



How To Ensure Equitable Access to Great Teaching

A Proposal for Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence

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Introduction and summary

Every child deserves access to a quality education,¹ and teaching is a core determinant of students' educational experience. Quality teaching is correlated with better learning outcomes, increased student achievement, and higher salaries and other benefits in adulthood.²

In the face of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, it is more important now than ever to ensure that students have access to great teaching. K-12 schools need great educators who can support children whose learning has been affected by the pandemic, especially the many students who have not been able to access school or the learning resources and supports to which they are entitled.

Yet access to good teaching is not equitably available to all students. As with many other important resources in the U.S. education system, students who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC) have less access to experienced, fully certified teachers³ and are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources and with high teacher turnover.⁴ This lack of access, like other inequities in the nation's education system, is an outcome of systemic racism, including but not limited to policies such as redlining and housing discrimination that resulted in segregated schooling and chronic underfunding of schools that serve communities where most people have low incomes or identify as BIPOC.⁵

Furthermore, students deserve access to teaching that is culturally responsive and affirming to their racial, cultural, and linguistic identities. One study outlined eight culturally responsive teaching competencies and surveyed state-level professional teaching standards for them. The study found that all states incorporate some components of culturally responsive teaching in the pedagogical skills and knowledge expected of teachers,⁶ but no state incorporates all eight.⁷ These competencies include drawing on students' culture to shape curricula and instructions; collaborating with families and the local community; and communicating in linguistically and culturally responsive ways.⁸ Incorporating these principles in the classroom helps to make students feel welcome in their learning environments.

In this report, the Center for American Progress proposes a new federal competitive grant program—the Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program—to directly address inequitable access to great teaching across the country. This program would provide districtwide or school-based grants to improve the working conditions that influence teacher recruitment, retention, and quality in the nation’s highest-need K-12 schools.

Ultimately, schools and districts would use the grants provided through the program to address the conditions that contribute to high teacher turnover. The grants would be targeted toward schools that currently have high teacher turnover or difficulty hiring and keeping great teachers to help enable these schools to become some of the best places for teachers to work. The grants would allow schools and districts to give teachers the supports they need to meet high expectations for instructional quality, which would in turn benefit student learning and achievement. This program is designed to be national in scope, though state governments could adopt something similar.

This report details the Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program. It synthesizes the research-supported strategies and interventions that schools and districts would be required to implement under the program in order to improve recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers in schools with the highest levels of teacher turnover. This research illustrates just how important access to qualified and experienced educators is, as well as how working conditions influence efforts to recruit and retain them.

To inform the research in this report, CAP hosted focus group sessions in Phoenix, Maricopa County, and Maricopa, Pinal County, in Arizona in December 2019 and Clarksdale, Coahoma County, and Jackson, Hinds County, in Mississippi in March 2020. In each location, CAP hosted three focus group sessions for: 1) students, 2) teachers and administrators, and 3) parents and community members. Each session had approximately 10 participants, though some were smaller or larger than others. The focus groups sought to understand the cause of teacher turnover in each location and to hear directly from those most affected. Participants were asked about their experience with teacher turnover and provided their opinions on methods to increase teacher retention.

CAP hosted focus group sessions in Arizona and Mississippi because these states have some of the highest rates of teacher turnover. According to analysis from the Learning Policy Institute, Arizona has the highest teacher turnover in the country.⁹ That same analysis found that Mississippi is one of the top 10 states for highest teacher turnover. In order to capture a variety of viewpoints, CAP selected one urban location and one suburban or rural location in each state.

Why good teaching is essential to a quality education

Research has long demonstrated that teachers can make a big difference in students' lives, especially students from families with low incomes and those who are BIPOC.¹⁰ Students who have been assigned to a higher-performing teacher for one school year can gain up to a full year's worth of additional academic growth compared with students assigned to an ineffective teacher.¹¹

Research indicates that there are limitations to the professional development that teachers currently receive.¹² For example, some surveys find that most teachers do not believe their professional development opportunities improve their teaching and practice.¹³ As discussed later in this section, teachers need evidence-based and job-embedded professional development in order to receive the maximum benefits of these trainings.

As the demographics of the U.S. student population change, it is also important that teachers receive professional development in culturally relevant pedagogy; this can produce a wide range of positive outcomes.¹⁴ The term “culturally relevant pedagogy” was developed by academic researcher and teacher educator Gloria Ladson-Billings to describe a form of teaching that requires students to develop and maintain cultural competence, encourages academic success, and helps students develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo.¹⁵ Culturally relevant pedagogy can increase motivation and engagement among students, cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and promote a sense of belonging in the classroom, among other benefits.¹⁶

The effects of a great teacher can be long-lasting: In one study, students who were taught by a kindergarten teacher with more years of teaching experience had higher earnings in adulthood.¹⁷ Other researchers have found an association between primary school teachers' effectiveness and students' educational attainment and future earnings.¹⁸ Research suggests that if more students had access to good teaching year after year, achievement gaps between students from families with low incomes and their more affluent peers may narrow or close.¹⁹

A racially diverse teaching workforce is also critical to providing every child with a quality education. For nonwhite students, research shows that access to a same-race teacher is associated with positive achievement outcomes in reading and math.²⁰ One study found that exposure to a Black teacher during elementary school decreased the likelihood that a Black male student would drop out of high school and increased his aspirations to attend college.²¹ The study also found that when Black students have a Black teacher, they are recommended for gifted and talented programs at the same rate as white students, which can narrow the gap in access to these programs.²²

Nonwhite students are suspended less frequently, perform better on standardized tests, and have improved attendance rates when they have at least one same-race teacher.²³ Research indicates that Black and Latinx teachers help to foster positive social and emotional development for students from the same race and ethnicity.²⁴ One study found that Black students taught by Black teachers performed better on standardized tests than Black students taught by white teachers.²⁵

Yet too often, students who would benefit the most from highly effective teachers are the least likely to have access to them. Schools with large populations of students of color and students from families with low incomes have more difficulty filling teacher vacancies and experience higher teacher turnover than schools that predominantly serve students from families with more resources.²⁶ For example, research from the Learning Policy Institute found that teacher turnover rates are 50 percent higher in schools designated as Title I schools, or schools that serve larger populations of students from families with low incomes.²⁷

Another study found that students who were eligible for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) were more likely to be taught by inexperienced or ineffective teachers than children from families with more resources.²⁸ Students from families with low incomes are more likely to be taught by novice teachers,²⁹ teachers who are not fully certified,³⁰ or teachers who are teaching with emergency certification.³¹ Similar patterns exist in schools that serve mostly students of color. Research predominantly indicates that schools with high proportions of nonwhite students have higher percentages of inexperienced and uncertified teachers than predominantly white schools.³² This limits these students' opportunities for higher academic achievement and prevents them from accessing the long-term benefits of a great education.

The current system, in which schools with the highest need often have the most difficulty attracting and retaining experienced, diverse, and excellent educators, short-changes students and teachers alike. Instead, these schools should be the best places

for teachers to work and students to learn. CAP's Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program is designed to transform schools with the highest teacher turnover into places that can attract and retain great teachers.

