Opportunity at the Top

How America's Best Teachers Could Close the Gaps, Raise the Bar, and Keep Our Nation Great

BRYAN C. HASSEL AND EMILY AYSCUE HASSEL

PUBLIC IMPACT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the Authors

BRYAN C. HASSEL is Co-Director of Public Impact. He consults nationally with leading public agencies, nonprofit organizations and foundations working for dramatic improvements in K-12 education. He is a recognized expert on charter schools, school turnarounds, education entrepreneurship, and human capital in education. Dr. Hassel received his doctorate in public policy from Harvard University and his master's degree in politics from Oxford University, which he attended as a Rhodes Scholar. He earned his B.A. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which he attended as a Morehead Scholar.

EMILY AYSCUE HASSEL is Co-Director of Public Impact. She provides thought leadership and oversight to Public Impact's work on human capital, organizational transformation, parental choice of schools, and emerging opportunities for dramatic change in pre-K to grade 12 education. She previously worked for the Hay Group, a leading human resources consulting firm. Ms. Hassel received her law and master's in business administration degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

About the Series

This executive summary for *Opportunity at the Top* is part of the series *Building an Opportunity Culture for America's Teachers*. To see the full report and others in this series, please visit www.opportunityculture.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our nation is squandering one of its most important resources — our best teachers — and children are paying the price.

Current policy initiatives overlook the most obvious, immediate source of improved teaching effectiveness: The great teachers we already have. The top 25 percent of U.S. teachers — more than 800,000 of them — already achieve results that would enable all of our children to meet and exceed standards.[1]

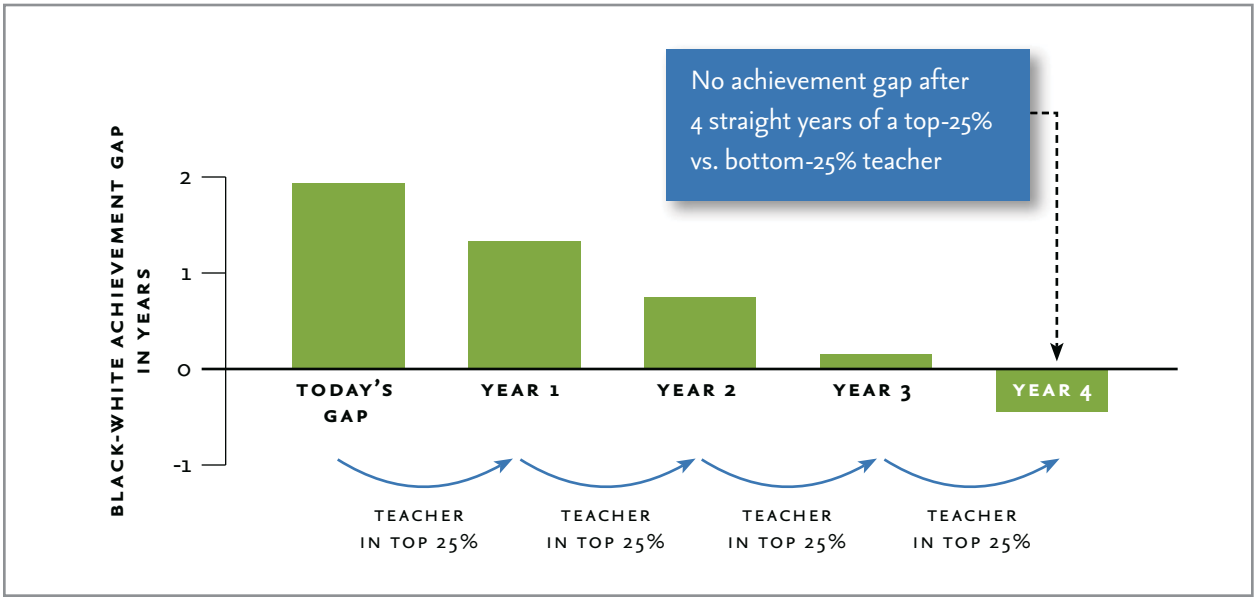
Top-quartile teachers are so much better than their bottom-quartile peers, who today populate our nation's classrooms in equal numbers, that they could close our nation's achievement gaps and raise our bar to internationally competitive levels in less than half a decade (see Figure A).[2] And it is not just ineffective teachers who fall short. Even today's "good" teachers do not generate enough learning progress to close achievement gaps and raise the bar for advanced students. Only great teachers get the job done. As others have noted, increasing educational achievement is critical not just for children's prospects but for our national economy.[3]

