



From Qualifications to Results

Promoting Teacher Effectiveness Through Federal Policy

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Introduction and summary

“One piece of No Child Left Behind calls for highly qualified teachers, but those qualifications are ... front-end qualifications—does the person have this certificate or this degree? And I believe we have to move away from the front-end inputs to looking at highly effective teachers. If you can produce results in the classroom, that makes you effective, and you can stay in the classroom. And it really shouldn’t matter whether or not you have your Ph.D. or your master’s.”

- Michelle Rhee, Superintendent of D.C. Public Schools, “Charlie Rose,” July 14, 2008.

Michelle Rhee captures a widely held view: Federal law should stop focusing on “quality,” as measured by front-end qualifications, and start focusing on “effectiveness,” as measured by whether teachers have actually helped students learn. Research now shows that most qualifications only weakly predict whether teachers will succeed in the classroom, and one of the best predictors of future performance is past performance.¹ This means that increasing the share of teachers who are high performers will be a straighter path to improving student achievement than focusing on credentials.

What is not so clear is how the transition to a performance focus can work on the ground. This paper briefly explains why a focus on effectiveness is needed and how it might work, and it describes current federal policy related to teacher quality. It then provides some new ideas about how federal policy can stimulate change at the state and local level to help states and districts move from a qualifications focus to an effectiveness focus: That is, a focus on a teacher’s ability to improve student learning as measured by both value-added measures and other measures.

If an effectiveness approach is going to succeed, three things must be in place:

- State and district capacity to collect and use high-quality data
- Knowledge about how to use these data to inform human capital policies
- The political will to focus on teacher effectiveness

Therefore, this paper proposes federal investments in the following:

- The infrastructure (data, assessment, and evaluation systems) needed to evaluate teachers and their ability to improve student performance
- A state and district grant program to incentivize reforms that focus on teacher effectiveness
- An alternative certification grant program to expand the pool of talented teachers, particularly for high-poverty schools
- A pilot state grant program to explore a pathway toward teacher certification that focuses on teacher effectiveness

These investments would make sense as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, currently titled No Child Left Behind. ESEA/NCLB is the main federal education law that supports elementary and secondary students.

Investment in infrastructure: Data, assessment, and teacher evaluation systems

States and districts need the capacity to collect and use high-quality data to make accurate and fair determinations about teacher effectiveness. This capacity requires strong infrastructure, such as data systems that track students and teachers, high-quality student assessment systems, and rigorous teacher evaluation systems. The federal government should be investing heavily, now, to put these prerequisites into place.

Federal investments should help all states complete the development of longitudinal data systems and develop data verification processes and training for key personnel on how to use the data. In the area of assessments, federal investments should fund research and development that would answer important substantive and technical questions about the best ways to measure student learning, develop high-quality national assessments that states could choose to adopt, and develop model assessments in currently untested subject areas.

State and district teacher effectiveness grants

But building infrastructure is not enough. Some of the important challenges ahead for effectiveness are challenges of implementation—how to structure new pay systems, how to design rigorous evaluation systems and ensure that meaningful consequences and supports are attached to them, and how to make a rigorous tenure system both fair and effective.

Therefore, in addition to proposing a new investment in infrastructure, this paper proposes a grant program that would provide seed money for states and districts to implement a range of reforms that focus on teacher effectiveness. In the proposed grant program, states

and districts would apply to implement a menu of reforms, which may include changes to compensation systems, tenure systems, and teacher evaluation systems to reflect an effectiveness approach.

While states and districts don't currently have the knowledge and the tools they need to make a wholesale shift from a qualifications focus to an effectiveness focus, federal money can invest in building these tools and spur experimentation, without which this shift is not likely to occur.

Alternative certification grants

If states and districts are to implement an effectiveness approach, they will need access to a much wider pool of teaching talent. Alternative certification programs are one critical strategy for expanding the pool of talented teaching candidates. Alternative certification grants could fund non-profit organizations, charter management organizations, both two- and four-year colleges, and universities that have a potentially scalable model of alternative recruitment, preparation, and certification. The programs would be designed to recruit effective teachers to high-needs schools and to expand rigorous but streamlined alternative routes to certification. Programs would be required to meet a set of indicators of quality developed by the U.S. Department of Education based on the work of independent organizations like the National Council on Teacher Quality and others.

Pilot state grant program: An effectiveness pathway toward certification

One critical way to help states move toward a focus on teacher effectiveness is to help them set up a second path to certification for teachers: In addition to their traditional certification requirements, states could establish a pathway based on effectiveness. Teachers would be certified through the effectiveness pathway by having a bachelor's degree, demonstrating subject matter knowledge, and indicating that they have met their state's effectiveness criterion for certification. The effectiveness criterion would have to be based on a rigorous evaluation system that includes value-added and other measures of teacher performance. These teachers would also be considered highly qualified according to the requirements in Title I of ESEA/NCLB.

It might make sense to invest in a pilot program for a few states to try out this effectiveness pathway and then evaluate it before expanding it further. If the effectiveness pathway works well, the federal government might consider allowing some states—those who have the capacity and a rigorous system in place—to replace the qualifications pathway with the effectiveness pathway.

Other incentives to adopt an effectiveness approach

If enough money isn't available to buy states' and districts' participation in effectiveness initiatives, a potentially promising approach is to give districts adopting rigorous effectiveness systems relief from remedial requirements currently imposed on schools not making adequate yearly progress, or AYP, under ESEA/NCLB. For example, current law requires these schools to implement supplemental educational services, or tutoring, after two years of not meeting AYP. Federal law could allow districts to bypass this requirement if they put into place strong systems for attracting highly effective teachers to schools in need of improvement and for removing ineffective teachers from these schools. That teacher-focused policy seems far more likely to yield results than the current supplemental educational services, or SES, programs.

Alternatively, states could be allowed to adopt an effectiveness framework as a corrective action for schools in need of improvement. Improving the quality of teachers and teaching in the school is just as likely—if not more likely—to improve school performance than the other strategies specified in ESEA/NCLB.

Finally, some of the primary obstacles to the use of effectiveness data are political. A number of states have passed laws preventing value-added data from being used to inform specific policies.

It is likely that federal incentives could grease the wheels of reform, and help states and districts overcome some of these political obstacles.

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