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Transforming the Teaching Profession

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By Joel Klein

Eliminating the racial and ethnic achievement gap in our nation's public schools is the most urgent civil rights challenge for this generation.

I co-founded the Education Equality Project to address the injustice and inequity that African-American and Latino students confront every day in their schools.

Poor and minority students will never get their fair share of educational opportunity -- and are far more likely to lead unsuccessful lives -- until administrators and political leaders commit to fundamentally changing the way teachers are recruited, rewarded, and retained. The goal is as easy to articulate as it is hard to realize: that every classroom will one day be led by an effective instructor who demonstrably advances student learning.

Here are specific ways we can do it.

- 1) Lower irrelevant entry barriers to the teaching profession. Advanced degrees and certification are not linked to producing effective teachers, and traditional schools of education typically attract lower-achieving college students from less competitive institutions. Alternative certification programs, like the Defense Department's Troops to Teachers initiative, are already demonstrating that mid-career and retiring professionals could provide a rich source of new teaching talent, particularly in high-need subject areas in inner-city schools like math and science.
- 2) The federal government should require states and districts to develop longitudinal data systems that allow school administrators and principals to use value-added data to measure and track the impact teachers have on student achievement. To move toward a performance-based system for teachers, school districts will need to have information that tracks the effect that individual teachers are having on student performance from year-to-year for a number of years. Performance-based metrics must not only be fair but transparent.
- 3) States and districts should be encouraged and free to use a variety of outcome-based measures to evaluate teacher effectiveness. One proviso: any system that states devise to evaluate teacher performance should include student test scores as a key measuring stick--and should not succumb to the temptation to substitute input-based measures to gauge teacher effectiveness, like licensure status and education credentials, that have been shown to have no connection to effective teaching. While student test scores over a multiyear period should figure prominently in value-added assessments of teacher performance, they should not be the only measure of effectiveness.

4) Every school and district should assess and document the impact that probationary teachers have on student learning from the moment they enter the classroom. Fledgling teachers should receive better professional development support, including on-the-job mentoring and supervision from peers and master teachers. Just as barriers to entering the teaching profession should be lowered, barriers to earning tenure must be raised.

5) To transform tenure into a progress-based prerogative, states and districts should require tenure candidates to demonstrate that they are effectively boosting student learning. At the same time, the least-effective probationary instructors should be denied tenure.

6) To stem the suburban tide, urban school districts should pay large bonuses -- on the order, perhaps, of 25 percent of annual compensation -- to effective teachers who stay to teach disadvantaged students. Teachers who raise student achievement should receive large bonuses for teaching in high-poverty schools and extra compensation for teaching core subjects in shortage areas like math and science. At present, top-notch instructors often end up leaving inner-city schools to teach at suburban schools that are closer to home, less disruptive, and pay higher salaries.

7) Tenured teachers should periodically be reassessed to ensure that they are still raising student achievement. Tenured instructors who are doing a good job should receive significant merit pay hikes. But persistently incompetent teachers should be dismissed -- after getting a chance to improve their performance. In much the same spirit, unionized teachers should enjoy the due process protections and seniority rights afforded to other white-collar professionals -- but not be shielded by excessive due- process requirements from meaningful job performance assessments or layoffs.

Transforming the teaching profession into a merit-based system will not be easy. But urban school reform and closing the achievement gap can no longer be secondary to protecting the prerogatives of union representatives, district bureaucrats, and professors at teachers colleges. Some of the reforms we need to create real opportunity for disadvantaged students and boost learning for all students are sure to be politically charged. They threaten a vast educational establishment that for decades has privileged the needs of adults over children.

The good news is that this radical transformation of the teaching profession could again help make education the great equalizer in America -- and not an ongoing source of inequity and injustice.

On Saturday May 16th, on the 55th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education I will be joining with civil rights leaders, education reformers, students, teachers, parents and concerned citizens at the White House Ellipse to issue a call to action. That call begins with improving teacher quality in our public education system.