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CHALLENGE

The Elusive Talent Strategy

An Excellent Teacher
for Every Student in Every School

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The Elusive Talent Strategy: An Excellent Teacher for Every Student in Every School

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CHALLENGE PAPER

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“The quality of our nation's teacher corps will largely determine the success or failure of our public education systems and affect the future of our democracy for years to come. If we really want to continue to improve student achievement we have no choice but to improve teaching.”

*Vartan Gregorian
President
Carnegie Corporation of New York*

Look at what most legislatures have done over the past decade to improve education, and you'll see bills to reduce class size, provide more funding, offer after-school opportunities and make schools safer. Unfortunately, few efforts have been aimed at a talent strategy that would provide all students with excellent teachers. While the reform *du jour* changes, and expenditures in education keep growing, our students fall further behind their international peers, and the achievement gap between black and white students and between disadvantaged and affluent students persists.¹ This is not a coincidence. In education, just as in every other industry, outcomes rise or fall primarily on the performance of employees. In schools, that means that teachers have a greater impact on student learning than anyone or anything else. And for this country, it means that all those reforms and all that money have little chance of success without a strategy to ensure that every student is taught by an excellent teacher. The lack of well-prepared, high-performing teachers, especially in high-poverty areas, is now recognized as the root cause of our lagging national performance and recalcitrant achievement gaps, and the only way to reverse the decline is to strategically recruit and prepare, develop and manage teachers and principals so that a high-performing teacher is in every one of our classrooms.

Fortunately, gaps can be closed. Research shows that having a strong teacher for three to four years in a row can bring disadvantaged students up to the level of white or affluent students, closing the achievement gap that has widened over the past decades.² While as recently as 2008, few districts were engaged in a system-wide strategy to get effective teachers into all schools, by 2010 the federal government had dubbed getting great teachers, especially in high-need schools, "absolute priority #1," prompting a groundswell of efforts by states and school districts to take action. The public agrees: A 2010 poll found that "Americans believe the most important national education program should be improving the quality of teaching."³

But is it possible, especially in dire financial times, to do anything to enhance the quality of our teacher workforce? Some 60 to 80 percent of annual public-

school budgets goes toward staff, for a total of more than \$350 billion. Even with potential cuts, \$350 billion is a lot of money with which to make strategic and creative choices to enhance the teacher and principal workforce to improve student achievement.

For America's students to gain the skills and knowledge they need to participate in both the global economy and our increasingly complex democracy—and for the nation to regain its competitive edge—an effective teacher is needed in every classroom in every school. Change on this scale is daunting: At nearly four million strong, teachers comprise the largest profession in the country. Doing this requires a whole new way of managing the people side of the education system,⁴ what many reformers have termed the strategic management of human capital. The process includes hiring people with the greatest potential, developing them throughout their careers, accurately assessing teacher performance and using that information as one part of an evaluation system that both rewards top performers with financial gains and opportunities for greater impact and removes the least effective teachers from the classroom. All of these together are necessary to truly provide an effective teacher for every student. Meeting this goal would go a long way toward meeting the nation's critical need for school reform.

Why Can't U.S. Students Compete?

The current demand for education reform is in part the country's response to shifting world trends. The economic recession has awakened political leaders and concerned citizens to two facts: (1) the U.S. economy is inextricably linked to global markets and (2) technological change has made educational attainment the direct driver of income mobility. In 2002 economists estimated that half of all job openings created by 2014 would require postsecondary education; now, they predict that by 2018 it will be almost two-thirds.⁵ These numbers reflect a complete reversal of the U.S. labor market in less than 50 years. In the post-

World-War-II era, a high school diploma could prepare a worker to be a successful participant in what was then a U.S. economy with a vibrant industrial sector, and as recently as the 1970s, nearly a third of the job market was open to dropouts—about three times the proportion available today. With huge numbers of jobs lost to technology and outsourcing, not to mention the recession, and with fields such as health, education, science and technology all requiring postsecondary education, fewer than half of U.S. high school graduates are currently able to earn a middle-class salary. Fully seven out of ten workers are in jobs for which there is low demand or oversupply, or both. In a world where technology dominates most workplaces and critical-thinking skills are a must, at least some education beyond the level of high school graduation is becoming increasingly necessary to get and keep a job.

