Center on
GREAT TEACHERS & LEADERS
at the American Institutes for Research®

Invest in Teachers First

A Call to Action for Teacher-Focused Investments of Federal Relief Funds

State education agencies are investing new federal relief funds in initiatives such as technology, broadband, summer programming, virtual tutoring, and teacher professional development for e-learning. Yet, without effective teachers in every classroom, states may not experience the highest gains from their ESSER investments.

Teachers improve student lives in myriad ways. They improve students' test scores, student attendance, and behavior. They have the potential to raise graduation rates; increase the future earning of students; decrease future public expenditures, such as health care; and improve other important life outcomes. Researchers also suggest that the consecutive assignment of effective teachers for Black students could close the Black-White achievement gap in 3 to 5 years.

Effective teachers are also a mediating factor for program effectiveness and become the conduit to ensuring that new recovery programs fulfill their intended purposes. For example, students who receive new technologies and connectivity will benefit only if they are supported virtually by an effective teacher. Similarly, classrooms that are reconfigured to address CDC guidance related to social distancing are effective only when they are staffed with additional effective teachers. Professional learning related to innovative curricula can only be implemented well with effective teachers. By investing in the educator workforce, policymakers and education leaders recognize and prioritize those who are pivotal in ensuring a return on investment on all recovery efforts.

And yet, states across the country have been plagued by a chronic shortage of teachers, and with the advent of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, shortages likely have been exacerbated. Schools are unable to fill teaching positions, and students consequently do not have fully prepared teachers in the classroom. Early retirement in some states has increased dramatically, and enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined. Most critically, the impact of these shortages has disproportionately impacted students in poverty, English learners, students with disabilities, and students of color—all of whom are less likely to be taught by effective, experienced, and qualified teachers.

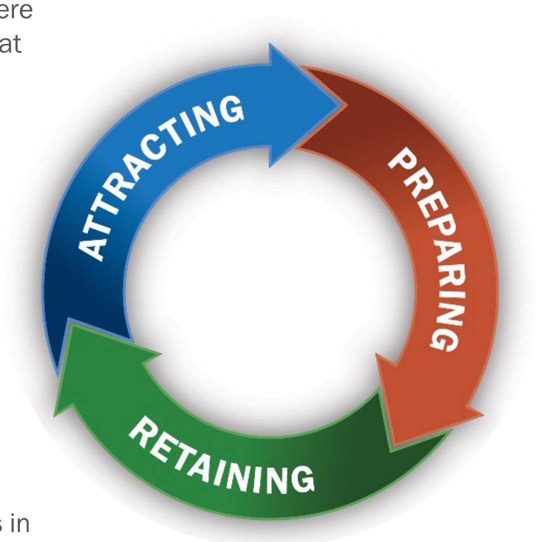
Simply put, the best way to invest in students is to invest in teachers first. We urge education leaders to make significant, strategic investments in educators to stabilize the educator workforce and address teacher shortages. These investments will be essential to ensuring that all other investments find solid ground.

The Risk of Widening Gaps

Research suggests that one of the most significant impacts of the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequality and widening achievement gaps. A condition associated with the American Rescue Plan Act funding is that 20% of district funds must address student learning loss. The COVID-19 learning loss—or, as we call it, learning privilege—is grounded in the fact that some students were able to learn this past year, whereas others were not. Bridging the gap is essential to prevent additional disengagement of students who are behind. Given that the shortage of effective teachers disproportionately impacts students who are at a disadvantage in both schools and society, states are in a critical position to use these funds to address equity and opportunity gaps. Investing in supporting and stabilizing the educator workforce in underserved schools is essential to avoid the risk of widening gaps.

Evidence-Base Components of a Teachers First Allocation Strategy

As education leaders make strategic and comprehensive investments to support and stabilize the educator workforce, they need to consider engaging in proactive, targeted, and purposeful policy and practice that is grounded in their unique needs and contexts. Such engagement should include a data-driven approach, as outlined in the GTL Center's Talent Development Framework, that is used to visualize and identify where in the pipeline a state is losing talent, why the state is losing talent, and how to take concrete actions to shore-up pipelines in the COVID-19 context. State and district investments now will support the teacher talent pipeline in the long term. Simultaneously, states can support short-term initiatives, such as differentiated staffing models, increasing the ranks of substitute teachers, and leveraging teacher candidates to support teachers.



For example, states can support Grow Your Own programs in districts where **attracting teachers** into the profession is a challenge. Research shows that Grow Your Own candidates are more likely to be effective teachers with higher retention. When ***preparing teachers*** is the driver of shortages, states can support investments such as (a) residency programs that are demonstrated to produce better teachers; (b) incentives and scholarships, with a particular focus on candidates of color to remove tuition barriers for diversifying the teacher workforce; (c) revisions of state licensure requirements to offer new pathways that dismantle barriers for teacher candidates of color; or (d) offering opportunities for paraprofessionals to become teachers who often have close ties to their school communities. When ***retaining teachers*** is the primary driver of shortages, states can invest in targeted mentoring programs that have been shown to support teacher retention. Investments can be made to improve mentoring programs to target the needs of teachers working in low-income schools, support teacher well-being, train teachers in social and emotional learning strategies, and build innovative systems to support professional growth and recognition that lead to strong professional communities.

Qualified, effective, and diverse teachers and leaders in our workforce are a must-have to make these investments worthwhile. Thus, ***the best way to invest in students is to invest in teachers first.***

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