Straight Talk on Teaching Quality: Six Game-Changing Ideas and What to Do About Them

Prepared by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

Annenberg Institute for School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization, affiliated with Brown University, that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes for all students in urban public schools, especially those attended by traditionally underserved children. The Institute's vision is the transformation of traditional school systems into "smart education systems" that develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students' lives – at school, at home, and in the community.

The Institute conducts research; works with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement to build capacity in school districts and communities; and shares its work through print and Web publications. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, the Institute's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts and communities strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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Introduction

If asked about the hottest topic or most talked-about players in American public education today, pretty much everyone's answer – from parents to policymakers to pundits – would include the words "teachers" or "teaching." From both intuition and experience, we know that good teaching matters. This has been true for a very long time. Yet it is reasonable to wonder why the drumbeat about teaching quality seems especially loud these days. Maybe it's because the evidence base about the link between the quality of teaching and the achievement of students has gotten a lot stronger over the last fifteen years. It could also be because federal education policy under our previous and current presidents has tied both regulations and dollars to definitions of "highly qualified" teachers and, most recently, to measuring teachers' contributions to their students' learning. And a growing focus on college and career readiness, emphasized in the Common Core State Standards and by reformers as a measure of educational excellence, has underscored how critical teachers are in ensuring that all students have the skills to succeed in their postsecondary lives.

This guide is about game-changing strategies for improving teacher effectiveness, but it **starts with a couple of important caveats. First, teaching is the single most important in-school influence on student learning (Johnson et al. 2005). It's what matters most inside schools.** But when any one player in a very important game gets that kind of attention, it's easy to forget about other factors, like the rest of the team (other teachers and student support professionals), the condition of the playing field (the school's physical environment and instructional resources), and the strength of the coaches (principals and school leaders), to name a few.

Beyond school walls, the supports and opportunities available to students and families in their communities – ranging from afterschool homework programs, to agencies that help newcomers and people who are non-native English speakers get settled in a new place, to clean and safe parks for all kids – strongly impact learning opportunities. And, just like students and families are part of communities, teachers and schools are usually part of a larger system or district. How that system makes rules and policies, spends resources, and provides support to teachers and principals also impacts the learning environment for students (Rothstein 2010, 2004).

The second caveat: If you work in public education you often hear that there is not a single, agreed-upon definition of what effective teaching looks like and how to measure it. Yet people are acting every day on explicit and implicit definitions, whether found in state standards, published frameworks, formal evaluation systems, or just their own thinking about what works for their own children. Even though there is not one common definition of what effective teaching looks like and how to measure it, we believe there's enough common ground and common knowledge right now to make better policies and implement more effective practices in schools, school systems, communities, and states. We reviewed definitions of quality teachers and teaching from more than a dozen organizations spanning a range of perspectives and ideologies and found more overlap than dissonance. **Each had something to say about the combination of teacher qualifications (credentials, knowledge, and experience); characteristics (attitudes and beliefs); and practices (what teaching strategies they use and how they relate to students) that lead to effectiveness.**

As our starting point, we used two fairly straightforward definitions of good teaching. The first is a "back to basics" approach from The Center for Teaching Quality: An effective teacher helps students learn more and spreads their expertise to their colleagues. (Berry et al. 2006). The second is from Laura Goe, who wrote that **effective teaching encompasses instructional quality, student learning, and professional responsibility.** (Goe & Sullivan 2011). With those definitions in mind, we've identified several important areas where the right steps can change the game for teachers and, most importantly, their students. Equally important, going in the wrong direction or ignoring these areas could set back the cause of better teaching and learning.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform has worked for nearly two decades with school districts, researchers, parents, and community members and comes to the teaching quality agenda with these different perspectives in mind. Our goal is to make the information that we've culled from a rich array of resources (so many, in fact, that they're too numerous to cite in a guide of this size) more accessible to everyone – from parents to policymakers to citizens who are advocating for better schools. We know this isn't everything. And we know that by trying to fit complex information about one of our most important professions into a relatively short document, we risk leaving out a lot! But we think that this guide can offer anyone who is interested in the topic of teaching quality some useful ideas, examples, questions, and resources that allow you to go deeper if you choose and that can help you be a more effective contributor to this very important cause.

In the following pages, we describe six strategies that both our own experience and our survey of the field have shown to be powerful supports for the quality of instruction. For each strategy, we outline the problem to be addressed; what needs to happen to address the problem; examples of organizations and sites that are implementing the strategy effectively; what readers can ask about and advocate for in their own school communities; and a short list of resources where readers can learn more.

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1 Follow Your Bliss: Career Pathways for Teachers

THE PROBLEM

Public school teaching has been seen as a long-term career with relatively static roles and responsibilities, regardless of a teacher's experience, expertise, interests, or ambitions. Historically, teaching has been viewed as women's work, and career advancement only happened if you were willing to leave the classroom behind. But that simple image has gone the way of the record album. The teaching profession today is more diverse than ever in terms of the experience, preparation, and long-term goals of those entering the profession. Some see teaching as a short-term, service-oriented professional experience and move on to careers in other fields. Others enter teaching as the first step on the road to a career in educational leadership and administration. Others enter the profession expecting to pursue a life-long career teaching students but become interested in multiple and hybrid roles and opportunities such as coaching or mentoring colleagues, developing and implementing curriculum, designing new schools, or working systematically with parents and community members – opportunities that allow for advancement while also keeping effective and experienced teachers in, or close to, the classroom.

