

Improving Teacher Quality: Redesigning Personnel Policies to Support Student Achievement

Submitted by: District Practitioner Working Group; California Collaborative on District Reform
Richard Alonzo, Superintendent, Local District 4, LAUSD
Art Delgado, Superintendent, San Bernardino Unified
Geno Flores, Deputy Superintendent, San Diego Unified
Juan Garza, Superintendent, Kings Canyon Unified
Mike Hanson, Superintendent, Fresno Unified
Maggie Mejia, Superintendent, Sacramento City Schools
Ruthie Quinto, Chief Financial Officer, Fresno Unified
Laura Schwalm, Superintendent, Garden Grove Unified
Brad Stam, Chief Academic Officer, Oakland Unified
Chris Steinhauser, Superintendent, Long Beach Unified
Dale Vigil, Superintendent, Hayward Unified
Judy White, Deputy Superintendent, San Bernardino Unified
Jennifer O'Day, Chair, California Collaborative on District Reform; AIR
Jim Brown, Springboard Schools

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Main contact and contact information – Jennifer O'Day, American Institutes for Research, jo'day@air.org

Statement of the Problem

Education is a personnel-intensive enterprise that depends on professionally trained staff and support personnel to provide the diverse services that make high quality teaching and learning possible. Approximately 85 percent of school district expenditures are directly related to the costs of hiring, training, and evaluating personnel. Of these personnel costs, the majority go toward the certificated employees who provide direct services to children, whether those services occur in the classroom, the counseling office, the library, or other locations.

We believe the key to effective teaching and learning is the quality of the certificated personnel who work in California's very diverse collection of school districts. The systems, structures, processes, and practices that guide the work of these districts must ensure that everyone stays focused on student success. They should support what works best for students, not for adults.

Unfortunately this is not the generally case in California. Certain policies and practices serve in fact to impede the district's mission-critical work to foster student success. We believe it is crucial for the state to address these policies and practices if we are to achieve our goal of preparing all students for success in higher education and/or a meaningful career. In this brief, we focus on policies related to the quality of our teachers and leaders. We categorize these policies into two groups: those related to the certification and hiring of qualified personnel, and those related to professional growth.

With respect to credentialing and hiring, examples of policies that impede district efforts to hire the best candidates abound. In particular, we highlight the following four:

1. A credentialing system that is cumbersome at best and that at worst undermines or impedes district efforts to identify and hire the most qualified staff. This problem especially impacts smaller, more rural districts.

2. The lack of connection of pre-service training to actual job requirements both for teachers and administrators. For example, high school teachers receive insufficient preparation to respond to the literacy needs of students; upper elementary and middle school teachers are often unprepared to teach content areas.
3. Laws related to the granting of tenure – arguably the most important personnel decision made by districts – which force districts to make a permanent commitment to personnel without adequate evidence to support ongoing success.
4. The absence of laws that require demonstrations of performance and continued professional growth to maintain teaching and/or administrative credentials.

The cumulative effect of these policies is to limit severely the ability of districts to make the personnel decisions that enable them to hire the best candidates both at the initial point and later when decisions about permanent status both for certificated and classified staff are required.

A second area is that related to the importance of encouraging and supporting participation in excellent professional development programs. Education is a dynamic and changing field. As new knowledge of practices that are likely to improve teaching and learning develops, teachers, administrators, and others must have continued access over time to this knowledge. Our particular concerns relate to three policies:

1. The severe curtailment of state support for professional development. While demands on teachers have intensified in the past decade, state support for professional development has decreased; we are nowhere near the level of eight professional development days we had in the 1990s, for example. Moreover, funding for professional development is either tied up in overly prescriptive categorical programs or spent on salary enhancements that accrue as a result of completing coursework unrelated to district and school improvement strategies. Neither is likely to contribute to improved student achievement.
2. The lack of state support for leadership development especially for teacher leaders, aspiring administrators, district office leadership, and governing bodies. We all know that the quality of our educational leaders is critically important to the ability of schools and districts to engage in continuous improvement strategies. Yet opportunities for leadership development and the maintenance of an effective pipeline to leadership positions are both woefully lacking in this state.
3. A credentialing system which fails to recognize the necessity of continued participation in professional growth and performance.

