

Retaining Teacher Talent:

# **Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas**



A RETAINING TEACHER TALENT report from Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda



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## Introduction

As a new decade dawns, teachers stand at the center of a policy vortex. They serve as the primary focus of one of the Obama administration's four pillars of educational reform—effective teachers and leaders. Educational reformers of all stripes have focused tremendous energy on thinking of ways to identify effective teachers and in turn recruit, retain, compensate, and support them. But what do teachers think of these ideas? What conclusions should reformers draw from teachers' perceptions? This report is the third release of data from the Retaining Teacher Talent study conducted by Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda with the support of The Joyce Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The report suggests that what teachers think are good indicators of effectiveness—and what they think will make them more effective—are not always aligned with what policymakers or researchers think.

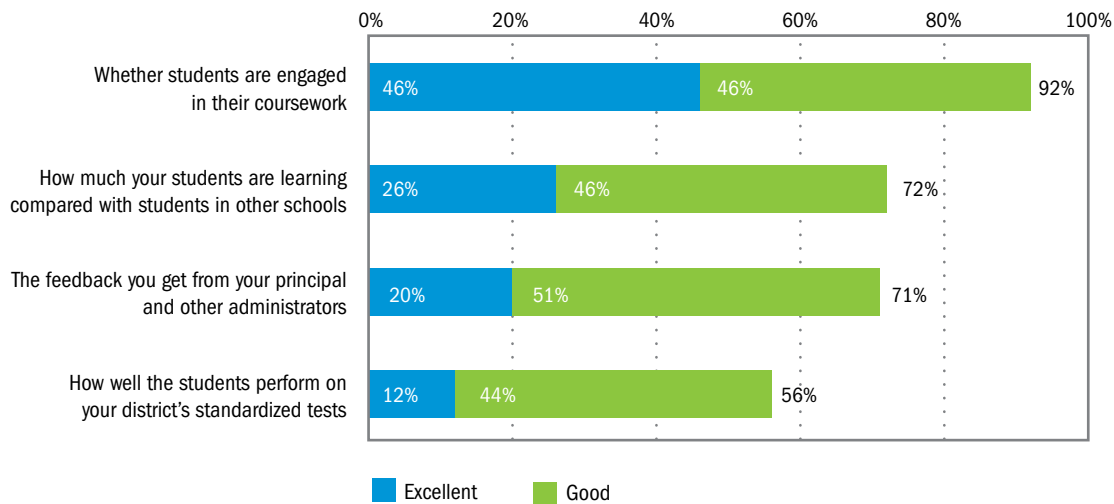
Some educational reformers have proposed dramatic changes to teacher evaluation, compensation, and working conditions in hopes that such changes will ultimately improve student learning. The success of these reforms, however, rests in large part on the support of those who will be most directly affected—teachers. Therefore, policymakers need to recognize the critical importance of including teachers in the debate to bring not only nuance and experience to the conversation but also to build legitimacy for the reforms as they are implemented. This report, intended for policymakers and teachers who want to influence policy, describes the implications of the results of the nationwide survey conducted by Learning Point Associates and Public Agenda. A discussion of the methodology and the results from the questionnaire can be found at [www.RetainingTeacherTalent.org](http://www.RetainingTeacherTalent.org).

## How Would Teachers Measure Effectiveness?

Although stakeholders in the field are beginning to agree upon a definition of excellent or accomplished teaching, how to precisely define and measure teacher effectiveness or success in the classroom is still under considerable debate. As Figure 1 demonstrates, teachers themselves are quite divided when it comes to how they believe their effectiveness should be measured; no one indicator of success in teaching was rated as *excellent* by a majority of teachers. Whether or not their students were engaged in coursework was the most popular indicator—92 percent thought it was either an *excellent* or *good* indicator. The least popular option was how well students perform on standardized tests, whereas one fourth of teachers thought that how well their students were learning compared with students in other schools was an *excellent* indicator.

**Figure 1. Measuring Effectiveness**

Would you say this measure is excellent, good, fair, or poor at indicating your success as a teacher?



Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Full question wording is provided in the raw survey data available at [www.RetainingTeacherTalent.org](http://www.RetainingTeacherTalent.org). Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding or omission of some answer categories.

Experience level seems to be related to the extent to which teachers are opposed to using particular measures of effectiveness. As Table 1 indicates, half of new teachers who have been teaching for less than five years think how well students perform on standardized tests is a *fair* or *poor* indicator, whereas only 32 percent of teachers who have been teaching more than 20 years agree. Less experienced teachers also are more likely to say that student engagement is a *fair* or *poor* measure of their success, and almost one third of teachers across all experience levels are leery of principal or other administrator evaluations.

**Table 1. Attitudes Toward Measuring Effectiveness Vary by Experience**

Percent who say the following is a *fair* or *poor* indicator of their success as a teacher:

	< 5 Years of Experience	5–10 Years	11–20 Years	> 20 Years
Whether students are engaged in their coursework	12%	15%	6%	6%
How much your students are learning compared with students in other schools*	27%	32%	30%	23%
The feedback you get from your principal and other administrators*	27%	27%	31%	31%
How well the students perform on your district's standardized tests	50%	46%	45%	32%

\* This difference by experience is not statistically significant.

These data suggest that as states and districts design teacher evaluation systems that incorporate student achievement outcomes, they may want to recruit their most experienced teachers to help communicate reform ideas to their less seasoned colleagues. As described in an earlier analysis of these data, *Retaining Teacher Talent: The View From Generation Y*, Coggshall, Ott, Behrstock, and Lasagna (2010) conclude that Gen Y teachers seem to be more open to differentiating among themselves but are hesitant about using student achievement data.

