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What Revisions to Federal Education Policies Mean for State Efforts to Improve Schools

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With the recent reversal of key accountability provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act, federal education policy is at a crossroad. Since 2002, federal aid dollars have come with significant strings attached. To get such funds, states must sanction low-performing schools – and more recently, teachers – following a ladder of remedial steps that can lead to school closures and teacher firings. But with the recent changes to the Every Student Succeeds Act, Congress now allows states to rethink accountability procedures. Many scholars and policymakers worry that the end of accountability enforcement may lead to falling student test scores, so they recommend that states maintain strict sanctions for low performers. In contrast, our work suggests that states should take another path – by focusing on programs and policies that encourage high-quality classroom instruction.

The logic behind our argument is simple, and based in research we have carried out over the last two decades. To improve student outcomes, the United States first needs to achieve improvements in classroom instruction – which means teachers use high-quality classroom materials like textbooks and enjoy effective professional development opportunities. To maximize the potential of improved materials and training, districts must help build teachers' knowledge and skills, and calibrate policies and regulatory guidance so as to reduce mixed messages flowing to teachers. This, in turn, implies critical ways states could respond to federal legal changes. Below, we further explain what could and should be accomplished.

How States Can Improve Classroom Instruction

To provide teachers access to high-quality materials and professional development, states can rely upon a trove of research published since 2001, when federal funds began prioritizing rigorous, randomized evaluations of classroom materials and professional development. A recent review of evaluations of science, mathematics and engineering programs shows that they can improve student outcomes, with students in improved programs performing roughly twelve percentile points higher than other students with similar characteristics. Other research assessments using cruder measures also show significant improvements.

What Works? As studies show, programs seem more likely to have a positive impact when they feature both new curriculum materials and opportunities for teachers to master those materials in depth. Similarly, programs that help teachers learn to plan, implement, and reflect on lessons also have positive effects for students. Ideally, teachers work together to study content, anticipate student responses, and refine their lessons. Also effective are programs where coaches observe teachers' instruction and offer concrete feedback or guidance.

What Does Not Work? Notably, one very popular program – collaborative teacher analyses of student test data – has repeatedly failed in recent randomized trials. In these programs, teachers meet regularly to review student benchmark test score data and plan instruction around student needs. Although our observations suggest that such programs are extremely common, they seem to have few effects on student learning. Qualitative evidence suggests that teachers often fail to translate information gleaned from student test score data into significant improvements in classroom instruction.

Aligning Key Elements of Instruction

Locating effective programs is a good first step, but states must also encourage districts to align their policies and regulations around effective programs and then get out of the way so school districts can do their work. A raft of recent federally-funded evaluations make clear why: when programs fail, investigators often point to the shifting and conflicting policy messages teachers receive and stress shortfalls in leadership.

A recent evaluation of a program in one district for mathematics professional development illustrates this point. Between the beginning and end of the three-year evaluation, both the state and district made constant changes in mathematics standards, tests, textbooks, and teaching guides – and the district went through three different superintendents. The district also shifted from requiring the use of a common textbook to advising teachers to develop their own curriculum from sources found on the internet. Some principals further mandated the use of small-group instruction and, in the final year of the study, the district instituted a mandatory math daily basic skills review session. In total, teachers had at least eight different sources of instructional guidance to attend to – not counting the actual professional development program they attended. A review of these sources of guidance showed that not all were aligned and some actually conflicted with program goals. Teachers in the district noticed. In exit interviews, over half identified their district's conflicting instructional guidance as a significant reason for failing to implement the instructional vision advocated in the professional development program – a vision many liked.

According to many teachers we have heard from in our research, similar situations play out in districts across the nation. Pressed by state and federal guidelines to tighten accountability for student test results, school districts push a dizzying array of new programs and kinds of instructional guidance. In the words of one scholar, schools end up like "Christmas trees," collecting flashy ornaments without consistently improving instruction. Teachers cite ever-shifting mélanges of policies and programs as the reason they cannot implement change.

What States Can Do

To shift this ineffective dynamic, states must encourage districts and schools to take a systems-level approach to instructional improvement. Such an approach begins with the identification of effective programs, practices and forms of professional development, which can now be pinpointed through online databases that synthesize research findings. But beyond identifying effective programs, districts must also carefully prune their regulatory underbrush, so they can better align both written and unwritten guidance to teachers. They need to send consistent messages about how to teach, and reduce the number of programs and personnel tasked with changing teaching methods. These two steps are not simple, but states must take them if they wish to use the Every Student Succeeds Act to improve instruction.