

A STRONG FOUNDATION:

Three State Policy Priorities to Give Every
Student Effective, Diverse Teachers



Introduction

Finding and keeping great teachers is the most important thing schools can do for their students. It's one of the most consistent takeaways from education research over the last two decades—yet school systems across the country continue to struggle with teacher recruitment and retention.

A shortage of teachers in key subjects and a failure to even identify—much less retain—highly effective teachers leaves many districts in an annual scramble to fill teaching vacancies before the first day of school, often without good information on their new teachers' performance or a strategy to improve it. Teacher preparation programs often exacerbate the problem by failing to train enough teachers in the grades and subject areas their local districts and students need most—and by certifying too many teachers who aren't ready to help students learn. On top of it all, the current approach to teacher training and hiring has created a teacher workforce that's far less ethnically and racially diverse than the student population in all 50 states—a gap that's only growing, with real consequences for all students, but especially students of color.

Together, these challenges fuel the stubborn inequities that affect millions of students every single day. Students who've traditionally been shortchanged by our education system—students of color, living in poverty, with disabilities, or who are still learning English—are the least likely to get effective teachers when they're in short supply, making it even harder for them to catch up if they fall behind academically.

While decisions about which teachers to hire and retain ultimately remain at the local level, state governments have a crucial and underappreciated role to play in building the teaching workforce our students need. Without access to the right data, preparation programs and school systems will struggle to match the supply and demand for new teachers. Without certification policies that prioritize skill and student impact over paper credentials, too many talented people will be shut out of the teaching profession even as teachers without the right skills are welcomed in. And without a forceful nudge to prioritize teacher diversity, many teacher preparation programs simply won't.

Governors, state legislators, and state education departments are uniquely positioned to provide all these things. But many aren't sure where to start or default to short-term, hastily implemented new programs that fail to address the root causes of the challenges they face year after year. We wrote this issue brief to help make the path to an effective, stable, and diverse teacher workforce clearer for state policymakers and advocacy organizations.

Below, we highlight three priorities—strengthening teacher pipelines, improving certification rules, and diversifying the teacher workforce—that can form the strong foundation of a teacher policy agenda in any state. We started by looking for publicly available teacher preparation and teacher workforce data in all 50 states. Then we took a closer look at eight diverse, data-rich states to get a more complete picture of the way policies may be interacting, and to understand the specific challenges each state is currently facing. At the same time, we conducted a literature review focused primarily on peer-reviewed research from the past decade, to identify major findings about the ways specific policies can affect the teacher workforce and student outcomes.

We offer recommendations—based on this analysis and our two decades of experience working on teacher pipeline challenges at all levels of the system—that address the critical challenges so many states face as they head into the 2020 legislative session and beyond. Policymakers can read the issue summaries, use the suggested questions to analyze their current policies, and find ideas in the case studies and profiles of other states. Advocacy organizations can learn about these issues and best practices in other states to start conversations and begin organizing around key policy changes.

Many of the solutions we offer have been talked about for years but are rarely implemented. All are relatively simple, politically feasible, and rooted in research. We offer them not as a substitute for more resource-intensive ideas that could support teacher recruitment and retention—such as dramatically increasing teacher salaries—but to highlight important policies states can adopt right away that will maximize the equity and the impact of their investments in public education.

Ultimately, we hope this brief reinforces the enormous influence states have over the size and quality of their teacher workforce—and inspires more state leaders to use it wisely.

Priority 1: Strengthen teacher pipelines to meet the actual needs of districts and students, especially in hard-to-staff subjects, schools, and regions.

Every year, urban and rural districts across the country scramble to hire teachers in time for the first day of school. These teacher shortages exist across subjects, schools and regions—in fact, they exist in all fifty states.¹ In some states, that means too few high school math and science teachers, and in others, vacancies are most pronounced at high-poverty schools or in rural areas.