By creating ideal working conditions for teachers, the grants would recruit the best candidates and provide them with the supports and resources necessary to be effective educators. This would improve the quality of teaching, enhance student learning, and ultimately boost student achievement. The schools participating in this program would also have the opportunity to demonstrate a new way forward for the profession as a whole by modeling great working conditions and how great conditions lead to better teaching and student learning and, in the long run, how they improve student achievement.

The following section compiles research on the working conditions that contribute to teacher recruitment, turnover, and job satisfaction, including how these conditions ultimately affect student learning. CAP's proposed grant program would provide funding to schools so that they can address these working conditions, delivering resources needed to reduce teacher turnover and retain great teachers.

How improved working conditions increase access to great teaching

Schools that receive funding from the Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program would be expected to use it to improve working conditions to ensure that their students have access to the best teachers. This section addresses teacher salaries, adequate training, professional development, instructional support, and how to develop a strong school climate that supports teaching and learning. The subsections address how these matters affect teacher working conditions and contribute to improved outcomes for students.

Working conditions affect employee morale across sectors, including education. Within organizations, employees' job satisfaction and comfort in their working environment affect whether they will stay in that job.³³ The same is likely true for the teaching profession. A variety of interventions, including increasing teacher salaries and addressing working conditions with an eye toward increasing retention, can provide students with more experienced, consistent educators.

Notably, however, singular interventions are not enough to influence teacher retention in schools where working conditions are strained by poor leadership, lack of collaboration, or inadequate student discipline.³⁴ To develop academic environments that serve teachers and students well, it is important to consider all of the factors that contribute to teacher satisfaction and inhibit student learning. The following subsections outline a variety of problems and suggest interventions that together would increase teacher retention in schools experiencing high turnover.

Low salaries hamper efforts to recruit and retain a talented, diverse teacher workforce

Teachers are not adequately compensated for the level of education and expertise required for their job. They experience a pay penalty, meaning they are paid less than other similarly educated professionals.³⁵ A 2005 study found that in most states, beginning teachers earn about 80 percent of the salaries of nonteachers—defined by the study as workers of a similar age, degree level, and number of hours worked—and that gap increases as teachers advance in their career.³⁶

When adjusted for inflation, research shows that nationally, teacher pay has remained relatively unchanged since the mid-1990s,³⁷ despite a rising cost of living in the United States.³⁸ One of the reasons for stagnant teacher salaries is the overall disinvestment in education, which has become particularly acute since the Great Recession in 2008.³⁹ Due to losses in revenue during the recession, state funding for K-12 education sharply declined, and few states returned to pre-recession education spending levels once revenue rebounded.⁴⁰ Cuts to education funding or lack of investment in education usually result in teacher layoffs or salary freezes,⁴¹ as teacher salaries account for a large portion of public school education budgets. In the 2014-15 school year, for example, salaries and benefits for staff accounted for 80 percent of U.S. public school per-pupil expenditures.⁴²

Furthermore, teacher pay is usually lowest in schools that need the most resources, with pay particularly low in schools that serve a large percentage of children from families with low incomes.⁴³ In schools where 75 percent or more of the student population receives FRPL, teachers are paid \$4,100 less than teachers working in schools where 34 percent or less of the student population receives FRPL.⁴⁴ The rates at which teachers leave the profession or change schools are also higher in schools where 75 percent or more of the student population receives FRPL.⁴⁵

This lack of salary equity can be particularly troubling for teachers of color and for any efforts to increase racial diversity in the teaching profession. Black and Latinx teachers are disproportionately more likely to teach in schools that serve a large percentage of students who receive FRPL,⁴⁶ meaning that while teachers are paid poorly overall, Black and Latinx teachers are more likely to be paid less compared with their peers.⁴⁷ CAP research shows that Black and Latinx teachers may also be more likely to struggle with student loan debt.⁴⁸ To increase teacher pay in schools that serve students with the most need, schools and districts must invest in salary parity for these educators.

Teacher demonstrations over the past few years indicate significant dissatisfaction with pay. According to CAP analysis, 7 out of the 10 states with the lowest average teacher salaries in 2018 experienced some form of teacher protest.⁴⁹ Protests, walkouts, and strikes highlight that teacher salary is likely a key component to overall job satisfaction. When paired with other interventions that increase workplace satisfaction among teachers, increasing pay could help improve working conditions for educators.⁵⁰

Making teacher pay commensurate with the pay of other similarly educated professionals could also decrease teacher turnover, which 2010 research showed has a negative effect on student achievement.⁵¹ Even modest increases in teacher salary are correlated with lower teacher turnover.⁵² With increased pay, teachers would also be less likely to need second jobs for sustainable income,⁵³ giving them more time, energy, and attention to devote to their students and classrooms.

The teaching workforce suffers when a large pool of college-educated talent avoids a teaching career because of salary concerns. One study found that students at highly selective undergraduate institutions were less likely to choose public interest jobs with lower pay if they had student loan debt.⁵⁴ This same study found that student loan debt influenced students' decisions about working in education.⁵⁵ Student loan debt may present a particular barrier for first-generation college students and students of color who could be interested in the teaching profession. CAP research has found that Black and Latinx teacher candidates are more likely than their white peers to borrow federal student loans for their undergraduate and graduate education.⁵⁶ And students with student loan debt are more likely to pursue careers with higher pay.⁵⁷

Conversely, higher salaries can be an incentive to attract people to the teaching profession and increase the quality of the candidate pool.⁵⁸ There is an established body of research that indicates salaries have a positive effect on the quality and quantity of teachers within the candidate pool.⁵⁹ In addition, one study found that teachers who have left the field altogether would consider returning if they received a salary increase.⁶⁰

Research suggests that increasing teacher salaries could also be an effective tool for recruiting applicants who are more effective at raising student test scores.⁶¹ One study found that during recessions, the teacher applicant pool had higher value-added scores on standardized assessments; the researchers hypothesized this was because talented professionals had limited alternative occupational choices and thus entered the teaching profession.⁶² This supports the hypothesis that talented candidates will be more attracted to the teaching profession if higher pay is an incentive.

