Every year, educators, urban leaders, and parents bemoan the fact that students in our lowest-performing schools lack the teachers they need to meet ever-higher standards. Students in high-poverty secondary schools are nearly twice as likely to have teachers who do not have a degree in the subject they are teaching. The problem is worst in math and science, where schools struggle to compete with the private sector for top graduates.

A recent study by McKinsey & Co. of education in industrialized nations found that the top-performing countries put a premium on high-quality teachers: They select teachers carefully, pay them well, provide ongoing training and support, and give them time to work together. Finland's teacher education system, for example, accepts just one in six applicants, and Singapore's takes only one in five—some U.S. programs take virtually everyone who applies. Starting salaries for teachers in South Korea and Germany are 141 percent of their nations' gross domestic product per capita, compared with 81 percent in the United States. And Japan's novice teachers get up to two days a week of continued mentoring, with more collaborative-planning time for all teachers.

These findings reflect not just cultures that value learning, but countries that make education a top priority, committing real resources to their teachers and the mechanisms that assure high-quality teaching in every classroom.

By contrast, U.S. school leaders in recent years have sought to mitigate teacher shortages through quick fixes, such as rushing ill-prepared liberal-arts graduates into classrooms or recruiting teachers wholesale from other countries. But many of these teachers lack the knowledge and skills to thrive in the classroom—especially in the nation's most challenging classrooms—for the long haul.

Hiring in hard-to-staff schools is a revolving door. Almost half (46 percent) of teachers leave the field in their first five years. High-poverty urban schools lose about twice as many teachers each year as low-poverty schools. New teachers rarely receive adequate mentoring to be successful in diverse and demanding classrooms, and teacher-preparation programs are highly uneven. Arthur E. Levine, the former president of Columbia University's Teachers College, dubbed the field of teacher education "Dodge City" because of its haphazard quality control and disconnect from classroom realities. Too few of the nation's teachers are prepared in programs where high standards, relevant courses, and close connection to school practice and effective practitioners are the norm.
Although the federal No Child Left Behind Act seeks to ensure “highly qualified” teachers for every classroom, we have made no significant progress in improving teaching. In truth, it is not the federal government, but states and their universities and local schools, that must lead efforts to strengthen teaching quality. Yet state and local leaders have had too little support for bold steps to change the status quo.

Regardless of what happens with NCLB in its uncertain reauthorization, it will be up to states to take ownership of the teacher-quality agenda. Many states have already been working to strengthen teacher education and mentoring. All states need new strategies to bring highly motivated teachers into the profession and keep them in classrooms. Combined, these changes will ensure that new teachers have the skills and support they need to remain in the field.

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation is going national with such a solution. The strategy is daringly simple: Recruit top undergraduates and career-changers, pay for them to complete an intensive, classroom-based master’s-degree program, place them in schools that need them desperately and are prepared to support them, and mentor them throughout their first years of teaching.

Indiana, with leadership from Gov. Mitch Daniels and key private philanthropies, is the first state to implement these fellowships. (“Philanthropies Launch Teacher-Training Fellowships,” Dec. 19, 2007.) In Ohio, foundations and policy leaders are developing a similar fellowship, while other states are also exploring the possibilities. A national version of the program, supported by the Annenberg Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, puts this same Woodrow Wilson fellowship in place as a gold standard at some of the nation’s premier universities.

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The foundation’s approach includes many steps that states could take, either as part of this growing national movement or in other forms:

1. Use Incentives to Encourage Education Schools to Raise Their Standards. Changing entrenched practices in any field requires real incentives to encourage changes in culture and improvement in programs. States should consider targeting resources to programs that showcase innovative methods of preparing teachers, draw upon the resources of the entire university, and support graduates in partnership with the public schools. The Indiana effort will recruit highly motivated students to education programs that have committed to raising standards and demonstrating new directions that can be tried on other campuses. One of the four Indiana universities, for instance, will base preparation for new science teachers in its school of science, not in its education school, in order to strengthen new teachers’ subject-level expertise. Another institution is developing residencies for K-12 teachers on the university campus, and for university faculty members in the partnering high schools. Still another institution will engage community and business leaders from science-based corporations and nonprofits in redesigning its teacher-preparation curriculum. All four universities will lodge responsibility for the teaching fellowship in the provost’s office, ensuring institutionwide commitment and promoting close partnerships between teacher education programs and colleges of arts and sciences.

2. Use Private Resources as Further Leverage to Raise Quality. When states pay for fellowships on their own without private aid, lawmakers have a tendency to spread the resources evenly across all institutions, regardless of quality. By raising private funds to inaugurate its programs, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation has created flexibility to ensure that money is directed to institutions that have demonstrated that they deserve new resources and the best
students. Public-private partnerships are also more politically palatable at times when state
budgets are tight.

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in culture and improvement in programs.

3. Focus on Hard-to-Staff Fields. Keeping a narrow focus on high-need areas can create
enough new teachers to make a real difference. The Indiana effort, for example, will initially
emphasize math and science. Through the fellowships, the state will prepare roughly one-quarter
of the total number of Indiana teachers in these fields.

4. Strengthen the Role of Teacher Education Programs in Mentoring and Supporting Their
Graduates. One of the greatest deficiencies of education schools is the disconnection of faculty
expertise, teacher education courses, and clinical experience from the realities of classrooms.
Equally troubling is the lack of follow-through in supporting and assessing graduates’
performance. States need to encourage education programs to follow their students’ progress,
mentor and stand with them as they launch their careers, and track their effectiveness. Once
Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellows complete their graduate programs, they will be placed with
other fellows in local high-need schools and given ongoing mentoring, supervised by their
university faculty members and principals. In addition, the universities will assess and monitor the
fellows’ classroom work, including their impact on student achievement.

To meet the economic and intellectual challenges of the 21st century, states—and the nation as a
whole—need well-educated workers and citizens, who need excellent teachers. The teacher-
quality challenge cannot be met through quick fixes, but will be addressed—and resolved—by
developing and deploying our next generation of teachers more effectively. Thoughtful, innovative
teacher preparation must become a still higher priority on all our states’ agendas. This new
fellowship strategy offers a powerful tool for the local and state leaders who can best make it
work.

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Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, in Princeton, N.J., and helped in the establishment of its
new teaching-fellowship program.

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/03/05/26hunt.h27.html?tkn=RMYF0QR3O3finWyKqD4nAkjQ6sUSolbYejDA&print=1