In most cases, district human resources systems, current school environments, and compensation systems are simply not set up to provide differentiated opportunities and rewards to people who have different reasons for joining the teaching profession, different skill sets, or differing professional goals. And without those opportunities, schools and districts have a more difficult time retaining excellent teachers or keeping them in positions where they can have the most direct impact on student learning.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

To retain excellent and experienced teachers in roles that are still connected to the classroom, state and local policymakers, school districts, and union leaders must embrace both the changes in teaching that mirror those in many other professions in the twenty-first century and the different career perspectives that are in many ways (but not exclusively) generational.

To address the different interests, talents, levels of experience, and career aspirations of teachers today, many districts are looking for ways to provide additional career opportunities that vary from the traditional path of advancing to a position in school or district administration. Some are implementing alternative forms of compensation that are not seniority based, including merit pay, salary ranges, and bonuses. However, research has shown that pay alone is not sufficient motivation for an excellent teacher to remain in the classroom. Thus, some districts are implementing career ladders in which excellent teachers who want to stay in the classroom can progress from apprentice to master teacher as they increase their experience and skills. These districts seek to systematically identify highly effective and ambitious teachers and give them increased responsibility and important leadership roles as they move through the ladder's "rungs," or defined professional levels. At each rung, they take on tasks such as mentoring new teachers or helping with curriculum devel-

opment, are held accountable for their performance, and receive compensation in accordance with their increased responsibility.

A career ladder assumes that there will be growth in a teacher's competence, responsibilities, and skills over time, which should be recognized, rewarded, and utilized to the school district's advantage. Career ladders have been found to help motivate and retain teachers by providing varied professional opportunities and a rationale for achieving new levels of expertise. And recent research suggests that teachers in advanced leadership positions bring more to a school than simply their teaching ability; they can share their expertise with less experienced teachers, bring teacher voice to decision making, strengthen connections with parents and community, and help to build higher overall teaching quality in the school.

WHO IS DOING SOMETHING GOOD?

Cincinnati Career Ladder: Cincinnati's career ladder is called the Career in Teaching (CIT) Program. Developed jointly by the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, teachers in CIT progress through apprentice, novice, career, accomplished, and lead teacher levels, with increased financial rewards at each step, based on a combination of assessment, advanced education, and experience.

Teachers in Cincinnati begin at the apprentice level, where they remain for no more than two years. Following two years of successful peer and principal evaluations, teachers then advance to the novice level, where they can remain for up to five years. In both of these levels, teachers receive ongoing support from experienced mentors. The next level is career teacher, where teachers can remain for the duration of their career at CPS, or they can move to accomplished by earning National Board Certification. Teachers with at least six years in teaching – the last

WHAT CAN I DO?

Questions to Ask:

- What opportunities do the school, school board, and administration provide for differentiated roles and compensation for teachers?
- What opportunities or incentives do excellent teachers have to share their expertise beyond their classrooms?
- What master, mentor, coaching, or planning roles are available for teachers?
- What are the criteria and reward systems?
- What tools or processes does the school, or school district, have in place to learn about the career goals of teachers, especially new ones?
- What kind of support does the school, or school district, provide for new teachers in their first five years, a time that has been shown critical to the development and retention/attrition of teachers?

Advocate For:

- Advocate *for* multiple opportunities for teachers to advance their careers in and beyond their own classrooms, share their skills, teach other teachers, or document and share practices that improve student learning.
- Advocate *against* systems that are exclusively "pay for performance," which have not been proven effective and are not characteristic of school and district improvement success stories.

three in the district – can apply for lead teacher status. An extensive application is reviewed by the Career in Teaching panel, made up of three administrators and three teachers. If the application meets all criteria, the teacher is observed by a skilled veteran teacher called a trained teacher observer (TTO), who also interviews the applicant's principal and several teaching colleagues. Highly proficient teachers with demonstrated leadership ability are then recommended by the TTOs for lead teacher status.

More information: http://www.renniecenter.org/CareerLadders/Example of Career Ladder.htm

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Evaluation Nation: Multiple Ways of Measuring Performance

THE PROBLEM

Teacher evaluation is an issue that has received a considerable amount of attention recently, with teachers unions and policymakers in many locales clashing over how to appropriately and reliably assess instruction. Most current evaluation systems suffer from several design flaws. Evaluations occur infrequently and are not usually focused on teachers' most important responsibility: helping students learn. In most districts, teachers can receive only two ratings – satisfactory or unsatisfactory – which makes it impossible to distinguish really good teaching from fair or even poor teaching. And, nearly every teacher (99 percent in some districts) receives a satisfactory rating, making identifying good teaching – or, more importantly, identifying poor teaching – even harder. Current evaluations also do not typically provide feedback that is useful for the teacher, and schools rarely consider such evaluations in decisions about professional development, compensation, tenure, or promotion.

