

America's Teaching Crisis

Our public schools are failing. To save them, we need to look to the head of the class.

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or too many students, American public education is failing. Class and race still play a significant and disturbing role in determining access to educational opportunity, and as a result large and unjust gaps in achievement and outcomes still divide American children. The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates that, by the time they are in the fourth grade, low-income children are roughly two-and-a-half times less likely to be meeting grade-level proficiency standards as compared to their more affluent peers. And studies from *Education Week*, the Harvard Civil Rights Project, and the Manhattan Institute all indicate that barely more than half of African-American and Hispanic students finish high school on time, while more

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than three-quarters of white students do. These disparities exist not because some children are inherently less capable than others, but because we have failed to create an educational system that provides even an approximation of equal opportunity to all children, regardless of background. These opportunity-crushing gaps tear at the fabric of America's social compact, especially as jobs requiring a strong mind rather than a strong back increasingly become the avenue for individual opportunity and national competitiveness.

There is no shortage of education-reform movements and proposals, some of them promising. Both Republicans and Democrats have embraced "standards-based reform," as embodied in President Bill Clinton's 1994 Improving America's Schools Act and President George W. Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. And there is an emerging consensus about the value of expanding choice in public education. But just beneath the surface of this promising consensus, complicated questions abound. And none is as politically and substantively complicated as the question of human capital. In the effort to significantly boost our students' achievement, how does the public education system in this nation select, prepare, support, and compensate its most important resource: teachers? People matter most in this incredibly complicated and challenging intellectual work, and the best curricula, assessments, and intervention programs will all fall short without highly capable and effective teachers, principals, and specialists. In fact, research shows that teacher effectiveness is the most powerful in-school factor affecting student learning. Having highly effective teachers for multiple years can help low-performing students overcome any achievement gaps they face, while multiple years of ineffective teachers can lead to devastating deficits. A more strategic approach to human capital is absolutely critical.

Yet despite the centrality of people to education, current strategies for teacher recruitment, training, evaluation, and compensation are largely divorced from the goals of effectiveness and equity and are misaligned with what we know works. While politicians repeatedly profess their respect for teachers, our public policies fundamentally disrespect them and the work they do. No enterprise, public or private, can thrive over time without paying close attention to how it recruits, trains, and retains its very best people. Considering that the majority of the \$500 billion spent annually on American public education goes directly to supporting personnel, it is unacceptable that we have a system that does not manage human capital more effectively.

This inattention to human capital is in part the natural byproduct of a historically favorable labor market for schools. For much of the twentieth century, discrimination prevented many highly educated women and minorities from entering most professions. The field of education, however, was open to them.

As a result, schools enjoyed a relatively captive labor market, keeping aggregate quality higher than it otherwise would have been. Thankfully, these barriers in the labor market are now mostly gone. But, as a consequence, public schools must now compete for high-quality talent on the same terms as every other profession. At the same time, lucrative, private-sector opportunities for college-educated Americans continue to proliferate. Despite these changes in the labor market, teachers are still recruited, trained, credentialed, and paid much as they were a generation ago.

What does the resulting system look like? Not surprisingly, it suffers from what labor economists would characterize as an adverse-selection problem. Individuals with excellent academic credentials are disproportionately drawn away from teaching in the first place. And top-performers that join the profession are more likely than others to leave within the first few years on the job.

At the same time, quality teachers are not equally distributed across school districts. For example, according to the Education Trust, low-income and minority students are much less likely than other students to have teachers with a college major in the subject they are teaching. And while certain subjects enjoy an abundance of candidates, others—like math, science, and special education—suffer from chronic and acute shortages.

Finally, while roughly three-quarters of our total education dollars are devoted to human capital, these resources are often misaligned from the goal of improving student learning. According to University of Washington school-finance expert Marguerite Roza, almost 20 percent of annual public-school funding is tied to programs and policies that are neither grounded in research nor aligned with the goals of improving student learning. It is estimated that these inefficiencies add up to \$77 billion, money that could be used to pay teachers more and train and support them more effectively.