Increasing teachers' salaries can also decrease the chance that teachers will leave their school or the profession altogether. For example, a 1990 study found that beginner teachers who were paid more than their peers in neighboring districts stayed in the classroom longer.⁶³

Even modest salary increases can be effective at reducing teacher turnover. A 2008 study on the effects of a North Carolina state measure that offered an \$1,800 bonus to math, science, and special education teachers in struggling public schools found that the bonus helped reduce turnover.⁶⁴ A Florida study from 2015 found that modest payments of \$500 to \$1,000 per year helped reduce attrition in some high-need subjects.⁶⁵ The same study found that a one-time bonus of \$1,200 reduced teacher attrition more than loan repayments of comparable magnitude.⁶⁶

While the research on merit pay—where teachers are paid more based on evaluations of their effectiveness—is more mixed,⁶⁷ some studies do show a link between the quality of teachers whom schools are able to recruit and retain and the pay schemes that reward effectiveness rather than years of service. A Wisconsin study found that districts were able to attract more high-quality teachers when they moved from a pay model based on seniority to a flexible one that rewarded highly effective teachers.⁶⁸ District of Columbia Public Schools’ improved performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ Trial Urban District Assessment has been attributed in part to its implementation of high base salaries coupled with performance-based salary increases and bonuses.⁶⁹

Beginning in 2008, the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences sponsored a talent transfer incentive (TTI) study to test the effectiveness of monetary recruitment incentives.⁷⁰ The study offered a \$20,000 bonus to teachers who previously demonstrated success in raising student test scores if they agreed to transfer to schools in the same district that were struggling with student achievement measures.⁷¹ The TTI project differs from some of the merit pay examples listed above both because of the high dollar amounts offered and because high-performing teachers, not educators perhaps unfamiliar with the district, were selected to transfer to other schools within a district that were struggling with achievement measures. This project found an increase in math and reading scores where highly effective educators were transferred.⁷² Average math scores of students increased from the 48th percentile compared with the rest of the district to the 32nd percentile. Average math scores increased from the 46th percentile to the 35th percentile.

At focus group sessions hosted by CAP in both Arizona and Mississippi, participants noted the need for increased pay to improve working conditions for educators. In Maricopa, Arizona, one teacher participant stated, “That concept of teacher pay does play a huge role in how teachers are perceived.”⁷³ Another teacher participant stated, “My husband doesn’t have any college, and he makes three times what I make, which makes me really sad because we invest all this time and money in our education and then we get this job that to me just deserves respect. We’re teaching our future whatever, presidents, doctors, etc.”⁷⁴ A parent stated, “When we’re talking about teacher turnover, pay is definitely a factor. . . . In this district, we have teachers that are in need of [the] food bank.”⁷⁵ Similar sentiments were expressed in the focus group sessions CAP hosted in Clarksdale, Mississippi. One parent and teacher expressed interest in applying for a manager’s position at a local McDonald’s because the pay was better. Hearing directly from educators, the authors learned that low pay was a concern with real consequences for teachers’ ability to provide for their families. Increasing salaries would provide these teachers with the financial stability they need to stay in the teaching profession.

Salary is an important component of any employee's experience at work, including how they perceive their working conditions. The teacher pay penalty makes it difficult to attract new talent to the teaching profession and can serve as a source of discontent or even hardship for educators. Increasing pay for teachers working in schools that predominantly serve students from families with low incomes and schools that predominantly serve students of color has the potential to improve the quality of teaching in the highest-need schools.

Current working conditions fail to support excellent instruction

This subsection addresses the working conditions that contribute to teacher job satisfaction. It outlines the importance of working conditions for all employees and then addresses the specific conditions that are relevant to teacher job satisfaction and student achievement. These include professional development, training, and instructional support; leadership and career ladder opportunities; and school culture and climate.

Working conditions are a key factor in job satisfaction for all employees, including teachers. It is well established in organizational psychology that there is a positive correlation between employee happiness,⁷⁶ morale,⁷⁷ and job performance. Employees who feel disconnected from their work are more likely to actively look for other opportunities.⁷⁸ Improving working conditions for teachers can be expected, then, to not only increase teacher recruitment and decrease teacher turnover but also improve outcomes for students.

Employees are more likely to find meaning and purpose in their work when they feel that the organization's values match their own.⁷⁹ As a whole, teachers are in a service-oriented profession that already provides a sense of meaning; however, this could be leading teachers to accept working conditions that employees in other industries would not tolerate. For example, in a 2015 American Federation of Teachers survey of 30,000 educators, 73 percent indicated that they found work stressful, and 45 percent said that they "do not get adequate bathroom breaks."⁸⁰ While many aspects of teacher working conditions will always be different from those of educated professionals in other fields, teachers deserve to have their working conditions taken seriously and made comparable where possible.

Studies have found that working conditions and teachers' perceptions of their working conditions strongly influence teacher attrition.⁸¹ As discussed above, schools serving large percentages of students from families with low incomes and large percentages of students of color have higher rates of teacher turnover.⁸² Yet one study

found that teacher attrition was lower in schools where teachers rated their working conditions highly, even though the schools served a higher proportion of students from families with low incomes and students of color.⁸³ Research shows that training, professional development, and instructional support have the biggest impact on teacher job satisfaction. By improving these working conditions and increasing salaries, schools with the highest rates of turnover can become some of the best places for teachers to work.

Teachers in high-needs schools deserve better training and supports

Training, professional development, and instructional supports are important for ensuring that teachers feel supported and mentored in their working environment, ultimately improving learning outcomes for students. Research indicates that certain strategies—such as low-stakes coaching, job-embedded professional development, mentorship and induction programs, meaningful career ladders, and pools of qualified substitute teachers—contribute to teacher job satisfaction and are ultimately effective at increasing teacher retention.

Regular and frequent low-stakes coaching

Regular and frequent low-stakes coaching—or coaching that is not tied to disciplinary measures—can provide teachers with better overall support and job satisfaction. Research shows that learning from instructional coaches for professional development increases a teacher’s knowledge and improves their classroom instruction.⁸⁴ A meta-analysis of the causal effect of teacher coaching on instructional practice and student achievement found that coaching had positive effects on teachers’ instructional practice.⁸⁵ This analysis also found that teacher coaching had a positive effect on student achievement.⁸⁶ Other studies support teacher coaching from colleagues who work in the same school as a form of peer learning. One study found that when a teacher begins working with higher-performing colleagues, their own performance improves.⁸⁷ Teachers who are struggling with performance can benefit substantially from partnering with a higher-performing colleague at their school, and their students ultimately benefit as well.⁸⁸

One study found that teachers of “students with emotional or behavioral disorders” were more likely to leave the profession when they felt that they had received far less support and assistance than they need from their supervisor and peers and from the parents of students.⁸⁹ Teachers need an environment where they can learn from their peers and collaborate to become more effective in the classroom, which ultimately benefits students by giving them more effective teachers.

Evidence-based, job-embedded professional development

Teachers should receive professional development that provides them with the tools necessary to be better educators. In a national survey, Educators for Excellence found that half of the teachers surveyed rated their professional development experiences as only “somewhat effective” in improving their instruction.⁹⁰ Similarly, only 21 percent of the teachers surveyed rated the professional development they received as “very effective” in improving their teaching.⁹¹

In an analysis of national public school teacher data, the Economic Policy Institute found that most teachers are not highly satisfied with their professional development experiences.⁹² The study found that only 50 percent of teachers have release time from teaching for professional development, and only 28 percent received reimbursement for conference and workshop fees.⁹³ Furthermore, a TNTTP survey of teachers and school leaders found that teachers feel they are not getting clear information about their strengths and weaknesses to improve their instruction.⁹⁴ Half of the teachers surveyed did not think the assistance they were receiving helped them improve their practice.⁹⁵ These surveys illustrate that teachers want quality professional development experiences and need support to engage in learning that improves their practice.

