

THE EDUCATION EQUALITY PROJECT POSITION PAPER SERIES ON IMPROVING TEACHER QUALITY

No reform is more critical to closing the nation’s shameful achievement gap than boosting the quality of teachers in high-poverty schools. Absent a large influx of better teachers for low-income minority students, every programmatic initiative to close the achievement gap will ultimately fall short. As President Obama has suggested, great teachers in inner-city schools are the unsung heroes of education reform. “The single most important factor in determining [student] achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from,” says President Obama. “It’s not who their parents are or how much money they have—it’s who their teacher is.” Without “the right people standing in front of the classroom,” the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution concludes, “school reform is a futile exercise.”

Low-income minority students, who already struggle with the burdens of poverty and the vestiges of discrimination, should, by all rights, be taught by the nation’s most effective teachers. But in a travesty of the American creed of equal educational opportunity, access to the best teachers is now more a matter of zip code than need. Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond summed up this unjust distribution of teaching talent by noting that “analysts consistently find that the most inequitably distributed resource—and the one most predictive of student achievement—is the quality of teachers. Many schools serving the most vulnerable students have been staffed by a steady parade of untrained, inexperienced, and temporary teachers, and studies show that these teachers’ lack of training and experience significantly accounts for students’ higher failure rates on high-stakes tests.” The next wave of school reform, as the *New York Times* put it in a recent editorial, must “end the odious practice of dumping the least qualified teachers into the neediest schools.”

How wide is the teacher effectiveness gap in high-poverty schools? A recent study in Los Angeles of 9,400 math classrooms in grades 3-5 found that students in the district’s poorest schools were nearly three times as likely to have teachers from the bottom quarter of teachers (measured by teacher effectiveness in raising math achievement) than students in the district’s most affluent schools. At the same time, the Los Angeles study shows that effective teachers have a profound impact on student learning. On average, students assigned a teacher in the top quartile increased their math achievement scores 10 percentile points more than students who had a teacher in the bottom quartile—a huge one-year gain. In practical terms, that suggests that if low-income minority students could be assured of having teachers who fell in the top 25 percent of effective teachers four years in a row in lieu of a sub-par instructor, the students could effectively eliminate the achievement gap altogether. No single reform-- inside or outside of school--comes close to having such a profound impact on the achievement gap.

Creating a new generation of more effective teachers for disadvantaged students is similar to the human capital challenge faced by any organization: How to identify, attract, develop, and retain the talent that best accomplishes its mission. In the case of schools, that mission is to elevate student achievement. Yet the shortage of topnotch teachers in inner-city schools today stems less from the poor choices of teachers or any personal shortcomings than from a system for cultivating teaching talent that regularly fails both teachers and students.

The syllogism is painfully straightforward: If the business of schools is boosting student learning, and if effective teaching is the most powerful means to that end, educators need to make profound changes to the five links of the human capital chain to maximize the productivity of instructors. Just like skilled managers in any sector, reform-minded lawmakers and policymakers should be looking to: 1) Recruit the best possible candidates for teaching jobs; 2) Give aspiring and veteran teachers the right incentives and training to perform well in the classroom; 3) Evaluate teacher performance fairly but rigorously; 4) Dismiss incompetent instructors after they have had an opportunity to improve their performance; and 5) Place the best teachers where they are needed most.

Unfortunately, the nation's current system for recruiting, developing, and maintaining effective teachers fails all five steps of a sensible human capital program. In fact, the current K-12 system has erected institutional and contractual bulwarks, vigorously defended, to protect the very practices most in need of change. Despite a universal consensus among researchers that teacher effectiveness is by far the most important variable in raising student achievement—especially for disadvantaged students—serious efforts to address the teacher quality gap almost invariably fail. From the moment a prospective teacher enters a teachers college to the day of his/her retirement party, a teacher's ability to elevate student learning is poorly assessed (if at all), and virtually never linked to consequences—either positive, as in the case of awarding merit pay, or negative, like being dismissed for poor performance.

