

# What States Can Do to Improve Teacher Effectiveness



The Education Trust

## TO THE POINT

- ▶ When measuring the effectiveness of teachers, start with student learning.
- ▶ Root milestones in the teaching career—training, evaluation, licensure, tenure, and rewards—in measured effectiveness.
- ▶ Ensure that all students, especially low-income and minority children, have access to the strongest teachers.

To make lasting improvements in student achievement and close gaps, states must increase the number of effective teachers and rush them to the places of greatest need—big-city and rural schools where the achievement gaps loom largest. States also must find better ways to help teachers develop the capacity to succeed with a wide range of learners. They must create fair but quick ways to shed from the workforce those teachers who can't improve—or won't.

# What States Can Do to Improve Teacher Effectiveness

BY BRAD JUPP

**N**o one has a greater impact on student achievement than teachers. This is especially true for young people on the wrong side of our nation's achievement gaps. For poor and minority students in particular, school has to work for them year in, year out.

To make lasting improvements in overall student achievement and close gaps, states must increase the number of effective teachers and rush them to the places of greatest need—big-city and rural schools where the achievement gaps loom largest. They also must find better ways to help teachers develop the capacity to succeed with a wide range of learners, and they must create fair but quick ways to shed from the workforce those who can't improve—or won't. Such efforts can't be isolated or episodic: They must be part of an explicit set of policies, systems, and practices that focus squarely on teacher effectiveness in improving student learning.

Our current education system does none of these things well. After all, it took shape in the era of the rotary phone and the typewriter, when we assumed that teachers would hold roughly the same job, perform mainly the same duties, and then retire after three decades of service. This career path developed when women and minorities had fewer career options and far less mobility. It reflects an era when finishing high school was a high expectation, when only a select few aspired to complete college, and when our economy demanded a far less educated work force.

Things have changed for women, for minorities, and for all of us. Fewer teachers actually work for 30 years in the classroom, yet these old practices are held firmly in place by a web of similarly outmoded state statutes, systems, and practices that define almost every milestone in a teacher's professional life—preparation, licensure, tenure, compen-

sation, evaluation, career and professional development, firing, and retirement.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR STATES

Today, the national conversation about educational equity and reform offers an extraordinary opportunity to transform the teaching career. Educators and policymakers understand that solutions lie not in tinkering around the edges but in a concerted effort to create systemic change.

To succeed, states must make rapid progress in four areas:

1. Define teacher effectiveness.
2. Build better systems to measure teacher effectiveness.
3. Base milestones in the teaching career on measured effectiveness.
4. Establish and enforce a policy of equitable access to effective teachers and align other reforms to support this effort.

### 1. Define teacher effectiveness.

Teacher effectiveness is best defined as the practical outputs of teaching. These outputs are quantitative—student learning, as calculated by value-added assessments (which measure how much a specific teacher improves an individual student's learning) or other rigorous measures. And they are qualitative—observations of a teacher's classroom performance by a principal or peer who understands the classroom practices that improve student achievement.

Measures of teacher effectiveness should be based on student *learning*—the difference between how much students knew before they began a course and how much they knew after they finished it. No matter how accurate a test

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may be, measures of student *achievement* that involve only data from a single point in time—typically the end of an instructional cycle—fail to gauge the effect of teaching.

Make no mistake: Teacher effectiveness is distinct from teacher qualifications. Accrued throughout a teacher's career, qualifications include state-issued certificates, college degrees, years of service, advanced licenses, and special endorsements.

Our present system tracks teacher qualifications and overlooks teacher effectiveness. In nearly every school system in America, most incentives—compensation, opportunity, and esteem—recognize and reward accumulated qualifications. We cannot abandon all these measures, of course, but we will have to realign career incentives to value measured effectiveness far more highly than we do now.

Where should a state begin this realignment? By overhauling its professional standards for teaching.

State teaching standards matter. They align expectations for teacher-preparation programs, teacher evaluations, and the statutory criteria for dismissing teachers. Today, professional teaching standards pay attention to what teachers do, but they do not consider students' results. Rewritten, the standards would pay attention to both. In addition to describing effective teaching practices, they would expect teachers to demonstrate the following:

- Commit to improved learning for all students.
- Use evidence to demonstrate that students in their class have learned.
- Make measurable improvement in student learning.
- Contribute to boosting overall student performance at their school.



