



Giving Every Student Access to Excellent Teachers

A Vision for Focusing Federal Investments in Education

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Introduction and summary

Despite constraints on federal resources and authority in education policy, the federal government has a pivotal role to play in identifying a compelling, high-impact focal point that aligns policy priorities at the federal, state, and local levels.

A great candidate for such a focal point is expanding student access to excellent teachers. Excellent teachers—those in the top 20 percent to 25 percent of the profession in terms of student progress—produce well more than a year of student-learning growth for each year they spend instructing a cohort of students. On average, children with excellent teachers make approximately three times the progress of children who are taught by teachers in the bottom 20 percent to 25 percent.¹ Students who start behind their peers need this level of growth consistently—not just in one out of four classes—to close persistent achievement gaps. Students in the middle of the academic-achievement continuum need it to exceed average growth rates and leap ahead to meet rising global standards.

Today, even students who have good, solid teachers every year—and therefore make about a year’s worth of learning growth annually—end up where they started relative to both their U.S. and international peers. Meanwhile, the higher-order thinking that excellent teachers develop so well in their pupils is increasingly important to students’ future employment prospects.²

These sobering facts have driven U.S. policymakers and advocates at the local, state, and national levels to focus intently in recent years on boosting the number of excellent teachers in America’s schools. Efforts to increase the number of excellent teachers in U.S. classrooms have focused primarily on recruiting more high achievers into the teaching profession, creating incentives for better teachers to stay in teaching and teach less-advantaged children, and dismissing the least-effective teachers. But even if these efforts are extremely successful, they will not close our nation’s achievement gaps in the near future or enable most students in

the United States to surge ahead and meet rising global standards. The reality is that a majority of U.S. students still will not have excellent teachers.³ Furthermore, the changes described above will not enable large numbers of good, solid teachers to make the leap to excellence—at least not while working in the traditional one-teacher-one-classroom model.⁴

The federal government could play a critical role in expanding students' access to excellent teaching. In the process, federal policies could also help transform teaching into a profession that attracts and keeps even more talented people and provides rich opportunities for on-the-job development and sustainably paid advancement for all teachers.

In this report, we present the following four principal levers that the federal government can employ to focus our nation on dramatically increasing student access to excellent teaching:

- 1. Structure competitive grants to induce districts and states to shift to transformative school designs that reach more students with excellent teachers and the teams that these teachers lead.** Incentivize innovation by awarding funds to districts and states with strong, sustainable plans to transform staffing models in ways that dramatically expand access to excellent teaching and make the teaching profession substantially more attractive.
- 2. Reorient existing formula grants to encourage transition to new classroom models that extend the reach of great teachers, both directly and through leading teaching teams.** Dramatically improve student outcomes by putting excellent teachers in charge of the learning of all students in financially sustainable ways. By teaching more students directly and leading teams toward excellence, great teachers could take responsibility for all students, not just a fraction of them.
- 3. Create a focal point for federal research and development efforts.** Spur rapid progress by gathering and disseminating evidence on policies and practices that extend the reach of excellent teachers, directly and through team leadership, and accelerate development of best-in-class digital tools.
- 4. Create and enforce a new civil right to excellent teachers,** fueling all districts and states—not just the winners of competitive grants—to make the changes needed to reach all students with excellent teachers and their teams.

Excellence in teaching and learning for all students must become the new goal. New school models that extend the reach of great teachers, directly and through leading and developing peers, make it possible. A federal policy focus on enabling successful and wide-scale implementation of these models is crucial. Together, federal use of these four policy levers could transform the American education model, dramatically expanding students' access to excellent teaching while turning teaching into a profession full of opportunities for sustainably paid career advancement and rigorous on-the-job learning.

But ultimate success will depend on the concrete policy actions—and the resulting changes at the school level—that accompany statements from the bully pulpit. These policy actions must overcome some substantial barriers to large-scale reform, including policy constraints that hinder educators' efforts to try new classroom and school models; a lack of exposure to and knowledge about alternative ways of organizing schools and classrooms; the still-early stage of digital tools that need to be fully developed to implement the models that require quality technology; and the fact that, in many cases, school and district leaders have been unable or unwilling to take on the massive change-management effort needed to truly transform schools and provide students access to excellent teaching through new classroom models.

In the pages that follow, we outline an initial set of ideas that, taken in whole or in part, could position federal policy and programs to better assist state and local education agencies that put excellent teachers in charge of student learning by implementing transformative school models and accelerating the development of the tools necessary to support them.⁵

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