

Human Resources a Weak Spot

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High-quality teaching matters more to student achievement than anything else schools do. So one would assume that states, districts, and schools would have a laser-like focus on attracting, training, and supporting the very best people for the job.

Yet many experts say the current system for recruiting, developing, deploying, and keeping teacher talent in the nation's classrooms is broken.

When the Washington-based Aspen Institute last year compared current practices in public education with the best human-resource practices in the corporate sector, it found that, at every juncture, education came up short. Public school teachers, on average, have lower academic skills than other college graduates. New teachers are routinely left to sink or swim. And most earn tenure after the first few years on the job regardless of their performance.

If they're particularly capable, it hardly matters. In most school districts, there is no career path to identify, nurture, and reward the most effective teachers so that they remain in the classroom. In fact, the salaries and career potential for teachers are remarkably flat: The average maximum salary that a teacher can earn is just 1.85 times the salary of a raw entrant, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, based on figures from the 2003-04 school year.

What's more, despite the importance of teachers to student learning, qualified teachers are not evenly distributed across schools and districts. Low-income and minority students are far more likely than their white and better-off peers to be taught by teachers who are inexperienced or who lack majors in their subjects.

The problem, says Andrew J. Rotherham, the co-director of Education Sector, a Washington think tank, is not that education has the wrong human-capital system to meet its needs, "it's just that we don't have one."

"No enterprise, public or private, can thrive over time without paying close attention to how it recruits, trains, and retains its very best people," he argues in a 2007 paper co-written with Jason Kamras, a former National Teacher of the Year from the District of Columbia public schools, who is now working for the school system's administration. "It is unacceptable that we have a system that does not manage human capital more effectively."

What Could Be This year's edition of Quality Counts focuses on what a human-capital system might look like so that states can unlock teaching potential and enhance student learning. In suggesting a new framework to help states think about developing human capital in education, the report borrows from Michael Fullan, a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. He argues that governments have three basic tools they can use to advance educational change: They can push accountability. They can provide incentives,

in the form of pressure and supports. And they can foster capacity-building—for example, by developing teachers' knowledge and skills.

Accountability for Quality The most traditional role that states play is that of a gatekeeper—determining who can earn a license to teach. Today, in part because of the 6-year-old federal No Child Left Behind Act, the majority of states require prospective teachers to have academic majors or the equivalent in the subjects they plan to teach. Similarly, most states require teacher-candidates to pass a basic-skills test, as well as tests in their content areas. Only half a dozen states, however, require teachers to pass tests in how to teach their subjects.

Evaluating Teachers Forty-three states require their teachers to be evaluated formally. The rigor, frequency, and basis of the evaluations, however, vary. Only four states—Florida, Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma—incorporate all the evaluation criteria.

States have done less well in ensuring that a teacher who is licensed in a particular subject actually ends up teaching it, and not something else. Only four states have a ban or cap on the number of out-of-field teachers—those who spend at least part of each day teaching outside their content areas. And while the federal law requires schools receiving Title I money for disadvantaged students to notify parents when their child is taught by an unlicensed or out-of-field teacher, only five states notify all parents under such circumstances regardless of the schools their children attend.

The other traditional gatekeeping function that states play is through their approval of teacher-preparation programs. States have exerted far less quality control in that area. Thirty states hold teacher-preparation programs accountable for results by rating institutions based on the passing rates of their graduates on state-licensure tests. But only 18 states hold programs accountable for the performance of their graduates in a classroom setting, such as through on-the-job evaluations.

One big problem is that the traditional measures states use to identify teaching talent—such as whether teachers have graduated from an approved program or passed a licensure test—don't provide many clues about who will actually be effective in the classroom at raising student performance.

Tracking the Distribution of Teacher Talent The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to report the numbers of classes taught by highly qualified teachers (HQTs) in high- and low-poverty schools. To learn more about states' capacity to monitor their teacher workforces, the EPE Research Center asked state officials about their ability to track the number of highly qualified teachers overall and by school poverty status. Thirty states and the District of Columbia demonstrated this capacity.

Because of that, many scholars suggest placing more emphasis on evaluating teachers on the job and putting in place more-rigorous procedures and requirements before awarding promotion or tenure.

“Further evaluation once teachers are in the classroom is essential to ensuring a strong workforce,” write Ron Haskins, the co-director of the Brookings Center on Children and Families, and Susanna Loeb, an economist at Stanford University, in a spring 2007 policy brief, “A Plan to Improve the Quality of Teaching in American Schools,” published by the Washington-based Brookings Institution. Most states require teachers' performance in the classroom to be formally evaluated. But only 26 states require that the people doing the evaluations—whether principals or others—receive formal training on how to do such observations. And only 12 states require that teachers' performance be evaluated at least annually. Twelve states tie the evaluation of teachers' classroom performance to the achievement of their students.

One issue is that without data systems that can track individual teachers over time, states can't monitor their performance based on which preparation program they graduated from or how well their students achieve. Building a stronger data infrastructure, experts say, is one of the most basic steps states can take to devise a better human-capital system in education.

