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A Cultural Shift in Education: Raising the Standards and Value of Public School Teachers in the US

Introduction

The American K-12 public education system continues to score poorly in academics against the rest of the world due to a lack of strong leadership. The leadership in this circumstance is not simply the administration at the federal or local level. This deficiency is largely at the classroom level due to a lack of highly skilled educators. The American public school teacher has become a caricature in modern society. They are faced with the important task of forming the minds of young people, yet they are not held to sufficient standards or paid at the level that would be expected for this duty. Attrition rate of qualified and devoted teachers continues to rise because their work is undervalued. Therefore, students often learn from underqualified educators that have little motivation to teach. This lack of motivation has a trickle-down effect to students who now have little incentive to give their best in the classroom when they cannot expect the same from their teacher. To correct the academic deficiencies of our students, it is essential to first take stock of the quality of our teachers and understand why the system is losing so many.

When seeking medical treatment, the expectation is that the provider will have years of education and experience in the medical field that will prepare them to provide care. Similarly, when looking for legal advice, the expectation is that the lawyer will also have years of education and practice in studying the law. Areas like medicine and law require highly skilled professionals to practice because they are important sectors of society. However, the question remains why in another vital field like the education of future generations, American society has accepted minimum standards and treated these practitioners as second-class professionals. The United States has run a consistent deficit of qualified teachers in the public K-12 education system for the past decade, and the problem is only projected to worsen.

It is important to consider the term qualified. Many states have been forced to provide emergency credentials to substandard teachers in the absence of teachers that have completed the necessary education and preparation requirements as defined by each state. Qualified teachers are retiring or leaving the field, causing a decline in school performance. It is important to consider this shortage as a rebuke from current and prospective public-school teachers, who are fed up with a culture that will not take them seriously (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Solving this shortage will require a significant shift in how teachers are treated and what is expected of them. In order to raise the standards of American public schools there must be a cultural shift in our approach to teachers. To do

this, the profession must be given the respect it deserves and there must be an operational change in the way teachers are hired. Only through this structural change will the benefits that these highly qualified teachers earn increase. This analysis will explore case studies that support this idea and delve deeper into raising teacher standards to address the shortage and improve public schools.

Background

The disparity between the respect for teachers and the monetary compensation for their services has been a cultural trend for over a century. In a 2014 *Atlantic* article titled “How to Make Teachers More Like Doctors,” attorney Dmitri Mehlhorn contrasts the evolution of the modern school system with the hospital system. This article describes how the medicine and education fields throughout the mid-1800s were both hardly legitimate practices and “hospitals and schools...seemed to offer little more than religious comfort, [as] poor children remained poor after attending school, and sick patients generally stayed sick or got worse after visiting hospitals” (Mehlhorn, 2014). Mehlhorn then examined the divergence of evolution for these two fields and how medicine was legitimized by raising standards and holding medical professionals accountable through malpractice law. Meanwhile, the field of education with the introduction of compulsory schooling and the development of the “factory model” of education, driven by ringing bells and a series of lectures only contributed to a decline in standards (Mehlhorn, 2014). With the introduction of compulsory, government-run education, the incentives for teachers to innovate and introduce better practices have declined each decade since, leading to a deficit of quality teachers.

Much of the work around teacher quality and school performance coincides with the research done on teachers’ unions. Teachers’ unions became prominent in the early 1900s and were established largely to negotiate better salaries and to provide equal rights for women who filled the majority of teacher roles (Gershon, 2016). Since then, teachers’ unions have gained significant influence on policy and protect teachers fervently against policies from school administrators that they do not collectively agree with and support. Eric Hanushek, an economist for the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, argued that “[teachers’] unions continue not to represent the vast numbers of highly effective teachers, but instead to lump them in with the ineffective teachers” (Hanushek, 2011). In other words, teachers’ unions have become so powerful in protecting teachers from potentially discriminatory policies that they often put the teacher’s needs before the needs of the students. This is especially prevalent when considering how most states offer teacher tenure after 2-5 years of working in the public school system (Will, 2016). With this near guarantee of tenure, there are

few mechanisms that policymakers can use to remove teachers who consistently underperform. Though unions are not fully to blame for the decline in student success, they limit the innovation and market-led behavior necessary to adapt to student needs.

