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Bumpy Path Into a Profession: What California's Beginning Teachers Experience

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Introduction

California has long been proud of its beginning teacher policies, but these policies currently fail to achieve their stated goals. This policy brief describes a recent study of California's policies on induction, evaluation, clear credentialing and tenure for its beginning teachers.[1] Through extensive interviews and an examination of existing documents and state databases, we found that California's policy system fails to recognize the realities facing the majority of the state's beginning teachers.

How teachers begin their careers—the standards they must meet to earn the right to teach and continue teaching, and the nature of early career supports and the appraisal of practice—is shaped largely by state policy enacted at the local level. State policy anticipates that aspiring teachers follow a uniform, multistep path into the profession. It assumes they will complete a preparation program and earn a preliminary credential, take a teaching job and be assigned probationary status, complete a two-year induction program (the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment System, or BTSA), earn a Clear Credential, and receive tenure[2] following two years of satisfactory evaluations. Developed primarily

Executive Summary

In California as elsewhere, state policy anticipates that aspiring teachers will follow a uniform, multistep path into the profession. It assumes they will complete a preparation program and earn a preliminary credential, take a teaching job and be assigned probationary status, complete a two-year induction program (the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment System, or BTSA), earn a Clear Credential, and receive tenure following two years of satisfactory evaluations. Developed primarily during the 1990s and early 2000s, California's policies for beginning teachers were designed to enhance early career practice, reduce attrition and increase effectiveness.

In this study Julia Koppich and Dan Humphrey present findings from their recent study of California's policies on induction, evaluation, clear credentialing and tenure for the state's beginning teachers. Their work shows that California's policy system fails to recognize the realities facing the majority of the state's beginning teachers, who must follow a much longer, bumpier and more circuitous path into the teaching profession than state policymakers currently recognize.

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We begin with a summary description of our study methods and then describe the origins and challenges of each early career policy—induction, evaluation, clear credentialing and tenure. Next, we examine a largely ignored reality of beginning teaching in California—temporary status—and how the policy system fails to serve this largely neglected portion of beginning teachers. Finally, we present conclusions and recommendations derived from our findings.

Gathering the Data

To begin the study, our research team conducted a detailed review of the relevant state policies, from their historical development and evolution to their current status. We examined the written record, interviewed state education leaders who were involved in crafting the policies, and examined relevant state databases.

To gather on-the-ground data, we conducted eight case studies in a purposefully selected sample of six California school districts, one consortium of districts, and one charter management organization. The study sites represented a diverse range of sizes and geographic, demographic, fiscal, and labor market conditions. We interviewed beginning teachers, BTSA support providers, principals, and district and union officials to gain an understanding of their experiences with the policies being studied. Additionally, three of the case study sites and their local unions provided access to redacted evaluation files of beginning teachers for deeper review. One district also provided us with redacted BTSA files. We systematically reviewed the contents of each file and used a researcher-developed rubric to record counts of the evaluation results.

BTSA and Clear Credentialing

California made history in 1998 when the state passed legislation that eventually required beginning teachers to participate in two years of induction to earn a Clear Credential, a full license to teach. California's BTSA, designed for teachers in their first two years of teaching, was meant to strengthen the foundation for effective teaching and increase the likelihood that new teachers would remain in the profession.

Each teacher in BTSA works with an experienced teacher, called a support provider, who helps the novice move through specified activities designed to promote professional growth and development. Our results show this BTSA support provider to be a highlight of the program. Teachers and administrators at all study sites voiced strong backing for support providers. As one interviewee noted, "The support provider is key to beginning teachers' experience. New teachers couldn't survive without their support provider." At the same time, our study uncovered a variety of challenges associated with BTSA.

Flex Funding and Uneven Implementation

Until 2008-09 BTSA was funded as a state categorical program. In 2009 the program became part of the state's "flex" funding. Districts could reallocate formerly targeted BTSA dollars as they saw fit. Teachers were still required to complete BTSA to earn a Clear Credential, but districts were no longer obligated to fund it.

