); and
- by academic field and at the secondary level by course.

STEP 3. PLACE INFORMATION ON TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS IN THE HANDS OF THOSE WHO NEED IT

Most principals think they already can identify their most and least effective teachers. Yet the evidence suggests that though some principals have an accurate sense of the strengths and weaknesses of their faculty, others do not. These school leaders need more and better information to make sound judgments.

It is vital that teachers and principals receive honest information about how well their students fare compared with their peers. By seeing data on student success and shortcomings, teachers will have important information they need to boost their effectiveness. And principals need such information both to assign children to the appropriate teachers and to use as a part of the teacher-evaluation process. But don't forget parents: In choosing schools for their children, parents should have honest information on the strength of teachers in every school.

What should state policymakers do?

- Require the state education agency to provide every teacher who teaches in tested subjects and grade levels with information on the academic growth of his or her students compared with other students in the same grade and subject. Where possible, break down aggregate data to help teachers see patterns in their effectiveness. An elementary teacher, for example, might be strong in reading and weak in math or strong in helping struggling students achieve and weak in inspiring high achievers.
- Require the state education agency to provide principals with value-added data on every teacher in their building who teaches in a tested grade level and subject.
- Require that the state's annual "school report card" include information on the proportion of the school's teachers who are highly effective (top quartile), ineffective (bottom quartile or decile), or moderately effective (middle half). The report card also should show the proportion of the school's teachers who are inexperienced and, for secondary schools, the proportion of classes taught by out-of-field teachers.

STEP 4. REQUIRE TEACHER EVALUATIONS TO FOCUS ON EFFECTIVENESS

All of the available research on teacher effectiveness suggests there are huge differences among teachers in their impact on student learning. But when it comes to annual evaluations, we generally rate all teachers the same. In most school districts, nearly every teacher receives the same rating: "satisfactory." Even in districts with multiple rating levels, almost all teachers get the top ratings, which deprives them of honest feedback.

If growing student learning is truly to be at the heart of school-improvement efforts, the universal practice of rating nearly every teacher "satisfactory" must end. Organizations that want to improve what they do take employee evaluation very seriously. Leaders of such organizations know it is essential to set clear standards for what good work looks like, evaluate employees rigorously against those standards, and provide targeted assistance where they fall short. This needs to happen in schools, too.

State policymakers should do the following:

- Require all teachers to be evaluated at least once per year and new teachers at least twice in their first year.
- Consider requiring districts to use common teacher evaluation metrics, with evidence of student learning as the chief criterion—or at least require districts to make student learning the predominant factor in local evaluation processes. Districts should have

the flexibility to include various indicators in their teacher-evaluation systems, but a core of common metrics is necessary to allow for district-to-district teacher-force comparisons.
- Stipulate that teacher evaluations include classroom observations that focus on and document the effectiveness of student learning.
- Ensure, through state guidelines, that when a district's teacher-evaluation regimen considers evidence of student learning beyond standardized test scores (for example, classroom-based evidence such as quizzes, assignments, interim assessments, school approved teacher-made tests, and student work) these items are included appropriately and do not compromise the integrity of the evaluation system.
- Prohibit districts that have failed to adopt effective evaluation systems from issuing permanent teacher licenses.

STEP 5. WRITE EXPLICIT POLICIES THAT EXPECT EQUITABLE ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

Principals in high-poverty schools have long shouldered the burden of improving teacher quality. If they are good leaders, goes the conventional wisdom, plenty of good teachers will want to work for them. But that is not always true. Who teaches where remains a function of intertwined policies, and untangling the morass will remain elusive until state, district, and school leaders all take responsibility for ensuring fair access to high-quality teachers.
Here's what state policymakers can do:

- Adopt an explicit policy that bars districts and schools from assigning disproportionate numbers of the most and least effective teachers—as well as first-year teachers, out-of-field, or unqualified teachers—to different student groups. The goals must be to ensure that low-income students, low-achieving students, and students of color are not disproportionately assigned to the least able teachers.
- Require districts to report on any disproportionality in teaching assignments and to demonstrate annual progress in rectifying imbalances.