Aspiring teachers in both traditional education schools and alternative certification programs have little or no classroom experience working with great teachers of disadvantaged students. And during the first three years of their careers, when teachers are typically on probationary status working toward tenure, a teacher's impact on student achievement is rarely evaluated well. A 2009 report from the National Council on Teacher Quality reports that “only two states require any evidence of teacher effectiveness to be considered as part of tenure decisions. All other states permit districts to award tenure virtually automatically.” Since 2006, two of the nation's most populous states—California and New York, home to more than 600,000 teachers—have even enacted laws that effectively bar school administrators from considering a teacher's impact on student performance in teacher pay and tenure decisions.

Once teachers receive tenure, they are typically blocked from earning merit pay and bonuses by demonstrating a proficiency at boosting student learning. Under the single-pay salary schedule, teachers with equivalent years of experience and educational attainment receive the same salary, irrespective of how much their students are actually learning or whether they teach in underserved schools. This uniform salary schedule, with all of its perverse incentives, was conceived almost a century ago, when schools were thought

of as factories where teachers played the role of interchangeable assembly line workers. But in the 21st century, teachers are long overdue to join the ranks of other white-collar professionals, whose remuneration is based chiefly on job performance.

Compounding the dearth of performance incentives, a small minority of tenured teachers who are incompetent continue to teach for years on end in inner-city schools--no matter how poorly they serve their students. A study by The New Teacher Project (Tntp) of five big-city school districts with nearly 75,000 tenured teachers found a grand total of four teachers who were formally terminated the previous year for poor performance. The Tntp data suggest that a tenured teacher's odds of being formally terminated in a given year for incompetence are about 1 in 18,500. Over the course of a lifetime, a teacher has a greater chance than that of being struck by lightning.

School administrators and lawmakers have attempted to raise the quality of the teaching force but with little success. For the most part, educators have sought to raise barriers to entry into the teaching profession--employing educational credentials, licensure, and certification as proxies for teacher quality. The No Child Left Behind Act, for example, requires teachers in core academic subjects to be "highly qualified," as evidenced by a bachelor's degree, full state licensure and certification, and demonstrated subject-area competence on tests (or by having completed academic coursework). Yet research has consistently found that education credentials, licensing, advanced degrees, and both traditional and alternative certification all have little predictive value when it comes to the development of effective teachers. Educators, in short, have fallen prey to pushing new "inputs" as the solution to the teacher quality problem (like revised curriculum or training) but lost sight of the importance of maximizing teacher "outputs"—namely, the impact of teachers on student achievement.

In stark contrast, the impact of teachers on student performance during the first three years in the classroom is a potent predictor of whether teachers go on to become great instructors or weak ones. Building a new and radically different system to track, evaluate, and reward teachers based on their impact on student achievement *after* they start work in the classroom could dramatically improve the quality of the teaching force.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: A NEW PATH FOR FOSTERING GREAT TEACHERS

The Education Equality Project believes that the current system for recruiting, rewarding, and retaining teachers must be turned on its head. In place of the hidebound system that now restricts entry into the teaching profession, fails to reward merit, and protects failing teachers from dismissal, teachers should be rewarded on the basis of their performance in the classroom—that is, on how well they fulfill their central mission of elevating student learning. Transforming the teaching profession into a merit-based system is a simple, even obvious first step toward solving the problem of educational inequality in America. Yet a progress-based system has powerful foes in education schools, teachers unions, and district bureaucracies.

To make teaching a merit-based profession, the Education Equality Project supports far-reaching reforms at every stage of a teacher's career--from the start of his or her training through induction, tenure, and the

awarding of salary hikes. **The ultimate goal of transforming the teaching profession is that every classroom will one day be led by an effective instructor, who advances student learning.** As the education historian Diane Ravitch has written, “The quality of teachers in the nation’s schools matters very much. For some children, the quality of their teacher is the difference between success and failure. A nation with a goal of ‘no child left behind’ will have to find effective strategies to ensure that every child has good teachers and that every teacher has working conditions in which to do his or her job well.”

