Trends in Teacher Preparation, Recruitment and Retention

By Michael Allen

Teaching quality seems likely to remain a state concern for the long-term, even though policymakers will come to see, if they haven’t already, that it isn’t a magic bullet. The impetus for that continued focus comes not only from the states’ pressing needs for well-qualified teachers, but also from the federal government.

How do we improve the supply, demand, quality and effectiveness of our teachers?

Over the course of the last few years, the need to address that question has become one of the foremost education policy issues facing our country. Teaching quality, or concerns directly related to it, was mentioned in 46 governors’ State of the State addresses in 2001 and in 24 addresses in 2002. And state legislatures adopted and signed into law 162 bills relating to teaching quality during the 2001 session. The annual Constituent Needs Survey we administer at the Education Commission of the States has seen issues related to teaching quality rise to the very top of the list of education priorities identified by the governors, legislators, chief state school officers, state higher education executive officers, state board members, and other education leaders who comprise our constituency. Other national and regional policy organizations note a similar trend, and almost every major national education organization has devoted significant resources to teaching-quality related work.

Many people, of course, would insist that political leaders are infamous for their episodic attention to education issues that go in and out of favor. Teaching quality, however, seems likely to remain a state concern for the long-term, even though policy-makers will come to see, if they haven’t already, that it isn’t a magic bullet. The impetus for that continued focus comes not only from the states’ pressing needs for well-qualified teachers, but also from the federal government. Although in very different dress, the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “No Child Left Behind,” retains the strong focus on quality teaching that existed in the previous version of the federal legislation. The reauthorized law even ups the ante by requiring all teachers in the states to demonstrate they are “highly qualified” by the 2005-2006 school year. Indeed, ECS is so convinced of the issue’s longevity that we’ve just committed to a significant expansion of our work in the area by launching a major Teaching Quality Policy Center.

Prominence of the Teaching Quality Issue

Why has the issue of teaching quality become so prominent? First, policy-makers and education leaders have become convinced that, if they are going to make significant improvements in the quality of education, attention to the quality of teaching is of the very highest importance. The work of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future has played a major role in making this case, as has William Sanders’ effort in Tennessee to demonstrate the statistical correlation between teachers’ effectiveness and student achievement. Similarly, organizations like the Education Trust have drawn attention to the fact that the much lamented “achievement gap,” the disparity in academic achievement between poor and more affluent students, is mirrored by the disparity in the qualifications of their teachers, thus suggesting a causal link.

And, of course, the notion that good teachers make a significant difference for student achievement is intuitive. It’s a relatively easy sell to policy-makers and the voters who elect them, because everyone remembers the truly outstanding teachers they and their children had and what a significant impact those teachers made. The harder sell is what we ought to do about it.

Once policy-makers are convinced that good teachers are critically important, the very real shortage of adequately qualified teachers in virtually every state — whether widespread or isolated to particular schools, districts and subjects — becomes a much more acute concern. Even the state of Connecticut, which only a few years ago was said by many to have solved its teacher shortage problem, has identified shortage areas. Moreover, if the goal, as No Child Left Behind defines it, is a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom — a teacher who not only has met the requirements for state certification or licensure but who also has command of the subjects he or she teaches — then the concern is even more urgent because there are tens, if not hundreds, of thousands
of teachers in our nation’s classrooms who have inadequate knowledge of their field, lack satisfactory training in pedagogy, and/or regularly teach classes in subjects outside of their recognized content area.7

Successful State Strategies

During the last several years, states have developed a large number of policies and programs to address teaching quality. These include measures to recruit and retain teachers more successfully, prepare them more soundly, certify and ensure their competence more reliably, and provide more effectively for their continuing professional growth. This article is far too brief even to mention all of these strategies, and so it focuses on teacher preparation, recruitment and retention and, even more specifically, on the measures that I’ve come to believe, over the past several years, have the best track record or show the most promise of success. My observations are not scientific and not thoroughly grounded in research; indeed, in most cases, the research base is still too thin to ground confident conclusions.9 Instead, these observations represent what I perceive to be the emerging consensus on what is most likely, but not always guaranteed, to work. Indeed, what works is never only a matter of a particular kind of policy or program but also depends upon the specific details of the program’s design, its political and financial support, the skill and determination of those who administer it, and the other factors that determine the manner and success of its implementation.

Teacher Preparation Strategies

Solidly field-based programs. To strengthen teacher preparation, one of the most important considerations seems to be the development of solidly field-based programs. Aspiring teachers must have the maximum amount of well-structured, hands-on classroom experience if they are to be adequately prepared for the realities of teaching. This, however, is more costly and involves more complicated coordination than sitting in a college classroom.

Adequate subject matter preparation. Another vitally important component of solid teacher preparation is adequate subject matter preparation. This means at least a subject minor, and probably a major, depending upon the level of difficulty of the classes a teacher will be expected to teach.

