Contents

CHAPTER 7

Doing What Matters Most: Developing Competent Teaching

> The experience of [high-performing] school systems suggests that three things matter most: 1) getting the right people to become teachers; 2) developing them into effective instructors and; 3) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.
>
> —Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed[1]

> As equality of opportunity comes to rest more squarely on the need for quality instruction, issues of how to enhance the professional competence of educators become more important. To ensure equal opportunity in today's context means enhancing, not limiting, the professional nature of teaching, and for that task state policy as it has been conceived in the past is hardly the best instrument . . . We need new ways of conceiving the state role and the strategies at the state's disposal.
>
> —Richard Elmore and Susan Fuhrman[2]

Nations that have steeply improved their students' achievement, such as Finland, Korea, Singapore, and others, attribute much of their success to their focused investments in teacher preparation and development. Creating an infrastructure that can routinely recruit and prepare teachers effectively and can support successful teaching at scale is the arena in which the United States has lagged the most. Although there are some great teachers in every community, and some strong professional preparation and development programs sprinkled across the country, the landscape of supports for quality teaching looks like Swiss cheese. In some states, the holes are smaller, and in others they are gaping, but in no case is there a fully developed system of instructional support even remotely comparable to that in high-achieving nations. And of course, as we have seen, the system is weakest in communities where students' needs are greatest.

Some have argued that the answer to weak teaching in the United States is to eliminate "barriers" to teaching, such as teacher education and certification requirements, allow anyone into the classroom who wants to teach, and fire those who prove not to be effective.[3] Often, this idea is accompanied by arguments for performance incentives, including merit pay, tied to student test scores. Although the interest in teacher effectiveness is important and overdue, this approach does not offer a strategy to ensure that teachers will have opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills they need in order to be effective, or that all schools will have the resources to entice and hire the best teachers. Nor does it protect the students—almost always those in low-income, high-minority schools—who will be the victims of unprepared novices in the years until these teachers have proved their mettle, demonstrated their incompetence, or left the field.

A prescription focused on easy access and easy firing ignores the question of how to develop widespread teaching competence and ensure a strong supply of highly able teachers for all schools. Without such a supply, principals will be unable to hire strong teachers even if they are free to hire whomever they please, and, evidence shows, they are unlikely to fire weak teachers, because they feel they won't be able to replace them. Even if they do, there is little guarantee that the quality of teaching will improve. Although there are good reasons to argue for stronger evaluation practices for removing incompetent teachers and for recognizing excellent ones (issues I treat later in this chapter), a theory that the major problems with teaching can be solved by carrots and sticks alone leaves the development of teaching competence to chance.

No high-achieving country approaches teaching in this way. These nations realize that, without a comprehensive framework for developing strong teaching, new resources in the system are less effective than they otherwise would be: Reforms are poorly implemented where faculty and leaders lack the capacity to put them into action; districts and schools are often unable to develop and maintain comprehensive training opportunities at scale, and scarce professional development dollars are wasted where teachers turn over regularly. Furthermore, when a profession's knowledge is not organized and made available to the practitioners who need it most, advances in the state of both knowledge and practice are slowed.

Although researchers have extensive and growing knowledge about how people learn and how to teach them effectively,[4] such knowledge is useless for improving practice unless it gets into the hands and minds of teachers and administrators who need to use it. The American university system has provided incentives for publishing articles in research journals not read by practitioners, and has only occasionally developed strong professional preparation programs that use this research and train practitioners to use it—which is the route by which knowledge would actually travel to the field.

Although it is common to hear at professional conferences that "we know how to create effective schools and classrooms," the "we who know" about what has proven effective does not include the broad swath of educators in the trenches. This conversation encompasses a small subset of practitioners who have gained access to strong training and other elites—pundits, consultants, and researchers—who talk mostly to one another. The American tradition of under-investing in preparation creates relatively little shared knowledge or skill within and across individual schools, except in extraordinary districts and in those states like Connecticut that have tackled a system-wide set of investments around shared standards and learning while eliminating the practice of emergency teacher hiring (see Chapter 5).

If teachers, principals, superintendents, and other professionals do not share up-to-date knowledge about effective practices, the field runs around in circles: Curriculum and teaching practices are inconsistent, many poor decisions are made, and the efforts of those who are successful are continually undermined and counteracted by the activities of those who are uninformed and unskilled. The American educational landscape is littered with examples of successful programs and schools that were later undone by newly arrived superintendents and school boards marching to a less-well-informed drummer. Equally common are successful initiatives that were not sustained when the teachers and principals who made them succeed moved on to be replaced by others with less skill.

Good teachers create little oases for themselves, while others who are less well prepared adopt approaches that are ineffective or even sometimes harmful. Some seek knowledge that is not readily available to them; others batten down the hatches and eventually become impermeable to better ideas. Schools are vulnerable to vendors selling educational snake oils when educators and school boards lack sufficient shared knowledge of learning, curriculum, instruction, and research to make sound decisions about programs and materials. Students experience an instructional hodge-podge caused by the failure of the system to provide the knowledge and tools needed by the educators who serve them.

These counterproductive conditions will continue until teaching becomes a profession like medicine, architecture, accounting, engineering, or law, in which every practitioner has the opportunity and the expectation to master the knowledge and skills needed for effective practice, and makes the moral commitment to use this knowledge in the best decisions of their clients. Teaching is today where medicine was in 1910, when Abraham Flexner conducted the famous study of medical education that eventually led to its overhaul. At that time, doctors could be prepared in a 3-week training program in which they memorized lists of symptoms and corresponding "cures" or, at the other extreme, in a graduate program of medicine at Johns Hopkins University that included extensive coursework in the sciences of medicine along with clinical training in the newly invented teaching hospital.