



Attracting the Best Teachers to Schools That Need Them Most

Laura Doherty runs four public charter schools in some of Baltimore’s toughest neighborhoods. Every year she and her principals make recruiting a priority. They know students will lose out if they don’t hire effective teachers. Selecting the right teachers fosters the following:

- high expectations, which creates a culture that encourages all students to learn;
- good student behavior, making learning easier and schools safer;
- satisfied parents and steady enrollment, leading to school stability;
- opportunities to collaborate, which attracts other effective teachers, ensuring that students get great teachers year after year; and, most important,

- effective instruction, leading to greater gains in student learning.

Hiring teachers who have the skills to build this environment in schools where so many children are growing up in poverty is extraordinarily challenging.

Yet Doherty does not accept that instruction in high-poverty schools should look all that different from teaching in schools with middle- and high-income students. “Instruction should be clear,” says Doherty, president of the Baltimore Curriculum Project, a nonprofit that runs a network of charter schools. “Interactions should be positive and respectful, and all students should be challenged.”

When hiring teachers, Doherty looks for qualities that every principal seeks but that are especially critical when teaching children who are growing up in poverty:

Students in high-needs schools need and deserve the best teachers. These students often have fewer opportunities outside of school to learn, less support at home, and are at a greater risk of not graduating or going to college. Some high-needs schools are doing what it takes to recruit well-trained teachers — and to keep them.

**by Kate Walsh, Hannah Putman,
and Autumn Lewis**

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Candidates need to understand how to engage students. They must be able to create routine and structure. Persistence, grit, and organizational skills are critical. And Doherty and her team want evidence that applicants will be sensitive to the obstacles their students face while also being capable of tailoring instruction to help students make big academic gains.

Doherty is vying for these talented, well-trained candidates alongside every other school principal. Applicants with proven track records and new teachers coming out of schools with strong reputations for training teachers have choices about where to teach. Consequently, the least experienced and least effective teachers too often are working in the highest needs schools.

This trend is well documented: Teachers at high-needs schools have fewer years of experience—a difference of almost two years—and have spent almost two fewer years teaching at their current school.¹ Similarly, teachers at high-needs schools are more likely to leave for other jobs.² Teacher turnover makes it difficult to create a stable culture in a school, and it can lead to lower student achievement.

This trend can be reversed. Concerted efforts to find well-prepared new teachers and to recruit and retain time-tested teachers can ensure students in high-needs schools have excellent teachers.

Training That Counts

Ensuring that high-needs schools get their fair share of effective teachers is no small feat. But this task would be easier if all new teachers were trained to be effective with high-needs students, no matter where they plan to teach. While some aspects of effective teaching are constant across all schools, schools with more low-income students have special challenges. A lesson plan for a class where half of the students are two years behind in reading will look different from one for a class where only a few students struggle to read.

Moreover, while many teacher preparation programs pay tremendous attention to the importance of diversity and teaching for social justice, too often teacher training around this issue consists of only talking about equity issues and employing various course-based exercises such as journal reflections to help teacher candidates overcome prejudices and respect diversity.

Leading teacher educators concede there is a lack of evidence for the efficacy of this approach: "It is very clear that empirical examination of the relationship between teacher preparation for diversity and pupils' learning and other outcomes is largely uncharted territory in the field of research on teacher education."³

Requiring teacher candidates to write reflections on how to inspire children in poverty is not the same as training them to plan lessons that lead students to master a new concept. Specific skill sets and approaches can reach children who may not have books at home or who have difficulty delaying gratification. Philosophizing about the importance of providing low-income and minority children an excellent education is a poor substitute for mastering the actual skills and techniques that can bridge the achievement gap. An institution's focus on "teaching for social justice" serves only to create teachers who want to help all students succeed, with no guarantee that they know how to do so.

Direct observation and supervised practice in classrooms with teachers who have demonstrated their effectiveness in high-needs settings is essential to prepare teacher candidates for jobs made tougher by the obstacles poverty creates.⁴ This training is crucial for reasons other than skill-building. Too many graduates come out of teacher prep programs believing that they cannot hold children living in poverty to high standards. When they learn from teachers who do not use poverty as an excuse for low achievement and whose students are succeeding, they see their role and responsibility differently (box 1).