A few years ago, University of Washington researcher Paul Hill dubbed the lack of attention to many of these issues a “conspiracy of silence.” And while the focus on human capital has increased modestly in recent years (we now see limited challenges to the uniform salary schedule as well as a handful of truly alternative teacher preparation routes) the “conspiracy” continues. What has not occurred is what the entire education system desperately needs: a top-to-bottom overhaul of how this nation recruits, trains, evaluates, and compensates the men and women who teach our nation’s children.

In other words, the nation needs a New Deal for teachers. Rather than a singular reform, we need a broad array of new initiatives to support four essential goals: higher aggregate quality in the teaching candidate pool, more opportunities for educator-driven innovation and professional growth, better measurement

of teacher effectiveness, and new forms of compensation and promotion based on skills and performance. Like other trends in education, human-capital strategies must move from being process- and compliance-oriented, with little attention to performance, to being flexible, customized, and directly tied to results. Such changes would benefit teachers, as they would provide educators with the training, development, compensation, and respect they deserve. But, even more importantly, such a fundamental redesign of our education system would benefit our children. After all, real freedom—the kind that allows young people, regardless of background, to pursue their dreams and fully exercise their rights—is simply impossible without access to an excellent education.

Teaching Today

The current human-capital system in American public education revolves around three primary functions: Preparation, training, and evaluation and compensation. In each of these areas, the system is misaligned with the needs of children and disconnected from the goals of equity and effectiveness. The problems are complicated and deeply rooted, and consequently the solutions require much more than additional resources; they require fundamental reform that addresses all three of these areas.

PREPARATION

The vast majority of teachers in this country enter the profession through traditional routes. They participate in either undergraduate or graduate programs in education designed to prepare them for the teaching profession. These programs influence the supply of highly effective teachers in three ways: by setting admissions standards, by imparting skills that help their graduates become effective teachers, and by setting program completion standards. Yet in each of these areas, many schools of education are not serving their students at a level that will lead to the increased student effectiveness we all desire. Of course, there are notable exceptions. But, in general, traditional teacher preparation in America is misaligned with the rigorous demands facing today's educators.

Take the criteria that education programs use to select their students. If the principal objective of a teacher-preparation program is to develop highly effective educators, then it ought to select its students with attention to the characteristics that correlate with effectiveness in the classroom. One such broadly recognized characteristic is the level of a prospective teacher's "literacy"—not merely an individual's ability to read, but rather one's "world knowledge," general academic proficiency, and ability to communicate. To be sure, this broadly defined literacy does not, by itself, guarantee effective teaching, but it is, on average,

very much related to success in the classroom. Multiple studies examining different proxies for literacy have shown that educators who are considered “highly literate” consistently produce student achievement that outpaces that of their “less literate” peers, sometimes by more than a third of a grade level per year. One study of Philadelphia students suggests that this effect may be greatest for low-income and minority students. Summarizing the evidence, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), of which we are both members, reports that, “clearly a prospective teacher’s level of literacy, however measured, should be a primary consideration in the hiring process.”

Despite this evidence, many schools of education do not select their students with an aggressive eye toward this broadly defined literacy. For example, one study of the graduates of the State University of New York system found

that, on standardized aptitude tests, elementary and secondary teachers were more likely to score on the lower end of the distribution than their non-teaching peers, and less likely to score at the higher end. National data reflect the same trends: Fewer than 7 percent of public school teachers, for instance,

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graduated from “selective” colleges. Of course, test scores and college selectivity are not the only indicators of effective teaching; a range of factors leads to excellence in the classroom. However, research suggests that there is a real connection between effectiveness in the classroom and “literacy” that could be more fully addressed in how current teacher preparation programs select candidates.

While higher selectivity is important, imparting the most salient teaching skills is vital. Yet, in many cases, these skills are not being addressed in as robust a manner as possible. For instance, a recent NCTQ study of elementary education programs found that only 15 percent actually teach the five components of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel as essential to reading instruction. Another study, by David Steiner, the dean of the School of Education at Hunter College, and Susan Rozen, the director of reading and literacy for the Bedford, Massachusetts, public school system, examined the syllabi from education programs across the country and concluded: “Most schools of education we reviewed risk . . . not providing their students with a thoughtful and academically rich background in the fundamentals of what it means to be an outstanding educator.”