## How Can We Learn What More Effective Teachers Think?

Determining the best indicators of teacher effectiveness to identify the most accomplished teachers is difficult enough. Clearly, multiple indicators and sources of evidence are necessary to build a credible measure of teacher effectiveness. The next challenge is supporting those more effective teachers adequately to maximize and extend their impact on students as well as retain them in the classroom (see Hassel & Hassel, 2009, for a discussion of enhancing teacher “reach”).

In an attempt to understand how more effective teachers might differ from less effective teachers in their attitudes toward the profession and their schools, we used factor analysis and a priori notions of what it means to be “effective” to divide teachers’ responses into two groups: “self-perceived effective teachers” ( $n = 292$ ) and “all other teachers” ( $n = 598$ ).

Self-perceived effective teachers answered four items in the following ways:

- They reported that the subject matter test scores of their students increased “a lot” from the beginning of the year (versus “increased somewhat,” “did not increase,” or “decreased somewhat”).
- They chose the statement, “Good teachers can lead all students to learn, even those from poor families or [those who] have uninvolved parents” as being closer to their view than the statement, “It is too hard for even good teachers to overcome these barriers.”
- They were either *very* or *somewhat* confident that most of their students will learn the skills and knowledge they were supposed to by the end of the year.
- They reported being *very* or *somewhat* confident that they could turn around their hardest to reach students by the end of the year.

Such teachers, it turned out, also were significantly more likely to believe that the effort students make is mainly determined by what teachers do to motivate them rather than by the level of motivation students bring to the classroom (74 percent of self-perceived effective teachers versus 52 percent of all other teachers). In addition, self-perceived effective teachers were more likely to believe that their students can go to college, given the right supports (46 percent agree strongly versus 36 percent). They also were more likely to say that they usually were able to differentiate their instruction for diverse learners (81 percent versus 69 percent) and create high-quality lesson plans (70 percent versus 57 percent).

Obviously, there are limitations to this approach. There is no way to determine whether self-perceived effective teachers are, in fact, more effective than their colleagues (whether defined by relative or absolute test scores, their ability to engage their students in challenging work, how their principals or other administrators might rate them, or any other measure). In addition, one teacher’s “a lot” might be another teacher’s “somewhat,” as many teachers may compare their test score increases to teachers in their immediate environment rather than all teachers. Nevertheless, research has shown that teachers who feel more efficacious, especially if they work with similarly efficacious colleagues, achieve higher student learning results (Armor et al., 1976; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000). Moreover, most administrators would likely want to work with teachers who believe that all students can learn, are confident professionals, and believe that they can have an impact on student learning (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000).

Table 2 displays some of the demographics of self-perceived effective teachers versus all other teachers. They are equitably distributed among experience levels, generational cohort, and school poverty levels; however, they tend to be female and concentrated in elementary schools (perhaps because these two factors are highly correlated).

**Table 2. Teacher Demographics**

	Self-Perceived Effective Teachers (n=292)	All Other Teachers (n=598)	Total
<b>School Type</b>			
Elementary school	64%	45%	51%
Middle or junior high school	11%	20%	17%
High school	20%	30%	27%
<b>Years Teaching</b>			
Less than 5 years	5%	4%	5%
5–10 years	21%	26%	24%
11–20 years	37%	36%	36%
More than 20 years	36%	34%	35%
<b>Age</b>			
22–32	17%	18%	17%
33–44	32%	30%	31%
45–63	50%	52%	51%
64+	2%	1%	1%
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	17%	29%	25%
Female	83%	71%	75%
<b>Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program</b>			
25% or under	22%	22%	22%
26%–50%	31%	28%	29%
51% or more	42%	46%	45%

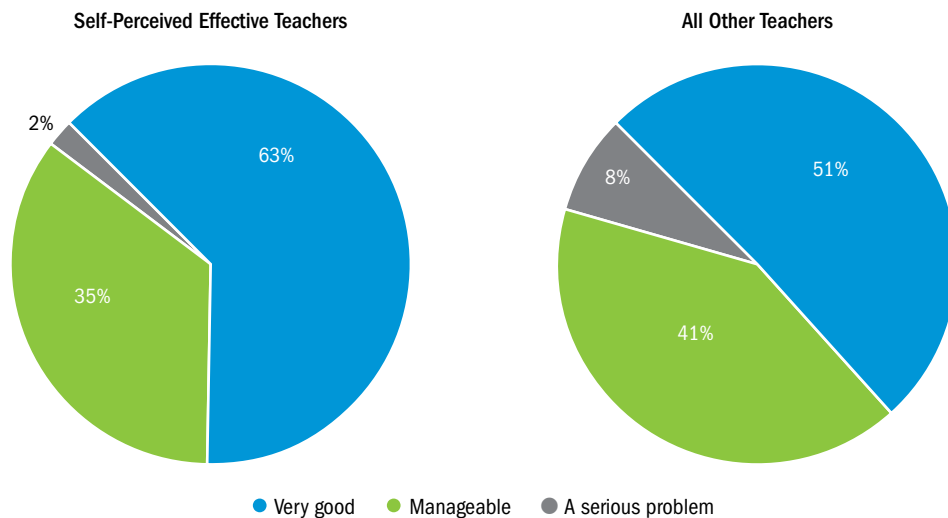


## How Do Teachers Who Perceive Themselves to Be Effective View Their Teaching Conditions?

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, teachers who perceive themselves to be effective are more likely to report working in an orderly, safe, and respectful school atmosphere as well as having a principal who does an excellent job providing useful instructional feedback. They also are more likely to report having smaller classes and lower numbers of special needs students in their classrooms (see Figures 4 and 5). These observations, of course, raise the following questions: Do high-quality teaching conditions produce teachers who feel more effective, or are more effective teachers attracted to better teaching conditions? Or as a third possibility, are teachers who perceive themselves to be more effective less likely to complain about their conditions? The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this survey, but they are worth exploring more.

