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A bad report card for our schools

State policies fail to attract, retain excellent teachers

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Do our schools have the teachers we need? A new report suggests that policies across the nation and in Minnesota aren't doing a good job of ensuring that they do.

The State Teacher Policy Yearbook is an annual publication of National Council on Teacher Quality. The council is, to quote its web site (www.nctq.org), a “nonpartisan research and advocacy group committed to restructuring the teaching profession, led by our vision that every child deserves effective teachers.” Its directors and advisers include former university presidents, presidents of state boards of education and teachers.

The yearbook grades state policies according to how good they are at “1) identifying effective teachers, 2) retaining those deemed effective and 3) exiting those deemed ineffective. Each category, in turn, is composed of a number of goals that a state policy should have.” Effectiveness, in turn, is determined by student progress as well as other indicators.

Why a report on state policies? The obvious reason is that teacher quality makes a significant difference in the educational achievement of students. The less obvious reason is that state policies, as the yearbook says, control tenure, licensing, and “virtually every aspect of the teaching profession.”

Have states enacted useful policies? Unfortunately, no. Consider policies on tenure, an important and unusual feature of public schools. (How many jobs offer more or less lifetime employment?)

Given the significance of tenure, you might think that schools offer tenure only to people with a track record of teaching proficiency. Yet state policies don't do much to ensure this is the case. Three states let districts give tenure to teachers with only one year of experience; 44 states set the bar at three years or less. Even that, the NCTQ yearbook says, “is not enough time to accumulate sufficient objective data about teacher performance.”

State policies also do little as far as getting rid of ineffective teachers, or in the jargon of the report, “exiting” them. Only 13 states require that “teachers who have been rated

unsatisfactory on multiple evaluations should be eligible for dismissal.” The goal of a school should be that students learn, yet student performance is the primary factor in teacher evaluation in only four states. Thirty-six states do not require any objective measurement of student performance in teacher evaluations.

Finally, states do a poor job of retaining effective teachers. Effective employees should be rewarded and recognized, yet state policies focus on qualities other than results. Eighteen states, for example, require districts to pay more to teachers with advanced degrees. There’s an administrative simplicity in that requirement, but advanced degrees “have been shown repeatedly to bear no connection to teacher effectiveness.”

A miracle for Minnesota?

You might be surprised to learn how poorly Minnesota fares in this report, which assigns a letter grade to each state. The median score is a D-plus. Minnesota earned a D. Each state’s overall grade is an average of its score on attracting, retaining, and dismissing ineffective teachers.

Minnesota’s best score, a D-plus, came in the area of teacher retention, with the state meeting two of the nine goals NCTQ set. One goal is for states to “support performance pay, but in as manner that recognizes its infancy, appropriate uses and limitations.” The state’s Q-comp fit the bill. Another goal is that pension policies “should preserve incentives for teachers to continue working until conventional retirement ages.” Minnesota did so well that it serves as a “best practices” state.

Minnesota earned a D for policies on removing ineffective teachers. It requires that schools evaluate teachers during their first year, which is good. But it does not require schools to place teachers with an unsatisfactory evaluation on an improvement plan.

Minnesota received its worst grade, a D-minus, for policies to identify effective teachers. It has the raw information to match student gains with teacher performance, but does not use it. Neither does state policy require that districts include student gains as the major component of teacher evaluations or tenure decisions.

The yearbook does a good job of pointing to a major flaw in education policy today: It emphasizes inputs (academic degrees, continuing education credits, participation in mentoring programs) and downplays outputs (student achievement). The report itself nods too often towards inputs. For example, it laments that 42 states allow some teachers to work with emergency licenses. I’d rather that my child have a effective teacher who took advantage of a loophole in licensing requirement than an ineffective one who has dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's.

Still, the NCTQ has put together an informative and intriguing yearbook. It’s a must-read for anyone interested in educational excellence, and does a good job of revealing how important state policies can be. As usual for a report of this type, look at the components rather than the final grade for the most useful analysis.