

NEPC REVIEW: ADDRESSING TEACHER SHORTAGES: PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND (TNTP, FEBRUARY 2022)



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May 2022

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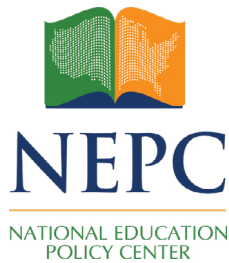
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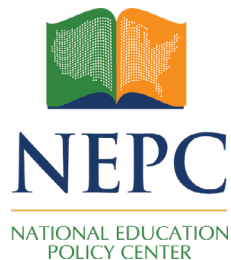
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Summary

The Covid pandemic has likely resulted in rampant teacher absences and widespread teacher shortages. Responding to this issue, TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project) has issued the report, *Addressing Teacher Shortages: Practical Ideas for the Pandemic and Beyond*, offering leaders clearly articulated employment goals and numerous recommendations for short- and long-term staffing plans. Although reliable evidence on the extent of teacher shortages is mixed, the report does provide leaders confronting staffing issues with some helpful questions and potentially useful recommendations. Despite these positive elements, however, the report has several weaknesses. First, the report fails to provide peer-reviewed research to substantiate claims, so that it's unclear which, if any, recommendations are evidence-based. Second, the report assumes districts are large and metropolitan, with ample discretionary funds. Many recommendations will not be useful to smaller districts—especially rural districts—or to districts with limited funds. Third, the report ignores at least three key research-based issues: the importance of teacher-student relationships to effective teaching and learning, the importance of leaders of color in recruiting and retaining teachers of color, and the importance of principal stability in creating a stable cadre of well-qualified teachers. Accordingly, while school and district leaders may find in this report some useful ideas to consider, they should read additional research and reports to independently determine whether recommendations of interest are evidence-based and how local context might affect implementation.



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I. Introduction

In response to numerous reports regarding teacher shortages across the US in 2021, TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project) published *Addressing Teacher Shortages: Practical Ideas for the Pandemic and Beyond*¹ in February of 2022. The stated purpose of the report is to “help district leaders understand and respond to the specific staffing challenges they’re facing, based on best practices [the organization] gathered working with hundreds of school systems over almost 25 years.”² While not every district has teacher shortages in general nor does every state have shortages in specific subject areas, sufficient anecdotal and research evidence suggests that a dearth of teachers is a problem across a fairly wide array of districts. The publication is therefore timely, and it can potentially help districts navigate current gaps and plan for likely future shortages.

In addition to clearly articulated policy goals, the guide specifically includes suggestions for diagnosing staffing problems, recommendations for short- and long-term school or district plans, and suggestions for policymakers to reduce the barriers to entry to the profession and to build a stronger teacher pipeline.

II. The Report’s Recommendations

The report offers recommendations within the parameters of three explicit goals: to ensure all students “have access to diverse, highly effective educators” who hold high expectations for every child; to ensure a district’s educators “reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender demographics of the students [they] serve”; and, to ensure the “system will retain strong and

promising educators.”³

Leaders are advised to undertake a context-specific *analysis of staffing challenges* based on several questions about recruitment, staffing and instructional delivery, and retention. Questions target such areas as whether strategies for recruiting diverse faculty are effective; how many substitute teachers are available; and why teachers leave.

After providing the analytical guide, the report offers recommendations for both short- and long-term plans. *Short-term recommendations* focus primarily on managing existing teacher and substitute teacher shortages as well as Covid-driven teacher absences. Many focus on responding to teacher absences while prioritizing children most in need. Six strategies are proposed: developing a vacancy/absence triage plan; addressing immediate vacancies; developing a differentiated retention strategy; expanding the reach of top teachers; using data to project future needs; and developing an early hiring strategy.