The Learning Policy Institute identified seven common design elements of highly effective professional development systems that increase student achievement,⁹⁶ including engaging teachers in collaboration, providing expert coaching and support, and setting consistent, sustained program duration that included additional professional development days.⁹⁷ Teachers should have professional development experiences that are relevant to their classrooms and tailored to their professional needs. Professional development should be consistently embedded in the coaching that teachers receive, while providing adequate time for teachers to learn and implement new strategies.

National Board Certification is an example of evidence-based professional development that was created to develop, retain, and recognize accomplished teachers.⁹⁸ Research has shown that National Board Certification teachers produce an additional six to eight weeks of student learning⁹⁹ and are particularly effective as instructors of high-need students as measured by the FRPL program.¹⁰⁰ Implementing such programs with proven results is one effective way to improve professional development for educators.

High-quality mentorship and induction programs for new teachers

Before teachers enter the classroom, they must be properly prepared for the learning environment that they will encounter. New teachers are more likely to be assigned to schools that have high turnover, so training new teachers appropriately is one strategy to increase student achievement.¹⁰¹ Through induction and training programs, teachers can receive the guidance they need to ensure that their entrance into the classroom is positive and productive. In a survey conducted by Educators for Excellence, only 1 in 10 teachers felt that educator preparation programs in colleges prepare teacher candidates for the realities of the classroom “very well.”¹⁰² This same survey found that 88 percent of teachers believe teacher preparation programs are falling short on preparing teachers for the classroom.¹⁰³

Particularly for teachers of color, quality mentorship from more senior teachers and induction programs can mean the difference between staying in the teaching profession and leaving. Research shows that teachers of color move schools or leave the profession at a higher rate than their white peers.¹⁰⁴ In a 2019 report from The Education Trust and Teach Plus that asked teachers of color what could be done to keep them in the classroom,¹⁰⁵ one major takeaway was that they felt their working conditions lacked the supports they needed to grow as professionals.¹⁰⁶ These educators also felt that principals should create formal and informal opportunities for their mentorship.¹⁰⁷ It is especially important that teachers of color are supported through mentorship to ensure that they feel supported in the school environment.

In addition to mentoring, teacher induction programs can better prepare teachers for the classroom and increase retention. Studies have found a strong link between participation in an induction program and reduced rates of turnover.¹⁰⁸ Studies also show that teacher induction programs, such as those offered by the New Teacher Center, can increase student achievement. The New Teacher Center is a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve student learning by increasing the effectiveness of new teachers, experienced teachers, and school leaders.¹⁰⁹ Overall, students taught by teachers enrolled in New Teacher Center programs experience two to five months of additional learning in math and two to four months of additional learning in English language arts and reading.¹¹⁰ New Teacher Center programs focus on job-embedded individual observation and feedback as well as high-quality trained instructional mentors with small caseloads.¹¹¹

A CAP national survey of school districts’ human capital practices found that most schools do not provide new teachers with mentoring and onboarding experiences that substantively build new skills critical to their work.¹¹² Providing new teachers with an induction program that pairs mentorship and collaboration with targeted feedback, sustained throughout their first year, can contribute positively to teacher retention and student achievement.

Meaningful career ladders that provide leadership opportunities and suitable pay
A working environment that provides teachers with career ladders and opportunities to advance in leadership with pay increases may improve teacher retention. In a survey conducted by Educators for Excellence, 89 percent of surveyed teachers indicated that “career ladders would make them more likely to stay in teaching.”¹¹³

Career ladders can be an attractive employment benefit for effective teachers who want to grow and develop in their career. Opportunities for leadership can make the difference for teachers who are unsure about staying in the profession.¹¹⁴ Research shows that new teachers want opportunities for leadership.¹¹⁵ A five-year longitudinal study discovered that teachers were more willing to stay in schools with high turnover when they were given opportunities to mentor new or struggling teachers by serving as department chairs.¹¹⁶ Another study found that teachers who led professional learning and contributed to the professional community were more likely to stay in education.¹¹⁷ In a CAP focus group session in Jackson, Mississippi, educators said that opportunities to grow were a determining factor in their careers.¹¹⁸ One educator stated, “I left [in] January, because I knew in that school district that [there would be] no growth. ... So I decided to go into charter because it was a better opportunity to go outside the state, and the growth was there for me.”¹¹⁹

Providing teachers with career ladders also has a direct effect on student learning outcomes. The Teach Plus T3 initiative, which trains effective and experienced teachers to become teacher leaders in high-need schools,¹²⁰ found some early gains, including improved schoolwide scores in math and English language arts for schools participating in the program.¹²¹ One study found that students perform better on state tests when their teacher has a leadership role in decision-making.¹²² This study found that schools ranked 20 percentile points higher in English language arts when teachers had a larger role in improvement planning.

Public Impact’s Opportunity Culture initiative has also achieved positive results for teachers and students. This program offers paid residencies to prepare teachers who have demonstrated high student learning growth to become teacher leaders.¹²³ These teachers lead small coaching teams of other teachers within their school and take formal accountability for students’ achievement results.¹²⁴ On the coaching teams, they are responsible for setting goals, establishing lessons, monitoring data, and coaching other teachers.¹²⁵ Analysis by the Brookings Institution found statistically significant learning improvements for students in schools with Opportunity Culture teachers.¹²⁶

Preparing the most effective teachers for leadership with career ladders and providing them additional opportunities for growth increases teacher retention and leads to positive outcomes for students. A school with embedded career ladders can be a great place for teachers to work, providing them with opportunities to expand their abilities and support to increase their effectiveness.

Pools of trained substitute teachers

Similar to employees in other fields, teachers need time off work for sick days and doctor's appointments and to take care of sick relatives. But sometimes this can be difficult, as the nature of their job means that a substitute or other adult needs to fill in for them. An adequate pool of trained substitute teachers who are prepared to take over a teacher's classroom without interruption to the student learning process would greatly improve teachers' working conditions.

A 2018 study found that employees who were encouraged to take vacation reported being happy in their jobs at higher rates than employees who were not encouraged to do so, at 68 percent and 42 percent, respectively.¹²⁷ Research also indicates that employees consider paid time off to be one of the most important benefits their employer offers.¹²⁸ A Harvard Business School study found that employee leave policies were more directly related to job satisfaction than additional salary.¹²⁹

In a CAP focus group session in Phoenix, Arizona, students expressed the need for trained substitutes to increase continuity when teachers are absent or leave altogether.¹³⁰ One student stated, "I believe that there should be more substitutes qualified for it, or more prepared. My precalc [precalculus] teacher, he [is] a really great teacher. But the thing is that—the only downfall of it—is that he misses, he misses a lot. Well, he teaches us, but then he leaves us things that sometimes we have to teach ourselves. We have to go on YouTube and learn it by ourselves." Students in this focus group session also expressed that they face difficulty in adjusting to a new teacher's style when their prior teacher leaves.

