



State Action to Improve Teaching

This Brief is based on the following CTP Working Paper:

What States are Doing to Improve the Quality of Teaching:

A Brief Review of Current Patterns and Trends

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For nearly two decades, America's schools have been at the center of a major reform effort to improve student learning. To accomplish that goal, it is also crucial to improve teaching. Consequently, efforts to address the quality of teaching are now in progress at all levels—from individual schools and districts to much broader state and federal initiatives.

This Brief summarizes a descriptive analysis of existing state-level policies designed to improve teaching quality. The analysis describes state actions as well as current patterns and trends, but does not attempt to evaluate any of these efforts. Key points of inquiry include what states are doing to:

- develop and project visions of good teaching and learning.
- attract, reward, and retain capable teachers.
- improve preparation and induction of teachers.
- motivate and support teachers' ongoing professional learning.
- enhance the school workplace environment.

Background

The nation is currently in what might be called a “third wave” of the education reform movement initiated in the early 1980s. First-wave reform efforts centered on establishing higher and more rigorous academic standards for students, designing new curricula around these standards, and creating new assessments aligned with the standards and curricula. These reforms focused attention on what students were actually learning, but assumed that educators could promote that learning by doing what they had always done, only redoubling their efforts. The results did not produce widespread improvement in student performance.

In the second wave, reforms focused on structural aspects of the teaching profession and the schools. These reforms included raising teachers' salaries and giving them a little more decision-making authority in their schools. However, student achievement still did not improve.



In this third wave, the policy focus is on improving the quality of teaching. Reforms address teacher preparation, certification, continued professional development, and professional standards. Central to these reforms is the recognition that capable teachers are the most critical link to higher achieving students.

The current focus on improving the quality of teaching was invigorated by the release of *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, the 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. This report states, "What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn." The Commission's five principal recommendations offered a blueprint for nationwide efforts to improve teaching through raising student and teacher standards, reinventing teacher preparation and professional development, revitalizing teacher recruitment, rewarding teacher knowledge and skill, and reorganizing schools to maximize student and teacher success. While not the first voice drawing attention to the quality of teaching, the Commission's work has provided both a framework for state-level action and demonstrations of how these actions might be taken.

States have played a critical role in all three waves of reforms. Perhaps more than any other in our nation's history, this movement has been state-propelled and state-led. Yet states vary in their approaches to education policy. Some enact individual policies designed to create specific instructional programs or address particular facets of education reform. Others adopt a much broader approach, developing student learning goals, achievement standards, assessments, and accountability systems. While states annually enact a number of education policies, there is a significant difference between a series of individual policies and a policy strategy with a unified set of actions designed to address many facets of the challenge.

The extent to which states reflect such strategic thinking in creating policies for teaching quality can be a measure of a state's ability to bring about significant change.

What states are doing to develop and project visions of good teaching and learning

States have concentrated considerable energy on establishing standards for student learning and, to a lesser degree, standards for teaching. To address the latter issue, some states have established independent boards to oversee professional standards for teaching on an ongoing basis. Through these processes, states are attempting to articulate visions of what students should be learning and related visions of what teachers should be doing to promote that learning.

Creating new standards for students and new directions for instruction. Currently 49 states have (or are developing) statewide academic standards. And 46 states have (or are developing) assessments to gauge students' progress toward the standards. These new standards and assessments for students also provide new directions for what teachers should teach and instructional approaches that will prepare students for what will be tested. While the debate swirls about whether some assessments unnecessarily narrow the curriculum or simply reinforce the most important (or testable) aspects of it, it is clear that assessments attract teachers' attention and exert considerable influence on actual classroom practice. State actions in this regard are thus based on the premise that teachers will "teach to the tests" that matter for their students and for their own professional reputation.

Virtually all states have created visions for student learning and standards to define progress toward those goals, and now states are beginning

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to think through what teachers should know and be able to do, and what policies will ensure they have the knowledge and skills to help all students achieve at high levels.

Upgrading certification and licensure policies.

Increasingly, state policymakers are realizing that teacher education programs often underprepare individuals for the classroom, state certification procedures are not sufficiently comprehensive, and ongoing professional development is not linked to improving classroom teaching. A number of states have begun to tackle some of these deficiencies, primarily by changing their certification and licensure policies. Changes in certification requirements continue to be a prime policy lever used by states to improve teaching quality. States such as Connecticut have used certification as a means to assure teacher performance relative to an accepted set of professional standards, and more than 20 states have adopted the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards to help promote a basic level of competence for beginning teachers.

