



# NEPC REVIEW: TACKLING GAPS IN ACCESS TO STRONG TEACHERS: WHAT STATE LEADERS CAN DO (THE EDUCATION TRUST, OCTOBER 2017)



## Reviewer:

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November 2017

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### Summary of Review

The Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) directs states and districts to identify equity gaps in students' access to excellent educators and transformative school leaders. States are encouraged to use Title II funds strategically in order to identify and remedy these gaps. A new report from The Education Trust draws on ESSA documents and state teacher equity plans to provide guidance to state leaders, including some sound advice—but with significant omissions. The report does not engage with thorny issues around alternative pathways into teaching, and it largely skirts issues around incentives for supporting teacher recruitment and retention in hard-to-staff schools. The report also does not consider what attracts teachers into the profession and into particular school environments. Likewise, the report fails to draw on the explicit remedies sought by ESSA to link high-quality leadership and strong teacher recruitment and retention. Instead, the report casts the teacher equity problem primarily in terms of labor supply shortages and treats teachers like interchangeable widgets. Relying heavily on advocacy sources, it misses an opportunity to unpack the root causes of the teacher retention problem, particularly the corrosive impact of past federal and state policies on the teaching profession. The report does not help state leaders understand how they might build incentives and cultures that draw strong teachers into high-need schools, and they will thus be left with an incomplete and insufficient set of tools for ensuring all students have equitable access to excellent educators.



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## I. Introduction

Various studies have shown that the current concerns about the teacher shortage would be better understood as a problem of retention and uneven human resource allocation.<sup>1</sup> Teacher retention is a problem, especially in the hardest-to-staff schools: usually urban or isolated, small rural schools where 30 percent or more of the students meet federal poverty guidelines for free and reduced lunches and/or students are from Black and/or Latinx backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> The same is true in regards to cultivating and sustaining the quality of school leaders.<sup>3</sup> While these schools face challenges with recruitment, not having continuity among experienced faculty and school leadership is even more disruptive to building a culture of learning for students, as well as staff.<sup>4</sup>

Students' access to high-quality teachers is a concern shared by federal and state leaders, policy makers, school leaders and communities. While evidence abounds that a strong teacher has the capacity to positively alter a student's educational course, the report relies on one econometric study to claim that access to teachers whose students produce high test scores can alter the earning potential of students.<sup>5</sup>

Assessing the impact of strong teachers on students' future earnings serves as a proxy for the academic preparedness of students. However, with greater focus on social-emotional and civic student competencies at every level of education, strong teachers need to be evaluated on a number of measures that require a holistic approach.<sup>6</sup>

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows for a comprehensive approach to describing and assessing teacher quality. Through ESSA, states are encouraged to work collaboratively with teachers to develop evaluation systems that include multiple measures of educator performance. Some measures may include "short, frequent, formative observations by multiple

well-trained observers” as well as family, teacher and student surveys, in addition to measuring student growth through local assessments and rubric-based reviews of portfolios.<sup>7</sup>

The Education Trust Report, *Tacking Gaps in Access to Strong Teachers: What State Leaders Can Do*, by Rachel Metz and Allison Rose Socol, draws on ESSA documents and state teacher equity plans to provide guidance to state leaders.<sup>8</sup> The report recognizes that there are many strong teachers working in U.S. public schools, but that they are unevenly distributed. Isolated, small rural districts and urban districts struggle to attract and retain the most well-prepared, experienced and effective educators.

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report calls upon state leaders to embrace the new flexibility made available in ESSA to address inequities in teacher quality for schools with higher percentages of student poverty and larger populations of students of color. Drawing on state-level examples of promising practices, the report urges state leaders to take responsibility for inequitable patterns of teacher quality across their states and within particular districts. Although not explicit in its framing, the report seems to synthesize and be modeled on the Department of Education’s *Non-Regulatory Guidance for Title II, Part A: Building Systems of Support for Excellent Teaching and Leading*, which also provides examples of state-level interventions.<sup>9</sup>

The report offers five lessons. These are 1) *Make the invisible far more visible (including both patterns of inequity and their impact on children)*. 2) *Set clear improvement expectations for leaders at all levels and make meeting those expectations matter*. 3) *Target resources to the districts and schools struggling most with this issue*. 4) *Develop networks of district leaders to problem-solve together*. 5) *Break down silos between work to increase strong teaching and school improvement work*.