The impact of unions was explored more deeply in *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way* by Amanda Ripley, who compared teachers' unions and teacher effectiveness in a variety of countries. The explicit juxtaposition she discussed was the contrast between American and Finnish teachers. Ripley described how both countries have teachers' unions that vehemently defend their teachers but how, in Finland, there is an expectation that the teacher is highly qualified and has earned those rights of protection under their union. Meanwhile, in the U.S., teachers are trained at far less selective institutions and are expected to pass a set of much less challenging standardized tests. Therefore, the unions exist more to shield teachers from scrutiny when they inevitably underperform through little fault of their own (Ripley, 2013, p.84-85). This is further explored by Marc Tucker, who was the former President and CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy. Tucker argued that the United States ought to follow the strategy of other developed countries whose students perform much better on international tests, like the PISA. His research concluded that teacher quality reflects student performance and that the U.S. needs to take action. They can address the problem by raising standards for teachers, making the profession more selective like the medical field, and properly compensate teachers who can meet these new standards (Tucker, 2011).

Analyzing the Current Policy and Context

Before pursuing potential policy changes to improve the quality of U.S. teachers, it is important to first examine the status quo and the political arena in that any educational reforms will need to navigate. The American public education system is vast and varies widely from one state to the next. Therefore, to capture the complexity of this system, the analysis will use broad terms to describe the current policy around qualifying teachers. It will also use case studies from states like Connecticut and Rhode Island, which have undergone change in their teacher standards and rank similarly to how the U.S. ranks on international PISA scoring.

I. Current Policy

Over the past two decades, states have used a range of approaches to improve the quality of their teacher workforce. Some states like Connecticut and Rhode Island have increased their teacher preparation and certification

requirements to improve quality. Other states like California and New Jersey have promoted alternative pathways to teacher certification to attract more people to teaching. Of these two, one approach emphasizes the quality of teachers, while the latter encourages a greater quantity of teachers to meet the necessary quota (Boyd et al., 2007). Overall, the approach to improving teacher quality has been mixed and there are no collective standards to prepare and certify teachers. This is in part due to the consistent shortages of public-school teachers across the United States. Experts argue this makes it more difficult to build a solid reputation and foundation to legitimize teaching, which feeds the shortage (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). It is projected that by 2025, the U.S. will have a shortage of nearly 200,000 qualified educators, based on the diminishing number of newly credentialed teachers and the increasing student population (Figure 1).

U.S. Teacher Shortage Projections

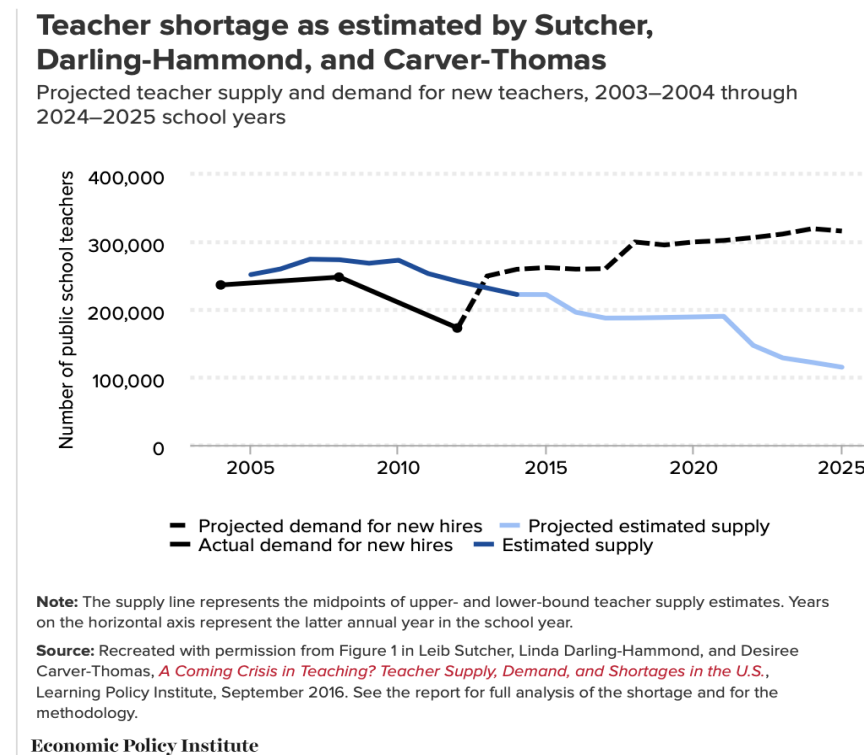


Figure 1: Projected teacher shortages from present to 2025 based on expected supply and demand (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Because of these persistent shortages the federal government, as well as state counterparts, have focused on the standards for students and holding schools

accountable through standardized testing rather than considering the teachers who are responsible for student success.

