

Staffing Priority Schools: Strategies and Commitments for Changing the Status Quo

Too many students in high-poverty communities do not have access to a great public school because their schools are often chronically underfunded, understaffed, and unsupported. This is simply unacceptable. That's why these schools are Priority Schools for NEA. By leading permanent changes in Priority Schools – and addressing working conditions, school leadership, and teacher quality – we will transform the lives of tens of thousands of students by significantly raising academic achievement.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Great teachers, with the right policy supports, are the ideal agents of meaningful and sustainable change in our most challenged schools. Accomplished and effective teachers help students learn at high levels. They also spread their expertise throughout the school on behalf of all students. Too often, however, our students with the highest needs do not have access to these skilled professionals.

Children of Poverty Deserve Great Teachers: One Union's Commitment to Changing the Status Quo, a report authored by the National Education Association (NEA) and Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ), lays out compelling evidence about what must be done to identify and develop effective teachers who are committed to working in high-needs classrooms. The report, summarized here, also presents NEA's commitment to advocate for principled changes in the status quo—signaling our determination to break ground for new teaching and policy partnerships.

Potential power of informed teaching policy ignored

In the large-scale reform experiments of the past decade, the power of informed teaching policy to drive school improvement has been mostly ignored. As a result, children of poverty and those of color are far less likely to be taught by qualified, effective teachers than are students from more affluent families. A recent Education Trust report¹ reveals that, nationwide, about 40 percent of all

core subject area classes in high-poverty, high-minority middle schools are staffed by out-of-field teachers. CTQ/NEA analysis and other key research make a compelling case for establishing—and enforcing—high standards for teacher quality and the working conditions in order to promote effective teaching in high-needs schools.

NEA believes that National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) are in a unique position to inform the conversation around those working conditions and to effect change within their own schools and the larger education community. The Association has worked both to recruit NBCTs for high-needs schools and to “grow” them from within those schools, because NBCTs have demonstrated—through a rigorous process of expert, peer, and self evaluation—that they are highly accomplished practitioners who positively impact student learning. In addition, NEA sponsored state policy summits in six states in order to get NBCTs' valuable perspective on how to help schools in need. More than 2,000 NBCTs who attended the summits identified the essential conditions that will attract and keep our most effective teachers in our most challenging schools:

- Good principals who both know how to lead and to support teacher leadership
- A commitment to creative teaching and inquiry learning, rather than to scripted instruction
- The opportunity to team with a critical mass of highly skilled teachers who share responsibility for every student's success
- Sufficient resources to get the job done, including

new technologies, classroom libraries, and instructional supplies, in addition to connections with social and health services.

The NBCTs agree that effective teachers need to be paid substantially more when they teach in high-needs schools. But the right working conditions matter most.²

Change the focus of reform: work with teachers, not against them

Unfortunately, in recent years the major focus of national school reform has been to marginalize teachers and “teacher-proof” curricula and instruction. This ill-advised strategy has wasted the expertise of accomplished teachers and has failed to capitalize on the energy and motivation of successful educators who are eager to improve schools through collaborative leadership.

If we fail to include effective teachers as full partners in reform, we lose their expertise. If we fail to create the conditions that ignite and sustain their passion to help every child succeed, then high-needs schools will continue to staff their frequent classroom vacancies with individuals who are inexperienced and poorly prepared—prolonging a chronic condition that is already undermining reformers’ attempts to improve teaching and learning.

Dispelling myths and advancing the teaching profession

It’s tempting to think that if we could somehow attract “smarter” individuals to teaching, or if principals were given more authority, or if school districts used merit pay systems, then our most challenging schools would become easier to staff, and student achievement would improve. The reality is much more complex.

Myth: *Too many barriers prevent talented individuals from becoming public schoolteachers.*

Fact: Growing numbers of academically qualified individuals are entering teacher education programs and joining the teaching profession, but many of them are unwilling to work in high-needs schools and districts because of uncompetitive salaries and poor working conditions. Shortcut alternative programs have also made it easier for people to enter teaching. But those who enter with too little preparation are likely to leave

the profession much sooner than teachers who have a thorough grasp of the fundamentals of teaching.³

Myth: *The key to improving high-needs schools is to remove incompetent teachers from them, but teacher tenure rules make it impossible to get rid of poor teachers.*

Fact: Removing poor performers does not ensure that talented and well-prepared teachers will be waiting in the wings to replace them. Furthermore, recent studies⁴ show that the difficulty of removing ineffective teachers stems from poor evaluation procedures and ill-trained administration that cannot truly distinguish between excellent, average, and poor teachers.

