

Tackling Gaps in Access to Strong Teachers: What State Leaders Can Do



Of the many inequities in our education system, gaps in access to strong teaching have proven to be among the most stubborn. That's not to say that there aren't excellent teachers in high-poverty schools. But research shows an indisputable and widespread pattern in schools and districts across the U.S.: Low-income children and children of color do not have the same access to strong, consistent teaching as their White and higher-income peers.

Reversing these patterns will require action at all levels. Although district and school leaders make many of the decisions about recruiting, hiring, assigning, and supporting teachers, state education officials also have a critical role in addressing disparities in teaching quality.

Unfortunately, when the federal government recently called upon states to propose how they would address inequities in assignment to strong teachers, most state officials only provided descriptions of broad efforts to raise overall teaching quality. But a few state plans show examples of equity-focused initiatives that could inform the work of other states. In this report, we outline five ways that state education leaders can incentivize and support leaders in districts — both traditional and charter — to remedy inequities in access to strong teachers.

These lessons from states and districts show that to overturn inequities in access to strong teaching, state leaders must:

1

Be transparent about which students get which teachers. As the keepers of data systems, leaders in state departments of education are uniquely positioned to provide district and school leaders — and the public — transparent information on patterns in assignment to strong teachers at the district, school, and classroom levels, potential causes of these patterns, and their impact on children.

2

Set clear improvement expectations for leaders at all levels and make meeting those expectations matter. State leaders must set clear expectations, with numeric goals and timelines for eliminating inequities in assignment to strong teachers. And they must make those expectations matter to their own staff, district leaders, and school leaders.

3

Target resources to the districts and schools struggling most with this issue. If state leaders want districts to take action on this issue, they're going to have to provide some real support. Of course, state education agencies are responsible for serving all districts, but they must prioritize support to the districts and schools that need it most.

4

Develop networks of district leaders to problem-solve together. Staff at the state department of education is an important source of support for districts struggling to give equitable access to strong teaching to all students — but staff members aren't the only source. State leaders have an important role to play in helping district leaders learn from one another.

5

Break down silos between efforts to increase access to strong teaching and school improvement work. Often, the lowest performing schools are assigned teachers who have the fewest resources and the least support. Also, less equity-oriented school leaders often fail to assign students who need the most access to strong teachers. Because these disparities are a key driver of schools' underperformance, state officials must integrate work to increase equitable assignment to strong teachers and school improvement efforts.

In the coming months, state leaders are working to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires that states ensure low-income students and students of color are not served at disproportionate rates by inexperienced, out-of-field, or ineffective teachers. In doing so, these leaders have an opportunity to correct course and move beyond generic improvement strategies to include strong, equity-focused action. In the report, we describe many of the ways that ESSA supports the strategies described above.

But the goal of teacher-equity work should not simply be complying with federal law. It should be doing what's right for kids and communities. State leaders have had the power — and the responsibility — to support district and school leaders in closing these gaps for a long time. For the sake of the students who have been shortchanged for far too long, state leaders must exercise that power now.