Ensuring that teacher candidates receive this experience is not so simple. Accreditation bodies identify the ability to teach in diverse settings as an important goal for prospective teachers. For example, both the former National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and its replacement, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), established standards that teacher candidates have experience working in diverse field placements.⁵ Yet neither sets clear criteria for what these diverse experiences should look like.

Little information exists about whether preparation programs require practice and experiential learning in successful high-needs schools. The *Teacher Prep Review*, developed by the National Council on Teacher Quality

Box 1. Training That Reverses the Trend

The Rodel Foundation of Arizona pairs aspiring teachers with exceptional teachers in high-needs schools. The Exemplary Teaching Initiative has trained more than 600 student teachers over 11 years. Most important, the program reports that teachers who complete it meet or exceed the effectiveness of other teachers at their school, and more than 80 percent of them continue to teach in high-needs schools.



(NCTQ), seeks to fill this gap by scaling up its identification of which institutions are providing student teachers with these opportunities. Specifically, we're comparing the proportion of student teaching placements in high-needs schools by each institution within a region. Currently, we have collected data for New York City, Boston, and Los Angeles. For example, our research finds that one teacher prep institution in Los Angeles sends 57 percent of its teacher candidates to student teach in high-performing, high-needs schools, while another sends only 19 percent of candidates to these schools (see figure 1). Superintendents and school boards in those cities should be asking why this sort of disparity exists.

NCTQ helps school districts leverage student teaching partnerships to improve their teacher pipeline. For example, it is often eye-opening to take stock of the student teaching programs in their schools, learn how many student teachers are placed, and track the type of schools where they are placed (high or low poverty, strong or struggling academically) and the effectiveness levels of teachers with whom they are placed. For many districts, an equity analysis can uncover disturbing trends of which administrators were unaware.

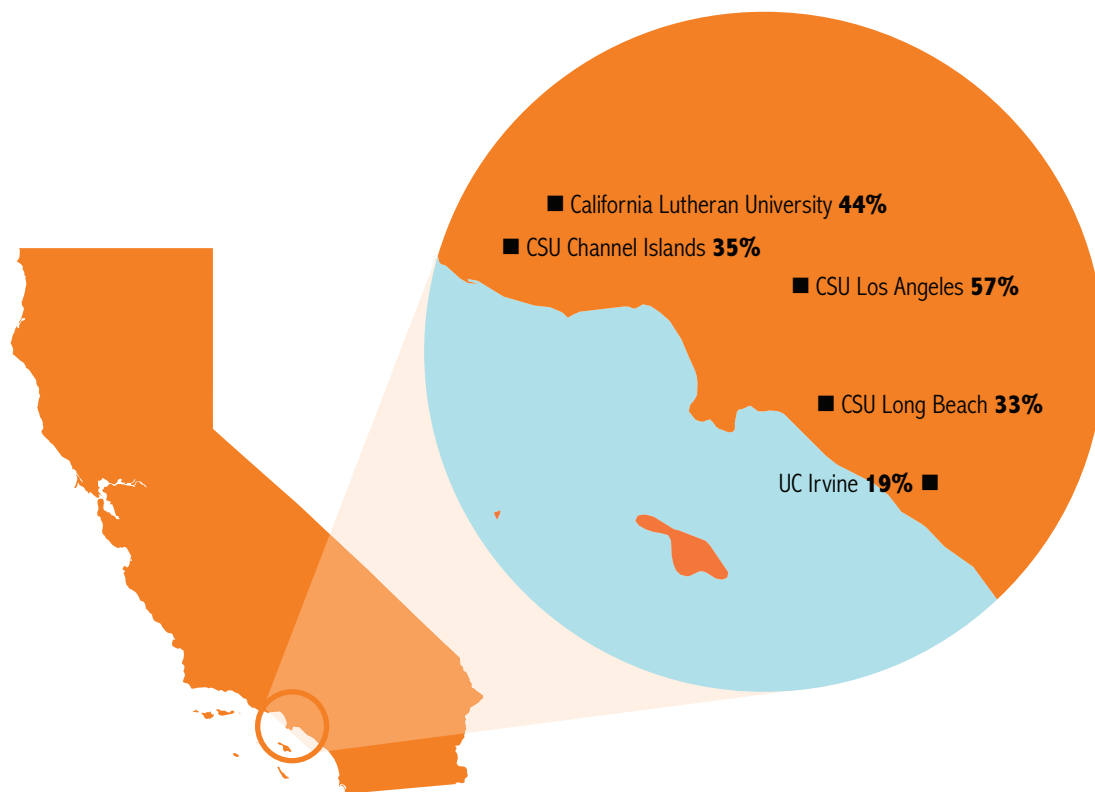
Districts then can use this information to work with programs so that more student teachers are placed in high-achieving, high-poverty schools. In addition, districts can and should vet student teachers before placement to ensure they have learned the fundamentals of classroom management and instruction. This screening makes it more likely that student teachers will become successful new teachers, and it also puts pressure on programs to strengthen the preparation they provide candidates prior to student teaching.