Tracking Teachers The Data Quality Campaign, a national effort to encourage states to collect and use high-quality education data, sponsored by 14 national organizations, reports that 46 states now assign a unique identification number to each teacher, so that they can track teachers over time. But only 12 states match such information with records about individual teachers' students, based on the grades and subjects of those teachers and how their students perform on state exams. State licensing requirements are a relatively blunt instrument for making sure that teachers have a minimum level of competence. But such entry barriers can, inadvertently, reduce the pool of people interested in becoming teachers if the licensing requirements are overly restrictive, or if they reduce competition among teacher-preparation providers.

Nontraditional programs, such as Teach For America and New Leaders for New Schools, have shown that easing entry requirements and focusing, instead, on rigorous recruitment and selection of job candidates, can greatly increase the pool of prospective teachers and principals.

Attracting Teachers to Hard-to-Staff Assignments Some states are using incentives as a way to attract teachers to hard-to-staff campuses and assignment areas. Among those, only a small proportion raise the bar by going after the most experienced teachers. Almost every state finances or regulates an alternative-route program that permits candidates with at least a bachelor's degree to enter teaching without first passing through a college of education. Indeed, alternatively prepared candidates now account for almost one in five new teachers nationwide—a “market share,” as the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute notes, of nearly 20 percent.

But a study released last year by the Fordham Institute and the Washington-based National Council on Teacher Quality found that such programs might not differ markedly in selectivity and content from the colleges of education they were meant to replace. Two-thirds of the programs studied accepted half or more of their applicants, and one-quarter accepted virtually everyone who applied. About a third of the alternative

programs for elementary teachers required participants to complete at least 30 hours of education school courses—the same amount needed for a master's degree.

In fact, a survey of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, conducted for Quality Counts 2008 by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, found that, in most states, alternative-route candidates must meet the same licensure requirements as traditional candidates.

The key difference comes down to timing—whether alternative-route candidates must meet various requirements before they begin teaching or once they are already in the classroom.

States can also expand their teaching pools by permitting individuals who have earned teaching licenses in another state to carry those licenses—and their retirement benefits—across state lines without having to jump through additional hoops. But while most states have licensing reciprocity with at least one neighboring state, fewer than half allow portability of teacher pensions across state lines. States also can attract and keep people in teaching by making salaries competitive with those of other professions, such as accounting and architecture, which require comparable levels of education and training, by rewarding teachers who actually raise student achievement, and by formally recognizing and rewarding effective teachers who take on leadership roles outside their own classrooms.

But the EPE Research Center found that only 20 states recognize differentiated roles for teachers, such as mentoring novices or coaching other educators within their buildings. And only seven states are experimenting with pay-for-performance programs that reward teachers based on their demonstrated ability to improve student learning.

An analysis conducted by the Research Center also found that in 40 states and the District of Columbia the median teacher salary falls below that of comparable occupations, while in 10 states it equals or exceeds that of comparable jobs.

Given the large body of research on the inequitable distribution of teaching talent, states also could do more to monitor the distribution of teachers across high- and low-poverty schools, and to provide incentives for teachers to work in hard-to-staff schools or subjects.

The Research Center found that 41 states and the District of Columbia were able to provide information about the number of fully licensed teachers in high- vs. low-poverty schools. At least half the states could provide data on the number of first-year teachers, “highly qualified” teachers, or teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in schools with different concentrations of student poverty.

Only 16 states provide incentives for teachers to accept assignments in hard-to-staff subjects, such as bilingual education or mathematics, and 20 states provide similar incentives for teachers to work in low-performing, high-poverty, or other targeted schools.

Though research consistently shows that one of the strongest incentives for teachers to work in such buildings is the quality of the school principal, only 10 states provide financial incentives for principals to work in hard-to-staff schools.

“The quality of school-level leaders, the practices they engage in, are second only to teacher quality in predicting student achievement,” says Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University. “It is the leader who both recruits and retains high-quality staff.”

Building and Supporting Capacity In addition to providing incentives to attract and keep teachers, states can play a role in developing teacher talent by supporting teachers once they are on the job and building their knowledge and skills.

Elements of Teacher-Induction Programs Vary Among the 22 states that require and finance induction programs for beginning teachers, all include mentoring. Other mandatory program elements, however, vary across the states. Most of those programs (14 states) include a performance assessment, while only five state programs require an individual growth plan for new teachers.

A large body of research has found that teachers do not land in classrooms fully prepared to teach. Instead, they go through a rapid learning curve during their first few years on the job.

Yet just 25 states require all new teachers to participate in state-funded mentoring or induction programs that provide novices with support. And only 20 of those states have standards for the training, selection, or matching of mentors for new teachers.

Even fewer states require induction or mentoring programs for prospective school principals.

Only North Carolina and South Carolina have policies that reduce the workload for novice educators, so that they have time to observe more expert teaching, prepare lesson plans, and otherwise get on their feet. Instead, research has found that new teachers routinely receive the most difficult and least attractive teaching assignments. **State Mentoring Programs Prioritize Training**

Twenty-five states require and fund mentoring programs. Nineteen of those states have mentorselection criteria, 14 have mentor-training criteria, and 10 have mentor-matching criteria.

Professional Development States have paid somewhat more attention to ensuring that educators have access to professional development on the job. Most states have adopted formal standards for professional development, about half pay for development for teachers across all their school districts, and 16 require districts or schools to set aside time for professional development.

Thirty states require districts to align the professional development that teachers receive with local goals and objectives.