Hence, the inability of U.S. schools to produce college-ready students has become a source of deep concern, not least because this failure signifies a grave competitive disadvantage in the global economy. The low rate of college degree completion in the United States is a mounting problem, and the future of the economy depends on solving it. Today only 70 percent of U.S. students graduate from high school in four years, and in low-income communities the average is closer to 50 percent. Of those who go on to college, many are unprepared: Forty percent require remediation, and 46 percent fail to graduate in six years.⁶ For the percentage of college graduates to increase, the number of high school graduates must first increase and the bar must be raised in terms of what high school graduation demands, significantly increasing the skills and knowledge required for a diploma.

Breaking Down the Challenge

The history of school reform demonstrates that success depends on a multifaceted approach. For years, Carnegie Corporation has invested heavily in an array of organizations attacking the nation's education problems

in complementary ways. This effort received a seismic boost when, in 2009, the U.S. Education Department took an unprecedented step, challenging states to vie for multimillion-dollar federal grants in an all-out attempt to regain the country's competitive edge. This "Race to the Top" focused the country on four priority areas: excellent teachers and principals (the most heavily weighted "priority #1"); data (specifically data that connects teachers to students and holds teachers accountable for student outcomes); standards and assessments; and turning around the lowest-performing schools.

As education leaders see it, this competition could result in the country once again achieving the highest college-graduation rate in the world, meeting the federal government's goal of 60 percent of young adults earning an associate or baccalaureate degree by 2020. Success on such a scale demands a strategy that is able to:

- Prepare teachers better, hire the best, and incentivize them to work where they are needed most;
- Support teachers so they can succeed, and develop them throughout their careers so that they, and their students, keep improving;
- Use data to accurately assess and evaluate teacher performance; and
- Retain the best teachers and, when necessary, fire the worst.

Talent Born and Bred: The Challenge of Recruitment, Preparation and Placement

The first requirement for improving teacher quality is simply to train teachers better. Many first-year teachers report that their preparation programs failed to provide them with the skills and practical experiences required to improve student achievement in high-need schools.⁷ The data bear this out: Most teachers improve significantly over the first three to five years of their career. Given that a third of new teachers leave the profession within three years, with half leaving by the end of the fifth year,

this means that many of our students are never taught by teachers at their peak performance. There is a growing consensus that the problem stems from teachers spending too much time learning theory in the university and not enough time learning practice in the classrooms where they'll eventually work. A number of ambitious programs are attempting to correct this imbalance.

Urban teacher residencies modeled after innovative programs in Boston (the Boston Teacher Residency) and Chicago (the Academy for Urban School Leadership) are one promising approach. In effect, residencies are apprenticeship programs for teachers that offer an intensive in-classroom experience alongside a mentor teacher, supplemented by academic coursework. While traditional university-based programs are weighted heavily toward that academic coursework, residencies flip the equation, with the bulk of training occurring in the K-12 classroom setting. The hypothesis is that teachers trained in the classrooms where they will eventually work, and with the students they will eventually teach, walk into school prepared to excel, and their students' performance reflects this preparation, though the jury is out on whether residencies can produce a level of results to justify their cost.

At the opposite end of the preparation spectrum is alternative teacher certification, which allows teachers to begin their careers while still in the process of getting their teaching certification. While on balance these programs fare no better than traditional teacher training, the average hides great discrepancies, with a few standouts including Teach For America and The New Teacher Project consistently producing teachers who outperform not only other first-year teachers but veterans as well, proving that both better selection and better training are possible, and putting the lie to the idea that great teachers must be born, not bred.

