

PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

ENSURE AN EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS

How teachers are assigned or placed within the school often gets less attention than other personnel issues, such as hiring or retention. However, teacher assignment is one key to equity, and can be an important lever for closing the achievement gap within the school. Without attention, research suggests that schools often allocate teachers within schools inequitably.

How do teachers tend to be sorted in schools?



Research suggests novice teachers get placed in classrooms with lower-performing students. A study of three large urban school districts demonstrated that classrooms with the largest proportions of low-achieving students were more likely to be assigned novice teachers. Additionally, classes with more students of color or students in poverty were also more likely to be assigned novice teachers.¹

Less effective teachers get assigned to “untested” classrooms (that is, those not subject to state standardized tests). Several studies have shown that schools tend to concentrate effective teachers in tested classrooms to the detriment of those that aren’t tested. For example, a study of North Carolina elementary schools indicated that less effective teachers tended to be moved from grades 3-5 to grades K-2. This pattern became more pronounced after the introduction of high-stakes accountability laws, suggesting that principals were strategically assigning less effective teachers to grades that were not tested and, thus, did not count for accountability grades.² Researchers using data from the Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida found that teachers with less positive performance measures were more likely to be placed in untested classrooms in the following school year. In elementary schools, this again meant that less effective teachers were systematically moved into lower-grades classrooms. The pattern was particularly pronounced in schools with low accountability grades and where surveys showed principals had more influence over teacher assignment, suggesting the principals were responding to accountability pressures.³ Researchers at the Tennessee Education Research Alliance have shown similar patterns of reassignment of less effective teachers to K-2 classrooms in Tennessee.⁴



What effect does sorting have on students?

- **Placing novice teachers in classes with lower-performing students can exacerbate achievement gaps.** Research demonstrates that novice teachers tend to be, on average, less effective than more experienced teachers. Students in elementary and middle schools who are assigned to first-year teachers tend to have significantly worse math scores when compared to students who are taught by teachers with four or more years of experience in the same school or in the same district. The difference in scores may indicate a difference of between three to nine months of learning. This difference suggests that if lower-performing students are systematically placed with novice teachers for multiple years, achievement gaps between low- and high-performing students will grow over time.⁵
- **While assigning more effective teachers to classes with high-stakes tests may increase student performance on those exams in the short term, it can have more adverse long-term effects on students.** A study of Miami-Dade County Public Schools data shows that schools that place more effective teachers in tested subjects tended to receive higher state accountability ratings. However, perversely, systematically placing less effective teachers in K-2 classrooms predicted lower third grade test scores for students taught by ineffective teachers who were reassigned from higher grades, with some evidence of lower fourth-grade scores as well. These findings are consistent with the idea that early learning matters disproportionately for future student success, and that systematically placing less effective teachers in K-2 classrooms could have long-term negative effects on students.⁶

References

- ¹ Kalogrides, D. & Loeb, S. (2013). Different teachers, different peers: The magnitude of student sorting within schools. *Educational Researcher*, 42(6), 304-315.
- ² Fuller, S. C. & Ladd, H. F. (2013). School-based accountability and the distribution of teacher quality across grades in elementary school. *Education Finance and Policy*, 8(4), 528-559.
- ³ Grissom, J. A., Kalogrides, D., & Loeb, S. (2017). Strategic staffing? How performance pressures affect the distribution of teachers within schools and resulting student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(6), 1079-1116.
- ⁴ Doan, S. & Rogers, L. (2019). *Do students in the early and upper elementary grades have the same access to effective teachers?* Nashville, TN: Tennessee Education Research Alliance.
- ⁵ Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research (2012). *Do low-performing students get placed with novice teachers?* Strategic Data Project. Retrieved from <https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/sdp/files/sdp-spi-placement-memo.pdf>.
- ⁶ Grissom, J. A., Kalogrides, D., & Loeb, S. (2017).