Today, **while an estimated 12.5 million children benefit from top-quartile teachers' instruction, three times that many do not.**[4] What are we doing wrong? In two critical ways we fail to capitalize on the extraordinary resource of great teachers:

- **We lose too many of the best teachers**: Contrary to popular belief, overall teacher turnover is modest compared with other professions. The crisis

> Today's top-quartile teachers achieve enough student progress to close our nation's achievement gaps and raise our bar to internationally competitive levels in less than half a decade.

FIGURE A. Effect of Having Great Teachers on the Black-White Achievement Gap[5]



Note: This graphic illustrates the effects on black students of having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher for four consecutive years. The distribution of teachers for white students remains the same as it is today.[6]

arises from our failure to keep the *best* teachers. Some 64,000 top-quartile teachers leave teaching every year, diminishing more than a million children's learning prospects each following year.

- **We fail to leverage their talent for the benefit of students**: Only 600 students benefit from the instruction of an excellent elementary school teacher even if she stays on the job for 30 years.[7] Our nation's best teachers reach no more children than the very worst teachers.

The Bleak Future with Our Boldest Current Reforms — and the Amazing Alternative

In the full version of this report, we project the payoff of different strategies for giving more children access to great teachers. Those strategies include our **current, boldest policy goals**:

- ***recruitment*** of high-potential teachers, increasing the proportion of great teachers we attract each year from about 25 percent to 40 percent;
- ***dismissal*** of ineffective teachers, tripling the percentage of teachers dismissed for low performance each year, from 2.1 percent to 6.3 percent;

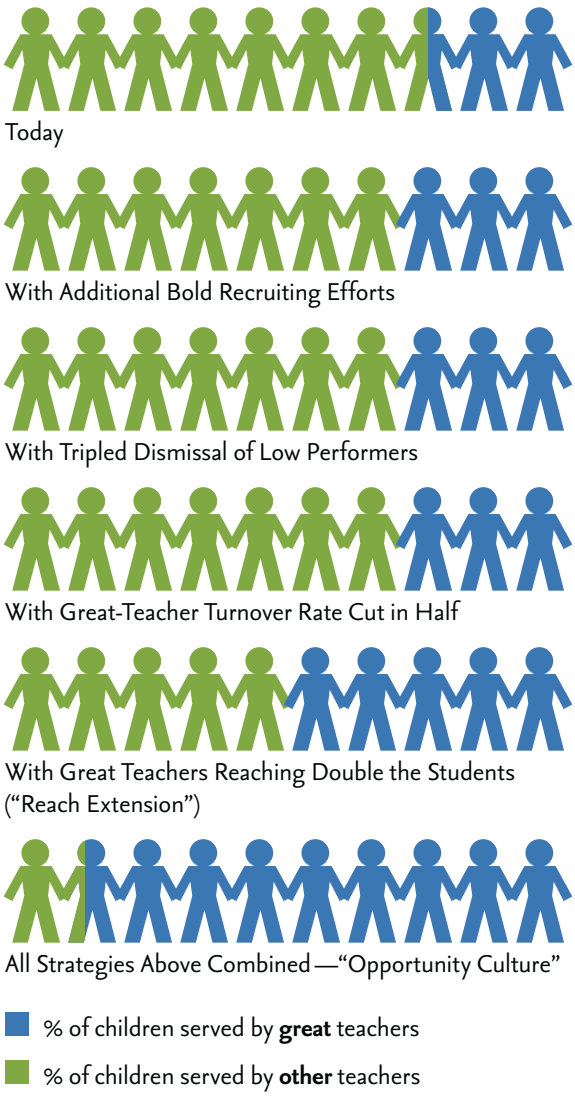
and **emerging policy goals aimed at the great teachers we already have**:

- ***retention*** of proven top-quartile teachers, cutting the annual loss of great teachers in half; and
- ***extension of top-teacher instruction*** to more children, doubling the average number of children reached by each great teacher.

