



## Educational Equity: Challenges for Educator Effectiveness

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In 2014, *Vergara v. California* became the latest in a long line of U.S. court cases to confront the issue of educational equity. Since *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, policymakers and practitioners have voiced concerns about persistent and widespread disparities in K–12 education, particularly those that impact disadvantaged students (McNeil & Blad, 2014).

With increasingly diverse student populations, educational equity is a bigger challenge than ever for public schools across the United States. The National Center for Educational Statistics estimates that by 2023, students of ethnic minority backgrounds will comprise 55 percent of the U.S. public school population (NCES, 2015). Further, as of 2013, low-income students became the majority in U.S. public schools. In 21 states, at least 50% of all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). The effects of student poverty in K–12 schools is profound, as an increasing number of American public school children are enrolled in districts with concentrated poverty (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2012). The lack of distribution of well-trained teachers and challenges related to preparing and supporting educators compound these issues and raise multiple questions regarding educational equity.

In response, states and districts are working to identify and analyze root causes of equity gaps to determine appropriate strategies to close them. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education has prioritized No Child Left Behind waivers, Race to the Top, and discretionary grants to raise student achievement and close gaps. Continuing efforts to improve access to quality teachers for all students include the U.S. Department of Education's Excellent Educators for All State Educator Profiles. These profiles show states where districts have equity gaps that may contribute to achievement gaps and identify districts that have successfully closed such gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

However, these efforts are hampered by a limited body of research-based best practices and strategies that help close equity gaps. To tackle educational equity challenges within the United States, therefore, additional rigorous thinking and research on the most effective approaches are required.

### Focusing on Educator Equity Gaps

From early childhood to post-secondary education, educational equity is a multidimensional issue. This brief provides an overview for policymakers on one aspect of educational equity: addressing equity gaps for vulnerable student populations through educator effectiveness. Specifically, three components of educator effectiveness will be examined: recruiting and distributing effective educators; supporting and retaining teachers through targeted professional development; and improving educator evaluation practices to address equity gaps for vulnerable student populations. Essential questions to consider and policy recommendations appear at the end of the brief.

The U.S. Department of Education cites a number of possible root causes of educator equity gaps. These include:

- Lack of effective school leadership
- Poor working conditions
- Inability to implement strategy to retain effective teachers
- Insufficient supply of well-prepared educators
- Insufficient development and support for educators

- Lack of a comprehensive human capital retention strategy focused on ensuring equitable access in the hardest-to-staff schools
- Inequitable educator salary and compensation policies (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a; U.S. Department of Education, 2014b)

## Policy Considerations for Promoting Educator Equity

In recent years, declining education budgets have forced districts and states to do more with less. However, addressing the challenge of educator equity is not as simple as investing more dollars or allowing an unending flow of money (Riley & Coleman, 2012).

The current focus of the equity conversation in the United States is on tackling achievement and equity gaps simultaneously. States may want to develop strategies that focus on both equity and achievement gaps in high-minority or high-poverty priority, focus, or other Title I schools, which can be integrated into both the State Plan to Ensure Equitable Access to Great Educators and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility renewal request (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). To continue to advance more rigorous thinking regarding strategies and investments, education policymakers may wish to consider resource realignment as an approach to creating conditions to promote equity. Issues to consider follow.

### *Recruiting and Distributing Effective Educators*

Research indicates that a student's race and family income often serve as predictors for access to excellent educators and schools (Reardon, 2011), and teachers and principals are under increased pressure to achieve equity standards. Every state is responsible for licensing and certifying educators to guarantee all students receive high-quality, effective instruction. Standards for educator accreditation, teacher licensing, certification, and evaluation have undergone significant changes over the last decade. The U.S. Department of Education's Excellent Educators for All initiative further addresses equitable distribution of high-quality teachers by asking states to assemble comprehensive plans for 2015 that demonstrate the collection and use of data to make equity-related decisions (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, 2014).

Low-income and minority students are typically concentrated in underfunded public institutions that have disproportionately high numbers of inexperienced and untrained educators who are not well equipped to teach their subjects (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000). While some states have developed their own programs or used earmarked federal funds to re-examine compensation, housing assistance, pay for performance, and other incentives (Martin, 2007), the best and most qualified educators still tend to gravitate toward more affluent schools that offer better working conditions and compensation, and have fewer high-needs students.