Long-term recommendations include: improving teacher experience (otherwise known as enhancing employee value proposition, or EVP); reducing barriers to entry of the teaching profession; expanding pathways into the teaching profession; and reimagining the teacher’s role. Improving teacher experience is a multifaceted strategy that includes establishing a unique school vision, crafting a positive working environment, offering competitive compensation, and offering professional growth opportunities. Reducing barriers to entry includes advocating for reducing or eliminating the role of test scores in teacher certification. Developing teacher pathways includes advocating for alternative routes to certification, establishing university-district partnerships, developing “grow your own” programs, and establishing partnerships with programs to expand the supplicant pool. Reimagining the teacher’s role suggests abandoning the one-teacher-in-front-of-30-students norm.

III. Rationale for Recommendations

The report’s rationale for its guidance is that having worked with hundreds of school systems over almost 25 years, TNTP has sufficient experience and expertise to reliably identify and outline best practices.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

TNTP asks the reader to trust TNTP’s past experience and suspend the need for supporting research to validate recommendations. Thus, no peer-reviewed work is referenced in the guide, despite a wide array of relevant research that substantiates or calls into question the report’s recommendations.⁴

The report does reference two prior TNTP reports describing findings from studies in some districts in 2003 and 2005,⁵ but neither of the TNTP documents was peer-reviewed or published in a journal. While that does not necessarily mean the research was weak or unreli-

able, it does mean the findings were not externally validated.

The single credible external research report cited is a study from the Wallace Foundation on how principals affect students and schools.⁶ I deem this work credible given that the primary author is the leading expert in the nation on principals and has numerous tier I journal articles on the topic. A few references to think tank reports using published research to substantiate claims are also included.⁷

Overall, of the 25 links that direct the reader to background information, 11 (44%) were TNTTP reports, 3 (12%) were news reports, and 11 (44%) were reports from other organizations and think tanks.⁸

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The absence of research evidence to support claims calls into question the reliability of recommendations. Readers are asked to simply trust that the claims are valid, based only on TNTTP's assertion that they are drawn from decades of experience. Since the value of formal research comes at least in part from its ability to determine which claims born of experience may be valid, which may be unfounded, the lack of supporting research is a significant weakness.

The importance of that weakness is compounded by the report's failure to detail three important issues relevant to any staffing plan: teacher-student relationships, the importance of recruiting and retaining teachers and principals of color, and the need for stable school and district leadership.

Extensive high-quality research has demonstrated that positive relationships between teachers and students are foundational to effective teaching and improved student outcomes,⁹ especially for students of color.¹⁰ Thus, recommendations for addressing teacher shortages while promoting effective teaching and learning must be assessed in terms of their likely effect on teacher-student relationships. For example, when recommendations call for using pre-recorded lessons for direct instruction or turning student interaction over to novice teachers, student teachers, or parent volunteers, leaders must ask—as the report does not—how such arrangements are likely to affect the development of strong and positive teacher-student relationships. Importantly, the report does not recognize that many or even most parent volunteers are relatively affluent White women and does not question how this has implications for equity and diversity issues.¹¹

The report does recommend hiring “diverse leaders,” and it appropriately notes Black teachers routinely have more positive relationships with Black students than teachers from other racial/ethnic groups, with benefits for Black students including: placement in gifted programs; appropriate placement with respect to special education; academic achievement; discipline issues; high school graduation; and, college attendance.¹² Yet despite the demonstrated value of ensuring Black students encounter Black teachers, the report does not directly state or document the reality that teacher hiring processes are often biased against

applicants of color¹³ or how a district might create more equitable hiring practices.

Similarly while the report recommends hiring “diverse leaders,” it does not mention that researchers have shown Black administrators to be more likely to recruit and retain Black teachers.¹⁴ Black leaders tap their friendship networks to facilitate recruitment of Black teachers—a point that could help non-Black leaders devise more effective recruitment strategies for Black teachers.¹⁵ In addition, researchers have also shown that compared to other leaders, Black leaders provide greater monetary rewards to Black teachers, one reason for their greater effectiveness in retaining them.¹⁶ Thus, the report misses an important opportunity to discuss the importance of hiring and retaining leaders of color as a strategy in recruiting and retaining teachers of color.

