



Reshaping Teacher Policies to Improve Student Achievement

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POLICY BRIEF

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Improving achievement for all California students—ensuring students have the skills to reach high academic standards—is the primary goal of the state's education system. To achieve this goal, California has developed and implemented the most rigorous academic standards in the nation, regular assessments based on those standards, and a system to hold schools accountable for results.

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Despite improvements in recent years, California students' performance still lags behind that of other states. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called the “nation's report card,” California ranks near the bottom.

The state has many policy levers at its disposal that could contribute to improving student achievement. Potentially among the most significant of these are policies designed to enhance human capital (the people in the system) and build the capacity of local school systems to support teachers in their work.

Guaranteeing that there are excellent teachers in all of California's classrooms is essential for the state's future. To achieve the state's educational goals, however, California will not only need more teachers, but also more administrators and other personnel including counselors, nurses,

and librarians to lead and support teaching and learning in the schools. (See Gerstein, 2008.) Current and new employees will have to be provided with the knowledge and skill that they need to do their jobs effectively. These policies cannot be implemented on the cheap.

Why Focus on Teachers?

The research is clear: teachers matter. High-quality teachers are the most important contributor to improving student learning. Students with effective teachers are likely to show significant and lasting learning gains. Those without such teachers are destined to play a never-ending game of academic catch-up. Without excellent teachers in the classroom, other policy reforms are likely to produce only anemic results.

The state's need to attract and retain well-qualified teachers is given added urgency by the state's demographics. Just under half of the state's nearly six million students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, the conventional education proxy for poverty. In addition, California educates one-third of all the English Language Learners (ELL) in the country, or more than 1.5 million K-12 students. These students—both non-English speakers and those with limited-English proficiency—often require more concentrated educational services in the form of more people, more time, and more dollars just to pull even with their more advantaged peers.

California's public schools currently employ more than 300,000 teachers. Even so, there are far too few educators in the

system. California ranks near the bottom, compared to other states, in the number of students per teacher. The state also has fewer administrators, guidance counselors, and librarians per pupil than almost any other state, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education. Higher class-sizes and counseling caseloads can only mean that students are less likely to receive the attention they need and teachers do not get enough time to plan and confer with colleagues in order to improve learning. As many as 10,000 of these experienced teachers are expected to retire within the next decade and will need to be replaced, just to maintain the present teaching force.

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Increasing the challenges in California’s most demanding classrooms, novice and under-prepared teachers continue to hold positions disproportionately in schools in the lowest Academic Performance Index (API) deciles. More than one-fifth (21%) of the teachers in the lowest decile schools are underprepared, novice, or both, compared to 12% in the highest decile schools. (See Figure 1.)

Schools with large proportions of racially and ethnically diverse students are more likely to have underprepared and novice teachers than are schools with lower minority concentrations (18% compared to 11%). Nearly half (44%) of all interns—individuals teaching without full credentials—are teaching in high minority schools, compared to 7% in low minority schools. Staffing California classrooms with well-qualified educators becomes all

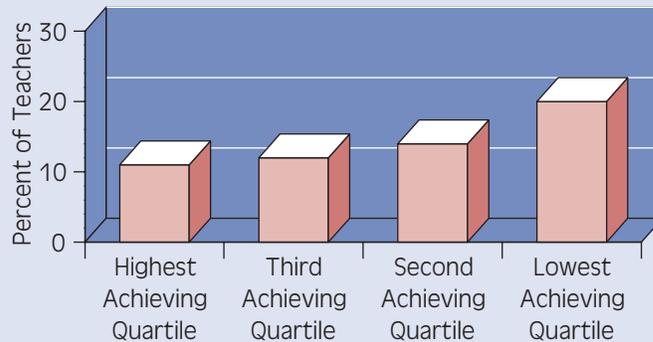
the more difficult because the state continues to experience shortages of teachers in mathematics and science, as well as ELL and special education. (See Figure 2.)