Recently, much of the debate has focused on measures of effectiveness that are tied to state tests and "value-added" measures, which are based on the idea that teacher quality can be measured by the test score gains of a teacher's students. Value added has a lot of different meanings, is measured in many different ways, and, at least currently, is available for only a small percentage of teachers. While it is important to keep moving forward with evaluation technology, replacing current systems with equally ineffective ones that rank teachers based on narrow standardized test scores will not transform teaching and learning. Instead, evaluation systems should be designed to identify excellence and help teachers improve their practice by considering multiple measures of effectiveness.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The ultimate goal of all teacher evaluation should be to improve teaching and learning. Good evaluation systems do not simply identify good or poor practice; they are tied to supports, targeted to a teacher's identified areas of weakness, that help to build excellent practice. In cases where there is no improvement, evaluation can provide evidence that support and development efforts over time are not making a difference. In other words, good evaluation systems help good teachers become better and identify poor teachers who should be counseled out of the profession.

School districts need to decide what their evaluation system should measure. Many schools and districts are trying to develop evaluation systems that provide both teachers and schools with information that can be used to improve classroom learning. More and more districts are finding that this is best accomplished by using a variety of strategies to evaluate growth in student learning, instructional quality, and professional responsibility. Some districts are currently trying newer, more elaborate approaches with more financial awards that could provide interesting lessons as they develop. These approaches share many of the same characteristics: student portfolios, teacher-designed assessments, student learning objectives, standardized tests, and student engagement measures, among others, to measure growth in student learning; multiple observations with more than one

observer, transparent feedback to the teacher, and examination of teacher artifacts to measure instructional quality; and administrator and supervisor reports and logs and documentation of professional activities to measure professional responsibility. Parents can also be engaged in helping to shape teacher evaluation, both by providing feedback on components of the evaluation system itself, such as the elements of effective teaching that are being measured, and by providing feedback in areas such as teacher communication and responsiveness.

By gathering data in all of these ways, we can more completely evaluate instruction and student learning growth. By linking the results with professional growth opportunities and supports for teachers, teaching and learning can be not only more accurately assessed, but improved.

WHO IS DOING SOMETHING GOOD?

Montgomery County, Maryland: In Montgomery County, Maryland, the Montgomery County Education Association and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) worked together to create an evaluation system for the district's teachers. MCPS uses two evaluation systems: Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) for all first-year and underperforming experienced teachers and a standards-based, principal-driven system for all other teachers. Evaluation in MCPS is part of the district's Professional Growth System, which includes new teacher induction, intensive professional development, evaluation, and a compensation system.

The PAR program provides intensive assistance to the teacher and is responsible for an independent assessment and recommendation for continued employment, continued assistance, nonrenewal, or dismissal. The assistance, as well as the performance review, comes not from a "specialist" or administrator, but a fellow teacher. This peer educator, called a "Consulting

WHAT CAN I DO?

Questions to Ask:

- Do teachers know how effectiveness is being measured?
- Are principals trained in high-quality observation and feedback?
- Is there a performance plan including instructional supports when a teacher needs improvement?
- Are professional development opportunities aligned to what individual teachers need to help them improve their practice and their students' learning?
- Are data collected and shared with teachers in a time and fashion that improves their practice?

Advocate For:

- Evaluation models that allow teachers from all subjects and grades to be evaluated with multiple measures of evidence of student learning, such as student portfolios, teacher-designed assessments, and student learning objectives.
- Professional growth opportunities that are aligned with results from evaluation.
- Adequate time and support for teachers to review and analyze data and develop responses that improve practice and student performance.
- The engagement of parents in shaping evaluation systems, and parent surveys on elements such as teacher communication and responsiveness.

Teacher," is a teacher on leave from the classroom for three years. Upon completing their three-year service to the PAR program, they return to the classroom. Following the year of assistance, the PAR Panel makes a recommendation for continued employment, another year of PAR support, nonrenewal, or dismissal. Unlike traditional evaluation systems, that recommendation is not made solely by administrators nor based solely on a principal's evaluation. The consulting teacher provides an independent performance assessment – a "second opinion" so to speak – and the employment recommendation is made by the joint PAR Panel, a group that includes an equal number of teachers and principals.

Once teachers earn tenure in MCPS (two years), they are placed in an evaluation system based on cycles of professional growth and evaluation. As a teacher gains experience and expertise, more time is spent in professional development activities and less time in formal evaluation. Upon receiving tenure, s/he then enters a three-year professional growth cycle. In the third year of the cycle, which is year five of service in MCPS, the principal formally evaluates the teacher. Teachers who successfully complete the three-year professional growth cycle enter a four-year growth cycle. In the fourth year of this cycle, which is year nine of service in MCPS, they are formally evaluated. After successfully completing the four-year cycle, teachers enter a five-year professional growth cycle. In the fifth year of this cycle, which is year fourteen of service in MCPS, and every five years thereafter, the principal conducts a formal evaluation of the teacher. During the years that teachers are not being formally evaluated, they prepare professional portfolios detailing the professional development work they have undertaken. The program requires principals, who are extensively trained, to appraise teachers' work using Montgomery County's standards of teacher effectiveness. Principals are required to prepare a descriptive narrative, documenting where teachers are succeeding and where they need improvement.

