

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

*Providing High-Quality Teachers
for Low-Performing and
At-Risk Schools*

The Education Alliance

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CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS FOR LOW-PERFORMING AND AT-RISK SCHOOLS

The impact of a highly qualified, caring teacher in every classroom has become the focal point of the continuing evolution and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The emerging research, coupled with the legislative mandate, has made providing a highly qualified and caring teacher in each classroom a national, state and local imperative.

Despite the force of this mandate and the development of what appears to be a series of promising strategies to address this issue, the reality of schooling continues to fall short of the goal, especially for children in low-performing and at-risk schools. A recent report by the National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools (2005) addressed the complexity and immensity of the challenge:

It requires overcoming the disadvantages that so often plague the 26 million children who grew up in low-income households: poor nutrition, substandard housing, inadequate health and dental care, physical danger from a culture of drugs and violence, family stress and insecurity, limited adult support, and few opportunities for cultural enrichment.

In addition to these disadvantages, poor children are typically handicapped by substandard and unequal educational opportunities. But of all the educational disparities poor children face, none is more significant than the disparity in the quality of their teachers. (p. 2)

More than six million middle and high school students are at risk of becoming school dropouts. As many as a third of the students entering ninth grade annually will not graduate and another third will graduate inadequately prepared for work or college. High school dropout rates are as high as 50 percent in approximately half of the high schools in 35 of the nation's largest cities (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005).

Haycock (1998) has suggested that about half of the achievement gap would disappear if we simply assured that poor and minority children had high-quality teachers. Clearly, the solutions are incredibly complex and are influenced by many interacting variables. Policymakers, legislators and administrators are confronted with many political, managerial and instructional challenges. These challenges notwithstanding, providing highly qualified teachers for low-performing and at-risk schools must move to the top of the action agenda.

Issues and Challenges

The 2005 report by the National Partnerships for Teaching in At-Risk Schools provides some insight into the variables influencing staffing in low-performing and at-risk schools. Acknowledging that many factors are involved and that all schools are not alike, the report identifies teacher shortages, teacher distribution, teacher recruitment, support for beginning teachers and the school environment as the most influential variables. These variables are interactive in nature and their impact can be profound:

Better teachers self-select into higher achieving schools and leave their less qualified peers behind. Schools in urban districts and in isolated rural areas have a

limited pool of qualified mathematics, science, and special education teachers from which to draw—a problem further exacerbated by inefficient recruiting and hiring practices. Even when qualified new teachers are hired, schools do not provide adequate support to help these teachers adjust, grow, and develop relationships with students who are often very different from themselves. And teachers in at-risk schools commonly find themselves in school environments that are often dangerous, overcrowded, and chaotic. (p.8)

An August 2005 study by the Alliance for Excellent Education provides a dramatic view of the teacher retention challenge overall, specifically as it relates to providing and retaining teachers for at-risk schools. The study, *Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and to the States*, estimates the national cost of replacing public school teachers who have dropped out of the profession to be 2.2 billion dollars annually. When the cost of teacher transfers is added, the total cost is estimated to be 4.5 billion annually. The total financial impact of teachers leaving the profession and teacher transfer is estimated to be more than twenty-five million dollars annually in West Virginia (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005).

The Alliance for Excellent Education study identified two factors which directly affect teacher recruitment and retention in at-risk schools. The attrition rate for teachers is approximately 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier schools. In addition, new teachers are far more likely than experienced teachers to leave the profession. Beginning teachers are also more likely than their experienced colleagues to be assigned to low-performing students and schools. When these factors are considered within the context of teaching high-need students, given that most new teachers are not provided with adequate professional support, the challenge of providing a high-quality, stable teaching force in at-risk schools is even more daunting (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005).

A September 2005 study published by the Education Commission of the States investigated eight critical questions about teacher recruitment and retention. One of the questions focused on the impact of school working conditions on teacher recruitment and retention. Although not focused specifically on low-performing schools, the study did conclude that research provides limited evidence that schools with greater administrative support and teacher autonomy have lower attrition. The study also found limited evidence that the higher the minority enrollment in a school, the higher the teacher attrition – at least among white teachers. There was also limited evidence that teacher attrition is greater in schools with higher levels of student poverty and also in schools with low student achievement (Allen, 2005).