The sites in our study dealt in various ways with flexible BTSA funding. Some took steps to ensure the induction program would remain comprehensive and effective. District officials in the rural counties we studied, for example, reported that they maintained consortia of districts to provide a comprehensive BTSA program for their new teachers.

One of the non-rural study sites also created a BTSA consortium with six other local districts and six private schools. The private schools receive BTSA support on a fee-for-service basis and generate added revenue for the lead consortium district.

Other sites in our study chose a different approach to flex funding and made resource allocation decisions that resulted in diminished BTSA programs and reduced services for beginning teachers. Some districts decreased the number of support providers and increased the caseloads of those that remained. This reallocation undermined the most valued part of the programs. One district had a waiting list of probationary teachers trying to

gain access to BTSA. Another district all but dismantled its BTSA program and is now trying to build it back using extramural funds. Still other districts completely shut down their BTSA programs and referred their beginning teachers to nearby programs at the county office of education or in neighboring school districts. Some beginning teachers reported that they had to pay for the cost of the program out of their own pockets.

It is not yet clear how the state's new Local Control Funding Formula will impact BTSA funding. What is clear is that, given the choice, some districts will sacrifice providing induction support to beginning teachers for other priorities.

Curriculum Duplication and Burdensome Paperwork

Many beginning teachers we interviewed reported that BTSA curriculum duplicates portions of their recently completed teacher preparation programs. Perhaps this is not surprising. The state's Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) sets the standards for teacher preparation and BTSA. Both programs are structured around the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTPs). But interviews suggest that the repetition inherent in BTSA curriculum presents a dilemma for beginning teachers. They are figuratively running flat out, trying to learn how to navigate a school, manage a classroom and teach their students. Repeating pedagogical ground they recently covered adds to their workload but not, say many interviewees, to their professional learning.

A number of beginning teachers we interviewed also told us that BTSA paperwork requirements often are burdensome and take time away from their planning and preparation for teaching. Support providers echoed this view. As one said, "Honestly, I feel bad about all the paperwork…. Is it really helping them to be better teachers or is it just adding more stress?"

Some districts in our study have developed "work-arounds" to manage the paperwork load and free up time for beginning teachers to focus on their teaching. In several of them, support providers completed the paperwork for their beginning teachers.

Timing Often Out of Sync

BTSA was intended as a support program for first- and second-year teachers. Sometimes, however, BTSA timing is off. This is perhaps the biggest challenge to an effective BTSA program.

As previously noted, not all first- and second-year teachers have access to BTSA support. At some study sites, teachers classified as temporary—and this can be a significant number of beginning teachers—are ineligible to participate in BTSA. Teachers hired after the state's October 30 "count date" also are not eligible for BTSA until the following year.

The BTSA timing problem is magnified by clear credentialing policy. When BTSA became a requirement for a Clear Credential, the time period for beginning teachers to complete the required induction program was extended to five years from two. A program intended for the initial years of teaching became a requirement that could be completed over a substantially longer period of time, often after beginning teachers had developed their habits of teaching. Thus, we found that many beginning teachers view BTSA as burdensome and opt to postpone its completion as long as possible.

As a result, some of our study sites viewed BTSA primarily as a hoop for teachers to jump through to earn their Clear Credential. An administrator at one of these sites referred to BTSA as "box checking for a Clear Credential." Our review of BTSA files from one district confirmed that beginning teachers had to complete hundreds of pages of paperwork, much of which appeared to be more about compliance than an opportunity to reflect on teaching practice.

Linking BTSA and clear credentialing has resulted in unintended consequences. In the majority of our study sites, as the time to complete BTSA was lengthened the connection between BTSA and efficacious early career support became more tenuous.