Research shows that there is a correlation between chronically absent teachers and low student achievement.¹³¹ One 2008 study found that 10 additional days of teacher absence—or 10 days of discretionary time off after teachers have used the days provided in their contract—decreased students' math achievement.¹³² The Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection even uses teacher chronic absenteeism to measure the quality of education that students receive.¹³³ Moreover, multiple studies make a connection between teacher absence and job-related stress.¹³⁴ It is possible that

schools where teachers experience higher levels of stress and an unsupportive work climate also have higher numbers of teacher absences.¹³⁵ This could create a cycle in which stress and lack of support increase teacher absenteeism.¹³⁶

Adequately trained substitutes would be prepared to teach lessons without disrupting the continuity of students' learning, giving students the stability they need and teachers the ability to take time away from work when they are sick or need to take care of critical family needs.

A strong school climate will support excellence in teaching and learning

A school environment has a collective social component that is shaped by larger social-organizational circumstances, such as students, community, and other educators.¹³⁷

Research shows that a collaborative school environment where teachers have good working relationships can improve the quality of instruction and student learning. One study found that students had increased achievement gains in math and reading in schools where teachers reported better quality collaboration.¹³⁸ Another study found that students had higher gains in math achievement when they were taught by teachers who spoke to other teachers about math and also reported a feeling of trust and closeness among their colleagues.¹³⁹ To increase student achievement, it is important to leverage the human and social capital already available within the school building.

For students, a positive school climate that supports learning and collaboration has been associated with increased motivation to learn, decreased absenteeism, and lower rates of suspension.¹⁴⁰ School climate can also affect teacher turnover, student learning, and overall school performance.¹⁴¹ The working environment and climate within a school is shaped by the relationships among teachers, administrators, students, and the community.¹⁴² A school environment that engages the community, while providing a supportive space for teachers and students, can be a great place for teachers to work and students to learn. One study found that improved indicators of school climate were associated with “an extra month and a half of math instruction and, in some cases, a 25 percent reduction in teacher turnover.”¹⁴³

A high-functioning school environment is necessary to provide teachers with the working conditions that enable them to do their jobs well as well as support student learning. This kind of learning environment takes into account the broader needs of

students, teachers, and communities. The evidence-based school climate supports discussed in the following subsections can help increase student achievement and decrease teacher turnover.

Effective instructional leaders

Leaders, principals, and other administrators play an important role in creating high-quality learning environments for students and better working conditions for teachers. A positive school climate needs a high-performing instructional leader invested in creating the kinds of teaching and learning conditions that support teachers in doing their jobs well. Just as all leaders have a role to play in setting the tone for an organization, creating a welcoming school environment is one of the responsibilities of a school leader. Principals who function as strong instructional leaders play a critical role in creating a learning culture within their school.¹⁴⁴

While teachers have the greatest influence on students, instructional leaders play a strong role in students' academic achievement.¹⁴⁵ School leaders who intentionally create safe and supportive school environments for students have the power to increase student achievement.¹⁴⁶ Studies have found that students' perceptions of their learning environment are related to academic achievement.¹⁴⁷ Principals most directly affect student achievement by creating a school culture that prioritizes learning and sets high expectations for all students.¹⁴⁸

Principals also affect student achievement by hiring and retaining high-quality teachers.¹⁴⁹ Research shows that teacher turnover is lower in schools that are led by highly effective principals.¹⁵⁰ School climate can improve student achievement, as well as parents' perceptions about whether they are welcome in the learning environment, by creating an inclusive school environment for students, teachers, and parents and by retaining effective educators.

Ensuring a positive workplace culture for teachers is also important. Such workplaces are more successful and productive in the long run because they increase the well-being of employees and foster positive emotions about the workplace.¹⁵¹ Employee job satisfaction in turn is directly related to turnover and absenteeism.¹⁵² One study of the hospitality industry found more burnout in organizations with minimal teamwork and more tightly held control.¹⁵³

Similarly, research on productive school culture indicates that schools need strong leaders who promote trust, on-the-job learning, innovation, and adaptation to change.¹⁵⁴ One study found that principals were able to build leadership capacity among teachers by creating a school culture built upon positive relationships.¹⁵⁵

Another study found that schools characterized by less safety and less respect are perceived by parents and students to have fewer opportunities for involvement and communication.¹⁵⁶

In a CAP focus group session with parents in Clarksdale, Mississippi, participants expressed the importance of a strong school leader in creating an inclusive school climate for students, teachers, and parents.¹⁵⁷ One parent stated, “It’s gonna take a really strong building administrator to be in support of the teachers. Everybody needs to be on one accord.”¹⁵⁸ In a focus group session with parents in Phoenix, Arizona, parents discussed the disruption that occurs when the school leadership changes frequently.¹⁵⁹ One parent teacher stated, “We’ve gone through leadership changes every year for the past four years . . . which kind of makes students and staff feel like we’re just a stepping stone for the next whatever . . . for that person.”¹⁶⁰

As the job of instructional leader is complex and challenging, principals and teachers alike can benefit from a distributed leadership model. This leadership model focuses on the practice of shared, collective, and extended leadership that builds upon expertise at all levels of the school.¹⁶¹ It is interdependent rather than individualistic, ideally fostering trust between teachers and school leaders, generating more opportunities for change, and building better capacity for improvement.¹⁶²

Additional support staff to give teachers more time to focus on instruction
Teachers need support staff capable of assisting with classroom tasks so that they have more time to focus on providing quality instruction. Classroom support staff can assist with instruction and administrative tasks. Through assisting with classroom tasks, learning support staff can improve the individual learning experience, improve behavior management and the classroom experience, cover for teachers when they are absent, and contribute to children’s inclusion in learning.¹⁶³ The additional help will also provide teachers with more time to design effective instruction, analyze data on student learning progress, and work directly with students who need additional assistance. In a parent focus group session held in Clarksdale, Mississippi, parents expressed that teachers should have this support staff.¹⁶⁴ When asked what supports teachers need to be successful in their job, parents stated, “having an assistant in the classroom” or “at least somebody that will come in, like a volunteer, that will do your coffees, and get your drinks if you need it, watch your classroom while you go to the bathroom.”¹⁶⁵

Additional support staff would contribute to a new perspective that teachers are professionals; after all, professionals in other fields employ personnel to assist with administrative duties and protect time for their core work. For any professional, delegation is a critical time management skill that allows them to be more effective and save time while

empowering other employees to develop new skills.¹⁶⁶ In other industries, delegation is seen as an effective employee development tool and a management skill.¹⁶⁷ Teachers should have the same opportunity as professionals in other fields to delegate tasks and focus more intently on the most important aspect of their work: student learning.

Strategic recruitment of effective educators

Through intentional recruitment, school districts can ensure that they are hiring teachers who will increase student achievement. Intentional recruitment should include prioritizing diverse, experienced, and effective school staff who are committed to remaining in the school long term. These staff members must also be able to provide a culturally responsive learning environment that is targeted toward and rigorous for the students they teach.

