

Scholars Suggest Policies to Bolster Teacher Quality  
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While many scholars say surprisingly little solid evidence exists on exactly which public policies are most likely to enhance the quality of teaching, a new volume by the Washington-based Brookings Institution points to ideas that research suggests may be more effective than others.

Among the approaches highlighted in "Excellence in the Classroom," and discussed at a forum at the think tank here March 28, are: selectively loosening up certification requirements for those entering teaching; targeting large pay incentives for highly effective teachers in hard-to-staff subjects and schools; redesigning professional development; and making it easier to dismiss poorly performing educators.

For More Info: "Excellence in the Classroom" is posted by the journal *The Future of the Children*. The Brookings Institution, which collaborated with Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School on the new volume, posts a transcript of a March 28 panel discussion on "Excellence in the Classroom."

"This bolsters the case for the kinds of changes that we need to consider" in reauthorizing the federal No Child Left Behind Act, U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, said during the event.

But Randi Weingarten, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, warned about the "unintended consequences" of some of the ideas. "My experience is from the ground, and the more I hear about theory, the angrier I get," said Ms. Weingarten, whose union is the New York City affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.

In particular, she argued that retaining teachers is a more crucial issue than firing bad ones, and that policymakers need to think carefully about what will actually motivate teachers, rather than design incentive and pay-for-performance programs that she said will turn them off.

The new publication—the spring 2007 volume of *The Future of Children*, a journal of the Brookings Institution and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University—includes 10 articles that address what research knows about key policy issues related to teaching. Although almost everyone recognizes the importance of effective teachers, how to improve the teaching workforce is much less clear, according to the report.

For example, little research exists on which aspects of certification serve to improve teaching and learning and which ones "so reduce the pool of teachers as to worsen student outcomes," write Susanna Loeb, an associate professor of education at Stanford University, and Ron Haskins, a senior editor of *The Future of Children*, in a policy brief based on the volume.

While that's no reason to eliminate certification requirements entirely, they say, policies that have loosened entry requirements by permitting alternative routes into teaching have been found to dramatically increase both the number of people interested in teaching and their average academic performance.

Because certification is, at best, only modestly effective at identifying good teachers, they suggest, school systems ought to place more emphasis on evaluating teachers during their first few years in the classroom, and put in place more rigorous procedures and requirements before awarding promotion or tenure.

### Salary Changes

Research has also made clear that wages and working conditions affect who enters teaching and where they teach. "Excellence in the Classroom" argues that the dominant practice of using the same salary schedule for all teachers in all schools has resulted in teacher shortages in some subjects and geographic areas, and teacher surpluses in others.

### Affecting Effectiveness

To improve the quality of teaching in U.S. schools, scholars Ron Haskins and Susanna Loeb put forth a range of recommendations.

- Selectively loosen entry requirements into teaching.
- Use test-score changes as only one element in a system of evaluating teacher performance and identifying effective teachers.
- Place more emphasis on evaluating and supporting teachers during their initial years in the classroom, before granting them tenure.
- Offer pay incentives to effective teachers willing to teach in hard-to-staff schools or subjects.
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- Revise professional development so that it is of longer duration, focused on subject-matter instruction, and aligned with district and school goals and curriculum.
- Remove staffing constraints so that it is easier to dismiss ineffective teachers, adjust to changing district needs, and make timely hiring decisions.

SOURCE: Brookings Institution

"A good short-term solution to these staffing problems may be to target large pay incentives for highly effective teachers in hard-to-staff subject areas or less desirable schools," according to an introductory article to the volume. "But in the long run, it may be more productive—though expensive—to address working conditions directly by reducing class sizes, increasing release time for planning, providing instructional supports such as coaches, and improving adverse working conditions such as crime and dilapidated buildings."

While incorporating elements of pay-for-performance into salary schedules also has a lot of theoretical appeal, the researchers found, experience with such policies has generated mixed results on student outcomes. They suggest much could be learned from carefully designed and implemented pilot programs.

U.S. Rep. Michael N. Castle, R-Del., said Congress should pay more attention to the Teacher Incentive Fund, which helps states and districts experiment with performance-based compensation systems. But, he cautioned, “I would be very reluctant to make testing the sole source of judgment of a teacher or a principal. Using the tests to judge everything might be going a little too far.”

That sentiment was echoed by the researchers, who said changes in test scores should be one element in evaluating teacher performance. Thomas J. Kane, a professor of education at Harvard University, suggested that any reasonable system of teacher evaluation include both “value added” measures that examine teacher effectiveness based on students' test-score gains and more “practice based” measures of competency.

Kate Walsh, the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit Washington-based organization that advocates changing a broad range of teacher policies, said what's unfair is the current system, which fails to reward excellent teachers and often pays weak ones too much. While value-added measures are only one tool, she said, “without an objective measure, it's very hard to make tough decisions. That's why we need that ingredient in the mix.” Easing Constraints

Given how hard it is to identify good teachers, the volume says, “the constraints that keep schools from removing poorly performing teachers likely hurt students. Easing these restrictions may have a large payoff when an ample supply of potential replacements is available, especially if schools and districts can also offer incentives to improve student learning.”

As an example, Rep. Miller argued that schools identified as needing improvement under the No Child Left Behind law should not be constrained by union contracts to accept any teacher who wants to teach there. If a school is identified for improvement, he said, “should you have to accept a teacher that you don't think will fit in your efforts to rebuild that school and its capacity?”

The Bush administration wants district officials to have the freedom to override collective bargaining contracts when staffing their most troubled schools, as part of the renewal of the federal law, but the controversial proposal could face an uphill battle in Congress. (“Administration Wants Districts Free to Transfer Teachers,” March 21, 2007.) The review of the research also suggests that more attention be paid to the quality of professional development for teachers.

According to Heather C. Hill, an assistant professor of education at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the average professional-development program is of little benefit. But a few programs have demonstrably improved teaching and learning.

Ms. Hill identifies three important characteristics of those effective programs: They involve a substantial time commitment, such as a two- to four-week summer program; they are targeted, for example, on specific content knowledge or subject-specific pedagogy; and they are linked to the instructional goals and curriculum materials of districts or schools.

The Brookings policy brief suggests that, as part of the NCLB reauthorization, Congress could provide the incentive and part of the financing for selected school systems to carry out creative plans for improving the quality of their teachers. The paper proposes giving the U.S. secretary of education the authority to solicit grant applications and select the best ones for implementation and evaluation.

School systems would have flexibility in crafting approaches to broaden entry requirements, identify effective teachers, promote only effective teachers, provide additional pay to effective teachers who teach in challenging schools, and promote professional development, under the proposal.

“There really is no one silver bullet, and the effort to improve teacher effectiveness is really not going to be a one-time initiative,” said Brian A. Jacob, an assistant professor of public policy at Harvard. Based on existing research, he said, he would “be hard-pressed to think of any policy so clear-cut” that he would advocate switching to it without further evaluation.