More information: http://mcea.nea.org/pdf/TeacherPGS_handbook.pdf

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Supports for Teachers, Not Just Rewards and Sanctions: Why Firing Teachers Won't Lead to Large-Scale Improvement

THE PROBLEM

There is considerable anxiety about teacher quality in American schools today. Not enough highly skilled people are going into teaching, and too many promising teachers leave the profession after a few years. Many teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and training they need to teach all students effectively. And the students who need the strongest instruction often are taught by teachers with the least experience and expertise.

One reason these problems persist is that the rules and procedures that affect teacher quality are often haphazard. Teacher education institutions and fast-track, non-university programs prepare teachers; district human resource departments recruit them; principals evaluate them; collective bargaining agreements determine where they can work; and universities and private organizations provide professional development. Yet these groups seldom work together systematically to ensure that all teachers are capable and effective in the classroom.

One of the reasons teacher evaluation is such a hot topic is that many people believe that removing teachers who aren't performing well is the highest reform priority. Teachers themselves believe that this is an aspect of reform but find it less critical than strengthening programs and resources that improve their ability to help diverse students with the highest needs meet college- and career-ready standards. The reality is that both are important. However, the attrition of effective or promising teachers who are not getting the support that they need to fully succeed, particularly in the neediest and hardest to staff schools, is more problematic than the issue of simply getting rid of "bad" teachers. As mentioned earlier, there are teachers who are inadequate or, in the worst cases, harmful and should be counseled out of the profession or dismissed outright. But in terms of sheer numbers, a focus on firing is a much lower-yield improvement strategy than supporting effective teachers, assisting struggling ones, and creating a professional development system that helps the majority of teachers to continuously improve.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Teachers are an important part of a child's education. While one teacher may be particularly significant to a student's academic success, it is the collection of teachers that a student encounters throughout his or her educational career that provides the foundation for academic success, along with parents, other school staff, administrators, and community members. The education community as a whole and all of its actors are responsible for providing every student with the opportunity to learn and to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Many schools and districts are increasingly focusing on human capital management. They recognize that the individuals who work for them are their most important resources and want to do whatever they can to grow and develop them. They are increasingly implementing policies to address issues of induction, deployment, and professional development in order to provide ongoing support to new and continuing teachers. Many places are trying to develop a responsive human capital system that aligns and strengthens these areas. For example, many districts are utilizing a variety of supports for new teachers, ranging from mentoring and coaching, to off-site training programs targeted at new teachers, to teacher residency programs.

Meaningful learning opportunities for teachers require effective methods of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individual teachers, and reliable teacher evaluation can provide the basis for targeted professional development. Ensuring that teachers have continuous opportunity to develop skills to meet the diverse needs of learners contributes to a positive and supportive working environment. Moreover, many schools and districts have begun analyzing data and collaborating to identify and implement practices that the data suggest could improve student achievement. In more and more places, teachers increasingly are expected and expect to collaborate more with their peers on issues ranging from curriculum development to school improvement – through structured common planning time, inquiry teams that look closely at data, and intervisitation, among others.

Educators increasingly recognize that they can only achieve the goal of improving learning for all students through partnerships. Significantly, the resources needed to provide this support often include support from institutions outside the formal structure of school – unions, universities, and private organizations. For example, school districts and teachers union locals must be partners in assuring a fair, clear, and time-limited plan for counseling out teachers whose performance is poor and has not improved with support, and there are good examples to draw on. Further, it makes a lot more sense to deal with standards on the front end, making it harder and taking longer to get tenure in the first place.

WHO IS DOING SOMETHING GOOD?

Boston Teacher Residency Program: A joint effort of the Boston Public Schools and Boston Plan for Excellence, the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR) program recruits college graduates, mid-career professionals, and community members who are committed to becoming urban teachers. Modeled on medical residency programs, BTR combines master's level coursework (aligned with the Boston Public Schools' instructional agenda) with a year-long classroom apprenticeship, thus giving residents content and pedagogical knowledge, the latest educational theory and research, and hands-on experience in an urban setting. During their residency year, BTR residents work in a classroom with a mentor teacher four days a week, with the fifth day and one evening devoted to rigorous coursework. Full-time coursework also occurs during summers and in a two-week intensive winter session. Residents are supported through collaborations with their mentor teachers, peers, and other practitioners and engage in various methods of observing and analyzing their own craft, as well as that of master teachers.

