



Issue 1703 California's School Daze »

The Future of Teacher Quality in California Is in Doubt--and That Also Puts California's Economic Outlook in Jeopardy

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California's [economy](#)—on a pace this year to potentially surpass the United Kingdom [as the world's fifth largest](#)—will likely become more and more dependent on the quality of its home-produced labor force. In that regard storm clouds are on the horizon.

California can possibly, as it has in the past, attract workers from other states and from other countries. That approach has been successful in augmenting its labor force in the past, although it might be less successful in the future.

But with pressures to reduce immigration in general and with the increasing expense of living in California, the ability to attract high-skill workers into California may decline. Regardless, even if the current level of in-migration can be sustained, locally educated students remain the majority of those from which the future labor force is drawn.

In that regard, California could be headed for trouble.

When [states are ranked](#) against one another by student performance on national tests, California falls in the bottom five to ten states, depending on the subject of the test. Of course, as many are quick to point out, California has an unusually hard-to-educate population. For example, [more than half of all students](#) in public elementary and secondary schools are Hispanic, suggesting that poverty and language issues may be particularly important in California. Nonetheless, comparing just Hispanic students across the states, California falls in the bottom five of states. (For comparison, Hispanics in Texas—a state with much the same demographics as California—place in the top five states of the nation.)

Some say that scores on standardized tests are inconsequential and do not indicate anything important. However, this isn't the case. [Individuals who have higher skills](#) as indicated by these standardized tests will on average earn more throughout their lifetime.

Perhaps more important, these tests of students indicate the skills to be found in the future labor force of the state. Research shows that the [skills of workers in each state](#) are closely related to the evolution of the state economy. In simplest terms, states with a more skilled labor force grow faster than those with fewer skilled workers.

Where can California go to improve on its student performance (and thus its long-term labor force)? There are no simple and easy answers, such as “just buy the right textbook.”

There are, nevertheless, answers.

Research shows conclusively that the most important element of schools is the quality of the personnel: the teachers and the leadership.

There's little dispute about the [impact](#) of either the best teachers or the worst teachers. A good teacher can dramatically change the careers of her students, as can a bad teacher, but in the opposite direction.

To set the scene, it's valuable to provide a better idea of the importance of the issue. [Research](#) has shown that the best teachers can produce an extra half-year of learning each academic year; the worst cost their students one-half year less. In other words, in one academic year, two students in neighboring classrooms can end up a full year's different in achievement just by the luck of classroom placement. The previous differences are found within urban schools serving disadvantaged children; they suggest that three to four years with a good teacher are sufficient to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged students.

Yet knowing the importance of teacher quality does not provide a clear set of policies that the state should pursue. It's not possible simply to write a law declaring that only good teachers can be in the classroom because the law would have to specify how to define a good teacher and to develop a set of policies to ensure that only good teachers so defined are in the classroom. Those steps are currently beyond our current ability.

To address teacher quality issues, two very different strategies have been proposed and pursued. Let's weigh both.

One strategic approach, which is dominant although not successful across the states, is to ensure that only highly qualified teachers can get into the classroom; in fact, it was part of the previous national accountability system, [No Child Left Behind](#) (NCLB).

This strategy has many components. A key element is putting a floor on the preparation of teachers that is permissible. That would include possibly testing potential teachers for subject matter knowledge, requiring masters' degrees, and emphasizing majoring in subject matter fields.

Part of the idea behind making it more difficult to get into teaching, besides just restricting the number of those who can teach, is elevating the prestige of the field. The chief objective is getting the right people into the field and then treating them with respect and making their career rewarding.

In principle, there's nothing wrong with this objective.

But it just hasn't worked.

The second strategy takes a different tack, arguing that we don't really [know how to describe](#) the characteristics and background of an effective teacher.

Although we can observe which teachers do the best job, we don't know the training, experience, or other characteristics that identify differences in them compared to teachers doing the worst job. As such, we can't easily describe what is necessary to have good teachers' thus it is very difficult if not impossible to ensure having good teachers.

