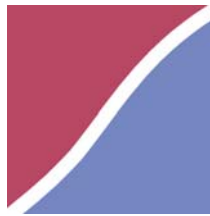


Reshaping Personnel Policies to Improve Student Achievement

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The “Getting Down to Facts” (GDTF) studies released in March 2007 offered a clear diagnosis of the issues facing California’s education system. Now, as California moves beyond the facts and begins the search for ways to improve the performance of California schools and students, the state faces a critical policy dilemma. On the one hand, the evidence presented in GDTF made it clear that simply putting more resources into California’s present education system is unlikely to produce the large gains in performance that Californians expect from their schools. On the other hand, the GDTF studies made it equally clear that bringing about significant improvements in educational performance may require a substantial increase in the resources that the state spends on education, along with increased autonomy and flexibility for local educators to decide how these resources should be used. The policy dilemma that the state faces is how to ensure that local actors use new resources in the best possible ways, without increasing the regulatory burden on schools and school districts or adding to the profusion of categorical funding streams.

In PACE’s view, the solution to this dilemma has two key elements. First, the state needs to focus its reform efforts on creating a system that fosters innovation and learns from experience to support continuous improvement toward the goal of academic success for all students. The critical first step toward this goal is to accelerate current efforts to build a strong and comprehensive data system based on the collection and analysis of longitudinal data on individual students and teachers. Second, the state needs to make significant investments in human capital and capacity building at all levels of the education system. Personnel policies must ensure that California educators have the time, knowledge, and skill they need to improve the performance of their schools and students, and incentives within the education system should be aligned to encourage the development and adoption of new and more effective practices.

The first of these elements—creating a robust and comprehensive data system—is addressed in another PACE policy brief.¹ The second—building a policy framework that supports educators in their efforts to bring about continuous improvement in the performance of schools and students—is addressed here. We argue that achieving the challenging goals that Californians have set for the state’s students will require educators at all levels to take advantage of increased autonomy and flexibility to find new and better programs and practices. Increased autonomy and flexibility will only lead to improvement if there is capacity at the local level to use new freedoms and resources effectively however, and this capacity is in short supply in California. To support continuous improvement, the state needs to develop incentives to make educators’ careers more flexible and attract more educators into leadership roles, and also fund policies that provide educators with the knowledge, skill, and time they will need to improve their own performance.

ISSUES, OPTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Differentiated Professional Roles and Compensation

To support continuous improvement in California’s education system, the Legislature should encourage local efforts to strengthen the capacity of educators by supporting investments in their knowledge and skill and also by increasing and diversifying the number of adults working in the education system. Policies to strengthen capacity might entail the employment of specialized

¹ “Continuous Improvement in California Education: Data Systems and Policy Learning,” by Susanna Loeb and David N. Plank.

personnel to address specific tasks (e.g., program evaluation, data analysis); the employment of additional personnel to allow current educators to take on new responsibilities (e.g., mentoring, peer evaluation); and the development of career options and incentives to reward educators who take on leadership roles.

Recommendation #1: The state should encourage districts to employ creative approaches to shared leadership and to reduce principals' regulatory and reporting burdens.

The job of principal, as currently constructed, is nearly impossible to do effectively. Management responsibilities, including state-imposed regulatory and reporting burdens, often swamp efforts to support effective instruction. The state should consider ways to encourage districts to separate management from instructional leadership responsibilities (perhaps through the introduction of additional school-based administrative staff), reduce administrators' regulatory and reporting burdens, and support districts to develop systems of shared leadership in the form of teacher-administrator collaborative teams.

Recommendation #2: The state should encourage and support district-based systems of differentiated professional roles for teachers.

Teaching is currently a static career with few differentiated responsibilities based on experience, interest, or skill. Expanding opportunities for teachers to use their instructional and leadership skills (for example, as mentors, professional development providers, Peer Assistance and Review consulting teachers, coaches, and members of school leadership teams) both distributes school-based leadership responsibilities and provides career pathways that encourage able teachers to remain in teaching. The state should make available resources to enable districts and their local unions to develop expanded professional opportunities for teachers through career ladders and lattices with accompanying differentiated compensation.

In addition, teachers who are interested in becoming administrators should be encouraged to do so. To further this end, districts can provide opportunities for teacher leaders to "try out" administrative roles in order to help them determine if such positions reflect the kinds of career moves they want to make.

Recommendation #3: The state should provide support for districts to develop alternative forms of teacher compensation.

The salary schedule operating in most school districts awards pay increases to teachers on the basis of years of experience and coursework (units). Emerging compensation systems in districts around the country are changing the standard teacher pay calculation to offer salary increases on the basis of one or more of the following options: pay for knowledge and skills targeted to increased student learning; pay for market incentives (added compensation for hard-to-staff schools and subjects); pay for professional evaluation results; and, pay for student growth (typically using a value-added calculation).

While research on this topic is not yet sufficiently mature to indicate what forms of teacher pay might produce particular results, emerging evidence points in promising directions. Thus, the state should provide information about developing findings regarding teacher compensation and resources to enable districts and their local unions to design and implement alternative forms of compensation in an effort to create financial incentives for continuous professional improvement and student learning.

Recommendation #4: The state should strive to boost the compensation differential between administrators and veteran teachers.