Subject-specific pedagogy. In addition to a grasp of the subject itself, the knowledge of how to teach it — what is often referred to as “subject-specific pedagogy” — is also important. This is a matter of understanding how students most effectively learn a subject and knowing how best to facilitate that process.

Alternative route programs. There has been a tremendous amount of controversy about “alternative certification” during the past several years, but there seems to be little doubt at this point that well-conceived and thorough alternative route programs can be every bit as successful as more traditional programs. This does not mean giving some teachers less rigorous preparation or lowering certification standards. It means getting mature individuals into the classroom sooner and providing them with collateral coursework and strong mentoring support during their first, if not also their second, year of teaching. According to the National Center for Education Information, 45 states allow alternative routes and, in the past two years, 20 states have created 34 new alternative route programs, though not all programs meet the recommended criteria.

Other promising strategies. In addition to the “tried and true” strategies just mentioned, there are also others that show significant promise for strengthening teacher preparation. These include the following:

- Aligning course and graduation requirements with state K-12 content standards;
- Preparing teachers to teach specific populations of students;
- Strong postsecondary institutional support for teacher preparation, including the involvement of college of arts and sciences faculty;
- Strong K-12/postsecondary cooperation, including state-level P-16 partnerships and formal relationships between institutions of higher education and local school districts.

Teacher Recruitment Strategies

Loan forgiveness. Student loans in which the borrower is forgiven from repaying them if he or she teaches for a prescribed period of time in a hard-to-staff school are an effective strategy for recruiting new teachers into those schools. Outright scholarships also can be employed as an enticement into teaching, but they generally lack a mechanism like the loan repayment incentive to ensure recipients teach where they’re expected to or even end up going into teaching at all. Experience has shown that getting teachers to teach in isolated rural settings is the most difficult challenge, and financial incentives to entice teachers to move to rural areas are frequently unsuccessful.

Regionally competitive compensation. Compensation is clearly a significant factor in recruiting people to teaching. Even idealistic new teachers, for whom compensation is not the primary consideration, are likely to be lured to districts — including those in
neighboring states — that pay the highest wages. Since teaching is still largely a regional market, it is important that compensation for beginning teachers in a given state be comparable to that in the other states in the region.

“Grow-your-own” efforts. Efforts to recruit local residents, including classroom paraprofessionals, to become teachers in hard-to-staff urban and rural schools are often the surest strategy. Teachers who have a personal connection with a school or the neighborhood where the school is located are more likely to be interested in teaching in that school and to remain there for the long-term. This is a particularly good strategy for drawing minorities into teaching, but a drawback is that the pool of locals is generally limited.

Effective hiring practices. Increasingly, states are streamlining their hiring procedures through the use of online teacher recruitment clearinghouses and application procedures. States also are moving toward using a common application form for all school districts. Such efforts help level the playing field for smaller, less affluent districts that don’t have a lot of money to spend on recruitment.

Allowing the return of retired teachers. Faced with teacher shortages, an increasing number of states are adopting policies that permit retired teachers to reenter the classroom full-time or part-time without losing any of their retirement benefits. In some cases, retired teachers are employed as mentors to help inexperienced teachers.

High-visibility recruitment campaigns with alternative preparation opportunities. One of the most interesting recent phenomena in teacher recruitment has been the high-profile efforts carried out by a growing number of states and districts to recruit mid-career professionals. These efforts have attracted as many as 10 times the number of candidates needed, making for a very selective recruitment process. In addition, they generally employ an alternative route program that is highly attractive to mid-career professionals who cannot afford to enroll in a long-term preparation program and give up a full-time salary.

Relying on community colleges. Community colleges are becoming increasingly important players in teacher recruitment and preparation. Integrating community colleges more fully into the teacher preparation pipeline takes advantage of the large pool of potential teachers who begin their postsecondary careers in community colleges, including many minority students.

Teacher Retention Strategies

Ensuring schools are conducive to learning and teaching. Like other committed professionals, teachers want to be successful and enjoy their work. Schools that are organized for learning success and teacher and student satisfaction are much more likely to retain their teachers. Indeed, recent studies by Richard Ingersoll and Eric Hanushek et al. indicate that difficult working conditions contribute more to the high turnover rate in the teaching profession than does low compensation.12

Strong, effective school leadership focused on instruction. The quality of administrative leadership at both the school and district levels is one of the key determining factors in a school’s culture and the support of its teaching staff. The need to train, recruit, retain and develop effective school leadership is just now being addressed as a significant state policy issue.