Evaluating Beginning Teachers

California's teacher evaluation framework dates from the 1971 Stull Act. The Act set expectations for teacher evaluations but left the specific evaluation procedures to local districts and their unions. Probationary teachers must be evaluated annually, permanent

teachers every other year. Those with more than 10 years of successful teaching experience may be evaluated every five years. Most California districts use an evaluation sequence that has not changed in decades: preliminary teacher-evaluator conference, classroom observation, and post-observation conference.

Evaluation Systems Unhelpful

Beginning teachers can benefit from comprehensive evaluations that include multiple cycles of feedback, support, and appraisal. Given that these teachers often have the toughest teaching assignments in the most challenging schools, evaluations designed to improve practice are critical to ensuring beginning teachers serve their students well. Beginning teachers we interviewed said they need help in establishing classroom routines, want ideas for engaging lessons, and need assistance understanding why a lesson worked or did not.[3] Yet both beginning teachers and their principals reported that current evaluation systems are largely unhelpful in diagnosing what teachers need or designing support for them.[4]

Moreover, beginning teachers reported that the quality of their evaluation depends nearly entirely on the skill and commitment of their evaluator, typically the principal. As one beginning teacher said, "It all depends on who you get…. Some administrators are good and others aren't."

Principals reported that they aspire to provide support and conduct thorough evaluations. The demands of their job, however, often make it impossible to do so. As one elementary school principal told us, "I am it at my school. There's no [Assistant Principal]. I can't be in classrooms enough to get a really good picture of what goes on every day." In addition, our interviews with principals revealed that they have no common understanding of the optimum number of teachers they can effectively evaluate. For example, one principal told us he could easily evaluate more than 20 teachers, while another told us that completing 15 teacher evaluations was too many to guarantee a thorough job.

Thorough evaluation is important, because beginning teachers' evaluations are meant to inform tenure decisions. Administrators reported, however, that most evaluations lack the rigor to serve as an adequate basis for making this critical personnel judgment.

In order more completely to understand the scope and breadth of beginning teachers' evaluations, we examined a selection of evaluation files.[5] Our review of the files was both disappointing and confirming.

The files contained little documentation of teacher performance—what the teacher did well or poorly—and almost no guidance about how the teacher could improve. Looking across the 41 files, we found some variation in the quality of the reports, depending on the time and effort the evaluator committed to the task. That variation was as great within districts as it was across districts. As beginning teachers told us, it all depends on the principal.

Evaluation Systems Do Not Distinguish Between More and Less Effective Teachers

Among the evaluation files we examined, the vast majority of beginning teachers—well over 80 percent—received all positive ratings. The evaluations of the other 20 percent of beginning teachers identified just one or two aspects of their performance that could be improved. Principals found no beginning teacher whose file we examined to be unsatisfactory or unable to meet performance standards in any areas of the CSTP.

Missed Opportunities to Make Evaluation Systems More Effective

In addition to the formal evaluation sequence, most study districts have a set of practices designed to assess beginning teacher performance. Typically these activities take the form of "walk-throughs," brief, usually unannounced classroom visits by principals that supplement formal evaluation observations.

Another source of credible data on beginning teacher practice resides with BTSA support providers. Currently, BTSA regulations preclude support providers from sharing their knowledge of beginning teachers' practice with principals. This is what is known as the "BTSA firewall." To be sure, blurring the lines between support and evaluation remains the subject of considerable debate. Nevertheless, we found the lines of communication to

be rather porous, especially in cases in which the principal and support provider had established trust and a mutual commitment to improving beginning teacher effectiveness. In these cases, informally meshing support and evaluation appeared to benefit the teachers involved and improve the general professional climate of the school.[6]

Our results strongly suggest that beginning teachers are not well served by the current evaluation system. There was broad agreement among the district leaders, principals and teachers we interviewed that beginning teachers received neither adequate support nor evaluations that advanced their teaching practice.

