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# An Effective Teacher in Every Classroom

## A lofty goal, but how to do it?

**P**roposals to reauthorize No Child Left Behind seek to ensure “equitable” access to effective teachers. The U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top fund rewards state plans for “ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals” and for “ambitious yet achievable annual targets to increase the number and percentage of highly effective teachers...in high-poverty schools.” These objectives pose a number of challenging questions. How readily can we identify effective teachers? And, perhaps most crucially, what are promising strategies for seeking to increase the number of effective teachers in high-poverty schools and communities? Addressing these questions are two of the leading authorities on the topic: Education Trust chief Kati Haycock and Stanford University and Hoover Institution economist Eric Hanushek.

### **Education Next: What is the evidence that inner-city schools are shortchanged on high-quality teachers?**

**Eric Hanushek:** Inner-city schools and especially those serving the most disadvantaged students routinely display unacceptable achievement levels, ones that seal their students off from further education and from good jobs. Coupled with the general finding that effective teachers are the key to a high-quality school, it is natural to infer that the children most in need are systematically getting the poorest teachers.

Unfortunately, direct evidence on the distribution of teacher quality and its impact for disadvantaged

students is hard to come by. Researcher Marguerite Roza and others have produced considerable evidence that teachers in schools serving the most-disadvantaged students have lower average salaries, reflecting in large part the movement of more-experienced teachers away from schools with a higher proportion of minority students and with lower-achieving students. There is also evidence that these schools tend to have more teachers with emergency credentials and without regular certification, although this appears to be declining over time. The problem is that these readily measured attributes of teachers have virtually nothing to do with teacher effectiveness.

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Extensive research on teacher quality by me and others suggests that the only attribute of teacher effectiveness that stands out is being a rookie teacher. Teachers in their first three years do a less satisfactory job than they will with more experience. And this has an impact on schools serving highly disadvantaged populations, because the more-experienced teachers who leave these schools are generally replaced with new teachers. The net impact of this on disadvantaged schools is unclear, because there is also some evidence that the experienced teachers who leave these schools are on average not their most effective teachers.

**Kati Haycock:** No matter what measure of “quality” you look at, poor and minority students—and not just those in inner-city schools—are much less likely to be assigned better-qualified and more-effective teachers. Core academic classes in high-poverty secondary schools are twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools to be taught by a teacher with neither a major nor certification in the subject. The percentage of first-year teachers at high-minority schools is almost twice as high as the percentage of such teachers at low-minority schools. The list of disgraceful statistics goes on and on.

Even if we dismiss traditional measures as imperfect gauges of true teaching quality, new studies employing more-sophisticated measures reveal the same inequitable patterns. When the Tennessee Department of Education analyzed the state’s Value-Added Assessment System—which measures the impact of individual teachers on their students’ tested academic growth—it found that “low-income and minority children have the least access to the state’s most effective teachers and more access to the state’s least effective teachers.” Recently, researchers at the University of Virginia studying teaching practices and learning climate in more than 800 1st-grade classrooms were dismayed to find that lower-income and nonwhite students are much more likely than their counterparts to be placed in “lower overall quality classrooms.”

We also have clear evidence of just how damaging those inequities are. An analysis of

data from Los Angeles found that the impact of individual teachers is so great that providing top-quartile teachers rather than bottom-quartile teachers for four years in a row would be enough to completely close the achievement gap between white and African American students. In fact, attending to this problem is the most important step policymakers can take to address the nation’s long-standing achievement gaps.

**EN: Can we get higher-quality teachers to inner-city schools? What strategies are most likely to work? Regulation or incentives?**

**EH:** Historically, the first policy response has been to try writing regulations. When these don’t work, the next response is generally to fine-tune the regulations. Developing regulations that ensure that local districts take appropriate action to deal with the teacher quality problem is not likely to be very successful. First, regulations work best when it is possible to measure precisely the underlying attributes that are important to success. Extensive research shows that commonly measured attributes of teachers, such as more than three or four years of experience, master’s degrees, and even state certification, are not related to effectiveness. In fact, all of the regulations that go into defining what is needed to be a fully credentialed teacher neither screen out bad teachers nor ensure that credentialed teachers are any more effective than uncredentialed teachers. Second, many union contracts in effect in inner cities vest rights to fill any teaching vacancies with senior teachers. New or reworked regulations would have to deal with collectively bargained teacher agreements.