An alternative is to make it easier, not harder, to enter teaching but then to make it harder to stay in teaching if the effectiveness is not high. This approach builds on the observation that it is possible to judge the effectiveness of teachers after they've been in the classroom, even if it is difficult to assess who might be effective before they get into the classroom.

The current system, as practiced in California, goes to the traditional but ineffective direction and has proven even less successful than the policies in most other states. It makes it hard to get into teaching by virtue of the requirements for certification but then makes it easy to stay in teaching regardless of effectiveness in the classroom.

This policy perspective was exactly the subject of the state court case of [Vergara v. California](#). That complaint asserted that laws of the state meant that some students received grossly ineffective teachers. (Sisters Beatriz and Elizabeth Vergara were [two of nine student plaintiffs](#) suing the case's defendants--the state, the California Teachers Association, and the California Federation of Teachers--on their constitutional right to a quality education.)

The legal challenge emphasized the tenure law--which means that teachers must be evaluated for tenure after just eighteen months; the dismissal statutes that make it difficult and expensive to dismiss a tenured teacher if it is ascertained that the teacher is ineffective; and the LIFO statute (Last In, First Out), which that means effectiveness cannot be used as a criteria in dismissing teachers if a reduction in force is required.

In other words, the argument was that the statutes made it impossible to implement a system that made it possible to weed out an ineffective teacher from the classroom, thus subjecting some students to bad outcomes.

A California Superior Court ruled in 2014 that all of these [statutes were unconstitutional](#). The ruling found that, "There is also no dispute that there are a significant number of grossly ineffective teachers currently active in California classrooms." But in 2016 the California Court of Appeals [reversed the decision](#), declaring it legally flawed. Then later in 2016 the California Supreme Court declined to review the appellate court decision, ending the case and leaving the existing statutes in place, in effect, [giving teachers unions a victory](#).

In 2017 California doesn't face the same judicial pressure as it did when *Vergara* was working its way through the courts. But the problem remains. The state's educational performance is near the bottom of the nation. Yet California's State Legislature finds it difficult to make the evaluation and dismissal of ineffective teachers something that can readily be done.

In July state lawmakers [shelved a measure](#) that would have added another year of probation (and an individual improvement plan) to teacher tenure rules and oversight. Meanwhile, the legislature debated [a host of teacher-related incentives](#) including granting a tax credit for new teachers and taxable income for teachers with six to ten years of service, as well as allowing "urgent state of need" districts to hire teachers without a credential or permit.

Unfortunately, the view from the state capital doesn't reflect what's on kids' report cards: based on what's reflected in student outcomes, California's teachers policies remain [among the worst](#) in the nation.

Unless this changes, the future of California is seriously in doubt. America's nation-state, blessed with an economy global in scale, is not meeting national achievement standards, let alone world standards. This [jeopardizes the economic future](#) of both California and the nation--ultimately we all fail.

CALNOTES



VERGARA--THE SEQUEL?

California's *Vergara* lawsuit, which earlier this decade threatened to topple the Golden State's teachers' tenure, seniority, and dismissal policies, ultimately fell short. Still, the cause endures, albeit, in other states. In late June, the Minnesota Court of Appeals heard oral arguments on a parent-led challenge to the state's teacher tenure laws (tenure's available after three years in Minnesota, versus only two in California). It's not the only judicial matter in that state that has national ramifications. This fall, the Minnesota Supreme Court is expected to hear a case, brought by Twin Cities parents, alleging that segregation along racial and economic lines has denied poor and minority children an adequate education.

COURTING REFORM ANOTHER WAY

Teacher tenure leads to the question of teachers' unions political muscle, which in California leads to the "paycheck protection" movement: legally trying to prevent Democratic-friendly unions from political spending with money raised by automatic payroll deductions. The biggest threat to such union financial muscle, *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association* (it sought an end of dues for politics), was rejected last year by a pre-Gorsuch Supreme Court that was one shy of a right-leaning majority. Look for another legal challenge, especially since the more populist approach hasn't panned out: three times in the past fifteen years, California ballot measures tried to curb union influence. Each and every time the unions prevailed.