To some extent, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) did offer strict scrutiny of how teachers are qualified, yet implementation fell short and no real change resulted. NCLB recommended two contradicting policy goals: first, to ensure that every teacher is highly qualified in the subjects they teach. Second, to reduce the barriers to becoming a teacher by ‘retooling’ traditional teacher preparation programs and opening alternative routes into the profession (Smith, 2008). These two objectives of NCLB are contradictory because the first seeks to make sure that all teachers are professionally certified in a particular subject area, while the second immediately lowers the standards of those certifications by providing alternative pathways to teach. Alternative pathways that allow prospective teachers to bypass crucial training programs in exchange for expediency in qualification. The strategy of this legislation only contributed to a decline in teacher quality because schools were more focused on meeting federal government standards to receive funding. The federal intervention exposed deficiencies in teacher quality, especially across low-income communities. But, as Ripley noted, “rendering problems visible did not guarantee they would be fixed, as thousands of U.S. school districts had proven under the testing mandates of NCLB” (Ripley, 2013, p. 132). As a result, states were forced to react and some mirrored their teacher qualification process with high-scoring PISA countries.

For example, the state of Connecticut was able to combine changes in teacher certification requirements with significant increases in teacher salaries. This led to political buy-in from important stakeholders, including teachers’ unions, teachers themselves, and community members who were willing to divert tax funds with the promise of more qualified educators. Connecticut recognized the deficiency in teacher standards long before the enactment of No Child Left Behind and sought to address these issues within its own state. The Education Enhancement Act of 1986, which was passed by the Connecticut General Assembly led to a significant increase in teacher salaries. This act and companion legislation served as the framework for advancing the quality of Connecticut’s teachers and established the political environment necessary to make this happen. Scholars observing this case study point out that the method of combining sharp increases in salaries with changes in certification requirements, allowed Connecticut state leaders to enlist support among teachers and teachers’ union leaders for more rigorous requirements (Youngs & Bell, 2009, p. 441). This is the formula that policymakers will need to create to raise teacher quality in any substantial way. Although Connecticut was able to reach this partly because of its nimble nature as a small state, given proper negotiation with key stakeholders, this could be replicated on a much larger scale.

II. The Policy Environment and Important Political Actors

As was the case for Connecticut, any effort to improve teacher quality and student performance will be operating in a complex environment of political actors who will need to be appeased for the initiative to be successful. Although it may appear to be the most comprehensive way to improve teacher quality in the U.S., any legislation that is enacted by the federal government is unlikely to be successful. As demonstrated through legislation, like No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the federal government mandates that do not allow for autonomy and interpretation at the local level rarely succeed in making substantial positive change. Therefore, the most politically feasible strategy with the highest rate of success is to use a model at the state level that is adaptable to each state's needs. It is also important to note that policy changes must be made gradual, to give time for teacher preparation programs to work on raising their standards to the new certification requirements expected of teachers. Otherwise, prospective teachers and current teachers alike will be deterred from staying in the profession, and instead of raising standards, they will be driven into other fields (Fisch, 2009, p. 144).

In addition to considering the policy environment and method of approach, it is also important to consider the stakeholders involved in legitimizing the policy change. The most significant political actors that will need to support any successful policy change are the teachers' unions. Due to the collective bargaining laws of most states, teachers' unions possess significant power through their political participation which gives them unrivaled influence over the laws and regulations imposed on public education (Moe, 2011). Therefore, any policy initiative will need to be backed by them to be successful on a large scale. In theory, a policy that raises standards but also raises salaries for teachers will fit the needs of most teachers' unions, as one of their main priorities is to increase teacher wages and benefits. Unfortunately, unions often bargain for teacher compensation schemes that are based solely on seniority and educational attainment, rather than on student outcomes, so there will need to be an evaluation process in place for existing teachers through performance reviews that determine if teachers qualify for increased wages (Baron, 2018). Teachers' unions continue to be the biggest challenge for administrative change in public schools. It will be vital to work with these institutions and gain their support when attempting to improve teacher quality.

Policy Alternatives

The best policy alternative to ensure that teachers are well-prepared and well-qualified to teach in public schools will need to follow several essential criteria.

