

**Getting the Balance Right:  
Federal Policy on Effective Teaching**  
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President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have made teaching quality a major focus of federal education policy – and rightly so. Teachers are the most powerful school-based influence on student learning. The [Race to the Top](#) competitive grant competition and the Administration’s [FY2011 federal budget proposal](#) – which represents the beginnings of a blueprint for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – exemplify the current focus on teachers.

Increasingly, the thrust of federal policy proposals is aimed at increasing *teacher effectiveness*. And that’s where controversy begins to emerge. Is ‘effectiveness’ entirely about measuring individual teacher impact? Is it about using effectiveness data narrowly to fire the least effective teachers and reward the most effective? Or is it about using such data more broadly to inform new teacher support and ongoing professional development for individual teachers as well as a community of educators?

At the New Teacher Center (NTC), we shared specific thoughts about what teacher effectiveness policy should encompass in [initial public comments](#) and [specific line edits](#) to the draft Race to the Top (RttT) regulations. Nearly all of our suggestions were [incorporated](#) into the final program regulations by the U.S. Department of Education. Many of these issues are not unique to RttT – but will carry over into conversations about reauthorizing ESEA (aka No Child Left Behind).

The NTC’s philosophy on teacher effectiveness rests on an understanding that great teachers are made, not born. We believe that every teacher deserves rich professional support and collaborative opportunities, including focused induction during their initial years in the profession. Teacher evaluations must not be treated as pass/fail exams, but should provide teachers constructive feedback about how to improve their practice, based on professional standards. Efforts to improve teacher effectiveness also must address teacher working conditions— including the critical role of supportive school leadership, opportunities for leadership and collaboration, and customized professional development—that greatly impact teachers’ chances of success.

There is no silver bullet to improve teacher effectiveness. It requires a systemic approach – and the Administration’s policy proposals largely take such a broad view and strike an appropriate balance between wholesale reform, scaling up what works, and abandoning what doesn’t. But there are forces within education who would upend this balance, either by resisting reform entirely or oversimplifying the teacher effectiveness conversation.

The federal policy debate about teacher effectiveness should aim to design a continuum of support—from initial preparation through induction and into career-long professional development—to strengthen the skills and abilities of all teachers. A developmental focus is too often missing in current conversations about teacher effectiveness. New teacher induction and job-embedded professional development are key strategies to help transform good teachers into excellent ones and average ones into great ones, and assist those who might otherwise fail, leave, or soldier forth in isolation to strengthen their skills and abilities on behalf of their students.

Measuring teacher effectiveness without providing opportunities for educators to strengthen their practice will ultimately fail. Likewise, policies that merely aim to fire the least effective teachers and award the most effective ones ignore the vast majority in the middle who can achieve greater success if provided opportunities for collaboration, professional growth, and teacher leadership. While stricter license and tenure requirements and more meaningful teacher evaluation systems might weed out truly ineffective teachers, and more money might keep some top teachers from leaving the profession, they won't do anything to make teachers better. Accelerating teacher effectiveness is where our greatest opportunity lies.

The Teacher and Principal Improvement Act – soon to be proposed by [U.S. Senator Jack Reed](#) of Rhode Island, a member of the Senate education committee – would be a welcome addition to the blueprint for ESEA reauthorization. It envisions a comprehensive approach to increasing teacher effectiveness and strengthening school leadership and would provide resources for schools that serve students most in need of high-quality instruction. Specifically, the Act would amend Title II of ESEA to provide \$1 billion in targeted assistance to schools to develop and support effective teachers, principals, and school leaders through: *comprehensive, multi-year induction and mentoring for new teachers, principals, and school leaders; high-quality support and professional development for principals and school leaders; team-based, job-embedded, data-driven professional development for all teachers; redesigned teacher and principal evaluation systems; increased teacher leadership opportunities and compensation; and surveys of teaching and learning conditions in schools and districts.*

As part of its FY2011 federal budget blueprint, the Obama Administration has proposed consolidating 38 existing k-12 programs under ESEA into nine new programs. For example, the proposal would create three subprograms under the new “Excellent Instructional Teams” programs: Effective Teachers and Leaders; Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund; and Teacher and Leader Pathways. Nine programs – including the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) and Improving Teacher Quality State Grants – funded under current law would be folded into these new consolidated programs. In an [analysis](#) of the proposal, the New American Foundation

concluded: “Eliminating overlapping or inefficient programs in favor of a streamlined approach to federal funding may achieve the Obama Administration’s goals – more accountability for federal money going to states and school districts, greater flexibility at the state and school district level, and more use of evidence in decision making.”

But one concern that this proposal raises is whether the consolidation of formula-driven programs will, at best, create budgetary uncertainty for already cash-strapped school districts and, at worst, actually decrease federal funding for school districts that most need it to improve the quality of their teaching force. Stay tuned, for questions such as these will continue to be raised during congressional consideration of the budget proposal and hearings on ESEA reauthorization.

If federal policy intends to have an impact on teaching in America’s classrooms, it needs to recognize teacher development as a primary means to maximize classroom effectiveness. Fundamentally, the definition of teacher effectiveness must not only meet the political needs of policymakers, but must also meet the professional needs of individual teachers. If it doesn’t reach into the classroom, it won’t matter. Teacher effectiveness policy should not be in service of educators – but should seek to impact all of them. A definition of teacher effectiveness narrowly aimed only at the so-called ‘best’ or ‘worst’ teachers will be a missed opportunity to strengthen teaching effectiveness in every classroom throughout our nation.

Read the related Education Week article, [“Obama’s Teacher Plans Stress Competitive Grants”](#):  
Read the summary of Senator Reed’s legislation, [Teacher and Principal Improvement Act](#).