Testimony
House Education and Labor Committee Hearing on Teacher Quality and Distribution
Linda Murray
Executive Director, Education Trust--West

Chairman Miller, members of the committee: Thank you very much for providing me with the opportunity to talk with you this morning about the importance of strong teaching to our effort to boost student achievement and close achievement gaps.

My name is Linda Murray. Currently, I am serving as Executive Director of the Education Trust—West in Oakland, California. Prior to joining the Trust, I was—for eleven years—superintendent of schools in San Jose, California (and, before that, assistant superintendent in Broward County, Florida). It's my experience as a district leader that convinced me years ago that there is *nothing* more important to our students than strong teachers.

The San Jose Unified School District is an urban district of 32,000 students. Fifty one percent are Latino and 45 percent come from low-income families. There are approximately 1,800 teachers in the district.

When I began my tenure as superintendent in 1993, there was a long history of distrust—even outright hostility—between the central office and the teacher's union. I saw quickly that any real progress on improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps depended on reversing the destructive relationship that paralyzed us and hurt our students.

Over time and with lots of effort from all parties, we became partners in improving student learning and our students reaped the benefits. Together, we raised expectations and substantially narrowed achievement gaps.

San Jose Unified became the first district in California to set the goal of college readiness for all students and to require all students—even the poorest—to take the toughest high school classes.

Our teachers were with us every step of the way.

So I can say to you from first-hand experience that it is possible to work with teachers' unions to improve outcomes for students.

But I can also tell you that getting strong teachers to the children who desperately need them is so important that we've got to do it even when local union leaders (or, for that matter, local administrators) drag their feet.

This is where you come in. Because, done right, federal law can provide the excuse that education leaders need to question the longstanding practice of assigning our weakest teachers to the poorest children—and the leverage that we need to change a pattern of unfairness that, frankly, common decency and American devotion to the ideal of a level playing field should have prompted us to act on a long time ago.

Nothing is more important to closing longstanding achievement gaps than getting more of our most effective teachers teaching our most vulnerable students. Doing this right will require replacing outmoded methods of teacher evaluation with evaluation systems that draw on longitudinal data that link teachers and the growth of the students they teach. And now–thanks in part to a push from Washington—we are building those systems, state by state.

But many states either can't yet—or simply won't—include teacher/student longitudinal data to evaluate—much less to assign, compensate, tenure, or remove teachers.

My state, California, is certainly no example of vigilance on this matter. Teacher evaluation systems are weak and have nothing to do with effectiveness in producing student learning. Our lowest-performing schools up and down the state have more than their fair share of the weakest teachers. In fact, I fear we may be a poster child for irresponsibility in this regard, with a legislated firewall between the student and teacher data systems. Secretary Duncan has seen our firewall for what it is—an intentional barrier to better serving our students—and has put tremendous pressure on the state to tear the wall down. His insistence that states with firewalls be excluded from Race to the Top got the attention of our legislature. A special legislative session is underway to deal with this and other barriers to our eligibility. The pressure needs to continue so that State policy leaders have the leverage they need to overcome politics as usual and do the right thing.

As Secretary Duncan said last week, our students have been waiting for far too long for our education policies to live up to our national promise. Neither our kids nor our nation can afford further delay.

This means that, even as we continue to pressure states to build and use better data systems, we cannot abandon research-based measures of teacher quality—especially, experience and content knowledge—when determining whether the schools enrolling our most vulnerable students are getting the teachers they need.

You knew this when you crafted the requirement contained in both NCLB and the ARRA that low-income students and students of color not be taught at higher rates than other students by out-of-field, inexperienced, or uncertified teachers.

So far, however, that requirement has not been getting much attention. Some say that's because the proxy measures are imperfect. They are not all wrong: We all know of first-year teachers who are spectacular and veterans who should not be in the classroom at all. We also know of teachers with deep content-area knowledge who simply cannot teach.

On the whole, however, the measures you chose show a strong connection to outcomes for students:

- Value-added research consistently finds that "teachers' effectiveness improves with the first few years of experience"[1] and "experience enhances teacher productivity at all grade levels in reading and in both elementary and middle-school math."[2]
- And, not surprisingly, studies also consistently suggest that, especially in math, content knowledge matters: Secondary mathematics teachers with bachelor's or master's degrees in

mathematics are more likely to produce high student achievement than their colleagues who lack such a degree.[3]

So, while not perfect, these research based proxies provide a strong base for solid public policy.

But despite this clear evidence and despite federal law, most school systems continue to assign disproportionate numbers of rookies—along with disproportionate numbers of out-of-field teachers—to the very children who are most dependent upon their teachers for academic learning.

Nationally, core academic classes in our high-poverty secondary schools are twice as likely as classes in low-poverty schools to be taught by a teacher with neither a major nor certification in their assigned subject. Students at high-minority -schools are assigned to inexperienced teachers at a higher rate than students at schools serving mostly white.[4]

The result is that, instead of catching up with their more advantaged peers, students who enter behind fall further and further behind over time. Not because they couldn't learn. But because, all too often, we didn't bother to teach them.

Interestingly, this practice also has the effect of diverting state and federal dollars intended for poor children from the very schools with concentrations of such children. Why? Because teachers with more degrees and more experience are paid more. As they gain experience, teachers typically transfer to schools with fewer poor and minority children, taking their higher salaries with them.

The Education Trust—West did a groundbreaking study of this practice several years ago. Called "Hidden Gaps," our work exposed glaring differences in average teacher salaries between high- poverty and low- poverty schools in the same school district! Perhaps this might be acceptable if the schools with the most inexperienced teachers got lots of extra teachers or extra funding to provide teacher coaches. But they don't. Both kids and teachers suffer.

Yes, better data systems that measured teacher effectiveness would certainly provide more precise information about the strengths and weaknesses of individual teachers. Such systems would allow us to identify and celebrate fabulous teaching, get struggling teachers the support they require, and better match teacher ability with student need.

However, as much as we may want and students may need suchinformation, many states and districts are still years away from having their data systems up and running. Moreover, while such data systems will certainly provide a finer grained analysis of who is teaching whom, they will only paint a richer picture of the inequities in access to strong teaching that have been documented time and again using other metrics.

In short, lacking value-added data we may not have the best information possible, but we have right now, and in fact for years, have had too much information about inequities in teacher assignments to wait a year, a month, a week, a moment longer to begin righting the wrong that has been done to so many of our students.

And to do that, we don't need new legislation or new investments. We need this administration to enforce the laws you already passed—so state and local education leaders have the leverage they need to move in the right direction now

Thank you.

---

[1] Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, "Teacher Credentials and Student Achievement in High School: A Cross-Subject Analysis With Student Fixed Effects" (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2007), *www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=1001104.*

[2] Douglas H. Harris and Tim R. Sass, "Teacher Training, Teacher Quality, and Student Achievement" (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2007), http://www.caldercenter.org/PDF/1001059_Teacher_Training.pdf.

[3] Dan Goldhaber and Dominic Brewer, "Evaluating the Effect of Teacher Degree Level on Educational Performance," in William J. Fowler Jr., ed., *Developments in School Finance*, *1996* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1997), (ED 409 634), p. 197-210. *http://nces.ed.gov/pubs97/97535l.pdf*.

[4] The Education Trust, "Core Problems: Out-of-Field Teaching Persists in Key Academic Courses and High-Poverty Schools," (Washington, D.C., 2008), http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/0D6EB5F1-2A49-4A4D-A01B-881CD2134357/0/SASSreportCoreProblems.pdf.