In a somewhat unique approach, a recent study by The Finance Project compared the preparation, licensing and professional development of educational personnel to that of professionals in six other professions: law, accounting, architecture, nursing, firefighting and law enforcement. The study findings appear to have some application to the discussion about challenges of staffing high-need schools. Significant findings were that education is alone among the comparison professions in allowing professionals to practice independently before they are licensed, in circumventing traditional preparation through “alternative programs,” in its lack of universally accepted standards for required in-service training, in the absence of a single entity to enforce in-service standards and in requiring principals and superintendents to obtain separate licensure before assuming a management role. The study also found that while not all of the comparison professions require a passing score on a single national examination, teachers are confronted with a confusing array of state tests with no consistency in required passing scores. The

study also concluded that, in contrast to the comparison professions, new teachers do not have consistent access to focused education and support programs. Clinical experiences in education were found to be less structured and less consistently supervised than those in the comparison fields (Neville, Sherman, & Cohen, 2005).

Recent studies in North Carolina and South Carolina provide additional support for the premise that merely providing a qualified teacher for every classroom, while necessary, is not a sufficient condition for closing the achievement gap. This premise would appear to be especially applicable to high-need schools. Reflecting the findings from more than 49,000 teacher and principal surveys, the studies found that improving teacher working conditions – time, empowerment, professional development, leadership, facilities and resources – significantly improves student achievement and reduces teacher turnover (SECTQ Releases New Reports on Teacher Working Conditions, 2005).

Although focused primarily on issues surrounding using National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) to improve low-performing schools, Linqanti and Peterson's (2001) study identified a series of concerns and challenges that would appear to be applicable to recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers for low-performing schools. These concerns and challenges included difficulties in accessing and engaging parents, concerns about being able to demonstrate excellence, the instability and unpredictability inherent in low-performing schools, the prevalence of highly scripted curricula and instructional methods, the use of top-down reform initiatives, the challenges of securing necessary hardware and technical support and the tendency to make high-stakes performance indicators based on tests the primary focus of staff and administrators.

The recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers for low-performing and at-risk schools should also be viewed from a labor market perspective. National and state-level data provide documentation of the distribution of the least-qualified teachers in schools with the highest minority enrollment, the largest low-income population and the most academically challenged students. This teacher distribution pattern is clearly influenced by many factors such as school system structure and administration abilities; however, a major influence continues to be the interaction of teachers' career choices and education labor markets (Boyd, Hamilton, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2004).

There are a number of job attributes that appear important to teachers, but three seem to be especially significant: wages, nonwage job attributes and distance from home to the job. Teachers appear to be more likely to choose to teach when starting wages are high relative to wages in other fields, seem to be as responsive to wages in their decisions to quit teaching as individuals in other occupations, and are influenced by wages in their choice of school districts (Boyd et al., 2004).

Nonwage job attributes that affect teacher employment preferences include student attributes, class size, school culture, facilities, school leadership and safety. For example, several studies have concluded that teachers prefer to teach in schools with high-achieving students and, when teachers change schools, they are more likely to move to schools that have high-achieving students. Working conditions can sometimes be more important than salaries and can serve as incentives for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in at-risk schools (Boyd et al., 2004).

In terms of location, most teachers prefer to teach close to areas where they grew up and in districts and schools similar to those where they attended high school. Consequently, areas which do not produce as high a proportion of college graduates may fall short in terms of the supply of

potential teachers. Urban and rural districts sometimes face an additional challenge as, historically, high school graduates have not received adequate education. The local nature of the teacher labor market tends to perpetuate the inequities in teacher qualifications (Boyd et al., 2004).

Teachers in High-Need Schools

The current debate regarding the element of quality teaching notwithstanding, findings from the research on effective teaching provide some guidance regarding the different characteristics of teachers across schools. For example, Ingersoll (1999) concluded that there is a significant difference in content knowledge between teachers in high-poverty and more affluent schools. When compared to teachers in more affluent schools, a significantly greater number of mathematics, science, English and social studies teachers in high-poverty schools lacked a major or minor in their teaching field.