Even as these programs grow aggressively, they can meet only a fraction of the country's demand for teachers. Most classroom teachers still come out of schools of education, and it will take a wholesale change in how these institutions operate to really improve teacher

preparation. A past Carnegie Corporation initiative, Teachers for a New Era, aimed to hold teaching colleges accountable for their graduates' results in the classroom. Despite this groundbreaking effort and some degree of change, which has accelerated in the past year, guarantees of teacher effectiveness remain elusive. Universities and other teacher training institutions generally resist being held accountable for how their graduates perform, citing the technical difficulty of data gathering and other more philosophical concerns about being held responsible for what occurs in classrooms long after graduates have left their halls.⁸ But unless schools of education can prove that the students their graduates teach are actually successful, they cannot claim to have an answer to what makes a good teacher.

Fortunately, many school systems, pushed by federal initiatives like Race to the Top, are placing newfound emphasis on data systems that can trace teachers from training through their careers. At the same time several teacher-preparation programs do hold themselves accountable for the performance of their teacher-graduates, and a major foundation initiative requires such guarantees of effectiveness.⁹ These cutting-edge efforts are transforming teacher education in the ways that all good businesses do: by creating a culture of accountability and letting innovation flourish. Adding to these improvements, selecting stronger applicants is another needed reform. The most successful teacher-training models are selecting candidates from a highly selective pool.¹⁰ A McKinsey report found that outside the United States, the top-performing school systems recruit 100 percent of teachers from the top third of graduates.¹¹ In the United States, the comparable figure is 23 percent, with only 14 percent of top-tier graduates found in high-need schools.

Implementing fairly simple management changes is an additional way to improve the applicant pool. Most struggling urban districts and their toughest schools have faced chronic teacher shortages for years. Each September, in a large number of classrooms, too many students arrive on the first day of school only to be met by one in a series

of less-than-stellar substitute teachers. Educators and the public long believed that the staffing problem was inevitable, but in New York City, for example, district leaders saw it differently. What they learned was that there were plenty of good applicants for these positions. The problem was that school budgets didn't get to principals until midsummer, and class registers weren't finalized until then, making it impossible for principals to hire teachers until the end of summer. By then, the best candidates, even those who wanted to work in New York City, had likely taken a job elsewhere. By finalizing the budgets sooner and learning to make better predictions about the number of students in a school, principals were able to do their hiring earlier. The year these changes were implemented, schools opened with no shortage of teachers for kindergarten through sixth grade. Granted, it wasn't an easy fix, but because dedicated people were determined to solve the problem, they got it done. It's called good management.

Helping Teachers Improve

A popular assumption persists that teaching talent is inborn and therefore can't be taught. But this notion flies in the face of experience in almost any other industry or profession. Providing support is both necessary and fiscally prudent. A recent study by the think tank Public Impact found that simply hiring and firing does not yield sufficient teaching talent. Teachers cite lack of support as their number one reason for leaving, and they leave in droves, a third within three years and half by the end of five, with turnover highest in high-minority, low-income public schools. Beyond the impact on students, turnover costs approximately \$7 billion a year, which even in less lean times is an unsustainable expense.

No new teacher walks into the classroom with a full set of classroom and instructional skills. Obviously, giving new teachers the support they need and cultivating their talent is critical to transforming public schools. But is it possible? An experience of Harvard economist Roland Fryer is instructive. He tested whether students in

high-need schools could be incentivized to score higher if they were paid for getting A's. As a control, he offered to pay another set of students for reading books, which Fryer hypothesized would correlate positively to student achievement, just less so than paying directly for grades. To his surprise, the students who were paid to read books outperformed the other students. All the students wanted to do better to get the prizes, but the group being paid just for higher test scores didn't know how to get there. The same seems to apply to teachers. Many want to do better, and can; they just don't know how.