STEP 6. ELIMINATE STATE POLICIES THAT SUSTAIN THE STATUS QUO IN LOCAL DISTRICTS

Many states have adopted policies that actually make it harder to assign strong teachers to the children who need them most. To see genuine progress, state leaders must make much-needed policy changes that will make this work easier for local leaders.

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What, specifically, can state policymakers do to protect vulnerable schools—especially those with the highest poverty or in the bottom quartile of performance—from becoming dumping grounds for ineffective teachers?

- Give principals in high-poverty, high-minority, and/or low-performing schools the right to choose their own teachers—and prohibit districts from sending "must place" teachers to these schools.
- Preclude districts from assigning disproportionate numbers of first-year teachers—whose effectiveness varies—to high-poverty or low-performing schools.
- Require districts to remove any teachers in the lowest decile of performance from low-performing schools and to assign them to other positions if they cannot secure another teacher assignment within a reasonable amount of time.
- Prohibit districts from entering into any agreements (such as seniority-based teacher assignments) that interfere with fair access to high-quality teachers.
- Make it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers—for example, by enacting policies that prohibit continuing contracts for novice teachers who do not meet high standards for performance (including student learning gains) and by reducing paperwork for dismissing experienced teachers who do not improve student achievement.

STEP 7. PROVIDE INCENTIVES FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHERS TO WORK IN HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS

Effective teachers who choose to work in the most challenging schools often sacrifice pay and professional status. State leaders should reverse that relationship: The most challeng-

Without addressing inequitable access to strong teachers, other efforts to boost the achievement of low-income students and students of color are likely to come up short.

ing teaching jobs should become the most respected and best rewarded. It is critical, however, that incentives go only to teachers with proven effectiveness—and that the incentives be tightly focused on the poorest (or the lowest performing) schools. Many reviews of existing incentive systems suggest that they are not sufficiently targeted to encourage teachers to teach in the very poorest schools.

State policymakers can help make this happen by the way they shape incentives:

- Stop paying teachers to earn master's degrees, which have no discernable impact on student achievement, and use the savings for incentives that actually improve effectiveness and encourage the best teach ers to work in high-need schools.
- Allow district and school leaders to target incentive funds where they most need them—in the form of recruitment bonuses, retention incentives, or financial incentives for teams of effective teachers to move to low-performing schools.
- Provide additional financial incentives such as student-loan forgiveness, housing supplements, double retirement credits, paid moving expenses, and paid sabbaticals for highly effective teachers who teach in high-poverty, high-minority, or low-performing schools.
- Design compensation systems that rapidly and generously increase rewards for highly effective teachers in hard-to-staff schools.

STEP 8. MAKE CERTAIN THAT HIGH-POVERTY DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS HAVE WHAT THEY NEED TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

What teachers want most is to work with strong leaders, collaborate with colleagues to improve student learning, and have access to meaningful support. Indeed, several districts have found that even large financial incentives, in the absence of better working conditions, fail to attract and retain strong teachers in high-need schools. But a supportive professional environment has benefits beyond recruiting new talent: The right environment also can reduce attrition and increase the effectiveness of teachers who already work in such schools.

Unfortunately, resource inequities—both between districts and between schools in the same district—often get in the way. In fact, in most districts, schools with large numbers of first-year teachers not only fail to receive the extra resources they need to support and mentor these teachers, but they often get fewer resources than schools with more expert staffs. Even in tough budget times, a fairer distribution of resources could help fuel real progress in access to high-quality teachers. What, specifically, can states do?

- Bar districts from unfairly budgeting fewer state and local dollars to schools with high proportions of poor and minority students. Insist that these schools receive at least their fair share and that actual—not average—teacher salaries are debited from school budgets.
- Devise and implement fair student-funding formulas statewide that "follow the child" all the way to the next school level and give extra weight to children with extra needs.
- Allow principals in high-poverty and high-minority schools, together with their leadership teams, to decide how to use these resources to improve working conditions and support teacher learning and advancement.
- Ensure an adequate supply of first-rate principals by (1) recruiting statewide for prospective school principals and giving them high-quality training, and (2) training experienced principals to meet the extra challenges of turning around low-performing schools.
- Immediately rescind state support for any first-year teacher-mentoring programs that fail to use data from high-quality evaluations to select mentors or design the program of support for the new teachers. Expand programs that use such data. Going forward, use effectiveness data—student-learning growth for teachers who have participated in mentoring programs—to determine whether such programs should receive future funding.
- Establish a ceiling for the percentage of teacher compensation districts can base on seniority.