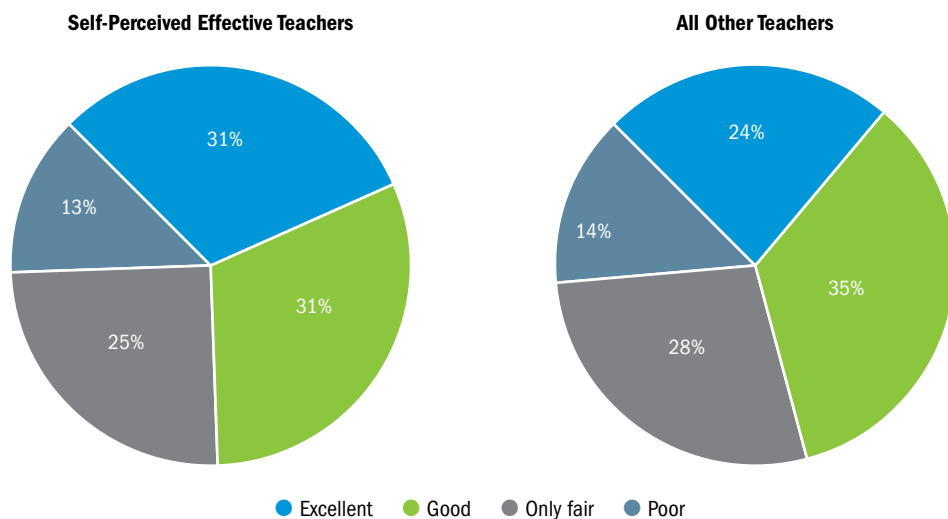
**Figure 2. School Working Conditions**

When it comes to having an orderly, safe, and respectful school atmosphere, the working conditions at my school are:



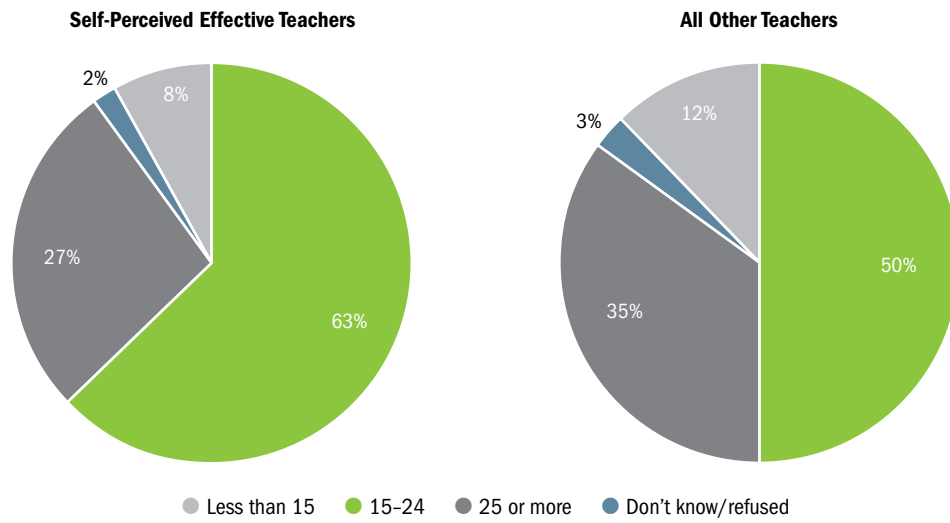
**Figure 3. Principal Feedback**

Would you say your principal is doing an excellent job, a good job, only fair, or a poor job when it comes to providing useful instructional feedback?



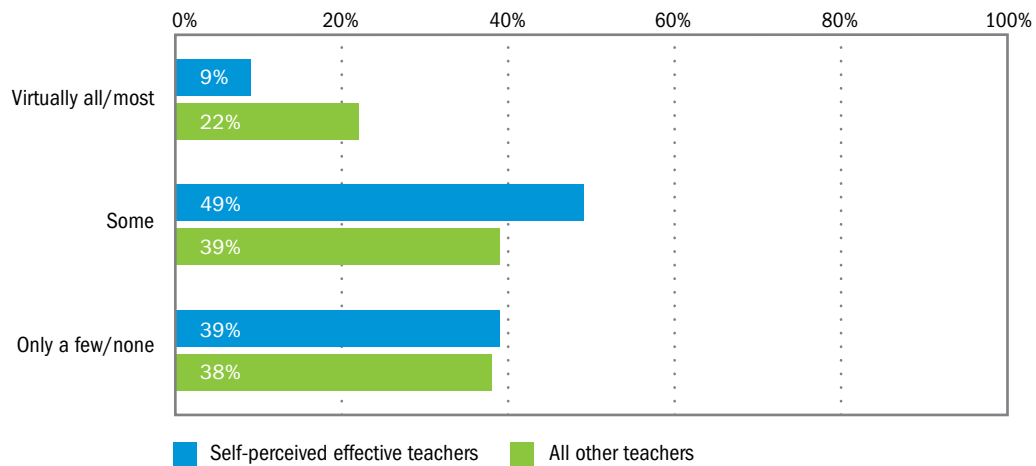
**Figure 4. Class Size**

Approximately what is your typical class size?



