

Policy Breakfast Series

Benchmarking teacher quality for policymakers in Minnesota:
A conversation with researchers, practitioners, and innovators



University of Minnesota, Teach for America, Bush Foundation, and state leaders address teacher quality.

On Feb. 5, more than 200 of Minnesota's top education leaders and policymakers met at the University of Minnesota to discuss how to develop, measure, and support teacher effectiveness. The question is a timely one. Federal and state policy measures—Race to the Top and Q Comp, for example—tie education funding to teacher quality. Additionally, teacher effectiveness has been found to be the most important school-based variable affecting student achievement.

Hosted by the College of Education and Human Development and moderated by Karen Seashore, the Robert H. Beck Professor of Ideas in Education, a panel of state and national experts shared perspectives from across the spectrum of the education industry. Panel members included Misty Sato, who holds the new Carmen Starkson Campbell Endowed Chair in Education; Bush Foundation President Peter Hutchinson; St. Paul Public Schools Superintendent Valeria Silva; Teach for America President Matthew Kramer, and Garnet Franklin, education issues specialist for Education Minnesota.

Sato laid out the research on teacher quality with a charge to think of investing in teaching quality as an investment in children and to extend thinking to the system as a whole. She focused on the teaching profession as a cycle from recruiting and preparation through ongoing professional development. The ultimate goal, she noted, is to have the most effective, experienced teachers become master teachers who can help those who are new to the profession.

A key moment in this cycle is when new teachers graduate from preparation into classrooms of their own. Sato suggested a multi-year model in which early career educators work with more experienced mentors, in addition to other supports. She described the Teacher Support Partnership—a collaboration between the University's College of Education and Human Development, the Minnesota Department of Education, Education Minnesota, and the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities—that has developed guidelines for such teacher support.

Sato also advocated for professional learning communities, which national research has shown to lower dropout rates and raise student achievement. She cited statistics from respected education systems, such as Finland and Singapore, where teachers spend 60 percent of their time on classroom instruction, and the remainder in ongoing learning and development, as opposed to U.S. teachers who spend 80 percent of their working time on teaching.

Sato also emphasized the importance of partnerships between teacher preparation colleges and the schools where their graduates will teach, saying that this is key to the college's Teacher Education Redesign Initiative (TERI).

"TERI is as much about developing schools into places of professional support and learning as it is about redesigning teacher preparation at the U," she said.

As part of TERI, the college is also the lead institution among state teacher preparation programs working with the Minnesota Department of Education on a national pilot assessment for pre-service teachers.

Each of the panel members followed with their perspectives on teacher quality, based in their individual positions within education. Bush Foundation President Peter Hutchinson reiterated the call for ongoing partnerships between Pre-K--12 schools and districts and colleges of education. The foundation has funded TERI with a \$4.5 million grant—part of a \$40 million investment in seven regional higher education partners over the next 10 years. The overall Bush initiative promotes ongoing collaboration between preparation programs, which track and guarantee their graduates' effectiveness, and school districts.

"This relationship in which the two sides are really working on one problem is absolutely essential," Hutchinson said, "and in many ways this is the most profound policy change we need to see. We need to actually integrate the work of the higher education system with the work of the K-12 system in order for this to work successfully."

Hutchinson also emphasized the need for future teachers to gain clinical experiences in the real world classroom.

Valeria Silva, who was named superintendent of St. Paul Public Schools two months ago, repeated the call for preparation, research, and policy that match the classrooms of today. She described the district's challenges, including 75 percent students from poverty, more than half who speak a language other than English at home, and many who are homeless. She pointed out that it is the teachers who receive those children every day, but that is harder than it sounds.

"That is all in the hands of the teacher," Silva said. "Because we can have great schools; we can have phenomenal leaders—which we do—but at the end of the day it's that teacher that is standing in front of the students every minute."

The current teaching model does not match the kids who are in these classrooms, Silva said, inviting the audience to substitute teach for a day—"not even a day, I give you two hours."

She challenged the policymakers and others in the room to talk about teacher quality that matches student needs in simple ways that provide real support. She also called for treating teachers as professionals and not blaming the educational system's failings on them.