Even if efforts to enhance recruitment of great teachers and dismiss low performers were wildly successful, only 40 percent of classes would be taught by great teachers. Sixty percent would not.[8] We would not come remotely close to closing our nation's achievement gaps or raising the bar to internationally competitive levels.

> Even wildly successful recruitment and dismissal will still leave most children without great teachers.

FIGURE B. Proportion of Children Served By Great Teachers — Today and in an "Opportunity Culture"



In contrast, if we add to these existing strategies two more aimed at *the great teachers we already have* — high-performer retention and reach extension — we could reach 87 percent of classes with gap-closing, bar-raising teachers (see Figure B).

This outcome is within our reach — but only if we vastly expand the opportunities for top teachers to achieve success, impact, and rewards — by building an "opportunity culture" in education.

Approximately 64,000 top-quartile teachers leave teaching every year, diminishing more than a million children's learning prospects.

Why Recruitment and Dismissal Alone Are Not Enough

Recruitment. We asked the question: what if we could get much better at recruiting great teachers, growing the ranks of incoming teachers who meet today's top-quartile progress standard from 25 to 40 percent, and then keep up that pace for five years?

The Answer: Even **after five years of truly remarkable recruiting improvement, 70 percent of classes would still be taught by teachers not meeting today's top-quartile standard**, and one in five children would still have teachers from the least effective group. **Raising the percentage of great recruits from 25 to 40 percent annually would be a breathtaking achievement**, requiring the attraction of at least an additional 50,000 very talented new entrants every year *above* the current inflows. As a reference point, consider that ambitious recruitment efforts by The New Teacher Project and Teach For America currently yield about 8,000 new teachers per year, not all of whom meet the top-quartile standard.

Just to be clear: better, bolder recruiting efforts like these and emerging new programs are crucial, because each new great teacher from among these recruits either replaces one of the departing great teachers or grows the ranks of great teachers. But recruiting improvements alone, even if dramatic, will leave far too many students without great teachers.

Dismissal. What if we were much more successful at dismissing teachers who are the least effective at instruction? Specifically, **what if districts *tripled* the current percentage (about 2.1 percent) *and* focused dismissals with perfect accuracy on the lowest performing teachers**, so that the least effective 6.3 percent of teachers left the profession annually for five years?

The Answer: After five years, only 7 percent of kids would have teachers in the bottom effectiveness group, compared with 25 percent under today's policies. The **proportion of teachers in the top tier would also rise, from 25 percent in the status quo to 31 percent**.

But even this highly aggressive, five-year effort to remove the worst performers would leave almost 70 percent of our nation's children without a great teacher. Fewer students would suffer from having the worst teachers, but far too few would gain access to the best.

If we combine aggressive recruitment and dismissal strategies, 60 percent of our children would still be taught by teachers outside of today's top quartile after five years. Large gaps would remain for most lagging children, and other children — including lagging ones who catch up — would not continue making advanced progress like their international peers.

Adding Strategies Focused on the Great Teachers We Already Attract

Recruitment strategies look outside of education for new talent. Dismissal strategies look inside schools, but with an eye to identifying and dismissing chronically ineffective teachers. What about strategies focused on retaining and enhancing the impact of the great teachers who already flow into our schools? What do we do with the best "birds in the hand"?

Our nation's best teachers reach no more children than the very worst teachers.

Retaining the best teachers. We lose about 8 percent of our top-quartile teachers every year, roughly 64,000 people serving 1 million students exceptionally well. Retention systems in education — compen-

sation, tenure, and benefits — are not built to retain high performers disproportionately, and indeed they do not.[9] But other sectors find ways to focus on high-performer retention, and public education could, too.

