May 4, 2010 House Committee on Education and Labor Hearing:
"Supporting America's Educators: The Importance of Quality Teachers and Leaders

Follow-up: Responses to further questions from members of the House Committee on Education and Labor

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1. Would the strategies you are proposing regarding teacher preparation work in all states and in all types of communities? Is it a good idea to address these through federal policy or do these strategies need to be locally tailored and left up to districts and states?

There is a national need to develop and implement a common standard of practice for beginning teaching. This would entail developing a coherent system for preparing teachers for the essential work of teaching and performance assessments that would measure candidates' skill with the entry-level aspects of professional practice. This strategy would work in all states and all types of communities. Producing and hiring skillful beginning teachers is crucial everywhere in the United States; it is not unique to particular areas.

To achieve this, we need to identify the instructional practices necessary for effective beginning teaching, and the knowledge and skills needed to carry out those practices. Needed then are to develop best materials, tools, and resources for training teachers, and valid assessments to measure candidates' progress and certify their readiness for practice. Although states and districts could work on these tasks independently, a coordinated effort would be the best way to ensure well-prepared teachers across the country.

Federal support for building this system and encouraging states to work on it and/or adopt it is crucial. It will work best if this system for teaching quality is closely tied to a common K-12 curriculum in the United States. Teaching involves teaching specific content. Without a common core curriculum, teacher training is far less efficient and targeted. For example, with common goals about pupils' learning of text comprehension, teachers could be trained to teach that goal with high levels of skill. Similarly, if we agreed on the competencies that middle schoolers need with fractions, we could specifically target teachers' learning, in detail, toward effective teaching of those proficiencies.

2. What do we need to do to prepare teachers not just for improved overall instruction but for diverse classrooms?

Teacher training should focus on specific practices of teaching that are most effective at helping students learn specific content. Preparation for teaching in diverse classrooms should focus on the actual tasks and skills of high-quality instruction, and on the knowledge, skills, and understandings that such skilled practice requires. Traditionally, teacher education for diverse classrooms has centered more on changing teachers' beliefs and orientations than on improving their skills with teaching academic content, relating to students, managing the classroom, and building effective connections with the home. Believing that all students can learn, and understanding how inequality is produced and reproduced in our society and schools, is of course vitally important. But beliefs and knowledge of this sort are insufficient for being effective with students of a wide variety of backgrounds. What beginning teachers need most is mastery of an essential set of professional skills and knowledge that they can put to effective use in real classrooms.

For example, all teachers should understand how to facilitate a whole-class discussion with students who lack experience in academic discourse. Teachers should know how to present mathematics problems that enable students to connect math to everyday contexts in ways that take advantage of students' out-of-school experience. Teachers must be able to interact effectively with parents and guardians who do not speak English, or who are unfamiliar with the curriculum, and help those parents support their children. Teachers should be able to diagnose the sources of students' difficulties and know how to remedy the problems efficiently. Given the rapidly growing diversity of American school population, all teachers need to be skillful in working with a wide range of young people. This requires effective, focused professional training. Prospective teachers need carefully supervised clinical experience working with diverse students, and they need close coaching to learn to improve their instructional and relational skills.

3. What are the barriers to remedying the ineffectiveness of many classrooms? Is it unions? Is it too much federal involvement or not enough?

Many barriers exist to remedying the ineffectiveness of classrooms. One crucial obstacle is the lack of a common K-12 curriculum that would enable a coherent system of instructional materials and comprehensive teacher training to achieve that curriculum. Other industrialized nations with high-achieving school systems take for granted the reality of a common student curriculum and professional education that is closely tied to it. Another barrier is that most U.S. schools are not organized to support high-quality education through the systematic analysis of data and examination of results, strong leadership, and resources for continuous professional improvement tied to effectiveness. Incentives for improvement are weak. Still another barrier is an incoherent "quick fix" orientation to educational improvement, marked by a stream of uncoordinated and often unproven interventions, and a significant lack of resources. And challenging social, health, and economic problems further complicate efforts to improve educational outcomes.

Despite this daunting list of barriers, skillful teachers can dramatically increase the probability that their students will learn. Such teachers can mediate between the barriers in the environment and students' engagement in academic learning. They make crucial decisions about how to interpret and implement curriculum, they manage interpersonal relationships in the classroom, and they respond to and strategically buffer outside pressures and interferences. What effective teaching can do is crucial. We must overcome our collective failure to appreciate the fact that skillful practice can — and must be — learned, and hence, taught. To achieve this, we need to build a system, at scale, for ensuring that teachers who enter the classroom have the requisite professional skills and know how to use them.

The federal government could play a pivotal role in aligning resources and commitment to support the design and implementation of a system of teacher training and continuous improvement of practice. Allocating resources for collective work could mitigate against the strong tendency for every state to work on its own, without sufficient resources or expertise to accomplish this crucial task. Although states and districts could work on these tasks independently, a coordinated effort would be the best way to ensure well-prepared teachers across the country.