An incentive approach must be the centerpiece of improving teacher quality in urban schools and in the most disadvantaged schools. It is necessary to reward success rather than try to regulate it. Unfortunately, we have little experience with how to structure incentives. Attempts to devise universal incentives from Washington or from state capitols are likely to be quite inefficient if not harmful.

Providing strong incentives is increasingly possible, however, as we develop better information linking teachers to student

achievement, but incentives linked to so-called value-added measures are likely to be a small part of the overall answer. We need to refine the evaluation of teacher effectiveness, and we need to introduce the serious use of evaluations into the schools, evaluations that guide tenure, retention, and pay decisions.

Research that Steve Rivkin and I have done indicates that the largest variations in teacher quality are found within the typical school, and that quality variation between schools is considerably smaller than that found in any given school, including high-poverty schools. The policy implication of this is quite clear. It is not a matter of trying to swap all of the teachers in high-poverty schools with those in suburban schools. It is very much a matter of focusing on student achievement gains and of keeping those teachers who do a good job while eliminating those who are inept. For this, it is more a matter of will, combined with eliminating the rigidities that have been built into teachers' contracts.

**KH:** We know it is possible to bring high-quality teachers into urban schools from recent efforts in New York City and other districts. The question is whether we will do what is necessary to provide low-income and minority students with the kind of powerful teaching they need and deserve. To solve the problem on a large scale, policymakers will need to think beyond simplistic, false dichotomies like "regulation or incentives" and embrace a robust combination of broad reforms coupled with targeted interventions.

First, we should press forward with efforts to provide education leaders with more sophisticated information on teacher effectiveness, to both maximize the impact of strategies that address distribution and to ensure cost efficiency. Education leaders need to be able to identify the strongest teachers in order to recruit and retain them, and assign them to the students who need their expertise the most. Similarly, they need to be able to identify weaker teachers in order to get them the support they need to join the ranks of effective teachers or to move them out of classrooms if they cannot improve. That is why the Obama administration is using the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act to insist that states tear down the "walls" that prevent them from linking teacher and student data and come clean on teacher evaluation systems that rate all teachers "satisfactory."

But it will take time to develop richer and more sophisticated measures of true effectiveness. Until then, policymakers should use a combination of the best available measures to analyze teacher distribution, report on it, and act to increase equity. A study in North Carolina found that having teachers with a combination of characteristics and credentials can more than offset the gap in annual learning gains between African American students whose parents did not go to college and white students whose parents did. We need to act on the information we have available, even while we work to create more sophisticated measures.

Next, we need new policies that empower local superintendents and principals to use that information to better recruit and distribute highly effective teachers. Districts can move up timelines for teacher resignations and transfers and give principals in hard-to-staff schools first dibs on new entrants and transfers. States and districts can establish a policy of "mutual consent" that gives principals the right to choose their own teachers. States can take actions to pump up the supply of stronger teachers by using data on the effectiveness of graduates to improve teacher training programs, expanding those that produce strong teachers and shrinking or closing those that do not. States and districts can eliminate seniority-based layoffs, which should consider effectiveness instead, and make it easier to transfer or remove ineffective teachers who cannot improve.

Finally, policymakers need to make these schools much more attractive places to work, including but not limited to improving financial compensation. Effective teachers who choose to work in the most challenging schools often sacrifice pay and professional status. State leaders should reverse that relationship, offering such teachers higher pay, visible respect, strong and supportive principals who provide effective instructional leadership, and opportunities to collaborate in meaningful ways.

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**EN: How can we measure teacher quality on an ongoing basis?**

**KH:** Measures of teacher quality should be based primarily on teachers' effectiveness in promoting student learning, but should also consider evidence of classroom teaching practices known to contribute to greater student learning. All states now have at least the raw capacity to use value-added techniques to measure teachers' contribution to their students' academic progress. Where those data are available, they should be front and center in efforts to measure teacher quality. But since the data rely on annual standardized assessments, such analyses will not be available for all teachers. Moreover, since value-added data by themselves do not tell much about why a teacher is more or less effective or how exactly he or she can improve, such "outcome" measures can productively be coupled with new kinds of "inputs" measures, provided the two are strongly correlated.

