

NEPC REVIEW: 2018 STATE TEACHER POLICY BEST PRACTICES GUIDE (NATIONAL COUNCIL ON TEACHER QUALITY, MARCH 2018)



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The authors of this review are members of PROJECT TEER (Teacher Education and Education Reform), which is a group of teacher education scholars and practitioners who have been studying U.S. teacher education in the context of larger reform movements since 2014. Led by Marilyn Cochran-Smith, the group’s work includes several NEPC publications, multiple journal articles, and the book, *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education* (Cochran-Smith, Carney, Keefe, Burton, Chang, Fernández, Miller, Sánchez & Baker, 2018, Teachers College Press).



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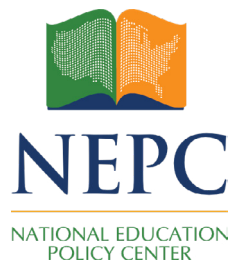
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Summary of Review

A new report from NCTQ begins with nine goals purportedly based on the “best available research evidence” about teacher quality. Yet neither this report nor its companion, which describes the original development of the goals, cites any research evidence. The report also uses the terms “teacher quality” and “teacher effectiveness” (on raising test scores) interchangeably. The report assumes reader buy-in to its goals, to its focus on test scores, and to its assumption that “great teachers” have an “outsize impact” on students’ learning and lives. Grounded in these assumptions, the report highlights examples of “leading state work” in 37 policy areas related to teacher quality, aiming to hold up these state policies as exemplars for other state policymakers to replicate. Despite its intentions, the report has multiple flaws that undermine its validity and usefulness. It offers no explanation about how the 37 best practices were selected in the first place and no justification for its selection of “leading” policy work, some of which has occurred in states that have consistently been low performers on national assessments. In addition, the report offers no evidence to support its approach and makes no references to the nuanced and complex research literature in this area. The report focuses primarily on human capital policies that explicitly target the qualifications and evaluation of the teacher workforce. This ignores the growing consensus that many other factors matter in the production of students’ learning, including supports that help teachers succeed, school contexts and cultures, state and regional labor markets, teachers’ relationship-building capacities, and the social organization of teachers’ work. In the end, the report is of limited use.



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I. Introduction

For more than two decades, there has been intense attention to teacher quality. Many states have implemented new teacher policies, and multiple new advocacy and policy organizations have emerged.

Since 2009, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a private, non-profit U.S. advocacy organization, has biennially graded states on their performance in nine teacher policy areas as reported in their *State Policy Yearbook Database*.¹ The NCTQ *2018 State Teacher Policy Best Practices Guide*,² which is the focus of this review, uses the same nine areas to showcase “exemplary” teacher policies in 23 states. The report is intended to offer policymakers a sense of “what is possible” in teacher quality policy by highlighting state work that “deserves to be recognized, celebrated, and held up as a model for replication in other states.”

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The *Best Practices Guide* focuses on 37 practices in nine “goal” areas, which are listed below. For each section, the report recommends what “every state should do” to boost the quality of the teacher workforce.

For example, under the goal, “general teacher preparation,” within the area labelled, “program entry,” the report looked at whether or not states: (1) compel preparation programs to require minimum GPAs for admission, or, admit only candidates scoring in the top half of standardized college admissions tests; and (2) support program efforts to recruit qualified candidates of color. The report lauds Utah’s policy as “best practice,” the only state that requires individuals to have a 3.0 GPA for admission. Additionally, 19 states are listed whose policies “support” the recruitment of candidates of color. Along different lines, under the goal, “alternate route teacher preparation,” within the area labelled, “alternate route preparation,” the report looked at whether or not states: (1) compel programs to require supervised student teaching; (2) compel programs to provide intensive induction support; (3) ensure that coursework is manageable for new teachers; and (4) ensure that coursework is targeted to new teachers’ immediate needs. The report singles out Delaware for its “best practice” along with 11 other states that meet the student teaching requirement.

The report follows the same pattern for the 37 “best practices,” which are listed below under the report’s goal areas.

