



**Promoting Teacher Quality:  
Recommendations from the California Teachers Association**

A Policy Brief Submitted by the California Teachers Association

for

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## **Promoting Teacher Quality:** **Recommendations from the California Teachers Association**

As the organization representing 340,000 California educators, the California Teachers Association has a special interest in promoting teacher quality and quality teaching. CTA has concluded that teacher quality is a result of the relationship among several factors, three of which are addressed here: pre-service preparation, professional development, and the occupational environment in which teaching occurs.

Over the last 15 years, research has consistently identified the inextricable links between the quality of teachers, the quality of teaching, and the achievement of students (Darling-Hammond, 2005). And for years, much of the district and state-sponsored training for teachers has been inadequate, piecemeal and unrelated to the instructional work teachers do in their classrooms. Although California students are improving on measures of achievement, in order to increase this trajectory it is time for California policymakers to seriously address and remove the barriers not only to opportunities to learn, but also to opportunities to teach.

CTA believes meaningful pre-service preparation and professional development are essential to help all educators more ably address the learning needs of every student. Every effort should be made to identify and support research-based strategies to improve student learning. These strategies must be carried out in schools that have established conditions for teaching and learning that allow teacher and student success to flourish. Therefore, the California Teachers Association recommends:

### **Pre-Service Teacher Preparation**

- California's current battery of tests should be streamlined and revised to focus on evaluating the skills that candidates need to apply content knowledge to teach students with varying needs.
- Teacher preparation programs should include a supervised teaching component that more appropriately supports teacher collaboration.
- Standards for preparation program approval and continuing accreditation should require closer cooperation between university-based programs and K-12 systems, especially in the transition and placement of new teachers in appropriate teaching assignments.

### **Professional Development**

- Professional development and teacher learning programs should be aligned to state standards and the work teachers do in their classrooms. They must also meet locally determined needs.
- California should invest in a professional practice model that builds school based teacher learning communities and teacher leadership. Teacher leadership includes traditional roles such as mentoring and coaching and should be expanded to increase teacher authority in other areas of professional practice. Funding must be provided for teacher-directed professional development that occurs during the workday and addresses the challenges of practice within the teachers' classrooms.
- California should fully fund professional development that spans the spectrum of a teacher's career, beginning with mentoring support for new teachers (Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment [BTSA]) and continuing through a comprehensive Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program.

### **Teaching Conditions**

- Teaching effectiveness should be recognized as more than the efforts and attributes of an individual teacher. Teachers are only as effective as the systems in which they work.
- California should invest sufficient resources to provide the teachers the facilities, tools, and resources necessary for effective instruction.

### ***Pre-service Teacher Preparation***

California's standards for becoming a certificated teacher are among the highest in the nation. In addition to course-based examinations, California requires high stakes certification tests including a basic skills test and the California Subjects Examination for Teachers (CSET), a test of subject-matter knowledge. These tests focus on a candidate's knowledge acquisition and retention; the tests do not help the credential candidate understand how to use that knowledge to teach students in effective ways. Although a teacher's knowledge is important, having the knowledge does not guarantee the teacher can use the knowledge appropriately or choose effective teaching strategies to improve student comprehension (Ball, 2007).

Supervised field experience (student teaching) focuses on the development of teacher candidates into effective teachers. Ideally, the supervised field experience allows teacher candidates to observe and analyze complex instructional skills and the tacit professional behaviors needed to be effective teachers (Barth, 2001). It is often assumed that teacher candidates learn from effective teachers by observing the skill set and training they bring to the classroom and by recognizing the processes and methods uniformly implemented that impact student development and achievement. Clift and Brady (2005) stress that teacher candidate beliefs and actions are not so easily changed. Teacher preparation programs are beginning to recognize that more intensive collaboration over extended periods of time is necessary to move teacher candidates beyond traditional ideas about teaching that they formed as students.

Ferguson and Brink (2004) demonstrated that when the supervising teacher is more collaborative, teacher candidates find ways to implement the instructional strategies they have learned. In addition, when teacher candidates are allowed to develop their own teaching style and repertoire of techniques, the students, the supervising teacher, and the teacher candidate are all likely to benefit. In other words, the potential for collaboration in a supervised teaching program develops effective teachers who learn how to integrate their knowledge with the skill to help students learn, comprehend, and use new information.

No one should be surprised by the fact that teacher candidates are often assigned to schools where the beliefs and instructional strategies differ from coursework in the teacher preparation program. Within this complex environment, Fullan (2001) would assert the university supervisor and the classroom teacher must collaborate even more closely to help the teacher candidate develop knowledge about the culture and the social organization of schooling and school change. Today, university programs are in a unique position to mediate the differences in teaching philosophies and school priorities. If teacher preparation programs focus training on the theory-to-practice connection, the success of the teacher candidates will improve along with the achievement of the students they teach over time (Neapolitan & Harper, 2001).

### ***Professional Development***

The link between high quality, sustained professional development for teachers and greater student learning is well known. Nonetheless, existing professional development policy and practice continue to promote fragmented activities only weakly connected to the challenges of teaching and learning as experienced by practitioners in high-need schools (Warren-Little, 2007). This type of professional development is unlikely to change teacher behavior or result in improved student achievement (Snow-Rennner & Lauer, 2005).

The model of professional development as something performed upon instructional staff by an external expert has so permeated public and professional perception that Fullan (2007) identifies the use of the term *professional development* as a "major obstacle to progress in teacher learning"

(p. 35). CTA believes that both the language and the substance of teacher learning must be redefined so that opportunities for authentic development of professional expertise are supported by policy and practice. Therefore, CTA supports the concept of a *professional practice model*. This approach promotes the type of teacher learning which leads to improved instruction and improved outcomes in student achievement, within the structural and contextual supports necessary to sustain it.