Before the Classroom

As central as a candidate's student teaching experience is, it should not be the first introduction to classroom strategies and skills. For example, too few programs instruct new teachers in how to teach elementary reading and math.⁶ As a result, the chance to close the achievement gap in these critical subjects early in a child's career—before the gulf is overwhelming—is missed.⁷

Similarly, teachers need to learn how to establish clear rules, routines, and positive reinforcement to prevent behaviors that lead to high rates of suspensions, especially among minority students.⁸ It is not a big leap to presume that

Figure 1. Los Angeles Area Teacher Preparation Programs by Percent That Place Student Teachers in High-Needs, High-Performing Schools



inadequate teacher preparation in classroom management can lead to troubling levels of exclusionary discipline.⁹

New teachers regularly report being surprised by students' behavior. Too often, a novice teacher's reflex is to be reactive rather than proactive, says Baltimore Curriculum Project's Doherty, "focusing on punishments and consequences." Teachers are more successful, Doherty argues, if they start with this perspective: "I'm going to set a tone, set expectations, and teach the behaviors I need."

Again, preparation programs must explicitly teach these classroom management skills, ask candidates to practice them, and concentrate on them in fieldwork. For example, student teachers could be assigned to count how many times a cooperating teacher praises students versus reprimanding them. The numbers can be telling, illustrating a practice that will memorably inform a new teacher's instruction.

When making hiring decisions, principals, human resource professionals, and

administrators should not take teacher prep programs at their word that they are giving candidates the skills and experience they need to close achievement gaps. Instead, they should ask direct questions about the type of training their teachers have received (box 2).

State school boards can assist this process by providing information on the quality of teacher preparation programs and by requiring that prep programs share this information when it is not readily available. They can provide measures of student growth and achievement linked back to the preparation programs that graduated those students' teachers. They can also track where different preparation programs send their student teachers. Publishing this information would allow school districts and principals to make informed decisions about how to target their recruitment.

Moreover, many state school boards are empowered to set clear guidelines for what skills and content teacher candidates must learn in their programs.¹⁰ When preparation programs

fail to provide that training, state boards can choose not to approve those programs.

Incentives for the Best Teachers

Selecting novice teachers from strong preparation programs is critical but not sufficient. Districts must also look at where their most effective teachers are assigned. Are they clustered in some of the lower-needs schools? Are they shying away from the schools with more low-income students? If so, monetary incentives may help (especially in the form of higher salaries as opposed to one-time bonuses). However, teachers are often drawn to other forms of recognition, such as teaching positions specifically designed for more experienced teachers, leadership roles, and opportunities to work with other skilled teachers.

State boards can work with districts to build incentive programs that attract strong teachers into high-needs schools. States should also have some candid conversations with school districts to learn if existing policies are hampering efforts to attract or retain these skilled teachers.