To respond, districts typically invest in increasing the number of applicants through urgent, last-minute recruiting campaigns, or by shuffling existing staff and school schedules to accommodate the incoming class of students. Many end up opening the year with large numbers of substitute teachers leading classrooms, with devastating effects on millions of students. But in cities and states across the country, teacher shortages are less about the overall number of teacher applicants than a mismatch between supply and demand. Teacher preparation programs produce too many teachers who teach certain subjects or who want to work in choice schools or districts, but not enough who teach high-need subjects or are willing to work in urban, rural, and hard-to-staff schools—leading to perennial shortages. For example, if local teacher preparation programs aren't producing enough teachers in high school chemistry, finding teachers in that subject will be a challenge every year—and, without intentional planning, too few will sign on to teach in the schools where they're needed most. When schools and districts fail to retain their effective teachers, they exacerbate these problems even further.

States can help districts address this challenge by facilitating data sharing around teacher staffing needs, incentivizing local partnerships, and supporting teacher retention.

Questions to Ask

- Are teacher preparation programs aware of the needs of districts/CMOs for teachers in particular grades and subjects, both now and what is anticipated in the future—and are they adjusting their practices accordingly?
- Are neighboring districts/CMOs collaborating on how to fulfill needs for teachers in particular grades and subjects?
- Do districts/CMOs know which preparation programs are providing the most teachers?
- Does the state regularly gather and share actionable data on needs for teachers in particular grades, subjects and regions?
- Do districts/CMO's effectively identify their highly effective teachers, and, if so, at what rate are they retained within and across schools and districts?

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) knows the district can't reach its goals without its partners at local teacher preparation programs. "There is already a lot of alignment on values," says CPS Chief Talent Officer Matt Lyons. "It's just a matter of engaging and working together."

For example, CPS has dramatically increased the number of teachers hired in the hardest-to-staff schools in the district, which they call Opportunity Schools. That couldn't have happened without strong partnerships with teacher preparation programs, including Northeastern Illinois University, Illinois State University, and Michigan State University. Further, the universities give teachers the skills they need to succeed in CPS, as well as communicate how valuable the work can be; CPS helps new teachers navigate the system and works with principals to find a school placement that's a great fit. "We want candidates to be successful," Lyons adds. And with these partnerships in place, more students will reap the benefits.

Recommended Strategies

Collect and share data on vacancies and connect it to teacher preparation data.

Simple data sharing and transparency is a critical first step for solving this problem. States should collect information on their teacher preparation programs, teacher characteristics, and vacancies, and ensure they are sharing the data they collect with districts and other stakeholders. District-level data is especially useful, but even statewide trends can help draw attention to pressing issues and encourage collaborative problem-solving among districts and teacher preparation programs.

*The **Tennessee** Higher Education Commission publishes an [annual academic supply and occupational demand workforce report](#), which includes all data from several sectors, including education. The report breaks out educators by certification area, showing annual statistics related to teacher production, projected demand, and number of candidates per opening.*

*The Governor's Office of Student Achievement in **Georgia** publishes an annual [K-12 Teacher and Leader Workforce Report](#) that analyzes workforce, production, retention, and retirement patterns for K-12 teachers and leaders from the previous school year. It also contains data on educator demographics, placements, and education level and connects teacher production data (which includes preparation program employment outcomes) to supply and demand.*

Empower local leaders to solve challenges by incentivizing strong partnerships between districts and teacher preparation programs.

Districts and teacher preparation programs rely on one another. Teacher preparation programs need both student teaching placements and job prospects for their students; districts need a steady supply of quality educators in their classrooms. By building strong, intentional partnerships, districts and teacher preparation programs can both meet their respective organizational needs and help ensure that all students have access to effective teachers. As Education First describes in [a 2018 report](#), there are concrete steps that both districts and teacher preparation programs can take to build these partnerships. While that local work is foundational, states can and should incentivize and support partnership development in order to close the gap between supply and demand.

*In **Massachusetts**, [partnerships](#) are one of the seven domains on which teacher preparation programs are evaluated during their continuing approval process. Programs are required to submit evidence that they, among other things, respond to the needs of district schools, and that partners improve the experience for preparation candidates and contribute to the programs' continuous improvement efforts.*

***Louisiana** makes partnerships a [precondition for certain targeted funding](#) under the [Teacher Incentive Fund](#) grant. The state is using this funding to [support "Grow Your Own" pilots](#) in rural schools, led by districts, in an effort to ensure access to high quality teacher preparation for all candidates, providing rigorous pathways to the classroom where multiple options might not currently exist.*

*[US PREP](#), based at Texas Tech University, pioneered a new model for creating authentic partnerships between teacher preparation and school districts, with a focus on teacher preparation and student success. The first cohort of partnerships have been in place since 2015 in five states, including **Missouri**, **Tennessee**, and **Texas**, and are already producing innovations that support the training and growth of new teachers.*

Incentivize great teachers to remain in the classroom.