A 2005 study by the Center for American Progress provides some insight into the content preparation of teachers in West Virginia's schools. Study findings indicated that 30 percent of middle and high school classes in core academic subjects are taught by teachers who lack at least a college minor in their subject. West Virginia ranks 39th nationally on this measure. Concurrently, 39 percent of the middle and high school core academic subject classes in high-poverty schools are being taught by teachers without at least a college minor in their subject. West Virginia ranks 24th of the 37 states providing data on this measure (Rocha & Sharkey, 2005).

Teachers of low-income students also tend to have less teaching experience than teachers in more affluent schools. A National Center for Education Statistics report (Mayer, Mullens & Moore, 2000) concluded that 11 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools have three or fewer years of teaching experience compared with 20 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools.

A 2005 report by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Panel on Research and Teacher Education analyzed the demographic profile of teachers, concluding that the teaching force is predominantly female, white and monolingual. New first-time teachers constitute an increasing percentage of the workplace and are more likely to acquire their initial teaching positions in low-performing, rural, inner-city schools with larger proportions of low-income and minority students (Cochran-Smith, & Zeichner, 2005).

A February 2001 report by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington examined more than 300 published research reports about teacher preparation. The study found a positive connection between teachers' subject-matter preparation and classroom performance and impact and that subject-specific method courses in education were also useful. The authors did caution, however, that more subject-matter study is not always better, that teachers gain subject-matter knowledge from a variety of sources, that changes in teacher subject-matter preparation are needed and that the solution is more complex than simply requiring a subject-matter major or adding more subject-matter courses (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001).

Research findings support the view that the pedagogical elements of teacher preparation make a difference in teaching practice and, ultimately, student achievement. Some research findings also suggest that content-methods courses also make a difference. Teachers also view clinical experience as a powerful element of teacher preparation. Effective clinical experiences are coordinated with university-based program components, include well-structured and focused

activities, account for the impact of the norms in the clinical setting and are cognizant of the powerful influence of the cooperating teacher (Wilson et al., 2001).

A recent National Academy of Education report, *A Good Teacher in Every Classroom*, provides some insight into what teachers working in at-risk schools must know. The student population is increasing in diversity in terms of language, culture and academic abilities. This report suggests that teachers must be prepared to adapt the curriculum and their instruction to provide meaningful work for students. To do this, it is imperative that teachers know how to learn about their students' experiences and use this as a basis for curriculum development and teaching. Similarly, teachers must know how to become knowledgeable about the families, community values, norms and experiences of their students as well as how to examine their own cultural assumptions and how they influence their teaching (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005).

The AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education also reviewed the research on preparing teachers to work with diverse populations. The panel concluded that the predispositions held by teacher education candidates function as "filters" through which decisions about practices, strategies, actions, interpretations and decisions are made. With a teaching force that is primarily white, female and middle class, there is a limited experience base with those from other cultures or areas different from their own. The panel organized the studies about teacher preparation into those which focused on prejudice redirection, equity psychology, field experiences and the experiences of candidates of color. Although the research is not clear as to the longitudinal effects of these systems, some strategies to consider in the development of teacher preparation programs were identified. These included use of prior experiences, early socialization, learning multiple approaches to thinking, learning to use equity strategies in creating curriculum and designing instructional practices, focusing on community-based fieldwork, relocating candidates to applicable settings, using biographies and storytelling and ensuring the application of multicultural knowledge to classroom practice (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

Although focused primarily on at-risk first graders, a recent University of Virginia study identified some related implications for preparing teachers for at-risk or low-performing schools. Study findings suggested that at-risk 1st graders placed in supportive classrooms where instruction was direct, where regular feedback was provided and where teachers were sensitive, warm and positive exhibited achievement levels nearly identical to those students not considered at-risk. These data suggest that what teachers feel, know and do, in addition to having a thorough and in-depth subject-matter knowledge, are critical elements in student learning (Jacobson, 2005).