Teach for America President Matt Kramer described his program, which recruits and intensely trains graduating college students who commit to teaching for two years in low-income urban or rural schools. He laid out the problem of the current educational system, especially the disparities between outcomes between students.

The school system was not designed for students with the kind of socioeconomic challenges that many kids bring to school today, Kramer said. "It was designed to solve a different problem, which is how to help average, middle class kids move ahead one year of growth per year," he continued. "And over time, that is what it does: It solves the problem it was designed to solve."

Finally, he blamed a lack of will and creativity aimed at finding a different way to educate, because ideologues have concluded the situation hopeless. Yet, he said, research has demonstrated that kids from lower income backgrounds can achieve just as highly as affluent students when given the opportunities they deserve. To provide these opportunities, Kramer called for finding educators who don't accept the system's limitations but commit themselves to doing whatever it takes to help students. In the end, though, he called for a systemwide change driven by leaders from across different fields.

Finally Garnet Franklin represented Education Minnesota, the state's teachers union. She reminded the listeners that teachers stand for high-quality teaching and learning but also emphasized their desire for schools that are conducive to that pursuit. She also reiterated the call for preparing teachers for the kind of schools they will enter, emphasizing the need for the kind of research that Sato conducts.

"Minnesota teachers, I'm here to assert, can do anything. They can do anything you ask of them, and they have," she said, ticking off the numerous school reforms of the past. She called for working together to reform the system before another ten years elapses under reforms that don't work.

"Please join me in calling a halt to talking about how the people who are in classrooms came to teaching, but they weren't the best and the brightest," Franklin said. "Please join me in celebrating what teachers and kids in your schools do, every day."

The panel then addressed a number of challenges issues that Seashore posed related to attracting and retaining high quality teachers and specific policy recommendations to meet those challenges. Silva called for a "recall system" for teachers who are not ready to teach, where they return for further preparation or even get their money back if they are not cut out for the job. To develop into quality teachers, she said, educators should be in a cohort for 2 to 3 years in which there's truly mentorship. Silva also called for deep, targeted change, rather than broad surface fixes.

Sato critiqued alternative routes in which teachers work really intensively for two years and burn out. Instead, she repeated the need for teachers to stay in the system and to serve as master teachers for their less experienced colleagues as a means to change the system over time. Sato also discussed ideas about distributing teacher resources to allow time for professional development, as well as the need for a "relentless focus on student learning," which is another hallmark of TERI.

"We can't be successful in this unless we instill that idea that we're here, we're committed, and we'll do what it takes," she emphasized.

Hutchinson emphasized creating a culture via preparation programs in which teachers expect regular feedback. He said over time, this would become the norm and an expectation for teachers.

He also sounded a call to action, saying there is nothing preventing the educational system from being changed right now. "It's sure as hell is a failure of will, and it's almost certainly a failure of imagination," he said.

During questions from the audience, Minneapolis School Board Member Pam Costain asked about preparing teachers to reach the spectrum of students in the classroom—not just those from lower incomes. In response, Sato described adaptive expertise: The ability of teachers to determine their students' individual learning needs and to adapt their instruction accordingly, which is also foundational to the TERI program.

Franklin and Silva both repeated the call for systemic change that supports sustained teacher professional development, rather than a new way to assess teachers within the existing system.

Though some panel members disagreed on controversial topics such as tenure and alternative teacher preparation, they all expressed their commitment and urgency towards solving the complex challenges of an educational system that does not work for all students. They also repeated the vitality of cooperation across higher education, pre-K--12, and state systems.

Sato warned against playing the blame game. "We have to bring together expertise in higher education, in districts, at the state level, and work on different parts of the system simultaneously with some leadership and coordination," she said. She called for policymakers to provide a way to coordinate pockets of quality work already underway in higher education and in the classroom.

For more information on the CEHD TERI program, please see <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/teri/>

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Office of Research and Policy
Laura Hagen
gardz001@umn.edu
104 Burton Hall
178 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN
55455-0226 USA
Tel: 612-625-0317
Fax: 612-626-7496