The foundation of the professional practice model is a community of adult learners who engage in continuous inquiry to improve their collective and individual professional knowledge and capacity. Teachers are the connection between the community of adults and the enactment of new classroom practice resulting from refined professional knowledge, skills, and abilities, all of which should be aligned to the goal of assisting students in meeting state content standards.

The professional practice model is a collaborative, job-embedded learning approach. It is neither discrete nor separated in time or place from the work of classroom instruction, and in this way is anchored in locally determined needs. Its description as a professional practice model is accordingly appropriate. The content of the inquiry is specific to the students at the school. Sonstelie's (2007) contribution to the *Getting Down To Facts* project underscored the desire of teachers to engage with their colleagues in this effort. This finding aligns with previous studies, several of which are specific to California (Futernick, 2007; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). Such a professional practice model looks very different from current policy. Current policy provides three professional development days funded through the Instructional Time and Staff Development Reform program (ITSDR). Scavenging time for a monthly "teacher collaboration" meeting as envisioned by California's Essential Program Components has not been consistent, efficient, or effective in implementing an inquiry-based collaborative teacher learning enterprise.

A professional practice model cannot exist without the structural supports necessary to sustain it. Along with sufficient collaboration time provided within the teacher workday, a professional practice model requires a new definition of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership in this setting must be both collaborative and distributive. Because pedagogical expertise resides primarily in teachers, logic dictates that leadership of the community rests in their hands.

A recent benchmarking study on professional development (APQC, 2007) highlights the importance of teacher leadership in professional learning initiatives. Of the 15 reported findings, one stands out as particularly relevant to the intersection of leadership and learning communities. Districts with strong professional development practices that lead to student learning gains are far more likely to involve school level instructional staff (teachers, principals, and support staff) in the design of learning opportunities. This practice engenders a culture of ownership that is qualitatively different from other schools with lower student achievement outcomes. In districts identified as "best-practice districts" teachers are more likely to be involved in the design of school-based professional development for the site administrators and other school-based instructional support staff.

Fully funded BTSA and PAR programs provide robust professional learning opportunities for new and veteran teachers. The Peer Assistance and Review Program, created through legislation in 1999, developed into a cooperative effort by school districts and teachers to assist classroom teachers for the purpose of improving instruction and student performance. PAR is a major step in expanding the authority of teachers in managing the profession by utilizing their expertise to provide collegial support, assistance, and review; however, state funding cuts curtailed the program before its full effect could be realized. Conversely, the success of BTSA induction programs are well known and provide concrete evidence that teacher collaboration enables program goals to be reached. According to 2006-07 data released by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 87% of new teachers who participate in BTSA remain in the classroom after four years compared to 50% of new teachers nationwide.

## *Teaching Conditions*

It makes sense that teachers will be more or less effective in meeting the goals of student achievement to the degree that they have the necessary tools, resources, and inspiration available to them in their workplace. Harris and Rutledge (2007) assert that most empirical research on teacher effectiveness has focused on the individual teacher as the unit of analysis at the expense of the organizational context of the school in which teaching occurs. Research indicates that teaching conditions have both direct and indirect effects on student performance.

For example, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) has identified five conditions that are instrumental in effective instruction: time, quality school leadership, teacher empowerment, professional development, and adequate facilities and resources. In North Carolina, a state which studies teacher working conditions, school leadership was the single greatest predictor of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status at the middle school level. For every one point increase in measures of quality leadership, schools were nearly seven times more likely to have made AYP. While leadership is not confined to the principal, the presence of an effective principal is central to an effective school. “Effective principals build instructional capacity, enable their teachers to become more effective, and ...increase the likelihood that their teachers will remain committed to schools in which they are teaching” (Futernick, 2007, p. 63).

A mechanism that appears to play a critical role in student achievement is the relationship between teaching conditions and a teacher’s commitment to student learning, mediated by the teacher’s sense of self-efficacy (Jerald, 2007). Jerald suggests that collective efficacy of a teaching staff may be even more powerful in supporting student achievement than teachers’ individual perceptions of efficacy, further bolstering the importance of teacher collaboration in every aspect of a school’s endeavors.

The conditions that contribute to increased student achievement are also the same conditions that promote teacher recruitment and retention, a major goal of California’s K-12 system. An aging California teaching force is a reality; nearly one-third of California’s teachers are older than 50 and half of those are over the age of 55. California will need to recruit over 100,000 new teachers in the next 10 years just to keep up with retirements and attrition. (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning [CFTL], 2005). There are solutions to the teacher labor shortage. “The good news...is that if teachers get what they want and what they need to be truly effective in the classroom, and if these satisfied teachers stay, then we will discover that California has far more good teachers than we thought” (Futernick, 2007, p. 7).

Because teacher shortages and teacher turnover disproportionately affect schools of greatest need, improving teaching conditions is a key lever in attracting and retaining qualified teachers to hard-to-staff schools. The state must live up to its obligation to ensure that supportive teaching and learning conditions are fully present in all California public schools.

Teachers are vested by the public with a trust and responsibility requiring the highest standards for professional service. Improving the conditions of teaching and learning means teachers must be supported in their efforts to focus on student learning. Every effort should be made to identify and support research-based and teacher-student friendly strategies to improve programs, schools, and the professional practice of teaching. Effective professional development must be consistent with current research and based on the needs of students and school programs. There must therefore be continued, systematic and coherent attention to the needs of both individual educators and the schools in which they work.

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