When we consider these issues in total, it is clear to us that absent a much better alignment of personnel policies and practices to other reform efforts, our ability to raise the level of achievement and close the achievement gap is constrained.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the issues and problems above, we recommend the following changes in current policy and practice to improve the quality of certificated staff in California's districts. We have grouped our recommendations into four categories – teacher credentialing, recruitment and retention, tenure, and professional preparation and growth.

➤ Revise the Teacher Credentialing System

We propose the following four recommendations for revising the teacher credentialing system:

Redesigned Credentialing System to Address Content and Language: First, we recommend that the state engage in a comprehensive study and reform of the current credentialing system with the intent of simplifying

the process to allow for three major credentials: K-3, 4-8, and subject matter specialty thereafter. The K-3 credential would focus on knowledge of literacy, numeracy, and instruction of English learners, which we consider to be the most important skill areas for this age group given California's student population. This credential would also have an option for a pre-K specialization. The 4-8 credential would address the transition to a content area focus. The credential would focus on subject matter knowledge (including a strong focus on mathematics and science) as well as writing, academic language, and instruction for English learners. We recommend the state negotiate with the federal government so that this 4-8 credential would satisfy the "highly-qualified" criteria at the middle school level. The primarily content-focused single subject credential would then just be used for high school teacher candidates. This new breakdown in the credentialing system would help to build necessary skills applicable to each grade span, balancing the need to address both content and language. Both the 4-8 and single subject credential should require demonstration of teachers' ability to incorporate literacy skills (reading and writing) into content instruction. We realize that changing the system in this way could pose logistical challenges initially, particularly for small schools and districts. The process for rolling out this change would need to be considered carefully and planned out over time to prevent operational difficulties during the transition.

Competence in Key Areas: We also recommend that the state identify and require the demonstration of competence in key skill areas for instructing California's students. These areas include (but are not limited to) the deep content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge tied to the curriculum and standards in California, assessment strategies (both formative and summative) and the use of data to inform instruction, cross-cultural competency, and strategies to work with parents and families. In addition, the elements of the Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development (CLAD) certificate should be strengthened within the credential program. These skills are essential for teachers to meet the needs of California's diverse student population. Performance measures in these various areas should complement the training.

Supplemental Special Education Credential: We recommend that the special education credential be re-visited, particularly in light of the shortage of qualified special education teachers and increased expectations that students with disabilities be held to the same standards as all students. We recommend that the regular education credential require sufficient and solid preparation such that a teacher with this credential could teach students with mild to moderate disabilities. The special education credential would be a supplemental certificate beyond the regular education credential and would ensure a teacher is prepared to teach students with moderate to severe disabilities. The special education credential would therefore be based more directly on the regular education credential, ensuring that students with disabilities have an education grounded in the same standards required for all students. In addition, this system would enable more cross-over and flow among teachers between these two credential statuses. We expect that a structure like this could attract more qualified teachers to special education classrooms and better enable regular education teachers to address the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Credential Renewal Linked to Professional Growth: Finally, as part of the credential revision process we also recommend that there be a stronger link between credential renewal every five years and performance (or skill level) and professional growth. As is the case with other professions, maintenance of one's credential ought to be conditional, based on evidence of performance and professional growth requirements. The state would need to consider ways to do this without greatly increasing the bureaucratic processes around credential renewal.