What if we could cut the turnover rate among top teachers in half, and keep up that pace of retention for five years? The Answer: After five years, 28 percent of kids would have a teacher from this group, compared with today's 25 percent. About 1.5 million more kids would have one of these great teachers for one or more subjects.

> Our largest opportunity is to extend the reach of the best teachers to more children — and pay them more accordingly.

Extending the reach of top teachers. Retaining more "birds in the hand" would produce benefits for some children, but we need to do much better. Our largest opportunity is to extend the reach of the best teachers — and pay them more accordingly. How can we extend great teachers' reach without diluting their learning results? As detailed in the report *3X for All: Extending the Reach of Education's Best*, we expect that education innovators will devise many more methods, but here are some examples of reach extension in three modes:[10]

- ***In-Person Reach Extension:*** **changing how schools are organized and instructional roles to leverage limited talent while keeping the best instructors close to the classroom**. Great teachers are still present to interact in person with children and other staff in schools. **Examples include** eliminating top teachers' non-instructional duties so they can reach 50 percent more children; choosing great teachers with managerial skills to lead multiple classrooms in which all staff use their methods and standards; allowing top teachers to voluntarily shift small numbers of children — e.g., two to four — to their classrooms. In-person reach extension could increase the number of students with access to top teachers by 10 to 50 percent *without diluting in-person instruction time.*
- ***Remote Reach Extension:*** **using technology to enable great teachers to engage directly though not in person with students**, bringing great teaching even to places where great teachers are in short supply. **Examples include**: forming pods of teaching specialists working together in desirable living locations and accessing children in schools in any location lacking sufficient local talent; eliminating low-value teacher tasks from top teachers' workloads and refocusing that time via email and internet on student work review, personalized feedback, and diagnostics of next-step needs. Remote Reach Extension could double or triple the number of children reached by top teachers, and it could do so where In-Person Reach Extension is not feasible.
- ***Boundless Reach Extension:*** **using video of great teachers and software based on their insights and practices** to deliver great teaching even when great teachers cannot interact directly with students. **Examples include** video recordings of teachers who are both masters of content and engaging performers; smart software designed to mimic the way great instructors ascertain and respond to each child's level of skill and knowledge.

> Innovators in other countries are reaching children nationwide with outstanding, charismatic instructors who are revered — and paid — like rock stars.

The precise formula for combining technology with other instructional elements to reach the level of learning progress that top teachers achieve remains unknown. And yet, innovators in other countries that outperform the U.S. on comparable exams are

moving forward aggressively, reaching children nationwide with outstanding, charismatic instructors who are revered — and paid — like rock stars.[11]

What if, using a combination of these techniques — each chosen carefully to match the circumstance and varying needs of children by age and other factors — we could double the number of children reached by top teachers we already have?

The Answer: Five years from now, half of students — more than 26 million — would have teachers from the top group at any one time, compared with just 13 million if we continue current patterns.[12] Because the nation would need fewer low-performing teachers in instructional roles, the proportion of students with bottom-tier instruction would drop as well.

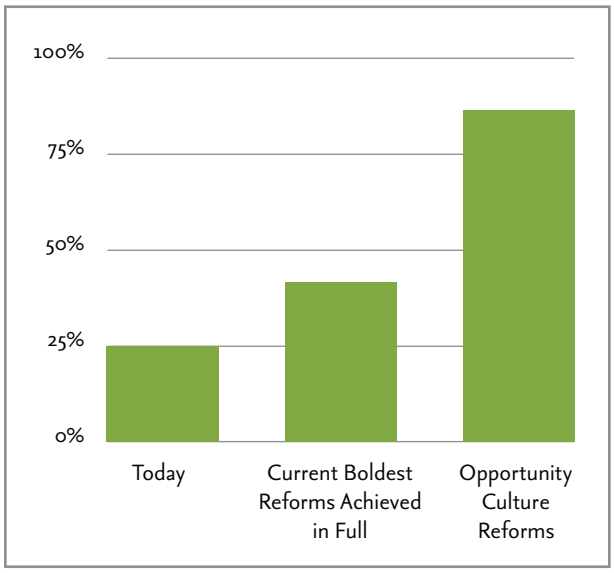
But not only does public education fail to offer these reach-extending opportunities to great teachers, our policies also often actively work against expanding the impact of education's best. Among the culprits: simplistic across-the-board class-size mandates; compensation systems that cannot flex up if teachers reach more students; funding systems that allocate staff positions rather than dollars; and limits on teaching across state lines. Consequently, the vast majority of great teachers reach the same number of students as their least effective peers, year-in and year-out.