A brief rationale is provided for each recommendation, followed by questions that should drive state leaders’ work in the domain. Readers will find sidebar cases from different states that the report designates as exemplars of targeted action that should inspire creativity in other state and district leaders. The report implores state leaders to empower themselves and their district leaders to take advantage of the strategic and targeted opportunities provided in the reauthorization of ESSA.

**Recommendation 1:** *Make the invisible far more visible (including both patterns of inequity and their impact on children)*. The report recommends that state leaders conduct finer-grained analyses of students’ inequitable access to strong teachers – across the state, by student population, between and within districts. The report also calls upon state leaders to examine patterns *within* schools of students’ differential access to high-quality teachers.

This recommendation also reminds state leaders to examine the root causes for inequitable access to strong teachers, for example: lack of nearby teacher preparation programs (especially for isolated, rural schools); “consistency and quality of school and district leadership”;

as well as school climate and working conditions.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the report highlights the distinct challenges for teachers of color.

This section concludes with a call for state leaders to clearly define their measures for teacher quality and to ensure that analyses take into account distinctions in teacher preparedness, experience and effectiveness. For instance, teachers working with emergency credentials may be considered “certified,” but they are not necessarily well-prepared to teach in their subject areas.

**Recommendation 2:** *Set clear improvement expectations for leaders at all levels and make meeting those expectations matter.* The report places responsibility for inequitable teacher quality with district leaders. It calls upon them to “set clear expectations for eliminating inequities in assignment to strong teachers.”<sup>11</sup> State leaders are told that they can achieve this objective by leveraging access to Title II funding, especially through competitive grant processes and goal-setting. The report also suggests that district and school leaders should be evaluated based on their making strong teachers available to all students.

**Recommendation 3:** *Target resources to the districts and schools struggling most with this issue.* This section of the report offers clear guidance for how state leaders might allocate funding to redress teacher quality inequities. It lists a range of suggestions such as using technology to connect rural teachers to professional support and addressing specific subject-area and geographic needs in the state’s teacher supply.

**Recommendation 4:** *Develop networks of district leaders to problem-solve together.* This is the least expansive recommendation of the report. It suggests that state leaders use their broader view to connect districts facing similar challenges. It also calls upon state leaders to leverage their broader perspective to help district and school leaders learn from others who have been successful in their efforts to improve students’ access to quality teachers. The state example highlights the role of a nonprofit organization in coordinating this work.

**Recommendation 5:** *Break down silos between work to increase strong teaching and school improvement work.* This recommendation calls upon state leaders to see the connections and synergies between school improvement efforts and teacher equity initiatives. The report urges state leaders to provide district and school leaders with the necessary data to see the connection between these efforts. It calls upon state leaders to require local actors to analyze the school improvement data through the lens of equity, with special attention to teacher assignment and retention.

### III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The rationale for the report could be easily overlooked, as it appears beneath a bold graphic of the five “lessons learned.” Although the federal government required every state to submit teacher equity plans, the report claims that “most [states] provided only descriptions of generic efforts to raise overall teaching quality. Far too often, state education agencies’ plans talked about improving teacher preparation or induction, for example, but failed to target

efforts to the highest need districts and schools.”<sup>12</sup> These state plans, according to the report, fail to address the problem of students’ differential access to high-quality teachers and miss an opportunity to leverage the flexibility built into Title II funding in ESSA. Notably, the report does not conduct a systematic analysis of the state plans nor does it reference an available analysis.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the rationale for the report is unsubstantiated.

