

School Staffing and Teacher Quality

by Thomas S. Dee

Overview

The recommendations in *A Nation at Risk* that focused on improving the effectiveness of in-service teachers prompted some of the most dramatic education policy innovations of the past forty years. Research reveals that strategies for improving the performance of in-service teachers have shown considerable promise.

Creating large-scale, lasting changes related to teacher effectiveness has proved challenging, however. Uninformative, low-stakes assessments of professional practices and rigid single-salary schedules are still the norm for the vast majority of teachers in US public schools.

To move forward, we need a deeper understanding of how best to design reforms such as new models for teacher evaluation or improved professional development programs for teachers. Political barriers have also stood in the way of taking these reforms to scale.

Guidance for Policymakers

- The knowledge base for how best to design the key features of teacher reform needs improvement. For example, efforts to improve teacher evaluation and introduce performance-based teacher pay rely critically on the continued development of valid and reliable measures of teacher performance.
- More needs to be learned about teacher professional development, which, if purposively designed, can have substantial impact.
- A compelling way to achieve change at scale may involve forming political coalitions that adopt some combination of reform approaches. For example, it may be possible to move school districts toward more effective professional development delivered by a carefully curated set of outside vendors if their provision involved cost-sharing that saved district resources.
- Reform efforts can fail when their success and durability rely on political commitments. It may be possible to achieve long-lasting political support for a teacher evaluation system if that system focuses narrowly on identifying master teachers and providing them with training and extra pay to coach their peers but takes a more incremental approach toward dismissing underperforming teachers.

What the Research Tells Us

- The variation in teacher effectiveness is large, but the manner in which teachers are currently assessed—that is, informal, “drive-by” evaluations—captures virtually none of this documented variation.
- Studies of professional development programs for teachers have provided mixed evidence of their impact and have noted considerable variation in program design and effectiveness.
- Several states and districts have experimented with providing teachers with extra pay and career-ladder recognitions for demonstrated merit. Despite their encouraging results, these reforms tended to be short-lived.
- Studies of programs that incentivize teachers—financially or otherwise—for improved student performance have shown little to no evidence of impact, reflecting the complexity of program design elements, such as measures of teacher effectiveness and structures of incentive packages.

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