Effective teacher placement practices. It is essential to ensure that teachers are placed in positions that match their level of experience and ability; placing inexperienced teachers in challenging positions is an invitation to failure and frustration. Indeed, one state, North Carolina, requires that new teachers not be given overly demanding responsibilities. Several states have made commitments to end the practice of out-of-field teaching — giving teachers assignments in subjects outside their field of competence — but the practice remains common.

Well-designed and well-funded induction and mentoring programs. States increasingly are recognizing the value of induction and mentoring programs for giving new teachers the additional orientation and support they need as they begin their teaching careers. Such support is especially important for young teachers who are placed in challenging teaching assignments. To be effective, however, induction and mentoring programs need to be adequately staffed and funded.

Other promising strategies include the following:

• Rewarding teachers for deepening their knowledge and skills and for demonstrated classroom success;
• Creating career advancement opportunities for teachers, e.g., career ladders, master teacher opportunities, National Board certification, or effective professional development;
• Ensuring that accountability systems do not hold teachers responsible for what it is beyond their ability to influence.

Innovative Ideas and Further Considerations

In addition to considering the policies and programs that seem most successful or promising, it is important for policy-makers to look to ideas that are
only beginning to appear on the horizon. Some of these are approaches states are taking that are far too new to evaluate their success but that bear watching for their innovativeness and potential implications. Others in the following list are intended only to encourage thinking “out of the box.”

**Teacher Preparation**

Additional teacher preparation strategies policymakers could consider include the following:

- Integrating induction and mentoring with teacher preparation so that they form a seamless program under the joint responsibility of districts and institutions of higher education;
- Encouraging teacher preparation programs to tailor their curriculum to the needs of specific districts, just as many community colleges provide specific training programs prescribed for students by specific companies;
- Raising entrance and exit standards for teacher preparation program participants, and requiring graduates to demonstrate they can promote significant student learning.

**Teacher Recruitment**

Ideas for recruiting teachers include approaches such as:

- Promoting teaching as a temporary career choice, and not only a lifelong occupation;
- Teacher exchange programs between hard-to-staff and easier-to-staff schools;
- Recruiting teachers on short-term contracts for isolated rural schools;
- Increasing the use of distance learning, especially for under-staffed schools;
- Giving every school within a district the same per-pupil funding for teacher salaries so that more senior, higher-salaried teachers can’t be stockpiled by a few of the most desirable schools;
- Paying higher salaries for teaching in high-need subjects and hard-to-staff locations;
- Increasing the prestige of teaching.

**Teacher Retention**

Additional strategies for improving teacher retention include:

- Implementing pay-for-performance compensation systems that reward teachers handsomely for advanced responsibilities and demonstrated success;¹³
- Giving deserving teachers sabbaticals;
- Increasing the cachet of teaching in hard-to-staff schools — perhaps by requiring a more advanced and prestigious license to teach in these schools or conferring a master teacher credential upon their most successful teachers;
- Giving teachers the option of 12-month contracts.

Finally, it is important to consider the possibility that ensuring the presence of well-qualified teachers in every classroom may be becoming not just an ideal but a legal necessity. Though eventually overturned, a landmark 2001 court decision in New York State explicitly held that teacher quality directly affects student achievement and that, therefore, the state’s education finance system was unconstitutional because it did not provide all districts — especially New York City — with sufficient resources to ensure the quality of their teacher workforce.¹⁴ The decision, rendered by Justice Leland DeGrasse, even went so far as to note New York City’s inability to provide its teachers with adequate professional development. If the DeGrasse decision sets a precedent for rulings in adequacy and equity cases pending in other states, then between the pressure of the judiciary and the pressure of No Child Left Behind, a well-qualified teacher in every classroom may indeed be a much less distant reality.

### Notes

¹ Source: Education Commission of the States.
² Source: Education Commission of the States. Information about the 2002 session has not yet been compiled.
⁵ William Sanders and Joan Rivers, “Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement” (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1996).
⁷ In California alone, there are 42,000 teachers who are not fully credentialed (Source: Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning); there are 32,000 incompletely certified teachers in Texas (Source: state 2001 Title II re-
port); and 13,000 in New York City (Source: New York Post). While many teachers lack full credentials for minor technical reasons, the lack of full credentials is often indicative of a deficit in subject knowledge or pedagogical training. For a more comprehensive discussion of what measures states are employing in an effort to improve teaching quality, see Eric Hirsch, Julia E. Koppich, and Michael S. Knapp, Revisiting What States are Doing to Improve the Quality of Teaching (Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, 2001). Available online from the CTP Web site, http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/.


About the Author

Michael Allen is the program director for the Teaching Quality Policy Center at the Education Commission of the States. He has written numerous policy briefs and articles on issues related to teacher policy and has recently completed a major ECS report entitled “Eight Questions on Teacher Preparation: What Does the Research Say?” A former philosophy professor and ethicist, he is also the co-author of a guidebook on nonprofit organizational ethics.