STEP 9. PUMP UP THE SUPPLY OF TALENTED TEACHERS

If we want school leaders to remove teachers who, despite ample support, linger at low levels of effectiveness, they'll need to have some assurance they can hire better teachers. To make that happen, state policymakers will need to understand which teacher-preparation programs—traditional colleges, alternative certification routes, and nontraditional providers such as Teach for America or The New Teacher Project—are producing high-quality teachers and which are not. But more important, states will have to act on that information, leveraging a range of supply strategies to boost the pool of talented candidates for teaching positions in high-need schools.

What might such strategies include?

- Create within state data systems the ability not only to generate information on the effectiveness of individual teachers but to link teachers with the teacher preparation programs that produced them.
- Identify and report data on the strongest and weakest teacher-preparation programs to the public and to district and school officials who hire teachers.
- Grow the programs that produce the strongest teachers. Expand links between those programs and the schools and districts with concentrations of low-income students and student of color. Programs producing weak teachers should receive assistance. Shrink or close those that do not quickly improve their results.
- Encourage and support initiatives that allow high need districts to grow their own talented teaching candidates; some districts are doing this through residency programs or are banding with similar districts for teacher recruitment, or both.

STEP 10. REQUIRE DISTRICTS TO FIX COUNTERPRODUCTIVE HIRING AND PLACEMENT PRACTICES.

Studies have found that hiring and placement practices in urban districts often put schools that serve low-income
students, students of color, and low-performing students at a disadvantage. States should encourage better hiring and placement practices that work to the advantage of high-need schools:

What, specifically, can states do?

- Eliminate laws requiring seniority-based layoffs of teachers.
- Require that all staffing decisions hinge primarily on assessments of effectiveness.
- Encourage districts to develop criteria-based hiring strategies at turnaround schools rather than relying on senority or generalized, subjective assessments of quality.

Ensuring that low-income students and students of color get at least their fair share of strong teachers is the single most important step that policymakers concerned with closing the achievement gap can take. Without addressing inequitable access to strong teachers, other efforts to boost the achievement of low-income students and students of color are likely to come up short. Similarly, policy fixes that simply aim to improve the teaching force are likely to miss the mark for poor and minority kids unless those policies have at their heart the goal of equity.

The suggestions offered in this paper provide a strong foundation for an equity-focused teacher agenda. But as with so many things in education, the steps outlined here are far easier said than done. The Education Trust is eager to work with state policymakers to tailor these sug gestions to the needs of the districts, schools, and most especially, the students in your state.

NOTES

(Some links may have expired. Some links that appear on multiple lines may not be reachable directly from this document. It may be necessary to copy and paste the entire link into your browser.)

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Assessment Center, November 1996. See analysis in Haycock, K. (1998). "Good Teaching Matters…A Lot." "Thinking K-16," 3(2), 1-14.

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14 California Dropout Research Project. "Solving California's Dropout Crisis." Santa Barbara, Calif.: University of California Santa Barbara, February 2008.

15 E. A. Hanushek. "Alternative School Policies and the Benefits of General Cognitive Skills." *Economics of Education Review* (2006): 25 447-462.

16 McKinsey & Company. "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools." Washington, D.C.: McKinsey & Company Social Sector Office, April 2009.

17 In examining these patterns, it's important to look at classes, not teachers. This is particularly true for secondary school classes. The English teacher who is saddled with a teaching section of science won't show up in an analysis of "out-of-field teachers" but will show up in an analysis of classes taught by out-of-field teachers.

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels—pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people—especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families—to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

The Joyce Foundation

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