

Issue Brief: Teacher Quality

No matter one's opinion on the degree to which students' learning is driven by their own circumstances—innate intelligence, home life, their parents' income and education—there is consensus today that good teachers can make a big difference.

The Carnegie Foundation's 1996 publication of "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future" launched a national move to improve teacher quality. In the years since, policymakers, researchers and educators have been reevaluating everything—how teachers are educated, recruited, compensated, and assigned to schools. Even so, there has been limited progress.

Critics charge that the nation's education schools do not prepare teachers adequately. New teachers disproportionately still start their careers in the toughest schools, and generally do not get enough support in their first years. Attrition is fueling shortages in high-need areas.

Policymakers are looking for ways to hold teachers more accountable for their students' learning. They are looking for ways to evaluate and reward teachers based on their skills and knowledge, and how well they help students improve.

Teacher Preparation

For at least a generation, there has been a drumbeat of criticism that colleges of education don't prepare teachers adequately for the realities of the contemporary classroom. And universities have been accused of using their education schools as cash cows, enrolling many students but then investing their tuitions in more prestigious programs.

No Child Left Behind requires that all classrooms be staffed with "highly qualified" teachers—though seven years after enactment, that goal remains unmet. The law leaves the term's definition up to the states, but in general they must have either an academic major or pass a test in the subject they teach.

Over the last decade, many alternative certification programs, run by states, districts or independent organizations, have allowed people to become teachers without going through the traditional pipeline. The best-known program is Teach for America, which trains college graduates for one summer before placing them in classrooms. Its lasting effect on reshaping the corps of permanent teachers, and on addressing distribution issues, is still to be seen.

School assignment

It remains a fact of the profession: The least experienced, least effective teachers most often work in schools with the greatest number of minorities and students in poverty. NCLB gave lip service to fixing this inequity, but provided plenty of loopholes. Some districts pay bonuses to teach in high-need schools.

But so far, this problem shows no signs of going away. Union contracts generally let senior teachers choose their schools rather than giving administrators the right to assign them where they are most needed. And when districts budget by assigning an average salary to each teacher, school-to-school payroll differences are masked.



Education Writers Association

It is important to note that there is not a neat correlation between teacher experience and ability to improve student performance, after the first few years in the profession.

Professional development

A 2005 report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future concluded, "The most persistent norm that stands in the way of 21st century learning is isolated teaching in stand-alone classrooms."

Schools and districts have been investing more in systemic programs to train teachers already in the field, provide mentors and ensure they work together inside their schools. At one time, professional development consisted mostly of voluntary workshops that may or may not have been connected to student needs or a district's curriculum. Now, most professional development is built into the school day and relates to a school's or district's educational plan. Many states also now require continuing education courses for teachers to maintain their licenses. Some districts turn over professional development time to the companies from which they bought curricular materials. One trend in some districts is peer coaching, in which specially trained teachers travel from classroom to classroom helping their colleagues.

In general, professional development is an undercovered topic in education journalism, given how much time and money it consumes, and how variable the quality is.

Evaluation and merit pay

In most school districts, teacher evaluation is highly regimented and directed by clauses in the teachers' contract. Historically, it has had little to do with whether a teacher's students are learning. In most places, those evaluations have no effect on compensation; teachers are paid on a scale based solely on how long they have taught and whether they have advanced degrees.

Support has grown for plans that assess teachers quantitatively. University of North Carolina's William Sanders pioneered a "value-added" system tracking test scores to determine a teacher's effect on student performance. His studies show that three straight years of a bad teacher can doom a student, while three straight years of an effective teacher can propel a similar student forward.

Value-added was once seen as a quirky little experiment; many now think it is the future. In some districts experimenting with value-added and merit pay, higher pay is tied primarily to improvements in student test scores; others rely on a more varied evaluation system that includes portfolio reviews and subjective evaluations. Few states and districts yet have the technology to track all students and teachers consistently.

Sources

Sources on teacher quality in general include the **National Council on Teacher Quality** and the **National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality**. The **New Teacher Project** works on teacher distribution issues. The **National Board for Professional Teaching Standards** runs the esteemed National Board Certification process. The **National Staff Development Council** promotes teacher training. Good work on value-added and merit pay can be found at the **University of Wisconsin-Madison**, the **National Center on Performance Incentives** at Vanderbilt University and by **William Sanders** at SAS.