**Figure 5. Number of Special-Needs Students**

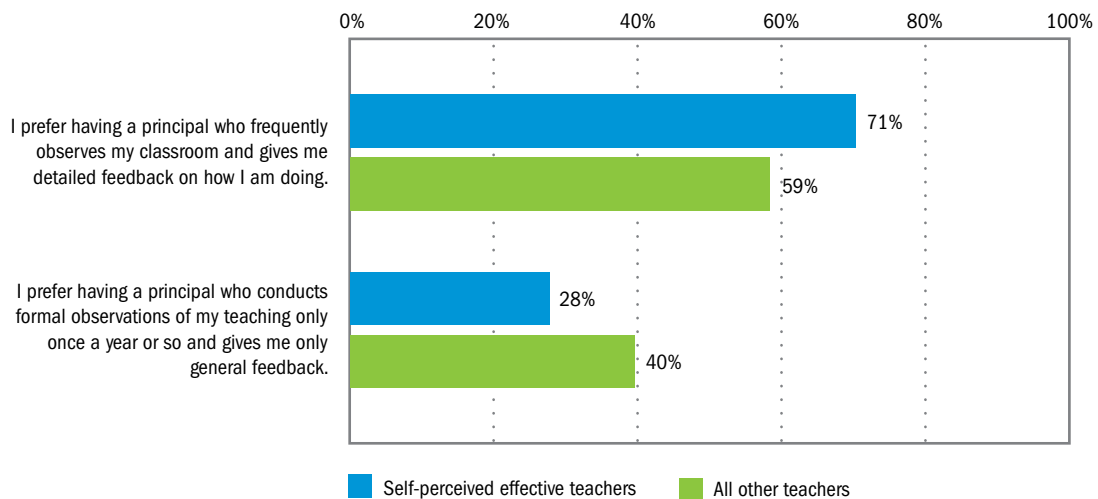
In a typical class, about how many of your students would be classified as having special needs?



As shown in Figure 6, self-perceived effective teachers also are more likely to want a principal who is an excellent instructional leader (i.e., one who frequently observes their classrooms and gives detailed feedback). Moreover, they prefer to work in a school where there is a lot of collaboration and guidance from other instructional experts to one where teachers are freer to design their own lessons (see Figure 7).

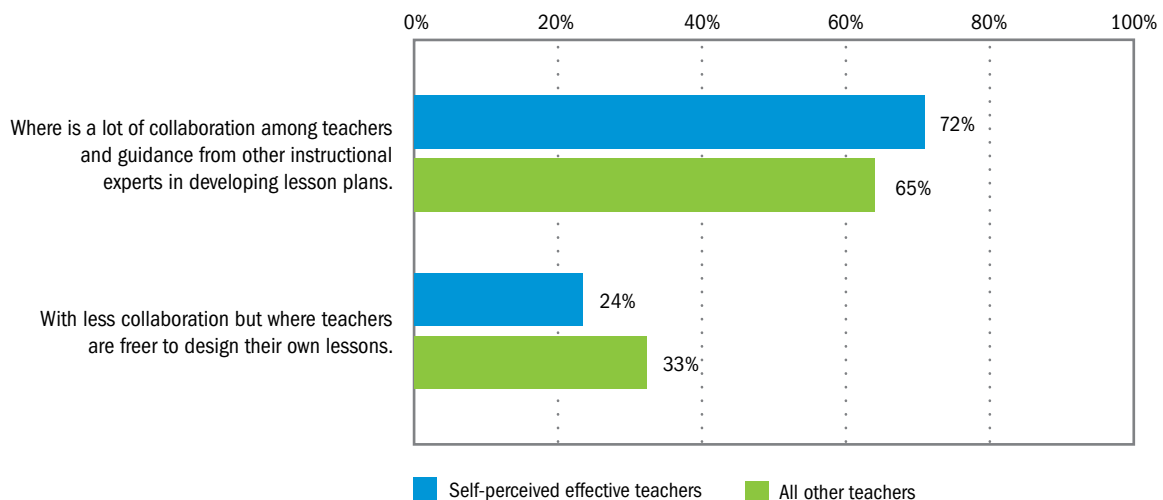
**Figure 6. Attitudes Towards Feedback**

Which comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?



**Figure 7. Attitudes Toward Collaboration**

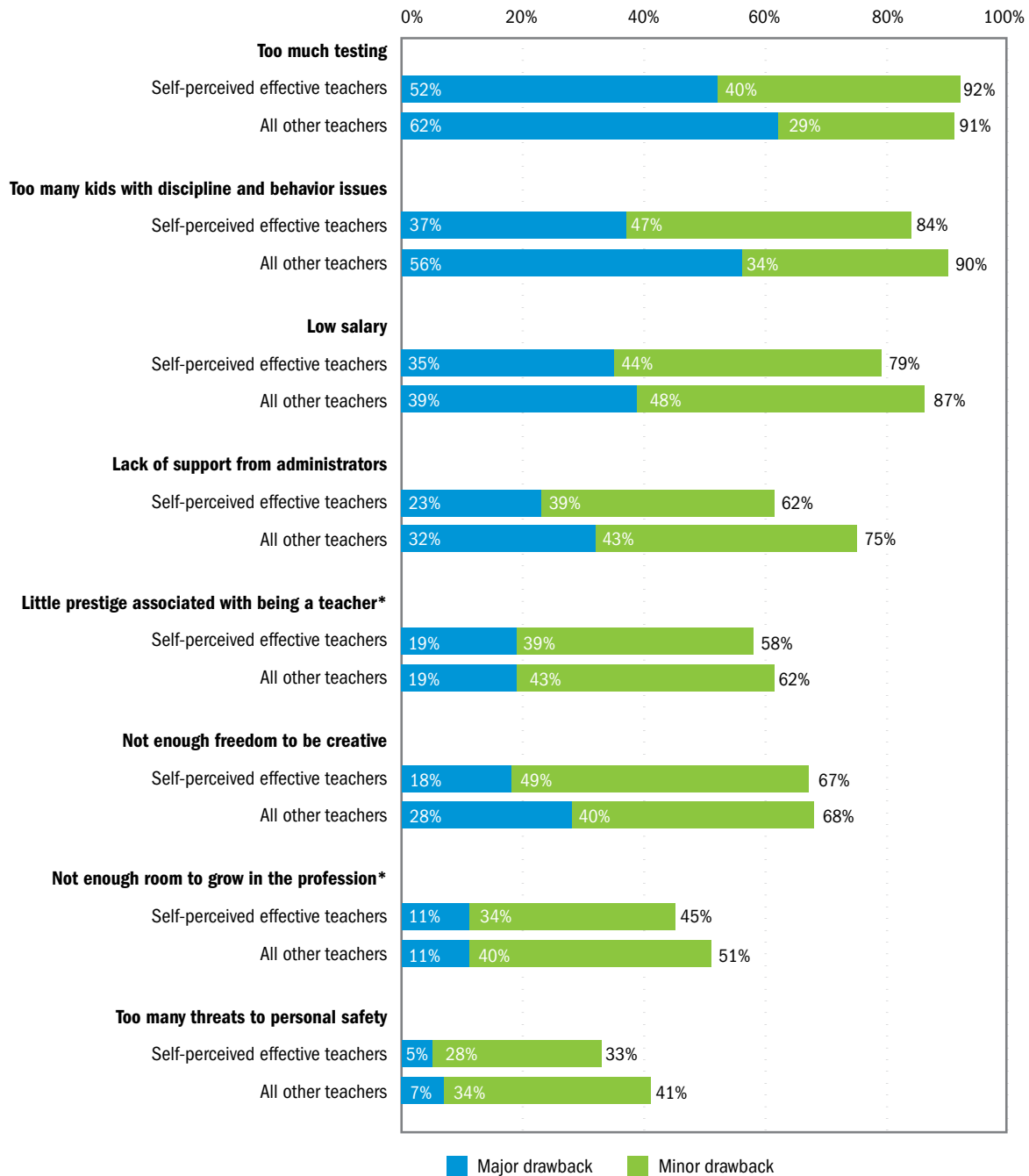
Pretending you were considering transferring to a different school in your district, would you prefer to move to a school ... ?



