

Recruiting, Equitably Assigning, and Retaining Strong Teachers for School Improvement

Use this advocacy guide to encourage schools and districts to address inequities in access to strong teachers between and within schools.

What do we know?

- **Teachers matter.** Students with strong teachers [make significant learning gains](#). There's no perfect definition of strong teachers, but states tend to use a number of proxies including effectiveness, observation ratings, years of experience, or expertise in a subject and/or grade band.
- **There are [inequities in access to strong teachers between schools and even within schools](#).** The highest-poverty schools fail to provide strong teachers the support they need to be successful and stay. In lower need schools, meanwhile, students who are struggling most are too often assigned to teachers who are also struggling the most.
- **These patterns are not inevitable.** For example, although teachers are, on average, almost twice as likely to leave a high-poverty school as a low-poverty school, this difference nearly disappears when teachers are satisfied with the [leadership and staff cohesion](#) at their school.
- **Teacher diversity matters.** Students of color are far less likely than their White peers to encounter a teacher who looks like them. While teacher diversity is important for all students, including White students who undoubtedly benefit from the opportunity to learn from teachers of other races and ethnicities, teacher diversity is especially important for students of color who are more likely to [attend school regularly](#), perform [higher](#) on [end-of-year assessments](#), [be referred to a gifted program](#), [graduate high school](#), and consider college when they have a teacher of the same race or ethnicity.
- **Money matters, but it alone is not sufficient.** [Research shows](#) that financial incentives may help schools retain strong and [diverse](#) teachers, but the effects fade after those incentives stop.
- **School, district, and state leaders** have critical responsibilities related to the **recruitment and placement, development and support, and retention** of strong and diverse teachers.

Advocacy guide roadmap

This guide focuses on decisions that, in most states, are made by school and district leaders (for information about the role of state education leaders, see [Improving Access to Strong Teachers and Increasing Teacher Diversity](#)) and what advocates can do to influence those decisions. It suggests:

- **Key questions to ask leaders** about the lowest-performing schools and schools that are underperforming for any group of students — **and what to look for and watch out for in the answers** — to ensure that improving teaching quality is an integral part of school improvement efforts
- **Examples** of districts that are rising to the challenge and implementing promising strategies to increase access to strong teachers
- Ways advocates can **use the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** to push district and school leaders to focus on access to strong teaching

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

1. What interventions have school leaders tried in the past and what were the results?
2. Why do district or school leaders think the proposed intervention will work?
3. How will district or school leaders plan for and implement the intervention?
4. How will district or school leaders know if this approach is working?
5. What will district or school leaders do if it doesn't work, and when?

► QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT *school-wide challenges and inequities between schools*

For schools that are low-performing, start with these questions. Ask questions labeled “D” to district leaders and those labeled “S” to school leaders. But keep in mind that you may have to ask the same questions at both levels to figure out who makes a particular decision.

1. What will the district do to recruit an adequate number of strong teachers and help principals attract strong teachers to the lowest-performing schools? (D)

Look for:

Evidence-based strategies for:

- Increasing the number of strong, diverse teachers, such as hiring [earlier](#) or [faster](#), [partnering with preparation programs](#) to ensure alignment with district needs, or creating a careful [screening process](#); and
- Attracting strong teachers to the highest-need schools, such as prohibiting placement of teachers [rated “ineffective”](#) in these schools or prioritizing, Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools in [salary incentives](#) and with attention to increasing racial and linguistic diversity of the teacher workforce.

Watch out for:

Plans that:

- Only address district-wide recruitment, but not attracting teachers to the highest-need schools
- Don’t mention racial and linguistic diversity of teachers

2. In what areas do the teachers in your school struggle? (S)

Look for:

Specific answers based on data (e.g., observations, teacher surveys) used to understand the capacity of teachers in each grade band/subject across multiple domains, such as content area, particular instructional practices (e.g. phonics, student engagement, interdisciplinary instruction), or classroom management

Watch out for:

Answers that:

- Blame students/community
- Aren’t grade/subject specific
- Don’t match the school’s greatest needs

3. How will school and district leaders support teachers in areas in which they struggle? (S&D)

Look for:

[Evidence-based strategies that address teachers’ needs](#), such as:

- Creating teacher leadership models with clear roles for leaders and rigorous selection criteria that ensures a strong and diverse cadre of master practitioners
- Providing targeted and frequent cycles of observation, feedback, and coaching
- Dedicating large blocks of time (e.g., [90 min. per week](#)) for collaboration and ongoing, job-embedded professional learning facilitated by expert teachers
- Districts providing training in rigorous, standards-aligned curricula

Watch out for:

- Descriptions of things that don’t address the needs of teachers
- No consequences when teachers refuse to change practices

4. What are working conditions like in the lowest-performing schools? How do they compare to other schools in the district and state? (D)

Look for:

Analyses of:

- Principal qualifications and evaluation results
- Results from research-based [school climate](#) or teacher surveys that examine levels of trust and [collaboration](#) within the building (see [School Climate guide](#)). These data should be disaggregated by racial and linguistic group

Watch out for:

- Failure to look at data about working conditions or to disaggregate those data
- Blaming any poor working conditions that may exist on the students or community

5. What will the district do to support principals in developing and retaining strong teachers in the lowest-performing schools? (D)

Look for:

Strategies such as:

- Coaching principals on how to build a collaborative school culture and provide teachers with [helpful feedback](#) (see [School Leadership guide](#))
- Providing [financial incentives](#) to strong teachers in high-needs schools
- Recruiting [teams](#) of strong, diverse teachers to low-performing schools
- Creating paid leadership opportunities for strong teachers, such as mentoring new teachers or [facilitating staff professional development](#)

Watch out for:

Strategies that:

- Focus just on teacher recruitment, and not retention
- Rely only on financial incentives

► QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT *inequities in access to strong teachers within schools*

Where there are gaps in achievement within the school (including, but not only, in Targeted Support and Improvement schools), start with these questions. Ask questions labeled “D” to district leaders and those labeled “S” to school leaders. But keep in mind that you may have to ask the same questions at both levels to figure out who makes a particular decision.

