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Research to Make a Difference

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Treat Teaching as Learned Profession

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Treat Teaching as Learned Profession

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Introduction

Efforts to ensure that all students are taught by “highly qualified” teachers must begin with a professional view of teachers and teaching. Essential to such a view is that teaching is not *a skilled occupation*, but a *learned profession*. Teaching is complex work that requires individuals to draw upon their knowledge of disciplinary content, human development, pedagogy, diverse student backgrounds, and local context. Teachers apply this knowledge daily to influence what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach. This type of sophisticated professional judgment cannot be legislated directly. Rather, resources must be allocated to ensure that teachers have the support and work in settings that develop the knowledge and instructional leadership they need to make informed and well-reasoned pedagogical decisions.

The Problem

Teacher quality is the single most important factor in predicting student achievement. However, not all students have teachers who hold full teaching credentials and access to quality teachers is especially vital for children in underperforming schools. As the state devotes more of its attention to mandating programs and curricular materials, more and more teachers lack the training and skills to teach effectively. Furthermore, different definitions of “quality” lead, in part, to inadequately designed and implemented professional development programs for new and experienced teachers.

The Solution

The solution begins with adopting the view that teaching is not *a skilled occupation*, but a *learned profession*. The state should shift its shortsighted emphasis on entry and induction, and focus as well on a critical aspect of any profession: the steady deepening of its members’ knowledge and skill. In the case of teachers, this means:

- Regular reflection with colleagues about teaching practices
- Regular workshops with curricular leaders
- Regular opportunities to examine student work, not only to assess student progress, but to inform instructional and programmatic decisions
- Regular meetings with colleagues and local community leaders that address the conditions of schooling.

Rather than professional development that helps teachers implement a single curricular approach or one-shot professional development days, policy should support coherent programs that acknowledge teachers’ professional decision-making, local work contexts, individual professional developmental trajectories, and encourage a deeper understanding of pedagogy and content.

Findings and Recommendations

This policy brief examines the High School Puente Project (the Project), housed in the University of California Office of the President. While the Project is a state-supported student outreach program, one of its ancillary effects has been on the development of teachers in the program. Building upon the strength of “familia” in Mexican American/Latina communities, a team of educators—a teacher, a guidance counselor, and a community mentor liaison—provides students with rigorous academic training, counseling support, and opportunities to develop community leadership. The Project addresses the structures of schooling by organizing teams of adults and older peers who teach and advise students in the Project, providing students with a more coherent school experience and a clearer understanding of how to accomplish their educational goals. In addition, the Project addresses the classroom practices that affect the academic success of students and the connections of schools to the communities they serve, making teaching methods, curricular innovation, and community resources primary features of professional development opportunities. Over a sixteen-month period, researchers surveyed and questioned 37 teachers about their definitions of work and their work relationships.

We found that it was critical to offer teachers sustained professional training that accounts for local context and classroom conditions alongside the more traditional efforts to provide new curriculum. So, in addition to “content,” project educators practiced and modeled teaching methods and engaged in long-term dialogues about assessing student work throughout the school year. The Puente Project used a dual model of induction and leadership development to train teachers in underserved schools—emphasizing teacher-led workshops targeting teachers’ specific needs, and offered teachers stipends for substantive discussions about student assessment.

This study illustrates the importance of integrating ongoing learning into teachers’ professional lives instead of providing them with a succession of training activities unrelated to each other or to a teacher’s daily work. Student achievement can be improved with attention to such on-going professional development activities combined with teachers’ understanding of school structures that support student achievement. Based on these findings, the following is recommended:

- Continue funding for outreach efforts at the University of California that address student achievement, and the development of new teachers *as well as* the on going professional leadership development of current teachers serving California’s underserved populations.
- Support coherent programs that acknowledge teachers’ professional decision-making, local work contexts, individual professional developmental trajectories, and encourage a deeper understanding of pedagogy and content.
- Review legislative actions, including the budget proposals, to minimize effects that funding fluctuations might have on the sustained efforts of professional development providers.
- Provide time and financial support for teachers to examine and discuss student work in ways that both provide information on student progress and inform instructional decisions.

- Augment funding for the California Subject Matter Projects to support an example of an organization that provides coherent, content-focused professional leadership development.
- Reinstate the 8 days of locally controlled professional development days for teachers. Doing so allows local districts and school sites to develop organic and locally relevant programs of professional development.
- Support school structures that provide opportunities for teams of adults to work across traditional boundaries for the shared goal of improving student achievement.

Conclusion

During tight budgetary times, resources must be allocated to those programs most relevant and effective in improving California's school system. The High School Puente Project illustrates that ongoing learning, meaningful collaboration among teacher peers and colleagues such as community leaders and guidance counselors is essential to improving student achievement. Without an effort to recognize the challenges faced by teachers, the purposes of education in our democracy continue to be burdened by the historical and contemporary realities faced by underrepresented minority students, and blighted, under-invested urban areas. While reasons for student underachievement are complex and broader social inequities of the larger society are forcefully illustrated in conditions faced by urban schools and their stakeholders, developing teacher leaders for these schools is an important step towards using limited resources more wisely and justly.

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