None of this is to suggest that teachers are to “blame,” or that improving the professional environment in which teachers work is not a critically important goal as well, as Ravitch notes. It is both fair and sound practice to give teachers every opportunity to be successful with adequate resources and training targeted to their accountability for elevating student performance. Until, however, lawmakers and educators are serious about taking every step possible to identify, develop, and rigorously evaluate teachers for their impact on student learning, our national aspirations for educational excellence and equity will remain unmet. Toward this end, EEP supports seven policy initiatives—call them the Seven Habits for Highly Effective Teachers—most of which are already being piloted in a variety of programs and school districts:

- 1) *Cast a wider net for prospective teachers by lowering the entry barriers to the teaching profession. At the same time, teacher colleges, alternative certification programs, and districts should redouble efforts to develop more effective human capital strategies for recruiting and selecting promising teachers.* Despite a looming teacher shortage, prospective teachers who are recent college graduates or professionals looking for a mid-career switch are often discouraged from becoming teachers by requirements for certification and master degrees. Advanced degrees and certification are not linked to producing effective teachers, and traditional schools of education typically attract college students with low GPA’s from less competitive institutions. By contrast, Teach for America, and the Baltimore and New York City Teaching Fellows programs have shown that alternative recruitment and certification programs can successfully attract high-caliber teaching candidates. In fact, TFA teachers are at least as effective at raising academic achievement as their peers. Meanwhile, other alternative certification programs, like the defense department’s Troops to Teachers initiative, are also demonstrating that mid-career and retiring professionals could provide a rich source of new teaching talent, particularly in high-need subject areas in inner-city schools, such as math and science.

While preparation and training at teacher colleges and alternative certification programs generally do a poor job of preparing graduates to teach in high-poverty schools, the shortcomings of the current system do not mean that educators should abandon efforts to find a better way to identify and train promising instructors. Programs like Teach for America are working hard to define teacher attributes that help predict student achievement gains. The EEP supports continued research designed to identify the background, personal characteristics and pathways to the teaching profession that are linked to better student learning. In addition, the EEP supports funding for research and assessments that can lead to better education and training of novice teachers--and it applauds pioneering schools of education that are rethinking their curriculum, with the intent to boost teacher effectiveness.

- 2) *The federal government should require states and districts to develop longitudinal data systems that would allow school administrators and principals to use value-added data to measure and track the impact teachers have on student achievement.* To move toward a performance-based system for teachers, school districts will need to have information that tracks the effect that individual teachers are having on student performance from year-to-year for a number of years. Performance-based metrics must not only be fair but transparent. To achieve both aims, a value-added model must isolate “teacher effects” by holding constant an array of variables outside of a teacher’s control, such as the starting achievement level and specialized needs (e.g., English Language Learner or special education status) of his or her students, and the educator’s years of experience. Unfortunately, only a relatively small number of states and districts have developed data bases that allow the creation of a model that enables school officials to track the performance of individual teachers and students over a multiyear period.

Tennessee has pioneered the use of value-added analysis of teacher effectiveness, and several states and numerous districts have followed suit. The federal government also provides modest funding for states to develop teacher quality metrics in high-needs schools through programs like the Teacher Incentive Fund. But the federal government can do much more to support the development of longitudinal, value-added data systems. It could, for example, reposition much of the Title I funding for disadvantaged students to Title II, the teacher quality section of the Elementary and Secondary School Act. States and districts need far more robust data systems than they have today to make value-added analysis a reality, and urban districts especially need to move aggressively to implement and fine-tune value-added analyses of teacher performance during the next decade.

To be sure, value added analysis is still a work in progress and methodological challenges remain. Yet for all its imperfections, value added analysis is still a vast improvement on the existing system, which fails in its elemental duty to use the one measuring stick that really matters: Compared to other educators with similar students and facing similar challenges, how well are a given teacher’s students actually acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life? While psychometricians debate the finer points of the value-added model, it is now clear that, at minimum, it is a fair and responsible way to identify instructors at either end of the competence bell curve. Given the poor job existing evaluations systems do to reward teaching excellence and redress clear incompetence, failing to develop and use value-added methodology as *one* important indicator of effectiveness is unjustifiable.

- 3) *States and districts should be encouraged and free to use a variety of outcome-based measures to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Yet any system that states devise to evaluate teacher performance should include student test scores as a key measuring stick--and should not succumb to the temptation to substitute input-based measures to gauge teacher effectiveness (like licensure status and education credentials).* While student test scores over a multiyear period should figure prominently in value-added assessments of teacher performance, it is neither desirable nor practical to use them as the only metric of effectiveness. At present, there is no single consensus about the best system to measure teacher effectiveness--and within limits, states and districts should be free to pick and choose their

own outcome measures. Structured classroom observations by principals and master teachers over the course of the year, independent assessments of student work, teacher attendance, mentoring of other teachers, and assessments of videotaped classes are just a few of the other outcome-based measures that districts might employ. Denver's ProComp merit-pay program rewards teachers and schools that meet academic goals, exceed expectations on state exams, and earn good evaluations from principals. The Teacher Advancement Program, which Secretary Duncan implemented on a pilot basis in Chicago during his stint as superintendent, helps teachers use data to improve their instruction and provides bonuses for teachers who raise test scores.