For example, researchers at institutions such as the University of Virginia, Stanford, and Michigan State and at programs like the Teacher Advancement Program and Teach For America have developed protocols for observing classroom practices and analyzing teaching "artifacts" that produce ratings sufficiently correlated with outcomes. Typically, they use highly specific frameworks and rubrics that describe effective teaching practices, ensure that all evaluators are trained in their use, require multiple classroom observations per year, and employ quality controls to ensure reliability across evaluators. Such systems can help administrators and teachers understand why value-added scores look the way they do and how they can be improved.

Some districts are experimenting with systems that incorporate an even broader range of measures. For example, the evaluation system currently being implemented in Washington, D.C., incorporates a schoolwide value-added measure, a gauge of how much the teacher participates in and contributes to the larger school community, and measures of student growth on instruments other than standardized tests.

**EH:** We have devoted a lot of research to identifying the attributes of effective teachers,

attributes that might be used for hiring or for policy purposes. This research has not succeeded, leading me to agree that the best way to identify a teacher's effectiveness is to observe her classroom performance. Most other professions are assessed by performance, including that of doctors, lawyers, accountants, and so forth. Indeed, one definition of "profession" might be an occupation in which one is willing to be judged (and rewarded) according to performance.

Research suggests that we can identify effective teachers from the value added to student achievement, although there are limits to the accuracy of doing this. Moreover, Brian Jacob and Lars Lefgren, in the most recent of this research, show that principals reach many of the same conclusions about effectiveness in their evaluations; at least they seem able to distinguish effectiveness in the classroom within broad ranges, i.e., bottom, middle, or top.

The long-run hope would be that we develop both better quantitative measures of a teacher's value added and better subjective evaluations by principals, supervisors, and peers. This approach is unlikely to satisfy a regulatory view of allocation of quality teachers, but if we are truly interested in improving student achievement, we cannot shy away from incorporating performance information of all sorts into our management decisions.

**EN: All the evidence says that experience does not affect teacher quality much after the first three or four years, so should we be concerned that the more-experienced teachers leave for different locations?**

**EH:** It is a concern if experienced teachers systematically leave the most-disadvantaged schools, because the first few years tend to be a little ragged. On the other hand, this fact by itself should not be overstated. Among all rookie teachers there is still a wide variation in skill. Take, for example, Teach For America teachers. On average, they start out looking like the typical experienced teacher from traditional training programs (even though TFA teachers will themselves improve with seasoning). More than that, the best and the worst TFA teachers or other rookies in the system

are dramatically different from each other, and the difference is much larger than the performance growth typical for the first few years.

Policies that concentrate on single proxies for skill, like initial years of experience, miss the much larger differences. Yes, if we say we can do nothing about retention related to individual performance levels, it would be good to have more-experienced teachers in the disadvantaged schools. But such a focus overlooks the place where truly large changes are possible.

A policy that simply stabilized movement from these schools would not really accomplish much and might even be counterproductive if no attention were given to actual performance. On the other hand, if we made inner-city schools more attractive places to work and if we developed policies that actively reward high performance by teachers, we would probably get a bonus of lower teacher turnover in our most-disadvantaged schools.

**KH:** While experience in no way equals effectiveness, we still should be concerned about teacher attrition. Here's why: high attrition rates in high-poverty schools create a "revolving door" environment with more job vacancies which, because such schools have a harder time recruiting teachers, tend to be disproportionately filled with first-year teachers. And experience does matter for inexperienced teachers. As a group, first-year teachers tend to be less effective than those with even a little more experience, and effectiveness tends to climb steeply for any given cohort of teachers until it begins to plateau after a few years. According to research by Eric Hanushek and others, disproportionate exposure to inexperienced teachers contributes to the achievement gap.

Therefore, policymakers should either seek to limit the number of rookie teachers hired to work in high-poverty and high-minority schools or ensure that beginning teachers come from programs or institutions with a proven track record of supplying teachers who are much more effective than average. Then they should track the effectiveness of beginning teachers in those schools over the first few years, offering substantial retention incentives to those who demonstrate high levels of effectiveness—not only salary incentives, but

also career pathways that provide opportunities to exercise leadership while they continue to teach.