Barriers to recruiting and distributing effective educators for all schools include:

- Educator shortages in hard-to-staff, low-income urban and rural districts
- Educator dropout rates and absenteeism in low-income schools
- Unclear professional pathways from preparation programs to high-need schools and classrooms
- Unequal distribution of accredited, trained, and seasoned teachers in affluent schools, and unlicensed, inexperienced, first-year teachers in low-income schools (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Johnson, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000)

Examples of state efforts to address recruitment and distribution of high-quality teachers include:

**New Mexico**—The state increased beginning teacher salaries in 2014 from \$30,000 to \$32,000 in order to better recruit, retain, and compensate new teachers and incentivize high-performing educators to teach in high-need schools (State of New Mexico Office of the Governor, 2014). Under the New Mexico's NMTEACH Educator Effectiveness system, educators are being evaluated to promote more equitable practices, increase retention, and create innovative systems to reward teachers and principals for their excellence (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2013).

**Mississippi**—The Housing Assistance for Teachers (HAT) program provides \$6,000 in housing assistance to incentivize teachers to work in hard-to-staff rural areas for three years (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, 2014). HAT provides additional incentives for educators to distribute themselves more equitably and features an innovative pay-for-success program.

### *Supporting and Retaining Educators through Targeted Professional Development*

School leadership, school culture, professional development opportunities, and support are critical factors contributing to teacher satisfaction and attrition. According to a 2014 national study, a majority of teachers believe current professional development is ineffective for job preparation and lacks training in, specifically, using technology and digital tools, analyzing student data to inform

instruction, and implementing standards, including Common Core State Standards (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Teaching diverse student populations (multicultural, ELL, special needs) is one area that requires specific preparation and has a direct impact on teacher effectiveness and positive student outcomes (Wenglinsky, 2002; Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Johnson, 2009).

To most positively impact vulnerable student populations and promote equity, it is necessary to support and retain educators through targeted professional development by:

- Providing educators with learning opportunities and professional development on culturally appropriate and responsive learning techniques, competency-based learning strategies, and supporting ELLs and the most vulnerable student populations (Samson & Collins, 2012)
- Using common instructional materials aligned with rigorous national curriculum frameworks for teacher development and training
- Developing culturally appropriate teaching tools and resources that use video and online technology components, particularly with ELL and native populations (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014)
- Developing guidelines for working conditions and school environment to enhance professional development while also giving educators more time to collaborate and plan (Hirsch, 2008)

Examples of state efforts to address targeted professional development for teachers include:

**Nevada**—Nevada, and Clark County in particular, has experienced a sizable increase in minority and ELL student populations. Clark County is one of the largest school districts in the country and serves approximately 77% of the state’s ELL population (Horsford, Mokhtar, & Sampson, 2013). In 2013, the Nevada State Legislature addressed population and school enrollment growth by passing Senate Bill 504, which provides dedicated funding and targeted programs to support ELL needs at the district and state levels (Legislative Council Bureau, 2014).

**Indiana, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C.**—Teach Plus and local school districts have partnered to form the Turnaround Teacher Teams (T3) Initiative, a teacher-designed school improvement model that uses professional development strategies to address inequitable access to effective educators in high-need schools (Teach Plus, 2014). The T3 program uses a cohort-staffing model, grouping 20–25 percent of school faculty by grade level or content area, and provides ongoing training, professional development, and coaching; resources for instruction; data on student progress; and differentiated pay for leadership roles (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, 2014). Research and evaluation of student outcomes in T3 schools have shown gains in English language arts and math proficiency as well as increased retention of teachers in these high-poverty schools (Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, 2014).

### ***Improving Educator Preparation and Evaluation Practices***

School districts have a variety of systems and feedback mechanisms for evaluating teachers and student performance. Since state agencies face capacity and funding challenges when implementing new evaluation systems, this process has become difficult to restructure and execute in a way that ensures equity. By developing better measures of educator quality and effectiveness, districts and states can use this information to monitor and evaluate teachers in high-need schools in comparison to other schools to design targeted support and professional development programs and obtain more accurate educator outcome data (Lemke, Kerri, Wayne, & Birman, 2012).

