Are qualified teachers always effective teachers?
Experts identify four obstacles to effective teaching, give advice for changing federal policy
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An effective teacher can alter a student's achievement by as much as 50 percentage points. Under No Child Left Behind, schools are required to make sure every teacher is “highly qualified,” which—according to the law—means teachers must be certified in the subject areas they teach. But amid a growing consensus that “highly qualified” doesn’t necessarily mean “highly effective,” a movement is under way to reshape how the nation views successful teaching.

The effort is particularly relevant as learning in today’s schools undergoes a 21st-century transformation, some observers say—and they say true reform won’t occur until education leaders redefine what “highly qualified” teaching means.

In the typical instructional model of the past, the teacher was a “sage on the stage,” well versed in facts within a specific subject area and able to teach from a textbook. But now, 21st-century education demands a different kind of teacher, many stakeholders say—more of a mentor than a sage, and someone who can facilitate both individualized and collaborative learning.

According to some education experts, teachers are not adequately prepared for what schools need today, are not supported in their school environment, and are not assessed for their 21st-century skills and performance.

In a policy brief titled “Call for Action: Transforming Teaching and Learning to Prepare High School Students for College and Careers,” Mariana Haynes, a senior fellow at the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE), writes that standards-based reform will continue to fall short in preparing graduates for college and careers without “sustained investments in building the teaching profession and a greater focus on redesigning schools to support teacher and student learning.”

According to Haynes’ research, many studies confirm that the interaction between a student and teacher is the primary determinant of what students learn in school, with school leadership following as a close second.

The report also says that having an effective teacher versus a less effective teacher for three consecutive years can alter a student’s achievement by as much as 50 percentage points—an impact sufficient to distinguish between students who struggle to graduate and those who succeed in entering college or the workplace.

“Unfortunately,” writes Haynes, “… the chance that a student—let alone one who is disadvantaged—will be placed with a highly effective teacher for one year is about 15 percent; the likelihood of having an excellent teacher five years in a row is 1 in 17,000.”

Better teacher preparation is key
One way to help produce effective teachers is by starting early with teacher preparation programs and colleges.

According to Haynes, current measures of teaching “quality” under NCLB—based largely on whether teachers are subject-matter certified—do not differentiate between how well teachers impart learning and how well they affect student achievement.

For Marc Liebman, superintendent of Berryessa Union School District in San Jose, Calif., there can be a large gap between certification and performance. Though certification is based on credentials, skills tests, and college courses, none of these areas ensure that a teacher will be, or is, effective in helping students achieve classroom success.

“There are no requirements to ensure that teachers know how to work with students, understand social development, can teach them to be critical thinkers, or how to motivate them,” said Liebman. “Certifications also don’t test if a teacher knows how to effectively work with parents to help their children, is dedicated to student success, or knows
Learning theory and/or differentiated instruction to work with students of different ability levels, different cultures, [or who] speak other languages.”

“Collaboration and teamwork are not emphasized in the pre-service programs, so new teachers do not have the skills to, or even the expectation that they will, work in a collaborative environment,” said Tom Carroll, president of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), and Hanna Doerr, program manager at NCTAF, in a statement to eSchool News.

Liebman said teacher colleges and programs simply don’t have the time to prepare teachers adequately. Instead, teachers tend to learn more about teaching students to think critically, differentiating instruction, and using alternative instructional strategies on the job.

“I think that the on-the-job support programs that districts provide are far more critical to the long-term development of teachers than the year they spend in college classes and student teaching,” said Liebman. **School support also is needed**

Whether colleges or programs adequately prepare teachers to be 21st-century classroom mentors or not, experts agree that teachers cannot be effective without support: from their peers and administration, from state standards, by receiving sustained professional development, and by having classroom resources.

Effective teaching is not an individual accomplishment,” said Carroll and Doerr. “High-performing schools need well-qualified teachers and principals, but they don’t become great places to learn until those individuals join forces to create a collaborative learning culture that improves student achievement beyond what even the best of them can accomplish alone. Effective teaching is a team sport.”

Carroll and Doerr also said that high-performing learning teams have a game plan for curriculum and instructional strategies that they develop together and work to improve through collaborative practice and professional coaching.

“They use authentic, real-time assessments to improve their performance, with real-time feedback on the impact of their practice on student learning. Learning teams hold themselves mutually and professionally accountable for their performance. The team is professionally responsible for recruiting and developing its members, it is responsible for evaluating and rewarding its members, and it is responsible for taking corrective action when individual members are falling short of the team’s objectives. This can include supportive professional development and, alternatively, separation from the team when necessary,” said Carroll and Doerr.