A Window of Opportunity

A number of recent developments have opened a significant window of opportunity within which California can design and enact needed changes in teacher policy. First, the recently released report, *Getting Down to Facts: School Finance and Governance in California* made clear the need for more people, more resources, and substantial structural changes in the educational system (Loeb, Bryk, and Hanushek, March 2007). The Governor’s

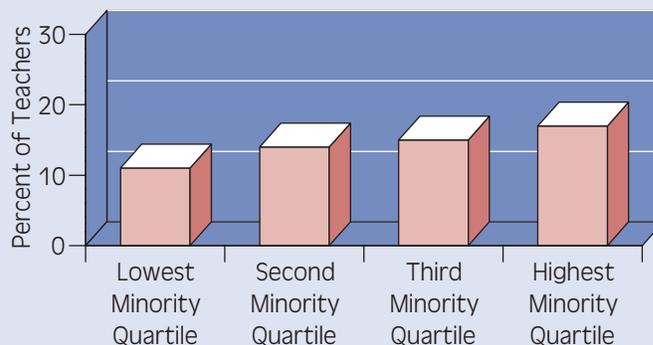
Committee on Educational Excellence has now released its own findings and recommendations for educational improvement in California, which build on the findings from *Getting Down to Facts* (GCEE, 2008). Governor Schwarzenegger has indicated that the Secretary of Education and members of the Committee will lead a public conversation about how to improve the state’s education system through a series of town hall meetings planned for this year. These circumstances offer policymakers a once-in-a-generation chance to formulate teacher policies designed to have long-term and lasting effects. Despite a very difficult budget situation, California cannot afford to let this opportunity pass by.

FIGURE 1. Percentage of Underprepared and Novice Teachers, by API Achievement Quartile, 2006-07



SOURCE: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2007

FIGURE 2. Percentage of Underprepared and Novice Teachers, by School-Level Percentage of Minority Students, 2006-07



SOURCE: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2007

A Role for the State

Local school administrators, board members, and unions are in the best position to devise the compensation, evaluation, and professional development models that work for their communities. Many changes in personnel policy will be the subject of negotiations between school boards and local unions. But the state also has a vital role to play in encouraging innovation by providing financial and other incentives to districts that are willing to experiment with alternative policies. The state should not mandate *specific* strategies but can nevertheless implement a set of coherent, cohesive, sustainable policies designed to enhance the quality of teaching and attract and retain able teachers, especially in high-needs fields and priority (low-performing) schools. The state can also ensure that new and innovative policies are carefully evaluated, and that new knowledge about what works and what doesn't is widely shared across schools and school districts.

This policy brief makes the case that the state can intervene in six teacher-related policy areas to improve the prospects that there will be high-quality teachers in all of California's classrooms.

Supporting Good Teaching Through Continuous Improvement

1. Support continuous improvement in teacher knowledge and practice by investing in research-based professional development.

If all students are to be given the opportunity to thrive academically, the state's educational system needs to support high-quality instruction. Effective teachers require a wealth of skills. They need to know the subject matter they teach and how to

convey that subject matter to students. They need to understand how children learn, that different children learn differently, and how to adapt instruction to students' different learning needs and styles. They need to be able to respond effectively to the constantly changing environment of the classroom, solving myriad and often complex problems on a daily basis. Developing, honing, and maintaining these diverse skills requires continuous work and support throughout teachers' careers. In order to continually improve their practice, teachers need opportunities for ongoing professional learning and development.

Effective professional development is standards- and content-based, to a large extent teacher-driven, closely aligned to what teachers do in their schools and classrooms, and part of each teacher's workday. Much of the professional development to which California teachers have access bears little resemblance to this description.

Professional development too often comes packaged as large, district-wide gatherings or in the form of college or university courses, sometimes leading to advanced degrees. There is no evidence that either of these formats contributes significantly to improved teaching.

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Moreover, good professional development takes time. At least some of this time needs to be in the form of structured teacher collaboration. Teachers learn professional practice skills from working with one

another— planning instruction, designing diagnostic assessments, and examining student work. There is a growing body of research that shows that this type of collaboration is linked to improved instruction. But collaborative teacher time is all too rare, and sometimes virtually non-existent, in California schools.