To design and implement personnel evaluations that advance educator equity at a systems level, efforts can focus on:

- Streamlining current data system requirements while improving the collection of relevant information on teacher preparation and performance at the school, district, and state levels (Riley & Coleman, 2012)
- Building transparency of teacher preparation and performance evaluation by creating feedback loops among necessary stakeholders (educators, unions, civil rights and community-based organizations, teacher preparation programs, and others) that facilitate continuous improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c; U.S. Department of Education, 2014b)
- Incorporating both incentives and interventions into accountability systems at the school, district, and state levels to ensure achievement and professional gaps are closed

Examples of state efforts to improve teacher preparation and evaluation systems include:

**Connecticut**—The School Change Initiative is a comprehensive reform strategy to improve New Haven Public Schools’ student performance by closing the gap between district and state achievement levels over five years (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In order to accomplish this goal, the district is focusing its efforts on staffing high-need schools with effective teachers and principals

(New Haven School Change, 2013). The district is improving methods of recruitment, evaluation, and development of educators, while recognizing high-performing professionals and creating comprehensive systems for linking teacher evaluation to student performance (New Haven School Change, 2013).

**North Carolina**—Fayetteville State University’s master’s degree program in education has incorporated the standards of both the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and National Board for Professional Teaching into its teacher preparation curriculum. Consequently, 87% of new teachers graduating from the program met or exceeded expectations for student learning growth, compared to the state average of 75% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). Following North Carolina’s lead, 18 states and districts have used similar program models and joined this effort in partnership with the New Teacher Center (New Teacher Center, 2014).

<b>Policy Issue</b>	<b>Questions to Consider</b>
<b>Recruitment and distribution of effective educators</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the incentives/barriers for educators to teach in low-performing schools? Have adequate career paths for teachers that promote professional development, growth, and learning been identified or promoted?</li> <li>2. What mechanisms are there at the district level to recruit diverse teachers in high-need subjects (i.e., special education, ELL, Indian Education, STEM) in schools that are difficult to staff? Where are teacher shortages in both urban and rural schools?</li> <li>3. How can equity be measured to show district and state improvement with recruitment, distribution, and retention?</li> </ol>
<b>Supporting and retaining educators through targeted professional development</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Are schools and districts taking advantage of online resources and collaborative professional development in alignment with school and district goals?</li> <li>2. Have states identified requirements or training supports that fit into current standards for professional learning?</li> <li>3. Are there clear guidelines for working conditions that promote positive environments in high-need, hard-to-staff schools and districts?</li> </ol>
<b>Improvement of teacher preparation and evaluation practices</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the methods for teachers and principals to demonstrate their ability to teach a diverse range of students particularly for priority, high-need student populations?</li> <li>2. Are state and local school data systems capturing accurate student and teacher data?</li> <li>3. Are data systems used to provide educators with professional development growth opportunities?</li> </ol>

## Recommendations

Improving educational equity requires a collaborative effort to design, implement, evaluate, and maintain agreed-upon standards. Significant change is necessary to help educators facilitate achievement and close equity gaps for low-income and minority students, English-language learners, and students with special education needs. To build a body of evidence-based best practices for successful equity strategies at different levels, policymakers are encouraged to support further research.

The following recommendations may assist policymakers as they consider ways to promote educator equity to benefit students at the local, district, and state levels.

### ***Recruit and Distribute Effective Educators***

- Offer incentives to recruit high-performing individuals, provide fair compensation, and prepare educators to face unique challenges.
- Identify educator shortages and gaps in high-need schools and subject areas and place effective educators accordingly.
- Tackle inadequate educator preparation and the unequal distribution of effective teachers simultaneously to help improve school outcomes and measure improvement.

### ***Support and Retain Effective Educators***

- Provide culturally appropriate resources for professional development, including the opportunity to engage with expert practitioners to promote collaboration, use of innovative online and video tools, and shared curricula.
- Maintain high standards for teachers while providing ongoing targeted professional development opportunities.
- Foster a positive culture for educators by providing clear guidelines on working conditions and school environments to promote academic success in hard-to-staff schools.

### ***Improve Preparation and Evaluation Systems***

- Use district data to determine effective practices and implementation of equity strategies that demonstrate educator ability to teach a diverse range of students.
- Develop appropriate data accountability systems for educators that are integrated at the school, district, state, and federal levels for continuous improvement using accurate, current data.
- Link data from accountability systems to provide educators with targeted professional development opportunities and identify areas of professional need to support ineffective educators.

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