Teacher shortages are typically considered a failure of teacher hiring and recruitment methods. But districts can also prevent shortages and ease the burden on their teacher pipelines by increasing the retention of effective teachers. At a minimum, states should ensure policy allows districts the flexibility to design and implement teacher leadership roles, such as [Public Impact's Opportunity Culture](#) model. States should also consider applying existing financial incentives to high-performing teachers, so they're more likely to stay in their schools. Besides higher salaries, these targeted programs could include retention bonuses and student loan forgiveness programs.

In 2019, **Texas** passed historic [school finance legislation](#) that, among other things, increased per-student funding with a mandate to use some of those funds to increase teacher salaries across the board, giving priority to teachers with more than five-years' experience. The bill also included a Teacher Incentive Allotment, which provides funding for LEAs to designate and pay high performing teachers based on a statewide system, with additional money available if those teachers work in rural and/or high-need schools.

In 2013, **Tennessee** piloted a [retention bonus program](#) for highly effective teachers in lower performing or hard to staff schools. Multiple studies reported that the program was successful in both retaining teachers and improving student achievement in subsequent years as a result of the high quality teachers continuing to teach at the school.ⁱⁱ LEAD, a Tennessee-based charter management organization, recently started its own retention bonus program, offering \$5,000 to teachers who stay at their schools for more than two years.

Priority 2: Make teacher certification count by supporting development and prioritizing effectiveness over paper credentials.

Teacher effectiveness is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement. Yet far too many new teachers struggle when they enter the classroom—and since those teachers are more likely to teach the students who most need great teachers, it exacerbates inequities in our education system.

Of course, teaching is a challenging profession. But teacher certification programs can do more to ensure that new teachers hit the ground running on their first day in the classroom, by offering stronger opportunities to practice and doing a better job screening out candidates who aren't demonstrating effectiveness with students. This matters: in addition to students having better teachers, early-career effectiveness is a strong predictor of teacher retention.ⁱⁱⁱ To support this, states should ensure that teacher preparation programs are giving new teachers the kind of practice they need to be successful, and also consider whether their certification requirements are truly encouraging effective teaching.

Questions to Ask

- Has your state laid out a coherent and compelling vision for great teaching?
- Do state certification requirements effectively screen for the elements of effective teaching determined by your state, or are they based on proxies that don't have a connection to teaching ability?
- Do districts know who their most effective teachers are by school or subject? Do they have the data and capacity to track the effectiveness of teachers from particular preparation programs?
- Are any best practices for clinical experiences reflected in the state's minimum requirements for clinical experiences?

"New teachers need real-world experience engaging with children of the same population they are going to serve. . . Verbal or written descriptions of a day in the life of a high-poverty school cannot make up for actually being there."

"Learning to teach is like a sport; studying a sport, no matter for how long, is no substitute for practice."

- Placido Gomez, pre-calculus teacher and Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow via [TribTalk](#)

Recommended Strategies

Focus clinical experience requirements on design elements, like mentors and placements.

Teacher preparation and certification programs should expose teacher candidates to students and classrooms as early and as often as possible. The most significant of these experiences, clinical placements or "student teaching," provide critical practice and training, an opportunity for a prospective teacher to be evaluated, and a potential pathway to a full-time teaching position. But some teacher preparation programs place student teachers haphazardly, especially when the only requirement for such experiences is focused on quantity—the amount of time in front of students—instead of the quality of the experience, including the effectiveness of the mentor teacher and the school's curricular alignment. This can lead to a poor clinical experience and, ultimately, to teachers who are not as prepared for the first

day of school as they could be. Additionally, teacher preparation programs can intentionally place student teachers in hard-to-staff schools to encourage them to work there after graduation. Multiple studies have connected specific types of student teaching to future effectiveness, including experience in a school with a similar student demographic as their current school,^{iv} and experience in the same grade or subject area they go on to teach.^v

Some states, including [Texas](#) and [Missouri](#), require that candidates be assigned to a mentor teacher who is an experienced, accomplished educator currently certified in the same certification category as the candidate. Mentors must commit to supporting the candidate throughout their clinical experience in areas such as planning, instruction, assessment, and community engagement. Field supervisors are also required to conduct formal observations and feedback conversations with candidates multiple times throughout their clinical experience.

