



Getting Better Teachers: Time for Experimentation

by

Chester E. Finn, Jr., & Marci Kanstoroom, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

American schools are not producing satisfactory results, and this problem is not likely to be solved until classrooms are filled with excellent teachers. There seems to be a national consensus about this problem and its solution, but how to achieve that solution is the subject of far less agreement. Our purpose here is to suggest a promising path that is very different from the one that most policymakers and education reformers are now following.

The present focus on teacher quality arises from a widening awareness that too few of today's instructors—and perhaps even fewer of tomorrow's—are well prepared for the challenges they face. While America is blessed with many fine teachers, we do not have enough of them, a problem that is more acute in some subjects than others. In devising solutions to this problem, policymakers can choose between two basic approaches. One approach is essentially a *regulatory* strategy that seeks to restrict entry into the classroom and that relies heavily on greater inputs, uniform practices, and more peer judgments as sources of quality control. The other, which we call the “commonsense approach,” is a *deregulatory* strategy that opens entry into classrooms and, for quality control, depends primarily on students' learning as evidence of their teachers' effectiveness.

We believe the regulatory strategy is flawed. Some of the shortcomings of the present teaching force are themselves

caused or worsened by regulatory policies that rely on state bureaucracies and education schools for quality control. Given the dearth of evidence in support of the regulatory approach, we ought to consider experimenting with a new way of finding qualified teachers: unbar the doors to classrooms while holding every school accountable for its students' performance.

Clarifying the Problem

We know that teachers make a big difference. Past research has found dramatic differences between the performance of the children who are assigned the best teachers and those entrusted to the worst classroom practitioners (Haycock, 1998). No matter how well-intentioned, school reform will likely falter unless more teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to help all their pupils meet high standards.

Many teachers, however, are not ready to meet this challenge. Only 36 percent of teachers feel well prepared to implement high district or state standards (Feistritzer & Chester, 2000). Children who face high-stakes tests for promotion and graduation will need instructors with more knowledge and skill than ever before. Yet our present system for recruiting, preparing, licensing, and deploying teachers is not prepared for the dual challenge of quality and quantity.

Although U.S. colleges of education produce many more teaching candidates than the market demands, there are

shortages in certain specialties (e.g., math, science, and special education). High-poverty schools also have difficulty hiring enough good teachers. Additionally, turnover is high; roughly one third of all new teachers leave the field within five years, a rate that rises to one half in high-poverty schools (National Association of State Boards of Education Study Group on Teacher Development, Supply, and Demand, 1998). Many people assume that low pay causes this attrition; we think that a rigid, mindless certification process also bears much of the blame.

For decades, the dominant approach to quality control for teachers has been state regulation of entry into the profession. State licenses are almost always needed before teaching in the public schools. To obtain a license, individuals must typically complete a teacher education program approved by the state, which imposes a host of requirements on the program. This approach to teacher quality creates a classroom force that is heavily credentialed in pedagogy but not necessarily well versed in content. Exacerbating the problem of weak subject mastery is the fact that teachers are often assigned to courses outside their own fields of expertise. For example, more than half of U.S. history teachers did not major or minor in history itself; similarly, more than half of the children studying physics have a teacher with neither a major nor a minor in physics (Ingersoll, 1999).

State regulations governing

teacher employment interfere with the hiring and retention of outstanding individuals. Able liberal arts graduates shun teaching, individuals who endure the training-and-licensure cycle often refer to it as “Mickey Mouse,” and over time the problems of supply and quality are exacerbated. State regulation also values the wrong things. Researchers have struggled to identify the key traits that distinguish good teachers from bad. Some of the findings suggest that recruiting smarter and better-educated people to teaching will do more to improve school results than requiring additional or different preservice training. However, outstanding candidates are often deterred by the hurdles that the regulatory strategy erects, including prolonged pedagogical training when there is little solid evidence that this leads to effective teaching.

Would a different kind of regulation work better? In recent years, peer review of teacher performance has become popular within the profession. Instead of input measures, it assumes that good teaching is best detected via observation by other practitioners and consists primarily of judging teacher quality by observing their skills in using conventional and popular classroom practices without noting how much and how well their pupils learn. Another approach favored by prominent education groups as a way of linking licensure requirements more closely to performance is to develop “teacher standards” that spell out what good teachers should know and be able to do. Although this sounds promising, most of these “standards” turn out to be empty slogans.

Rethinking Quality Control: A Commonsense Proposal

Instead of using degrees earned or “standards” met as indices of quality, we should evaluate teachers based on whether their pupils are learning. Careful statistical analysis can identify the gains that students make during a year and then estimate the effects of individual teachers on their progress. This technique is used today in states and school districts.

Since good teachers can be found in many places, prepared in many ways, and channeled into schools via many pathways, states should eliminate nearly all the hurdles that discourage good candidates from entering the classroom. Deregulating teaching in this way will not only expand the pool of available teachers; it will also raise its quality. Such an approach recognizes that there is no “one best system” for preparing and licensing good teachers. In a deregulated environment, good teacher education programs will thrive and prosper. Those that do a poor job will not.

Trading accountability for autonomy does not mean eliminating all regulation. States have an obligation to ensure that all prospective teachers possess a solid general education, deep subject-area knowledge, and have no record of misbehavior. States could reasonably insist that teaching candidates have at least a bachelor’s degree in some academic subject. States could ensure subject-matter competence by requiring teachers to major in the subjects that they teach or mandating that they pass challenging tests in those subjects.

Power to the Principals

For principals (and other education leaders) to manage their personnel in a way that allows them to shoulder accountability for school results, they must be free to select from a wide range of candidates, have the flexibility to compensate employees according to marketplace conditions (and individual performance), and be able to remove those who do not produce satisfactory results. School-level managers are in the best position to know who teaches well and who teaches badly. They have access to far more significant information than state licensing boards and government agencies. They should be empowered (and, if need be, trained) to appraise each teacher’s singular strengths and weaknesses rather than having distant bureaucracies decide who should be on their team. Once hired, teachers should be evaluated based on the only measure that really matters: whether their pupils are learning.

Conclusion

For too long, policymakers have tackled the teacher-quality issue by tightening regulations and expanding pedagogical requirements, even as this approach has shrunk the pool of candidates while not significantly affecting quality. We believe that states that reduce barriers to entry will find not only that their applicant pool is larger but also that it includes many more talented candidates. The key is to turn our back on excessive and ill-conceived regulations and focus instead on student outcomes.

In this spirit, many jurisdictions have scrapped the “one-best-system” view of education reform. The country’s 1,700 (and counting) charter schools provide perhaps the most vivid example of the effort to solve a quality problem via deregulation. This approach trusts principals to run schools worth attending and parents to be astute consumers in the education marketplace. We should try a similar approach with teacher quality. Today, however, the profession’s conventional wisdom pushes in the opposite direction, pressing for greater uniformity and micro-management of inputs and processes instead of concentrating on results.

References

- Feistritzer, C. E., & Chester, D. T. (2000). *Alternative teacher certification: A state-by-state analysis 2000*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Information.
- Haycock, K. (1998). Good teaching matters a lot. *Thinking K-16*, 3(2), 3-14. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (1999, March). The problem of underqualified teachers in American secondary schools. *Educational Researcher*, 28(2), 26-37.
- National Association of State Boards of Education Study Group on Teacher Development, Supply, and Demand. (1998, October). *The numbers game: Ensuring quantity and quality in the teaching workforce*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Boards of Education.