

# Making Education Work for All Students

**T**he US is one of only two industrialized countries in which today's young people are no more likely than previous generations to complete high school.<sup>1</sup> In fact, about one in four students doesn't graduate on time.<sup>2</sup> And even among those who do, about 40 percent of them lack the skills necessary to succeed in college and the 21st-century workplace.<sup>3</sup>

Once the global leader in educational attainment, the US school system is no longer keeping pace. Now, America has slipped to eighth in the world in the percentage of young adults with college degrees.<sup>4</sup>

And at the K–12 level, one-fourth of eighth-graders and one-third of fourth-graders still read below the basic level on national examinations.<sup>5</sup> In math, 29 percent of eighth-graders and 19 percent of fourth-graders scored below basic.<sup>6</sup>

⋮ Kati Haycock  
⋮ The Education Trust



Although it's difficult to track the national dropout rate, many organizations estimate that **every 26 seconds, a student drops out of school in America. That's more than 1.3 million students per year.**<sup>1</sup>

## from the editor

To reverse this trend, the way we “do school” in this country has to change. Two steps are crucial: setting higher expectations for all students and hiring and supporting strong teachers.

### High Expectations for All Students

Historically, the highest expectations and most resources have typically been set aside for the highest performing students. However, schools with the strongest records of student achievement set high goals; they also leave nothing about teaching and learning to chance. Teachers in these schools work together to ensure that they are all providing the same rigorous content at the same high levels to all students. States like Arkansas, Florida, and New York are making serious progress in closing gaps by adopting robust policies aimed at preparing every student for life beyond high school.

In recent years, Arkansas has ratcheted up expectations by emphasizing instruction across subject areas (for example, ensuring that social studies lessons reinforce reading and math) and by linking assessments and curricula to state standards. State standards are reviewed regularly to ensure appropriate rigor, beginning as early as kindergarten. And as expectations are raised, so too are minimum requirements to be deemed “proficient” on state tests. The result: Achievement is going up for all student groups, and

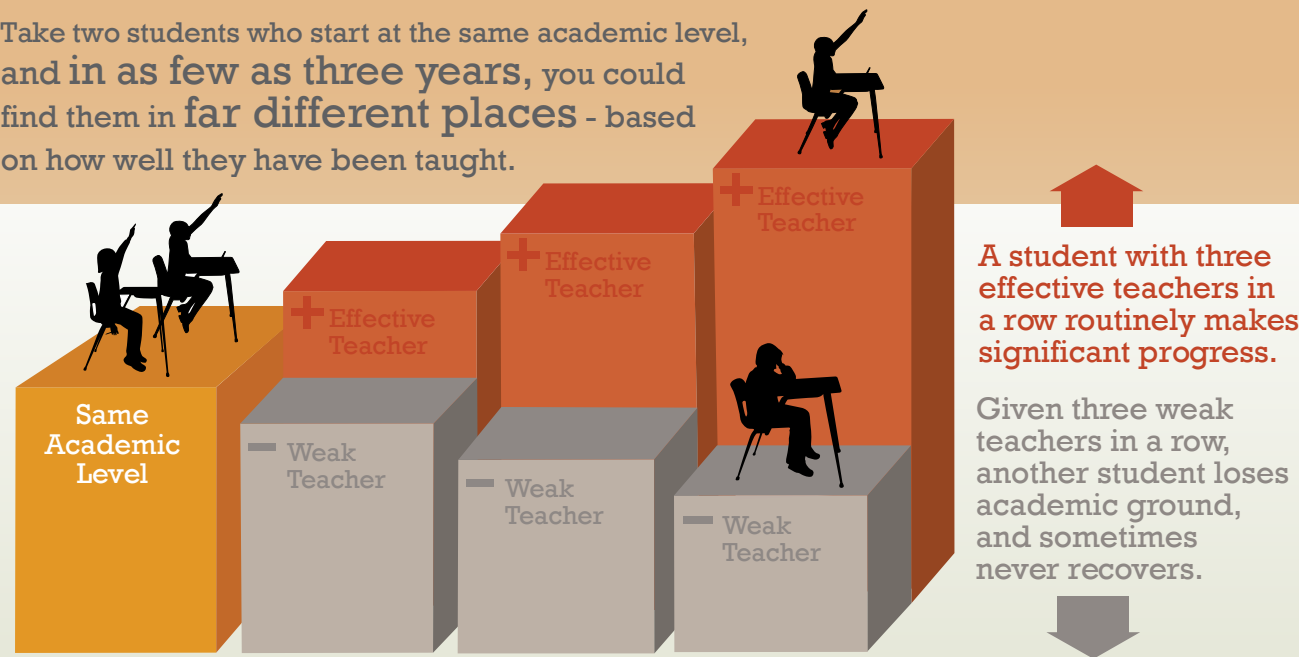
**Decades of research tell us that the single most important factor in a child's education is the quality of their teacher.**

gaps between racial and ethnic groups are narrowing on both state and national exams.