At the heart of the matter is the way evaluation is defined. In most districts, evaluation practice and intended purposes are not congruent. Despite universal aspirations for an evaluation system that improves teachers' skills and knowledge, beginning teacher evaluation in California is not typically associated with professional supports. In fact, most interviewees reported that evaluation is completely separate from support. As a result, evaluations provide only a rough approximation of beginning teachers' performance and precious little in the way of guidance for improvement.

Some districts are beginning to rethink their teacher evaluation systems. The Chief Academic Officer in one district we studied described that district's vision for a new system:

> *[The system] needs to be multi-dimensional, more aligned to a 360-degree feedback process, with various stakeholders able to provide teachers with thoughts and ideas regarding the impact of their work.... It needs to not be done unto the teacher but done with the teacher. And it needs to be a formative process rather than it being so narrow, [with] multiple data points.*

This vision, however, is not the norm in California.

Earning Tenure

State policy specifies that teachers earn tenure after two years of successful teaching—in other words, two years of at least "satisfactory" ratings on their evaluations. In practice, however, earning tenure often takes much longer.

The two-year tenure clock does not begin to run until a teacher achieves probationary status. That clock can start and stop as beginning teachers serve in temporary status, gain probationary status, are laid off, are rehired in temporary assignments, and then perhaps gain probationary status again. As Table 1 shows, over a recent 10-year period just 31 - 45 percent of California teachers earned tenure by their third year of teaching.

Time to Tenure—Subject to Debate

How long it should take for a teacher to earn tenure has been a topic of policy debate for years. No clear answer emerged from our study. Some site administrators we interviewed said two years is not enough time to determine if a teacher should be granted tenure. A principal in one district, for example, told us that while some beginning teachers at his school are extremely promising, he would like more time to

TABLE 1: Number and Percent of Third-Year Teachers with Permanent Status (Tenure)

Year	Number of Third-Year Teachers with Tenure	Percent of Third-Year Teachers with Tenure
1999	6,779	33%
2000	5,994	31%
2003	5,372	32%
2004	4,682	34%
2005	4,685	34%
2006	5,444	38%
2007	6,311	43%
2008	5,771	42%
2009	4,655	42%
2010	3,527	45%

Source: CA Public Schools file (http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp) and the PAIF files (http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/df/filesstaffdemo.asp)

determine if these teachers are likely to continue to be effective in the future.

Other district administrators viewed the state-determined time to tenure as just about right. Administrators in one study district who made it a point to spend time in beginning teachers' classrooms observing practice and offering feedback said they do not believe they would gain much new information if the time to tenure were extended. As one high level administrator said, "If you can't make a determination [about] a teacher in two years, you shouldn't be the person doing it. If you're in the [class]room all the time and you're doing the things you should be doing, you should know in the first year."

When we began this study we believed that tenure was an important issue to beginning teachers. We found that generally this is not true. Beginning teachers we interviewed typically did not understand tenure. Many see no relationship between their evaluation and tenure. Most say they do not understand what information their district uses to make decisions about tenure. More significantly, with careers that shift back and forth between temporary and probationary status, punctuated by layoffs, beginning teachers say that earning tenure is not their most pressing concern.

Beginning a Career as a Temporary Teacher

Under the California Education Code, districts can hire teachers on temporary status to: 1) replace a teacher on leave of absence (long-term substitutes), 2) fill a position supported by temporary funds, such as grants or non-mandatory categorical funds (temporary teachers), and 3) fill immediate or acute staffing needs (intern or short-term permit teachers). As we began to interview beginning teachers in the case study sites, we were surprised to find that nearly all of them had been on temporary status at some point during their careers and many had served (or still were serving) in temporary status several years into their employment.

Initially we thought that using temporary teachers was a predictable response to the fiscal crisis that had resulted in $20 billion in cuts to schools between 2007 and 2011. Because temporary teachers do not have the same re-employment rights as probationary and tenured teachers, using temporary teachers seemed to be a prudent method for districts to manage declining resources.

