

# Alliance for Quality Education: Agenda for School Improvement

## Quality Teaching for Every Student

Parents recognize that excellent classroom teaching is key to their children's academic success. We also know that our most troubled schools, those in low-income communities, often lack the resources and supports necessary to attract, develop and keep the best teachers. The state's education deficit is, at least in part, a reflection of the disparities in the distribution and support of exceptional teachers in our schools. Our challenge is to provide high quality teaching to every student, in every school, to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Effective teachers are developed over time. Effective schools are places that help develop those teachers through a school culture where educators are encouraged to constantly improve their skills—and are provided with the support and guidance to do so. Effective schools are places where educators can take leadership roles, and where they can look to their peers for guidance.

The current trend which promotes identifying and getting rid of “bad” teachers does not address the essential question of how to support the overwhelming majority of good teachers to help them get better.

Quality teaching *and learning* emerge when schools foster a culture of shared leadership and responsibility, high expectations, strong support and fair accountability.

### What Policy Initiatives contribute to high quality teaching and learning environments in our schools?

Strong schools require strong leadership, willing to share responsibility and committed to supporting both students and staff. We support programs that recruit and train effective school leaders. Teacher training programs are equally important. We support efforts to strengthen and deepen teacher licensing programs to ensure that our newest teachers are well prepared before they step into a classroom of their own. But teacher training should not stop when teaching starts—it should just be the beginning.

*Schools need to be structured for ongoing learning, reflection and evaluation.* We believe the following components need to be in place to build schools as learning communities. New York State is moving in the right direction on these structures:

**CAREER LADDERS** systematically identify experienced and highly skilled teachers and give them increased responsibility and vital leadership roles. Career ladders have been found to help motivate and retain strong teachers by providing a career pathway and rationale for achieving new levels of expertise.<sup>1</sup> Career ladders allow new teachers to be mentored and supported by more experienced peers. New York State is currently phasing in its new “career development continuum,” a career ladder that is scheduled to be approved by the Board of Regents in 2012.

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1. “The Effects of a Career Ladder Program on School Organizational Process.” By Howard Ebmeier and Ann Weaver Hart. EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION AND POLICY ANALYSIS **September 21, 1992** vol. 14 no. 3 **261-281**

**COMPREHENSIVE INDUCTION** programs support new teachers in their first 3 years of teaching and are intentionally designed to foster relationships, collaboration and trust among teachers.<sup>2</sup> Too often induction programs only provide mentors for first year teachers. We support a much more robust form of induction which research shows not only better supports teachers, but helps to build schools as learning communities.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT** must meet the specific needs of teachers, school by school. High quality professional development is multi-faceted. It not only trains teachers how to use a curriculum, but supports individual teachers to help them grow and develop their instructional skills. Good professional development helps strengthen teachers' capacity to promote critical thinking and creativity in their students. High quality professional development also includes structures to hold teachers accountable to each other and to their students. In order to deliver comprehensive and supportive professional development, schools should have *internal capacity* to provide hands-on support—mentoring, demonstration classes, study groups—to teachers, and *external supports* to ensure that teachers in each building are able to talk with and learn from peers in other buildings through teacher centers or district-coordinated opportunities.

**SCHOOL SCHEDULES** need to be re-imagined, so that they open up the time necessary for teachers to work together and for students to receive extra support as needed. Unfortunately, in low-performing schools these days, teachers are under immense pressure to produce immediate test score improvements. In order to provide a more well-rounded educational experience, teachers as well as students need more time to deepen the learning process.

New York State has signaled its philosophical support for all four of these strategies by including them as part of its federal Race to the Top (RTT) and Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants. But these grants programs are currently targeted at only a small number of the lowest-performing schools in the state.

If we are serious about closing our education deficit, we must have a plan to implement these strategies in a way that reaches all of our struggling schools.

## **A New System for High Quality, Equitable Staffing**

New York State is currently rolling out its “career development continuum,” or career ladder for teaching. The continuum establishes four levels of achievement for teachers, and attaches additional responsibilities and compensation for teachers as they reach these levels of excellence in their practice. It’s a start.

*Career ladders should not just recognize excellent teaching—they should be the foundation for a comprehensive staffing structure that guarantees that each school an appropriate and equitable share of teachers at all levels of expertise and experience. Career ladders should be connected to the way schools are staffed in order to help both teachers and students. We call this “professional staffing.”*

Professional staffing brings to schools the kind of internal structure that is taken for granted in other professions: Hospitals are staffed with residents, interns and specialists who teach and learn from each other. Fire stations always are structured to include sergeants, drivers, hose-operators, paramedics and others who assume specific roles and develop specific skills to ensure that each “company” can effectively tackle the worst blazes. Schools, too, must be staffed as teaching and learning institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> “Induction Programs that Keep New Teachers Teaching and Improving.” Harry K. Wong. NASSP Bulletin, Vol. 88 No. 638 March 2004.

