



# Improving and Supporting Michigan's Teaching Quality

## The Problem

As any parent knows, teachers matter. A teacher's effectiveness has more impact on student learning than any other factor controlled by school systems, including class size, school size, and the quality of after-school programs—or even which school a student is attending.<sup>1</sup> In Michigan, our teachers often do not get the support or professional development they need and deserve. Research shows our brightest teachers are not evenly distributed across different schools and districts. Low-income and minority students—the very students who could benefit most from our very best teachers—are typically taught by a disproportionate share of our least able teachers. This teacher quality gap contributes mightily to our student achievement gap.

To tackle this issue in the Great Lakes State, Michigan must address its fragmented and incoherent teacher policies. Our state lacks an organized set of policies, systems, and practices that focus on improving teacher effectiveness -- from preparation through recruitment, placement, compensation, strong professional development and reliable evaluation. Our state needs to build the overdue systems and standards needed to ensure teachers are reliably, meaningfully evaluated and supported. This work will require years of leadership at the state level, and a commitment among educators across our state.

## The Solution

We propose a comprehensive teacher quality improvement package that will dramatically help produce what our state, schools and children deserve: **access to effective teachers for *all* Michigan students.**

## Teacher Tenure

- **Tenure should be earned -- and maintained -- based on high performance, not only years of experience.** Performance needs to matter in teaching for the sake of our students. We urge the Michigan legislature to reform tenure, not to eliminate it. Tenure should be made into a meaningful career milestone of which teachers can and should be proud.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven G. Rivkin, Eric A. Hanushek, and John F. Kain, "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement," *Econometrica*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (March 2005), pages 417-458.  
<http://edpro.stanford.edu/Hanushek/admin/pages/files/uploads/teachers.econometrica.pdf>



*Our recommendation:* Teachers should achieve at least three consecutive “effective” or higher ratings on their annual performance evaluations and obtain five years of service to earn tenure. A portion of this evaluation should be based on an objective measure such as state-provided, value-added growth data to ensure consistency across districts regarding who receives tenure – and who is considered to be an effective teacher in Michigan. Value-added data is most reliable after three to five years of data, so five years is an appropriate time to consider a new teacher’s overall performance.

- **Make tenure meaningful by providing greater professional development and feedback to new teachers.** During the first five years in the profession, Michigan teachers should undergo annual evaluations with intensive feedback to help grow. As they approach their fifth year in the profession, they should get a rigorous final review before tenure is awarded.
- **Provide a “fast track” to tenure for high performers.** For teachers who show outstanding performance, Michigan should provide a fast track to tenure. Teachers who receive three consecutive “highly effective” annual performance evaluation ratings in their second, third and fourth years could qualify for tenure during their fourth year in the profession. This provides an incentive for teaching excellence.
- **Performance over the long-term should matter, too.** Tenured teachers who receive three “ineffective” ratings within a ten-year period should be dismissed.
- **Empower districts.** The length of the probationary period for most teachers should be changed from four years to five years. Teachers in the probationary period should be subject to dismissal due to poor performance.
- **Quickly exit tenured teachers from schools if they are low-performers.** Tenured teachers who earn two consecutive “ineffective” annual performance evaluation ratings may be dismissed at the option of a local school district. Teachers who receive three consecutive “ineffective” ratings should be dismissed for the sake of Michigan students.
- **Make sure underserved students get the high-performing teachers that they deserve.** Low-income and African American and Latino students are disproportionately taught by ineffective teachers, research shows. Our state



superintendent and district superintendents should have the flexibility to ensure there is equitable access to strong teachers across schools within school districts.