Some districts are doing particularly well in designing programs to attract talented teachers to high-needs schools. Typically, their efforts are multipronged, offering additional professional

development, leadership opportunities, and higher pay. Washington, DC's IMPACT teacher evaluation program offers substantially larger bonuses to highly effective teachers working in high-poverty schools compared with those offered to teachers in low-poverty schools.¹¹ In Boston, schools with cohorts of teachers recruited and trained through the Turnaround Teacher Teams have seen improved student achievement in English language arts and math.¹²

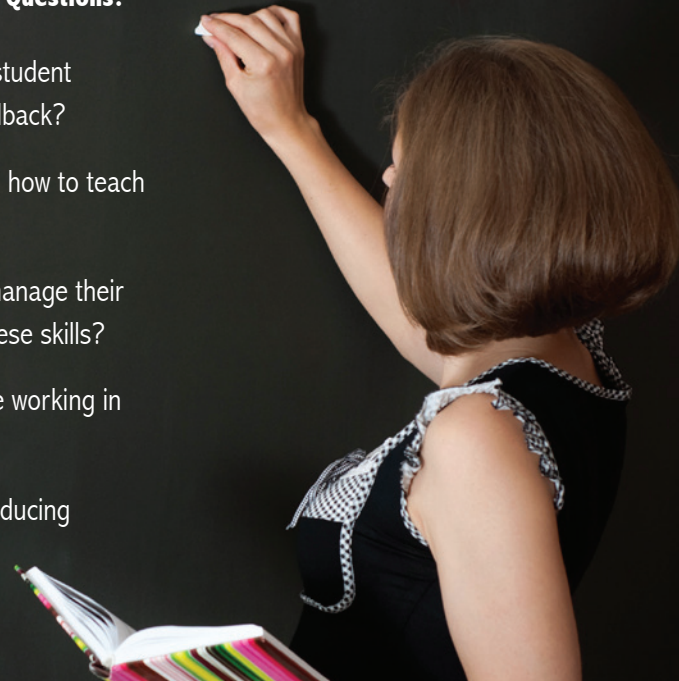
Retaining Teachers

Promoting equity also requires retaining effective teachers once they are hired. High-needs schools often suffer from a reputation as difficult places to work. Many are seen as schools where new teachers “cut their teeth” before moving on to schools with students who face fewer challenges. This perception accurately reflects real workforce trends, and unless administrators help all teachers succeed in high-needs schools, the practice will persist.

Teacher inexperience and turnover can significantly impede student learning. Teachers improve substantially in their first three to five years in the classroom, so students who have novice teachers year after year are repeatedly put at a disadvantage.¹³ Research also has linked

Box 2. Can Your School Districts Answer These Questions?

- Which teacher prep programs ensure that student teachers get regular observations and feedback?
- Which programs instruct their candidates in how to teach early reading and elementary math?
- Which programs teach candidates how to manage their classrooms and make sure they practice these skills?
- Which programs give candidates experience working in high-needs, high-performing schools?
- Which programs have a track record of producing effective teachers?



teacher turnover to lower student math and English scores, with the most dramatic effect in schools with more low-performing students.¹⁴

Recruitment and retention indisputably drive the inequitable distribution of the best teachers. A 2014 NCTQ report on the Miami-Dade County School District compared two areas educating the highest concentration of both poor and African-American students with the county's seven other areas.¹⁵ In one of the high-needs areas, one in every seven teachers is in her first year or two of teaching. In contrast, the area with a tenth as many African-American students and fewer students living in poverty reports that only one teacher out of every fifty is new.

Miami-Dade County students in these two highest-needs areas also experience the highest rates of teacher turnover. Teachers in those districts resign at a higher rate than the rest of Miami-Dade, with 22 percent of all resignations in the county coming from just one of the highest-poverty areas. Overall, teachers in Miami-Dade performed very well on the district's new teacher effectiveness evaluations, with the vast majority of teachers being rated as effective or highly effective. The two poorest areas, however, had the lowest percentage of highly rated teachers.

Miami-Dade County's struggle is a familiar one for school districts. For some, this combination of novice teachers and high turnover creates a cycle of poor performance that is hard to break. Novice teachers want to teach where they can learn from effective colleagues, and effective teachers want to teach where they are among other effective teachers. If neither condition is met, recruiting strong teachers and ensuring high student achievement will remain elusive.