The job of an administrator is extremely challenging. Long hours, a long work year, and highly visible public accountability often make these jobs less than appealing. Moreover, the current differential between a veteran teacher's and a principal's compensation typically is insufficient to warrant a career move. Given the critical importance of effective leadership, the state should provide financial incentives designed to increase teacher-administrator salary differentials in order to encourage talented educators to assume these challenging positions.

II. Evaluation and Accountability

Excellent classroom instruction is the key to higher levels of student learning. The Legislature should seek to ensure that teachers and site administrators focus on the core practices of schooling by supporting training and professional development programs that emphasize teaching and learning, and by encouraging the implementation of evaluation policies that hold educators accountable for the effectiveness of their practices and the improvement of their performance.

Recommendation #5: The state should require that the study of effective classroom practice be central to principal preparation and professional development.

Currently, just 10-20 percent of the curriculum of administrator preparation programs focuses on classroom instruction. Yet, if the goal is for principals to serve as instructional leaders, they must know how to recognize effective (and ineffective) instruction and support teachers who need to improve their practice. At the heart of strong instructional leadership is a set of skills and knowledge related to teacher supervision and evaluation (which requires a deep understanding of effective classroom practice), coaching and professional development, and using data to inform instruction and school-wide decisions. Acquiring and honing these skills should be at the core of administrator preparation and professional development.

Recommendation #6: The state should support continuous improvement of teaching knowledge and practice by investing in research-based teacher professional development.

Research is clear about what constitutes effective teacher profession development. It is standards- and content-based and aligned with the work teachers do in their schools and classrooms. Good professional development is designed to improve teaching practice.

Research further suggests that professional development provided through coursework offered by colleges and universities is of limited utility in improving teaching knowledge or practice. Effective professional development tends to be teacher-provided and job-embedded. Districts should, therefore, be encouraged to seek out a range of providers as well as look internally to teachers and other district employees who might offer this service.

In addition, teacher practice is improved when teachers have time to collaborate with one another, to plan instruction and teacher-developed (formative) assessments, and review student work and achievement data. The state should provide support so that districts can create this collaborative time through the addition of in-school specialists, or by extending the salaried work day or work year, or a combination of these.

Recommendation #7: Districts should be encouraged and supported by the state to develop rigorous, standards-based systems of professional evaluation for teachers and administrators.

Effective evaluation is based on recognized professional standards, and aligned with school and classroom learning objectives. It identifies areas of strength and areas of needed improvement. The state should encourage districts to experiment with new, more rigorous, standards-based systems of evaluation for administrators and teachers.

Principal evaluations, for example, should include an appraisal of the extent to which site administrators establish clear expectations for teachers and students, use data to inform decision-making, create collaborative school cultures, support effective classroom instruction, and demonstrate success in improving school and student performance.

For teachers, the state should consider a system of “tiered” evaluation in which longer serving teachers who are generally acknowledged as effective in the classroom are evaluated less frequently than are their novice colleagues. Such a system of administratively driven evaluations will require better training of principals and others charged with evaluation responsibilities, and sufficient time for them to take this responsibility seriously.

In addition, the state should consider amending the current Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) statute so that PAR encompasses both beginning teachers and under-performing experienced teachers. In districts that have long-standing PAR programs (e.g., Poway; Toledo; Cincinnati; Columbus; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Rochester, New York), teachers who are subject to peer assistance and review at the outset of their careers gain a faster and deeper understanding of effective teaching, or find themselves out of the classroom.

III. MAKING SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES VISIBLE

Recommendation #8: The state should conduct regular evaluations of state-funded policies and programs.

California has a wealth of education policies. Too often, however, the state simply enacts new policies on top of old ones, resulting in a kind of “policy pile-on.”

The state should conduct regular program and policy evaluations of its efforts to improve teaching and educational leadership. These evaluations should be designed to track progress of improvement efforts so that those that show promise and positive effects can be sustained and those that fail on these dimensions can be discontinued. Results of these evaluations should be made available through a state analog to the federal What Works Clearinghouse.

Recommendation #9: The state should develop a network that enables districts to share successful programs and practices.

Developing and implementing successful educational programs is important district work. Sharing the results of these efforts with colleagues may be equally important.

To be sure, program effectiveness is often dependent on district context. What is successful in one district may simply not work in another. That being said, however, much can be learned from sharing program challenges and successes.

The state should facilitate a network of inter-district communication about programs and policy implementation to give principals and teachers structured opportunities for discussion and review.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief has presented a set of recommendations designed to improve teaching and educational leadership. In evaluating these recommendations it is important to recall that spending on personnel is by far the largest category of expenditure in California's education system. Policies that aim to enhance human capital and build capacity in the system are therefore likely to require significant investments on the part of policy-makers and taxpayers. In addition to direct investments in the knowledge and skill of current educators, an education system capable of continuous improvement may also require new and different kinds of personnel, including those with specialized skills in data analysis, policy evaluation, professional development, and training. Unless these investments are made and effectively monitored, however, California's schools are unlikely to achieve the high expectation that the state has placed upon them.

RESEARCH AND ADDITIOAL RESOURCES

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is a non-partisan policy research center based at the University of California – Berkeley and Stanford University. PACE seeks to increase the impact of academic research in educational policy debates in California. The policy recommendations included in this brief are based on the research reported in "Getting Down to Facts," and on continuing research at PACE and elsewhere on personnel policies in education and the conditions required for continuous improvement in educational systems. PACE will publish two additional policy briefs on personnel issues and continuous improvement in California's education system in Fall 2007.