



## Lessons from Abroad

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The premise of the question seems to be that the route to teacher quality is to identify our best and worst teachers on the basis of the performance of their students on standardized tests, and to use that data to reward the best and get rid of the worst.

If test-based accountability was the key to national education success, we would expect to find policies of that sort in the countries with high quality teaching forces and top-performing students. But this is not what we find at all. Not one of the top-performing countries have policies of that sort. The top-performing countries agree that teacher quality is key to student performance but they have a very different idea about how to get it. They set pay for their teachers at levels comparable to their high status professions, they set very high standards for entry into teacher education institutions, and don't provide licenses to teach in their schools unless their teachers—even at the elementary school level—have very firm command of the subjects they will teach and have spent at least a year really mastering their craft. And they never, never waive those high standards for teachers in the face of teacher shortages. They don't have to, because they have more highly qualified teachers than they need. The top-performing countries have anywhere between six and ten applicants for every opening in their teacher education institutions.

Sometimes it seems as though we think we can fire our way to a top-quality teaching force, that people think we can somehow produce a top-quality teaching force by getting rid of our worst teachers. But where are their replacements supposed to come from? Our most successful competitors think the way to get a top quality teaching force is to make teaching very attractive to their best high school and college graduates. That's where they are placing all their bets.

Many of these points were made in a report to Secretary Duncan last December, a report that was presented by the OECD and prepared by the National Center on Education and the Economy under the supervision of the OECD. A few days ago, the Secretary proposed that teachers be paid on scale ranging from \$60,000 a year to \$150,000 a year and that standards for getting into our schools of education be greatly raised. This is a proposal that is moving in the right direction. The reader can find a detailed proposal of this kind in NCEE's report, *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (<http://www.ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Executive-Summary.pdf>).

So I would reframe the question on the table as follows: What should the federal government do to improve teacher quality? And my answer would be: Offer some

money to the states to do what the countries doing the best job of educating their students are doing about teacher quality. This does not include test-based accountability. It does include the points made above as well as others. The interested reader will find the full list of findings concerning what the top-performing countries are doing about teacher quality in *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems*, to be published in October by the Harvard Education Press.

Teacher quality is the result of a wide range of policies affecting the whole system of teacher recruitment, selection, education, compensation, training and mentoring. The single most important factor is the pool from which future teachers are selected. Only the state is in a position to build such systems. No single not-for-profit organization or school district is in a position to pull all these policies into alignment except the state. The way to do it, then, is to run a competition among states interested in taking advantage of the experience of the top-performing nations to create world-class teaching forces for their schools. Such a competition would summarize what the research says about the methods being used by the top-performing countries, including the variation among them from country to country. It would not be dogmatic about the steps to be taken, the targets to be hit or the standards to be set. The proposals would be judged on the basis of whether the state had put together a coherent, powerful proposal, based on the experience of the top-performing nations, that was well adapted to the realities and ambitions of the state and whether the reader believed that the state had the capacity to implement the plan it advanced. This would leave great latitude for states to propose plans that make sense to them.

And it would enable the United States to build its strategy for creating a high quality teaching force on empirical data on what really works at the scale of a state or nation, not ideology or guesswork.