Teachers who perceive themselves to be effective see fewer drawbacks to the profession, yet they seem to imagine themselves staying in the profession for just as long as other teachers (see Figures 8, 9, and 10). For example, they are less likely to perceive a lack of support from principals or lack of freedom to be creative as being major drawbacks to the profession, yet similar numbers see themselves leaving the classroom within the next four years (24 percent of self-perceived effective teachers versus 25 percent of all other teachers).

**Figure 8. Drawbacks to Teaching**

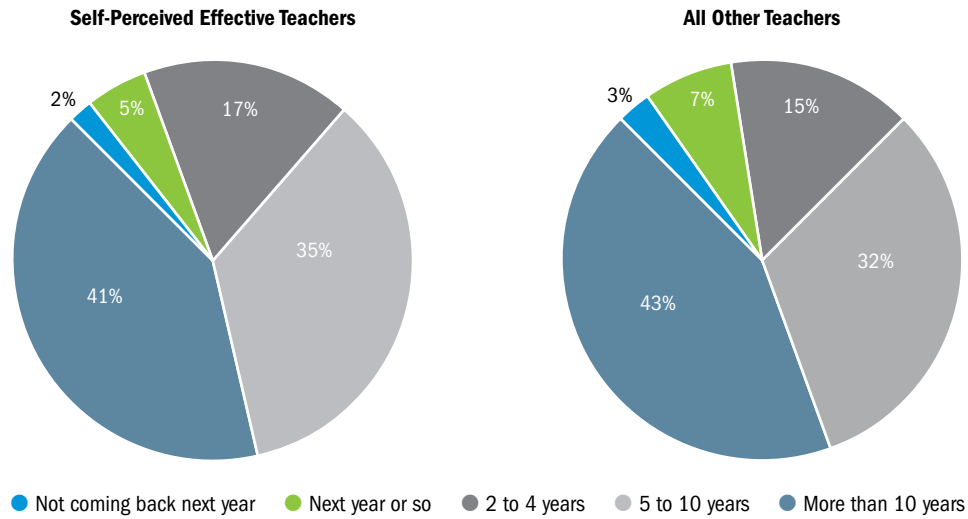
Based on your personal experience, please tell us whether the following is a major drawback, a minor drawback, or not a drawback for you.



\* This difference is not statistically significant.

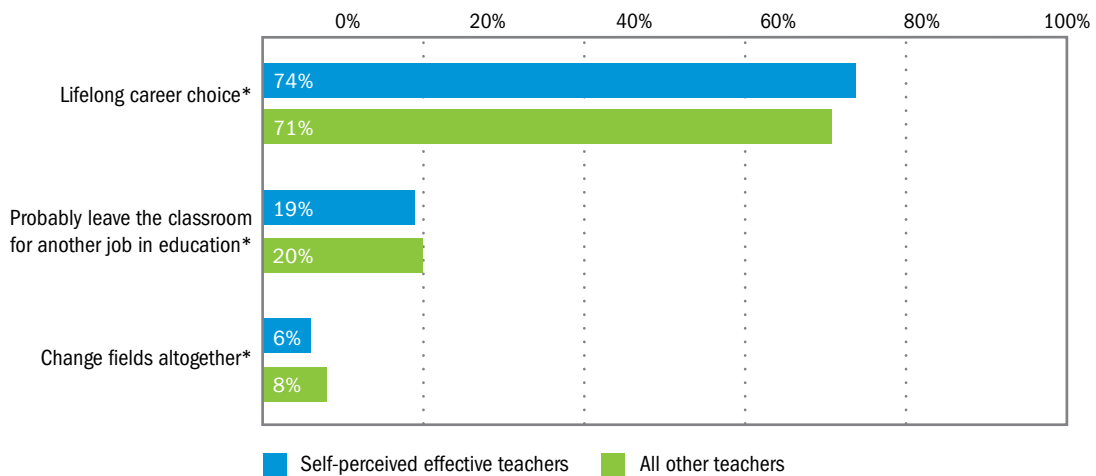
### Figure 9. Intention to Stay in Teaching

What is your best estimate for how many more years you think you'll be a classroom teacher? Do you think it will be for the next year or so, 2 to 4 years, 5 to 10 years, more than 10 years, or do you think you will not come back next year?



