

How Can We Ensure That All Children Have Excellent Teachers?

A Choicework
Discussion Starter
from Public Agenda



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This Choicework guide was developed as part of the Everyone at the Table initiative, a partnership between Public Agenda and the American Institutes for Research, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information about Everyone at the Table, please visit www.EveryoneAtTheTable.org.

A version of this guide is available online at <http://www.publicagenda.org/media/how-can-we-ensure-that-all-children-have-excellent-teachers>

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How Can We Ensure That All Children Have Excellent Teachers?

It almost goes without saying: If we want every child to have a good education, then every child needs to have effective teachers—teachers who have passion, commitment, expertise and support.

Research by the University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center found that a student with three effective teachers in a row routinely makes significant progress. Given three weak teachers in a row, a student loses academic ground. That ground remains difficult to recover, even if a student later has a highly effective teacher.¹

There are tens of thousands of great teachers around the country, but one key dilemma facing the American education system today is that low-income, minority students who are more likely to struggle with academics are also more likely to have less experienced and less effective teachers. Many experts believe that doing more to ensure that children from poor families have better access to excellent teaching would go a long way toward helping to close the achievement gap.²

Consider the following:

- Data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights indicate that students of color and English-language learners are more likely to be taught by teachers who
 - are not fully certified. Black students are also four times more likely to attend schools with higher rates of uncertified teachers, and Latino students are two times as likely to attend these schools as white students.
 - are paid less.
 - are in their first year of teaching and teachers in schools with high concentrations of teachers in their first year.³
- Three recent studies show that students from low-income families receive less effective teaching than other students. These disparities vary across districts. However, on average, low-income students receive an equivalent of four fewer weeks of learning for reading and two fewer weeks for mathematics.⁴

¹ Sanders, William L., and June C. Rivers. "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement." University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center. (1996) http://heartland.org/sites/all/modules/custom/heartland_migration/files/pdfs/3048.pdf

² Kati Haycock. Closing the Achievement Gap. *Educational Leadership*. Vol 58. Num 6. (2001): 6-11. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar01/vol58/num06/Closing-the-Achievement-Gap.aspx>

³ U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. "Data Snapshot: Teacher Equity." Issue Brief 4. (2014) <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-teacher-equity-snapshot.pdf>

⁴ Institute of Education Sciences. "Do disadvantaged students get less effective teaching? Key Findings from recent Institute of Education Sciences Studies." (2014) <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144010/pdf/20144010.pdf>

- Another recent study examined data from two states and found that in Louisiana, a student in a high-poverty school is approximately three times as likely to be taught by ineffective teachers as a student in a low-poverty school. In Massachusetts, students in high-poverty schools were three times as likely to be taught by a teacher rated as unsatisfactory.⁵
- Low-income and minority students are almost twice as likely to be taught by teachers with less experience—typically three years or less.⁶
- Students in high-poverty schools are more likely to have teachers who did not major—or even minor—in the subjects they teach.⁷
- Teacher turnover is considerably higher in high-poverty schools. In fact, a study in New York State found that schools in which teachers transferred within five years tended to have a larger population of poor students than the schools into which these teachers transferred.⁸ A study in North Carolina found similar results observing that a higher percentage of teachers in low-poverty schools were retained over the course of five years when compared with teachers in high-poverty schools.⁹
- Minority high school students are almost twice as likely to have math teachers who didn't major in math and aren't certified to teach it.¹⁰
- Superintendents in high-poverty districts are twice as likely as other school leaders to say they are dissatisfied with the quality of their teaching staff.¹¹

The questions we tackle in this discussion guide are why students in high-poverty schools do not have more equitable access to high-quality teaching and what could be done to change that. The issue is especially timely now. In July 2014, the U.S. Department of Education launched a national initiative aimed at ensuring that all children, no matter where they live or how poor their families are, have excellent teachers. Each state is required to submit plans showing how they intend to make that happen by June 2015, along with how they engaged key stakeholders in the process.¹²