In exchange for forgiveness of the cost of the program, residents are asked to commit to teaching in the Boston Public Schools for three years. They emerge from their residency prepared for the reality of teaching in an urban district and continue to receive comprehensive supports – designed to build on the knowledge attained during their residency – throughout their three-year commitment and beyond. Ongoing supports include content-focused coaching groups that help teachers to build their practice in their subject area; school-based coaching targeted to areas in need of improvement; and professional learning communities in which graduates form collegial relationships with other BTR alumni and collaborate to continuously improve their practice. Induction coaches also work with BTR graduates to help in their transition from novice to skilled teachers. BTR graduates also work with colleagues and school leaders to help build and sustain a collaborative, data-driven culture in their schools. The BTR model has led to impressive retention rates – 80 percent of BTR graduates are teaching in the Boston Public Schools beyond their initial three-year commitment, as opposed to an average 50 percent retention rate for urban public schools nationally. To support the replication of the residency model in other cities, BTR co-founded the Urban Teacher Residency United.

More information:
http://www.bostonteacherresidency.org/

http://www.utrunited.org

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WHAT CAN I DO?

Questions to Ask:

- What is the process for getting tenure in the district? Who decides?
- How many teachers were rated ineffective last year? By what standard? What is being done to help them get better?
- What supports do teachers have to get better?
- Where do most of the school and district's new teachers come from and by what standards are they selected? Who decides?
- Do local universities work with public schools to train teachers?
- How are new teachers trained and supported?

Advocate For:

- Transparent criteria for hiring new teachers.
- Ongoing professional development embedded in the school day/year that connects to core curriculum standards, differentiated students needs, and what's actually happening in classrooms.

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4 Environmentally Friendly: Why School Culture and Working Conditions Matter

THE PROBLEM

Discussions of "bad" teachers often attribute ineffectiveness to an individual's qualifications, skills, or disposition and omit the kinds of organizational supports and systemic factors – such as poor working conditions – that can have a major impact on a teacher's performance in the classroom. As noted earlier, sometimes a teacher's inability to succeed is due to his or her own shortcomings. But no matter how skilled, experienced, or motivated an individual is, it is difficult to thrive in a professional culture of distrust and closed doors, in a climate where school leaders leave you to sink or swim, in classrooms where textbooks are outdated, or in a building with crumbling plaster, antique facilities, and no Internet access. In fact, teacher surveys conducted by organizations such as the Center for Teaching Quality and the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as several studies on teacher retention, have found clear connections between poor culture and working conditions and a teacher's motivation to leave his or her school. These issues are cited as often as, if not more than, issues such as large class sizes and low salaries.

Inequitable allocation of human and material resources and an unsupportive policy environment can have a direct and devastating impact on the culture and climate of a school. Dysfunctional schools and systems often have problems with understaffing and overcrowded classrooms, assign teachers to out-of-field subjects, or concentrate new or inexperienced teachers in hard-to-staff schools where kids need the most support. Administrators may be ineffective or unsupportive, and teachers don't get targeted professional development in the areas where they need it. There may also be structural barriers, such as lack of dedicated time and space to meet as a team and talk about instruction, that prevent teachers from developing the kinds of productive and collaborative relationships with their colleagues that have been shown to bolster their own effectiveness.

Schools and systems with poor working conditions or a counterproductive culture also may prioritize compliance with district, state, or federal mandates and lack a focus on continuing adult learning, leaving teachers to feel like interchangeable cogs in a wheel rather than intellectuals doing rigorous and demanding work. Teachers may not have access to the resources or technology that they need, or the school's physical environment may be unsafe. In such a context, teachers wind up in "survival mode," and it can be difficult to get beyond basic day-to-day responsibilities and crisis management. This can lead to burnout, prompting teachers to leave the school or leave the profession altogether. In a context of continuous turnover, poor school climate becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – a revolving door of teachers ensures that a critical mass doesn't stick around long enough to develop the kinds of collegial relationships or professional culture that can help to transform a school.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Schools and systems that work to build a positive and productive school culture attend to both the physical and intellectual needs of teachers and students. Basic needs including safety and adequate resources are systematically addressed; up-to-date and appropriate materials for teaching and learning are provided; and learning environments promote trust, respect,

empowerment, and a focus on continuous learning for students and adults. There are clear norms and standards, and everyone in the building has a common vision of what great teaching looks like and a common language that they use to talk about it. Teachers are held accountable for their work but also receive the kinds of supports that allow them to improve their practice. They are also able to hold administrators accountable for providing the resources, supports, and developments that enable them to be successful.

Professional development is ongoing, happens inside the school, and is closely tied to the needs of students and teachers. This includes not only development in the areas of content and pedagogy, but strategies to address students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs and an emphasis on cultural competence for all school staff. The building is staffed so that collectively there is adequate experience and expertise, such as the skills to work with students with disabilities or English language learners, and there is a healthy balance of new and experienced teachers. Opportunities for collaboration with colleagues are built into the school day, and teachers have a valued voice in decision making, policy creation, and reform efforts. A positive culture for adults in a school often translates to a good learning climate for students, with high expectations, ambitious instruction, and the academic and personal supports to help students succeed.