➤ **Provide Flexibility and/or Incentives to Improve Recruitment and Retention in High-need Areas, Hard-to-staff Schools, and Identified Subject Areas with Shortages**

Along with revisions to the credential system, the state should address the difficulties that some districts and schools have finding and retaining credentialed personnel. Some districts, particularly rural districts, struggle

to find teachers in their locale or teachers who are willing to move to the district. Others struggle to maintain credentialed staff in specific high-need schools. These could include schools that are facing particular challenges (e.g., in improving achievement) or schools that are in various stages of Program Improvement such as restructuring, where there is the potential for staff to be released. In addition, districts and schools throughout California struggle to identify, hire, and retain teachers in certain subject areas, including mathematics, science, and special education. These difficulties are exacerbated by current state conditions and policies. For example, it is difficult for districts and schools to be pro-active in locating and hiring qualified staff when the state fiscal calendar prohibits them from knowing sufficiently ahead of time how much money they will have available to hire staff. In addition, the Williams requirement that schools have staff in place by the 20th day of the school year often forces schools to hire whomever is available to fill the position rather than spend additional time to locate a strong, credentialed, and experienced teacher.

In order to address these recruitment and retention challenges, we recommend the state implement incentives to help recruit and retain teachers in these areas and/or provide more flexibility in the hiring process for these districts. Specifically,

- **Incentives:** The state should implement incentives to attract and retain teachers in these high-need areas, including rural districts, hard-to-staff schools, and identified subject areas. For example, incentives could be provided to a rural district and its closest urban district to share staff. Or a teacher could be given an extra year of service credit for each year he/she continues teaching in a high-need district or hard-to-staff school. Other incentives could be considered as well, such as improvements in working conditions, opportunities for professional learning, additional pay (e.g., hiring bonuses), etc. By establishing these incentives at the *state level* (similar to the incentives offered to National Board Certified Teachers), the need to navigate unique collective bargaining agreements in local jurisdictions will be minimized.
- **Flexibility:** We also recommend that districts in very high need areas – particularly rural regions – be given increased flexibility with respect to credentialing requirements. We suggest that specifically identified districts be allowed to hire individuals they have identified as likely to achieve success in the classroom, but who may not have completed the requirements for a credential. These districts should then receive assistance to help these individuals earn their credential, potentially through flexible or creative processes. We recognize that the state may need to apply to the federal government for this increased flexibility in order to meet the highly qualified teacher provisions of NCLB.

➤ **Increase and Add Flexibility to Tenure Timing**

Our third area of recommendation concerns the length of the probationary period. It is important that before granting tenure, districts be confident of the ability of the staff member to succeed in the classroom. This is particularly important given that the removal of ineffective tenured staff is an extremely difficult and time consuming affair. Under current law this decision for all practical purposes needs to be made in one and a half years. This is simply too short a period of time for novice teachers to develop or demonstrate their skills. We therefore recommend the following:

- The expected probationary period for tenure should be increased to three years, on average. However, while we suggest three years as the norm, we also recognize that the particulars of specific tenure cases may vary. In some situations and for some particularly well-qualified individuals, two years may be sufficient time for a district to feel confident granting tenure. There may be times when a speedier tenure process may be necessary to keep a well-prepared and mobile teacher in the system. In contrast, there may also be cases in which even three years does not provide enough time for a

candidate to develop or demonstrate his or her potential as a qualified teacher. In these situations, the district may want to provide the candidate with an additional year to hone his/her skills before making the tenure ruling. For these reasons we are recommending a flexible window of 2-4 years in which the tenure decision would need to be made. In all cases tenure decisions should be based on sufficient evidence that the candidate is ready and qualified to teach independently within the system.

- This probation window and tenure clock should start after any internship period in which a teacher is not fully credentialed and *after* any temporary assignment period.

➤ **Provide Support for Professional Preparation and Growth**

Finally, we recommend the state take actions that will place a stronger emphasis on the value of continued professional growth for all members of the education profession.