In addition to what they teach, education schools can also influence teacher effectiveness by using actual performance data about each prospective graduate

(gleaned from student practicum experiences) to set exit standards. However, where robust practicum experiences are required, students are infrequently held accountable for their performance. Further complicating matters, there is little appetite among many policymakers to hold teacher-preparation programs themselves accountable for the performance of their graduates. In fact, only a handful of states actually track teacher-performance data with the explicit purpose of gauging the effectiveness of preparation programs.

What about alternative paths to the teaching profession? Do they fare any better than their traditional counterparts? This is a difficult question to answer because such programs vary so widely in design, and many mirror traditional programs in their basic structure and content. In practice, what seems to matter most is not the program's classification—traditional or alternative—but rather the extent to which it pays attention to the levers of quality: high admissions standards with a focus on literacy levels, rigorous and relevant coursework, and high graduation standards based in large part on student teaching performance.

Programs that do these things typically get results. Take for instance the best known, Teach for America (TFA), which recruits top college students to teach in high-poverty communities for at least two years. It has very high admissions standards (only one in eight applicants to the program was admitted in 2006); requires streamlined, but rigorous, coursework the summer before TFA corps members begin teaching; and provides intensive ongoing support and training. And while many TFA teachers would agree with the program's critics who say that additional training beyond the summer institute would have been useful, randomized trials indicate that these educators are, on average, as effective, and in some cases more effective, than traditionally prepared teachers. Obviously, scale dictates that TFA and similar programs (such as the non-profit New Teacher Project, which works with urban districts to recruit, train, and place teachers) are not "the answer" to the human capital crisis in education. But by taking teacher selection and recruiting so seriously, these and other initiatives do offer broader lessons for the American public education system.

INDUCTION, MENTORING, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

After they are hired, teachers typically receive limited ongoing support from their school systems. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which for years has championed better induction and mentoring for teachers, has found that while states frequently have induction and mentoring programs on the books, they often lack funding, rigor, and sustained district support.

Mentoring programs can be an incredibly important support for novice teachers. Such programs, where they exist, however, are frequently ineffective,

for two reasons. First, in many school systems, there are simply not enough quality mentors to go around. This is particularly true in high-poverty districts that struggle to retain their highest-performing teachers in the first place. As a result, mentors often have only limited opportunities to connect with the new teachers in their charge. Furthermore, because of the scarcity of quality mentors, it is not uncommon for a school system to pair two educators who teach different subjects and different grade levels. Of course, some elements of pedagogy are universally transferable. But, if two colleagues are to wrestle deeply with their instructional methods, it certainly helps if they teach the same subject and roughly the same grade. Second, many mentoring programs are ineffective because they rarely offer quality training to the mentors themselves. Without formal training, it can be difficult for a teacher—even a highly successful one—to help a colleague effectively reflect upon and improve his or her practice.

Professional development throughout the school year—for new and veteran teachers alike—is equally inadequate. In fact, most school districts dedicate less than 1 percent of their annual budgets to the training and support of the teachers within their systems. And these funds are often spent on programs that are characterized by a lack of both rigor and relevance. A 2005 analysis by the Finance Project, a non-profit research and training organization, concluded that, in terms of quality, professional development in education was of a significantly lower caliber than that offered in other professions. Not surprisingly, educators are often neither satisfied with, nor challenged by, their professional development. Teachers want to improve their practice, and they know they are being cheated of meaningful opportunities to grow professionally.

It does not have to be this way. Promising professional development models do exist. One example is the Education Trust's Standards in Practice (SIP), a six-step process through which teachers collaboratively examine their own instruction in an effort to ensure that all students participate in rigorous, grade-level work. A similar effort being implemented nationally is the Teacher Advancement Program, which, in addition to creating new career paths and compensation schemes for public educators, places greater emphasis on teacher-led professional development by encouraging professional collaboration in the workplace.