Refocusing teaching standards on effectiveness would signal the end of business as usual. This first step is a critical precursor to the hard work of remaking everything from the way we prepare teachers to the way we assign, evaluate, and compensate them.

## **2. Build better systems to measure teacher effectiveness.**

Our capacity to gauge teacher effectiveness is in its infancy. At this early stage, educators and policymakers must build systems that better measure effectiveness and design information-management systems to track teacher performance statewide and beyond. This effort may be broken into three undertakings:

Improve value-added measures and other measures of student learning. Value-added measures examine differences among schools and teachers in the extent their students “grow” on state assessments from one school year to the next—for example, from the end of fourth grade to the end of fifth grade. Although opinions differ about the best ways to do this, value-added calculations currently are the best data-driven technique for examining the effectiveness of many teachers.

Value-added measures have a simple strength: They show differences in the effectiveness of different teachers over time. Although such measures surely should not be the sole source of data in any judgment about a teacher's performance, all states should routinely provide such data to teachers themselves as well as to their supervisors.

To be sure, value-added measures have their limits. They require large-scale student assessments, such as standardized state tests. And if one of the uses of the data is to measure individual teacher effectiveness, such tests work best when administered every year. Such tests typically cover reading, writing, and mathematics; sometimes they include science, usually only in grades three through eight or ten. Thus, in most states, value-added measures only can be used to assess teachers from fourth through tenth grades (third grade cannot be incorporated without data about the prior year)—and only for teachers who teach the subjects in which students were tested. This is a limited portion of any state's teacher corps.

States therefore should invest in other measures of student learning and teacher effectiveness, such as end-of-course exams and early reading assessments, or encourage districts to do the same. But because of the limits of large-scale assessments, it is important to resist the temptation

to rely entirely on standardized tests. To ensure a fuller set of measures for assessing teacher effectiveness, states could do the following:

- Provide periodic benchmark assessments that enable teachers to assess their students' growth over shorter cycles.
- Provide "anchor" assignments that teachers of the same subject and grade levels could teach in common, with data from the resulting student performances fed into the performance-monitoring system.
- Provide incentives and technical assistance for local school systems—or consortia of school systems—to develop additional ways to assess student learning.
- Offer practical guidelines on ways to develop and administer assessments that fairly measure student learning and teacher effectiveness, along with tips on comparing these small-scale assessments with large-scale ones.

Because value-added measures employ sophisticated calculations that can mystify skeptics, states should ensure that all non-personally identifiable value-added data are publicly available. States also will benefit from shared use and portability of information among states.

### **Overhaul teacher-evaluation processes, including classroom observation practices.**

Current teacher-evaluation processes are laden with rules, most of which are intended to protect underperforming teachers from unfair dismissals. States should provide clear guidance and technical assistance to local districts and encourage them to transform the process in four ways.

First, teacher evaluations should align with new state-teaching standards that require evidence of effectiveness.

Second, states should encourage districts to redesign evaluation processes so they distinguish between highly effective, effective, and ineffective teachers. In other words, the systems should contain at least three or four rating levels—rather than the two levels ("satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory") many districts employ today. Such systems should incorporate evidence of student learning as well as other measures of a teacher's classroom performance.

Third, evaluation systems should presume the good faith of evaluators, whether they are principals, teachers, or other educators. It is less important to decide whether teachers or principals make better evaluators and more important to ensure that an evaluator can distinguish between good and poor performance. Honest and accurate

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appraisal is the heart of any successful effort to help individual teachers improve their effectiveness or increase the overall number of effective teachers in the workforce.

Finally, states and districts should calibrate evaluation systems and evaluators with student performance results. Principals and superintendents who rate large numbers of teachers as excellent despite poor academic growth of their students—or conversely, rate large numbers of teachers as poor despite strong growth among students—should themselves be evaluated as unsatisfactory and provided with the help they need to improve.

### **Develop state and local human-resource information systems capable of supporting initiatives to improve teacher effectiveness.**

Raising teacher performance statewide requires information systems that link teachers with the achievement data of the students they teach. Doing this right, though, requires more than just removing "firewalls" between teachers and students in state data systems.

