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Attaining Equitable Distribution of Effective Teachers in Public Schools

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Introduction and summary

Since Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, or NCLB, much has transpired in K-12 public education. NCLB, the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, or ESEA, sought to ensure that all children have the equal opportunity for a high-quality education, established criteria for highly qualified teachers, and required all students to be taught by “highly qualified” teachers by 2006. Criteria for a highly qualified teacher, or HQT, included a bachelor’s degree, full state certification, and demonstrated competency in each core academic subject taught. For accountability purposes, the law required that states assess the extent to which all students have highly qualified teachers and develop plans to ensure that poor and minority students are not taught by inexperienced, unqualified, and/or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other students.

Today, well more than a decade since the passage of NCLB, we know much more about the impact of high-quality teaching on student achievement. We also know that teacher characteristics once considered important indicators of teacher quality are only weakly related to their performance in the classroom. New measures of teacher effectiveness, determined by evidence of teacher practice and improvements in student achievement, are now available and provide strong markers for assessing teaching quality and the equitable distribution of the most capable teachers.

Current federal education policy reflects this new understanding and its accompanying changes. The Obama administration offered state flexibility, or waivers, from key provisions of NCLB in 2011.¹ Through waivers, the administration provided a structure for states to develop coherent systems to evaluate teacher effectiveness and put in place systems of support to improve teaching quality. Among the tradeoffs: School districts that did not meet their HQT targets were no longer required to develop HQT improvement plans, and state education agencies were exempt from their role in the implementation of these plans, including the requirement to provide technical assistance to local school districts.² To date, 42 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have flexibility under ESEA.³

We are now at a junction where the current law focused on teacher-quality measures exists along with emerging new criteria, policies, and useful tools to help determine access to and equitable distribution of effective teachers. This is an opportunity to reset the old and align with the new. It is now possible to address concerns about teacher quality in broader, more creative ways that incorporate thoughtful approaches to prepare teachers and school leaders to successfully support learning for all students; hire and recruit the best future educators based on evidence of their performance; reward and retain the best teachers we have in place; create work environments capable of supporting and sustaining a well-prepared and effective teacher workforce; and address the structural causes of inequitable teacher distribution embedded in how we fund and staff our schools. It is time to jettison policies that act as barriers to staffing and compensating the most effective teachers for the most challenging schools and working assignments.

This report explores shifts in policy and practice at this juncture and explores a range of state policy levers that can be used to improve the overall quality of the educator workforce as a larger strategy to ensure that all students have access to effective teachers. Furthermore, this report addresses federal oversight of teacher-equity provisions in current education law and efforts to encourage states to build rigorous systems of educator evaluation and support. We include examples of promising models and strategies to ensure that poor students and students of color have strong and effective teachers and illustrate the potential for extra efforts and investments in schools in need of qualified and effective educators.

Our aim is to initiate a meaningful dialogue among critical stakeholders about what is possible within the current education framework, what is working, and approaches that should be expanded or discarded. Large-scale change in the effectiveness of educators will require a coordinated effort that involves policymakers at all levels to consciously raise the floor of expectations for all teachers, as well as ensure that disadvantaged students get not only their fair share of effective educators but also a larger share of those teachers in places where schools are low performing and low student achievement is evidenced.

Specifically, this report finds that:

- States and districts made great strides in the implementation of the HQT provisions of NCLB, and these criteria are now deeply embedded in school-staffing norms. But inequities persist across schools and districts based on measures of teacher quality and effectiveness.

- Many of the required state equity plans are out of date with respect to the old measures of teacher qualifications and do not reflect newer measures of teacher effectiveness. Still, many of the plans are rich with strategies to ensure equitable teacher distribution and improve teachers' overall effectiveness. With proper tweaking, these strategies can be applicable to the policy change of an effectiveness framework.
- Some local districts and schools are implementing changes to make hard-to-staff schools professional working environments where effective teachers—both novices and veterans—want to work.

The recommendations included in this report—specific to states, districts, schools, and the federal government—come from diverse sources and, in many cases, have been advanced over the years. They are restated here, however, because they are crucial and contribute to a framework of actions that must be continuously reinforced. Specifically, we recommend that states, districts, and schools take the following steps:

- Embrace a comprehensive and holistic view of strategic talent management to recruit, retain, compensate, and tenure effective teachers and school leaders.
- Develop and act on the information provided through strong data systems that link teacher characteristics and effectiveness data to student achievement and school success.
- Build capacity to facilitate equitable teacher distribution.
- Incorporate successful service in the most challenging schools with the neediest students as part of the pathway of an effective teacher toward master status.
- Establish and pilot model programs, such as teacher-residency programs, master-teacher corps of the most highly effective teachers, and strategic teams of motivated and effective teachers and leaders. Provide greater flexibility for local school leaders to hire the best candidates.

For the federal government, we recommend the following:

- Use the data from new state educator-evaluation systems as they become available to determine the equitable distribution of effective, experienced, and in-field teachers across schools based on factors of student race and ethnicity and poverty.
- Strengthen the comparability provision in ESEA Title I, Part A, to ensure schools that serve low-income students receive the same share of local and state dollars, before federal funds are added, as schools that serve higher-income students.
- Hold states accountable for reporting and acting on teacher-distribution inequities.

Finally, in a future reauthorization of ESEA, Congress must acknowledge the shift from a focus on attaining highly qualified status to a focus on teacher effectiveness. Equity provisions must ensure that poor students and students of color are not taught by inexperienced, ineffective, or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other students. In a new ESEA, states must demonstrate that they are using strong systems of evaluation based on multiple measures, including student academic growth, to address inequities in order to maintain federal funding support.

It is time to get serious about eliminating achievement differences between poor children and children of color and their more affluent and white counterparts. Closing the achievement gap requires doing things differently, which means beginning at the root of the problem—the quality of available teachers. For the United States to maintain—indeed, some might say, regain—its competitive edge internationally, all of our young people, not just the most advantaged, must share a common core of knowledge in a range of subjects and have requisite skills for success in college and careers. To do this, their teachers must be equipped to support student learning to the highest levels of achievement.

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