Finally, although research has shown that principal turnover negatively impacts teacher and student outcomes,¹⁷ many of the report’s recommendations simply assume leadership stability. But a principal leaving a building is associated with greater teacher turnover,¹⁸ and it also affects the ability to hire early and to ensure the attractive working conditions important in staffing.¹⁹ The report also fails to note that principal turnover is greater in schools serving greater proportions of students of color,²⁰ although that consideration is inextricably linked to the report’s stated diversity goal.

Districts attempting to address teacher shortages without also addressing principal recruitment and retention are unlikely to be successful.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Recommendations

Overall, because the report cited so little reliable research, it is difficult to judge the validity of the recommendations. Readers are left to independently research strategies of interest.

There are, however, two implicit global assumptions likely to limit the context in which several suggestions might be useful. More specifically, while the diagnostic segment of the report does offer many helpful questions to guide good planning, some short- and long-term recommendations deserve special scrutiny.

Implied Global Assumptions

Large, Metropolitan Districts. Many recommendations assume conditions that would be met primarily in very large metropolitan districts employing human resource staff with the time and skill to complete such tasks as rewriting recruitment materials, reviewing former candidate pools, and developing a strategy for tracking and analyzing data. For example, one suggestion is to “Designate central office staff who are responsible for your vacancy and absence triage plan.”

However, an analysis of NCES data from 2021 suggests that 78% of districts enroll fewer than 5,000 students.²¹ Of those districts, 58% are in smaller towns or rural areas; 67% employed three or fewer district administrators; and 56% employed three or fewer administra-

tive support staff. Many rural districts had only a superintendent.

In the many districts lacking the assumed human resources staff, suggested work would need to somehow be accomplished by already overextended and exhausted existing staff.

Adequate Resources. Similarly, many recommendations would require additional funds or the reallocation of funds, even though many districts may be underfunded or may lack discretionary power. Many schools serving primarily students in poverty or students of color are routinely underfunded. Districts cannot implement such recommendations as investing in strong substitutes or providing mental health services to all staff without adequate funds.

Diagnostic Section

As mentioned above, the guide is based on “best practices” gathered from TNTP’s work with “hundreds of school districts over almost 25 years.”²² TNTP, however, never provides evidence of whether these best practices were effective in the districts, for whom they were effective, or under what conditions they were effective, nor do they provide any research support for any of the recommendations in this section. As such, the report should have explicitly cautioned the reader that the recommendations are not research-based and, thus, the reader should further investigate a recommendation prior to implementation.

Further, additional issues are worth mentioning. First, the report suggests the teaching staff should closely reflect the diversity of a student body. In doing so, the report communicates that all-White schools need not employ *any* teachers of color—despite research suggesting students in all-White schools also benefit from having teachers of color.²³ Second, the report ignores that the number of students of color enrolled in teacher preparation programs has plummeted over the last decade.²⁴ Districts—especially rural districts—often have very little control over how many teachers of color are in their applicant pool because of their geographic location. That is, the report does not confront the challenging reality that there simply are too few teachers of color.

A third weakness is a failure to define teacher “effectiveness” and explain how it might be determined. Regardless of how teacher effectiveness is measured, research suggests the potential of bias against teachers of color. Research, in fact, has found classroom observations are often biased against teachers of color²⁵ and value-added scores can also be biased against teachers of students with particular characteristics—including students living in poverty, English language learners, special education students, and students of color.²⁶ Moreover, research further suggests that principals often have difficulty in identifying the effectiveness of beginning teachers during the hiring stage.²⁷

Short-Term Recommendations

The short-term recommendations are, with some exceptions, useful starting places. They address serious and immediate concerns in responding to existing teacher shortages, Covid-related teacher absences, and reported substitute teacher shortages. In particular, recommendations that include consciously prioritizing which classrooms in which schools

will be staffed by qualified teachers provide an excellent planning guide to address issues of instructional quality and equity.