General Teacher Preparation. Every state should:

- require programs to admit only candidates with strong academic records while simultaneously increasing the number of candidates of color
- inform district hiring needs with teacher supply and demand data
- publicly report data on program quality
- make preparation programs accountable for teacher quality as part of program approval
- require programs to provide “high quality” clinical experiences

Elementary Teacher Preparation. Every state should require elementary preparation programs to:

- provide liberal arts education to improve teaching “to college- and career-readiness standards” (CCRS)
- ensure that teacher candidates have sufficient math knowledge
- ensure that candidates know the “science of reading instruction” aligned with CCRS
- ensure that early childhood teachers eligible to teach elementary grades have sufficient content knowledge

Secondary Teacher Preparation. Every state should require secondary preparation programs to:

- ensure middle school teachers can teach CCRS-aligned content
- distinguish the preparation of middle school and elementary teachers
- ensure middle/secondary teachers can provide CCRS-aligned literacy instruction
- ensure secondary teachers can teach rigorous grade-level content
- ensure secondary science/social studies teachers know content in all licensed ar-

eas

Special Education Teacher Preparation. Every state should require preparation programs to:

- ensure that special education teachers know content in all licensed areas
- ensure that special education teachers can teach CCRS-aligned reading
- distinguish between elementary and secondary special education

Alternate Route Teacher Preparation. Every state should require alternate route preparation programs to:

- admit candidates with strong academic backgrounds while responding to the needs of nontraditional candidates
- provide “efficient” preparation and induction support responsive to new teachers’ needs

Hiring. Every state should:

- make teacher licensure portable across states
- close loopholes to keep unlicensed teachers from teaching

Teacher and Principal Evaluation. Every state should require schools/districts to:

- make instructional effectiveness the “determinative criterion” of teacher evaluation
- ensure teacher evaluations assess professional practice
- evaluate all teachers annually
- give teachers performance feedback and require evaluation-based development
- maintain a state data system that assesses teacher effectiveness
- publicly report teacher quality distribution to identify inequities
- meaningfully assess principal performance
- evaluate all principals annually based on frequent observations

Teacher Compensation. Every state should require schools/districts to:

- make effectiveness a factor in teacher compensation
- provide differential pay for effective teaching in shortage and high-need areas
- compensate teachers for prior content-related experience to encourage career changers

Retaining Effective Teachers. Every state should require schools/districts to:

- base licensure advancement on teacher effectiveness
- base tenure decisions on effectiveness
- provide teacher leadership opportunities that support retention
- create fair and expedient termination processes based on ineffectiveness
- consider classroom performance in layoff decisions

III. Rationale for Findings & Conclusions

The report's rationale is that teachers have a major impact on "student learning and lives," but many states have been too slow to change teacher policies. The report asserts that these states should replicate the "great work" of other states to drive positive change. There are two implicit but clear assumptions here. First, teacher quality—or teacher "effectiveness," a term used more or less interchangeably with teacher "quality" in the report—is defined primarily as students' achievement on standardized tests along with student surveys and observations. Second, human capital policies that target the qualifications of the teacher workforce, especially academic credentials and content knowledge, are key to school improvement. Even though these assumptions have been widely challenged and critiqued,³ the report treats this rationale as self-evident with no evidence to support its claims and no attempt to sort out the complexities of the issues. In short, readers are expected simply to accept at face value the report's conclusions about which state policies are "best."

IV. Report's Use of Research Literature

As noted, the report's nine goals are purportedly based on the "best available research evidence."⁴ However neither this report nor its companion, which describes the original development of the goals, cite any research evidence. This is curious given the rapid expansion of interest—and debate—among governments, researchers, and policy analysts over the last two decades about the role of teacher quality in students' learning and in the general quality of education systems. This body of research has been analyzed in multiple handbooks on teacher policy,⁵ edited and specialized volumes,⁶ and articles and special issues of prominent journals,⁷ none of which is referenced in the report. Additionally the report makes no reference to the work of major research partnerships and centers that concentrate on teacher policy issues.⁸

The report makes sweeping claims about "best practices" in teacher policy. Most of these claims focus either on requirements regarding teachers' preparation, knowledge, and licensure or on monitoring and evaluation once teachers are in schools. The report implies that there is a proven constellation of policies that serves as a blueprint for all states. However, to our knowledge, there is no research that has empirically examined the collective impact—or interactions—of a large number of state policies. Further, a growing body of research argues that human capital policies alone—like those regarding teacher selection and evaluation—simply don't work. Teacher and school effectiveness are the result of many complex and interacting factors *in addition to* what teachers bring to school and how they are evaluated. The literature suggests that in addition to larger structural and systemic matters, like poverty, institutionalized racism, and the financing and governing of schools themselves,⁹ these factors include larger policy environments, regional and state labor markets, school and community resources, working conditions and social arrangements within schools, teaching environments, teacher's relationship-building capacities, and many others.¹⁰

In addition to incorrectly implying there is a proven constellation of effective teacher policies, the report also wrongly promotes policies regarding very specific aspects of teacher quality. For example, it is widely known¹¹ that high school GPAs and admissions test scores are not intended to be predictors of teacher effectiveness. Along different lines, college admissions tests have historically disadvantaged minority students, an issue the report does not address. The report neglects to recognize this contradiction when it asserts that states should simultaneously raise admissions requirements and support programs that increase teacher diversity.