A disclaimer follows that builds on the concern that most state plans attended primarily to teacher preparation and induction: the report does not review or catalog every state policy relating to strong teaching; it focuses on the role of state leaders in “drawing attention to, and motivating district leaders to act on, inequities in assignment to [sic] strong teachers.”<sup>14</sup> The disclaimer also includes the caveat that the approaches cited are promising, but not yet proven, as they are new and evolving. State leaders will need to collect data on their interventions for ongoing and future analysis.

#### IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report relies primarily on three types of sources: a) Think tank reports (including five of its own); b) government documents; and c) econometric research. There are few references to peer-reviewed research on teaching and teacher quality. In the 2016 edition of *The Handbook of Research on Teaching*, the chapter “The Sociopolitical Context of Teaching” addresses inequitable opportunities for students to learn, including inequitable access to strong teachers and teachers of color.<sup>15</sup> This chapter includes over 125 peer-reviewed sources written from a broad range of methodological approaches and subjects, including educational administration, policy, sociocultural, as well as econometric perspectives.

**Table 1: Unique Sources for Tackling Gaps in Access to Strong Teaching**

Source Type	Number of references	Notes
Advocacy organization/ think tank	18	Education Trust (4)
Peer-reviewed journal	5	All articles cited are from an econometric perspective
Government organization	5	All state plans submitted to DOE are counted as one source
Personal communication	2	Unnamed staff, no positions listed, from ME and OH DOEs

The report relies heavily on reports from advocacy organizations and think tanks. The report does not consult the robust research literature that examines inequitable access to strong teachers for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.<sup>16</sup> In par-

ticular, examining research from a number of sub-disciplines and perspectives could shed more light on the root causes of inequitable teacher quality patterns, especially in regard to crafting advice for state leaders on improving the recruitment and retention of strong teachers.

Strong teachers, a term used in the report's title and throughout the recommendations, are never defined. This omission could be read as purposeful rather than an oversight since ESSA encourages state leaders to work collaboratively with teachers to develop measures of quality. However, the report misses an opportunity to help guide state leaders in how to recognize strong teachers. Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson's foundational *Teachers College Press* article "On Making Determinations of Quality in Teaching" shows that quality teaching occurs only when it is both successful *and* good. Successful teaching produces the desired results; good teaching engages learners appropriately in a worthwhile activity. Quality teaching is achieved when worthwhile aims *and* morally defensible methods lead to the intended goals.<sup>17</sup> Multiple *types* of measures and perspectives are necessary to define and assess quality teaching.

## V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is premised on the assertion that the teacher equity plans submitted by states failed to address the issue of inequitable access to strong teachers. However, no rigorous analysis or proof of this claim is provided in the report.<sup>18</sup> The report does not reference the 263-page analysis of state's educator equity plans prepared for the Department of Education.<sup>19</sup> As a result of the omission of conducting original analysis or referencing previously published analysis, the necessity for the report reviewed here remains in question.

Nonetheless, the report helpfully synthesizes *portions* of the Department of Education's recommendations for improving student's equitable access to strong teachers, even though the report curiously does not cite this source document.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned in the disclaimer discussed in Section III of this review, the report limits its scope to the role of state leaders in "drawing attention to, and motivating district leaders to act on, inequities in assignment to [*sic*] strong teachers."<sup>21</sup>

Setting boundaries to the topics addressed in the report is methodologically sound. However, the use of starkly one-dimensional peer-reviewed sources undermines the report's value for state leaders, especially when addressing the root causes of the uneven teacher quality problem. This overly-narrow vision becomes evident in the report's reference to the more equitable "assignment" of strong teachers.



## VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The recommendations made in the report have been raised by researchers for at least a decade.<sup>22</sup> The report offers a condensed version of most of the information that can be found in the Department of Education's guidance documents, but with significant omissions.<sup>23</sup> The Education Trust's report eliminates all references to alternative pathways into teaching and incentives for supporting teacher recruitment and retention in hard-to-staff schools.