***California** requires that all clinical experiences include [formal observations and evaluation](#), and placements must consider a school's curricular alignment and the diversity of its student body.*

Replace certification requirements that don't consistently predict effectiveness with actual evidence of performance in the classroom.

Teacher certification requirements exist to ensure that all teachers have the skills they need to help students learn. Yet, in most states, teacher certification requirements are based on proxies for effectiveness, such as standardized tests. Proxies aren't necessarily a bad thing if they accurately measure the things they are standing in for. But standardized tests for teacher certification are weak predictors of teacher effectiveness.^{vi} Instead of relying so heavily on these tests, states should set clear expectations for what great teaching looks like and ground their certification requirements in whether teachers are actually meeting that bar—primarily using observations and evidence of student learning. These measures don't have to include or be limited to standardized test scores: observations and student surveys can provide valuable information about student engagement, the amount of time they spend on rigorous and relevant work, and whether they feel confident in their ability to grow.

***Massachusetts** recently piloted its own practice-based performance assessment of teaching skills called the *Massachusetts Candidate Assessment of Performance (CAP)*. The assessment is taken during a candidate's student teaching placement, aligned to the evaluation system for fully certified educators, and is a requirement for teacher preparation program completion. An [October 2019 research study](#) found that candidate performance on CAP predicts in-service summative performance evaluations in their first year of teaching after program completion, and that there is stronger alignment between teacher in-service performance and CAP than the state's traditional licensure exams.*

Priority 3: Make diversifying the teacher workforce a priority.

A growing body of research shows that all students benefit from having teachers of color. Students who demonstrate higher levels of engagement and achievement^{vii} while also experiencing cross-cultural social interactions can be inoculated against harmful stereotypes. For students of color, the effects are even stronger. Students with teachers who share their race are less likely to be suspended, more likely to be referred to gifted and talented programs, and more likely to complete high school and go to college. Yet, in most states, there is a huge ethnic and racial diversity gap between students and teachers. Nationally, 53% of students are people of color,^{viii} yet 80% of teachers are White.^{ix} Further, 40% of all public schools don't have a single teacher of color.^x

It is worth highlighting that, despite what we hear others suggesting, increasing teacher diversity doesn't require us to lower standards. In fact, there are an enormous number of Black and Latinx college graduates, and other graduates of color, who'd be perfectly qualified to pursue teaching, but do not—a number exacerbated by the disproportionate share of teachers of color who leave the profession every year. The problem is that preparation programs and schools are not doing the work to recruit and retain these teachers—meaning students are missing out on being taught by thousands more outstanding teachers of color every year. The problem is not a lack of talented prospective teachers of color, but a lack of commitment to diversity among too many leaders in the education field.

Many districts and teacher preparation programs across the country are already working on fixing this problem. By setting explicit diversity goals, interrogating barriers to recruiting and retaining high performing teachers of color, and providing meaningful financial incentives, states can support these efforts.

Questions to Ask

- How many teachers of color are in your state? How are they distributed? How does that compare to student demographics?
- What are the demographics of your state's individual teacher preparation programs? How does that compare to the demographics of the student population on that campus or in the district?
- Can you determine whether there are ethno-racial disparities in program persistence or completion, or in the percentage of effective teachers who are retained?
- Are any existing policies serving to exclude promising candidates of color, or accelerating the attrition of effective ones? Has your state undertaken this analysis?

Recommended Strategies

Set goals and be transparent about diversity at every stage of the teacher pipeline: preparation, hiring, and retention.

