A Caring, Qualified, Well-Supported, and Effective Teacher for Every Student: Questions for Smart School Districts to Answer

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Introduction

At the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) we are developing a framework for assessing the effectiveness of the school community in its effort to ensure a caring, qualified, well-supported, and successful teacher for every student, in every district and school. Although one can find powerful examples of how states and school districts have transformed some strategies for recruiting, supporting and rewarding teachers, few, if any, communities have achieved comprehensive and coherent teaching quality policies to ensure access to good teaching for all students. Reaching this goal is no easy task, as insufficient and inequitable resources, out-of-sync federal and state policies, uncoordinated efforts, and lack of political will for bold action all limit the ability of many school communities to recruit and retain the teachers they need.

During the last 15 years, research has consistently identified the inextricable links between the quality of teachers and teaching, and the achievement of students.[i] However, poor students and those of color are far less likely to have access to qualified teachers — no matter how a qualified teacher is defined.[ii] Although serious teacher shortages exist in high-demand fields, there are many qualified teachers willing to teach. However, neither the laws that govern the teaching profession nor the teacher working conditions found in most urban and rural school systems advance the likelihood for all students to be taught by those who know how to teach them. In the vast majority of our nation's urban schools, teacher preparation, recruitment, hiring, assignment, induction, professional development and compensation policies and practices rarely cohere and mutually support one another. Consequently, the misdistribution of effective teachers has reached crisis proportion, especially in urban and rural school systems. Most school systems fall well short of the goal of creating a comprehensive and systemic approach to ensure a continuum of support and development that helps attract and retain the teachers that all students need to achieve at high levels.

The challenges to improve teaching quality are considerable, and policymakers and the public should be aware of the difficulties in ensuring that public schools have the type of teaching in place for students to serve as an engine for America's economy and democratic way of life. But, as a society, we must deal with the consequences of neglecting our nation's teaching profession — the one that makes all others possible.[1]

[1] To the best of my knowledge, my friend, David Haselkorn, coined the poignant words, "Teaching — the profession that makes all others possible," and I wish to acknowledge him for his eloquence and precision in describing the importance of teachers in American society (B. Berry).

Smart school communities ask and answer hard questions about which teachers they attract and how they are developed and supported, as well as whether they reward and retain the teachers they most need to help all students achieve. Designed to provoke and inspire, the subsequent framework offers a blueprint for how school communities can develop a system for ensuring that all students benefit from quality teaching. The framework, described below, represents a "Top Ten" list of questions smart school districts ask and answer in ensuring a caring, qualified, well-supported, and effective teacher for every student.

Question #1: Does the system identify and reward expert teachers?

Any organization needs exemplars that serve as models of excellence. School systems must have a system to identify and reward expert teachers and use that system to shine a bright light on what "good teaching and learning look like" (e.g., National Board Certification®) and to drive recruitment, hiring, professional development and compensation practices. The district must go beyond the traditional and often perfunctory checklist forms of teacher evaluation and use multiple measures to identify effective teachers. Then the district must provide the right incentives for all teachers to learn and use effective teaching practices. More effective teachers should be given special responsibilities — and compensation — commensurate with their abilities. However, this professional compensation system must be developed in an equitable way — building cooperation and collaboration, not competition, among teaching colleagues. Without rewarding good teachers and making more public what good teaching looks like, systems cannot develop a high-functioning, coherent teacher development system.

Question #2: Does the system prepare and support principals so they can build teacher leadership and draw upon those leaders in school improvement?

Successful leaders, including principals, develop and count on contributions from many others in their organizations. While the idea of the principal as the instructional leader is a noble one, the job is too big for one person to accomplish. School systems must invest in principals so they can draw on its most accomplished teachers to (a) spread their content and teaching expertise (especially to lesser prepared and novice teachers); (b) implement a consistent and rigorous, yet adaptive curriculum within and between grades and across schools; and (c) help make smarter decisions about new teacher hires, curriculum, and school-community partnerships. Principals, with the right set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, are essential to developing and spreading teacher leadership.

Question #3: Does the system work with colleges and universities as well as other agencies to develop and grow a next generation of teachers?

Because no novice teachers can be fully-prepared for all the challenges of classroom teaching, school districts must work closely with universities and other agencies to ensure that new teachers are as ready-to-teach as possible. School systems must work with local universities and other social service agencies in creating and sustaining professional development schools, where the most challenging schools emerge as sites that jointly prepare student teachers and interns. In this model, akin to a teaching hospital, expert K-12 teachers take on a larger role in teacher education. Additionally, urban (and rural) schools can help address the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers for hard-to-staff schools by growing their own new teachers. Some states

and systems have started "teacher cadet" programs that introduce middle and high school students to teaching as a profession, and work with local universities to encourage and develop new teachers. Other systems look to their current teaching assistants, with adequate funding and support, as a viable source of novices. Finally, universities, school systems, and other agencies must develop new operating agreements — and even new governing and financial arrangements — to jointly grow and development a new generation of effective teachers.

Question #4: Has the system redesigned its budgeting process and created streamlined personnel practices that allow for the best teacher candidates to be recruited and hired?

Perhaps more than anything else, urban systems must have more predictable budgets to recruit top-flight teachers for the schools that need them the most — matching the aggressive mid-spring hiring schedules of many competing suburban systems. State and local funding agencies must develop new procedures in order to assist systems in early hiring. District administrators and teachers union officials must work together to redesign HR functions and procedures in order to commit to hiring and placing at least 30 to 40 percent of new teachers by May, and the remainder by June.[iii] District offices must use new technologies to cast a wider recruitment net and to screen and process applicants more efficiently. Decision-making must be decentralized in order to involve more principal and teacher input into who is hired, while still tending to high and rigorous standards. Districts should examine a wide range of performance measures in determining who should be hired.