### Figure 10. Teaching as a Career

Do you think of teaching as a lifelong career choice, do you think you'll probably leave the classroom for another job in education, or will you change fields altogether?



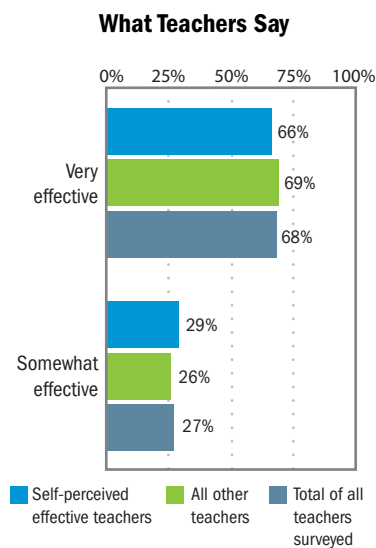
\* This difference is not statistically significant.

## What Do Teachers Who Perceive Themselves to Be Effective Believe Will Improve Overall Teacher Effectiveness?

Policymakers have advocated and adopted various reform ideas to improve teacher effectiveness. These ideas often are based on research that attempts to investigate the link between the reform practice and its impact on student achievement. This final section reveals how the two groups of teachers believe each of these practices would improve teacher effectiveness and what the research says about its impact on teacher effectiveness (as measured by impact on student learning). Teachers in both groups agree more than they disagree, suggesting that the policies that are priorities for effective teachers are priorities for all teachers.

### Teacher Perceptions of Policy Options

#### Ensuring That Students Who Are Severe Discipline Problems Are Removed From the Classroom and Placed in Alternative Programs More Suited to Them



\* This difference is not statistically significant.

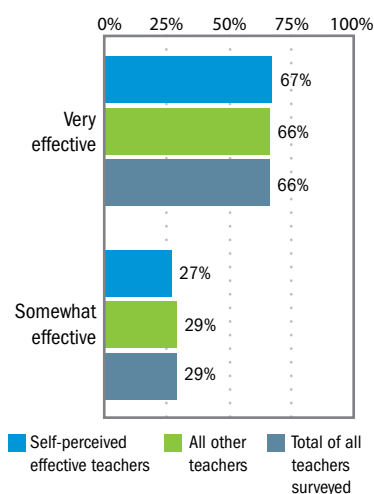
#### What Researchers Say

Highly effective instruction will reduce, but not entirely eliminate, student behavioral problems (Emmer & Stough, 2001); however, researchers have yet to adequately investigate the impact of the practice of reassigning particularly disruptive students to different classrooms on either the student that is removed or the students that remain in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Researchers also hypothesize that removing a student from class creates a negative reinforcement trap, whereby both teacher and student are given immediate relief, but learning is ultimately hindered (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Nevertheless, there is evidence that average student achievement (i.e., overall teacher effectiveness) is higher in schools where student discipline issues are addressed at the administrative or school leadership level (Hirsch, 2009).

<sup>1</sup> More research has been done on the use of the “time out” strategy in classrooms, which can be used effectively to reduce disruptive behavior (Vegas, Jenson, & Kircher, 2007) and likely leads to improved student learning. However, there are several different forms of “time out,” and excluding students from the classroom remains understudied in terms of its impact on both behavior and learning (Ryan, Sanders, Katsiyannis, & Yell, 2007).

## Reducing Class Size by Approximately Five Students

### What Teachers Say



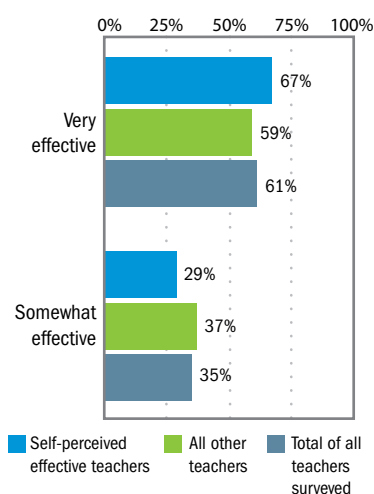
\* This difference is not statistically significant.

### What Researchers Say

Reducing class size for students in Grades K–3 has been shown to have a meaningful and lasting effect on student achievement (Finn & Achilles, 1990; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2002), particularly for African-American students (Krueger & Whitmore, 2001). The impact of reducing high school classes by five students, however, has been found to be positive but barely perceptible. Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2007) found that having a teacher with strong credentials has an impact on student achievement that is 14 times greater than reducing class size by five students. Moreover, simple class size reduction is quite expensive, and if it is implemented by hiring new, untrained teachers to cover newly constituted classes, its impact is disappointing at best, particularly for minority and rural students (Jepson & Rivkin, 2002) who are usually assigned the newest, least trained teachers (Imazeki & Goe, 2009). Even when controlling for teacher quality, however, it does not appear to benefit low-achieving students as much as it does high-achieving students (Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2002). Unfortunately, the existing research does not provide insight into how class size reduction changes instruction or how teachers might best adapt their instruction to take advantage of smaller classes (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2002). Thus, the question of how it could improve teacher effectiveness and why it does for some students and not others remains unanswered. There is also a dearth of rigorous research on how class size reduction influences teacher recruitment and retention.

