Better Policies

Invited Commentary: Better Policies Leading to Improved Teaching

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This commentary represents the opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the National Center for Education Statistics.

The featured report, a national profile of teacher quality in public elementary and secondary schools, could not have come at a more appropriate time. The President, Congress, governors, state legislatures, and many others are increasingly focused on how to improve the quality of the teaching occurring in America’s classrooms.

As only one example, in 1998 the federal Higher Education Act was amended to include financial incentives for college students to become teachers and for institutions of higher education to produce better teachers. Also included in the new law is a controversial new accountability provision leading to the eventual cut-off of federal student aid to teacher preparation institutions with low rates of passage by their graduates on state certification and licensure assessments.

To better inform the debate on how to improve teaching, the National Center for Education Statistics has compiled the Teacher Quality report, a clear and readable summary of what teachers say about their preparation and qualifications, and about practices supporting improved teaching in their schools. But, it is important to know what this document is not. The report does not include information on the quality of training that institutions of higher education have given to new teachers, nor does it say anything about whether teachers are doing a good job in their classrooms. Evidence about those matters must come from other sources, such as from assessments of teachers’ knowledge and of students’ academic performance.

The good news in the report is that American public school teachers have many of the basic prerequisites for teaching: almost all have bachelor’s degrees, nearly half have master’s degrees, most are fully certified in the field of their main teaching assignment, most have their main teaching assignment in the field in which they had an undergraduate or graduate major or minor, almost all participated in professional development the previous year, almost all collaborated with other teachers in the previous year, and they work in supportive environments.

Additional good news comes from trends showing the effects of recently enacted or implemented reforms. Newer teachers are substantially more likely than senior colleagues to have degrees in an academic field; more teachers than previously have their main teaching assignments in the field of their graduate or undergraduate major or minor; and more professional development is occurring regarding student academic standards and assessments, the use of educational technology, and the implementation of new teaching techniques. Moreover, newer teachers are far more likely to participate in induction programs than did their more senior colleagues, teachers believe that school administrators are more supportive of their work than was reported in the past, and schools have clearer goals and priorities than in the past.

Those are the facts, as teachers see them. In a way, it can be said that the basics for a good public educational system are in place. As nearly everyone knows, though, the bar has been raised: good is no longer good enough. In this report, teachers acknowledge this fact by admitting that, in many important regards, they do not feel themselves to be well prepared to teach. Less than half of teachers felt “very well prepared” to implement new teaching methods. About a third felt very well prepared to implement curriculum and performance standards, and fewer felt adept at using student performance assessment techniques. Only about a fifth of teachers felt very well prepared to integrate educational technology or to address the needs of students with disabilities, those with limited English proficiency, or those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

To address those shortcomings perceived by teachers themselves, the many recently initiated reforms of teacher preparation and practice must be accelerated. For example, teachers who are uncertified are mostly those who are new to the profession, and the number of teachers who leave teaching in their first years seems to be higher than in most other professions. Therefore, supportive activities for new teachers must be expanded. For instance, induction programs for new teachers, now affecting two-thirds of them, should be made available to all who wish to participate. Mentoring by more experienced teachers, which now involves less than a fifth of all teachers, must also be made more readily available. Further momentum is needed to increase the number of teachers who have majors in an academic field and who are teaching in the field of their undergraduate or graduate major or minor.
In addition to accelerating current reforms, this report clearly points to two areas needing much greater attention, if the country is to improve teaching in the public schools: teachers are not spending enough time on good practices to improve their teaching, and poor and minority children are not being afforded a fair chance to succeed in school.

In the report, teachers assert that the greater the amount of time invested in a practice to improve teaching, the greater are the benefits. This is common sense, but unfortunately what we do today in our schools does not always reflect what we intuitively may know.

Most professional development, for example, lasts one day or less (1 to 8 hours). Yet, teachers report that long-term professional development is far more effective in helping them to improve teaching in the classroom. In fact, there is a consistent progression of perceived effectiveness for all such activities as the number of hours increases. Eight percent of teachers believe that 1 to 8 hours of training addressing the needs of students with disabilities helps them “a lot” with classroom teaching, but 42 percent believe that more than 8 hours helps them a lot. With the integration of educational technology into teaching, the difference is between 12 percent and 38 percent.

Furthermore, practices within schools, such as common planning among teachers and mentoring of new teachers by more experienced ones, show the same pattern: some effect with a short time spent on the activity and progressively greater effects from longer periods of time devoted to it. For example, networking with teachers outside the school is perceived as helping “a lot” by 15 percent of teachers if done a few times a year, but 49 percent of teachers believe in its greater effectiveness if done at least once a week. Eleven percent of teachers being mentored believe it helps a lot if done a few times a year, but 70 percent of them so believe if done at least once a week.

In a nutshell, more time on task produces greater results—much greater. Teachers are implicitly asking in this report that policymakers ensure that they have enough time to learn how to teach better. Extended professional development, long-term mentoring, and extensive sessions for common planning among teachers are the ingredients that will result in better teaching for youngsters—according to teachers.

The question is whether states, local school districts, and unions will find ways to give teachers that time. Can the school day be reconfigured to allow greater time for teacher preparation? Will teachers themselves, as represented by their local unions, show enough flexibility in negotiations with school boards to implement changes so that they can be better prepared? Can states and school districts find financial resources to provide for in-depth preparation?

The other persistent theme that comes from these data is that poor and minority children face serious obstacles in getting a good education. This too is no surprise, but it is enlightening to see how teachers themselves report on the problems facing these children.

A stark example is that teachers who have master’s degrees are far more likely to be found in more affluent schools—57 percent of teachers in the lowest poverty schools have a master’s, compared with 37 percent in the poorest schools. In many subject areas, moreover, persons teaching in the field in which they received a major or minor are less likely to be found in central cities, in schools with high-minority enrollments, and in high-poverty schools.

Furthermore, the least-taken professional development activity is addressing the needs of students with limited English proficiency, of those who are from diverse cultural backgrounds, or of those who are disabled. Despite that discouraging fact, some hope arises because newer teachers, those in heavily minority schools, and those from the western region of the country are more likely to be involved in such professional development activities.

A further problem facing poor and minority children is the lack of parental support for their education. In general, teachers believe that parents of all children are not greatly supportive of their efforts to educate; but they see a great difference in the degree of support provided by parents from more affluent areas and that provided by parents from poor areas. Forty-one percent of teachers in schools with less than 15 percent of children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches strongly agree that parents support them, but the perceived level of support declines progressively as the level of poverty in the school increases. In the poorest schools, only 23 percent of teachers strongly agree that parents are supportive of their efforts to educate their children.
The United States is not going to be first in the world in education unless we deal better with those problems facing poor and minority children—a growing proportion of American students. Such youngsters are not only more likely to have less well qualified teachers in their classrooms, but students in the poorest schools also have less support from home to do well in school—at least in the opinion of their teachers.

Policymakers, such as state legislators, will find the Teacher Quality report very useful. For example, they will learn that recently initiated reforms of teacher preparation, certification, licensure, and staff development are going in the right direction, but they must be accelerated. In the process of implementing such reforms, much greater attention must be given to the intensity of the effort; more time spent on the activity will achieve greater results.

Lastly, the needs of poor, minority, and disabled children must receive greater attention from the federal government, the states, and local school districts. We must recommit ourselves to bringing equal educational opportunity to all of America's children.