**EN: If we force teachers to teach in particular schools, will they just leave for another district, or for an administrative position, or leave education altogether?**

**KH:** We don't know, since it's never been tried on a large scale. More to the point, I would suggest that this is the wrong question to be asking, as nobody thinks forced reassignments are a good solution and nobody is seriously proposing it. Every once in a while, district leaders become frustrated and make noises about the possibility of forced reassignments. But no large district has done it because they know that it would be met with too much resistance and resentment.

Instead, as district leaders are discovering for themselves, a better solution lies in a creative combination of targeted incentives for teachers and policies that empower administrators and school leaders to recruit and retain effective educators.

**EH:** Coercion is generally costly, particularly when it violates the expectations of workers. The U.S. military found that the draft was not a good policy, even when it allowed them to get soldiers cheaply. With schools, the situation is more complicated. There are many jobs (including the all-volunteer military) where the employer can establish the right to make specific job assignments, but in general the employer must pay for that ability. Today's urban teachers frequently have a contract that gives the more-experienced teacher certain transfer rights across schools, and changing that provision would generally require bargaining with compensation involving higher salaries or other benefits that the teachers value.

The current contractual arrangements are in many cases overly concerned with teachers' rights and less concerned about student outcomes than is desirable. It would make sense to work toward more assignment flexibility by school districts. But, again, this may be lower priority than simply having more control over retention based on classroom effectiveness.

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**EN: If we pay teachers more to teach in inner-city schools, will that really attract the best teachers?**

**KH:** Financial incentives can have a positive impact on teacher distribution, but how much of an impact depends on the size of the incentive and to whom it is being offered. Research from North Carolina suggests that smaller financial incentives can help retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools, but experience in places like Dallas and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system suggests that incentives need to be fairly large to convince highly effective veterans to transfer and remain there. That shouldn't stop leaders from offering higher salaries for effective teachers who successfully take on more-challenging jobs. But the qualifiers in that sentence are important: Pay incentives should be offered only to teachers of proven effectiveness, and a portion should be in the form of bonuses contingent on continuing high performance.

Policymakers can free up resources by putting a stop to or limiting counterproductive incentives in current salary schedules. For example, they can set a ceiling on the percentage of teacher compensation districts can base on seniority, and they can stop the practice of paying teachers to earn master's degrees, which study after study has shown to have no discernible impact on student achievement.

But higher pay alone might not be enough to solve the problem. Some districts have found that even large financial incentives, in the absence of better working conditions, fail to attract and retain strong teachers in high-need schools. The reason is simple: like any other professionals, great teachers place great value on a positive and supportive working environment characterized by strong leadership and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues.

Rather than being discouraged to know it takes more than money to attract stronger teachers to struggling schools, leaders can leverage that knowledge to devise creative solutions. For example, when recruitment bonuses failed to solve the teacher inequity problem in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, leaders came up with a comprehensive “Strategic Staffing Initiative.” The district

transferred high-performing principals into targeted schools, allowed them to handpick a team of strong administrators, and gave them the opportunity to recruit up to five highly effective teachers from a roster of volunteers identified and recruited by the district. Everyone who transferred received substantial financial incentives, but, just as important, all were offered the opportunity to work with a team of teachers and administrators committed to achieving success.

**EH:** There is a simple economic axiom that bad teachers like more money as much as good teachers. Providing higher salaries will do little to improve the quality of urban teachers or teachers of disadvantaged students unless this is coupled with a clearer judgment about effectiveness. If the objective is raising achievement, there is no real substitute for observing achievement and taking actions based on it.

School accountability systems move in this direction when the rewards to principals and teachers are linked to the growth in student learning. At that point, higher salaries, if directed toward more effective teachers and administrators, can be effective. But if higher salaries are awarded by geography and not demonstrated effectiveness, there is little reason to expect improvement.

The central message of this discussion must be that improving student outcomes in the inner city cannot be done by proxy. We must use the direct and available information on teacher effectiveness that comes from objective achievement data and subjective evaluations for both administrators and teachers to guide rewards and management decisions. We may conclude that this is too difficult—because of union contracts, traditions, or other issues. In that case, we must be willing to live with disastrous results or, alternatively, be prepared to give parents the real opportunity to choose better schools. We have a long track record of regulating that schools should “do good”; of following the current ideas, including simply paying teachers more; and of holding out for the perfect, fully tested alternative. We are left with stagnant achievement results that are especially egregious for poor, inner-city kids. More of the same will not work. ♦