Establishing independent professional standards boards. How the teaching profession is governed—who sets requirements for licensure and how standards of good practice are articulated and enforced—is a critical state policy decision. If teaching standards can be separated from politics and shifting policies, those standards can serve as a foundation for building a profession capable of increasing student learning. Currently 14 states have established autonomous professional standards boards. The degree to which these boards have true independence and decision-making authority remains to be seen.

What states are doing to attract, reward, and retain capable people in teaching

Attracting smart and capable people into the teaching profession, and keeping them, are essential for schools to reach the higher goals embodied in the new state standards. Consequently, states are taking steps to recruit quality teachers and create a more diverse teaching force. State policies are also

addressing the issues of hiring and retaining only those who are demonstrably capable. In addition, some states have increased salaries for both novice and experienced teachers, and some have restructured salary schedules to reward teacher knowledge and skill.

Intensifying recruitment. Since the U.S. Department of Education estimates that two million new teachers will be needed in America's public schools over the next decade, recruiting qualified teachers is now a major priority for schools, districts, and states. The need arises because a quarter of the teaching population is approaching retirement age, student enrollments are increasing (especially in western states), and new state policies to reduce class size require more teachers.

Some deny the impending teacher shortage, citing the large “reserve pool” of education graduates and certified teachers not in the classroom. But the issue is one of quality, not quantity, and of distribution by geographic and certification area. Considerable shortages also exist nationally, in areas such as bilingual and special education, mathematics, science, and computers. Moreover, the distribution of practicing teachers and the “reserve pool,” if any, do not always match the areas of greatest need. Urban areas often face teacher shortages, and schools serving low-income and minority students have a greater proportion of educators teaching out of their field and without an advanced degree. The diversity of the teaching force is also an issue, especially since nearly one-third of the U.S. public school population is minority, compared to 13.5% of the teacher corps.

Designing new recruitment programs. With projections of increased teacher shortages, states are taking various approaches to recruit new teachers. Efforts include attracting minorities by offering scholarships for teacher education, developing programs for teacher-aides and mid-career professionals to become credentialed teachers, enabling retired educators to work part-time without losing benefits, and supporting high school students interested in becoming teachers.

Some states are designing more flexible license reciprocity agreements to make it easier for teachers to move to geographic areas where they are needed. In addition, 33 states are working with INTASC to

create performance-based licensure standards to ensure that teachers share a common set of standards to facilitate state-to-state certification reciprocity.

Raising teacher salaries and offering bonuses. Low teacher salaries have long been identified as a prime deterrent to attracting a large number of quality teachers. Teaching pays less than other professions requiring similar levels of education. The average teacher salary in 1997 was \$38,436. Clearly, individuals considering a teaching career must weigh the intrinsic rewards against lower salaries and often difficult working conditions.

While 23 states have implemented some form of statewide salary schedule, salaries are generally set through locally negotiated collective bargaining agreements. One state (Connecticut) raised salaries and attempted to equalize salary levels across districts, making the average teacher salary \$51,181, in 1996-97. Since then, teaching shortages have been virtually eliminated in both urban and rural communities throughout the state. A few states and districts are implementing teacher pay schedules that are linked to assessments of their knowledge and skill, such as achieving certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

Another incentive some states and districts use to attract teachers is offering bonuses and rewards. For example, states may offer one-time signing bonuses to entice quality teachers into harder-to-staff districts. In addition, some states offer financial rewards for group or school performance, or for teachers who acquire and demonstrate particular knowledge and skills.

Setting standards for entering teaching. Ensuring that teachers entering the profession are capable is a related policy challenge. One of the most widespread means of assessment is through examinations taken before enrolling in teacher preparation programs and before gaining certification. The virtue of these assessments—which generally focus on basic skills and subject-matter knowledge, but not on teaching ability—is they ensure that teachers possess minimal knowledge and skills. Yet many educators argue that these achievements are not clear indicators of potential teaching success.

Revising tenure and dismissal policies. In addition to efforts to hire and retain high-quality teachers, states are also addressing the issue of dismissing incompetent ones. Many states are re-examining teacher tenure policies and considering changes, from abolishing tenure, to extending probationary periods, to streamlining dismissal timelines. One state (Oregon) eliminated tenure and now employs educators with two-year contracts. Critics argue that abolishing tenure can lead to the dismissal of good teachers as well as poor ones, and that removal of tenure will harm recruitment as well.