Requiring transparency about the current state of teacher diversity and setting clear goals for the future is an important first step. Title II of the Higher Education Act requires teacher preparation programs to report on the diversity of program enrollees, but not completers. In addition to adding persistence and completion measures for preparation programs to their in-state reporting, states could add teacher diversity to their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) report cards for districts and schools. With better and more transparent data, states could then incentivize districts and teacher preparation programs to share and meet their individual teacher diversity goals.

When Kiara Wynder was a child growing up in Baltimore, she didn't think she could become a teacher. "I'm Black, and there were so few teachers who looked like me," she recalls. "It just didn't seem possible."

But after 7 years as a paraeducator, she successfully applied to the Baltimore City Teacher Residency. And today she is a kindergarten teacher at Harford Heights Elementary School, just five minutes from where she grew up.

Ms. Wynder knows that having a teacher of color makes a difference for her students—regardless of their race. "Black and brown students feel a little more comfortable learning from teachers who look like them. They see it's something that they can accomplish—that they can successfully reach a goal." But it's also significant for White students: "It makes them more well-rounded to meet people who don't look like them."

She's proud to give her students this experience—one she wished she had herself.

*A handful of states, including **Illinois, Louisiana, and Massachusetts** confirm teacher race on their ESSA report cards and use this data to inform teacher workforce diversification initiatives.*

*In addition to reporting teacher demographics, **Delaware** [scores its teacher preparation programs](#), in part, on the diversity of their enrollees and reports the demographics of its completers. The state uses this data to inform recommendations for continuous improvement of preparation programs and determine the direction of statewide initiatives related to diversifying the teacher workforce.*

Identify pipeline practices that have a disparate impact on candidates of color, and either improve or eliminate them.

Teacher diversity—or lack thereof—is a result of many interdependent factors within the system. State leaders should look across the state's policy structures, particularly those identified in Priorities 1 and 2 above, and analyze their effect on diversity. A shortage of teacher candidates of color is a direct consequence of other flaws in the teacher pipeline, such as lower rates of entry into teacher preparation programs, greater rates of placement in high poverty schools, negative impacts from being the only teacher of color at a school,^{xi} financial barriers to entry and a lack of attention paid to what works when it comes to recruiting and supporting quality prospective teachers of color.

Massachusetts is [researching](#) the impact of teacher preparation program policies and practices on teacher diversity as part of its Department of Education Equity Plan. They are [aggregating and sharing data and best practices](#) on how individual districts are employing more inclusive practices to ensure the teacher workforce more closely mirrors the diversity of the state's student populations. The Department's strategic plan also includes a [Teacher Diversification Pilot Program](#) that names and works to combat challenges that impact the diversity of the teacher workforce across Massachusetts.

Provide financial incentives for recruiting and retaining teachers of color, and ensure they are large enough to have a meaningful impact.

Most of the states we reviewed have programs in place to offer financial incentives to increase diversity or specific high-need placements, including scholarships, loan forgiveness, stipends, and bonuses. This matters because teachers of color are more likely than their White peers to graduate college with student debt and more likely to borrow money to continue their education,^{xii} exacerbating the effect of low salaries relative to other professions with a similar education requirement. Further, research demonstrates that moderate to large incentives have been effective at recruiting new candidates to the profession, retaining them, and encouraging them to work in high-need schools they had not previously considered.^{xiii}

In Illinois, the [Minority Teachers of Illinois \(MTI\) Scholarship Program](#) is designed to intentionally support students of color who want to become educators, and there are [multiple grant and loan forgiveness opportunities](#) for prospective teachers that can be combined.

The *Arkansas* [Geographical Critical Needs Minority Teacher Scholarship Program](#) is offered to teacher candidates of color enrolled in in-state preparation programs who commit to teaching in the Delta or other geographical regions facing a critical shortage of teachers. The state also publishes [an annual report](#) describing the strategies each preparation program has in place to increase the diversity of their teacher candidates, as well as the numbers who enter and persist in targeted recruitment and scholarship programs.

Now What?

As we've described above, states have an important role to play in improving and developing their teacher workforce. Though policies related to teacher preparation and certification can seem esoteric and technical, their impact on educators and students is very much real. We hope that state leaders will critically examine these policies and help to give every student in every classroom access to a great teacher. We also know that there are many states making progress in this area, so if there are other examples of strong policies we should highlight, please don't hesitate to [contact us](#).

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