

Improving Teacher Performance: What the Feds Can (and Can't) Do

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The nation faces serious teacher quality problems including recruitment (in some areas), an overall lack of effective teachers who consistently improve achievement for low-performing students, the migration of veteran teachers away from high-poverty and high-minority schools, and a substantial percentage of middle and high school teachers teaching “out-of-field.” These are the problems that demand the immediate attention of policymakers.

To date, state and federal policy has mostly relied on pre-service education and state certification and licensure to ensure students are taught by good teachers. However, such practices are of dubious value even in weeding out those who should not be teaching, let alone in their ability to serve as accelerators to improve and maximize teacher effectiveness. Plus, the evidence base supporting the efficacy of these policies (as well as many others in education) is strikingly thin. In other words, outside of very specific subfields, there is no empirical body of evidence defining essential knowledge or skills for practitioners, or showing that current approaches to teacher quality are either adding value to teacher candidates or serving as an adequate screen for effectiveness.

In addition, once teachers enter public schools, they are greeted with a system replete with poor working conditions, cumbersome and inequitable hiring and distribution policies, and little attention to rewarding improved performance over time. In fact, the current system is largely blind to special skills, exceptional performance, or especially challenging assignments.

The way forward is to shift the focus from ensuring “highly-qualified” teachers to ensuring “highly-effective” teachers who consistently improve student achievement. Smart federal policies can help do this by funding innovation that spotlights and accelerates change at the state and district levels.

The Current Debate

Today, there is general agreement that teachers matter a great deal in student learning, but there are mainly two, sometimes divergent, schools of thought on how to increase the supply of good teachers. Although the debate does not always break down along clean binary lines, these general categories frame its outlines.

The **teacher professionalism** approach views teaching as a profession—akin to law or medicine—including formalized paths to entry and “canonical” knowledge for practitioners. Teacher professionalism embraces much of the previous teaching-standards-movement agenda, including the following:

- Increased formal education and student teaching requirements: A pre-service undergraduate or post-baccalaureate experience conducted, designed, or mediated by an institution of higher education
- Accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education for teacher preparation programs
- Increased professional development
- Restricting teachers to areas in which they are certified
- Control of the profession by professional educators who understand the unique knowledge and skills of teaching
- Professional certification of master teachers through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
- Higher teacher pay across the board
- A broad view of effective teaching, not limited to measured student performance

The **competitive certification** approach views teaching as more of a craft—such as journalism, policy analysis, or business management—and embraces a wider view of what constitutes a “profession” in today’s society. Competitive certification calls for the following:

- Reducing education coursework requirements, especially where there is no clear research evidence linking them with teacher effectiveness
- Lowering barriers wherever feasible, especially education coursework requirements, to expand the pool of prospective teachers
- Expanding alternative forms of teacher training and routes to licensure
- Increasing emphasis on content knowledge, relative to education coursework
- Increasing flexibility for local administrators and schools in teacher hiring and other personnel matters
- Narrowing the view of teacher-quality, based on measured student performance
- Increasing pay through differential or performance-based strategies to reward outstanding teachers and those with special or scarce skills, and to attract more teachers to subjects or communities in which there are shortages

Even within each camp, there are points of agreement and disagreement. For instance, some proponents of competitive certification support a greater emphasis on high-quality professional development for teachers, while some in the “professionalism” camp support differentiated pay schemes. What is vital to understand is that today’s debate is not a binary one with one side defending a status quo and the other demanding reform. Instead, it is a debate over two divergent views about what reform should look like.

The linchpin of disagreement is about what pedagogy teachers must know before setting foot in the classroom and, thus, what barriers to entry should be regulated. Second, the two camps disagree about how teachers should be treated once in the classroom, with the former urging professional development and tiered licensing and the latter arguing for evaluations and pay structures based on achievement data. However, the two camps agree on some basic points – the status quo does not ensure effective teachers; traditional teacher preparation programs are largely inadequate in preparing

teachers for low-performing schools; content knowledge matters; and practices like induction are crucial, especially for novice teachers and teachers with less preparation.

Federal Policy Options

The federal government alone cannot remedy teacher quality, which is largely in the hands of the states. The federal leverage point, at least for pre-service preparation, is small since it rests on state licensure and certification. Plus, funds for preparation programs are limited, leaving the federal government no real hook other than the highly-qualified-teacher provisions in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which themselves are a blunt instrument and highly-dependent on federal enforcement.