The criteria are as follows: (1) Impact on equity: the alternative must work to raise the bar for all teachers and give them an equitable chance to succeed regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or other marginalized demographics. (2) Impact on efficiency: the alternative must raise credentials for teachers in an efficient manner while increasing compensation at the same pace. If there is to be a cultural shift in how teachers are treated, then these two mechanisms must work in tandem. (3) Strong financial responsibility: the alternative must strike a balance between compensating highly-skilled teachers properly and efficiently using taxpayer dollars. (4) Political feasibility: the alternative must satisfy the involved political actors and their interests.

A. Raising Teacher Pay

The first policy alternative looks at teacher compensation. It assumes that increasing teacher pay will incentivize teachers to perform better. This policy attracts prospective teachers to public schools yet it falls short of providing any mechanisms that will raise teacher expectations. States that use this specific policy continue to run a deficit of qualified teachers that meet minimum certification requirements. This is because this alternative provides salaries that are competitive compared to other jobs with a similar skill level to make up for the increasing pay gap over the past two decades (Garcia & Weiss, 2019, pg. 13). Unfortunately, this pay-increase serves as a band-aid on the issue of declining teacher quality and it does more to attract poorly skilled teachers that serve with emergency credentials than it does to raise teacher quality.

A broad pay increase across all districts would not only be inefficient but many teachers would consider it inequitable. School districts vary greatly in the academic level of their students which leads to differences in teacher efforts. This is the case within any given school. Each teacher is given a classroom of students with diverse circumstances. Therefore, providing a blanket pay increase for all teachers may not necessarily reflect how much work each teacher puts into their job (Barshay, 2019). Additionally, simply raising teacher pay does not meet the financial responsibility and political feasibility criteria. Taxpayers are unlikely to support pay raises for teachers without any measurable improvement in student performance. Though pay increases will appease teachers' unions, they are not the only stakeholders involved in this policy action. It will be necessary to show voters that the state is managing taxpayer dollars appropriately by not solely raising salaries but also holding teachers accountable for improving their students' performance. With "several recent randomized controlled trials suggest[ing] that linking teacher pay to their student's academic performance does little to raise student achievement," it is unlikely that voters will be willing to spend tax dollars

on raising salaries without measurable results (Imberman & Lovenheim, 2015, p.364).

B. Raising Teacher Expectations

The next policy alternative focuses less on the pay and more on improving standards unilaterally. In this scenario, state Departments of Education would enforce stricter standards for teacher certification in their state. This strategy was used particularly around the turn of the century in the early 2000s, when the federal government pushed for education reforms that required all U.S. states to set minimum standards to receive teacher certification (Angrist & Guryan, 2008). The policymakers who pushed for this reform had some level of equity in mind by ensuring that all teachers had a baseline education to teach children. However, they failed to see the potential economic disparities that these tests would bring on marginalized communities with typically lower incomes. Though this meets the efficiency criteria by ensuring that all public-school teachers pass a test of minimal qualifications, it does not increase the effectiveness of teacher preparation schools and programs. The policy attempts to mimic tests like the legal bar exam or the medical board exams by setting a minimum standard. Contrastingly, the teacher certification exams vary in difficulty greatly from state to state. There is also no incentive to pass teacher certification tests on the first try or repeatedly throughout one's career. Further research has also indicated that raising teacher pay does little to increase hiring selectiveness (Frey, 1998).

This point is particularly important to the financial responsibility test of the alternative policy. This approach is unsatisfactory due to its inability to raise quality standards at all phases of the certification process. Raising wages slightly while simultaneously increasing standard certifications is an ineffective way to spend taxpayer dollars. This also indicates a likelihood that the policy would be unpopular politically over time when there is little change in the quality of teachers. The rise in standards without a pay increase tends to lead to greater shortages in supply, as prospective teachers are deterred from entering the field due to rising costs and diminishing returns (Angrist & Guryan, 2008). Although certification requirements should increase at the administrative level, this appears to be a reactive approach to a growing problem of decreasing teacher quality. The strategy does hold applicants responsible for meeting a certain standard but it does not consider the process of getting there. This policy approach fails to invoke the cultural shift necessary to legitimize the role of teaching in society and thus is not the best alternative.

Policy Recommendation

I. Raising the Bar and Raising the Pay

Based on the analysis of these potential policy alternatives, the recommended policy to best improve the quality of teachers is a combination of both alternatives. State governments will need to increase the qualifications for becoming a teacher to a common standard while also increasing pay. The purpose of this strategy is to shift the cultural perception of teachers and ensure that they have the necessary skills and salaries.