Re-designing teacher assessment. While teacher dismissal has been a state policy concern, less attention has been paid to the larger issue of developing comprehensive teacher evaluation policies. Assessing teacher quality is difficult, yet it is critically important to have an assessment process that evaluates a teacher's particular strengths and weaknesses and then remediates where needed.

Some districts are adopting new evaluation processes, such as peer review programs in which teachers assess the professional performance of their colleagues. Anecdotal evidence suggests these reviews can be thorough and rigorous, but a closer examination will demonstrate how well the peer review process works over time.

What states are doing to improve the initial preparation and induction of teachers

Current state efforts to strengthen and expand teacher preparation include the development of new program standards with systems of accountability, the design of alternative routes to certification, and the improvement of teacher induction programs.

Guiding teacher preparation programs. State legislatures have generally been reluctant to impose regulations on teacher preparation programs, relying instead on altering certification and licensure requirements. However, states have enacted policies that encourage teacher education institutions to focus less on inputs (e.g., number of courses required) and more on outcomes (e.g., demonstrations of teaching competence). Some

states are considering using certification assessments to hold schools of teacher education accountable for preparing qualified teachers. Texas, for example, will put teacher education programs on probational accreditation if at least 70% of graduates do not pass the state licensure exam; New York has constituted a similar requirement. Consistent with this trend, a number of colleges and universities have undertaken major reforms of their education programs, adding fifth years of study, increasing emphasis on subject-matter preparation, extending internships, and collaborating with K-12 professional development schools.

Strengthening program approval standards. All states now have some sort of approval mechanism in place for teacher education institutions, often based on standards such as those of the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) or the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Currently, 45 states have partnerships with NCATE, and 15 use NCATE professional standards as the basis for state program decisions. Further reform in teacher education is likely to be spurred by the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which requires report cards on schools of education, as well as parental access to teachers' professional qualifications.

Enabling alternative certification programs. Alternative routes to achieving teacher certification have become popular recently due to teacher shortages, a need to prepare post-baccalaureate recruits, and criticism of traditional teacher preparation programs. Currently, 41 states have some type of alternative teacher certification, and 25 states report an increase in licensing by alternative routes over the past five years.

There is a broad spectrum of state-supported alternative certification programs, and a wide range of quality. The controversies that surround these programs hinge on their ability to prepare competent teachers. The most effective programs (which demonstrate higher teacher competence and retention) generally take longer and involve considerable preservice coursework coupled with supervised internships. Conversely, alternative programs that eliminate much of the coursework

and clinical experience may have a negative impact on both the retention of teachers and on their ability to perform in the classroom.

Supporting a range of teacher induction programs. Beginning teachers, even those who have been well prepared, need ongoing support and mentoring. Since an estimated 30-50% leave the profession within five years, such support is critical. They leave for various reasons, but one of the most common is lack of administrative and school support. Induction and mentoring programs help fill this gap.

More than half of beginning teachers participate in some form of teacher induction program, and 28 states have policies in place that offer varying levels of support. However, there is great disparity in their quality and funding sources and whether they are required. There are also questions concerning what constitutes adequate support for new teachers. Still, there are promising examples of effective programs. California's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program (BTSA), for instance, lowered the attrition rate of beginning teachers from 37% to 9% in five years. This suggests that providing a sound teacher induction program can make a difference.

What states are doing to motivate and support teachers' ongoing professional learning

Ongoing professional development has traditionally been considered a local district issue, yet a number of states are now providing resources and some regulations to ensure the equity and quality of professional development for teachers.

Research suggests that both the quality and duration of programs are critical to improve teaching and student achievement. Evidence shows that effective professional development generally relates directly to what teachers are doing in their classrooms and focuses on helping them understand deeply the subjects they are teaching. Studies also show that students perform at higher levels across all grades when they have teachers who participate in extended learning programs focused on standards-based curriculum and instruction.

Nearly all public school teachers participate in some form of professional development each year, but few have experiences that promote significant and sustained professional learning. For example, in 1993-94, only 30% of teachers participated in professional development that involved in-depth study in a specific field, and only 15% received nine hours or more of this type of training. District sponsored inservice programs remain the norm, and they tend to be one-shot and brief, precisely what research describes as ineffective professional development. Further, state-level requirements for teachers to renew certification may contribute to the problem because most requirements are for “clock hours” of some formalized learning, with few regulations guiding the quality or content.