Emerging Policies and Strategies

States and school districts have developed and are implementing a number of initiatives directed at improving the preparation, recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers for low-performing and at-risk schools. One initiative increasingly being discussed as a vehicle for placing more highly skilled and experienced teachers in low-performing schools is focused around the issue of how best to use those teachers who have achieved certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). A recent North Carolina Policy Summit focused on supporting and staffing high-need schools developed a series of recommendations directed at increasing the number of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) assigned to low-performing schools. These recommendations included allowing NBCTs to serve as full-time mentors or in school leadership positions, targeting funds for reducing class size in high-need schools and providing two extra teachers for each low-performing school to allow time for

collaboration/planning. Other strategies recommended included using incentives such as retirement credit, money and college tuition waivers to attract NBCTs to high-need schools, restructuring teachers' staff development time, allocating 1.3 teacher positions for every NBCT hired or "grown" in a high-need school and seeking legislative/policy changes that require/encourage teachers to work in low-performing schools (Keller, 2005a).

In a related initiative, some 300 of the 800 Miami-Dade County Schools System NBCTs have formed an incorporated nonprofit association directed at increasing the involvement of NBCTs in school improvement initiatives. The group's activities have included conducting conferences for new teachers, providing professional development for the district's lowest-performing schools, providing data for policymakers through research in their own classrooms and participating on university advisory committees (Keller, 2005b).

Rotherham (2005) suggests an enhanced role for state and federal policymakers in facilitating the assignment of NBCTs to low-performing schools. By making two interrelated changes, states could do a better job of aligning incentives for National Board Certification with initiatives to assist low-performing, high-poverty schools. First, states should substantially increase the pay differentials and bonuses for NBCTs and commit to sustaining these increases over time. Secondly, states should link these increased payments to teaching in high-poverty or low-performing schools or, as a minimum, make these incentives conditional on mentoring or service as a part of state or district school improvement programs. The federal government could multiply the impact of state initiatives by providing matching funds for state initiatives for attracting board-certified teachers to work in high-poverty or low-performing schools. The NBPTS could assist with this effort by providing financial incentives and waiving renewal fees or creating special certifications for board-certified teachers working in low-performing or high-poverty schools.

Chicago's 435,000-student school district has identified encouraging more of its 27,000 teachers to seek NBCT status and to develop strategies for best using its 380 NBCTs as a "core strategy" for improving the city's schools. Acknowledging that financial incentives are a necessary but not sufficient condition for attracting NBCTs to low-performing schools, the system also is aware that a supportive working environment, leadership opportunities and effective building-level leadership are critical elements of the equation. The opportunity to work in a building with colleagues who are committed to a common vision and leadership that supports teachers using the best ways they know to teach are also important considerations (Keller, 2005c).

Linquanti and Peterson (2001) identified a series of strategies and leverage points that have the potential to increase the likelihood of success in using the NBPTS process as an organizing framework for improving low-performing schools. The following strategies and leverage points, they caution, are probably best considered as starting points for discussion and not simply recommendations:

- School- and district-level administrators need to understand and support NBPTS principles and processes
- A tiered process of progressive involvement, leading in stages to voluntary NBPTS candidacy, is more likely to engage larger schoolwide support and participation
- NBPTS standards should be used to develop a common language/understanding of teaching excellence

- Time should be “built in” within school routines for dialog and reflection on instructional practices and student work
- NBCTs should be assured of opportunities to provide instructional leadership at multiple levels.

Another major area of focus has been the improvement of the instructional quality and practical classroom experience in traditional teacher preparation programs. Specific strategies have included changing resource allocation models, new academic organizational structures, modifying faculty roles and evaluation, new accountability mechanisms, strengthened relationships with P-12 schools, development of alternative certification programs and emergence of performance-based certification policies. Teacher recruitment strategies have included the development of Web-based application systems, “grow-your-own” programs for hard-to-staff areas, financial incentives including signing bonuses and enhanced efforts to recruit minority teachers and community college students into teaching (National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005).

Providing a comprehensive support system for beginning teachers, especially for those in at-risk schools, is emerging as a crucial factor in the development and retention of high-quality teachers. Although expensive and labor-intensive, comprehensive programs for beginning teachers have proven to be extremely effective in retaining effective teachers, providing clinical training and support, developing teacher learning communities and orienting teachers to local schools. States and schools are also developing a wide variety of strategies focused on increasing the satisfaction, effectiveness and retention of experienced teachers. A promising practice in this arena is the development of targeted compensation packages such as achievement of NBPTS certification or documented student achievement gains as performance-based measures providing a basis for additional compensation (National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005).