- To ensure the data are accurate, systems designers will need to create a reliable process of verifying that students and teachers are correctly matched—a process much harder than it seems because of the many classroom-sharing arrangements in today's schools.
- Effective information systems also will require incorporating sources of other data about individual teachers, including how and where a teacher was trained, as well as annual performance evaluations, licensure status, and other qualifications.
- And it means protecting against potential abuses by

developing and adhering to strict rules that require personal data remain to confidential, that appropriately incorporate data from multiple sources, that ensure officials adhere to due process in judgments about teacher performance, and that prevent anyone from using data in an arbitrary or capricious manner.

### **3. Base milestones in the teaching career on measured effectiveness.**

Unlike most other professions, the teaching career's milestones are mapped in state statutes and policy manuals. States set the bar for how teachers are prepared, licensed or certified, granted tenure, compensated, evaluated and dismissed, and retire. It is time for states to ask, "How do these policies align with our goals of improving student performance, narrowing gaps between groups, and increasing teacher effectiveness in addressing those goals?"

#### **Link teacher training with measured teacher effectiveness.**

If teachers should be judged on their ability to improve student learning, teacher-preparation programs should be judged on the same basis—by the degree of effectiveness of such programs in producing teachers who can improve student performance. To make sure the message is clear, states will need to set explicit targets for teacher-preparation programs, rigorously compare them with one another, cultivate the strong ones, and strengthen or close the weak ones.

Many possible approaches exist. Louisiana, the first state to examine teacher-preparation programs this way, compares the teachers various preparation programs in the state produce. It does so not only with other new teachers within the same school district but with experienced teachers in those same school districts. Weak programs are expected to improve or face closure.

Another state might choose a different approach after analyzing data on the effectiveness of new teachers. For example, it might set a target that requires more than half of the students of all new teachers to exceed the state median for annual growth on the state standards test. If a teacher-preparation program produces disproportionate numbers of candidates who can't meet that mark, the state might choose to withdraw accreditation. Another state might require teachers to be in the top three-quarters of their hiring class to be retained and then penalize (or close) programs that produce disproportionate numbers

of bottom-quartile teachers.

Such targets would make a dramatic impact on aspiring teachers and those who train them, whether those are traditional college and university programs or alternative providers. New standards would affect the design of teacher-preparation curricula, setting expectations for prospective teachers to make a measurable difference in student performance. Higher standards also would change the skills and knowledge aspiring teachers would be required to develop, placing new attention on measuring student progress on a wide range of instruments (including, but not limited to, state standards tests).

Testing the effectiveness of teacher-training programs, rather than arguing over business versus pedagogical models, would shift the discussion to what best meets the needs of students, not adults. Any training program wishing to propose candidates for licensure or receive state and federal subsidies would need to commit to basic performance expectations. Failure to meet those expectations would lead to probation and, in the end, revocation of funds and accreditation.

#### **Establish new requirements for teacher licensure and tenure based on measurable results.**

Licensure and tenure mark two important early milestones on a teacher's career path. Licensure gives the teacher permission to lead a classroom of students. Tenure provides the right to a job with a school district and a pension at the end of a career. It also grants extensive due-process rights before that job can be revoked. Today, neither of these milestones is linked to rigorous expectations of effectiveness.

States could begin to link decisions on licensure and tenure to teacher effectiveness simply by reframing in simple statutory language the intentions underlying these career milestones.

- States would grant probationary licenses "with the expectation that teachers will demonstrate effectiveness and commitment to improvement of student learning prior to being granted professional licenses."
- States would grant non-probationary or professional teaching licenses "upon consistent demonstration of effectiveness and commitment to improving student learning."
- States may even begin granting advanced teaching licenses upon "consistent demonstration of out-

standing effectiveness and commitment to improvement of student learning” and perhaps as a result of “overall commitment to advancing the profession of teaching.”

Tenure will have to change as well. Teachers should be granted tenure only “upon consistent demonstration of effectiveness and commitment to improving student learning.” This means pre-tenure evaluations would be required to gather evidence that proves whether a teacher has met these conditions over time.

To facilitate this collection of evidence, states may want to consider extended or variable tenure periods. The usual three-year, one-size-fits-all pathway to tenure may need to give way to a performance-based decision between the second and seventh year on the job. States may even reach a point where teachers have to renew tenure by meeting the original standard.