EVALUATION AND COMPENSATION

Unfortunately, teachers are also evaluated and compensated in perfunctory ways that are neither aligned with the goal of significant student learning nor respectful of the difficult work that educators do. Take those teachers who are struggling to achieve in the classroom, but who desperately want to improve.

The logical response is to give them the tools and resources they need. In our current system, though, these individuals often do not receive the necessary support. This is both unfair and unwise. Considering the mathematics of the teacher workforce, this vast pool of “educator potential” must be tapped if we are to supply an excellent teacher to every child.

What about the individuals who have, over many years, inadequately served the children in their charge? It does not denigrate the teaching profession to admit that such low-performing educators exist and that low-performers hurt the educational chances of children. Every field and profession has some members who are not performing at an acceptable level. But, in education, it is often the case that teacher contracts, state laws, and cumbersome and weak evaluation systems make transitioning out consistently low-performing teachers unreasonably difficult. For instance, Common Good, a non-partisan legal-reform organization, documented 83 specific steps administrators must take to remove a low-performing teacher in the New York City public school system. Not surprisingly, relatively few teachers are removed for cause. New York is not anomalous; the same issues exist around the country. Transitioning out such educators is crucial to retaining more effective ones. After all, ambitious, results-driven individuals, in any field, typically desire to be surrounded by likeminded colleagues. When poor performance is seen as acceptable, it is not uncommon for high-quality people to become demoralized and exit the profession.

At the same time, little is done systematically to recognize, retain, and develop high-quality teachers. In fact, the prevailing norm is a classic misalignment of scarce resources. Teachers are paid increasingly higher salaries as they acquire more years of experience with little, if any, attention to their performance, special skills, or the difficulty of their particular teaching assignments. In addition, high performers are offered little in the way of a meaningful career ladder. In fact, it is entirely possible for teachers to have the same level of professional responsibility on the last day of their last year after a 20- or 30-year career as on the first day of their first year. Often, the only way to take on greater responsibilities is to leave the classroom, an ironic outcome in that working with children is exactly what attracts most teachers to the field in the first place. Moreover, given the top-down, compliance-oriented nature of most public-school bureaucracies, there are limited opportunities (outside public charter schools) for truly innovative and entrepreneurial work, precisely the type of work that is attractive to ambitious, performance-oriented people. In short, the current system does little in terms of compensation, career path, or opportunities for innovation to entice its highest performers to stay in the profession and continue to achieve strong results with our children.

The New Deal for Teachers

Some commonly proposed ideas to improve the quality of teaching in our schools are well intentioned, but untenable when scaled to the enormity of the challenge. Substantial across-the-board raises for teachers, for example, make great political rhetoric but would require extraordinary tax increases that the public is unlikely to accept. Moreover, across-the-board raises will not create the right incentives to bring high-quality people to work in the districts and to teach the subjects that need them the most.

Similarly, the notion of making education more like law or medicine—with a large body of canonical knowledge for all practitioners and the expectations of a lifetime career—makes for great talking points but ignores key differences between these professions. What's more, many talented young people today are not looking for static careers spanning 30 years in a singular profession. The labor market is more mobile and dynamic than it was a generation ago, and public schools should embrace and exploit this trend in a search for talent, rather than resist it.

Instead, the nation needs a New Deal for teachers and the nation's school children. Such an effort would involve more (and smarter) pay, better training and support, and increased opportunities for professional growth. It would also allow more people to come into education at different points in their careers, and it would structure the incentives to more effectively promote the goals of student achievement and educational equity. It would also involve more responsibility—namely more accountability for job performance in the service of our children.