Reach extension by itself is an important means for meeting the needs of far more children, but it **is also the first domino in a virtuous cycle of opportunity for great teachers.** When large numbers of great teachers have an all-you-can-eat menu of achievement opportunities and earn proportionally more money:

- more of the best potential teachers will enter the profession;
- more of the proven best will stay; and
- dismissals will become far easier, because the replacement pool will be stronger and tomorrow's "bad hires" will be today's average teachers.

Ambitious recruitment, dismissal, and retention strategies are much likelier to succeed if great teachers have significant opportunities for career and pay advancement that keep them in instructional roles. Reach extension is the golden key to achieving — and exceeding — our nation's boldest goals, both for recruiting and retaining great teachers and for dismissing the worst.

FIGURE C. Projected Percent of Classes Taught By Great Teachers[13]



If great teachers can advance their careers by reaching more children and earning more money, more will stay, more will enter, and low-performer dismissal will become easier.

Remember, **after 5 years of combining these strategies — high-performer reach extension, recruitment, and retention, coupled with low-performer dismissal — nearly 87 percent of the nation's classes would be taught by great teachers,** up from 25 percent today (see Figure C). At any one time, some 46 million students would be taught by great teachers, compared with just 13 million if current trends hold. Our schools would still have some middle- and low-performing teachers, but the normal, expected experience of a student would be to

The normal, expected experience of a student could be to have truly great teachers — the kind that today most children have only a few times in a whole school career.

have a truly great teacher — the kind that today most children have only a few times in a whole school career. Imagine that.

The potential boosting power of professional development. Note that here we do not include a potential boost in the number of great teachers as a result of improved professional development. Despite much "how to" research, professional development in implementation has not led to widespread, measurable results. However, we suspect that professional development consistently designed and led by teachers who are already performing well will benefit students more than professional development today, particularly when it is coupled sensibly with accountability for student outcomes. The prospect of professional development led by capable, accountable stars only increases the astonishing potential of an education culture dominated by excellent instructors.[14]

First Steps Toward Building an Opportunity Culture: The Will and the Way

Even as we improve recruitment and hiring and dismiss more low-performers, **we need a substantially heightened focus on education's top talent. We call this "building an opportunity culture."**

> **"Opportunity Culture"**: An organization or field of endeavor open to all candidates with valid indicators of likely performance and providing further opportunities for achievement, impact, and rewards that are significant and proportional to each person's actual effectiveness at work.

How can public education move toward an opportunity culture? This is the detailed subject of the companion report, *Seizing Opportunity at the Top.*[15] Two areas of action are essential: finding the will and the way to build an opportunity culture.

The Will. Our nation's great teachers can accomplish only so much within the shackles of current policies and practices. Our federal government, state leaders, district leaders, and school leaders must use the powers they already have to remove barriers and start building opportunities for our best teachers. When will is wanting at the local or state level, leaders with broader powers must enforce existing laws in new ways that reflect modern realities — or create new legal means for our nation's children to gain access to highly effective instruction. The moral imperative is enormous, and the alternative unacceptable.

Our nation's great teachers can accomplish only so much within the shackles of current policies and practices.

The Way. Many systems operate together to define our nation's existing culture in education. Of course these include human capital systems, from recruitment, hiring, pre-service training, job design, and professional development to performance evaluation, tenure, and pay. But other systems and policies play a role as well: funding formulas, facilities, technology, and school design. These systems are a tightly wound chain of policies choking off opportunities for our nation's best educators. Our policies at every turn effectively pick the pockets of our best teachers and rob them of opportunities to help more children — and earn more pay.