Good working conditions aren't accidental, and they don't usually happen organically. Creating the kinds of environments that are most conducive for good teaching and learning requires not only a thoughtful leader at the school level, but a supportive district that pays deliberate attention to issues of culture, climate, and equitable conditions at a policy level, and supports schools in their efforts to create an environment in which teaching and learning can thrive.

WHO IS DOING SOMETHING GOOD?

Hamilton County Schools' Benwood Initiative: The Benwood Initiative, which began in 2001 as a partnership between Hamilton County [Tennessee] Schools, the Chattanooga-based Benwood Foundation, and Chattanooga's Public Education Foundation, focused on reforming eight low-performing elementary schools and resulted in impressive gains in student performance and teacher effectiveness. Recognizing the districtwide inequities in the distribution and retention of highly effective teachers, the creation of a cadre of strong leaders and strong teachers in the schools that needed them most became the Initiative's focus. Though the Initiative implemented financial incentives and the extreme and controversial measure of calling for teachers to reapply for their jobs, the success of the Initiative rests largely on its efforts to help existing teachers improve the quality of their instruction. In fact, more than two-thirds of the teachers who had to reapply for their jobs were rehired at Benwood schools.

The types of supports put in place for Benwood teachers included a significant investment in mentoring programs for teachers, moving instructional support staff from the central office to schools to provide embedded professional development, the funding of new consulting teacher positions, and working to make school leadership stronger and more collaborative. The district created a new division of data and accountability and trained teachers how to effectively analyze and use student performance data and other assessment tools. After asking teachers what they needed to be more effective, the district also provided opportunities for more collaboration, peer support, lesson preparation, and constructive feedback from leaders. As a result of these efforts to build a professional and supportive culture, Benwood schools created environments that were more conducive to teacher and student success. Teacher effectiveness improved, turnover declined, and teachers ranked the professionally supportive environment as one of their top reasons for choosing to work in a Benwood school. Additionally, in climate sur-

veys, Benwood teachers ranked their schools as highly as some of the country's top-performing schools on measures of working conditions.

More information: http://www.pefchattanooga.org/initiatives/benwood-initiative

http://www.educationsector.org/publications/benwood-plan-lesson-comprehensive-teacher-reform.

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WHAT CAN I DO?

Questions to Ask:

- Are school climate surveys for staff conducted? Who sees the results, and who is responsible for acting on the information?
- How are principals evaluated? Are the factors most important to teacher, parent, and student satisfaction assessed?
- Do teachers have the classroom resources they need (i.e., books, technology, etc.)?
- Are the most expert teachers assigned to the highest-needs student populations?
- What percentage of teachers are new to the profession and to the school?
- What percentage of teachers are teaching within their license area?

Advocate For:

- School district and teacher union collaboration on teacher assignment, so that talent deployed to schools matches student needs.
- The availability of data on teacher turnover and absenteeism by school.
- A resource assessment to determine what resources are needed and what needs are being met.
- The school district to prioritize the highest-needs/lowest-performing schools and to target resources, support, and expertise to improving those schools.

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No Teacher Is an Island: The Importance of In-School Partnerships and Teacher Collaboration

THE PROBLEM

While it was once commonplace for a teacher to enter her classroom, shut her door, and effectively remain isolated from her colleagues and community, today we know the importance of building strong relationships both inside and outside of a school building. A focus on social capital – the productive interactions and connections between adults in a school community – can significantly impact school climate, teacher retention, and student and teacher performance. While social capital is a key part of promoting a positive school culture and working conditions, as touched on in the previous section, it is a critical and unique enough component that it merits a deeper, targeted exploration.

Current discussions of developing teachers often focus on human capital, which entails building teachers' skills, knowledge, and intellect. But a concentration solely on human capital ignores the importance of the human connections that can lead not only to improved teacher practice, but greater job satisfaction and increased investment in the success of a school and its students. In the private sector, collaborative work is increasingly the norm among skilled professionals. Teachers also need kindred spirits – peers with whom they can collaborate and from whom they can learn. They don't want to operate in isolation, nor are they most effective when they do so. Collegial situations where educators can interact, share knowledge and expertise, and provide feedback on each other's work not only bolster teacher practice, but also contribute to a collaborative environment in which everyone has a stake in ensuring high-quality teaching and learning.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

A focus on teaching as a collective practice recognizes that although individual capacity and accountability is still important, systematic and supported collaboration as a way of doing business has the potential to transform an entire school. In fact, research has shown connections between access to collaborative learning environments and both student gains and teacher retention.

For a focus on collective capacity to become the norm, teachers of different skill and experience levels must be expected and enabled to work together consistently to improve student learning. Professional learning communities (PLCs) allow teams of teachers – grouped by grade level, subject area, or common interests – dedicated in-school time to work together to bolster their practice. PLC members may, for example, observe each other in the classroom and provide feedback or reflection, look at and analyze student work and student data, participate in a joint book study, or engage in peer-led professional development on topics identified by teachers themselves. A related structure, common planning time, is built into the school day to complement individual teacher planning and preparation time. Common planning time is usually facilitated and structured by a lead teacher or specialist and brings together teachers on subject or grade-level teams on a scheduled daily or weekly basis to plan and align curriculum and lessons, reflect on their own practice, or discuss student work, performance, or needs.