Owing to gaps in NCLB's testing regimen, districts inevitably will be obligated to look beyond test scores to assess teacher effectiveness. Under NCLB, virtually all students are tested in reading and math in grades 3-8. But high school students and K-2 students are not universally tested, and even in grades 3-8, instructors who teach subjects other than English and math may not give widely-used, standardized tests. A rich evaluation system, using a variety of performance measures, is more likely to earn the support and respect of teachers.

- 4) *Every school and district should assess and document the impact that probationary teachers have on student learning from the moment they enter the classroom. Fledgling teachers should receive better professional development support, including on-the-job mentoring and supervision from peers and master teachers. Just as barriers to entering the teaching profession should be lowered, barriers to earning tenure must be raised. At present, probationary instructors can earn tenure almost automatically merely for surviving their first two to three years in the classroom. Professional development during the probationary years is now largely a lost opportunity, despite the fact that a teacher's first three years in the classroom provide a good indication of whether they will develop into an effective teacher.*

The paltry effort that districts currently make to assess the impact of probationary teachers on student performance is inexcusable and counterproductive. Better on-the-job training and mentoring could assist struggling teachers to become more effective instructors. Just as aspiring doctors serve stints as interns and residents in teaching hospitals, aspiring teachers might well receive similar supervision, feedback, and assessment. A number of successful residency programs, like Chicago's Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), the Boston Teacher Residency Program, and the Boettcher Teacher Program in Denver, recruit talented college graduates and then put them through year-long paid residencies under the supervision of master teachers. Clinical supervision and fieldwork, rather than academic course work, can help speed a shift in professional development to promoting effective teaching.

- 5) *To transform tenure into a progress-based prerogative, states and districts should require tenure candidates to demonstrate that they are effectively boosting student learning—a process that should take a minimum of five years. At the same time, the least-effective probationary instructors should be denied tenure. Once districts have in place better professional development programs and a fair process for assessing the impact of probationary instructors on student performance, they should end*

the practice of indiscriminately granting tenure. At present, most probationary teachers receive tenure after only two to three years in the classroom—a time when they typically are not effective instructors, and before they have accrued enough years of value-added data to judge their impact on student performance. If the waiting period for tenure was lengthened to five years, and if the least-effective probationary instructors had an opportunity to improve their performance (as indicated by student outcomes) but failed to do so, then the residual core of probationary teachers who are poor performers should be denied tenure. Disadvantaged students cannot continue to be saddled with inferior instructors because school administrators and principals are reluctant to judge the performance of their employees.

Nor should the perfect be allowed to become the enemy of the good in assessing teacher performance—especially at the critical juncture when the protections afforded by tenure are at stake. By a teacher's fifth year, value added analysis will be based on multiple years of data, reducing the risk of error. Moreover, teachers who fall at the bottom of the effectiveness continuum tend to do poorly on multiple measures, while teachers in the top quintile tend to do well. Identifying the most effective and least effective probationary instructors would provide principals and teachers with an invaluable opportunity to reward their most promising instructors—and discourage bad teachers from staying in the classroom, to the detriment of their students.

