POLICY BRIEF | February 2010

How Federal Education Policy Can Reverse the Widget Effect

Transforming ESEA Title II to Improve Teacher Effectiveness and Student Outcomes

Background: The Widget Effect

In June 2009, The New Teacher Project's study, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, drew national attention to the issue of ineffective teacher evaluation systems. The study documents how teacher evaluation systems ignore variations in performance, giving virtually all teachers positive ratings despite the fact that teachers and principals both say poor performance is common. As a result, excellence goes unrecognized, poor performance goes unaddressed, and a teacher's instructional effectiveness almost never factors into critical decisions such as how teachers are hired, developed or retained. To reverse the "widget effect," the study recommends that states and school districts:

widget effect:
The tendency to treat teachers like interchangeable parts rather than individual professionals, based on the false assumption that one teacher is the same as another.

www.widgeteffect.org

1. **Adopt a comprehensive performance evaluation system** that fairly, accurately and credibly differentiates teachers based on their effectiveness in promoting student achievement and provides targeted professional development to help them improve.
2. **Train administrators and other evaluators** in the teacher evaluation system and hold them accountable for using it fairly and effectively.
3. **Integrate the performance evaluation system** with critical human capital policies and functions such as teacher assignment, professional development, compensation, retention and dismissal.
4. **Address consistently ineffective teaching** through dismissal policies that provide lower-stakes options for ineffective teachers to exit the district and a system of due process that is fair but efficient.

Based on survey data from over 16,000 teachers and administrators across 12 districts in four states, as well as the insights of nearly 80 district, state and teachers union representatives, *The Widget Effect* drew widespread support. Among others joining in the call for change were Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; Congressman George Miller, Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee; and the presidents of both national teacher unions. The study's findings and recommendations have since been

reflected in the federal Race to the Top initiative's focus on effective teacher evaluation systems and appear in numerous states' applications for Race to the Top funding. Its push for including evidence of student achievement in teacher evaluations has been echoed by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten.

The New Teacher Project believes that the widget effect represents the single greatest challenge to improving teacher effectiveness and eliminating educational inequality. Until a teacher's effectiveness is accurately measured and matters in decision-making, the nation's schools will never be able to build a thriving teacher workforce capable of realizing sustainable improvement or closing the achievement gap. Shifting federal education policy to focus on measuring and responding strategically to differences in teacher effectiveness is essential, and the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) creates an opportunity to realize this shift.

ESEA Title II: Ripe for Rethinking

Title II(A) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is expressly intended to fund school district and state efforts to increase student achievement by improving teacher and principal quality. This is a critical objective, particularly in light of the unacceptable gap in achievement that has put poor and minority students at a disadvantage for decades. Unfortunately, the bulk of Title II funding is currently being expended in ways that do little to advance this worthy goal.

Approximately $3 billion is allocated for Title II, which amounts to about 5 percent of federal education spending. Nearly all school districts are recipients. Used as general funding to supplement district budgets, Title II is too modest to have a significant impact. However, if used strategically to fund innovative teacher effectiveness initiatives or improvement efforts that districts might otherwise be unable to undertake, Title II could become a powerful lever for addressing issues of teacher effectiveness highlighted in *The Widget Effect* and more meaningfully advance the goal of improving student achievement. The upcoming reauthorization of ESEA offers policymakers a valuable opportunity to transform Title II in this way.

Currently, nearly 80 percent of Title II funding is used by districts for reducing class sizes (38%) or providing professional development (39%). Both uses are problematic, as described below.

Class Size Reduction: Popular but Impractical

The debate over class size is one manifestation of the widget effect in that it ignores teacher effectiveness as the most critical school-level variable in student success. Schools should not have unmanageable class sizes, but initiatives solely intended to limit class sizes are generally high-cost and low-impact.

Though drastic class size reductions may produce meaningful gains for students, especially in the early grades,[1] Title II funding is not nearly sufficient for this purpose. Researchers have estimated that reducing class sizes to 18 students in grades 1-3 nationwide, for instance, would cost up to $6 billion

[1] Tennessee Department of Education (1990). The State of Tennessee's Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) Project: Summary Report. http://www.heros-inc.org/star.htm

annually and necessitate the hiring of 100,000 new teachers.[2] At current funding levels, Title II affords only insignificant class size reductions—far below what would be required to change student outcomes nationally.