On the national exams, Arkansas was the biggest gainer in fourth-grade math achievement from over the past decade, and the second-biggest gainer in eighth grade. Arkansas also ranked among the top states in boosting math achievement in both grades for low-income students. Similarly, the state's improvement in writing was among the biggest in the nation, slashing by nearly half the number of low-income eighth-graders who scored below basic.

This kind of statewide improvement doesn't happen without a lot of local schools and districts pulling in the same direction. Norfolk Elementary School is a particularly good example. Located in a rural area known as the methamphetamine capital of the Ozarks, the school enrolls mostly children from low-income families. In recent years, four out of five Norfolk sixth-graders met or exceeded Arkansas' math standards. In fact, the school's test scores were so high

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that the state sent a monitor to the school in 2008 to ensure there was no cheating. That year, Norfolk's success continued: its sixth-grade literacy scores were third highest in the state.

A few years earlier, the district had put into place a number of improvements, including raising teacher salaries to compete with nearby districts, expanding communication with parents and families, and improving instruction. But the teachers themselves are adamant that one of the giant steps in the school's improvement was the implementation of Arkansas state standards. The standards allowed teachers to set clearer goals for classroom instruction and to fully align the curriculum so each year's learning provides the foundation for the next.

Reading classes also were increased to 90 minutes, which allows for whole-group instruction, cooperative learning, and independent time to allow teachers to work one-on-one with students. And as their results improved, and the teachers saw their kids could surpass the state standards, they chose to tie the curriculum closely to the even more rigorous national standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

### Hire and Support Strong Teachers

High standards, of course, don't accomplish very much without strong teachers to teach them. And not surprisingly, research tells us that the most important variable in a child's education is his or her teacher.

Take two students who begin second grade at the same academic level. By the end of fourth grade, you could find them at vastly different levels, depending on who teaches them. In fact, a student assigned to three effective teachers in a row will gain ground on peers, while one with three weak teachers in a row will lose ground, regardless of family background.<sup>7</sup> One study found that providing low-income elementary students in Texas with highly effective teachers (rather than merely average ones) would close the achievement gap.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to strong teaching, content knowledge is critical. On national math exams, eighth-graders taught by math majors scored ten points higher than those assigned to teachers who majored in other subjects. That ten-point difference is equivalent to roughly a year's worth of learning.<sup>9</sup> But tragically, too many students in America are assigned to teachers with inadequate training and skills. And in our middle and high schools, it's even worse for low-income students and students of



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### Re-thinking Teacher Tenure

A teacher's effectiveness has more impact on student learning than any other factor including class size, school size and quality of after-school programs.<sup>1</sup> Many national education reform movement proponents are calling for an end to the tenure systems in an effort to ensure all students have access to effective teachers.

When created early 20th century, the tenure system was designed to protect teachers, who were often fired for reasons unrelated to their work, including race, sex, political views or favoritism. Although it doesn't guarantee lifetime employment, the tenure system makes it difficult to let go of ineffective teachers. New York, Chicago and Los Angeles have each fired fewer than 1 out of 1,000 of their tenured teachers in recent years. Those numbers are not unusual. Reviews of dismissal cases can take years to make their way through the system, costing tens of thousands of dollars each.<sup>2</sup>

Michelle Rhee has been tackling teacher tenure debate since 2007 and it is a cornerstone of her national educational reform organization, StudentsFirst.

"Tenure is the holy grail of teacher unions," Rhee said, "but has no educational value for kids; it only benefits adults. If we can put veteran teachers who have tenure in a position where they don't have it, that would help us to radically increase our teacher quality."<sup>3</sup>

Several state governors are pushing to eliminate tenure and many districts are working to change teacher evaluation practices.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not the tenure system is abolished, the fact is teachers should be supported and evaluated based on the quality of their teaching and student results rather than contractual terms.

from the editor



Photo courtesy Phill Marmo/The New York Times/Redux

Math teacher John Squillace teaches a class for students who need extra help before school starts at Elmont Memorial High School.

color: They are about twice as likely as other kids to be taught core academics by out-of-field teachers.<sup>10</sup>

Successful schools are acutely aware of the importance of strong teachers, especially for their most vulnerable students. Take, for example, Elmont (NY) Memorial Junior-Senior High School, where most of the students are African American or Latino and the school's 96 percent graduation rate is almost twice the statewide average for similar students.<sup>11</sup> Early in the school's improvement process, then-principal Diane Scricca made sure all students had access to college-preparatory Advanced Placement (AP) classes, but she knew that some students would need considerable support in order to succeed in them. To teach AP US History, she assigned a dynamic teacher she had recently hired, supplanting a long-standing teacher who objected to working with students thought to not be "ready" for AP-level work.

