



# Teacher Quality

## EDUCATION POLICY BRIEFING SHEET

### Improving Teacher Quality and Distribution

Teaching matters. Research evidence is persuasive that students benefit from high quality instruction, and that for students who have had good teachers several years in a row, the effect is cumulative. There are many outstanding teachers among the 3.7 million working in America’s public schools. However, not enough teachers are effective, especially in the schools that serve large numbers of poor and minority children. Labeling teachers as “highly qualified” because they have earned a degree or completed a training program does not in fact make them highly qualified. Instead, as a nation we need policies and programs that bring academically talented and diverse recruits into teaching and help them to succeed. And, we need policies and programs to retain and reward effective early career teachers.

**Recommendation: States, school districts, and the federal government should continue to experiment with a variety of teacher recruitment programs, while collecting data to be used to improve those that are promising and end those that are not.**

Innovative alternative routes into teaching have emerged over the past 10 years. Although most teachers still enter teaching by attending university-based training programs, a growing number of new teachers have no formal background in education, including people who are making mid-career changes and those who majored in other fields in college. Limited evidence about these alternative routes suggests that streamlining the process of becoming a teacher can increase the applicant pool, especially in such hard-to-staff areas as special education, science, and mathematics. Forty-seven states and the District of Columbia

offer one or more alternative pathways, and New Jersey, Texas, and California hire more than a third of their new teachers from this pool.

Although the nation now has diverse routes into teaching, there is still no clear evidence about which routes produce the best results for student learning. The urgent question we now face is how to effectively support new entrants to the profession—regardless of how they enter the field. Researchers find considerable variation in the backgrounds of individuals in each program, the types of schools in which they teach, the amount of training they receive, and the cost of the programs, both between and within alternative and more traditional certification programs. Policy, funding streams, and evaluation research should hold all entry paths to the same high standards for producing effective teachers as measured by student achievement—whether the programs are within schools of education, run by school districts, or operated by non-profit entities.

**Recommendation: States and the federal government should continue to fund experiments that examine the full range of possibilities designed to increase teacher retention, including salary incentives for successful teachers, improvements in working conditions and school culture, and mentoring and professional development.**

Although recruiting teachers and giving them early career support are crucial for improving teaching, retaining teachers and assuring that they are distributed among the schools that need them most are also of great concern. At some schools, turnover is so great

that most of the teachers at any particular moment are new to the field or to the school. Attracting and maintaining a stable faculty of qualified teachers at schools serving many low-income, low-performing, and minority students is particularly difficult, even when incentives are available. Financial incentives such as bonuses may attract teachers initially, but many quickly move on when their obligation is over. We need to find the financial and other incentives that will induce good teachers to stay in schools where they are most needed.

Studies show that good hiring, dismissal, and promotion policies can improve the quality of the teacher workforce. In some cases, strict seniority provisions of contracts may need to be renegotiated to make it easier to maintain stable faculties in high-need schools. State policy can also help in this regard. In addition, more rigorous early evaluation policies are needed. Few teachers are dismissed for poor performance; yet, a recent study shows that the performance of a teacher during the first two years on the job predicts later career effectiveness. Decisions about whether to retain or dismiss an individual teacher must be based on a

combination of both objective measures and subjective evaluation, as neither provides a complete picture of how well a teacher is performing.

Research shows that promising new teachers leave inner city schools when their salaries are lower (relative to suburban school districts), when principal leadership is weak, when working conditions are chaotic, and when instructional resources are lacking. There is some evidence that professional development and mentoring can reduce turnover of new teachers, but we have limited information as to which characteristics of mentoring matter the most. We know that thoughtful induction policies matter as well. Rigorous planned variation experiments that systematically evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches are needed on ways to improve these teacher supports in the most challenging school settings.

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