## Preparing Teachers to Adapt or Vary Their Instruction to Meet the Needs of a Diverse Classroom

### What Teachers Say

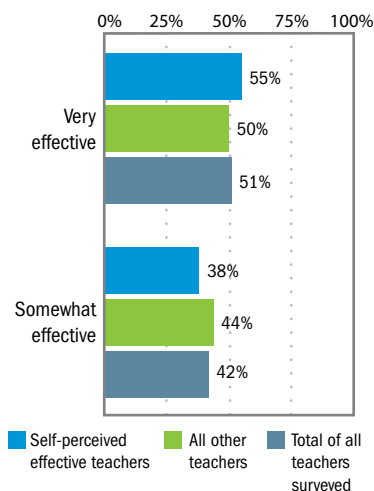


### What Researchers Say

As a bundle of practices and strategies (e.g., grouping students, adapting curricular materials, using alternative assessment techniques, creating learning centers, creating independent study opportunities), differentiated or personalized instruction lacks solid empirical grounding in terms of its impact on teacher effectiveness. Nevertheless, differentiated instruction is based in years of educational theory and research suggesting that students learn differently at different rates and so teaching must respond actively to individual learners (Tomlinson, 2001). How to prepare teachers to do this well is a continuing challenge for teacher preparation and induction programs, particularly for inclusive classrooms (Holdheide & Reschly, 2008).

## Improving Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers

### What Teachers Say



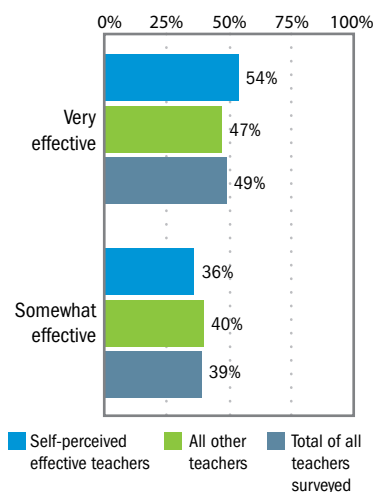
\* This difference is not statistically significant.

### What Researchers Say

After reviewing approximately 1,300 research studies, Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapley (2007) found only nine studies that rigorously investigated the causal link between professional development programs and student achievement outcomes. The studies largely showed positive results, depending on the type of professional development teachers received. Teacher self-report data show, however, that high-quality professional development can have the ability to change how teachers practice and their perceived quality of teaching (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). The National Staff Development Council reviewed the evidence regarding the characteristics of professional development most likely to improve teacher effectiveness: It must be sustained, intensive, and focused on the work of teaching and student learning (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

## Increasing Teacher Salaries to Levels Similar to Other Professional Jobs Such as Lawyers and Doctors

### What Teachers Say



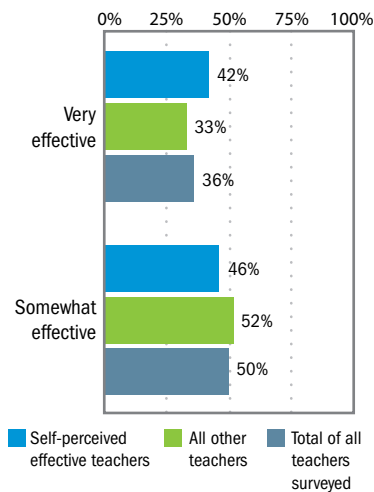
### What Researchers Say

Although it is not possible for researchers to demonstrate a direct correlation between teachers' salaries and student achievement test scores, an indirect relationship appears to exist. There is consensus within the research community that effective teachers are the single most important school-level factor leading to increased student outcomes. Meanwhile, there is ample research to show that teacher recruitment and retention are improved when teachers' salaries are more comparable with those in other professions (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Dolton, 2006; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), and some research indicates that pay compression at the top of the salary schedule may have led to the decline of teacher quality since 1960 (Hoxby & Leigh, 2004).



## Requiring New Teachers to Spend Much More Time Teaching in Classrooms Under the Supervision of Experienced Teachers

**What Teachers Say**

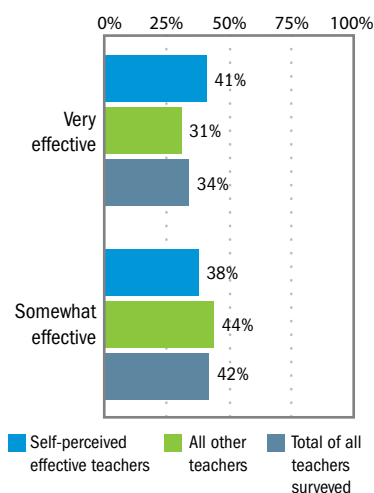


**What Researchers Say**

Research on the impact of the duration or quality of student teaching experiences (in which teacher candidates teach lessons under the supervision of a cooperating teacher) on teacher effectiveness is currently insufficient to draw conclusions; however, there is evidence that more weeks of student teaching leaves teachers feeling better prepared (Westat, 2000). In addition, analyses of the Schools and Staffing Survey show that more extensive practice teaching and emphasis in pedagogy in coursework is related to reduced new teacher attrition (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2006). In terms of new teachers of record, having access to high-quality mentorship experiences as part of comprehensive induction programs also improves retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004), but there are few studies that rigorously investigate the impact of expert mentorship on teacher effectiveness, and those that have been conducted have focused on particular programs. A recent randomized control trial showed no difference in teacher effectiveness outcomes in terms of student achievement gains for teachers who participate in a comprehensive induction program versus those who receive prevailing induction support (Isenberg et al., 2009), but study critics contend that variation in implementation confounded the findings (New Teacher Center, 2009).

## Making It Easier to Terminate Ineffective Teachers

**What Teachers Say**

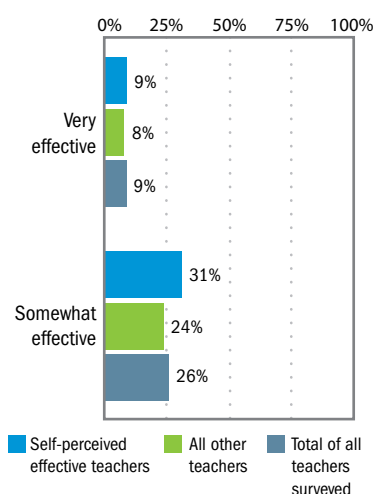


**What Researchers Say**

Organizational researchers found that organizations that do not actively address poor performance send a message to employees that there are low or unique standards for performance, which in turn diminishes motivation and incentives to perform effectively (Daley, 2008; O'Reilly & Weitz, 1980). Economist Eric Hanushek (2008) argues that if the bottom 5 percent of teachers in terms of their contributions to student achievement test scores were removed from the classroom, overall student achievement would increase dramatically based on several as yet untested assumptions. More positively, new research shows that having effective peers makes teachers more effective (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009).