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Continuous Improvement Through Evaluation

2. Encourage and support districts to develop and implement rigorous standards-based systems of evaluation.

Evaluation has two classic functions: improvement and accountability. Good evaluation is a continuation of good professional development. Effective professional appraisal identifies areas to which teachers need to devote more attention and helps them improve their practice. This is the improvement aspect.

In addition, an effective evaluation system identifies teachers who are not performing up to standard. It offers them help to improve, and if that assistance is not sufficient, makes provision to ensure that these teachers are no longer in the classroom. This is the accountability aspect.

Effective evaluation is based on a recognized set of professional standards and aligned with identified learning objectives. A good system is credible, fair, and includes evidence of student learning.

Peer Assistance and Review in Poway, California

The Peer Assistance and Review Program in Poway, California offers intensive support and summative evaluation for all beginning teachers and experienced teachers who have been designated by their principals as under-performing. Consulting Teachers (specially trained experienced teachers) are selected in a competitive process by a joint Poway Unified School District-Poway Federation of Teachers project governing board. Consulting Teachers are released from the classroom for three years and have a “caseload” of both novice and underperforming experienced teachers with whom they work. They spend time in these classrooms observing, modeling lessons, and generally offering help and support.

At the end of a designated period of time (usually a year), the Consulting Teachers appear before the project governing board to recommend either continuing contracts for the teachers under their charge or to recommend that individuals who have not shown adequate progress no longer be employed in Poway.

Teacher Evaluation in Montgomery County, Maryland

Experienced teachers in Montgomery County, Maryland, a large suburban district near Washington, D.C., are evaluated using a standards-based system. The program was developed as part of a cooperative effort between the Montgomery County Public Schools and the Montgomery County Education Association.

The program offers a tiered system of evaluation. Longer-serving teachers are evaluated less frequently than their more junior colleagues. During the years that teachers are not being formally evaluated, they prepare professional portfolios detailing the professional development work they have undertaken.

The program requires principals, who are extensively trained, to appraise teachers’ work using district-specific standards of professional practice. Unlike conventional checklist-style evaluation formats, Montgomery County’s requires principals to prepare a descriptive narrative, documenting where teachers are succeeding and where they need improvement.

As a result of this evaluation plan, teachers and principals report that they talk much more frequently about teaching and learning and use data more regularly to shape instruction.

Very little information is available about the particulars of evaluation in California. Under collective bargaining, each school district negotiates its own evaluation system. But national assessments of teacher evaluation systems point to a number of shortcomings endemic to these programs. Among these are that teacher evaluation systems typically

apply the same teaching standards and criteria to all teachers regardless of level of experience. In addition, principals often are not well trained, nor do they have adequate time to conduct evaluations. As a result, principals’ ratings of teachers frequently are neither helpful in improving instruction nor good indicators of how much students are learning.

The boxes at left briefly describe two evaluation models that have been used successfully. The Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program in Poway (San Diego County) has been in place for more than 15 years. Patterned on the program pioneered in Toledo in 1981, PAR provides support to and evaluation of both novice teachers and under-performing experienced teachers.

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The evaluation model in Montgomery County, Maryland has been in operation for approximately five years, and is used with experienced teachers who are generally functioning successfully in the classroom. (Under-performing experienced teachers as well as novice teachers in Montgomery County are supported and evaluated using a peer assistance and review program similar to Poway’s.)

Redefining a Static Career

3. Encourage and support district-based systems of differentiated roles for teachers.

Teaching is by and large a static career. It is often said that a teacher must “move out to move up.” In other words, leaving teaching, usually for administration, is typically the only route to advancement in the profession. Few differentiated job possibilities are available to teachers on the basis of their experience, skill, or interest.

Providing career pathways for teachers—opportunities for them to use their leadership and instructional skills in multiple ways that do not require them to abandon classroom teaching altogether—is an important strategy for retaining capable individuals in teaching.

Many states have relatively recent experience with differentiated teaching responsibilities in the form of career ladders, which were in policy vogue in the 1980s. Most of these programs foundered on the shoals of diminishing budgets.