From its own exploration of effective teaching methods, the design firm IDEO concluded, "In addition to the talents, beliefs and determination they bring to the job, teachers' success also depends on their individual experience in the system."¹² The person with the most impact on that individual experience is the principal, who is best-positioned to attract, improve and retain the strongest staff. The National Bureau of Economic Research substantiated this school-level approach, finding that the more effective a teacher's colleagues, the more effective she or he is, and that such "spillovers," as they called them, tended to benefit less-experienced teachers most.¹³ Evidence like this confirms that ongoing, data-based, on-the-job professional development is as critical in school reform as it is anywhere else. Boosting results requires accurately capturing what students have and haven't learned, communicating those outcomes to teachers in a timely way and providing teachers with the skills and knowledge to improve the specific teaching methods they use with those students.¹⁴

Data Drives Accountability: New Evaluation and Support Systems That Improve Teaching

A key measure of effectiveness for a teacher or school is whether students have learned, as measured in significant part by data from student assessments. Standardized testing reveals differences in student outcomes indicating that, over time, good teachers move their students steadily ahead, while poor teachers let them fall further behind.

Yet many teacher evaluation systems continue to ignore variations in actual performance, giving virtually all teachers positive ratings despite the fact that teachers and principals both admit poor performance is common. This practice of treating all teachers identically has been termed the “Widget Effect” by The New Teacher Project,¹⁵ a Corporation-supported nonprofit dedicated to ending educational injustice. According to its report, this practice is largely to blame for the fact that “excellence goes unrecognized, poor performance goes unaddressed and a teacher’s instructional effectiveness almost never factors into critical decisions such as how teachers are hired, developed or retained.”

The nation’s schools won’t be able to build a thriving teacher workforce capable of closing the achievement gap until a teacher’s effectiveness is accurately measured and accounted for in human-capital decisions like tenure, promotion and firing. It’s time for education policy to shift away from one-size-fits-all HR processes and move toward accurately identifying teachers’ strengths and weaknesses and using that information to properly evaluate and develop them. What’s needed is a system that:

- captures teacher and student data and uses it to make decisions from support and compensation, to tenure, promotion and firing;
- uses data to create personalized professional development aligned to individual teacher needs;
- trains administrators on how to conduct high-quality evaluations;
- provides teacher-leadership opportunities for the most effective teachers;
- creates new ways to expand the reach of the most effective teachers¹⁶; and
- offers other incentives that reward the most effective teachers, especially those who make a long-term commitment to teaching a high-need subject or turning around a failing school.

Taken together, these innovations are the building blocks of a comprehensive, performance-based evaluation

system able to differentiate between more and less effective teachers and inform key decisions affecting assignments, tenure, career advancement and retention.

A valid evaluation system would guarantee that skills, abilities and performance are accurately and credibly assessed. When a performance-based evaluation system informs teacher salaries, those who have been able to spur more gains in student learning would receive bonuses reflecting their performance. The same would be true for principals, who bear the ultimate responsibility for implementing the school-wide reforms that result in significant student growth. Figuring out how to structure, develop and implement new teacher and principal compensation strategies has caused a good deal of heated debate, with the national teachers unions opposing putting student learning gains (as measured by standardized tests) at the center of new teacher evaluations. One good sign is that the American Federation of Teachers has indicated some willingness for such performance-based evaluations to factor into pay and retention decisions.¹⁷

While refinements are made that more accurately gauge teacher effectiveness, it’s important to keep the quest for a perfect measure from becoming the enemy of a good one. We need to fix the airplane while it’s in flight, as former New York City Chancellor Joel Klein liked to say.

At the same time, data can be more than an accountability tool. Designing these systems, often from scratch, presents an enormous opportunity to gear them to teacher support as well as assessment. Used wisely, evaluation systems can lead to improved student outcomes in real time instead of after the fact. This type of application requires schools to help teachers translate the student data into specific, actionable plans for improved instruction. Ideally, this timely use of data can help crack the code, making teaching easier and ultimately more rewarding.

Letting Go

School systems are notoriously bad at differentiating talent, to the point where, nationwide, less than one

percent of teachers are dismissed for incompetence. But no system can improve without some means of exit at the bottom, both to move out low-performers and to make room for new talent. It's a necessary if difficult part of the total picture. President Obama didn't mince words summing up his administration's thoughts on managing teacher talent in a speech in summer 2010: "I want teachers to have higher salaries. I want them to have more support. I want them to be trained like the professionals they are—with rigorous residencies like the ones doctors go through. I want to give them career ladders so they have opportunities to advance, and earn real financial security. I want them to have a fulfilling and supportive workplace environment, and the resources—from basic supplies to reasonable class sizes—to help them succeed...All I'm asking in return—as a president, and as a parent—is a measure of accountability. Surely we can agree that even as we applaud teachers for their hard work, we need to make sure they're delivering results in the classroom. If they're not, let's work with them to help them be more effective. And if that fails, let's find the right teacher for that classroom. As Arne [Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education] says, 'our kids get only one chance at an education, and we need to get it right.'"

