

Reinvigorating the Teacher Pipeline

by Michael Hansen

Overview

A Nation at Risk concluded that both the quality of teachers and the quantity of available talent to fill teaching roles in public schools were sorely deficient in the 1980s. We face similar challenges today.

Both the quality and quantity of available teachers are useful dimensions in producing effective education: higher-quality teachers can cover instructional material in less time, while more teachers can enable smaller class sizes and more personalized instruction. Given limited resources, these two dimensions are in conflict—for example, a push for quality will tend to limit the quantity of people who can meet the higher expectations.

Ultimately, both approaches offer useful ways to reform the teacher workforce. If we insist on doing all of one but not the other, we will continue to snuff out opportunities for success.

Guidance for Policymakers

- Policymakers need to let go of the desire to treat all teachers the same, regardless of context or specialization, and should develop a systematic plan for workforce development that is sensitive to varying workforce needs.
- Efforts that build and sustain teacher quantity in high-need settings, which have difficulty attracting and retaining teachers, should be prioritized. For example, monetary bonuses for teachers or generous service scholarships conditioned on working in high-need settings would be an excellent way to shore up those workforces.
- Investment in strong mentoring programs involving effective teachers can lower turnover (and hence the quantity of new teachers needed) while also developing teachers' instructional skills.
- Since the cost of college is likely deterring young people from training as teachers, policymakers should craft a menu of scholarship options for prospective teachers, trading more generous scholarship support for higher levels of commitment to teaching and for teaching in high-need schools. Enlarged aid amounts and adjustments to selectivity criteria could also be used to attract more high-quality candidates in hard-to-staff subject areas such as math or science.

What the Research Tells Us

- Alternative pathways to the teaching profession have grown in popularity, and while some have proven effective, such as Teach for America, research suggests that teachers utilizing these pathways have higher turnover rates and are no more effective than their traditionally trained peers.
- Evidence shows that “pay for performance” models attract high-achieving individuals and that providing financial incentives for teachers in hard-to-staff positions is a promising approach for addressing teacher pipeline issues.
- Having highly effective teachers support new teaching candidates increases the latter's performance, as does placing them into schools with high levels of collaboration among teachers.
- When done well, mentoring of new teachers strengthens their commitment to the profession, increases retention, enhances their instructional practices, and improves student achievement.

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