In these structures, teachers have the opportunity to learn from their peers and build their own instruction while maintaining a clear focus on student learning and are also connected to new developments in their field. It is important to note, however, that structure or time alone does not guarantee the success or sustainability of teacher collaboration efforts. School and district administrators must be deliberate in working with teachers to facilitate collaboration and team building and ensuring that the work being done is useful, relevant, and ultimately affects student outcomes.

The types of school-based advancement opportunities for teachers mentioned earlier in this document, including coaching and mentoring roles, can contribute significantly to a school's collaborative culture. Some teachers may also have "joint appointments," in which part of their time is spent sharing their expertise and working with other district offices or programs, community-based organizations, or universities. This can broaden a building's social capital to include professional allies and partners from across a district or external organizations. Furthermore, building relationships with colleagues can help teachers discover techniques to make connections to and strengthen their relationships with students and families. Finally, an emphasis on the idea that everyone's work is tied to student learning – from building administrators to teachers to front-office staff and custodians – can help to reinforce a sense of community and instill in people at multiple levels a responsibility for being active contributors to school and student success. And when a positive and collaborative culture isn't just tied to one leader or a small group of people, it is more likely to be sustained through changes in leadership or personnel.

WHO IS DOING SOMETHING GOOD?

Sanger School District: The Sanger School District in California's Central Valley has attracted significant attention for its continually increasing achievement levels for all students. Named in 2004 as one of the ninety-eight lowest-performing districts in the state of California, the district put in place a comprehensive turnaround effort with a marked focus on student learning, as well as adult learning, to support this goal. Creating a districtwide culture and common language is a priority of district leadership, and a central strategy in achieving this has been the district's use of systems-focused Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to build not only the capacity of teachers and district staff, but their ability to collaborate, develop relationships, and commit to change.

PLCs were put in place for teachers, school leadership, and central office leadership. At the teacher level, in 2006 the district required that all of its schools create teacher teams, based on the PLC model, to continuously improve student achievement. Sanger focused on developing a common vision and shared ownership for PLCs amongst all teachers; technical capacity, particularly in the areas of data access and use and a functional communications system; organization capacity, including schedules that allowed teachers time to effectively participate in PLCs and ongoing professional development to PLC facilitators to ensure that the time was well spent; and a culture change in which teachers were expected to be comfortable with sharing data and practices with one another.

Teachers have found that PLCs have been helpful in facilitating data use as an improvement strategy and focusing instruction on student needs and have brought about a sense of shared accountability and efficacy throughout schools and the system at large. In a recent survey, 85 percent of Sanger teachers agreed that PLCs are critical to their school's success.

More information: http://www.stanford.edu/group/suse-crc/cgi-bin/drupal/sites/default/files/Sanger-Report.pdf

http://www.sanger.k12.ca.us/

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WHAT CAN I DO?

Questions to Ask:

- Do teachers have professional learning communities or dedicated common planning time during the school day?
- Is that time structured and facilitated by a skilled leader?
- Are teachers free to observe each other's classrooms or have organized intervisitations with other schools?

Advocate For:

- School schedules that allow common planning time among grade levels and/or subject areas.
- Evaluation and compensation systems that take into account teachers' professional responsibility to work effectively with their fellow teachers.

No School Is an Island: Partnerships with Parents and Community

THE PROBLEM

Schools and school districts have struggled to improve schooling in many communities, largely in isolation from community-development initiatives. In some cases, gains have been made within schools and districts through reform strategies, only to disappear when there are changes at the school or district – the principal or superintendent leaves, for example – because the reforms are not connected to or supported by the community. Lack of community involvement in schools and districts has a number of drawbacks. Schools cannot teach children well if teachers lack an understanding of their students' cultures and lives, if they lack meaningful relationships with their families, or if educators see families as only problems to be fixed. Some teachers may have "deficit" views of low-income parents of color, seeing them as incapable of supporting their children's success rather than as untapped resources. This can lead to a hostile environment where parents don't feel comfortable, and to a vicious cycle: parents don't come in because they don't feel welcome, then the school further blames parents for not being involved. On the flip side, parents also may have negative views of teachers. Without efforts to build relationships between the two, parents and teachers can become locked in a counterproductive cycle of mutual blame. Even more important, there is power in both numbers and in common cause. Teachers, parents, and community working together can truly change their community's schools for the better.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Over the last few years, more and more evidence has emerged that effective parent and community involvement can positively impact school culture, working conditions, and student achievement. A school that actively welcomes parents and sees them as important stakeholders with valuable knowledge and expertise can build the trust and support throughout a community that is necessary to build and sustain reform and enhance parent and community efforts to support learning outside of school. Parents, with the help of community-based organizations, can play a key role in initiating a culture shift that bridges cultural and racial differences and positively affects teacher quality and retention. In response to these findings, the United States Department of Education is now funding a number of Promise Neighborhoods, whose purpose is to significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and youth in the most distressed communities and transform those communities by building a complete continuum of cradle-to-career solutions of both educational programs and family and community supports, with great schools at the center. And parent/community involvement has to go beyond bake sales, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences to really engaging parents in making decisions about their children's learning and drawing from their interests and talents.