Rather than tackle the tough issue of tenure head on, states may sidestep the debate by permitting school districts to pilot results-based systems for teacher licensure and tenure. Conditions for these pilot programs should include results-oriented professional teaching standards, an aligned teacher-evaluation system, a reasonable way to measure student learning, a robust data system and aligned support, incentives and accountability for schools and principals, and faculty support—either at the district or school level.

### **Build career development on expectations of measured impact.**

After tenure, milestones in the teaching career occur primarily through a series of entitlements—scheduled pay increases and pensions that move upward in steady steps and leap in value in the last decade of the career. As a result, teachers receive no clear message that they are expected to improve their effectiveness over time. Moreover, high performers do not stand out from their peers, and there is no way for them to increase their career trajectory without leaving the classroom.

Refocusing professional and career development on improving the way we measure teacher effectiveness could reverse these circumstances. How might states send clear signals to districts and teachers that effectiveness matters?

A state might adopt a tiered licensure system with different titles, responsibilities, status, and pay—for example, probationary or novice, teacher, master teacher, and lead teacher. But moving through the levels would depend on evidence of effectiveness at each level.

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A state might adopt expectations for growth in effectiveness over time—for example, in the percentages of children who achieved expected growth—and require evidence of that growth to be included in evaluations. Those expectations for growth, then, also would apply to state-managed professional development funds, including federal funds from Title II. Programs whose client-teachers were less successful than others in meeting their improvement targets would be defunded.

Clear expectations for mentoring and induction programs also should exist. These, too, should be evaluated based on their relative success in enabling their clients to meet growth targets. This goes for the coaches these programs employ as well: They should neither be hired by these programs without demonstrating their own effectiveness in producing student learning nor retained in them without demonstrating an ability to improve their clients’ effectiveness.

### **Recognize and reward effectiveness in teacher-compensation plans.**

By aligning compensation with classroom impact, states can reward and recognize teacher effectiveness. Such policies would help focus teachers on continuous improvement, increase the ranks of effective teachers, attract high performers into the profession, and draw teachers with strong track records into districts and schools with wide achievement gaps.

How might this work in practice? One way would be for states to establish large pools of incentive funds—from 5 percent to 15 percent of average teacher compensation—for teachers in the top quartile of effectiveness based on state-recognized means. Because such incentive rewards would be bonuses, they would not build base salaries.

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Instead, teachers could earn the incentives again in future years for similar outstanding performance. Such policies would not create continuing fiscal obligations for a state and would require no changes to salary schedules, which would draw opposition from foes of performance pay for teachers.

To ensure that such incentives focus on closing the gaps in teacher effectiveness between high-poverty and low-poverty schools and high-minority and low-minority schools, states could create more-generous incentives in schools with bigger challenges. These might combine with additional incentives for effective teachers to teach in high-needs schools, including periodic paid sabbaticals or double credits in the retirement system. States also could devise similar incentives to attract strong teachers to work in turnaround situations to reverse longstanding underperformance in schools.

Finally, because local school districts determine teacher pay, states should encourage districts to tie compensation to effectiveness. This means eliminating barriers to incentives from state statutes, where they exist. For example, states will need to rescind rules that prohibit the use of student-performance data in determining teacher compensation. They also will have to strip from statutes requirements for uniform salary schedules that prevent differential pay based on effectiveness. If this proves difficult to accomplish, states at least can allow school districts to opt out of the statutory requirements through agreements reached through collective bargaining or some other process that incorporates teacher participation.

### **Streamline processes for dismissing ineffective teachers.**

States need to encourage districts to dismiss ineffective teachers. As simple as this sounds, it turns existing dismissal systems upside down. Current systems focus on whether administrators comply with due-process requirements, not on whether teachers improve student learning.

This emphasis exists because teachers usually are dismissed for wrongdoing—breaking laws, acting immorally, or consistently failing to follow directions in the workplace. It makes sense to hold administrators accountable for following due process in investigating such incidents, because if they do not, teachers are reinstated. This dynamic means that hearing officers treat teacher dismissals as tests of process, not as tests of whether the teacher is improving student performance.

In dealing with cases of ineffective teaching in the dismissal process, this orientation must change. Due process for ineffective teachers should consist mainly of a fair chance to become effective—not to become marginally competent but to achieve better learning results with students and stronger measured results on their own evaluations. If ineffective teachers fail to improve, they should lose their classroom assignment quickly and without prolonged dispute.