V. Review of Report's Methods

The report has no methods section. It does not specify the procedures used to select the 37 “best practices.” Furthermore, it is not clear what, whether, and how the features NCTQ looked at when reviewing state policies represent “a truly rigorous standard.” The report does not stipulate how or what evidence was gathered regarding the teacher policies of each state. Nor does it describe how it was determined that a state did or did not have “best practices” in place. For example, in the “program entry” area mentioned in the findings section, there is no discussion of what it means for states to “explicitly support programs” that recruit qualified candidates of color. Nor is it clear how the authors determined that 19 states did so (and presumably 31 did not). Within the same program area, it is not clear how states did or should procedurally and conceptually connect the report’s “best practice” regarding teacher candidates’ GPA minimum to the report’s “best practice” regarding the recruitment of candidates of color. This omission is especially puzzling given that there has been extensive debate among practitioners and policy researchers about whether these two are competing goals.¹²

In addition, many of the “best practices” listed in the report are vague or not justified. For example, with no further clarification, the report says all states should require that: elementary teachers be “*sufficiently* prepared for the *ways that college- and career-readiness standards affect instruction*” and that alternate route preparation programs provide “*efficient* preparation relevant to the *immediate needs* of new teachers.” Without clarification and justification, state policymakers would have no information about what these practices actually involve or how to implement these recommendations.

Finally it is unclear how leading states were singled out. Some states deemed “worthy of emulation,” such as New Jersey and Massachusetts, are indeed high-performing states according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is broadly considered the most reliable indicator of students’ achievement over time in the U.S.¹³ However other “exemplary” states, according to the report, such as New York and Georgia, perform at average levels on NAEP. Still other “exemplary” states, such as New Mexico, California, Tennessee, and Arkansas, are consistently low performers. Louisiana, the state singled out more times (four) than any other in the report, is a consistently low-performing state, according to NAEP.

VI. Review of Validity of Findings and Conclusions

Some of the policies the report highlights may be worthy of replication in particular state contexts. However the value of the report is fundamentally contingent upon the validity of the 37 recommended best practices, which are nested within the nine larger goals. As noted, according to the report's companion document, the NCTQ *State Policy Yearbook Database*, the nine goal areas are purportedly based on research evidence. Yet no evidence to this effect is provided in either the companion document or in this report. This omission is magnified in that there is no evidence provided in support of the validity of the 37 "best practices." Additionally, some of the so-called exemplary policies rely on questionable or controversial conclusions. Finally, the "best practices" section does not provide any discussion of the labor market, historical, cultural, community, or political contexts in which the recommendations were developed and implemented. As we know from international analyses,¹⁴ policies cannot simply be "borrowed" from one context and dropped into another with the same result. Overall, the report fails to justify the validity of its rationale, its goals, or its best practices. It does not provide sufficient information concerning methods or research.

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

This report offers little concrete and actionable guidance for policy and practice. While the guide may provide states "a sense of what is possible," it highlights a cherry-picked collection of examples that does not provide policymakers with "the necessary information to catalyze improvement." The report's attempt "to support increased state collaboration" is well-intentioned. However the list of resources at the end of the document is a poorly curated mix of email addresses and links to actual policy documents, none of which includes research or supporting evidence. By failing to specify the criteria and methods used to determine what makes policy practices "the best" and by ignoring the variations and complexities of individual state contexts, the report lacks both the nuance and the detail required to be useful.

Notes and Resources

- 1 Ross, E., Gerber, N., Jarmolowski, H., Lakis, K., Ledyard, N., Staresina, L. & Worth, C. (2017). *2017 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. National Summary*. Washington, DC: NCTQ.

According to NCTQ, the nine goals were originally established by its Board of Directors and “distinguished” Advisory Board with comments from multiple education policy groups, scholars, and practitioners. NCTQ asserts that the nine goals are: based on the best available research, practical, cost neutral, and responsive to both the teaching profession’s needs and state constraints. However, there is no research evidence cited in the *State Policy Yearbook Database* nor is it made clear how these nine areas were determined.