An opportunity culture, one that supports great teachers at every turn, will include tightly designed and purposefully implemented systems aimed at reaching the most children with high-progress learning. As a start, education leaders will commit to the

An "opportunity culture" would support great teachers at every turn in the quest to reach the most children possible with high-progress learning.

ultimate goal: providing every child with instruction that achieves results at least on par with what top-progress teachers provide today, by any means necessary — in all important topics, every year.

Conclusion

Policymakers and education leaders have far more to offer our nation's best teachers. Top teachers, in turn, have far more to offer our nation's children than current policies enable them to deliver. We are optimistic: proposals addressing the pieces needed to complete the opportunity culture puzzle are beginning to circulate.[16] We must work together to ensure that our nation's education system is rebuilt around America's great teachers. Building an opportunity culture in education will take creativity, hard work, and determination, three of our nation's greatest strengths and ones we must rely on now to close our gaps, raise our bar, and keep our nation great.

We must work together to ensure that our nation's education system is rebuilt around America's great teachers.

Notes

1. The 800,000 figure is the top 25 percent of the nation's 3.2 million teachers, the estimated teacher population according to the National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 32. Actual and Alternative Projected Numbers for Elementary and Secondary Teachers and Elementary and Secondary New Teacher Hires, by Control of School: Fall 1992 through Fall 2017," *Projections of Education Statistics to 2018,* 2009. Available: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/projections2017/tables/table_32.asp?referrer=list. It is worth noting that most research on teacher effectiveness focuses on the teaching of reading and math in grades 3 through 8, where students are typically assessed each year. We assume here that a similar distribution of effectiveness characterizes teacher effectiveness in other grades and subjects, but data do not yet confirm that assumption.

2. Statement is based on comparing top-quartile teachers' results with those of bottom-quartile teachers' results. Compared with second- and third-quartile teachers, of course, top-quartile teachers' relative advantage is smaller. Authors' calculations based on comparing results reported in two studies of teacher effects in large districts: Thomas Kane, Jonah E. Rockoff, and Douglas O. Staiger, *What Does Certification Tell Us About Teacher Effectiveness?* (2006). Available: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~dstaiger/Papers/nyc%20fellows%20march%202006.pdf (New York City); Robert Gordon, Thomas Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger. *Identifying Teacher Performance on the Job* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2006). Available: http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/200604hamilton_1.pdf (Los Angeles). Reported effect size equivalents for the 4th-grade math test score gap between white and black students (0.99) and non-FRPL-eligible and FRPL-eligible students (0.85) in Carolyn J. Hill, Howard S. Bloom, Alison Rebeck Black, and Mark W. Lipsey, *Empirical Benchmarks for Interpreting Effect Sizes in Research* (MDRC Working Papers on Research Methodology) (New York: MDRC, 2007), p. 2. Available: https://www.mdrc.org/publications/459/full.pdf. In the LA study, 4th-grade math students with top-quartile teachers gained 5 percentile points while those with bottom-quartile teachers lost 5 points, for a difference of 10 percentile points, approximately equivalent to an effect size of 0.29. The NYC study found the effect size of having a top-quartile vs. a bottom-quartile teacher to be 0.33. So 0.31 is a reasonable estimate of the effect size of a top- vs. bottom-quartile teacher in 4th-grade math. Combining these figures, we calculated that having a top-quartile vs. a bottom-quartile teacher for four years in a row would more than eliminate the achievement gap.

3. McKinsey & Company, *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools* (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Available: http://www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Images/Page_Images/Offices/SocialSector/PDF/achievement_gap_report.pdf.

