Special Studies and Evaluation
Office of Policy and Evaluation
California Department of Education

August, 1998

Research Brief

Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching[1]

On March 12, 1998 the California Education Policy Seminar and the California State University Institute for Education Reform sponsored a forum on "Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching." Linda Darling-Hammond, Executive Director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future addressed a group of about 50 California policy makers, administrators, educators and policy advocates on the findings of the National Commission, data on teacher quality and preparation in California and strategies for enhancing teacher quality in California.

Findings of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

Research shows that the single most important determinant of what students learn is the expertise of the teacher. Nearly half of the variation in math test score gains is explained by home and family factors (49%) such as parent education, language background, race and location; 43 percent is explained by teacher qualifications such as licensing examination scores, education and experience; and 8 percent is explained by class size. Of the school factors, the impact of teacher qualifications far exceeds that of class size. After controlling for socio-economic status, virtually all of the difference in the test scores of white and African-American students is due to the difference in teacher qualifications.

When you look at the cumulative effects of teacher quality over 3 years in two school districts the effects are staggering. Student test scores were 50 percentile points lower (about 30 to 43rd percentile) if a student had 3 poor quality teachers in a succession than if a student had 3 high quality teachers in succession (82 to 95 percentile). This information helps explain minority students' test scores. In the most heavily minority schools, fewer than 50 percent of the math and science teachers are licensed and have a degree in the field they are teaching. The low achievement of minority students can be explained, in part, due to the cumulative effect of poor quality teachers.

Almost one-quarter of newly hired teachers nationally in 1993-94 had either a substandard license or no license at all. Teachers in some subject areas are less likely to have training in their field than teachers in other subject areas. About half of the math teachers did not have both a state license and a math major.

Different Approaches to Improving Teacher Quality

The approaches of two states, Connecticut and North Carolina, were highlighted. North Carolina has a salary schedule that gives an extra 12 percent for National Board certification and increases for a second license, a master's degree and meeting performance standards. Connecticut simultaneously raised salaries and licensing standards in 1986. These states have shown improvements on NAEP. By contrast, Georgia and South Carolina were among the first states to institute student tests, with rewards and sanctions for certain levels of results. But there was no investment in teaching and no change in the nature of schooling. According to Linda Darling-Hammond more testing doesn't create more learning. And rewards and sanctions designed to motivate teachers aren't enough. What is needed is greater knowledge by teachers of how to meet a variety of student needs.

Other countries provide more intensive teacher training. For example, Germany requires its teachers to obtain two subject-area undergraduate degrees and spend three years studying education at the graduate level. In addition,

[1]This is a summary of "Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching" a discussion sponsored by the California Education Policy Seminar and the California State University Institute for Educational Reform in May, 1998. The full document is available on the Internet at <www.csus.edu/ier/> or by contacting the CSU Institute for Education Reform at (916) 278-4600.
Additional information on the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future is available through their website at <www.tc.columbia.edu/~teachcomm/what.htm>.

they have a full year's internship, are required to pass a rigorous test and write a thesis. In Japan, beginning teachers have 60 days of professional development a year and they spend 10 to 20 hours a week collaborating with other teachers, meeting with parents, and getting to know the students.

California versus the Nation

Based on 1993-94 data, California lags behind the rest of the nation on most indicators of teacher quality. The percentage of teachers with no certification or something less than full certification was about 13 percent in California compared to 8 percent nationally.

Recommendations for Improving Teacher Quality in California

- **Recruit teachers from states that have high standards, granting them reciprocal licensure.** Provisional licenses could be given to certified teachers from other states while they are trained in any essential areas such as educating English language learners.

- **Recruit California's licensed teachers into high-need areas.** Connecticut provided financial incentives for teachers to teach in areas of greatest need.

- **Offer a license to anyone who has earned National Board certification.** Districts should also offer salary incentives for National Board certified teachers.

- **Recruit certified staff who have gone into administration or support positions back into the classroom.** If teaching were made more attractive by reorganizing current staffing in schools, teachers might be interested in returning to the classroom.

- **Expand scholarship programs to bring students into the teaching profession.** Fully fund the fifth year of teacher education for students interested in high-need areas and subject matter fields.

- **Support teacher education for paraprofessionals and get them licensed.**

- **Start recruiting prospects at the undergraduate level.** Don't let the best and brightest get away by blocking the study of education in the four-year undergraduate program. Recruit college students early and then continue their preparation through the fifth year.

- **Create a link between the need for certain types of teachers and the number of slots in teacher education programs.** For example, the state could provide grants to students who train for high-need fields and high-need areas, and also reward education schools for creating or expanding programs to provide the training in high-need fields such as math.

- **Evaluate current licensing exams to make sure that the tested criteria are tightly tied to teacher effectiveness.** Don't put up more barriers than necessary -- and make sure you are testing for the right things.

- **"Just say no" to hiring unqualified teachers.** New York City Schools used to hire 4,500 unlicensed teachers annually. When they overhauled recruitment and hiring they nearly eliminated that practice within three years. California should be able to accomplish this as well if we adopt targeted policies including:
  - Full one-year scholarships in high-need subject matter areas and for those willing to teach in high-need areas.
  - An overhaul of hiring practices to streamline them.
  - Reciprocity and outreach to other states to attract high-quality teachers who can't find a job elsewhere.

Highest Priority Areas for Reform

The highest priority areas for reform should be:

- Investing in attracting quality candidates through full scholarships -- scholarships that are targeted at areas of greatest need.

- Creating one or two solid paths for becoming a well-prepared teacher rather than the multiple options now offered in California.

- Equalizing resources so low-wealth districts can attract the best teachers.

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