- 2 Ross, E. & Worth, C. (2018). *State Teacher Policy Best Practices Guide*. Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality.

- 3 See, for example:

American Educational Research Association (2015). AERA statement on use of value-added models (VAM) for the evaluation of educators and educator preparation programs. *Educational Researcher*, 44(8), 448-452;

Cochran-Smith, M., Baker, M., Chang, W-C., Fernandez, M.B., & Keefe, E.S. (2017). *NEPC Review: Within Our Grasp: Achieving Higher Admissions Standards in Teacher Prep*. National Education Policy Center: Boulder, CO. Retrieved May 17, 2018, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-admissions>;

Feuer, M.J., Floden, R.E., Chudowsky, N., & Ahn, J. (2013). *Evaluation of teacher preparation programs: Purposes, methods, and policy options*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Education;

Meyer, E.J. (2016, December 13). *Review of “Smart, skilled, and striving: transforming and elevating the teaching profession.”* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved May 17, 2018, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-tprep>;

National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (2009). *A practical guide to evaluating teacher effectiveness*. Washington, DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality..

- 4 Ross, E., Gerber, N., Jarmolowski, H., Lakis, K., Ledyard, N., Staresina, L. & Worth, C. (2017). *2017 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. National Summary*. Washington, DC: NCTQ.

- 5 For example:

Akiba, M. & LeTendre, G. (Eds.) (2018) *The Routledge international handbook of teacher quality and policy*. New York, NY: Routledge;

Day C. (2012). *The Routledge international handbook of teacher and school development*. London & New York: Routledge;

World Bank. (2012). *What matters most in teacher policies? A framework for building a more effective teaching profession*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

- 6 See, for example:

Akiba, M. (2013). *Teacher Reforms around the world: Implementation and outcomes*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing;

Darling-Hammond, L., Burns, D., Campbell, C., Goodwin, L., Hammerness, K., Low, E.,...Zeichner, K. (2017). *Empowered educators: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality around the world*. Marblehead, MA: Wiley & Sons;

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- 7 Akiba, M. (2017). Teacher reforms in global context: Research and policy dialogues. *Educational Researcher*, 46(4), 153-168;
- Rice, J.K., Roelke, C., Sparks, D., & Kolbe, T. (2008). Piecing together the teacher policy landscape: A policy problem, typology. *Teachers College Record*, 111(2), 511-546;
- Tatto, M.T. (2006). Education reform and the global regulation of teachers' education, development, and work: A cross-cultural analysis. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 45(4-5), 231-241.
- 8 Teacher Policy Research (TPR), a partnership among the University of Virginia, Stanford University, and the University of Albany, that has published a large body of research about teacher pathways and teacher quality issues. <http://cepa.stanford.edu/tpr/overview>;
- CPRE, the Consortium of Policy Research in Education, which includes multiple universities and has conducted research over many years regarding teacher evaluation, teacher compensation, teacher attrition/retention, teacher preparation, and professional development. <http://www.cpre.org/>
- 9 Carter, P. & Welner, K. (Eds.) (2013). *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press;
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- Rothstein, R. (2013). Why children from lower socioeconomic classes, on average, have lower academic achievement than middle-class children. In P. Carter & K. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 10 Akiba, M. & LeTendre, G. (Eds.) (2018) *The Routledge international handbook of teacher quality and policy*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 1;
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- 11 Cochran-Smith, M., Baker, M., Chang, W-C., Fernandez, M.B., & Keefe, E.S. (2017). *NEPC Review: "Within Our Grasp: Achieving Higher Admissions Standards in Teacher Prep"*. National Education Policy Center: Boulder, CO. Retrieved May 17, 2018, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-admissions>;
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- 12 Sawchuk, S. (2017, May 7). Diversity at issue as states weigh teacher entry. *Education Week*;
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- 13 National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (n.d.). *NAEP: A common yardstick*. Retrieved April 28, 2018, from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/>
- 14 Phillips, D. (2012, September 18). *The Perils of Policy Borrowing*. Centre for Education Research and Policy. Retrieved March 12, 2013, from <https://crp.aqa.org.uk/perspectives/perils-policy-borrowing>;
- Steiner-Khamsi, G. & Waldow, F. (2012). *World yearbook of education 2012: Policy borrowing and lending in education*. London: Routledge.