⁵ DeMonte, Jenny, and Robert Hanna. "Looking at the Best Teachers and Who They Teach." Center for American Progress. (2014) <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/TeacherDistributionBrief1.pdf>

⁶ The Education Trust. "Fact Sheet – Teacher Equity." [http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Ed Trust Facts on Teacher Equity_0.pdf](http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Ed_Trust_Facts_on_Teacher_Equity_0.pdf)

⁷ Kati Haycock. Closing the Achievement Gap. *Educational Leadership*. Vol 58. Num 6. (2001): 6-11. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar01/vol58/num06/Closing-the-Achievement-Gap.aspx>

⁸ Lankford, Hamilton; Susanna Loeb and James Wyckoff. "Teacher Sorting and the Plight of the Urban Schools: A Descriptive Analysis." *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. (2002): 24:37-62. <http://epa.sagepub.com/content/24/1/37>

⁹ Clotfelter, Charles; Helen F. Ladd, Jacob Vigdor, and Justin Wheeler. "High-Poverty Schools and the Distribution of Teachers and Principals." Calder Center. (2006) http://www.caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/1001057_High_Poverty.pdf

¹⁰ The Education Trust. "Fact Sheet – Teacher Equity." [http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Ed Trust Facts on Teacher Equity_0.pdf](http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Ed_Trust_Facts_on_Teacher_Equity_0.pdf)

¹¹ Johnson, Jean; Ana Maria Arumi, and Amber Ott. "The Insiders: How Principals and Superintendents See Public Education Today." Reality Check 4. Public Agenda. (2006) <http://www.publicagenda.org/files/rc0604.pdf>

¹² For more information on engaging stakeholders to ensure all students have equitable access to excellent educators, see the Moving Toward Equity Stakeholder Engagement Guide from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders: <http://www.gtlcenter.org/learning-hub/equitable-access-toolkit/stakeholder-engagement-guide>.

Kick-Starting the Discussion

So what would have to change to ensure more equitable access to effective teachers—especially for students in high-poverty schools and districts? Should we change how teachers are rewarded and assigned? Should we look at teachers' working conditions? What about revamping how schools of education and teacher training programs operate? What kinds of policies and reforms would make a real difference?

To kick-start a discussion on these questions, this guide lays out three different ways of thinking about the problem, along with some specific proposals, benefits and trade-offs often associated with each. Our aim is not to confine the discussion to these three approaches or to suggest that anyone should endorse any one of these three strategies as is. Instead, we hope that putting a wide range of ideas on the table will get all of us thinking more broadly and critically about what can and should be done to promote and support effective teaching.

As you work through this guide, here are some overarching questions to keep in mind:

- What are the most daunting challenges facing teachers today, especially those working in high-poverty schools? Do the policies and proposals here really address them?
- What's behind ineffective teaching? Is it a lack of training or skill? Lack of support and poor working conditions? Burnout? Are there some people who simply aren't cut out for teaching?
- The three approaches here aren't mutually exclusive, but there's only so much money, time and energy available to address this issue (or any other issue, for that matter). If we can make only a limited number of changes to strengthen teaching, which ones should they be?
- Some of the proposals suggested here could be enacted fairly quickly, while others would require years of redesign and reform. What's the best mix of near-term and long-term policy changes?
- Are there other ideas and proposals that should be considered in addition to the ones mentioned here?

THREE BROAD APPROACHES TO THINK OVER AND DISCUSS

In the following pages, we lay out three broad strategies for ensuring that all children have access to excellent teaching, along with plenty of specifics to reflect on. Considering these three approaches is only a beginning, but it will give you a lay-of-the-land framework for thinking about how this issue might play out in your own school and district. You might also want to take a look at some of the research and analysis on equitable access to excellent teaching.¹³ The aim of this guide is to open up a thoughtful, honest discussion—one that brings out competing ideas and differing perspectives and makes us all think through the devils in the details.

APPROACH 1: Let's give our best teachers a real incentive to work where they are needed most.