Unable to secure legislative approval for a similar program, Governor Rich Perry of Texas recently set aside ten million dollars for a new program to reward successful teachers working in low-achieving and difficult-to-staff schools. The funds will be distributed to schools based on their success in raising student test scores and at least 75 percent of a school’s grant must be used for classroom teacher compensation (Texas Governor Announces Cash Awards for Teaching, 2005).

States and school districts are also developing several initiatives associated with improving the school environment, an important variable in teacher retention and effectiveness, especially in at-risk schools. These initiatives include statewide work environment surveys of the teacher workplace, regular school satisfaction surveys of students, teachers and parents and strengthening the sense of community and connection by reducing the size of high schools. Schools and districts are also recognizing the critical role of leadership in developing a productive school environment with a renewed focus on principal preparation, licensure and professional development (National Partnership of Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005).

De Stefano and Foley (2003) reinforce the need to address the school environment through an organizational culture framework. They hypothesize that how schools recruit, hire, assign staff, distribute opportunities for responsibility, authority and development, and how they evaluate and advance staff members through their careers, limit the choice in whom can be employed, thus leading to the inequitable distribution of the best personnel. Policymakers and administrators must reevaluate their contributions to these critical variables in order to attract and retain the best teachers in high-need schools.

Summary

Guided by the No Child Left Behind mandate to provide a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, states and districts are developing and implementing an array of related policies and strategies. These efforts notwithstanding, the goal of providing highly qualified teachers for low-performing and at-risk schools remains unachieved.

Policy Implications

As evidenced in this brief review of literature, there are many factors influencing teacher quality in at-risk schools. Implications for policymakers have been organized into the following categories:

Category	Policy Implications
Teacher Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review/revise state policies to ensure that initial teacher preparation programs prepare teachers to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use student experiences as a basis for curriculum/teaching. ▪ Become knowledgeable about family/community values, norms and experiences of their students. ▪ Examine the influence of their own cultural assumptions in teaching. ▪ Understand and respond to student diversity. ▪ Incorporate experience in a low-performing or at-risk school into clinical and field experiences.
Teacher Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appoint a state-level task force charged with developing a comprehensive plan for recruiting highly qualified teachers for low-performing schools. ● Intensify efforts to recruit minorities into the profession. ● Develop recruitment practices that consider the importance of the idealism and strong interest in children and youth important for teachers in low-performing schools. ● Develop alternative routes to certification that are specifically designed to attract teachers to at-risk schools.
Beginning Teacher Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Evaluate/revise the current mentoring/induction program. ● Promote the development of “learning communities.”
Teacher Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop pilot projects that provide differentiated compensation based on performance and other variables. ● Provide incentives (e.g., salary supplements, housing assistance, state income tax credits, etc.)

	<p>for teaching in low-performing schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase state-level promotion/support for NBPTS certification in low-performing and at-risk schools. • Investigate the reasons teachers leave low-performing and at-risk schools and develop responsive policies/strategies.
School Environment/Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target funds for reducing class size in high-need schools. • Provide additional teachers for low-performing schools to allow time for collaboration/planning. • Conduct baseline studies of working conditions in low-performing versus high-performing schools. • Review/revise state policies to ensure that administrative preparation programs include a focus on working in low-performing and at-risk schools. • Develop policies that promote strong school-based administrative support and adequate teacher autonomy. • Recruit a cadre of master/mentor teachers to serve as resource personnel for low-performing schools.
Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the true costs and outcomes of professional development. • Conduct “value-added” analyses of professional development. • Restructure professional development programs consistent with NASD standards and long-term recommendations. • Ensure professional development is data-driven, content-focused and school-wide in focus. • Provide targeted professional development for high-need schools.
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use incentives (e.g., retirement credit, money, tuition waivers, etc.) to attract NBCTs to high-needs schools. • Develop strategies that allow NBCTs to serve as mentors in low-performing schools. • Develop a state-level plan for using NBCTs in low-performing schools. • Promote NBPTS as a framework for improving low-performing schools.

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