

Putting a High-quality Teacher in Every Florida Classroom

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Executive Summary

The most important school factor affecting student achievement is the quality of teachers. Yet there are misconceptions about what it means to be a quality teacher and how schools can attract and train more of them. This brief summarizes evidence about the characteristics of effective teachers, describes the characteristics of teachers and teacher policies in Florida, and recommends policy changes to help the state meet the significant challenges of meeting the demand for quality teachers in the coming decade.

Research suggests that teacher effectiveness depends both on the abilities of teachers and on the training they receive. Teachers are more effective when their preparation includes higher levels of formal education and in-service professional development, particularly when this training is focused on the specific fields in which they teach. Effective teachers also tend to have higher scores on tests of verbal and quantitative skills.

While generally there appear to be enough teachers, many individual schools in Florida face severe teacher shortages. These schools have large percentages of disadvantaged students, and the teacher shortages tend to be in subjects such as math,

science, and exceptional student education. These shortages, as well as the disparities between schools, are likely to worsen significantly with upcoming class size reduction and growth in student population.

Although some aspects of Florida's policies appear to be steps in the right direction, the overall effort in the state has been incoherent and severely under-funded. Different groups of teachers are held to very different standards. Additionally, low salaries provide few economic incentives for the best and brightest college students to choose teaching over more lucrative and prestigious positions. This is particularly true in math and science, where other job prospects are greatest and, not coincidentally, where teacher shortages are most severe.

Recommendations

The following changes in policy are recommended to ensure that there is a high-quality teacher in every Florida classroom:

1. Require high-quality teachers in all schools receiving public funds, not just in traditional public schools.
2. Continue alternative certification, but monitor it closely to ensure that teachers perform at a high level and stay in the profession.
3. Reduce restrictions on colleges of education that limit innovation and create an uneven playing field in relation to the alternate certification system.
4. Monitor out-of-field teaching in a rigorous manner, providing an accurate picture of teacher quality and facilitating the targeting of resources to shortage areas.

5. Increase funds for district-based professional development that accounts for school-specific needs and integrates subject matter with teaching skills.
6. Ensure salary increases for teachers willing to work in critical shortage areas and schools that have trouble attracting high-quality teachers.
7. Make teacher salaries competitive with salaries in other states.
8. Fund the state's Better Education for Students and Teachers (BEST) program to increase opportunities for career growth and to reward high performance.
9. Expand induction programs to increase retention and training for new teachers.

The foregoing is a summary of a policy brief in the report *Reform Florida* (Education Policy Research Unit, April 2004). The complete policy brief is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) website at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSL-0401-111-EPRU.doc>

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