Not all alternative pathways are equal. Some alternative pathways such as Teach for America send underprepared temporary workers into schools—an approach that is promoted by ESSA, but undermines ESSA's stated goal of students' equitable access teacher quality.<sup>24</sup> Some alternative pathways involve significant preparation partnerships with higher education partners. They could also address problems of lack of proportional representation of teachers of color in the profession. These thorny options are not discussed directly in the report, but fall well within the scope of resolving students' inequitable access to strong teachers.<sup>25</sup>

The report eclipses an opportunity to consider what attracts teachers into the profession and into particular school environments, save for a small, but important, statement about the role of school leaders in positive work climates.<sup>26</sup> Instead, the report casts the teacher equity problem primarily in terms of non-distinct labor supply shortage. For instance, in Recommendation 3, the report profiles Tennessee's attempts to "improve the partnership between districts and preparation programs." This so-called promising practice is highlighted because the state is "encouraging preparation programs to steer candidates to districts with the greatest need."<sup>27</sup> Yet, no mechanisms are discussed for creating incentives or matching candidates with skills, interests and competencies that could benefit particular schools. It seems that teacher assignment is simply a matter of shifting around deck chairs.

The report is silent on the many root causes (including past federal policies and destructive public anti-teacher discourse) that have contributed to the current conditions. This ahistorical perspective fails to avail state leaders with information to aid them in conducting the reparative work that needs to be done within and beyond schools.

Previous versions of high-stakes accountability for teachers, notably No Child Left Behind, the former iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now ESSA), have been shown to have a "corrosive influence" on the quality of teaching and learning in high-need schools. Yet, it is strong teachers who "offer the strongest defense" against these corrosive influences.<sup>28</sup>

The level of professionalism for teachers varies widely by school type and student poverty level, especially in terms of teacher autonomy over decision-making and pay.<sup>29</sup> Schools traditionally labeled as underperforming, especially those serving high populations of students of color in urban areas, were early adopters of many deprofessionalizing reforms. Improving teachers' working conditions, including addressing "corrosive" practices, is an essential feature to improving retention for educators working with students of color and from low-income backgrounds.<sup>30</sup>

The report has the potential to undermine the stronger and more collaborative relation-

ships between state, district and school leaders and teachers that ESSA promotes. The report employs a top-down managerial style that depicts teachers as non-distinct laborers merely awaiting “assignment.” Teachers have multiple reasons for entering and leaving the profession and schools. Those reasons can be attributed to any number of factors, including: underpreparation, lack of collegial support, bias, family needs and deprofessionalization. The report rightly seeks to examine root causes, but fails to sufficiently return to these root causes when developing incentives and pathways that might redress patterns of inequity in students’ access to teachers.

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

The Education Trust’s report has few references to alternative pathways into teaching and provides (limited) incentives for supporting teacher recruitment and retention in hard-to-staff schools. The report misses an opportunity to consider what attracts teachers into the profession and into particular school environments. Likewise, the report fails to draw on the explicit remedies sought by ESSA to link high-quality leadership with strong teacher recruitment and retention. The report by the Education Trust casts the teacher equity problem primarily in terms of non-distinct labor supply shortage.

Readers will appreciate the accessible format and synthesis of the DOE recommendations for creatively addressing professional knowledge and support gaps amongst teachers. However, state leaders, in particular, will be left with an incomplete and insufficient set of tools for ensuring all students have equitable access to excellent educators. They are given no guidance as to how they might define, identify and assess strong teachers. State leaders will likely come no closer to understanding how they might build incentives and cultures that draw strong teachers into high-need schools.

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- 23 U.S. Department of Education, (2016, September). *Non-Regulatory Guidance for Title II, Part A: Building Systems of Support for Excellent Teaching and Leading*. Retrieved on October 31, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essatitleiipartaguidance.pdf>
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- 25 The report mentions that TN will “support districts in developing more “Grow Your Own” programs and “officials plan to invest \$100,000 in grants for targeted districts to develop plans to increase diversity of the teaching force.” This scant funding does not indicate that increasing teacher diversity is a priority for the state.
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