Some districts, however, have found ways to break free of this cycle. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC, the Project L.I.F.T. initiative recruits talented principals who bring along staff teams and offers career advancement to teachers while allowing them to stay in the classroom.¹⁶ This recognition for successful teachers who stay in the classroom can be powerfully motivating. Mentoring programs can also increase retention for new teachers. The Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP) offers new teachers the opportunity to learn from an effective, experienced mentor and to receive regular feedback. After four years, 92 percent of SCNTP teachers

remained in the classroom, compared with 67 percent nationally.¹⁷

As these models show, recruiting and keeping good teachers is not impossible, but districts do need to be intentional in their efforts:

- Target recruitment to teacher preparation programs that place a high value on the skills needed to teach in high-needs schools.
- Identify schools that are both high-performing and high-needs and encourage these schools to host student teachers; watch the candidates closely and hire the best.
- Hire from teacher prep programs whose candidates spend time student teaching in high-needs schools.¹⁸
- When interviewing candidates, evaluate whether aspiring teachers have important skills in classroom management. If they do, they're more likely to stick around.¹⁹
- Provide financial incentives and leadership opportunities to help keep the best teachers in the classrooms.
- Work with state boards to gather the data needed to make these strategic decisions.

Getting It Done

Teaching is a difficult profession in ideal circumstances. But the job requires immense talent and training when students have the overwhelming challenges associated with poverty. Teachers will succeed only if they're given excellent preparation and valuable fieldwork experience with effective teachers. School boards and leaders can and must insist that teacher prep programs step up to this challenge. If their teachers do not receive the training and support they need, students will continue to be denied the education that will ensure they meet and exceed high expectations. ■

¹⁷Teachers at schools with 75 percent or more students approved for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) have 12.7 years of teaching experience, compared with 14.4 years of experience for teachers at schools with less than 35 percent of students approved for FRL. Teachers at schools with 75 percent of students approved for FRL have spent 6.8 years at their current school versus 8.6 years for teachers at schools with less than 35 percent FRL. R. Goldring et al., *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results from the 2011–12 Schools and Staffing Survey*, NCES 2013-314, (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), retrieved 11

February 2015 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

²In a survey of teachers about their 2012–13 school year, 78 percent of those at schools with 75 percent FRL students chose to stay at the end of the year, while 82 percent of those at schools with fewer than 35 percent FRL chose to stay. R. Goldring et al., *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results from the 2012–13 Teacher Follow-Up Survey*, NCES 2014-077 (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), retrieved 11 February 2015 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

³E. Hollins, and M. T. Guzman, “Research on Preparing Teachers for Diverse Populations,” in M. Cochran-Smith and K. M. Zeighner, eds., *Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education* (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 2005), 512.

⁴M. Ronfeldt, “Where Should Student Teachers Learn to Teach? Effects of Field Placement School Characteristics on Teacher Retention and Effectiveness,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 34, no. 1 (2012): 3–26.

⁵Standard 4d from NCATE specified that field placements should include working with diverse student populations (Unit Standards in Effect 2008, Washington, DC, NCATE), retrieved 20 March 2015 from <http://www.ncate.org/Standards/UnitStandards/UnitStandardsinEffect2008/tabid/476/Default.aspx#stdn4>. CAEP’s standards specify that the clinical experience has “sufficient depth, breadth, diversity, coherence, and duration to ensure that candidates demonstrate their developing effectiveness and positive impact on all students’ learning and development.” (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, Standard 2: Clinical Partnership and Practice, Washington, DC), retrieved 20 March 2015 from <http://caepnet.org/standards/standards/standard2/>.

⁶Fewer than one in five elementary and special education teacher preparation programs teach all five components of effective reading, and less than half provide sufficient coursework in elementary mathematics (J. Greenberg, et al., *2014 Teacher Prep Review*, Washington, DC, National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014), retrieved February 2015 from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Prep_Review_2014_Report.