Moreover, mounting research suggests that we have far more powerful tools at our disposal. The academic impact of reducing class sizes pales in comparison to the impact of providing students with highly effective teachers. For example, increasing the effectiveness of the teacher by one standard deviation (e.g., from "average" to "very good") would have approximately the same impact on a fifth grade classroom as reducing the class size by 13 students.[3] As University of Washington professor Dan Goldhaber notes, "A very good teacher as opposed to a very bad one can make as much as a full year's difference in learning growth for students. Indeed, the effect of increases in teacher quality swamps the impact of any other educational investment, such as reductions in class size."[4]

An outsized focus on class size reduction perpetuates the widget effect by overlooking and failing to act upon the differences in effectiveness among teachers. Such an approach presumes that teacher effectiveness is fixed, not variable, and that the solution to low student achievement is *more* teachers, not more *effective* teachers. A stronger federal policy would couple manageable class sizes with a deeper emphasis on teacher performance.

Professional Development: An Opportunity for Greater Impact

Similarly, high-quality professional development is a worthy expenditure that could help teachers and principals improve, as *The Widget Effect* makes clear. In practice, however, today's offerings are largely undifferentiated and unhelpful.

Without fair and accurate evaluation systems, it is impossible for school districts to provide effective professional development, because they cannot discern teachers' individual strengths or weaknesses. As documented in *The Widget Effect*, just 26 percent of teachers surveyed across 12 districts were told that any aspect of their performance was unsatisfactory or in need of improvement. The remainder reported receiving what were essentially perfect evaluations. An overwhelming majority of teachers studied were awarded the highest possible rating on their district's performance evaluation system, even those working in chronically failing schools.

Consequently, the professional development that school districts are able to offer is notoriously one-size-fits-all, and empirical evidence of its effectiveness improving student achievement is scant.[5] Of the teachers surveyed for *The Widget Effect* who had development areas identified on their most recent evaluations, less than half (45 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they received useful support to improve.

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[2] Brewer, Dominic J.; Cathy Krop, Brian P. Gill and Robert Reichardt (1999). "Estimating the Cost of National Class Size Reductions Under Different Policy Alternatives." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Vol. 21, No. 2, 179-192.

[3] Rivkin, Steven G.; Eric A. Hanushek, and John F. Kain (2005). "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement." *Econometrica*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (March, 2005), 417–458.

[4] Goldhaber, Dan (2009). "Teacher Pay Reforms: The Political Implications of Recent Research." Center for American Progress.

[5] As Chait and Miller note in "Ineffective Uses of ESEA Title II Funds" (Center for American Progress, 2009), "A recent review of 1,300 studies conducted by researchers at the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory found only nine studies that were sufficiently rigorous to include in their analysis. These nine studies did find positive effects, but they also found that "no professional development training lasting 14 or fewer hours had a positive impact on student achievement; in contrast, professional development of extended duration (an average of 49 hours) boosted student achievement by about 21 percentile points."

Currently, there is no requirement that professional development provided through Title II funds be linked to any assessment of a teacher's skills, or that districts show evidence of improvement after a teacher has received development. In short, there is almost no way of showing that these investments of hundreds of millions of dollars have any positive outcomes for teachers or students. This use of professional development funding perpetuates the widget effect by treating teachers as interchangeable components whose individual professional needs are not relevant, not considered and not met.

Refocusing Title II on Teacher Effectiveness

The research is clear: No school factor has a greater impact on student achievement than teacher effectiveness. While the purpose of Title II is to increase student achievement by improving teacher and principal quality, it inadvertently reinforces the notion that teachers are interchangeable. The impact of Title II could be increased dramatically if it were focused far more sharply on the prime objective of ensuring all children are taught by effective teachers.

Therefore, we propose a new vision for Title II. As part of the reauthorization of ESEA, Title II should be restructured as an **Equity Fund** specifically disbursed to help states and districts reverse the widget effect. By ensuring that teachers are properly evaluated and developed, and that poor and minority students have fair access to the most effective teachers, the nation's schools stand to make tremendous progress toward increasing educational equity.