Myth: *Teachers’ unions and their negotiations are a root cause of the maldistribution of effective teachers.*

Fact: Collective bargaining can lead to a reduction in teacher transfer rates from high-poverty urban schools as administrators and unions work jointly to improve working conditions and salaries.⁵

Myth: *Financial incentives are the key to attracting teachers to high-needs schools.*

Fact: It is true that resolving the shortage of well-prepared teachers in high-needs schools will require equalizing resources and providing equitable, competitive salaries. Many high-needs school districts pay beginning teachers about \$10,000 less than what their nearby suburban counterparts are paying. At the top of the salary ladder, the differences may reach the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range. But financial considerations are only part of the picture. In efforts to recruit and retain qualified and effective teachers, improved working conditions and preparation for teaching in high-needs schools may be even more powerful than financial incentives.⁶

Myth: *Standardized tests now in place are invariably the most accurate means of assessing student progress and teacher effectiveness. Scores from these tests should be the primary metric for evaluating teachers and increasing accountability.*

Fact: There is too much faith placed in the results of standardized tests. Researchers and educators agree that they are not the most accurate or useful means of

assessing student progress or teacher effectiveness. Standardized tests currently in use are not designed to help teachers become more effective. While so-called “value-added” systems for measuring teacher effects can provide useful information, the data are not reliable for making high-stakes decisions.⁷

Clearly more research is needed to determine the most effective ways to find, prepare, develop, pay, and retain effective teachers for high-needs schools. The lack of credible research on this specific issue need not immobilize us, however. Existing evidence already tells us that we need dramatic change in all teacher education and certification programs. Distinctions must be made in how teachers are prepared for different school settings. Beyond the teacher preparation programs, school districts will need to restructure their operations in order to allow the most effective teachers to spread their expertise to others in the system. Administrators and unions must create a new compact by overhauling evaluation and compensation systems and addressing the working conditions that impact student achievement.

Strategies for transforming schools

NEA believes four core strategies will move us toward research-driven policies that can transform every high-poverty school in America into a high-performing school, fully staffed by highly effective teachers.

1. Recruit *and* prepare teachers for work in high-needs schools. One cannot be done well without the other.
2. Take a comprehensive approach to teacher incentives. Performance pay makes the most difference when it focuses on building a collaborative and high performance culture to improve practices and outcomes.
3. Improve the right working conditions. Identify the school conditions that matter most for attracting, developing, retaining, and inspiring effective and accomplished teachers.
4. Define teacher effectiveness broadly, in terms of student learning. We need new evaluation tools and processes to measure how teachers think about their practice as well as help students learn.

NEA launches Priority Schools Campaign

NEA has launched the Priority Schools Campaign to focus its resources on advancing these four strategies. By committing \$1 million per year over six years, NEA will develop and support comprehensive strategies and policies to increase teacher effectiveness in high-needs schools. NEA will:

- Launch an outreach campaign to encourage NEA members to teach in high-needs schools and offer programs such as online virtual mentors and National Board Certification incentives to support them.
- Promote expanded financial incentives for National Board Certification and support local and state affiliates that choose to partner in innovative incentive programs, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund grant program.
- Expand NEA’s current working conditions project to survey at least 1,000 high-needs schools and disseminate data on specific working conditions that should be targeted in order to attract and retain teachers in these schools.
- Provide resources and strategies that support local association collaboration with school districts to develop memoranda of understanding, collective bargaining provisions, and similar “compacts” that provide increased flexibility in staffing high-needs schools. These efforts can include expanding the scope of collective bargaining to focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in high-needs schools.

President Obama, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, offers state and local policymakers as well as K–12 and higher education stakeholders unique opportunities to “elevate the teaching profession and help recruit and retain great teachers and principals for underserved schools and communities.” However, history has shown us that a one-size-fits-all regulatory approach to teacher recruitment and preparation is a failed strategy. As policymakers look for answers to the question *How do we recruit and retain effective teachers for high-needs schools?*, it’s worthwhile to recall the words of H.L. Menken: “There

is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”

It’s time to recognize the complexity of assuring every child a great teacher and work together to get it right.

References

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² Berry, B., Rasberry, M., & Williams, A. (November 2007). *Recruiting and retaining quality teachers for high-needs schools: Insights from NBCT summits and other policy initiatives*. Hillsborough, NC: Center for Teaching Quality, www.teachingquality.org/legacy/NSF_Report.pdf

³ Constantine, J., Player, D., Silva, T., Hallgren, K, Grider, M., & Deke, J. (2009). *An evaluation of teachers trained through different routes to certification*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., www.ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094043/pdf/20094043.pdf

⁴ Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The widget effect: Our national failure to acknowledge and act*

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⁵ American Federation of Teachers (2006). *Meeting the challenge: Recruiting and retaining teachers in hard-to-staff schools*. Washington DC: Author, aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/h2s.pdf

⁶ Berry, B., Smilie, M. & Fuller, F. (November 2008). *Understanding teacher working conditions: A review and look to the future*. Hillsborough, NC: Center for Teaching Quality, www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/TWC2_Nov08.pdf

⁷ Braun, H. (2005). *Using student progress to evaluate teachers: A primer on value-added models*. Princeton, NJ: Education Testing Service, www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICVAM.pdf

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Resources

Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) seeks to improve student learning and advance the teaching profession by promoting teacher leadership, conducting timely research, and crafting policy—all in an effort to ensure that every student in America has a qualified, well-supported, and effective teacher. www.teachingquality.org

Children of Poverty Deserve Great Teachers: One Union’s Commitment to Changing the Status Quo. The full text of the joint report by CTQ and NEA is available online. www.nea.org/home/35597.htm

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan and nongovernmental organization formed to advance the quality of teaching and learning by developing professional standards for accomplished teaching, creating a voluntary system to certify teachers who meet those standards, and integrating certified teachers into educational reform efforts. www.nbpts.org