## Eliminating Teacher Tenure

**What Teachers Say**

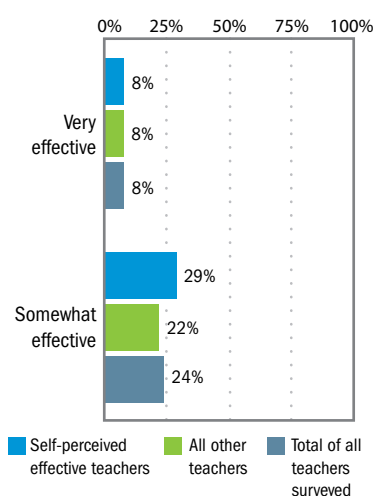


**What Researchers Say**

There is no empirical evidence to indicate that eliminating teacher tenure completely is an effective way to improve teacher effectiveness because it has never actually been done. Although there have been no peer-reviewed studies empirically documenting that tenure makes it more difficult for administrators to manage or terminate ineffective teachers, Baratz-Snowden (2009) finds that due process requirements associated with tenure vary widely across states, with some having more burdensome and tortuous requirements than others. As of 2009, 43 states required three or fewer years of experience before being eligible for tenure; five states require four years, and two require five years (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2009); the differences in outcomes of these policies have not been rigorously studied, although a longer probationary period gives administrators more information about a teachers' track record of effectiveness. Researchers and others are hopeful that making the achievement of tenure a more rigorous process, as it is in Minneapolis, will likely contribute to improved teacher effectiveness (Koppich, 2009; L. Nordgren, personal communication, September 10, 2009).

## Tying Teacher Rewards to Their Students' Performance

**What Teachers Say**



**What Researchers Say**

Although there are numerous efforts under way to tie teacher compensation to student performance, many of these programs are in their infancy, so evidence of their impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning remains sparse but promising (Podgursky & Springer, 2007). Moreover, pay-for-performance programs tend to embody numerous reforms,<sup>2</sup> so separating the effects of compensation changes based on student achievement from other changes to teacher support systems is difficult. Nevertheless, there exists limited but growing evidence that pay-for-performance programs are beginning to improve teacher retention (Glazerman, McKie, Carey, 2009; Podgursky & Springer, 2007), especially among teachers who receive a bonus based on their effectiveness (Springer et al., 2009).

<sup>2</sup>For example, in addition to tying teacher compensation to student learning outcomes and other measures of teacher quality, the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) includes additional job-embedded professional development opportunities for teachers, including mentoring, changes to teacher evaluation processes, and teacher career advancement opportunities (for more information about TAP, see <http://www.tapsystem.org/>). For another example, the Minnesota Quality Compensation (Q Comp) program requires not only that 60 percent of teacher pay increases be based on measures of student achievement but also that schools provide career ladders and job-embedded professional development opportunities and evaluate teachers using instructional observations and standards-based assessments (for more information, see [http://cecr.ed.gov/initiatives/maps/pdfs/CECR\\_MN\\_QComp.pdf](http://cecr.ed.gov/initiatives/maps/pdfs/CECR_MN_QComp.pdf)).

## Conclusion

The policy vortex referenced at the beginning of this report has in the last year focused on teacher evaluation and teacher preparation as well as alternative ways to compensate and reward teachers. These reform ideas are not the most popular from teachers' perspectives. For example, the widely publicized Race to the Top competition, increases in funding for the Teacher Incentive Fund program, and discussions regarding the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act do not emphasize the policy options that seem most popular to teachers, namely class size reduction and addressing student discipline.

This disconnect suggests that teachers' voices do not have a strong influence on the policy agenda, which may be problematic when it comes to its implementation. How teachers make sense of top-down policy determines whether they will embrace or resist change (Gold, 2002; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005). Policymakers who want to improve teacher effectiveness seek to hold teachers accountable for their practice as well as encourage improved practice through incentives and opportunities to learn. The incentives that cause change in teacher behavior will ultimately determine the success of these policies. Taking teachers' advice on what will improve their effectiveness, or working hard to communicate with teachers about how their policies will improve student learning, or both, will likely give these reforms the best chance of success.

Some newly funded initiatives seek to remediate this disconnect between teachers' and policymakers' priorities by increasing teachers' participation in the national policy conversation. For example, Teach Plus, based in Boston and now Indianapolis, supports the retention of highly effective urban teachers who have between three and 10 years of experience by giving them access to research and experts in education policy as well as venues in which to advocate for change. A group of Teach Plus teachers recently drafted a policy proposal, which argues, based on the research, that implementing a cohort staffing model, rigorous selection criteria, and differentiated pay; providing opportunities for career growth based in the classroom; and dramatically changing urban school culture will vastly improve teacher effectiveness for all students (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, & Teach Plus, 2009). As another example, the Center for Teacher Quality hosts the Teacher Leader Network Forum.<sup>3</sup> As part of this work, a group of 12 accomplished teachers, collectively called *TeacherSolutions 2030*, are writing a book describing what the teaching profession could look like in the year 2030 if policymakers begin to make changes today.

Finally, in addition to the importance of engaging teachers in education reform, this report highlights the continued lack of solid, replicated empirical evidence on which to base policy decisions. This dearth of evidence remains a stubborn hindrance to effective policymaking and ensures that the debate will continue. Grounding this debate with the voices of experience and evidence continues to be of critical importance.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Teacher Leader Network Forum, see <http://www.teacherleaders.org>.

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