We discovered, however, that the temporary teacher phenomenon is neither recent nor solely a result of the fiscal downturn. California districts have a long history of hiring teachers on temporary status. As Table 2 displays, nearly one-quarter of first- through third-year teachers have held temporary teacher status since 1999.

State Data Underestimate the Number of Beginning Teachers Experiencing Temporary Status

The numbers in Table 2 may, in fact, understate the temporary teacher issue since the state's database is rife with problems. First, the Education Code notwithstanding, the numbers districts report to the state are not based on a uniform definition of what constitutes a temporary teacher. Case study districts used varying criteria for assigning teachers to temporary status. Thus, the numbers in the state's database reflect different definitions of what constitutes a temporary teacher.

TABLE 2: Number and Percent of First- Through Third-Year Teachers on Temporary or Long-term Substitute Status

Year	Number of Teachers on Temporary or Long-Term Substitute Status	Percent of Teachers on Temporary or Long-Term Substitute Status
1999	14,666	23%
2000	14,582	24%
2003	8,950	19%
2004	9,159	20%
2005	10,318	22%
2006	9,893	21%
2007	10,160	22%
2008	8,913	23%
2009	5,046	21%
2010	4,582	24%

Source: CA Public Schools file (http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp) and the PAIF files (http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/df/filesstaffdemo.asp)

Second, the state merges temporary teachers and long-term substitutes into a single category for reporting purposes, although these are quite different categories of teachers. Third, the state counts the number of temporary teachers only once during the school year (typically October 30) even though they are hired throughout the year.

The state's problem-laden databases seem not to provide a sufficiently clear or accurate picture of the temporary teacher problem we encountered in the study districts. State policymakers we interviewed for this study were unaware of the number of teachers on temporary status or the length of time they serve in this employment limbo.

Prolonging Temporary Status

Typically, beginning teachers in our sample reported that they were hired as temporary teachers, advanced to probation, then were laid off and rehired in temporary status. In one of our rural case study sites, nearly half the beginning teachers were hired as temporary in the year we interviewed. The district told us that this hiring practice enables it to maintain flexibility in the face of enrollment and funding uncertainty. But what does it mean for beginning teachers?

One teacher we interviewed was hired as a long-term substitute at the high school in his first year, became a temporary teacher in the middle school his second year, and was reassigned to the high school as a part-time temporary teacher his third year. Sometimes a teacher in this district is given a "combination appointment" that blends temporary and probationary status. A teacher we interviewed, for example, was hired as an 80 percent time probationary teacher his first year then rehired his second year as 60 percent probationary and 40 percent temporary.

For teachers who face unpredictable status from year to year (and we found many of them), the early years of teaching include a perpetual job search and the insecurity of not being a full member of their school communities.

Often No Support or Evaluation

Despite the best intentions of the policymakers who crafted BTSA, many beginning teachers receive little or no support to improve their practice and are not evaluated. In some case study sites, temporary teachers were deemed eligible for induction support through the state's BTSA program; in others they were not. In all districts, teachers hired after the start of the school year, as is the case for many temporary teachers, were not allowed to participate in BTSA. In addition, state law does not require that temporary teachers be evaluated. In some case study sites, temporary teachers were evaluated regularly; in others they never were. Thus, many beginning teachers serve for several years in positions with complete teaching loads and all the responsibilities of full-time teachers without being supported in their work or having their performance appraised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

State policymakers put in place what is in theory a coordinated system designed to provide a structured and graduated pathway to teaching: preliminary credential, probationary appointment, required two-year support and induction, annual evaluation, and tenure and clear credential. Our study revealed a consistent theme, however. Many of California's beginning teachers must travel a bumpy path as they make their way through the early years of their careers. While this bumpy path is partly a result of district-level practices, the policy system currently in place fails too many beginning teachers.