NCTAF also emphasizes that effective teaching takes place in, and exploits the power of, a “technology-enabled open learning ecology.”

“As a final point, we emphasize that students must be active members of the learning teams—they are not served by the learning teams, but are participating members of learning teams, with well-defined roles for contributing to and taking responsibility for their own learning,” said Carroll and Doerr.

**Antiquated standards is a problem**

AEE’s Haynes said state education leaders must understand how their state standards shape teaching. “Research shows that teaching has been constrained by the design of state standards and tests that reinforce 20th-century schooling, where the teacher merely serves as a transmitter of a fixed body of knowledge and information,” Haynes said.

According to Haynes, by adopting the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which is led by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association’s Center for Best Practices, states will be able to define fewer, clearer, and higher content standards in English language arts and mathematics.

“The standards will provide teachers with clearer benchmarks to assess students’ progress and a better grasp of the pedagogical practices needed to move the learner to the next level,” she said.

In her policy brief, Haynes also gave a detailed example of how Common Core Standards are different from current state standards.

Recently, the state of Indiana said it was the first state to align its teacher standards with the Common Core standards, in partnership with Pearson.

“A 2006 Brookings Institute study found that having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row would be enough to close the black-white test score gap,” said Tony Bennett, superintendent of public instruction in Indiana. “We are confident that these new teacher standards will lead to higher-quality instruction and improved achievement for all Indiana students.”

**One-shot professional assessments aren’t enough**
A hallmark of good teaching is using formative assessments to measure student growth, said Haynes, but schools also must use different methods to measure teacher effectiveness that go beyond simple test scores. According to Haynes, today’s evaluation systems must move beyond focusing on methodologies that identify “good” and “bad” teachers for purposes of reward or dismissal. Schools can do this by using longitudinal data systems and formative assessments. A modern “value-added” methodology incorporates “complex statistical techniques to determine the contribution of teachers” to student learning, she said. “… Experts recommend using at least three years of test results to generate reliable estimates of teacher effects, since rating year-to-year tends to be unstable.”

Haynes also said that most researchers recommend using multiple measures of student learning over time to determine teacher effectiveness and identify the quality of traditional and nontraditional teacher education and professional development programs. 

Solving the problem
Implementing better teacher preparation programs, bolstering school support, integrating better standards that incorporate higher-order thinking skills, and creating better professional assessments are good ideas in theory, but experts say that effective teaching needs federal backing in order to change theory to practice.

For Haynes, the pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as NCLB, provides an opportunity to address what she calls “the fundamental misalignment between the current framework for public education in this country and the nation’s educational goals for ensuring that all graduates are prepared for college and careers.”

AEE says key policies to support educator development that should be included in the reauthorization include:

- Support for state-led adoption and thoughtful implementation of common standards and aligned assessments toward advancing college and career readiness.
- Creation of standards of practice that define high-quality teaching based on what teachers need to know and be able to do to elicit targeted student performances embodied in common standards and assessments.
- Development of robust teacher performance assessments that incorporate observational measures of teaching for the purpose of evaluating, developing, and recognizing teacher effectiveness and informing preparation and development.
- Development of coherent, performance-based human capital systems based on core practices that address career-long professional growth and advancement.
- Longitudinal data systems to track teacher and student growth data and link teacher and student performance with programs responsible for preparing and providing professional development.

“ESEA reauthorization needs to move the national debate from its focus on how to fix the schools we have, so that we can empower the nation’s educators to create the schools we need,” said Carroll and Doerr. “If ESEA reauthorization remains mired in fruitless fights over how to give low-income students a better industrial-era education, the future is already over.”

However, not all educators believe that ESEA will have the power to change the entire landscape of the teaching profession.

“Until we change the teacher preparation process, lengthen it to include more intern time in the classroom, and involve our best teachers in working with [prospective teachers] rather than professors who are steeped in research and have not been in the classroom, ESEA or any other reform will not be successful,” said Liebman.

Teaching is a profession in which new teachers need to work with mentors over several years, he added. Carroll and Doerr said that NCTAF agrees with the need for better teacher programs. The organization currently works with eight universities through a program called Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (TLINC), which provides an online platform for pre-service teachers, novice teachers, veteran teachers, and university faculty to work together in online communities. This teaching residency model also gives teaching candidates a year-long exposure to the classroom where they work with, and learn directly from, a veteran teacher in the school system where they will begin their career.