4. The reference to 12.5 million students and subsequent similar references are estimates, in round numbers, of how many students would be affected by various changes in the inflows and outflows of teachers. With about 50,000,000 students in U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 2. Actual and Projected Numbers for Enrollment in Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Organizational Level and Control of School: Fall 1993 through Fall 2018," *Projections of Education Statistics to 2018*, 2009. Available: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/projections2018/tables/table_02.asp?referrer=list), 12,500,000 (25 percent) of them have top-quartile teachers at a given time.

5. See note 2.

6. The policy directions suggested in this paper would include increased access to top teachers by all children. Once children achieve today's grade-level standards, teachers would enable them to make further progress, as advanced students do today when they have great teachers.

7. Based on an average class of 20 students. See National Center for Education Statistics, "Highest Degree Earned, Years of Full-Time Teaching Experience, and Average Class Size for Teachers in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by State: 2007–08," *Projections of Education Statistics to 2018*, 2009. Available: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_067.asp.

8. All projections on the following pages are based on a model that begins with a starting distribution of 25 percent of teachers in each of today's quartiles of effectiveness, and then projects the change in that distribution each year as existing teachers leave the profession, new teachers enter, and (if applicable) top teachers extend their reach to more students. The projections model the consequences of changing key parameters, such as (in this case) increasing the percentage of newly entering teachers who match today's top quartile from 25 percent to 40 percent. Like any projection or model, the results are intended to be illustrative rather than definitive predictions of the future.

9. See the main *Opportunity at the Top* report for a fuller discussion and citations related to the non-selective ways in which K-12 systems retain teachers.

10. Adapted from Public Impact, *3X for All: Extending the Reach of Education's Best* (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, 2009), pp. 2–3.

11. See, for example, this article about a Korean firm that is an early mover in this field: "Where a teacher can make

millions," *Business Week,* September 2006. http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_50/b4013056.htm

12. According to *Projections of Education Statistics to 2018,* enrollment in public schools is likely to exceed 52 million within five years, meaning 25 percent of students will at that time exceed 13 million.

13. See note 8. The figure shows projections for three five-year scenarios: (1) the status quo; (2) enhanced recruitment and dismissal (increasing the percentage of newly entering teachers who match today's top quartile from 25 percent to 40 percent and dismissing the 6.3 percent lowest performing teachers with perfect accuracy each year); and (3) opportunity culture reforms: the reforms in scenario 2 plus cutting in half the attrition of teachers who meet today's top-quartile standard and extending the reach of such teachers so that they educate, on average, twice as many students.

14. For two recent examples of efforts to document and share what top teachers do for the benefit of other teachers, see Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); and Steven Farr and Teach For America, *Teaching As Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

15. *Seizing Opportunity at the Top: How America's Best Teachers Can Close Our Gaps, Raise the Bar and Keep Our Nation Great* (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, Forthcoming 2010).

16. Barnett Berry, *The Teachers of 2030: Creating a Student-Centered Profession for the 21st* Century (Hillsborough, NC: Center for Teaching Quality, 2009); Robin Chait and Raegan Miller, *Treating Different Teachers Differently: How State Policy Should Act on Differences in Teacher Performance to Improve Teacher Effectiveness and Equity* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2010)*;* Jane Coggshall, Molly Lasagna, and Sabrina Laine, *Toward the Structural Transformation of Schools: Innovations in Staffing* (Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates, 2009); Steven Glazerman et al., *America's Teacher Corps* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2010); Frederick M. Hess, "How to Get the Teachers We Want," *Education Next 9, 3* (Summer 2009), 35–39; National Council on Teacher Quality, *Human Capital in Boston Public Schools: Rethinking How to Attract, Develop and Retain Effective Teachers* (Washington, DC: NCTQ, 2010); Public Impact, *3x for All: Extending the Reach of Education's Best;* Elena Silva, *Teachers at Work: Improving Teaching Quality through School Design* (Washington, DC: Education Sector, 2009); TeachPlus, *Ready for the Next Challenge: Improving the Retention and Distribution of Excellent Teachers in Urban Schools; A Proposal by Teachers* (Boston, MA: TeachPlus, 2009); Dan Goldhaber and Jane Hannaway (eds.), *Creating a New Teaching Profession* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010).