

Improve Teaching Quality with Aggressive Support



The new Administration and Congress have their jobs cut out for them in education. Here are six strategies to get them started.

BY GARY SYKES AND KENNE DIBNER

Teachers are education's greatest *unnatural* resource. Students in American public schools cannot depend on steady access to capable teachers. The reasons are complicated, preserved by a history of unequal local funding and democratic control, bureaucratic organization and unionization, rapid expansion and segregated attendance patterns. Access to good teaching is a major factor in student learning, and American schools — and American achievement gaps — require good teaching now more than ever. Supplying qualified teachers to all schools is a critical concern, and the federal government has an important role to play in this mission.

Based on a review of federal teacher policy, we have identified recommendations for achieving less regulation, enhancing and targeting recruitment, encouraging more innovation around incentives and accountability, reforming teacher preparation and entry standards, paying greater attention to issues of human resource management and policy coordination, and developing state and federal information systems to track key indicators (Sykes and Dibner 2009).

Mission and Strategy for Federal Teacher Policy

The federal government should stimulate promising ideas, study alternatives closely, disseminate best practices, and build capacity at state and district lev-

els. Four basic goals should inform the federal teacher policy agenda.

GOAL #1

Attract and retain qualified teachers for high-need schools and districts.

Poor students in poor schools don't have access to the best teaching. This stubborn problem has roots in how our education system has been constructed over the years. Past measures to equitably distribute quality teachers have been only moderately successful, so bolder approaches are needed. The new administration should make this a top priority. No single policy can make a difference, but a combined body of policy coordinated across federal, state, and local levels could stimulate improvement.

GOAL #2

Attract and retain qualified teachers for high-priority fields.

Recruiting qualified teachers in the STEM fields — science, technology, engineering, and mathematics — is of utmost importance. These subjects will build human capital for the new economy, and there is ample evidence that the U.S. has longstanding teaching

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shortages in these fields. Other shortage areas that also need attention include teachers for English language learners, special education, and foreign languages.

GOAL #3

Attract and retain high-priority candidates to teaching.

Teaching needs to be aggressive about attracting a diverse pool of academically able students from colleges, as well as other talent pools.

Furthermore, research suggests that minority teachers are more likely to work in schools with higher percentages of poor and minority students (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force 2004). Because these schools have suffered historically from lack of access to high-quality teaching, high teacher turnover, and other inequities, providing these schools with academically talented minority teachers presents a critical challenge in better serving those communities.

GOAL #4

Improve teacher and teaching effectiveness.

Improving teaching effectiveness is another important goal. This broad aim may be accomplished through a wide range of policies that include new uses of incentives, better preparation and development, enhanced working conditions, and others. In addition, research on what constitutes teacher and teaching effectiveness, together with better measures and indicators, will be a critical component of an overall strategic approach.

A Federal Teacher Policy Agenda

Our proposed federal teacher policy agenda is built around six main strategies that, taken together, can make a difference.

STRATEGY #1

Shift to zero-based accountability and innovation.

We derive this idea from “zero-based budgeting,” an approach to rethinking budgeting priorities from year to year. Regulations constitute a kind of “cost” that ought to be revisited periodically to determine whether the benefits of the regulations outweigh their costs in compliance, monitoring, and relation to mission.

Evidence on the effects of regulation is not promising. State accountability standards vary greatly, and out-of-field teaching continues to be a problem. NCLB has been largely ineffective in reforming professional development, and responses to the regula-

tions have been inconsistent. The result of this increasing regulation has been compliance with the letter of the law without the capacity building that addresses the law’s intent. A one-size-fits-all regulatory regime for teaching and teacher preparation is unreasonable.

A two-step response is appropriate. First is a strategic retreat from the regulatory role through a process of “zero-based accountability.”

The U.S. Department of Education should review specific regulations in both NCLB and the Higher Education Act (HEA), including how they are implemented, and should develop strategies aimed at selective deregulation when regulations serve no useful purpose or produce adverse, unintended consequences. Second, the federal government should sponsor and test new accountability measures that might improve programs and build capacity. The appropriate federal role is to supply ideas that states and districts can use.

STRATEGY #2

Target and strengthen teacher recruitment.

Beginning in 1958, the federal government has set policies aimed at recruiting future teachers. These have been part of such large tuition-grant initiatives as the Perkins and Stafford loan forgiveness programs and also more targeted efforts, such as the Paul Douglas Scholarships and the new TEACH grants to be supplied through the 2008 reauthorization of HEA. We could locate no studies that examined the efficiency and effectiveness of these programs in meeting their recruitment objectives. Given the size of the total federal investment, we need better guidance to shape policy in this area.

Establish a study group to evaluate the effect of the federal government’s long-term investment in loan forgiveness, fellowships, and scholarship programs designed to attract talent to teaching. The study group’s findings should shape federal policies aimed at recruiting teachers and should guide the size, timing, nature, and oversight of recruitment efforts.

Furthermore, federal recruitment efforts should concentrate on drafting teachers for high-need schools, in high-priority fields, and for high-priority candidates. The various instruments already in use — including Stafford and Perkins loans, Pell grants, and the new TEACH grants — should be treated as a combined strategy and managed accordingly by the U.S. Department of Education. Currently, the various federal programs are scattered across legislation, not coordinated with one another, and not transparent to applicants. Better coordination and management is needed.

Recruiting more qualified minority teachers requires

a pipeline strategy that begins by encouraging greater minority college attendance followed by entry to the teaching profession. Special recruitment efforts can be targeted to the historically black colleges and universities and others serving minority populations, specifically through the new Augustus Hawkins Centers of Excellence authorized in the new HEA.