1. How are decisions made about who teaches which classes? (S)

Look for:

School leaders know who their strongest teachers are and have a strategy for assigning them to classes that include the students for whom the school is underperforming (district leaders may need to enable this through collective bargaining)

Watch out for:

- Assignment based only on seniority or teacher preference

2. How will the district support principals in — and hold them accountable for — assigning strong teachers to the students for whom the school is underperforming? (D)

Look for:

- Actionable data provided by the district on assignment to strong teachers
- Strategies that build principals’ capacity to [assign students to teachers who are equipped to meet their academic needs and to incentivize teachers to teach courses with more struggling students](#)
- District leaders include retention of, and equitable assignment to, strong teachers as a criterion in principal evaluation

Watch out for:

- District-approved improvement plans that don’t explicitly address assignment to strong teachers

3. In what areas are teachers struggling to serve students for whom the school is underperforming? (S)

Look for:

Specific answers, such as culturally proficient teaching practices, teaching academic vocabulary to English learners during regular classroom instruction, or providing structured literacy instruction for students with learning disabilities

Watch out for:

Answers that:

- Blame students/community,
- Don’t match students’ most urgent needs

4. What will the district and school do to develop the knowledge and skills of teachers assigned to the students for whom the school is underperforming? (D & S)

Look for:

- Evidence-based strategies for developing teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to better teach the students the school is underserving, such as [in-person](#) or [web-based](#) coaching
- Support or subsidies for earning special education or English learner/bilingual certifications

Watch out for:

- Descriptions of activities that aren't tailored to specific needs of struggling teachers
- Explanations that blame students or families
- No consequences for refusing to change practices

5. How do teachers of different races and ethnicities or who teach different classes experience the working conditions of the school? (D)

Look for:

- Data on racial and linguistic diversity of teachers, teacher turnover rates, and responses from surveys or focus groups with teachers of color. (Lack of teacher diversity or high turnover of teachers of color may indicate [racial climate challenges](#) that impact both teachers and students)
- Data on teacher turnover rates and from surveys or focus groups with teachers of [English learners](#) and [students with disabilities](#) about support from school leadership and colleagues (see [School Climate guide](#))

Watch out for:

- Lack of data about how different teachers experience school climate
- Responses that dismiss the distinct experiences of teachers of color

A district that is rising to the challenge in improving access to strong teachers

[Several districts](#) have seen promising results from implementing teacher leadership models. For example, [Denver Public Schools \(DPS\)](#), one of the fastest-improving large districts in the country, created a program whereby lead teachers coach and develop a team of their colleagues. The district allocated more funding to high-need schools to implement these teaching teams.

How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act to urge district and school leaders to focus on the issue of access to strong teachers?

- **Improvement plans:** Under ESSA, school improvement plans for Comprehensive and Additional Targeted Support schools have to identify and address **resource inequities**. Advocates — who district and school leaders should consult under ESSA's stakeholder engagement requirements — can push leaders to prioritize access to strong teaching as an issue of resource equity.
- **Funding and Required Plans:** Districts must engage stakeholders when developing their applications to the state for funds from several titles under ESSA, including:
 - Title I (for education of students in poverty) and Title II, Part A (for improving the quality of the teacher workforce), in which they have to specify how they will make sure that low-income students and students of color in the district are not disproportionately taught by out-of-field, inexperienced, or ineffective teachers; and,
 - Title III, which can be used to support professional development for teaching English Learners.

Advocates can use these requirements to call on district leaders to address both within- and between-school inequities in access to strong teachers. Advocates can also encourage district leaders to make intentional use of Title IX funds, which can be used to increase teachers' capacity to respond to specific challenges in the education of homeless children and youth, and to apply for Teacher and School Leader Incentive Funds.

Additional resources

[***Achieving Equitable Access to Strong Teachers: A Guide for District Leaders***](#) (The Education Trust) shares lessons from districts across the country — and lays out a process that other districts can replicate to begin the work of changing inequitable patterns of access to strong teachers.

[***Building and Sustaining Talent: Creating Conditions in High-Poverty Schools That Support Effective Teaching and Learning***](#) (The Education Trust) describes the urgency of making high-poverty, low-performing schools satisfying places to work, and how some schools and district are doing it.

[***Resource Check: Teaching***](#) (Education Resource Strategies) is a web-based self-assessment tool that allows district leaders to evaluate their resource choices around teaching.

[***Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections from Black Teachers***](#) and [***Our Stories, Our Struggles, Our Strengths: Perspectives and Reflections from Latino Teachers***](#) (The Education Trust) reveal the distinct experiences, perspectives, and assets of Black and Latino teachers, providing leaders with critical insight into recruiting and retaining teachers of color.