Intentional recruitment of experienced staff members ensures that students are being taught by educators who are in the best position to help them learn. Research shows that teachers improve most in their first and second years of teaching.¹⁶⁸ As teachers gain experience, their students perform better on standardized tests and other measures of achievement.¹⁶⁹ Research also shows that experienced teachers increase the effectiveness of their colleagues and improve student outcomes across the school community.¹⁷⁰ As previously mentioned, students can gain up to a full year's worth of additional learning with a high-performing teacher over the course of a year.¹⁷¹

To create a high-quality learning environment for students, schools with high turnover must recruit effective educators. In addition to recruiting educators with experience, it is important that schools hire educators committed and able to provide culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive pedagogy centers students in teaching and incorporates their unique cultural strengths to promote their achievement.¹⁷² Some studies have found a wide range of positive outcomes linked to this form of teaching, including academic achievement and greater interest in school.¹⁷³ Ultimately, recruiting educators who are committed to culturally responsive teaching will benefit students and the overall learning environment.

School districts must also intentionally recruit a racially diverse teacher workforce that better reflects the student population. Recent research has found that increased gender and ethnic diversity among staff leads to better profits for businesses.¹⁷⁴ A diverse workforce would also produce better outcomes in the teaching profession. Research shows that all students benefit from having diverse teachers. As discussed above, students of color demonstrate greater academic achievement and social and emotional development when taught by teachers of color.¹⁷⁵

Implementation of hiring best practices

To create an environment that fosters high student achievement and increases teacher retention, schools must follow guidelines that are well established in the human resources industry. For example, job knowledge tests are useful in situations where a candidate is required to possess a body of knowledge prior to job entry.¹⁷⁶ Interviews are also an opportunity for employers to meet candidates and determine whether their skill set matches the needs of a particular role.¹⁷⁷ One study of six high-performing urban schools that served a large proportion of students from families with low incomes found that all of the schools treated hiring as a two-way process.¹⁷⁸ Both parties to the process had opportunities to exchange information and make an assessment of one another before extending an offer or signing a contract.¹⁷⁹ A hiring process that includes interview tasks and allows time to properly match a candidate with a school can effectively attract high-quality teachers.

In a national survey, Educators for Excellence found that 98 percent of teachers agreed with the perspective that potential teachers should demonstrate “the knowledge and skills necessary to teach” before they are licensed and certified.¹⁸⁰ Prior CAP research found that many school districts hired candidates without first observing their teaching skills.¹⁸¹ During the hiring process, administrators should use performance-based tasks such as teaching a sample lesson to assess candidates’ teaching style and management techniques.¹⁸² Particularly for teachers of color, using multiple measures of qualification, such as performance-based tasks, during the hiring process can be a more accurate predictor of success in the classroom than relying solely on resumes and interviews.¹⁸³ Such tasks allow teacher candidates to demonstrate their skills and school districts to determine which candidates have the skills they need.

High expectations for students

Schools that are successful in maximizing students’ learning gains have high expectations for students and commit to increasing student achievement.¹⁸⁴ Research found that students from certain ethnic groups performed poorly in classrooms where teachers held implicit negative attitudes towards their group; these attitudes were associated with larger achievement gaps within the classroom.¹⁸⁵ Another study found that teachers demanded better performance from students of whom they had higher expectations and were more likely to accept poor performance from students of whom they had lower expectations.¹⁸⁶ These teachers were also more likely to praise good performance from students of whom they held high expectations and less likely to praise good performance from students of whom they held low expectations.¹⁸⁷ This is particularly true for students with disabilities, who experience a stigma and low expectations of achievement from educators.¹⁸⁸

In a CAP focus group session with students in Clarksdale, Mississippi, participants expressed how important teacher encouragement and positivity are to their classroom performance.¹⁸⁹ One student stated, “I think encouragement is really, really important—when teachers say ‘good job’ ... or even when you get the answer completely wrong and they [say] nice try. ... I can’t stand when I’m meeting a teacher for the first time, and they’re like, ‘You’re not gonna pass my class.’ That doesn’t give any type of hope or encouragement.”¹⁹⁰ Expanding upon this sentiment, another student stated, “That sticks within a child’s mind, that one thing that a teacher could say. You never know how impactful or traumatic that could be on the student, and that one thing is what you remember and what you recall when you go in that teacher’s class.”¹⁹¹

Teachers with high expectations for students are key to increasing student achievement. A study by public policy expert Seth Gershenson found that teachers with higher grading standards raised student achievement more than teachers with lower standards.¹⁹² These teachers increased student learning by approximately 3.6 months.¹⁹³ Hiring and retaining a diverse teacher workforce is an important component of ensuring high expectations for all students, as there is evidence that same-race teachers can have higher expectations of same-race students and can increase their math and reading achievement.¹⁹⁴ A school with a culture of high expectations for students can increase achievement outcomes for students and contribute to a positive learning culture.¹⁹⁵

High-quality, content-rich curricula

A high-functioning school characterized by strong student achievement and great working conditions for teachers must also have a high-quality, content-rich curriculum, adopted with teacher input and buy-in. Research has shown that providing teachers with a high-quality curriculum has a greater return on investment than class-size reduction.¹⁹⁶ A high-quality, content-rich curriculum can have significant positive impacts on student achievement.¹⁹⁷ Teachers are the core planners of everyday classroom curricula, and as a result, they know learners best. Engaging teachers in the curriculum selection process can empower them in the content they are teaching while allowing them to contribute to the school community.¹⁹⁸

For implementation of high-quality curricula to work, however, teachers must receive aligned professional development and significant planning and collaboration time to understand the underlying content and pedagogy.¹⁹⁹ Studies show that a high-quality, content-rich curriculum is most effective where teachers work together with administrators and professional learning is tailored specifically to the curriculum.²⁰⁰

Currently, selection and implementation of a high-quality curriculum is far from the norm. In one study reviewing school math assignments, The Education Trust found that assignments had “low cognitive demand, over-emphasize procedural skills and fluency, and provide little opportunity for students to communicate their mathematical thinking.”²⁰¹ This trend was particularly acute in schools that served large proportions of students from families with low incomes,²⁰² which are also the types of schools that struggle with high turnover.²⁰³

There is also a gap in the quality of curriculum and instruction provided and in the expectations that students must meet to succeed in college or a career. In a review of school assignments in five diverse school districts, a TNTP report found a gap between the assignments that students were given and the opportunity the assignments gave them to practice a core set of grade-level-appropriate competencies.²⁰⁴ The report found that students succeeded on 71 percent of the assignments they were given but only met grade-level standards on 17 percent of those same assignments.²⁰⁵ Prior CAP analysis of curricula and instructional materials used by the 30 largest school districts in the country found that only about one-third of the materials that districts reported adopting or recommending were highly rated by EdReports—that is to say, that they met expectations for alignment with grade-level standards.²⁰⁶

Adopting a high-quality curriculum also enables teachers to provide better lessons with less planning time. Research shows that high-quality lessons have been associated with bigger boosts in student outcomes, as the lessons may lead to improved teacher performance.²⁰⁷ With the time that was once allocated to searching for lessons, teachers can focus on other aspects of their jobs. One report found that teachers in the United States spend an average of 12 hours per week searching for or creating their own materials.²⁰⁸ Removing the burden of curriculum design will allow teachers to focus on other important aspects of teaching, such as deepening their content and pedagogical knowledge and analyzing student data in order to adjust instruction.