Despite a history of sponsoring recruitment policies, these policies have suffered from an inability to systematically determine effectiveness and to change programs based on evidence. A careful review of this investment has long-term implications for the future of teacher recruitment and retention.

STRATEGY #3

Build capacity for teacher preparation and development.

The subject of teacher preparation is hotly contested. Alongside traditional university programs are hundreds of alternative routes developed by states, localities, and private ventures, such as Teach for America. Federal funding has supported many of these. Research has uncovered considerable variability in these programs (Grossman and Loeb 2008). A new model — the Urban Teacher Residency — was included in the 2008 HEA. New teacher mentoring and induction programs also have emerged as important for teacher development, and federal funds support these initiatives. Some research indicates that such programs are effective in supporting and retaining teachers; other research has raised questions.

In addition to sponsoring new teacher preparation programs, the federal government has continued its role in funding professional development for teachers. For example, Title II provides about \$3 billion to states and districts for class-size reduction and professional development. The National Science Foundation also supplies professional development funds, and the total federal investment across many programs is substantial.

Where can teacher preparation policy have the most impact? First, large urban districts must locate partners to prepare teachers while avoiding resorting to alternative teacher preparation routes that fail to meet a standard of safe practice. “Safe” in this case means protecting children from the equivalent of malpractice in the early years of teaching. At the very least, such a standard would rule out programs that are unselective, lack practical training and experience, and are unsupported by a district policy that supplies protected assignments and proper induction. Options such as the Teaching Fellows Program and Teach for America might well

meet the safe standard, while others would be ruled out. Without such a standard, teaching could devolve into a two-tier occupation — well-prepared teachers for affluent suburban schools, raw recruits for inner-city schools. The federal government has a leadership role to play in establishing a safe standard.

Second, the Urban Teacher Residency is a promising innovation, but the history of the original Teacher Corps program (1965-80) suggests that developing and sustaining partnerships is difficult. Understanding that history, the federal role should create sound guidance in the regulations; supply technical assistance, possibly through regional agencies; study the implementation and effects; and disseminate best practices based on research results. Under the right circumstances, Urban Teacher Residencies could best meet standards of safe practice, replacing weak alternatives.

Third, the federal government should invest in research on what makes teacher preparation and development effective in producing good teaching. Current studies on teaching are driven strongly by economic theories that, while valuable, omit important qualitative issues. A research and development strategy should involve new competitions, targeted grant programs, and a continuing round of clinical field studies that supply rigorous tests of promising ideas.

Finally, the federal government needs a new strategy for funding professional development. Because numerous policy efforts have been tried with little success, the federal government could withdraw funding on the grounds that the money hasn't been spent wisely. However, teacher professional development is too important and too vulnerable to local budget cuts to be abandoned. Rather, the federal government should invest in research to determine how to better target these funds to high-needs schools. The federal government should shape programs more aggressively to promote a variety of professional development approaches, then study these carefully. As a first step, the Department of Education should assemble an expert study group to make recommendations on how to implement this strategy.

STRATEGY #4

Study effects of qualifications policy.

Teacher qualifications policy today is another highly political issue. Two options have emerged:

- Deregulate teacher licensing in favor of opening up the profession, or
- Increase regulation that aims to strengthen and improve the standards for entry.

The downside of deregulation is that too many unqualified teachers will probably join the faculties of schools with large proportions of poor and minority students; the downside of increased regulation is teacher shortages, especially in high-priority subject areas and the neediest schools.

Teaching could devolve into a two-tier occupation – well-prepared teachers for affluent suburban schools, raw recruits for inner-city schools.

Arguments for each alternative are valid, so the federal government should invest in research that examines the effects of qualifications policy on a range of outcomes, including teacher supply, effectiveness, retention, and others. The federal government doesn't set entry standards to teaching, but federally sponsored research can provide evidence to guide the state policies that do set those standards.

STRATEGY #5

Expand uses and kinds of incentives.

The federal government should continue its experiment with incentives in teaching. The National Center on Performance Incentives (NCPI), established in 2006, is charged by the federal government with exercising leadership on performance incentives in education. But today's policies often recycle such past efforts as merit and bonus pay or career ladders. Such efforts have been tried without overwhelming success.

However, a variety of studies have underscored the importance to teachers of school working conditions. This is especially true for attracting and keeping good teachers in urban and rural schools. Teachers choose not to work in inner-city schools for many reasons, but working conditions offer an important leverage point for the federal government. While school working conditions pose a very uncertain target for federal teacher policy, the federal government should launch a new initiative aimed at enhancing school working conditions.

STRATEGY #6

Improve policy management and coordination.

There has been an explosion of state and local policies for teachers (Loeb and Miller 2006). Unfortunately, the combined effects of so many policies are unclear. The problems include both gaps and duplication in policies, policies that work against one another, inefficient use of funds, inadequate accountability for

programs, and poor management of human resources.

Public funding is needed to help states and districts develop human resource management strategies. The federal government also can disseminate models of good practice and can fund studies of the effects of state policy systems on key federal policy goals.

Moreover, the federal government should support better information management systems at state and local levels. New technologies create possibilities for collecting, analyzing, linking, and tracking a wide range of data that can be instrumental to policy development. Three streams seem most promising to track: dollars, students, and teachers. Creating systems with the potential to link these entities to one another offers a new opportunity for program and policy evaluation.

These goals and strategies constitute a comprehensive approach appropriate for federal teacher policy. Funding for the various initiatives proposed might be secured through re-allocation of existing monies, set asides in current programs, funds in newly or soon-to-be authorized legislation, or new federal initiatives. The federal government should stimulate promising ideas, study alternatives closely, disseminate best practices, and build capacity at state and district levels. **K**

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