Equity Fund Goals and Metrics

The Equity Fund should be structured around four overarching goals that school systems need to meet in order to improve student academic outcomes and close the achievement gap:

EQUITY FUND GOAL	METRIC
1 **Enhanced supply** of effective new teachers	Number and percentage of new teachers who meet an effectiveness standard based predominantly on student growth
2 **Differential retention** of top-performing teachers	Retention rate of highly effective and effective teachers compared to retention rate of ineffective teachers
3 **Improved effectiveness** of retained teachers over time	Average improvement in teachers' effectiveness from year to year
4 **Equitable access** to effective teachers for high-need children	Percentage of high-need students taught by highly effective and effective teachers, compared to peer groups

We recommend that districts and states be required to set specific objectives for each of the four Equity Fund goals--with particular attention to the Equitable Access goal. Funding should be awarded according to formulas and recipients should be free to select specific uses from a broad list, as long as they lead to measurable progress against all four Equity Fund metrics.

Each of the goals depends on strong systems for assessing teacher effectiveness. Districts and states that do not adopt and faithfully implement effective teacher evaluation systems, with multiple rating categories and significant weight placed on student academic growth, should not be eligible for Equity Fund grants. This requirement is in keeping with the recommendations from *The Widget Effect*, which

pointed to credible, accurate evaluation systems as a prerequisite for improving teacher effectiveness; it also aligns with recent federal initiatives such as the Race to the Top competition.

Qualifying districts should be required to show progress on the four Equity Fund metrics or have their funding reduced over time. It is simply not enough to pay lip service to overcoming the widget effect; we must focus resources to demand change. Additionally, to ensure that states and districts place sufficient focus on improving equity, many current purposes for Title II funding, including insignificant class size reductions, should be prohibited or capped far below current spending levels.

What kinds of expenditures would align with the recommendations from *The Widget Effect* and the four Equity Fund goals listed above? The following list provides several examples:

- **Professional development**, but only in instances where it is aligned to needs identified in individual teacher evaluations and where the particular strategy results in demonstrable improvements in teacher effectiveness. Spending on professional development should be capped at approximately 20 percent of expenditures to ensure that districts focus on the entire range of Equity Fund goals.
- **Teacher recruitment,** especially from programs with a demonstrated record of producing effective teachers (as measured by student academic growth). These new teachers should be required to demonstrate their effectiveness in order to continue in the classroom.
- **Training** for administrators on how to conduct high-quality evaluations of teachers, as measured by the ability of administrators to differentiate teachers based on effectiveness.
- **Design** of objective, reliable student achievement measures for subjects and grade levels not currently subject to state tests.
- **Integration** of evaluation outcome data into major personnel decisions, such as tenure conferral and compensation.
- **Research and program evaluation** to track and report relative effectiveness of teachers from local teacher preparation pathways (similar to the existing Louisiana system).
- **Incentive systems,** such as recognition programs to identify and reward the most effective teachers; salary differentials for highly effective teachers who make a multi-year commitment to transfer to or remain in a high-need school; or group incentives for clusters of highly effective teachers who commit to turning around a failing school.
- **Peer evaluators** to observe and monitor struggling performers, with an expedited dismissal process when performance does not improve to standards.

Conclusion

Federal policy plays a unique and critical role in promoting equity in education. Title II has the potential to serve as one of the most powerful tools for this purpose, driving $3 billion annually—more than the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative—to the cause of improving student achievement. Yet today, much of Title II funding is squandered on expenditures that do little to improve teachers' practice or students' outcomes. That can change with the reauthorization of ESEA, which offers policymakers the

chance to realign Title II with the research base on teacher effectiveness and support school district and state efforts to make long overdue reforms. It's time to modernize Title II by transforming it into an Equity Fund that improves educational equality for millions of American students while bolstering the foundations of the teaching profession.

About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) helps school districts and states fulfill the promise of public education by ensuring that all students - especially those from high-need communities - get excellent teachers. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP is driven by the knowledge that although great teachers are the best solution to educational inequality, the nation's education systems do not sufficiently prioritize the goal of effective teachers for all. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to find, develop and keep great teachers and achieve reforms that promote effective teaching in every classroom. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 37,000 teachers - mainly through its highly selective Teaching Fellows™ programs - benefiting an estimated 5.9 million students. TNTP has also released a series of acclaimed studies of the policies and practices that affect the quality of the nation's teacher workforce, most recently including *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (2009). Today TNTP is active in more than 40 cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland, among others. For more information, please visit **www.tntp.org**.