High-Quality Pre-Service Training: To better align the pre-service training that teachers receive with the challenges and expectations they will meet in the classroom, we recommend the state provide incentives for higher education and school districts to work more closely together in the development and delivery of high-quality pre-service programs. While statewide credential requirements can ensure necessary training in key skill areas, individual districts can help local pre-service programs better prepare teachers to meet the needs of students in their area. For example, Long Beach Unified has partnered closely with CSU Long Beach to ensure students graduating from this program are well-prepared to meet the needs of the diverse Long Beach population. Many teaching candidates participate in internships in Long Beach Unified, and Long Beach Unified staff help to teach courses and inform program faculty of district needs. This has been a very effective partnership that has helped to increase the quality of teachers entering the system.

Additional Professional Development Days: We recommend that the length of the school year be expanded (for teachers) to provide at least ten days for professional development outside the 180-day school year. These days should not continue to be carved out of time necessary for direct teaching and learning. The use of these days should be determined locally, based on the instructional needs in the district. The provision of additional days will mean that districts and their external partners will be able to provide the breadth and depth required for the kind of professional development efforts which will be necessary to close the achievement gap. This also has the benefit of raising salaries so that we can attract and retain more quality people in the profession.

Leadership Training: We recommend that the state support and/or implement systems to develop high-quality leadership (at all levels) in the state. Specifically:

- The current administrative preparation system should include a stronger pre-service preparation program, such as that offered in a high-quality MBA program.
- Continued leadership development should be fostered through increased opportunities for professional growth and coaching. This could be accomplished through better leadership development partnerships between higher education and K-12 such as that which occurs with Central Valley school districts, CSU Fresno, and the Central Valley Education Leadership Institute or Long Beach Unified and CSU Long Beach. In addition, other models, such as the California School Leadership Academies (CSLA) or the California Subject Matters Projects (CSMP), that have been viewed positively in the past for their leadership development work, should be reinvigorated.

Strengthening the quality of leadership development through improved pre-service programs and continuing professional growth requirements will help improve the management of the systems that support education reform. Recognizing that development of our teacher, school, and district leaders is an important part of the

reform process, we recommend that the proposals be solicited for the development and operation of partnerships among higher education, third party organizations (e.g., reform support organizations, research groups, professional associations), and districts that develop leadership programs that equip our present and future leaders from in and outside education to provide the leadership required to raise achievement and close the achievement gap by making high-quality instructional practice the focus of everyone's work.

Summary of Evidence Supporting Recommendations

Several of the *Getting Down to Facts* Studies addressed issues of teacher quality and teacher/leadership development. These studies corroborate the policy issues that are outlined in this brief, the implications of which we have directly experienced in our leadership roles. For example, Loeb and Miller (2007) point out that California is one of only 10 states that issues tenure after only two years, and that many principals reported that they viewed the current tenure laws "as a barrier to improving teaching in their schools." Survey responses from principals in Darling-Hammond and Orphanos's study of leadership development in California (2007) indicated that the leadership development efforts in California were weak compared to those in other states. The authors note the variation in quality among administrator preparation and credentialing programs and the few opportunities to participate in administrative internship or mentoring/coaching programs. Finally, Koski and Horng (2007) find in their research (which supports prior research in California) that schools with higher percentages of minority students and large and growing schools have fewer credentialed and experienced teachers than others. They report that their findings imply a need for incentives to attract teachers to difficult-to-staff schools.

One of the primary findings of Loeb and Miller (2007), however, is that few states have systematically evaluated their teacher policies, including preparation, certification, and tenure policies. Therefore, evidence of effective policies across the U.S. is limited, leaving California with few models to draw on for improving teacher quality. Given the limited research evidence, evidence from practice and the professional judgment of educators in California should be considered in making improvements to policies that affect teacher preparation, hiring, and professional growth.

We also cite the analysis of administrator development programs led by Levine (2005). This study was critical of the misalignment between current leadership development programs nationwide and the actual job demands placed on principals, superintendents, and other support personnel. The study called for institution of a preparation program similar to that offered in a high-quality MBA program.

References

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