Some teachers routinely demonstrate that they can deliver the goods. The main problem we face is that our most effective teachers often aren't working in high-poverty schools or with the most disadvantaged, challenging students. To change that, we need to give highly skilled teachers better incentives to stay in the profession and work in the schools and classrooms where they could do the most good.

APPROACH 2: Let's give teachers better working conditions and more support. That's how we'll get more excellent teaching.

Nearly all teachers could be much more effective if they had more support and got more useful feedback on how to improve their skills. And very few can do their best if schools are unruly, classes are overcrowded, students are truant and principals and parents don't give teachers the backup they need. These are the challenges we should be addressing.

APPROACH 3: Let's rethink the teaching profession.

It's time to make some fundamental changes. Compared to other advanced countries, fewer top-notch college students in the U.S become teachers. And that shouldn't be surprising when other professions offer much better pay and more opportunity for advancement, not to mention more autonomy and prestige. If we want more excellent teaching, we need to change how our schools of education operate and be prepared to treat teachers like true professionals.

¹³ The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders is one resource for research and analysis on this topic: <http://www.gtlcenter.org/tools-publications/publications>.

APPROACH 1: LET'S GIVE OUR BEST TEACHERS A REAL INCENTIVE TO WORK WHERE THEY ARE NEEDED MOST.

Key policy changes associated with this perspective:

- Give substantial bonuses to highly effective teachers who work in high-poverty schools or with the most disadvantaged, struggling learners.
- Reassign highly effective teachers to work in failing schools, teaming them up with principals committed to turning these schools around.
- Eliminate tenure laws that make it difficult to remove teachers who are burned out or simply aren't effective.
- If there need to be layoffs, give school principals the authority to designate which teachers will leave. Decisions like this should be based on teacher effectiveness, not seniority.

Arguments often made in favor of this perspective:

- Professionals who do valuable, top-quality work should be rewarded for it. That's how most professions operate.
- Offering substantial bonuses for working in high-poverty schools will encourage good teachers to stay and attract more top-notch teachers to the schools and classrooms where they are needed most.
- Poor school districts generally can't pay their teachers as well as wealthier ones. Giving teachers extra financial incentives to work in high-poverty schools can help address this inequity.
- "Putting up with" teachers who are burned out or incompetent harms the students and demoralizes other teachers who are working hard.

Arguments often made against this perspective:

- The goal should be to develop many more excellent teachers—not just move the best teachers around from one school to another.
- Teacher surveys routinely show that most prefer to work in schools with strong administrative and parental support rather than schools where they could earn more. Financial incentives may not work.
- Even highly skilled teachers can't overcome the severe learning deficits so many poor children bring into the classroom. We need to start helping these children before they set foot in first grade.
- Eliminating tenure and letting principals choose which teachers to lay off would give administrators too much power. That power could easily be abused to save money or remove seasoned teachers for unwarranted reasons.

Before you move on from this approach, have you considered...

- How do we judge whether a teacher is "effective"?
- Is it reasonable to assume that teachers who are effective in middle-class and affluent schools will be equally effective in high-poverty ones?
- What should have the higher priority—hiring teachers with strong academic track records and top-notch credentials or hiring teachers with strong connections to the community and a genuine understanding of the challenges their students face?

APPROACH 2: LET'S GIVE TEACHERS BETTER WORKING CONDITIONS AND MORE SUPPORT. THAT'S HOW WE'LL GET MORE EXCELLENT TEACHING.

Key policy changes associated with this perspective:

- Reduce class sizes in high-poverty schools so teachers can give students more personal attention.
- Reduce workloads and provide extra support and coaching for teachers working in high-poverty schools or with students who struggle.
- Make sure teachers see student test scores immediately so they can identify those who need extra work. Student test scores should be used to help teachers plan their teaching—not to evaluate teacher performance.
- Make sure principals are held accountable for promoting and ensuring a school climate that supports learning. Effective policies to address discipline issues and truancy are a must.