Guiding and supporting district-level professional development programs. To address the perceived lack or low quality of professional development opportunities, a number of state legislatures have attempted to provide school districts with more guidance and financial support for professional development. This is critical considering the creation of programs locally may depend on the state’s priorities and financial support of these activities. In this regard, many states have implemented programs designed to build statewide infrastructures that promote teachers’ continual learning of curriculum and instruction through workshops, newsletters, summer institutes, consortiums, commissions, and other means. For example, Missouri has established nine regional Professional Development Centers, and 1% of each district’s total budget must be set aside for school-based professional development. Vermont pioneered an initiative that links state academic standards with assessments and professional development by training teachers to grade portfolios of student work. Teacher networks across the state discuss this task and other ways to achieve the state standards.

Along with policies that encourage more effective professional development, many states have set specific targets for local professional development activity. While still relying heavily on school district discretion, states are mandating that districts include criteria for professional development in district accreditation, assessment, or goals.

Targeting specific issues vs. overall instructional needs. Many states target specific areas for teachers’ extended learning, such as conflict resolution, drug and alcohol abuse, and school violence. While these issues are important, the approach can lead to a fragmented array of inservice workshops that do not necessarily help teachers address the content and pedagogical concerns of their practice. Other states have attempted to address professional development in more comprehensive and potentially integrated ways in areas such as long-term school improvement, curriculum development, and subject-specific support networks.

What states are doing to enhance the school workplace environment

Teachers encounter various forces and conditions in their schools that are likely to contribute to their sense of a positive work environment. These include a close community of colleagues, supportive leadership, time to reflect and plan, access to resources and advice, and a manageable load of classes, students, and other assignments. For some, it also means the authority to make some important education decisions for which they take full responsibility and are held accountable.

Supporting local efforts to improve the workplace. Typically, legislatures take few actions that might be construed as imposing school-level requirements on local districts. Policies related to the quality of the school as a workplace are generally set by local school boards and teacher collective bargaining contracts. However, some state initiatives do focus on schools as relevant units of change. These actions aim at the quality of teaching, and they also affect the quality of the workplace environment. For example, some actions encourage mission development, planning, and collaboration among school staff. Some states make resources available for school-based professional development related to the needs of the individual school. Others design policies that facilitate greater school autonomy,

allowing individual schools to redesign the workplace environment, though typically within fairly stringent guidelines.

Enacting charter school laws. A more radical attempt to relinquish authority to the school has been through charter school legislation. Currently 36 states (up from 33 in the 1998 report) have charter school laws which free schools from local and state regulations and hold them accountable for student performance. However, few schools have sought such charters, and there is considerable debate about the ability of charter schools to realize their aspirations. Evidence shows that teachers may have only marginally more authority to shape their schools' educational programs than teachers in other public schools. Consequently, the effect on teaching quality and the workplace environment remains in question.

Moving from separate policies to a unified policy strategy

States have played and continue to play an important role in the reform effort to improve teaching. Policies that address various aspects of the teaching quality agenda outlined above are evident in nearly every state. However, few states have

developed a set of policies that systematically address all or most of these aspects. Consequently, few states have adopted comprehensive and cohesive strategies designed to improve teaching quality.

The challenge for state policymakers now is, first, to determine what kinds of policies will improve the quality of teaching most effectively, and then to design future policies as component parts of a unified set that form a comprehensive and enduring policy strategy.

Policymakers must also wrestle with difficult trade-offs, such as how to balance aggressive state-level policies with initiative exercised by schools, districts, professional groups, and institutions of higher education. Many of the promising teaching reform policies are new, so policymakers will want to pay close attention to the data sources that track whether and how these policies actually affect teaching practice over the long term.

State policymakers need to proceed with the understanding that authoritative action by legislatures, governors, or state departments of education is only one means to the goal of improving teaching. Ultimately, the challenge is to find the right balance of requirements, supports, inducements, incentives, and alliances that engage capable professionals in the enterprise of teaching and learning.

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One of the Center's chief goals is to offer timely and useful information concerning efforts to improve the quality of teaching to national, state, and local policy communities. The Teaching Quality Policy Brief series is one vehicle for accomplishing this purpose. Issued periodically throughout the year, these briefs summarize Center working papers, reports, occasional papers, and other research products. The original publications, as well as the briefs, are available for download from the Center's website: www.ctpweb.org

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