

COMMENTARY

A National Strategy to Improve the Teaching Profession

By Jack Schneider

We need better teachers. It's a mantra in education reform circles. And as Congress gears up to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, last rewritten in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act, the refrain will only grow louder. That's because, despite deep ideological polarization, politicians on both sides of the aisle are in general agreement that our teachers are inadequate.

The aim of strengthening the teaching force is a laudable one. Research indicates that, among in-school variables, teacher quality does exert the strongest influence on student achievement. But policy conversations surrounding the issue have tended to be disturbingly misguided, manifesting themselves all too often as attacks on educators. Groups like the Partnership for Educational Justice and StudentsFirst, for instance, have pushed for repeal of teacher tenure and the institution of performance-based incentives for teachers. As they appear to see it, the teaching corps is full of rotten apples—many of whom need to be rooted out, and the rest of whom need to be goaded into greater efforts.



There's a logic to this kind of thinking. Yet it is also characterized by a fundamental assumption about what shapes teacher quality. And insofar as that is the case, it raises a serious question: What if the problem isn't with our teachers but, rather, with teaching as a profession?

Because the truth is that American teachers are, on the whole, quite competent. They're well-educated, highly motivated, and hard-working. They just happen to work in a profession where growth is actively thwarted. And as a result, many never realize their full potential.

So how is teacher professional growth hindered in the American educational system?

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to teacher growth is the absence of downtime in the profession. The average teacher has one period each day for preparation, grading, and review. For the rest of the school day, teachers are with students—teaching or engaging in supervisory tasks. Consequently, not only are they constantly working—compared with the average American employee, who wastes an average of two hours each day—but are also constantly engaged in acts of performance. As a result, they have little time for practice, reflection, or innovation.

Another challenge teachers face is related to their workload. Once a mechanic learns how to work on a car, or a doctor learns how to identify flu symptoms, he or she can apply those lessons almost universally. Teaching, however, is quite different. Because each student is different—in such factors as background knowledge, motivation, and support at home—effective teaching requires not just a set of general practices, but also highly specific knowledge of the student. This is a significant challenge in its own right. And we ask teachers to work with up to 150 students—a massive number—with class rosters turning over entirely each year.

A third challenge teachers face is the lack of autonomy inherent to the profession. In fields like psychotherapy, for instance, practitioners can choose their clients, determine their own measures of success, and generally exercise professional discretion. Teachers have none of these autonomies. They are assigned their students, their curriculum, their textbooks, and even the standards of achievement. As a result, much of what teachers know is wasted because they do not have the freedom to put their wisdom to use.

A fourth factor worth considering is the structural isolation teachers face. During the workday, teachers have no time to collaborate with peers or provide each other with meaningful support. Teaching an average of five periods each day, working more hours a week than their global counterparts, and spending the bulk of the day isolated in their classrooms, teachers are quite literally left with no space to learn from each other. In teaching, you're on your own.

Finally, teachers get very little feedback about their effectiveness. Day in and day out, teachers can't really see the results of their work. In part, this is because teaching is about human improvement, and measuring personal growth is difficult. But in equal part, this is due to ineffective approaches to measurement. Current data efforts are focused almost entirely on student standardized-test scores, which often tell teachers little that they don't already know.

So, could we build systems that incentivize teachers to work harder or longer? Yes.

And might making it easier to fire teachers help weed out the very worst performers? Sure.

But such efforts won't make much of a difference in the overall quality of instruction. Because we don't have a problem with our *seeds* so much as we do with the soil in which we ask them to grow.

Drop down any teacher you want, and there's going to be a problem. They'll stall out. They'll burn out. They'll struggle more than they should.

Of course, some don't. Those teachers are truly amazing. But the vast majority could be better. Not because of who they are. But because of how their jobs have been structured.

If we want a teacher-centered reform that might actually succeed, we need to begin by ending the misguided attack on those in classrooms. And then we need to get down to work on a much more challenging and essential set of tasks—overhauling the profession so that all teachers can realize their full potential.

Broadly speaking, this means crafting a national teacher strategy. Currently, our approach to all questions involving teachers is ad hoc. Even at the federal level, there is

no overriding philosophy, no consistency, and no coherence to our teacher-related policies. This is in contrast to every nation with a strong professional corps of teachers.

What would a national teacher strategy look like?

It would begin with widespread changes to the school schedule. Teachers need more time to plan, prepare, and reflect. And they need more time to collaborate with each other. Of course, more time is hardly a stand-alone solution; but it is an absolute prerequisite. Recognizing this fact, pioneering schools and districts have already begun to experiment with the length of the school year and the school day—creatively using extracurricular time, utilizing paraprofessionals, and renegotiating teacher contracts.

Next, we need to develop a new set of support structures. At the most basic level, this would include the creation of common, high-quality instructional materials for teachers. Given the emergence of the Common Core State Standards, this is increasingly possible. Developing a small set of world-class tools to replace a grab-bag of idiosyncratic resources should be a priority. Somewhat more challenging, though perhaps even more essential, would be a move toward embedding professional development into the workday, rather than delivering it through periodic one-shot workshops. One alternative is the professional-learning-communities model, in which teachers meet frequently by grade level or content area to collaborate on strategies, set goals, and analyze data. Another model, used commonly in Japan, is lesson study, a procedure in which teachers work in teams to closely examine sample lessons. Whatever the specifics, educators need more support centered around both what and how to teach.

No less essential to teacher growth is access to meaningful observation and feedback. If we are serious about teacher quality, we need to make a universal commitment to training and engaging instructional coaches and teacher mentors to regularly observe teachers, debrief with them, and help them set challenging personal goals. We also need to reorient our teacher-evaluation systems away from punitive "valuation" and toward support for improvement. The high stakes of current evaluation practices only encourage teachers to hide their flaws, and have been generally ineffective in transforming the labor force. Instead, all teachers should be able to look forward to a thorough annual performance review, and a year-long follow-up process, designed to help them grow.

Finally, we must strengthen the teaching profession by broadening the roles and expectations for teachers. We can encourage teachers to take on greater levels of responsibility by developing new pathways—career ladders being the most common proposal—that recognize and compensate great teachers. We can foster higher levels of autonomy for teachers who have demonstrated their abilities. And, perhaps most importantly, we can create opportunities for teachers to take on new roles leading innovation at the school and district levels.

It's a lot to ask for, certainly. But perhaps now is the time.

For more than a decade under NCLB, our dominant national approach to improving schools has taken the form of a demand: Get better or else. And that approach has failed. In this next reauthorization of the ESEA, then, Congress might want to try the opposite tack: building school capacity for improvement. Because if policy leaders stop issuing threats and start building capacity, they might build a better kind of teacher.

Jack Schneider is an assistant professor of education at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Mass. He runs the opinion blog [K-12 Schools: Beyond the Rhetoric](#) on [edweek.org](#).