The box at right presents a brief outline of Cincinnati’s career ladder program that has operated for more than 15 years.

Developing a Professional Pay System

4. Provide support for districts to experiment with alternative forms of teacher compensation.

Nearly all teachers in the United States are paid on the standard single salary schedule. Popularized in the midst of the teacher shortage following World War II, the system was designed to equalize pay by level (elementary and secondary), gender, and race.

“Policy pressure is growing across states and at the federal level to design and implement different kinds of compensation systems for teachers.”

Teachers on the single salary schedule earn added compensation on the basis of years of experience and college credits, the conventional “steps and lanes.” Critics assert that this system provides neither reward for accomplishment nor incentive for teachers to assume challenging assignments.

The Career Ladder in Cincinnati

Cincinnati’s career ladder is called the Career in Teaching (CIT) Program. Developed jointly by the Cincinnati Public Schools and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, CIT provides a progression of teaching responsibilities, linked to increasing pay.

Teachers in Cincinnati begin at the Apprentice level, where they remain for no more than two years. Following two years of successful evaluation (both peer and principal review), apprentices advance to Novice teacher, where they can remain for up to five years. While at the Apprentice and Novice levels, teachers receive continuing support from experienced mentors.

Career teacher is the next level. Teachers can remain at this level for the duration of their tenure in the Cincinnati Public Schools, or can move to Accomplished status by earning National Board Certification. These teachers often serve as mentors for their more junior colleagues.

The final level is Lead teacher. This is a competitive position that enables teachers to serve as consulting teachers for peer review, as curriculum or staff development specialists, team leaders, and program facilitators.

Policy pressure is growing across states and at the federal level to design and implement different kinds of compensation systems for teachers. The failed “merit pay” plans of the 1970s and 1980s granted so-called merit increases on the basis of subjective and often unclear standards and made them available to only a limited number of teachers. However, emerging teacher compensation plans—in Toledo, Denver, Minneapolis, and the 38 districts and states funded by the federal Teacher Incentive Fund—are founded on much more sophisticated measurement and technology. Many of these systems employ some combination of paying teachers for knowledge and skills, for teaching in hard-to-staff schools and subjects, and for added responsibilities. Most also include a more controversial criterion, that of student scores on standardized tests, often by using a “value-added” approach designed to measure student growth based on this one factor.

The boxes below provide three examples of different approaches to new forms of teacher compensation in Denver, Toledo, and New York City.

“Despite increasing nationwide experimentation with alternatives to the single salary schedule, virtually no such experiments are underway in California.”

New forms of teacher compensation are being designed with multiple purposes in mind, including attracting and retaining high-quality teachers in challenging schools, promoting improved student achievement, and providing additional dollars to teachers who assume new and expanded responsibilities. Despite increasing nationwide experimentation with alternatives to the single salary schedule, virtually no such experiments are underway in California.

Expanding Knowledge by Sharing Successful Practices

5. Regularly evaluate state-funded policies and programs.

The impact of thoughtful and effective teacher policies to improve student achievement can be enhanced if: 1) they are regularly reviewed, and 2) they are widely shared. “Policy pile-on”—continually adding new policies, rules, and regulations on

top of older ones without examining what could be reduced or eliminated—is a recurrent fact of California policy life. As *Getting Down to Facts* made clear, California policy tends to be overly bureaucratic and regulatory, often constraining districts’ ability to shape and implement programs designed to enhance quality teaching and improve student learning. And once implemented by the state, policies and programs rarely are evaluated for effectiveness or impact.

ProComp in Denver

Enacted in 2004, ProComp, Denver’s teacher pay program, was developed as a cooperative effort of the Denver Public Schools and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association. The plan provides multiple ways for teachers to earn added compensation: by acquiring and demonstrating knowledge and skills linked to improving student achievement, market incentives for hard-to-staff schools and subjects, dollars for successful professional evaluations, and financial incentives for improved student scores on standardized tests.