- 6) *Teachers who demonstrate their effectiveness at raising student achievement should receive large bonuses for teaching in high-poverty schools and extra compensation for teaching core subjects in shortage areas, like math and science.* At present, topnotch instructors often end up leaving inner-city schools to teach at suburban schools that are closer to home, less disruptive, and pay higher salaries. To stem the suburban tide, urban school districts should pay large bonuses—on the order, perhaps, of 25 percent of annual compensation—to effective teachers who stay to teach disadvantaged students. Some districts already offer bonuses to instructors who teach in high-poverty schools or underserved subject areas. But to avoid rewarding bonuses to *ineffective* instructors in high-poverty schools, the EEP believes bonuses should only be awarded to teachers who demonstrate that they are successfully boosting student achievement.
- 7) *Tenured teachers should periodically be reassessed to ensure that they are still raising student achievement. Tenured instructors who are doing a good job should receive significant merit pay hikes. But persistently incompetent teachers should be dismissed—after getting a chance to improve their performance. In much the same spirit, unionized teachers should enjoy the due process protections and seniority rights afforded to other white-collar professionals—but not be shielded by excessive due-process requirements from meaningful job performance assessments or layoffs.* Teachers first sought tenure, seniority, and collective bargaining rights a half-century ago to protect against arbitrary dismissals by principals. Today, however, labyrinthine contract provisions have made it a laborious ordeal to fire an incompetent tenured teacher, even though the federal government and states now have a battery of laws on the books to protect employees from arbitrary dismissals. To improve teaching quality in high-poverty schools, good teachers must be rewarded and bad teachers must be encouraged to leave the profession. Yet last year, the New York Department of Education had to spend

nearly \$256,000 and almost 8,000 hours of staff time to fire a single tenured teacher for incompetence—and the department has had to spend even more in the past to remove an incompetent instructor. For poor children, the danger is no longer that they will lose a great teacher because of an arbitrary principal but rather that they can never be freed from a weak instructor. As President Obama, a supporter of performance pay, summed up at his first press conference, “Bad teachers need to be fired after being given the opportunity to train effectively.”

In the midst of the nation’s deep recession, principals and school administrators across the country are now being forced to lay off thousands of teachers by seniority irrespective of their skills, as mandated by collective bargaining agreements. These last-hired, first-fired layoffs bear no relationship to teacher performance, and they are sure to only accelerate teacher turnover in high-poverty schools, which have disproportionate numbers of novice and probationary instructors.

Even more egregious, school districts are now required under collective bargaining agreements to provide full salary and benefits for years on end to teachers who are removed from classrooms after being accused of serious misconduct or criminal offenses. Onerous due process requirements, which go far beyond the protections afforded most public sector employees, effectively block district officials from removing accused teachers from the payroll until investigations of any alleged offenses are concluded with a finding of wrongdoing. In Arizona, teachers who cannot be dismissed yet cannot work in the classroom are assigned to “the bus;” in New York City, they sit in the city’s designated reassignment centers or “rubber rooms,” where they may play cards, listen to iPods, and pursue other diversions. At present, New York City has more than 500 teachers assigned to rubber rooms at a cost to the city of more than \$56 million. To be fair, some teachers in the rubber rooms are vindicated and return to the classroom. Even so, such expenditures are indefensible at a time when cash-starved districts and talented teachers are facing layoffs.

Transforming the teaching profession into a merit-based system will not be easy. But there are signs, too, that the anti-performance strictures of the current system are beginning to break. Promising new alternative pathways to teacher certification like Teach for America and the New York Teaching Fellows have emerged for the first time in numbers in inner-city schools; first-rate residency programs like AUSL are bolstering teacher quality in failing urban schools; and a number of districts and states have already started to experiment with teacher performance pay initiatives. For the first time, the nation has a Democratic president who campaigned on the promise of merit pay for teachers and forthrightly acknowledges that bad teachers should be fired—despite the fact that unions are a traditional Democratic stronghold. Even a few union leaders have thrown open the door to rethinking tenure, the single-salary pay structure, and merit pay. Last November, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, pledged that “no issue [with the exception of vouchers] should be off the table” anymore in urban school reform. “I will start,” Weingarten declared, “by tackling the tough issues like teacher assignments, tenure, and differentiated pay.”

To be sure, many union leaders and education school professors still oppose efforts to move the teaching profession in the direction of a meritocracy, and some do not take seriously the notion that educators should be held accountable for student learning. But urban school reform and closing the achievement gap can no

longer be about protecting the prerogatives of union representatives, district bureaucrats, and professors at teachers colleges. However politically charged such reforms may prove, the EEP's mission is to boost student learning and speak up on behalf of disadvantaged students. Holding teachers accountable for student learning would constitute a radical shift in our nation's schools, and that chain of accountability for student achievement should extend straight up to principals and the school superintendent. The good news is that this radical transformation of the teaching profession could again help make education the great equalizer in America—and not an ongoing source of inequity and injustice.