Demand for these improvements is coming from across the country, from parents to our nation's capital. Carrying them out will require changes either to state regulation or to union contracts in many districts, and considerable management change will be necessary everywhere. For a long while, significant movement in this critical area of human capital management seemed unlikely. However, a combination of pressure and incentives from federal, state and local governments has resulted in significant strides being made. In a January 2010 speech, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), signaled a shift when she stated that the union would "lead the way in developing a fair, efficient protocol for adjudicating questions of teacher discipline and when called for, teacher removal."¹⁸ Later that same year

the AFT announced plans to use a \$5 million federal grant from the Invest in Innovation fund to work with ten districts in New York and Rhode Island to implement comprehensive, performance-based teacher development and evaluation systems.

Leaders of school districts across the nation have also stepped up efforts to develop proof-points confirming that, thorny as the issue may be, performance-based evaluation can be constructively addressed. In creating its first union-charter contract, Chicago took a cue from Green Dot Public Schools, a Los Angeles network of unionized charter schools, by negotiating what is known as a "thin contract" that does not specify details such as work hours but does spell out exactly how teachers should be evaluated. In summer 2010, another flexible contract was ratified in New Haven, Connecticut, that focused on mechanisms for teacher development, evaluation and performance pay. These are early signs of what many education leaders hope is a growing trend.

Looking Toward What Works

The challenge of reinventing how we develop and manage our teacher workforce comes at a moment of great opportunity. Roughly half the current teacher workforce will be eligible for retirement in the next ten years, marking a significant shift in the makeup of the teaching workforce. One way to make the most of this opportunity is to look toward the world's highest-performing school systems, many of which worked their way to the top by focusing on talent in education.

Education systems in top-performing Finland, Singapore and South Korea, unlike those in the United States, are organized around recruiting, developing and retaining the best and brightest teachers—a talent strategy that aims at bringing only the top third of college graduates on board. In these countries teacher training is more akin to medical training, meaning that it is highly rigorous, selective and, in some cases, heavily subsidized.

Additionally, schools are equipped with the tools to both support teachers and enable them to innovate; there are robust opportunities for development within the profession, as well as rigorous performance-management systems; and compensation is competitive and often tied to performance. Integrating these components into the U.S. system would “make teaching attractive enough to draw many more top-third graduates, [more than double the current figures], into the profession, and to high-need schools in particular,” according to the McKinsey report referenced earlier.

Education in the United States is still a far cry from its international competitors. Transforming the life chances of all students to allow them to become full participants in democracy and legitimate competitors in the world economy depends on this country’s ability to reinvent the way teachers are recruited, developed, retained and rewarded. To assure student success there must be an effective teacher in every classroom for every student. There’s more evidence than ever showing how this can be achieved, and more pressure than ever to get it done. The moment to meet the human-capital challenge is now.