However, the federal government *is* well-positioned to leverage its existing investment in teacher quality (more than \$2.8 billion in FY2006 excluding smaller programs). By supporting innovative efforts in states and districts through targeted, conditional aid, federal policy can drive state-level changes, acting as a kind of catalyst to, or booster shot for, reform and better policy.

But first, the federal government can do more to *enforce existing standards* for teacher quality—namely, strengthening or possibly expanding accountability standards for teacher preparation programs in the Higher Education Act, and ensuring state compliance with NCLB's highly-qualified teacher provisions. These provisions regulate the quality of a state's teaching force, as well as the equitable distribution of qualified teachers between high- and low-poverty schools. Absent vigorous federal enforcement, these policies merely add to the accretion of bureaucracy and buttress a culture of minimal compliance.

Second, the federal government can use its investment to encourage *demonstration projects and greater innovation*. This currently happens on a small scale through grants requiring partnerships or language enabling broad allowable uses, most notably in Title II of NCLB, the large federal grant for teacher quality. The opportunity for a much more robust and focused role in supporting innovation exists, but requires some laying down of swords between camps and the building of consensus along the lines mentioned above.

In terms of teacher training, credentialing, and induction, promising ideas include: more involvement from local teachers' unions in the recruitment, hiring, and professional development of teachers; creating charter colleges of education and supporting rigorous alternative route programs; greater involvement from non-governmental and nonprofit entities in teacher training; and more sustained and coherent induction and training programs for career-switchers and new teachers. Proponents of the professionalism and competitive certification camps often quietly agree on these matters, even if not always publicly.

In terms of pay, the federal government can support innovative practice while requiring that certain conditions be met. Rigid salary schedules, based on years of service, are unfair to many effective teachers who improve learning, especially for poor students. To attract teachers to subjects and schools where their expertise is in demand, we must pay them better—not only compared with jobs in other professions, but also compared with teaching jobs in more affluent schools and in subject areas where there is no shortage. Such pay schemes not only address basic supply and demand

problems in education, but also recognize that talented young people are not attracted to jobs that reward hierarchy instead of performance, initiative, or special skills and responsibilities.

Rewarding teachers for performance remains a largely elusive goal, substantively and politically. Despite a great deal of rhetoric around the issue, evidence is largely anecdotal and theoretical, so federal policymakers would be wise to support a variety of approaches rather than prescribing a single course for states. The Teacher Incentive Fund is the way the federal government has experimented so far. The fund is limited (\$99 million in FY2006 rather than the \$500 million the president requested) so its impact will be limited, though it will provide lessons for future initiatives. Because pay-for-performance programs may introduce helpful or unhelpful incentives into education, it behooves policymakers to encourage and support innovation in this area, albeit with latitude and caution.

Finally, working conditions remain a concern. Neither exceptional preparation nor salary can overcome a chronically demoralizing or even hazardous workplace. Professionals with multiple options will simply move on from such environments to better opportunities. Federal policy is entirely too blunt and removed from the problem to tackle the more subtle issues of morale, but it can address the “wrap-around” issues tied to working conditions. It can foster induction support for new teachers, reward excellence, recruit and retain talented leadership, and provide flexibility and autonomy to persistently low-achieving schools in terms of hiring, distribution, collaboration, and targeting professional development, to subjects and areas identified by achievement data.

This raises several questions for federal policymakers to consider as policy shifts from ensuring highly-qualified to highly-*effective* teachers:

- What is the right federal role to ensure the quality of teacher preparation programs, especially when its investment in pre-service education is so small?
- What are the right measurements and mechanisms for regulating teacher candidates, and how can they ensure and encourage effective teachers?
- Banking on the focus on data, how can federal policy develop incentives to encourage the good use of teacher data systems to inform instruction and to help target professional development?
- How does the federal government get distribution right and put teeth in NCLB’s requirement that low-income and minority students receive their fair share of good teachers?
- What is the right amount of flexibility and direction to give low-performing schools so they can improve the hiring, pay, and working conditions of effective teachers?
- How can the federal government best serve as a catalyst to prod ossified state bureaucracies to change, and to promote reform in the face of a change-averse culture in education?

These are the central questions to ask when considering the federal role to improve the effectiveness of teachers.