



Elevate the Profession to Attract Great Educators and Leaders for Every Public School BACKGROUND March 2010

A growing body of research confirms what school-based personnel have known for years—that the skills and knowledge of teachers and education support professionals (ESPs) are the most important factors in how well students learn. In turn, the presence of strong and supportive school leaders is critical to recruiting and retaining accomplished teachers and ESPs. For too long, we have paid too little attention to ensuring that today’s best and brightest choose teaching as a career. As an entire generation of educators nears retirement age, there is an urgent need to address all aspects of working in public schools. It is time to elevate the profession.

How do we do that? Federal and state policies can help draw new talent to teaching careers, but that won’t be enough. What we need is a bold new initiative to raise the profile and status of the teaching profession—such as creating a national education institute. Such an entity would be in a position to attract top college graduates and talented second-career professionals all over the country.

Also, we know that all teachers, even the most accomplished, are more effective when they are supported by skillful instructional leaders. We need more top-notch principals and other school leaders serving as mentors and coaches for classroom educators. Federal policies, therefore, must foster well-prepared and effective school professionals of all ranks and positions, including administrators. And it is time to recognize and truly value the work of all education professionals: administrators, classroom teachers, aides, office staff, cafeteria workers, and others. Every one who works in a school is essential to that school’s success.

Finally, we must ensure that every school, whether high- or low-achieving, has access to great educators. The federal government must develop policies and provide funding to enable struggling schools and districts to offer incentives and conditions that will attract and retain accomplished and effective educators.

- **Is this really a pipeline issue?**

Yes. Research shows that infusing the educational system with great educators requires attention be paid to each segment of the educator pipeline—from promoting education as a career to rigorous standards for entry into the profession. It also includes induction and placement, certification and licensure, mentoring, professional development, advancement, and retaining accomplished educators. Ultimately, we must develop systems to recruit legions of top undergraduate students and professionals leaving other professions, to prepare them effectively, and to nurture and safeguard their path to careers in education.

- **Can we foster excellence while establishing attainable standards within the teaching profession?**

Teachers need more than high-quality preparation from schools of education because much of their learning comes from their real world classroom experience. We need policies that foster continuous learning in the form of high-quality, job-embedded professional development, mentoring programs, common planning and reflection time, and timely and continuous feedback from peers and school leadership.

More teachers need financial support to become certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and those who earn this credential should be deemed highly qualified.

Federal policy also should recognize that some teachers— rural, special education, or elementary and middle school teachers—must teach multiple subjects. Therefore, teacher quality standards also must provide accommodations for teachers in special circumstances and give them reasonable, common sense opportunities to improve or increase their skills and breadth of certification.

- **What can we do to improve school leadership?**

We must ensure that school principals and other administrators—as well as teachers and education support professionals—receive adequate preparation, mentoring, and continuous professional development and support to improve their craft. They must receive timely and useful feedback from school staff as well as other administrators and be evaluated fairly and comprehensively. And they must have the resources and the staff necessary to create and maintain a successful school.

We also must look for ways to promote the leadership skills of teachers and education support professionals. All staff benefit from such opportunities.

- **How would a national education institute fit in with state and local reform of teacher and principal preparation programs?**

Elevating the profession means ensuring that the most talented individuals in the nation have access to world-class education preparation programs. Establishing a National Education Institute (NEI), a highly competitive public academy for the nation's most promising K-12 teacher candidates in diverse academic disciplines, would allow the federal government to attract top undergraduates as well as second-career professionals and prepare them as leaders of school reform around the nation. NEI would provide an intensive one-year path (free tuition, room, and board in exchange for a seven-year commitment to service in select public schools) to full licensure, school placement, induction, along with lifetime professional development and mentoring opportunities from NEI faculty/ graduates/master teachers.

NEI also would partner with existing teacher preparation programs to establish a highly competitive "National Scholars" program in select universities that would foster regional and local excellence in teacher preparation, licensure and induction. Additionally, NEI would sponsor a principal or leadership development program for top candidates who have served as teachers for at least three years and wish to enter an intensive program to become a principal or school leader in a hard-to-staff school.

- **Can we do more to recognize and support education support professionals?**

Education support professionals (ESPs) comprise a critical part of the education team. They include school secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, teacher aides, food service personnel, paraprofessional laboratory technicians, telephone operators, medical records personnel, bookkeepers, accountants, mail room clerks, computer programmers, library and reference assistants, audio-visual technicians, and others. Schools cannot function without top notch ESPs. The federal government should create incentives and provide funds to recruit certified and qualified ESPs and ensure they are included in job growth and professional development opportunities.

- **Can we recruit and create incentives for high-quality educators to work in hard-to-staff schools?**

The NEA supports financial and other incentives to encourage top educators to work in hard-to-staff schools. Such incentives are most effective when they are voluntary, locally agreed upon, and include non-financial incentives such as access to continuous professional development, mentoring, paraprofessional assistance, effective school leadership, sufficient resources, planning time, class size reduction, and other factors that improve job quality and effectiveness. Inexperienced or new teachers should not automatically be placed in hard-to-staff schools because they need to be prepared to deal with the challenging environment.

NEA Recommendations to Congress:

- **Focus on undergraduate preparation and educator recruitment, preparation, certification and licensure, induction, professional development, mentoring, tenure, advancement, and retention**
- **Foster continuous learning and rigorous yet attainable standards for all school staff**
- **Develop and support school leadership at all levels and positions within schools**
- **Create a prestigious national education institute and provide incentives to states to create world-class teacher preparation programs that attract the top tier of college graduates nationally**
- **Recognize the contributions and achievement of education support professionals**
- **Offer both financial and non-financial incentives to those who teach in hard-to-staff schools**