Question #5: Has the system redesigned its teacher assignment policies with a focus on the needs of students, and especially those in hard-to-staff, low performing schools?

Teacher unions and management must agree to revise teacher transfer processes so principals and teachers can choose among external and internal candidates equally. In many school systems, experienced teachers requesting transfers have "first dibs" on vacant positions in their teaching field, often in order of seniority, and they can pick and choose where they teach. Absent comprehensive incentives and supports for teaching in the most challenging schools, union officials are reluctant to back down on their seniority transfer "rights." (In most situations, schools are required to take one of the transferring teachers who applies to fill a vacancy.) District administrators and union officials can create the kinds of positive assignment policies (e.g., different teaching loads, additional salary, more intensive professional development) that serve as incentives to recruit the best teachers for hard-to-staff schools.

Question #6: Does the system have a comprehensive new teacher induction program that accommodates the needs of different types of novices and ensures that they do not get the most challenging assignments?

New teachers arrive at their first assignments with different degrees of readiness. Even well-prepared novice teachers do not possess all of the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to be effective. Other professions and organizations formally induct their novices into their jobs, offer additional training and supports, and do not assign them to the most difficult tasks. Smart systems create new-teacher induction programs that are built on specific teaching standards. These systems also ensure that accomplished teachers serve as mentors who are trained for this new role and match mentors and novices on the basis of their teaching areas. These systems also

devise ways for mentors to routinely observe and assess novices and for novices to watch other expert teachers teach. Strong induction programs are built in collaboration with local universities that can provide for novices a more seamless transition into teaching (for those who graduate from their program as well as others). Strong induction programs ensure that novices have a reduced teaching load and/or modified schedules so they have more time to learn to teach. Systems ensure that novices do not get the most challenging assignments in their first years of teaching — and if they do, they work with a teaching team and do not have full responsibilities for the students and classes they teach.

Question #7: Does the system create professional development opportunities that respond to the needs of teachers and their students?

Teachers must have more professional development time that is related to their classroom needs and has meaning for improving student achievement. Smart systems provide more professional time but also hold teachers, administrators, and schools accountable for the new time devoted to professional development. The professional development that teachers experience must be related to their teaching assignment and focused on the content-specific teaching needs of the students being taught, as well as give teachers considerable input over what they are expected to learn and do. Systems must devise more ways for their teachers to engage in what the Japanese call "lesson study" — where common lessons are observed by teacher teams over time, the effects of the lessons on student learning are recorded and studied by the team, and curriculum materials and plans are adapted accordingly. Districts should assemble evidence on the effects of their professional development offerings on teaching practice and student learning.

Question #8: Does the system create smaller learning communities and professional development opportunities for teachers to learn from and observe one another and analyze student data to improve practice?

Providing meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers is complicated by the fact that most schools are organized the same way they were 50 years ago. However, the small schools movement represents a "new" way of streamlining curricula and focusing on essential learning goals, reallocating resources in order to put more dollars into classrooms, and re-deploying staff so more teaching adults can serve fewer numbers of students over time. Several school-redesign networks, charter schools, and the Gates Foundation small schools initiative provide powerful examples of how schools can find more time for teachers to learn from one another and to work with a smaller group of students who they can know and teach more effectively. Systems must prepare (and universities must be expected to assist) principals and other administrators in learning how to redesign their schools so teachers can be more effective. Without such redesign efforts teachers will never have these powerful opportunities.

Question #9: Does the system have a data infrastructure that combines information on teaching practices and teacher working conditions, spurring continuous improvement and increases in student achievement?

Systems must be data driven — both in terms of student outcomes and the conditions that allow teachers to teach differently and more effectively. Systems must build data systems and capacity to link teaching practices, working conditions, and student achievement. Recent studies are

showing powerful links between teacher working conditions and student achievement. Systems must assemble data that reveal not only which schools, teachers, and students are doing better. Data also must be collected and used in terms of what is working in classrooms and the school as a whole — and why. For example, this means that systems must collect data on what and how teachers teach and what kinds of teaching practices appear to make a difference for student learning as well as what kind of professional development teachers experience and how often they work with colleagues in joint problem solving. Principals and teachers must be consumers of these data.

Question #10: Does the system inform and engage policymakers and the public on matters of teaching quality and student learning in ways that support the closing of the achievement gap?

Too many policy leaders do not believe that teaching is "smart" work and have little understanding of what it takes to create a comprehensive teacher development system that can help close the achievement gap. Systems can assemble the right kind of data and stories that engage key public constituencies around the issues at hand. In turn, these community leaders can become the advocates needed for securing the resources and the political will necessary to transform teaching and ensure that every student has a caring, qualified, well-supported, and effective teacher. Student voices around what constitutes "highly qualified" teachers and good teaching are part of a public engagement campaign. The system uses both the data and the stories from schools, teacher leaders, and students to develop new approaches to board-district and district-school relations as well as to engage state-education decision makers in order to strategically align with state reform policies and resources.[iv]

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[ii] Darling-Hammond, L, and Sykes, G. (2003, September 17). Wanted: A national teacher supply policy for education: The right way to meet the "Highly Qualified Teacher" challenge. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 11(33). Retrieved March 19, 2006 from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n33/.

[iii] Levin, J., Mulhern, J, and Schunck, J. (2005). *Unintended consequences: The case for reforming the staffing rules in urban teachers union contracts*. The New Teacher Project: New York.

[iv] Anderson, S. (2003). *The district role in educational change: A review of the literature*. International Centre for Educational Change. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.