



IDEAS IN ACTION

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Unsatisfactory Performance

How California's K-12 Education System Protects Mediocrity and How Teacher Quality Can Be Improved

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The Importance of the Teacher

Research confirms that the effectiveness of the teacher, more than any other factor, determines whether students receive a quality education or are relegated to classrooms where the prospects for a successful future often die. *Unsatisfactory Performance* finds that, contrary to prevailing beliefs, what most ails the teaching profession are not general shortages of qualified candidates, nor low salaries. The real problem is that excellent teachers are not rewarded for their superior work, and failing teachers are rarely held accountable for their poor performance.

Shortages and Standards

Teachers deserve the same performance-driven compensation system that exists in other professions. Good teachers have nothing to fear from results-based school reform. Also, under the current system crucial staffing decisions, like teacher assignment, evaluation, and dismissal, are taken out of principals' hands and codified in state law or collective bargaining agreements.

If the quality of the teacher force is to improve, teachers must be held accountable for their performance and schools must be allowed to manage their own affairs. This is especially true in California, where the state's schools are highly regulated on the district and state levels, but students continue to score in the bottom ranks of national tests.

Despite massive regulation, California schools suffer from a gaping accountability lapse. Teacher pay is not tied to performance, and salaries are the same for all teachers—good and bad alike. Salary schedules are largely based on degrees and credentials rather than classroom performance. California's disastrous record suggests that, instead of relying on credentialism, school districts should provide incentives that encourage teachers to be successful in the classroom. Empirical evidence supports this view.

Salaries and Seniority

Unsatisfactory Performance documents several academic studies that suggest credentials, higher salaries, and teacher experience do not have a positive impact on student outcomes. Instead, credentials serve as a barrier to entry by failing to ensure quality while dissuading qualified candidates from entering a highly-regulated field where superior performance is not rewarded. Higher uniform salaries are supposed to lure qualified candidates into the profession, but general pay raises attract candidates of every stripe. The rigid salary schedules employed by most districts fail to provide incentives for teachers to improve.

Other studies suggest that teachers with years of experience who earn salaries at the top of the ladder fail to elicit greater gains from their students. Often, teachers with greater career mobility who leave the profession after a few years are more successful in boosting the performance of their students. Yet the current compensation system does not take this factor into account. In general, state policymakers have proven unable to cope with the many problems afflicting California schools.

Preserving Mediocrity

Legislators have passed a wide range of reforms without measuring the impact on student performance. Further, the problems confronting the state's public schools are unevenly distributed. For example, while most California schools have enough qualified teachers, approximately 20 percent, usually in poor areas with large minority populations, face acute shortages in crucial subject areas such as math and science.

Restrictive collective bargaining agreements prevent principals from implementing meaningful teacher evaluations with consequences for failure. *Unsatisfactory Performance* documents how the state's teacher-tenure law ensures lifetime job security. In order to fire an incompetent tenured teacher,

school districts must comply with a costly and time-consuming process that discourages administrators from moving forward with dismissals. Across the state, between 1990 and 1999, only 227 cases reached the final phase of the dismissal process. If all these cases occurred during one year, it would represent one-tenth of one percent of tenured teachers in the state. Yet this number was spread out over an entire decade, and not all of the cases that reached the end of the process resulted in firings (the state maintains no data on dismissals of tenured teachers). Thus, the actual number of tenured teachers fired for poor performance is lower and a virtual proxy for zero. In Los Angeles alone, over the same time period, only one teacher went through the dismissal process from start to finish.

Bargaining for Failure

While teacher firings are non-existent, district teacher contracts control almost every aspect of school management. Principals are not held accountable for performance and, under the existing arrangement, cannot be. In California, which has a statewide collective bargaining law, key staffing decisions are taken from principals' hands and negotiated between local school boards and teacher unions. In many instances, issues, ranging from textbooks to class size, are not decided at the school level, but by union negotiators and district officials.

Unsatisfactory Performance samples eight school districts across the state with varying students populations and achievement levels. It compares their management with that of Catholic schools in Los Angeles and the Vaughn Learning Center, an innovative charter school in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley. All of the school districts spend more than two-thirds of their budgets on teacher compensation. The districts that pay their teachers the most do not necessarily have better test scores. Even worse, districts such as Oakland continue to hike teacher pay while student performance worsens.

In most of the sample districts, teachers are assigned to classrooms by seniority, rather than by measures designed to maximize student output. In some districts, contracts retain affirmative-action clauses, a potential violation of state law against race-based hiring. Meanwhile, Catholic schools that have superior performance records allow principals wider autonomy in running their schools, and the Vaughn Learning Center, which is in the process of implementing a limited per-

formance-pay plan, is exempt from Los Angeles Unified's restrictive teacher contract.

The Path to Reform

In order to improve teacher quality, California lawmakers must bridge the accountability gap by enacting several reforms the report describes, including:

- Introduce performance incentives for teachers. Teachers should be rewarded if the performance of their students improves.
- Replace the ossified teacher tenure system with performance contracts for teachers and principals. This will ensure that school employees are held accountable for the performance of their students. The dismissal of failing teachers should be changed from an impossibility to a practical reality.
- Implement differential pay for the state's public school teachers to compensate for the uneven distribution of teachers across academic subjects. If a school requires more science teachers than art instructors, then the law of supply and demand should apply, as it does in other professions.

Reform Demands Courage

In order for these and other commonsense reforms to take hold, school principals must be able to exercise greater control in hiring and firing teachers, while being held accountable for the decisions they make. Rigid collective bargaining agreements that centralize decision-making and have a profound impact on the distribution of resources, not to mention contributing to the declining levels of student achievement, must be amended and made more flexible. If districts continue to hire and assign incompetent teachers who fail to educate students, all parents should have the right to send their children elsewhere.

Serious reforms with any chance of success demand bold decisions. Siding with the failed status quo amounts to unsatisfactory performance and is no longer an option for those who claim they have the best interests of children at heart. Policymakers should opt for the accountability and standards that put the needs of children above the demands of an irresponsible system.



This **Ideas In Action** fact sheet is a digest of a publication entitled *Unsatisfactory Performance*. This study is available through the Publications Department for \$12.95 or on PRI's website at www.pacificresearch.org.

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