Many teachers are hired on temporary status, remain temporary for several years, and are neither supported nor evaluated. Probation, once achieved, can be short-lived or interrupted. BTSA induction, designed for teachers in their first two years of teaching, is often unavailable or not a good match with beginning teachers' needs. Linking BTSA to clear credentialing lengthens the time beginning teachers have to complete induction but also can dilute the power of the program.

Often, the two-year path to tenure is longer and much more circuitous than state policy anticipates. Evaluation, arguably the weakest link in this rather incoherent policy chain as it typically plays out in practice, is commonly unrelated to support and is insufficiently rigorous to use for career advancement decisions such as tenure.

We cannot know how many good teachers California has lost as a result of its incoherent and inconsistent beginning teacher policies. Suffice it to say, pursuing a teaching career in California requires substantial persistence and more than a little good luck.

What actions might the state take to further the goals of improving effectiveness and retaining successful beginning teachers in California's classrooms? We offer a modest set of recommendations for state policymakers to consider.

BTSA and Clear Credentialing

BTSA remains a highly regarded model for new teacher induction. California should continue to require that beginning teachers receive systematic support and acknowledge that such support is most useful in the first two years of teaching. The state should:

- Allow districts and consortia to tailor induction support to the needs of their beginning teachers;
- Give districts and their local unions the option of developing induction programs that eliminate the firewall between support and evaluation;
- Make sure that beginning teachers receive induction support in their first two years, in part by decoupling BTSA and clear credentialing requirements.

Evaluation

Teacher evaluation is under scrutiny everywhere and under revision in most states. Many states have developed teacher evaluation systems that include multiple measures of performance, including observations by more than one observer, requirements for portfolios of lesson plans and student work, state and locally developed measures of student achievement, student and parent surveys, and other local sources of information. California should:

- Rethink the purpose of evaluation so that it focuses more squarely on support and improvement;
- Require that all teachers, regardless of employment status, be evaluated;
- Support local experiments in educator evaluation systems, including peer review for beginning teachers.

Temporary Teachers

California has long relied on temporary teachers to fill the gaps in the teacher workforce without attending to the need to support and evaluate them. The state should:

- Require districts to keep, and submit to the state, accurate counts of the number of temporary teachers.
- Include temporary teachers among those who must be supported and evaluated.

Financial Implications

While not all of these recommendations require new resources, some do. The introduction of the Local Control Funding Formula should provide some districts with the resources they need to make these changes. Regardless, the cost of not doing anything will only impede California's efforts to improve teacher quality and effectiveness. Just as important as new investments in improving teaching, however, is the need for state policymakers and district leadership to treat induction, evaluation, clear credentialing, and tenure as closely linked components of a system. Rather than operating as if each component is distinct and disconnected, the components should dovetail and complement each other to support and improve beginning teachers' practice.

Endnotes

1 "California's Beginning Teachers: The Bumpy Path to a Profession" found at http://www.sri.com/work/publications/california-beginning-teachers-bumpy-path-profession. The study was conducted from 2012-13 by SRI International, J. Koppich & Associates, and Inverness Research.

2 The California Education Code uses the term "permanence," not tenure. Tenure is the more commonly used word.

3 http://www.newteachercenter.org/blog/5-key-takeaways-supporting-and-evaluating-teachers-new-ntc-guide-il-leaders

4 Whether a beginning teacher is evaluated at all depends on employment status. State law does not require that temporary teachers be evaluated.

5 We examined 41 redacted files from three of the study districts. Both the district and the local union agreed to the review, and a representative of each redacted the files.

6 We previously conducted a study of peer review programs in California. That study found that teachers can successfully serve as both support providers and evaluators, enriching efforts to improve professional practice and increasing the rigor of evaluation in the process. For more information, see Humphrey, D., Koppich, J., Bland, J., & Bosetti, K. (2011). "Peer Review: Getting Serious About Teacher Support and Evaluation," Menlo Park: SRI International.

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