

You Know Who Your Great Teachers Are—*Now What?*

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Thanks to increasingly meaningful teacher evaluations, we know far more than ever about the effectiveness of teachers in public school classrooms. What should states, districts, and schools do with that knowledge?

In policy debates, much of the attention has focused on teachers at the “ineffective” end of the spectrum. With better teacher evaluation, the thinking goes, districts can stop awarding tenure to ineffective teachers. They can dismiss teachers who, in spite of professional development and support, do not improve sufficiently.

Policies like these are important, but states that stop there will miss a major chance to transform their schools into places that are far better for students—and for teachers. State and district policymakers must focus even more on opportunities for the top 25 percent of teachers, with strong policies that **attract, reward, retain, and extend the reach of highly effective teachers.**

Why must states focus on excellent teachers?

Without them, children who start behind do not catch up. Even with good teachers who produce a year of progress annually, these students stay behind forever. In contrast, teachers in the top 25 percent make well over a year’s worth of learning progress with their students each year, on average. Students who have these teachers consistently can not only catch up but leap ahead—the American Dream in action. If states could *consistently* provide their students with excellent teachers, they could close most of their stubborn achievement gaps within five years.¹

But today, only about a quarter of U.S. classrooms have a teacher that strong. And as noted in the recent TNTP report *The Irreplaceables*, schools lose

highly effective teachers at an alarming rate.² We shouldn’t be surprised: schools give great teachers little reason to stay. Unlike other professions, the best teachers have few opportunities to expand their impact, helping more students and peers. They can’t advance their careers unless they leave the classroom and become administrators. Emerging master and mentor roles typically confer no real authority to lead peers, nor credit and clear responsibility for helping more students. And great teachers do not necessarily earn more. Bonuses that some districts and states have begun to introduce are typically small and disappear once the special dollars that fund them are spent, providing little incentive to enter or stay in these roles.

State policymakers can change all of that. With better information about which teachers are most effective, state policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to reward, retain, and attract more of those teachers. By spurring schools to redesign roles and use technology in age-appropriate ways, policymakers can enable great teachers to reach more students and develop their peers—and can pay them *far* more from existing funding.³ In some new models, schools can pay *all* teachers more, while still paying the best even more, sustainably. With these changes, a state’s schools can become places where all students have access to excellent teachers, consistently. And its schools can become places where the highest-potential teachers want to work, where good teachers move more quickly toward excellence, and where great teachers stay.

Policymakers ready to create the policy changes to leverage, reward, retain, and attract excellent teachers can start with a seven-point plan:⁴

1. **Identify excellent teachers—now.** While

states wade through the process of creating teacher evaluation systems airtight enough to dismiss low-performing teachers, they can go ahead and require districts to identify their top-25-percent teachers. Using multiple measures in all grades of high-priority subjects, with student learning growth as the main element, states can identify their best and move ahead on redesigning jobs to enable them to reach more students and lead peers.

2. **Track and report student access to great teachers.** A state needs to know more than just how many excellent *teachers* its schools have; the critical number is how many *students* benefit from those teachers. States should require districts to report the number and percentage of students whose teachers—the ones accountable for each student’s progress—are highly effective, by school and student subgroup.
3. **Track and report retention rates of excellent teachers.** As TNTP noted, much of teacher retention is within the control of schools and districts.⁵ States should require reporting of top-teacher retention each year—and hold principals and district leaders accountable when the best teachers leave education.
4. **Pay top teachers more, within current budgets, for reaching more students.** Amend statewide salary scales, leaving districts and schools free to pay excellent teachers more for reaching more students within available budgets. Implement state-level incentives for schools and districts that reach more students with excellent teaching, and share the financial benefits of efficiencies with those teachers and their effective peers.

And no budget fudging—states can do this sustainably. As Public Impact’s financial analyses have shown, schools could redesign their teaching roles and increase top teachers’ pay today, up to approximately 130 percent, *without increasing class sizes*

*and within existing budgets.*⁶ When budgets rise, new funds should flow to excellent teachers, and their supporting teammates, who help more students successfully.

5. **Make tenure meaningful via “elite tenure,”** offered only to consistently excellent teachers who then can be empowered to choose their peers. Without flexibility to change roles unhindered by current tenure policies, schools simply will not be able to free the funds to increase pay for any teachers.
6. **Clear the other barriers that keep excellent teachers from reaching more students.** With redesigned jobs and organizations, states can increase their top teachers’ reach. State policies must:
 - Provide funding for schools as fungible lump sums, including funding for teacher pay, freeing schools to pay for their best combinations of teaching roles and technology.
 - Eliminate class-size limits for willing, excellent teachers, or require average class-size limits across districts or schools, rather than per classroom.
 - Eliminate or reduce “seat time” requirements for students to be with licensed staff, focusing on student outcomes instead. This will allow, for example, unlicensed staff to monitor digital labs, freeing funds to pay more—within budget—to the excellent teachers accountable for learning.
 - Grant absolute protection during layoffs to excellent teachers, regardless of seniority. For example, guarantee protection to teachers who produced top-25 percent student progress for two of the past three years *or* the most recent year.
 - Revise licensure to make top out-of-state teachers automatically eligible to teach.
 - Provide universal wireless broadband for all students, to save teachers time and equalize online opportunities.
7. **Create the will to give every student excellent teachers.** Even when states

remove barriers, many districts act too slowly. State policies must catalyze change. For example, a state could declare a *new civil right* for all students to excellent teachers. For any student who did not make grade level in the previous school year; who did not make at least a year's worth of growth in any designated subject in the previous school year; or who has not been assigned an excellent teacher in a designated subject during the prior two school years, require schools to put an excellent teacher in charge of instruction. Require that teacher to be fully accountable for the student's learning outcomes, in person, online, or in combination. If schools and districts do not provide such a child with an excellent teacher, empower the student to take legal action to enforce the right. States also can allow only top high school graduates to teach, while attracting more of these students with paid career opportunities within teaching.

Using new teacher data, states and districts can attract, reward, and retain excellent teachers and leverage their talents to reach more students—giving all of our nation's students, not just a lucky few, the education they deserve.

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¹ Numerous studies confirm these findings. For one example, see Gordon, R. J., Kane, T. J., and Staiger, D. O. (2006). *Identifying effective teachers using performance on the job*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

² TNTP. (2012). *The irreplaceables: Understanding the real retention crisis in America's urban schools (executive summary)*. Brooklyn, NY: Author. Retrieved from http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Irreplaceables_2012.pdf

³ For many examples of school models that extend excellent teachers' reach for more pay, within budget, see www.opportunityculture.org.

⁴ For more on these policies, see Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. C. (2011). *Seizing opportunity at the top: How the U.S. can reach every student with an excellent teacher: Checklist*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from <http://opportunityculture.org/seizing-opportunity-at-the-top/>.

⁵ TNTP. (2012). *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the real retention crisis in America's urban schools*. Brooklyn, NY: Author. Retrieved from http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Irreplaceables_2012.pdf

⁶ Public Impact. (2012). *Redesigning schools to reach every student with excellent teachers: Financial planning summary*. Chapel Hill, NC: Author. Retrieved from <http://opportunityculture.org/reach/pay-teachers-more/>