Endnotes

1. American 15-year-olds ranked 25th out of 30th in math skills on the 2006 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development test, down from 18th out of 27 in 2000. At the same time, the U.S. ranked high in inequity, with the third largest gap in science scores between students from different socioeconomic groups. <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0812benchmarking.pdf>
2. R. Gordon, T. Kane, and D. Staiger (2006). Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance On the Job. The Hamilton Project, Discussion Paper 2006-01. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
3. http://www.pdkintl.org/newsroom/docs/2010PDKGallupPoll_PR.pdf
4. The “people side” of education reform is a term borrowed from the Carnegie Corporation- and Gates Foundation-funded Strategic Management of Human Capital Task Force report, Taking Human Capital Seriously. <http://www.smhc-cpre.org/>.
5. Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl (2010). Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2010. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
6. L. Horn (2006). Placing College Graduation Rates in Context: How 4-Year College Graduation Rates Vary with Selectivity and the Size of Low-Income Enrollment. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007161.pdf>.
7. National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality and Public Agenda (2007). Lessons Learned: New Teachers Talk about Their Jobs, Challenges and Long-Range Plans. <http://www.tqsource.org/publications/LessonsLearned1.pdf>.
8. A recent report from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, one of two national accrediting bodies for teacher education, signals that change might be afoot: The report calls for teacher education to be “turned upside down” by placing clinical practice at the center of teacher preparation and including more rigorous accountability for teacher preparation programs and school districts. Though the proof is in the pudding (see Teaching the Teachers, *Washington Post*, 11/20/2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/20/AR2010112003083.html>, questioning whether the resources and will to implement these changes exist), it bodes well that the report calls for such sweeping reforms.
9. See the Bush Foundation’s Teacher Effectiveness Initiative, http://www.bushfoundation.org/News/pdf_files/12032009_ED.pdf. The New Teacher Project is directing its philanthropic support, as well as its recent federal grant from the Investing in Innovation Fund, to not only train new teachers but to build and roll out a process that requires its teachers to prove they are effectively teaching students in order to receive certification. Similarly, the Urban Teacher Center, a Baltimore-based organization, is creating a teacher-training program that will link teachers’ certification to their students’ performance outcomes. They will begin recruiting in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore in the winter of 2010 and will be launching their graduates into classrooms for school year 2011–12.
10. See a recent *New York Times* article on TFA’s candidate pool: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/12/education/12winerip.html>.
11. Byron Auguste, Paul Kuhn, and Matt Miller (2010). Closing the Talent Gap: Attracting and Retaining Top-Third Graduates to Careers in Teaching. McKinsey & Company, http://www.mckinsey.com/clientservice/Social_Sector/our_practices/Education/Knowledge_Highlights/~/media/Reports/SSO/Closing_the_talent_gap.

- 12.** IDEO (2010). Enriching Effective Teaching.
- 13.** C. Kirabo Jackson and Elias Bruegmann (2009). Teaching students and teaching each other: The importance of peer learning for teachers. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*. 1.4: 85–108. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w15202.pdf>
- 14.** Pioneering work by organizations such as Uncommon Schools, Achievement First and Teach for America has attempted to codify what makes an effective teacher and to deliver that information to teachers in an actionable way to improve their practice. Many states and districts now require some form of early-career mentoring, and a national organization, the New Teacher Center, is working to determine the best ways to accelerate new teachers along that five-year learning curve.
- 15.** Daniel Weisberg, Susan Sexton, Jennifer Mulhern, and David Keeling (2009). The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness. This is a wide-ranging report by Carnegie Corporation grantee the New Teacher Project that studies teacher evaluation and dismissal in four states and 12 diverse districts, ranging from 4,000 to 400,000 students in enrollment. From the beginning, over 50 district and state officials and 25 teachers' union representatives actively informed the study through advisory panels in each state.
- 16.** See Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel (2010), Opportunity at the Top: How America's Best Teachers Could Close the Gaps, Raise the Bar, and Keep Our Nation Great.
- 17.** The New Teacher Project recently released Teacher Evaluation 2.0, which it describes as a “blueprint for rigorous, fair, and credible teacher evaluation systems centered on student outcomes.” <http://www.tntp.org/files/Teacher-Evaluation-Oct10F.pdf>. In a sign of the changing waters, the American Federation of Teachers described the blueprint as “much in line with the evaluation work being done by the AFT.” <http://aft.org/newspubs/press/2010/100710a.cfm>.
- 18.** http://aft.3cdn.net/227d12e668432ca48e_twm6b90k1.pdf



“Public education is unquestionably the most potent equalizing force in the nation and in many communities is a beacon of excellence. To strengthen and transform our common bonds, we must strengthen our public schools, not abandon them.”

Vartan Gregorian

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