"Every one of those kids passed [the class]," Scricca said, largely due to the skill, knowledge, and high expectations of the new teacher, John Capozzi. Fittingly, Capozzi is now the principal at Elmont and shares Scricca's passion for ensuring that his neediest students get the best teachers.

**Like professionals in other fields, teachers should be paid more if they are especially effective, and effective teachers should be paid more to take on the biggest challenges.**

At Elmont, school leaders spend a great deal of time ensuring that every new hire not only has the content knowledge and teaching skill needed to make a rigorous curriculum come to life, but also the "Elmont heart"—a love of kids, high expectations for all, a strong work ethic, and a willingness to spend time outside of the classroom to ensure that struggling students catch up.

Unfortunately, in too few places, teachers aren't supported or evaluated with the kind of single-mindedness employed at Elmont. The performance evaluation systems used in virtually every school system in America fail to differentiate between individual teachers who boost student learning and those who desperately need to improve. As a result of this quality-blind approach,



If we don't start to turn the trends around, to learn from the schools that are getting results, and to refuse to buy into the myths about who can learn & who can't, **we will relegate another generation of young Americans to lives on the margins.**

**Not because they couldn't learn, but because we simply didn't bother to teach them.**



Photo courtesy Chris Volpe Photography



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New Haven Public Schools have implemented a new evaluation system that will help make sure New Haven students get the best teachers possible.

**In every part of the country, there are schools that powerfully demonstrate that when you teach all students at high levels and provide them with adequate supports, all students can achieve at those high levels.**

the students who need the most from their teachers are far less likely to get those who can help them achieve at high levels—and the teachers who need help to improve are never identified for targeted training and professional development.

But some districts around the country, including the New Haven (Conn.) Public Schools, are beginning to change. In New Haven’s recently implemented evaluation system, all teachers will be evaluated on student progress on both statewide and teacher-generated exams, in addition to their instructional practice and professional values. School leaders can then use this information to assist them in teacher assignment, support, and dismissal decisions.

In 2010, after years of negotiation, a groundbreaking collective bargaining agreement was ratified in Washington,

DC, that revises the rules associated with developing and retaining teachers, all with the final goal of ensuring that a strong teacher is working in every city classroom.

No matter how you think about this—through the lens of the children or that of their teachers—more districts need to move in this direction. In communities big and small, all across the country, some schools are powerfully demonstrating that when we focus on high expectations and strong teachers, our children can achieve, even when they live in challenging circumstances.

Unless we stand up for quality schools for all, we will continue to relegate thousands of young Americans to lives on the margins. Not because they couldn’t learn, but because we simply didn’t bother to teach them.

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Photo courtesy cagdogblog, flickr

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## Making Higher Education Affordable

A postsecondary credential—whether it’s a bachelor’s degree, associate degree, apprenticeship, or certificate—is increasingly important for success in today’s economy. By 2018, more than six in 10 jobs will require some sort of postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup>

While college enrollment is at an all-time high today, more than half of all students who enter the postsecondary system don’t earn a degree or credential within eight years of enrolling.<sup>2</sup>

The number one reason students leave school is due to the stress of going to school and working at the same time. More than half of those who left higher education before completing a degree or a certificate said that the “need to work and make money” while attending classes was the major reason they left.<sup>3</sup>

According to one recent analysis, college costs have risen more than 400 percent in the last 25 years, while the median family income has increased less than 150 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Achieving a postsecondary credential can lift people out of poverty and into the middle class. National statistics show that young people who leave college without a degree are more likely than their peers to come from less privileged backgrounds and to live in more precarious economic circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

Making loans more available and keeping tuition costs in line are important for raising college completion, but the vast majority of young people who left college without a degree said more flexible schedules and help mitigating the challenge of working and going to school at the same time would also make graduation feasible.<sup>6</sup>

One set of solutions might revolve around making part-time attendance more viable by giving those students better access to loans, tuition assistance and healthcare—benefits and services that are frequently available only to full-time students. There may also be implications for employers. Business owners could find ways to help part-time workers to pursue higher education by providing access to health benefits and by offering more predictable or flexible working hours so that students can more easily schedule their classes.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis on the importance of a higher education credential makes sense given that the country is moving into a more knowledge-intensive-workplace economy. As a society, we need to support secondary education students all the way through graduation.

**from the editor**