II. Supportive Evidence

To achieve this goal it is important to look at countries that have already succeeded. The gold standard is Finland, which is known for improving teacher quality. In Finland, becoming a teacher in a public school is similar in prestige to a MD or JD. One way that the Finnish have attained this is by setting the minimum requirement of a master's degree for all teachers in compulsory education before they begin teaching, which naturally increases expectations for a well-qualified teacher (Malinen et al., 2012, p. 581). In the U.S., most public-school teachers are required to obtain a master's degree but only after they have already been certified and begun teaching. In some cases, these requirements are postponed or waived entirely as districts hastily attempt to remedy sustained teacher shortages. Therefore, this policy alternative will require holding teachers accountable at every stage of the process. This happens not only by being selective in who becomes a teacher but also by being selective in who can even begin the process of becoming a teacher. In Finland, only 1 in 10 applicants to teacher education institutions is accepted and they recruit from the top 20 percent of high school graduates (Tucker, 2011, p. 42). This sifts out any potential applicants who may only be pursuing teaching for perceived job security.

When shifting policy in this way, it will be equally important to properly compensate teachers for this increase in expected quality. The reason Finland is so successful in maintaining high-quality teachers is that its teachers are given higher compensation and more autonomy. Instead of using punitive accountability measures, Finland incentivizes teachers to innovate by continuously rewarding them for improving outcomes (Tucker, 2011, p. 46). Once teachers obtain higher qualifications there is a greater opportunity for them to serve as policy agents who shape the academic expertise of the country's future generations. For instance, in Finland, teachers are expected to be bilingual to reflect the needs of their students who are often Finnish and Swedish. In 2016, the Finnish government rolled out a new core curriculum with seven new principles of learning. One of these was

cultural diversity and language awareness, which aims to support each students' linguistic and cultural identity and the development of their first language (Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018, p. 431). Studies found that the government was able to introduce this seamlessly because public school teachers were already prepared with the knowledge of multilingualism and the government was able to give teachers the autonomy to fulfill this core curriculum because they had a trusting relationship (Ripley, 2013, p.52). It is this trusting relationship and shifts in the social perception of teachers that make it possible for this policy recommendation to meet the required criteria.

This policy alternative is most able to attain a high level of equity because obtaining credentials is a test of academic integrity and passion for the field. In Finland, all public schools are selective. The benefit to this is that once an applicant passes the exam, the cost of their teacher training is covered by the state. In addition to this, they are well compensated for completing the requirements once they are in the profession (Ripley, 2013, pp. 84-89). This system is not only more equitable for minorities and other marginalized groups who typically have more barriers to entry into the teaching field, but it is also the most efficient way to create quality teachers. If teachers are selected from highly competitive programs from the start, then they are much more likely to succeed in improving student performance once they are practicing their craft. This efficiency expectation also meets the requirement of financial responsibility. The state will be able to quantify how their allocation of resources to better prepare teachers leads to a superior quality of teachers overall. The final criteria of political feasibility will be discussed in the considerations of policy implementation.

Policy Implementation

For this policy option to be politically feasible, policymakers will need to strike a careful balance between administrative implementation and gaining support from important stakeholders. Regarding the administrative piece of implementation, policymakers can do a lot to raise the standards of teachers not simply by increasing certification requirements. This can also be achieved by evaluating and determining if state-funded teacher preparation programs are adequate to reach these new standards. In Finland, the government shutdown smaller schools and moved teacher preparation into more respected universities (Ripley, 2013, p. 89). In the US, it may not be as easy for state and federal governments to shutter teacher programs based on their size because there are more private universities than Finland. However, what can be done at the administrative level to raise the quality of teacher preparation programs is to base the accreditation of these smaller schools on their ability to meet certain standards

and produce quality prospective teachers. Additionally, the state and federal governments could withhold funding to universities that fail to meet accreditation requirements. This would lead to a natural elimination process of schools that do not meet necessary standards.

This unilateral strategy of state governments raising standards is modeled in the case of Rhode Island in 2009. Deborah Gist, the education commissioner for Rhode Island at the time, made it one of her first acts to require teachers to score significantly higher on the SAT, ACT, and the Praxis (Ripley, 2013, p. 91). Because of this policy, Gist was able to make it more competitive to become a teacher and, in turn, more attractive to become one as well. This must be the strategy of state government officials across the board. It shows a commitment rather than a simple desire to raise teacher quality. This commitment has proven highly effective at providing a healthy supply of quality teachers in Finland and countries with similar models. Because of this, their students perform exceptionally well at an international level. The high caliber student performance gains public support, which allows for states to raise salaries more easily for teachers and provide them with the autonomy necessary for continued performance growth.