With Professional Staffing, districts would establish a *uniform staffing model*, guaranteeing that each school will have a sufficient number of teachers at each level of the career development continuum to create a teaching and learning environment that offers the best instruction and the best teacher supports inside each building. For example, under a Professional Staffing system, high schools might automatically be assured of having at least one “Teacher Leader” (the NYS Continuum’s highest step) in each subject area, who would serve as the department head. In addition, there might be required slots for two Master Teachers per grade level, per subject area, and four Professional Teachers at each grade level. There would be a ceiling on the number of Novice Teachers that could be placed in the school, to ensure that each Novice Teacher would have the support of a cohort of more experienced teachers within the building. These numbers are used as a simple example: the actual staffing structure would also depend on the size of the school, of course, and would vary between elementary, middle and high schools.

The key promise of Professional Staffing is to build schools that, by structure, are established as learning institutions for the staff they employ. No longer would some schools have a disproportionate share of first or second-year teachers (in some schools around the country, over 70% of teachers have less than five years experience!!), struggling along without the guidance of more experienced peers. Professional Staffing gives meaning and substance to the New York State Career Development Continuum.

By utilizing a Professional Staffing model along with structural supports for better teaching – like comprehensive induction and additional planning/collaboration time—we can begin to change the culture of schools so that teaching becomes a collaborative effort to provide the best instruction for all students.

## Is This a Totally New Idea?

The idea that schools should have specific positions for highly skilled educators whose responsibilities include professional development or training is not new at all. New York City (through a collaboration between the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools, the City’s Department of Education and the United Federation of Teachers) placed cohorts of highly skilled “Lead Teachers” into schools to help with reading instruction. In Montgomery County, Maryland, each school has a “Staff Development Teacher” who coordinates professional development and acts as a coach and mentor for teachers in the building. Hopewell, Virginia’s teacher induction program (see sidebar) guarantees that every new teacher has a range of more experienced peers to support them in their first years.

Dozens of school districts utilize their best teachers in such ways. But few districts actually employ a comprehensive professional staffing model.

In **HOPEWELL, VIRGINIA**, a comprehensive teacher induction program provides a glimpse of professional staffing in action. In every Hopewell school, new teachers have the support of three on-site professionals to help them develop classroom management and organizational skills, and effective planning and teaching skills. Each school is staffed with:

- ✓ **“H.A.T.S. Buddies”** (which stands for “Hopewell Assisting Teachers for Success”) who are strong teachers with three or more years of experience in the district. Buddies are assigned to new teachers in their same grade level or department, and provide basic information on school and district routines. The buddies also share ideas and provide a sounding board for new teachers;
- ✓ **“Lead Teachers,”** who are experts on the state’s standards of learning, and help new teachers with issues around the curriculum. Lead Teachers model lessons, provide technical assistance and make sure that all new teachers are fully familiar with the district and state expectations;
- ✓ **“SET Coaches”** (SET stands for Skills for Effective Teaching) demonstrate best practices in instruction and classroom management.

Professional Staffing is a new proposal, but its roots are in effective practices currently being used in districts across the country.

## What will the challenges be?

The implementation of professional staffing will take time. It requires the full implementation of the state's career development continuum. There needs to be a process—mutually agreed upon by educators and districts—for how transfers and adjustments will be made to achieve this new balanced approach to staffing.

Once professional staffing is in place, though, each school will be structured for collaboration and on-site coordination of supports for new or struggling teachers. It should go a long way towards creating cultures of learning in our schools—cultures that support teachers as well as students.

## Research and Further Reading:

"PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE LEARNING PROFESSION: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad" by Linda Darling-Hammond, Ruth Chung Wei, Alethea Andree, Nikole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos. Published by the National Staff Development Council and The School Redesign Network at Stanford University. February 2009 National Staff Development Council.

*"Policies to Enable Teacher Collaboration,"* Teachers Network.org. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/research/growth/dillon.htm>

*"Profiles in Excellence: Montgomery County, Maryland. A Districtwide Coalition to Improve Teaching through National Board Certification."* National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. 2010.

*"Induction Programs that Keep New Teachers Teaching and Improving,"* by Harry K Wong. NASSP Bulletin, Vol. 88 No. 638 March 2004 Retrieved from: <http://www.newteacher.com/pdf/Bulletin0304Wong.pdf>

*"Job Embedded Professional Development: What it is, who is responsible and how to get it done well."* **Issue Brief**, April 2010. National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, et al. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.tqsource.org/publications/JEPD%20Issue%20Brief.pdf>

*So Much Reform, So Little Change – The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools.* Charles M. Payne. Harvard Education Press, Cambridge. 2008.

For more information on the Hopewell City Schools teacher induction program, see a full description on their website, at:  
<http://www.hopewell.k12.va.us/education/components/whatsnew/default.php?sectiondetailid=3985&>