Teachers employed in Denver when the plan went into effect were offered the choice to participate in the new pay system or remain on the standard salary schedule. About half made the choice to switch. Any teacher hired after January 2006 is automatically placed in ProComp.

The system is funded by a voter-approved special tax override.

TRACS in Toledo

The Toledo Review and Alternative Compensation System (TRACS) is a three-tier plan that operates as a cooperative effort of the Toledo Public Schools and the Toledo Federation of Teachers. Tier 1 provides incentive dollars for teachers to participate in professional development linked to improving teaching and learning. Participating teachers can earn 5% above base salary.

Tier 2 is based on group (team, grade level, school) effort in increasing students’ scores on standardized tests. Groups of teachers who reach designated goals earn 10% above base pay.

Tier 3 bonuses are based on individual teachers’ success in raising scores on their students’ standardized tests. Teachers eligible for Tier 3 dollars, which amount to 15% above base pay, must be willing to be assigned to low-performing schools.

Tiers 1 and 2 are funded out of the district’s general fund revenues. Tier 3 is funded with federal Teacher Incentive Fund dollars.

The New York City Plan

New York City, the nation’s largest school district, announced agreement on a new teacher compensation plan in November 2007. Under the terms of the agreement between the city, the school district, and the local teachers’ union (the United Federation of Teachers), teachers in 200 low-performing schools will participate in the plan’s first year, with 200 more low-performing schools being added in the second year.

Participating schools must have a 55% approval by the school’s teachers, and then are eligible for incentive dollars based on their students’ measured growth on standardized tests. Those schools that reach the growth target will receive the equivalent of \$3,000 per teacher, the money to be apportioned by a four-person committee composed of two teachers selected by the teachers, the principal, and a fourth person designated by the principal. The committee may distribute the dollars as they see fit, with the caveats that seniority may not be the primary basis for allotting funds and if the committee cannot decide how to divide the dollars, the school forfeits the money.

Funded in the first year by a New York City-based business coalition, the pay program will be funded in subsequent years by the City.

As California moves to improve the performance of students and schools, the state will need to give local educators sufficient flexibility to experiment with new and different personnel policies, but it must simultaneously invest in the rigorous evaluation of policy innovations and in the development of regional networks and other institutions to ensure that new knowledge about effective policies is widely shared.

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6. Develop a network that enables districts to share successful programs and practices.

Finally, successful programs often remain well-guarded local or regional secrets, with no opportunity to share them among the larger population of California school districts. The state should develop ways, perhaps through technology or the development of regional partnerships or networks, to facilitate opportunities for schools and school districts to share their experiences with innovative educational programs and policies.

Conclusion

This policy brief has made the case for the state to pay closer attention to a number of policy areas in its continuing efforts to ensure the presence of a well-qualified teacher in every classroom. First, California needs more teachers, along with policies that increase the availability of time for teachers and other educators to reflect on their own practice and learn from oth-

ers. To improve the teaching workforce, the state must also focus on high-quality professional development, rigorous evaluation, expanded career opportunities, a more professional compensation system, evaluation of state-funded programs, and opportunities for districts to share successful practices. The goals of these policies include attracting and retaining adequate numbers of teachers to fill available teaching slots, especially in high-needs schools and subject areas; providing ongoing, career-long support for effective teaching; recognizing and rewarding good teaching; and developing the capacity of districts to promote continuous learning among teachers and administrators.

“Local collaboration and agreement between district leaders and local unions can result in effective models for training, retaining, and rewarding high-quality teaching.”

As the state designs these new policies, it must strike an appropriate balance between its role and the role of local school districts. The examples provided here show that local collaboration and agreement between district leaders and local unions can result in effective models for training, retaining, and rewarding high-quality teaching. The state should support innovation and experimentation, while being careful not to create further mandates and regulations that are likely to hamstring districts in their efforts to improve student achievement.

The challenge for the state is to make changes to teacher education policies that will improve student learning. Collectively, the six teacher-oriented policy recommendations described above are likely to achieve that purpose and move California

closer to its goal of ensuring an excellent education for all students.

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