Implementation of evidence-based instructional practices

Evidence-based instruction—a teaching approach, practice, or method informed by reliable evidence of its effectiveness—is a key component of effective teaching and student achievement.²⁰⁹ Schools should commit to implementing evidence-based instruction with the expectation that teachers understand and are ready to apply well-established practices that increase student achievement.

Evidence-based instruction includes the science of learning, the science of reading, culturally responsive pedagogy, and other aspects of teaching that research indicates improve student learning. The science of learning refers to an educational approach

that “recognizes the value and importance of cross-fertilization across traditional fields of study, drawing on many different methods and techniques to understand how learning occurs.”²¹⁰ Research into the science of reading, meanwhile, shows that all students can learn to read if their reading instruction is grounded in the converging scientific evidence about how reading develops, why many students have difficulties, and how reading failure can be prevented.²¹¹ It is important for educators to be trained in implementing these evidence-based instructional techniques.

In 2012, the Institute of Education Sciences’ What Works Clearinghouse published an evidence-based practice guide on teaching elementary students to be effective writers.²¹² The guide offers four recommendations: 1) “provide daily time for students to write”; 2) “teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes”; 3) “teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing”; and 4) “create an engaged community of writers.”²¹³ These recommendations can serve as a tool for to educators looking to implement evidence based practices.

School-based supports that meet children’s and families’ nonacademic needs

Even a school with great working conditions for teachers and a positive learning environment for students needs strong supports to help it and the community thrive. Research has found that school district investment in comprehensive academic, health, nutrition, and emotional support can help address opportunity gaps and improve academic outcomes, particularly for students from families with low incomes.²¹⁴

Research supports using school-based behavioral health interventions to improve academic outcomes for students, such as services provided by specialized instructional support personnel.²¹⁵ Currently, the term “specialized instructional support personnel” refers to nonclassroom educators such as school counselors, psychologists, social workers, speech language pathologists, and others²¹⁶ who help remove learning barriers for students and assess their individual strengths and talents.²¹⁷ They provide support to students who need it and assist teachers in meeting students’ needs.

In CAP focus groups hosted in Mississippi, educators mentioned the need for additional classroom support to address behavioral matters that distract from instruction. With behavioral and mental health supports in the school environment, teachers can spend more time focusing on instruction and students will have the support they need.

Schools can also extend such supports to the broader community by providing resources such as language courses, counseling, and social services to families.²¹⁸

During focus groups in Clarksdale, Mississippi, one administrator suggested that offering free laundry services at the school could increase parent engagement. Creating space for parents in the overall school community would help them feel included. This level of parent engagement and community support from schools would help ensure that students' basic needs are met and that they come to school ready to learn. It would also provide teachers with more time to focus on teaching and learning, as they would no longer need to act as informal social workers and take time out of their workday to help students find the social service resources that they require. These kinds of programs must be implemented with an intentional mission and an understanding that producing better learning outcomes for students is the main priority.

How to implement CAP's Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program

The purpose of CAP's Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence proposal is to create near-ideal teacher working conditions in schools that have historically had the most difficulty attracting and retaining teachers. Ultimately, the hope is that improved working conditions would make these schools great places for students to learn, providing a supportive and engaging environment and improving outcomes for student development, learning, and achievement. Better working conditions will also help these schools attract and retain excellent, experienced teachers so that they no longer have difficulty filling vacancies; are not overreliant on substitutes or teachers who are not fully certified; or do not see teachers leave midyear or after only a short time for jobs in better-run schools with higher pay. This section details this proposal and provides information about implementing and evaluating it. The proposal is described as a federal program, but it could also be implemented at the state level.

Application and eligibility criteria

In order to create improved teacher worker conditions in traditionally hard-to-staff schools, the program would consist of two types of competitive grants: districtwide grants and school-based grants. Local education agencies (LEAs) or consortia of LEAs would be the recipients of and fiscal agents for both types of grants, but the funds for each type would be used differently.

Districtwide grants would provide funding for districts with a high proportion of schools experiencing difficulty attracting and retaining good teachers, high turnover, and/or persistent low achievement. School-based grants would target a school or schools within a district that is experiencing the issues described above acutely, even if the rest of the district is not experiencing the same issues.

To be eligible for this program, the schools within the district expected to receive funding would have to serve students whose families earn low incomes. Other eligibility criteria include additional factors affecting school needs and teacher working conditions, including socioeconomic opportunities in the broader community,

student achievement and attendance, teacher turnover, difficulty filling vacancies, and vacancies disproportionately filled by substitute teachers or teachers who are not fully certified.

The Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program would be voluntary, and applications should demonstrate that the school and community receiving the funds are committed to making the changes and shifts in practice described below. The program should not be implemented using a top-down approach or required by districts, as it is meant to provide funding for communities that believe the approach described will work for them. As part of the application process, therefore, districts would need to work with participating schools to apply to the program after soliciting input and buy-in from educators, students, parents, and other relevant community stakeholders.

How the program would work

Schools and districts could use program funds in a variety of ways to support improved conditions for teaching and learning in schools that currently have difficulty attracting and retaining great teachers. The activities and uses of funds described below are based on the research and evidence base detailed earlier in this report.

District activities

Districts that receive grants would receive a set-aside for districtwide activities, the amount of which would be determined by the number of students served in participating schools within the district.

Districtwide activities could include providing support to participating schools for recruitment and hiring as well as teacher training and professional development. As a requirement of receiving the funds, districts may institute a planning grant year to get input and buy-in from key stakeholders, assess any union negotiations that may be affected by planned changes, and think through in greater depth the ways that schools can use funding from the program.

School activities

The majority of funds from the grant program will flow through the district to participating schools. At the school level, there are some shifts in policy and practice that must occur as part of receiving a grant. These center around improving teacher working conditions in ways that benefit student learning and reflect the research described in previous sections:

- **Providing professional salaries:** High base teacher salaries must at least match the average earnings of other college-educated professionals in the area. Schools must also provide opportunities for leadership and advancement as well as increased pay for experienced, accomplished, and effective teachers.
- **Improving recruitment and hiring practices:** Districts and schools should engage in the intentional recruitment of a racially, linguistically, and gender diverse, experienced, and effective school staff committed to remaining in the school long term; in hiring or training experienced, high-performing instructional leaders invested in creating a strong teaching and learning environment, including through a distributed leadership model;²¹⁹ in the implementation of hiring best practices, including asking teachers to deliver a lesson to students as part of the application process; and in the prioritization and assessment of applicants' ability to provide culturally sustaining instruction for the specific community or communities that schools serve.
- **Investing in high-quality, intensive teacher training and development:** There should be a schoolwide commitment to implementing evidence-based instruction, including an expectation that teachers understand and apply the sciences of reading and learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, and other pedagogical methods supported by research; regular and frequent but low-stakes coaching from instructional coaches who also have teaching responsibilities within the school; extensive induction and training for all teachers new to the school; schoolwide mentorship and professional development to train and support teachers in shifts to schoolwide practice; and career ladders and meaningful leadership opportunities within the school for experienced teachers who excel.
- **Structuring and staffing schools to recognize teachers' professionalism and the demands on their time:** This includes having high expectations for student learning growth across the school and hiring only experienced teachers with a proven track record as lead teachers in eligible schools; providing high-quality, historically accurate, and content-rich curricula that teachers implement with training and support, which will allow them to reduce the time needed to develop or search for curricular materials; providing aides, co-teachers, or resident teachers in classrooms who take on some of the administrative duties often given to teachers, such as grading, recording grades, and decorating classrooms to free up teachers' time for core duties such as building relationships with students and parents and delivering grade-level content; and having an adequate pool of trained substitute teachers so that teachers are able to take time off work for sick days or doctor's appointments without affecting students' learning trajectories.

