

Education Finance Research Consortium
Symposium on the Teaching Workforce

Executive Summary

Hamilton Lankford
Department of Economics
The University at Albany, SUNY

Whether or not New York State will succeed in its ambitious plan to ensure that its children meet the new higher academic standards set forth by the Board of Regents will depend in large part on the skill and dedication of the state's teachers. As expectations for students rise, so do expectations for teachers. In such an environment, the ever-present need to provide students with high-quality teachers intensifies. To meet this need, policymakers will have to rethink traditional approaches to teacher preparation, teacher compensation, and teacher evaluation. They will also have to develop a more comprehensive view of the complex forces driving the teacher labor market. Such a view will help them to devise incentives that will motivate talented individuals to become teachers and encourage our best teachers to work in low-performing schools.

As a step in this process of improving student achievement by improving the quality of the teaching workforce, the Education Finance Research Consortium, a research partnership involving the New York State Education Department and researchers from academic institutions, organized a symposium on the teaching workforce in New York State. A panel of distinguished education researchers was invited to present research that could help policymakers develop policies to attract and retain high-quality teachers. Their papers—along with comments by three discussants—offer a variety of perspectives on this question. Although each participant treated the issue from a particular vantage point, the papers reveal broad consensus in several areas.

The development, implementation, and evaluation of teacher policies need to focus on improving student learning—especially that of low-achieving students. As we weigh strategies to encourage good teaching, we need to remember that our ultimate goal is producing better student outcomes. This means that we must understand the relationship between teacher attributes and student success. For example, New York State requires that teachers earn a master's degree in order to obtain permanent certification. Odden and Kelley argue, however, that research indicates that having a master's degree has little, if any, effect on teaching ability; indeed, the requirement may serve as a deterrent preventing qualified individuals from entering the profession. Better measures of teacher effectiveness are the value teachers add to student achievement.

Measuring this “value added” is not easy and requires very rich data, but recent work discussed by Lankford and Hanushek and Rivken show that it can be done. Tying teacher compensation to student outcomes rather than seniority or credentials is another way to ensure that student outcomes are the engine driving education policymaking.

Creating appropriate incentives is crucial for effective teacher policies. Regulatory measures that mandate particular behaviors or outcomes will not necessarily succeed. Policymakers must design incentives that encourage and/or reward desired behavior. These could include incentives for teachers to seek out high-quality teacher preparation programs or to participate in effective professional development. C. Philip Kearney argues that the National Board Certification process is a valuable experience that appears to improve teacher performance. Ongoing research will soon give us firm information on whether and how Board Certification improves teacher quality. In the meantime, a number of states are offering teachers financial rewards—as much as \$6,000 per year for the ten-year life of the certificate—for obtaining National Board Certification. Allan Odden and Carolyn Kelley discuss several “knowledge- and skills-based pay plans.” Such plans offer bonuses or other rewards for teachers or schools that demonstrate teaching proficiency, rather than specific credentials.

As we design and implement new policies, we must also devise ways of systematically evaluating them. In the case of dramatic policy shifts, small-scale experimentation with several promising strategies should be undertaken. By taking the time and effort to find out what really works, we can increase the likelihood that our investments in education will result in a healthy return in the form of better student outcomes. Currently, although most school districts in New York State have invested heavily to prepare students to meet the new Regents standards, the New York State Education Department is not in a position to evaluate effectively the range of policies that have been implemented across the state. Researchers lack both the research designs and the data necessary to evaluate education policy accurately.

A policy evaluation and data taskforce should be established to examine an array of evaluation and database policies that bridge issues of data production, data use, and rigorous policy evaluation. Hanushek and Rivkin argue persuasively that any effective policy evaluation system must include student-level data and implementation that allows for detailed analysis. Such a system would also include performance measures that are specific to individual students and can be linked to individual teachers, principals, superintendents, and student peers. Also, implementation using random assignment, or at least a staggered phase-in, would allow for research designs that would yield robust reliable results that could then form the basis for sound policy decision making.

Realities of the teacher labor market necessitate salary differentials for teachers in shortage areas and those willing to work in hard-to-staff schools. While not all of the panelists agreed on specific teacher compensation policies, substantial agreement exists that the current single salary schedule is ripe for fundamental reforms. Extra pay for teachers certified in high-needs areas and for those willing to work in hard-to-staff schools is a sensible response to labor market conditions. Loeb’s study of variation in

teacher qualifications and teacher sorting indicates that teacher qualifications vary widely among schools within districts, even though there are no corresponding variations in teacher salaries. Much of the remaining variation Loeb finds in teacher salaries occurs among districts within individual metropolitan areas. She finds in particular that employment choices made by teachers indicate preferences for teaching in schools having smaller proportions of students in poverty and smaller proportions of black or Hispanic students. Loeb's data do not allow her to determine whether these preferences are directly linked to the demographic composition of the student body, or instead are linked to other features of the work environment which are correlated with student body characteristics. Loeb's research suggests that we cannot rely on current policies to place a high-quality teacher in front of classes with high proportions of minority students and students in poverty. Incentives such as salary differentials, or stipends and supplements such as the ones Odden and Kelley analyze in their discussion of the Teachers of Tomorrow Program, are ways to arrive at a more equitable distribution of our teacher resources.

Targeting salary increases at the beginning of teachers' careers can help schools retain promising new teachers. It is clear that expanded career opportunities for women have made it more difficult for schools to attract and retain highly qualified women. In addition to this cultural sea change, long-standing economic pressures have pushed up salaries of highly educated workers in other occupations, thus reducing the relative attractiveness of teaching. Loeb's policy brief notes that research offers substantial evidence that teacher wages, especially relative to alternative wage opportunities, are important in individuals' decisions to enter or quit teaching. If the goal is to attract high-quality new teachers, a strong case can be made for targeting salary increases to teachers at the beginning of their careers, since decisions to enter the profession depend more on starting salary levels than on salaries paid to experienced teachers. Moreover, as teachers are more likely to leave the profession in the early years, salary increases at the front end of the pay schedule will be more effective in retaining well-qualified new teachers than increases targeted at teachers with many years of experience.

State and local policymakers will have to work together to rethink teacher compensation. Since salary schedules and other compensation policies are determined at the local level, the state should work with local policymakers to create incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers. Some symposium participants supported experimentation with a variety of compensation policies.

Non-monetary incentives, such as improved working conditions, may also be effective ways to attract high-quality teachers. Salaries may not be the only way to influence teacher sorting. School leaders and state policymakers should consider ways to make teachers work environments more attractive. Facilities, hours, and workloads are all policy levers that might be activated to encourage teachers to work where they are most needed.

More resources and more attention need to be devoted to screening prospective and continuing teachers. Simply making teaching more attractive will not suffice to improve the quality of the teaching workforce. For that, school officials will have to be more selective in their hiring and retention of teachers. Tyler notes that public schools need to be able to make firm offers in the spring, before the most promising candidates have accepted jobs in private schools or non-teaching positions. When budget uncertainties or poor leadership prevents school officials from making firm offers until August, the remaining applicant pool is likely to be of lower quality.

Districts and schools need to be encouraged—and given flexibility—to experiment with alternative organizational, leadership, and personnel models. Because hiring, retention, and professional development policies are largely determined at the local level, state-level action may be more effective if, rather than focusing primarily on regulatory policies, it creates incentives for local districts to change their recruitment, screening, compensation, and professional development policies. Financial incentives and technical support could also encourage and support experimentation at the local level. The state, in turn, should play an active role in rigorously evaluating specific practices and policies and in disseminating information about promising educational strategies.