Arguments often made in favor of this perspective:

- Students who struggle with academics need more time with and help from their teachers. Until we accept that—and are willing to pay for it—not much is going to change.
- Surveys of teachers routinely show that poor working conditions are the number one reason people leave the profession.
- It's not reasonable to keep talking about "effective" versus "ineffective" teachers when working conditions are so poor in so many schools.
- Teachers can't teach students who aren't in school or aren't focused on their education. If schools don't provide a climate that supports learning, teachers will be hard-pressed to be effective.

Arguments often made against this perspective:

- School climate and class size are often used as excuses. Teachers need to take responsibility for being effective in their own classrooms.
- Reducing the number of classes and students each teacher teaches is massively expensive. This money could be better spent elsewhere.
- This approach does nothing to remove or reassign teachers who clearly aren't effective. Until we do that, we are cheating the students.
- Talent matters. Management studies consistently show that improving working conditions doesn't help unless employees have both talent and expertise.

Before you move on from this approach, have you considered...

- Can teacher effectiveness be taught?
- What kind of school climate best supports teaching and learning?
- What should be done when a teacher is not effective despite repeated attempts to improve his or her teaching skills?

APPROACH 3: LET'S RETHINK THE TEACHING PROFESSION. IT'S TIME TO MAKE SOME FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES.

Key policy changes associated with this perspective:

- Raise teacher pay substantially. Set a goal of making it comparable to the pay of doctors and lawyers within a decade.
- Raise entrance requirements at schools of education so mediocre students simply don't get to enter the field.
- Strengthen and extend teacher training. Put less focus on theory and more on classroom practice and lesson development.
- Change policies so teachers are eligible for tenure only after a five-year probationary period and a rigorous assessment of their qualifications by a group of master teachers and administrators.

Arguments often made in favor of this perspective:

- We can't expect to attract the best college graduates to teaching unless we're willing to pay teachers like the professionals they are.
- You can't learn to be a good teacher without investing real time to develop and practice genuine skills. Learning the theory is not enough.
- Public opinion surveys show that most Americans agree that teachers should be paid more.
- Right now, most teachers get tenure almost automatically. To strengthen the profession, we need to make getting tenure a real measure of attainment and performance.

Arguments often made against this perspective:

- This approach includes a huge new expenditure that will have to continue into the future. It's simply not realistic.
- Getting top grades in college doesn't mean someone will be a good teacher. In fact, academic superstars often fail at teaching.
- Teacher recruitment and training could be improved, but it won't make much of a difference unless we address the problems of poverty and community dysfunction that are the true sources of the achievement gap.
- Making it more time-consuming and difficult to become a teacher will shut out people who have great potential—people coming out of the military, for example, or recent college graduates who would like to teach for a few years before moving on to other careers.

Before you move on from this approach, have you considered...

- What kind of professional preparation, training and development would be most effective? How long should teacher training take?
- What motivates people to become teachers? Why do so many teachers leave the field after only a few years?
- Why don't more highly accomplished college graduates choose teaching as a career?

USING THIS GUIDE IN COMMUNITY CONVERSATION, DISCUSSION GROUP OR CLASSROOM SETTING

After a discussion of the choices, it can be helpful to first summarize the conversation and then bridge to action-oriented deliberations, as follows:

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement, the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today? This is a brainstorming phase of the discussion.
2. Among the action ideas we've discussed, how should we prioritize them?
3. How should we follow up on today's conversation? Are there individual steps we can take? Are there things we can do collectively?

ABOUT CHOICEWORK DISCUSSION STARTERS

Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Starters support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations, discussion groups and classrooms and by journalists, researchers, policymakers, community leaders and individuals looking to better understand and discuss solutions to a variety of public and community issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and trade-offs. The different perspectives are drawn both from how the public thinks about an issue and from what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates. Users of the guides should be encouraged to put additional ideas on the table or consider combining elements from different choices in unique ways. They are designed as a starting point for constructive dialogue and problem solving.





About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on school reform, teacher effectiveness, achievement gaps, parent and community engagement, and other K-12 education issues.

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