Improving the Front -
End of the Teacher and Leader Pipeline

Michael DeArmond

Teacher evaluation and dismissal reforms have been in the education policy spotlight in recent years. From The New Teacher Project's "The Widget Effect" to states' Race to the Top applications, educational leaders and advocates have been thinking about how to make evaluation and dismissal more performance-based. These downstream personnel reforms are important, but they beg a critical question: How can states ensure that the best possible teachers and leaders are entering the system in the first place?

Concerns about the status quo talent pipeline

Since at least the 1980s, researchers and advocates have been concerned about the quality of preparation programs in education. In 1986, for example, a consortium of education school deans warned in a report, "Tomorrow's Schools of Education," that too many education schools were a low priority at major universities, had low admission standards, and faced little quality control under state accreditation policies.

Today, education leaders and advocates still voice many of these same concerns. In addition, they recognize that today's teacher and leader pipeline faces a whole host of demands it didn't face twenty years ago. In his provocative report on education schools[1] , Arthur Levine, the former dean of Teachers College at Columbia University, argues that today we must prepare educators for "an outcome-based, accountability-driven system of education in which all children are expected to learn." This outcome-based system has made teaching a fundamentally different job than it once was; to prepare people for that job, the institutions and policies surrounding the teacher and leader pipeline need to be fundamentally transformed.

Efforts to reform and expand the talent pipeline

In an effort to transform their teacher and leader pipelines, a handful of states are moving to simultaneously reform and expand how they oversee the preparation and certification of teachers and leaders. These efforts include:

- **Collecting and using more performance data on prep programs:** From New York State to Louisiana, states are beginning to collect and use data on teacher performance to improve how they oversee teacher preparation programs. Some of these efforts focus narrowly on value-added measures of teacher performance; others, such as the 21-state Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium, use a broader array of measures. Regardless of the approach, these data efforts are a first step in helping states identify their lowest-performing and at-risk preparation programs that need to be improved or closed, as well as flagging their strongest programs for recognition and continued support.

- **Offering more preparation options:** As states begin to collect performance data on traditional preparation programs and hold them more accountable for the quality of their graduates, they are also opening up opportunities for non-traditional institutions to train teachers. In many ways, New York State is leading the way, allowing for new preparation programs at the American Museum of Natural History and the Relay Graduate School of Education, a stand-alone preparation program that grew out of the Hunter College School of Education's Teacher U preparation program. In Boston, Chicago, and elsewhere, districts are offering teacher residencies in which candidates have an intensive full-year residency working with an experienced mentor teacher as they complete master's level coursework. The bottom line is that states are creating opportunities for alternative providers to contribute to the teacher and leader pipeline.

- **Re-designing certification:** For years now, many states have had alternative certification pathways for teachers; some have similar pathways for school leaders. As states rethink the types of institutions that can train teachers and leaders and how they are held accountable, some are also redesigning teacher certification programs to focus more on performance—not just value-added measures but also video-based performance assessments and rubrics that focus on teaching practice.

None of these approaches are easy. They require technical expertise and longitudinal data systems. And they can be politically and emotionally charged. As Arthur Levine told the New York Times recently, "The rhetoric is enormously heated…we have a group of education schools that are perplexed at why they are being so criticized…we have states saying that they are going to create alternative routes to being a teacher, and they are going to increase standards for the existing schools."

And yet if states want to improve the overall effectiveness of their teacher and leader workforce, policy makers need to think not only about how to provide productive feedback through evaluations and, when necessary, manage layoffs in a way that is sensitive to quality. They also need to ask themselves how they can redesign the teacher pipeline to get the best possible teachers and leaders entering the system in the first place.

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1 Arthur Levine, "Educating School Teachers," September 2006.