## Teacher Evaluation

- **Parents and districts need honest, comparable information about the quality of their teachers and schools' student learning.** Michigan provides no common definition of effective teaching or a common measure of student growth for districts to use to evaluate teachers. It's the equivalent of letting every district and charter operator in the state set their own cut scores on the state assessment. The result: Michigan parents have no idea how their children and teachers are really performing at school – nor how they are performing compared to other districts and charter operators around the state. Some districts may set the bar low on these standards and growth measures to make their schools appear as if they are doing better than they really are. Parents need honest, reliable and comparable information in order to determine what the best school is for their child – and policymakers need that information to make important decisions about how to improve our schools.

To address these problems, we urge the Michigan legislature to require the state to provide value-added student growth data, linked to teachers' performance, and require all school districts to use that data as one measure of teacher evaluation. For subjects where state test data is available, all school districts should use the state assessment and state-provided, value-added student growth data – not local or other assessments – for at least 40 percent of teacher evaluations. This will provide consistent teacher evaluation across districts – and give parents much more information about how their schools and teachers really are performing.

- **Districts need state standards and guidelines for evaluation.** Without such guidelines, educators won't know if they are being properly and consistently evaluated. And parents and students won't know if their teachers are performing better than other districts or if their district simply set the bar low for teacher evaluation. We recommend Michigan sets four ratings categories — highly effective, effective, minimally effective and ineffective — to be used statewide, and defines what “effective” teaching looks like in Michigan.



- **Require districts use multiple measures in teacher evaluation.** Good evaluation should consider many measures. We recommend classroom observation make up 40 percent of teacher evaluation, and other measures -- such as parent surveys – make up the rest.
- **Provide a voluntary opt-in teacher evaluation model for districts that cannot afford or lack the expertise to create good evaluation systems.** Many budget-strapped Michigan school districts are struggling with capacity issues – and most lack the high-level technical skills needed to create a sophisticated value-added growth model, observation protocols, proper evaluator training that strong evaluation systems require.

*Our recommendation:* In order to develop a reliable, comprehensive evaluation system to support Michigan’s education progress over the next decade, Governor Rick Snyder and the state legislature should create a Governor’s Council on Educator Effectiveness. This council will be comprised of stakeholders and technical experts convened to develop a meaningful and useful evaluation system, including a voluntary opt-in model. A Governor’s Council also can address the challenging issue of non-tested subjects, and provide valuable experience to the Michigan Department of Education and State Board of Education on challenging aspects of the development of a voluntary evaluation model; the protocols and guidelines for evaluation that should apply to all school districts across the state; and the supports that the state should provide to help districts do this work in an intelligent, cost-effective way.

- **Engage Michigan’s philanthropic community to support the development of strong data system and training to support high-quality educator evaluation.** Other states and communities realize how costly – and yet how important – good evaluation is to fully supporting our classroom teachers who have so much potential to grow – but too often, get very little good professional development. Such training, data systems and other supports can cost millions. Foundations should help support the initial development of this work. The state also must invest public dollars, however, to ensure long-term success.

### **Teacher Lay-Off**

- **Students must be made the top priority in lay-off decisions.** For decades, school districts have laid off teachers based only on seniority – regardless of whether that meant laying off hundreds of some of Michigan’s finest teachers. This is not



only a disservice to them – it also hurts students every time a good teacher disappears from a classroom, only to be replaced by a lower-performing educator.

*Our recommendation:* We recommend that the preponderant factor in school district lay-offs should be performance, particularly teaching effectiveness.

- **Seniority should be considered, too.** We know experience matters. Research shows experienced teachers, on average, are more effective teachers than novice teachers, on average. Seniority should be a part of any lay-off decision-making formula.
- **Other factors such as student needs and teachers' extra responsibilities also should be considered in school lay-off decision-making.** In many schools, teachers who have deep content knowledge, subject area training and experience in a topic can be laid off due to seniority-only based lay-off policies. This is wrong. Our students lose many of their best teachers – and their potential to learn -- due to such misguided policies.

*Our recommendation:* Schools should be able to consider other variables in teacher lay-off decision-making, such as the qualifications of educators to teach their subject areas, as well as the extra responsibilities and talents that they share with their schools and students.