It is worth noting, however, that hyperlinks in this section that appear to link to research support often link to something else entirely, like an earlier TNTP toolkit. Though much of this segment will be useful in planning, the report's general lack of a research base applies to this segment.

Long-Term Recommendations

There are four major recommendations in this section. The first recommendation is for districts and schools to adopt and implement an Employee Value Proposition (EVP). The EVP is a framework leaders can use to create attractive incentives for teachers to accept a position in a district and remain in the district. The EVP includes four components: mission and fit; working environment; compensation and rewards; and professional growth. The next two recommendations—reducing barriers to entry into teaching and developing and expanding teacher pathways—have routinely been proposed over the past 20 years as strategies for addressing teacher shortages. The fourth recommendation—reimagining the teacher's role—is a relatively novel proposal, but one that has consistently been proposed by TNTP and other think tanks.

While the EVP framework is useful, the report's proposal for how to use it lacks nuance and glosses over serious implementation issues. For example, the report does not problematize the issue of teacher fit despite a substantial body of research about the systemic racist nature of schools. If schools are systemically racist, how do teachers of color or anti-racist white teachers “fit” within the organization? Another example is that the report claims it is unacceptable that “people must choose to become teachers despite a set of difficult working conditions, low pay, and a job that's often perceived as impossible,”²⁸ without calling for states or districts to increase teacher salaries—despite a wealth of research that concludes that pay and working conditions are the factors most strongly associated with teacher retention.²⁹ Nor does the report recommend additional pay for teaching in hard-to-staff schools or hard-to-staff positions, and/or a reduction in tuition for candidates enrolled in teacher preparation programs. All these suggestions have substantial research evidence to support their use.³⁰ Similarly, there is little discussion of professional growth despite some recent research about coaching and other efforts that improve instruction.³¹

The next two recommendation target state policymakers. Many other organizations have urged reducing barriers to entry into the profession, but the discussion here lacks nuance. For example, the report does not discuss competing research findings on the relationship between teacher certification test scores and both teacher entry into the workforce and teacher effectiveness.³² Nor does it consider that a number of studies have found that alternative pathways to teaching have greater teacher attrition rates³³—a primary cause of teacher shortages.

The report's concluding long-term recommendation is to reimagine the teacher role by moving away from the traditional instructional model of having one teacher responsible for 20

to 40 students in one classroom at a time. The report, however, does not specifically describe such initiatives, how districts would fund such initiatives (some designs require more adults, not fewer adults), or how such initiatives impact student outcomes.

Given the documented importance of student-teacher relationships, creating new systems of schooling in which some teachers develop curriculum or grade papers without ever interacting with children could arguably increase student misbehavior, absenteeism, and dropout rates while concurrently lowering student achievement.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report provides some good questions for analysis and useful suggestions to consider as starting points for planning. However, its lack of a research base means that policymakers or practitioners interested in implementing specific recommendations are left to independently research whether there is support for the recommendations. It also leaves readers to research key issues identified in this review but neglected in the report. These limitations significantly reduce the report's usefulness.

Notes and References

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- 4 Throughout this critique, I provide peer-reviewed research that directly addresses the various topics at hand. TNTP had ample opportunity to substantiate its recommendations with appropriate research or provide a more nuanced discussion of specific recommendations. However, including research might problematize the recommendations and draw attention to those recommendations for which there is literally no research base. Multiple special journal issues and reviews of the literature address the topics of teacher shortages, supply, demand, recruitment, and retention. For example, volume 27 number 34 of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (EPAA) provides research addressing these issues.

In addition, Loeb and Myung review all of the economic research through 2020 regarding these topics.

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