This holds as a similar trend in the aforementioned Connecticut case where the state government introduced incentive grants that were designed to encourage school districts to gradually raise salaries (Moran, 2022). The Connecticut state programs that inspired this change are outlined in Figure 2. The programs implemented a multifaceted approach that involved improving teacher education programs and worked with school districts and unions to make sure the qualified teachers were properly compensated.

Connecticut Policies Related to Teacher Credentialing

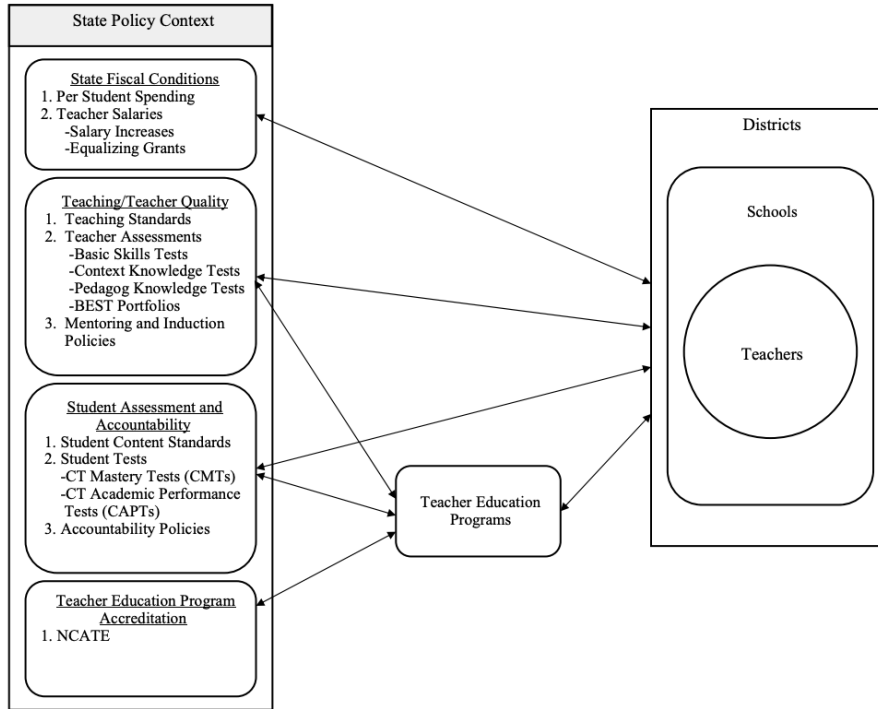


Figure 2: Connecticut policies concerning teacher education programs, districts, schools, and teachers (Youngs & Bell, 2009).

Because the state had political buy-in from union leaders, politicians, and voters, the government was able to raise salaries substantially and provide more rigorous requirements for certification. This was all possible because the Connecticut state government has made a significant commitment to improving the performance of its teachers and students. This political will and cooperative strategy are the best ways to make the recommendation politically feasible. If all states intend to make the cultural shift of improving teacher status, they will need to adopt similar tactics.

Conclusion

As the United States continues to fall behind in student test scores internationally and suffers vast shortages of teachers domestically, it is apparent that the public-school teaching system needs a serious adjustment. All previous attempts to make this adjustment and improve teacher quality have fallen short in their efforts for several reasons. These include punitive measures against teachers, poor

cooperation among stakeholders, and inability to hold teachers accountable, among others. Overall, strategies to improve teacher quality have been through top-down efforts that are disconnected from the interests of each state. These failed attempts have pushed the situation to a crisis. Existing and prospective teachers alike are deterred from the field, causing mass shortages across the country. State governments must act now to raise standards for teachers, while also properly compensating them. Teachers are making a mass exodus and instead of governments searching for solutions in emergency credentialing and sign-on bonuses, they need to reflect on the root causes of the problem. Only through more selective qualification processes and proper rewards will the U.S. be able to address its problems of poor performance and supply of teachers. It is respect for teachers that solves the issue of teacher shortages in the long term. They will indisputably be entitled to the benefits reserved for highly-skilled workers. If any country wishes to improve the scores of its students, it must first improve the quality of its teachers.

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