

## Motivate Teachers with Incentives

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### Riverside Press-Enterprise

Can the United States achieve a top-notch public education system? The answer is yes -- we have to.

Business is sounding the alarm already, echoing the dismay of many educators, administrators and parents. The Wall Street Journal has called the poor results of our education system "an economic time bomb."

In California, the overall high school graduation rate has been slowly but steadily increasing for the past decade -- reaching about 71 percent in 2002 -- according to Urban Institute research. But historically disadvantaged minorities have graduation rates between 50 percent and 60 percent. Fewer than two-thirds of all students graduate from high school in the state's central city districts and in communities with high levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education traces part of the problem the economy faces to the changing demographics of the U.S. population. The racial and ethnic groups that are the lowest-performing academically are growing the fastest, and the most highly educated generation in U.S. history is retiring.

But even our highest-performing schools aren't making the grade, especially in math and science. We are turning out top students at only half the rate of our economic competitors.

What can we do to catch up and excel? At the top of the list: We have to reach directly into the classroom to improve teacher quality.

Recent data on Texas schools and students show that having an above-average teacher for five years running can close the average achievement gap between low-income and more advantaged students. No other remedy matches these results.

We need policies that build performance incentives into the teacher pay structure and get the best teachers into settings where they can make the most difference.

Education is one of the few industries that assigns the least-qualified and least-experienced workers to the most difficult working situations. Governors nationwide are beginning to establish bonuses for teachers, rewarding those in fields short of highly trained teachers and those willing to teach in low-performing schools.

Coupled with professional support for teachers in the schools, such as instructional coaches and time for planning, these policies can make a lasting difference. Research is showing that teachers matter even more than we thought. They should receive the rewards and supports necessary for them to make the difference they can.

Jane Hannaway directs the Education Policy Center at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. The views expressed are her own.

### Other Publications by the Authors

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