Compared with dismissals in other professions, teacher dismissals are extraordinarily rare. They involve arcane rules for observations, lengthy periods required by law for teachers to improve their performance, extended paid leave once a teacher's performance is found unsatisfactory, and hearings before officers or boards before final decisions are rendered. New practices could make the teacher-dismissal process more reasonable. States could shorten required time periods, simplify rules for classroom observations, and run the hearings less like trials. States also could separate the decision to dismiss a teacher from revocation of the teaching license.

All of these measures would fall short, however, if states fail to take the fundamental step of defining unsatisfactory teaching performance as the inability to achieve student-performance results comparable to one's peers. In other words, states would use effectiveness as a basis for treating teachers more like other professionals.

## **4. Establish and enforce a policy of equitable access to effective teachers and align other reforms to support this effort.**

Available data suggest that effective teachers are not dispersed fairly across schools with varying types of students. Poor children and children of color—especially those who attend schools with large concentrations of such children—are less likely to be taught by our strongest teachers and far more likely to be taught by our weakest ones. To close longstanding gaps between groups, we need exactly



the opposite to be the case.

That won't happen, though, just by making generic improvements in teacher policy. Instead, state policymakers must adopt and enforce a policy of equitable access to effective teachers and hold districts accountable for making swift progress toward that goal.

To monitor progress on this critical issue, states might create district-level "dashboards" of teacher quality that examine and report on trends—both in overall teacher effectiveness and on fair access to such teachers. Are weak teachers (or teachers who are new and whose effectiveness is unknown) concentrated in high-poverty schools? Do high-poverty schools have less than their fair share of teachers whose effectiveness has earned them "advanced" or "master" status? Are the least effective teachers most likely to teach the lowest achieving students?

Changing these patterns should not be left solely to principals, though they have hugely important roles in such determinations; districts have important responsibilities, too. A clear policy around equitable access to high-quality teachers, in other words, will provide a much-needed focus on getting effective teachers to the children who most need them. It is especially important to create conditions that will attract more high-caliber teachers to underperforming schools.

Two specific reforms would help. First, individual schools need greater control of resources to drive improved performance. Principals need to be able to choose the people who work in the schools, organize their schedules and calendars the way they see fit, and determine how to spend money. The extent to which a local school has freedom to control such resources will determine its ability to assemble the team of effective teachers its students deserve.

Second, states need to support the development of high-performing principals and school leaders and emphasize the importance of managing the effectiveness of their staffs. Identifying, developing, and advancing the careers of effective teachers are discrete skills. Principals able to manage talent are most likely to lead successful school reform and drive improvement in overall student performance. Principals who have not demonstrated these abilities never should be assigned to low-performing schools.

## POLICY DECISIONS TO AVOID

Two initiatives states have employed have underperformed and would benefit from a new focus on teacher effectiveness.

The first, school-improvement initiatives, especially school turnarounds, have almost never aimed to increase the number of effective teachers at schools that need to change. Effective teachers are necessary to alter a school's educational direction and thus should be at the heart of any school-turnaround strategy.

Second, states have taken stewardship of huge federal funding sources, such as Title II, and administered these programs without seeing broad, lasting improvement in student performance or in narrowing gaps in achievement. States should begin to focus these and other related funding streams to ensure that equitable access to high-quality teachers becomes the highest priority. To this end, states should ensure that Title I and Title II funds support development and implementation of teacher-effectiveness policies and practices at the state and local levels, including differentiated compensation and staffing approaches.

In addition, states should shy away from the following policies that undermine a framework for improving teacher effectiveness:

- investing in school improvement without supporting large-scale development of teacher effectiveness;
- refining teacher qualifications, licensure, tenure, or dismissal without regard to teacher effectiveness;
- investing in data systems without creating measures of teacher performance at the classroom level;
- endorsing professional development programs that fail to base program and teacher evaluations on student outcomes; and
- revamping state standards and assessments without commitment to tracking teacher effectiveness.

## CONCLUSION

No state will raise student achievement and close its achievement gaps unless it develops teachers with appropriate and effective skills. Any state that hopes to create rapid, lasting improvement in student performance must boost the number of effective teachers in its classrooms. And to close achievement gaps at the same time, states must direct the greatest increase in high-impact teachers to the schools with the greatest needs.

## ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels—pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people—especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families—to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

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