Participating schools should also make changes that improve their climate and learning conditions in order to create better working and learning environments for teachers and students. They should consider:

- **Fostering a warm and welcoming school culture and community** for teachers, students, and parents. This could include developing a thoughtful plan for designing the school's rituals and traditions, supporting students, and welcoming parents. Teachers should also have the ability to implement culturally responsive and affirming instruction.
- **Building and sustaining partnerships with teacher preparation programs** to better equip teachers to teach in grantee schools. This partnership could include training student teachers in participating schools, adjusting curricula and practice in preparation programs to better align it with schools' needs, and recruiting from these preparation programs for teaching positions in the district. The partnership could be entered into with local preparation programs or programs identified as feeder preparation programs.
- **Providing strong supports for students**, including:
 - Sufficient mental health supports and personnel to serve the needs of schools
 - Holistic supports, with the needs determined by schools and communities
 - Schoolwide behavioral supports that balance the needs of students and teachers and prioritize positive relationships and positive school culture—for example, employing restorative practices, which is an approach to school discipline that avoids punishment and focuses on community building, reflection, and restoring harms²²⁰
 - Assistance in meeting the basic needs of parents or families, including housing, health care, and laundry facilities
 - If applicable, assistance in meeting the basic needs of teachers, such as housing subsidies, child care assistance, or debt relief

How the program should be implemented

This program envisions a drastically different way of organizing schools, centered around providing supports for teachers so that they are able to meet high expectations for driving student learning. As with any major shift in how an organization runs, moving toward schools that operate this way will be a transition that involves some adjustment. However, it is important to keep upheaval and turmoil to a minimum during implementation of this program to avoid detracting from the goal of creating a more productive and supportive working and learning environment.

Additionally, experience from previous reform movements, such as those around school desegregation and standards-based reform, shows that disruptive implementation of new programs can have detrimental effects on students and be an additional source of trauma for communities that have already experienced too much of it.²²¹ Therefore, during implementation of this program, there will be no school closures, school takeovers, or firing of significant portions of staff. The following subsections provide suggestions for ways in which participating districts and schools can work together to minimize upheaval during the transition period while also ensuring meaningful changes in practice.

Start with community engagement

The first and most important step of a smooth implementation will be to engage with communities within and outside the school. Getting their feedback during the early planning stages and building that feedback into the proposed policy solutions will help bolster community support for the transition and help ensure that the proposed changes work in specific community contexts.

Create a modified voluntary talent transfer initiative

Voluntary talent transfer initiatives offer teachers incentives to voluntarily transfer to different schools within and outside their district. Schools that have used this initiative found that it correlated with improvements in both teacher quality, as measured by teacher evaluations, and student outcomes for high-poverty schools.²²² In CAP's grant program, teachers who volunteer to transfer to participating schools should be offered a large salary increase determined by the school district. Additionally, they would be expected to buy into the culture and structure of their new school, which may be different than what they have experienced in previous teaching positions. One advantage of this option is that it is more gradual than other implementation methods. Therefore, the transition may feel smoother for students and families. The downside to this option is that it would likely take several years for teachers who are transferring to these schools to become the plurality. The gradual nature of this implementation option may present some difficulties in fully transitioning to the kind of school described above, particularly if there are faculty and staff who remain that have not bought in to these changes.

Offer exit bonuses

This idea is borrowed from a method that some companies use to ensure that employees buy in to their company culture.²²³ In the context of the grant program, it could mean informing school staff throughout the school year of what changes are coming the following year. At the end of the current school year, schools would

provide teachers and other staff members the option of leaving, with a generous severance, if they do not feel the changes and the new school culture are the right fit for them. One downside to this option is that it could create a more chaotic school environment during the transition months than some of the other options.

How the program should be evaluated

After three to five years, grantees in the program should conduct an evaluation to determine whether it has improved teacher working conditions, teacher effectiveness, and student learning. The evaluation should incorporate metrics such as:

- An implementation evaluation of the process of transitioning the school as part of the grant as well as any lessons learned
- Student achievement and growth on standardized assessments as well as disaggregated outcomes for economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups as defined by the state for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), students with disabilities, and English language learners as well as by gender
- Other measures of student engagement, achievement, and educational attainment, such as graduation rates, attendance rates, performance on local assessments, or surveys of student engagement
- Participating teachers', participating administrators', and parents' satisfaction with the policy changes
- Teacher turnover rates once the program has been fully implemented, along with other measures of teacher engagement, such as teacher attendance and teacher performance such as teacher evaluation scores
- The professional qualifications of teachers in the school, the percentage of teachers teaching with emergency or provisional credentials, and the percentage of classes in the school taught by teachers who are not fully certified

Finally, a national evaluation of the program should measure the above metrics for all participating schools as well as whether the program has had a broader impact on other, nonparticipating schools within districts and on teacher working conditions in

other districts that did not receive the grant funding. Schools would not be penalized for failure to meet specific achievement metrics, but considering broader impact would allow policymakers to measure the magnitude of what this program can achieve.

Options for integrating Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence into federal policy

Policymakers could integrate the competitive grants into federal education policy in several ways. The first option would be to create an entirely new competitive grant program within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Funds for a new program could be authorized through a new section of ESEA or could be structured as a set-aside or portion of ESEA Title II Part A dollars with a concomitant increase in funding for the program. Title II Part A is a funding stream already dedicated to preparing, training, and recruiting teachers and principals.

A second option for including the Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program in ESEA would be to replace the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program (TSL), formerly known as the Teacher Incentive Fund, with the grant program through a different but related theory of change. TSL has historically been focused on performance-based compensation, the research for which is decidedly mixed,²²⁴ but has evolved to also incorporate implementation and improvement of human capital management systems as possible uses for its funds. TSL was designed to serve educators in high-need schools with the intention of raising academic achievement, but it lacks the CAP proposal's focus on teacher working conditions. Given the lackluster research basis for performance-based compensation, this shift may be a welcome one for policymakers and grantees alike.

Conclusion

All students deserve access to great educators. Unfortunately, the U.S. K-12 system has significant gaps when it comes to access to great teaching. Schools that serve mostly students from families with low incomes and students of color are more likely to struggle with high teacher turnover. This consistent turnover negatively affects the student learning environment, leading to lower achievement outcomes for students and lower morale for teachers. The purpose of the Targeted Grants for Educational Excellence program is to provide resources to schools that need them the most, with direction on how best to retain great teachers. Implementing such a program would enable schools and districts to improve teachers' working conditions and job satisfaction and incentivize talented teachers to stay in their roles.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