First, we must substantially improve teacher recruitment and training by raising the bar for candidates and by creating real competition among preparation programs. The signals that a profession sends to would-be members are vital. Today, American public education sends the signal that teachers' credentials are more important than their performance. We need a system of teacher training that is less focused on where a teacher was trained, and more interested in what a teacher knows and can do. To create this, we need to end the effective monopoly that education schools have on teacher training. Policymakers must foster a robust marketplace of providers from which schools and school districts can choose candidates. Traditional programs, as well as school-based residency initiatives like the Academy for School Leadership in Chicago, could all thrive in this new environment. Rather than common process and method, what ought to unite the American teacher-preparation system is a focus on demonstrable results in the classroom. At the same time, states ought to employ rigorous assessments—rather than today's minimal requirements—as a predicate for teacher

licensure and certification. Such standards should reflect both content knowledge and measures of teaching ability. There are few things the country could do to show more respect for teachers and the difficult work of teaching than ensuring serious training and rigorous entry requirements into the profession.

Second, once teachers enter the workforce they should have more control over their professional development. Imagine a market-based system that would provide teachers with portable vouchers that could be used for the professional development opportunities of their choosing. The result? Rather than today's system of weak and often irrelevant training, we would have one where colleges and universities, as well as other vendors, competed for professional-development dollars based not on relationships with school district personnel but on the preferences of teachers. School districts would still need to manage some elements of teacher training to ensure cohesion across the instructional program and to ensure that sustained and intensive induction and mentoring programs are in place. But professional-development vouchers could easily support district efforts by empowering teachers to be true professionals and direct their own professional growth.

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Finally, evaluation and compensation must be reoriented from often-perfunctory, input-based processes to rigorous, output-based ones that are aligned with the overall goal of the educational system—student learning. In most fields, experience counts for some aspect of base pay. But, in education, it counts for a disproportionate share. If effectiveness and equity are our goals, then pay must be differentiated to reflect variations in skill, content knowledge, the difficulty of a teaching assignment, and on-the-job performance. All differentials need not be individually based; teams of teachers, or entire schools, for instance, could be rewarded for gains in student learning. Teachers also ought to be rewarded for taking on leadership responsibilities in their schools and school districts. By building meaningful career ladders for educators, school districts could reward exceptional teachers and improve the overall work environment in schools without losing these educators to non-classroom positions.

Although student test scores remain an imperfect measurement, student performance data also can be used to more closely tie evaluation to performance. For example, student achievement data could, at the very least, be used to link decisions about when teachers can earn “tenure” or other job protections to performance in the classroom. In an influential 2006 paper for the Hamilton

Project, Robert Gordon, Thomas Kane, and Douglas Staiger recommended informing tenure decisions with measures of how much teachers impact their students' learning in the first few years of their careers. Similarly, real peer review, based on defined outcomes and objective criteria, can give teachers an opportunity to collectively evaluate their colleagues, recognize strong performance, and counsel those who are not performing adequately out of the profession. Teachers deserve protections against unfair or capricious treatment, but their positions should not be immune from a review process that is rooted in a teacher's impact on student achievement.

How do we jump-start this New Deal? During the second half of the twentieth century, whether it was integration, helping students with disabilities, or creating accountability systems to protect poor and minority students, the federal government was the central player. It can and must be here, too. Inertia and special-interest pressure are intense at the state level, and vested interests understandably resist many reforms. Yet the powerful effects of conditional federal aid can already be seen in a variety of other educational reforms, from special education to state standards for students. Right now, Washington spends about \$3 billion on teachers, mostly through efforts to support professional development and class-size reduction. This funding has little impact and there is little attention paid to results. Instead, the federal government should invest substantially more in teachers, but use its dollars to catalyze state and local efforts to address the human-capital challenge. Rather than allowing funding to flow regardless of results, the federal government should view its role as more akin to that of a venture capital fund and use its dollars to leverage reform. Federal dollars alone cannot finance reform, but aggressive federal action can leverage state and philanthropic resources as well.

Of course, none of this is easy. Even setting aside the political hurdles posed by vested interests in the current system, serious, substantive challenges exist. Yet today's uneven and unjust educational outcomes can no longer be tolerated, and no serious change can occur without rethinking our approach to human capital. A New Deal for teachers, one that better aligns teaching with the goals of effectiveness and equity, is what we need. Then, and only then, will every child in America—regardless of skin color or zip code—have access to what should be their birthright: excellent teachers, an excellent education, and an equal chance in life. **D**