Similarly, community-based organizations can play a key role in creating opportunities for positive and productive relationships between schools and the community. This may include introducing educators to the community through open houses, home visits, and community tours or participating in efforts to build deeper cultural understanding in schools.

Recent research has shown that effective community organizing has resulted in higher student outcomes including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college-going aspirations. It can also help build

school-community relationships, parent involvement, and trust that contribute to improved schools. Finally, it can stimulate important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution – including the equitable distribution of highly effective teachers – at the system level that expand school capacity and equity, especially in historically underserved communities.

WHO IS DOING SOMETHING GOOD?

The New York City Coalition for Educational Justice: In 2006, as the New York City school system became increasingly centralized, three collaboratives, CCB (Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools), BEC (Brooklyn Education Collaborative), and BQ4E (Brooklyn-Queens 4 Education) came together to form a new citywide organization called the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ). CEJ is a citywide collaborative of community-based organizations and unions organizing the power of parents and community to create a more equitable educational system. Each individual organization continues to organize public school parents and community residents within their neighborhood and also commits time, resources, and support for a shared campaign to improve educational outcomes at a city level. CEJ continues to engage in accountable collaboration with the teachers union and the New York City Department of Education.

After CEJ member groups developed a mission statement and a citywide structure, CEJ leaders researched key school reform issues, discussed paths to school reform with parents in their communities, and eventually defined middle school improvement as the key lever to reducing dropout rates and enhancing pathways to college. CEJ then began to develop its initial strategy to shape citywide education policy. As part of a multi-dimensional organizing campaign, CEJ released a report on achievement gaps in

WHAT CAN I DO?

Questions to Ask:

- Are there are any community and parent organizing groups in your community or school district?
- What kinds of supports do the school or administration provide to enhance teacher collaboration with parent and community groups to advance student learning?
- How can I start a community or parent organizing group?
- Are parent-teacher conferences meaningful? Do they allow for real understanding of the instructional plan and relationship building between parents and teachers?
- Are there meaningful opportunities for parents and teachers to collaborate as peers?
- Are parent engagement structures going "beyond bake sales" to engage parents in substantial issues regarding the quality of education?

Advocate For:

- Outreach efforts to parents and students through after-school and neighborhood programs.
- A parent advisory council that engages parent leaders in issues of district-wide education policy concern.
- Neighborhood walks or home visits, in which teams of teachers and parent leaders go to students' homes to meet families, learn about their concerns, and recruit new leaders. (These strategies depend on good relationships with schools and teachers.)

New York City middle schools in January 2007: *New York City's Middle-Grade Schools: Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?* The report called on the City Council to convene a taskforce that would create a plan of action to address the failing middle schools. The Speaker of the City Council chaired this task force, which CEJ parents sat on, along with a variety of experts in middle school reform. CEJ launched an intense organizing campaign to marshal public input into the work of this task force and to secure funds to implement the group's findings. This complex campaign by CEJ concluded with an agreement by the City Council and the Mayor to fund a middle-grades reform package in the lowest-performing schools, largely based on the recommendations of the taskforce.

More information: http://www.nyccej.org

LEARN MORE:

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Contact the Annenberg Institute's Center for Education Organizing for research, policy analysis, and training to support individual groups and national networks to meaningfully engage in education reform. The Center also facilitates alliance building among education organizing groups and between those groups and other stakeholders such as civil rights and advocacy organizations, teachers unions, academics, and education researchers: http://www.annenberginstitute.org/project/center-education-organizing

Keeping the Conversation on Track

At the beginning of this guide, we cited three areas of competence essential to effective teaching: instructional quality, student learning, and professional responsibility. And we borrowed a simple, but powerful image of an "effective teacher" as one who helps students learn more and spreads her or his own expertise to colleagues. When it comes to what makes for good teaching, people will always find plenty to argue about – especially the farther away they get from classrooms. But whether you are a parent, an educator, a student, a member of a district or school governing board, or simply a concerned community member, you can help keep the conversation on the right track with the information in this guide. And, while qualifications and career paths, evaluation and compensation systems, and supports and sanctions (first half of this guide) may get more "air time," you can help keep the other essential topics of climate and culture, collaboration, and community in the conversation.

In this brief guide, we could not do justice to all the sources upon which we drew, or to all the available examples of people "doing something good." We invite you to visit http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/StraightTalk for a complete list of sources and many more examples and other resources than we could reference in this document, and to submit your own best practice examples or resources you've found useful. Like the effective teachers who spread their own expertise to their colleagues, by sharing our experiences of what works and how to keep the conversation about teaching quality on track, we multiply the impact of the good work being done in cities across the nation.

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