⁷The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) finds persistent gaps in reading and mathematics between white and black students (A. Vanneman et al., *Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress*, [NCES 2009-455], National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2009), and between white and Hispanic students (F. C. Hemphill and A. Vanneman, *Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress* [NCES 2011-459], National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2010).

⁸The US Department of Education reports that “black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. On average, 5 percent of white students are suspended compared with 16 percent of black students. American Indian and Native-Alaskan students are also disproportionately suspended and expelled.” US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, *Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot (School Discipline)*, 2014, retrieved February 2015 from http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf?utm_source=JFSF+Newsletter&utm_campaign=0f6e101c7e-

[Newsletter_July_2013&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2ce9971b29-0f6e101c7e-195307941](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf?utm_source=JFSF+Newsletter&utm_campaign=0f6e101c7e-Newsletter_July_2013&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2ce9971b29-0f6e101c7e-195307941)

⁹Fewer than two in five elementary, secondary, and special education teacher preparation programs provide student teachers with feedback on their use of essential classroom management techniques (J. Greenberg et al., *2014 Teacher Prep Review*). Only one in five programs address all of the “big five” of classroom management (setting and teaching rules, establishing routines, reinforcing positive behavior, addressing misbehavior, and maintaining student engagement) through course lectures or assignments (J. Greenberg et al., *Training our Future Teachers: Classroom Management*, Washington, DC, National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014, retrieved March 2015 from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Future_Teachers_Classroom_Management_NCTQ_Report).

¹⁰S. Jacobs et al., *2012 State Teacher Policy Yearbook: Improving Teacher Preparation National Summary* (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013), retrieved 20 March 2015 from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/2012_State_Teacher_Policy_Yearbook_National_Summary_NCTQ_Report.

¹¹M. A. Chandler, “District Embarks on Plan to Bring More Quality Teachers to Poor Schools,” *The Washington Post* (February 6, 2015), retrieved 12 February 2015 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/district-embarks-on-plan-to-bring-more-quality-teachers-to-poor-schools/2015/02/06/b82d25b6-ae0e-11e4-9c91-e9d2f9fde644_story.html.

¹²Teach Plus, *Closing the Gap: Progress over Two Years at T3 Schools* (Boston, December 2012), retrieved February 6, 2015, from http://www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1355156579_T3Closingthegap.pdf

¹³R. Gordon et al., “Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job,” *Hamilton Project Discussion Paper* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, April 2006).

¹⁴M. Ronfelt et al., “How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement,” *American Education Research Journal* 50 (2013): 4–36.

¹⁵S. Kumar and N. Waymack, *Unequal Access, Unequal Results: Equitable Distribution in Miami-Dade County Public Schools* (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). Retrieved February 2015 from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/MIami_Teacher_Distribution.

¹⁶M. Norton and K. Piccinino, *Project L.I.F.T.: Year 1 Report* (Philadelphia: Research for Action, 2014), retrieved February 12, 2015, from https://docs.google.com/a/nctq.org/file/d/0B_KAbeAWPiQfMnBpNTZjzshvQ1U/edit; Project L.I.F.T., *Project L.I.F.T. Year Two Full Report* (Charlotte, NC, 2014), retrieved February 12, 2015, from <http://www.project-liftcharlotte.org/blog/project-l-i-f-t-milestones-infographic>.

¹⁷M. Strong, *Mentoring New Teachers to Increase Retention: A Look at the Research* (Santa Cruz, CA: New Teacher Center, 2005), retrieved March 23, 2015, from http://www.newteachercenter.org/sites/default/files/ntc/main/resources/BRF_MentoringNewTeacherstoIncreaseRetention.pdf

¹⁸For useful data on this topic, see NCTQ’s analysis at <http://www.nctq.org/teacherPrep/review2014/findings/byTrainingArea/index.jsp>.

¹⁹D. Goldhaber et al., “Screen Twice, Cut Once: Assessing the Predictive Validity of Teacher Selection Tools,” *CEDR Working Paper* 2014-9 (Seattle: University of Washington, 2014).

²⁰Rodel Foundation of Arizona. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.rodelaz.org/>

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