



Pearson

United States: What makes an effective teacher?

SERIES 8 OF 23



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Executive Summary



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The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.
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BARBER & MOURSHED, 2007

Decades of research make it clear: teachers make a difference in student learning. In fact, Stanford University economist Eric Hanushek (1992) has noted that the difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year. Given the strength of these findings, nations around the world recognize that in order to improve educational outcomes and equity they must focus on effectiveness of teachers. A critical step toward achieving that goal is for individual countries to identify the competencies required for effectiveness and use them to inform teaching standards, pre-service teacher preparation, professional development programs and performance evaluations. To make an impact, those systems and processes will need to be based on a common understanding, within each country, of what it means to be an effective teacher.

Oxfam’s international study of teacher competences and standards concludes that in order to build that common understanding, it is “absolutely necessary that the question as to what is considered a quality educator is investigated among stakeholders” (Bourgonje & Tromp, 2011, p. 145).

Giving stakeholders a voice not only allows us to understand how they think and feel about a topic; it provides an opportunity to help frame important policy decisions that directly impact their lives. Pearson is therefore surveying learners, teachers, principals, education researchers, policymakers and parents in 23 countries regarding their perceptions of what it takes to be an effective teacher. Pearson is comparing the views expressed by these stakeholders with both current government teaching standards and research on effective teaching.

This report, the eighth in the series, summarizes the results of the survey conducted in the United States, where the federal government and states have been working to provide a high quality education to all children, yet significant struggles remain in developing and training teachers to deliver high quality instruction. In the global report, data from all 23 participating countries are compared not only across stakeholder groups, but by country as well.

The Survey

To learn the top qualities education stakeholders in the U.S. seek in their teachers, we administered surveys across the country (see **Figure A1** in the Appendix). The stakeholder groups include:

- Students ages 15-19
- Parents of K-12 students
- K-12 teachers
- K-12 administrators
- Education researchers and policymakers

Respondents were asked to list, in their own words, between 3 and 15 qualities that they feel are most important in making an “effective” teacher and to indicate what type of teacher, by subject(s) and grade level(s), they were thinking about while creating their list. The survey did not define “effective” for respondents, other than that it meant “good,” allowing respondents to define what an effective teacher meant for themselves. We developed a coding system to categorize responses, based on prior research about competencies of effective teachers. This coding scheme was reviewed by teachers, principals, education policymakers and researchers and revised iteratively as additional responses were coded, resulting in a final list of 32 categories.

The Most Important Qualities of Teachers in the United States

We found remarkable consistency in how the groups of surveyed stakeholders responded when they were asked to list between 3 and 15 of what they believed to be the most important qualities or competencies of effective teachers. The most common response across the full sample was that effective teachers need to build trusting, compassionate *Relationships* with their students. It was also the most common response when comparing elementary, middle and high school grade levels, private and public schools, and males and females.

The second and third most common responses across all stakeholder groups were a patient, caring and kind personality and knowledge and understanding of learners. *Patient, Caring* and kind personality addresses positive personality characteristics, particularly associated with compassion and empathy. *Knowledge of Learners* includes an understanding of how students learn at a given developmental level; how learning in a given subject area typically progresses; awareness that learners have individual needs and abilities; and an understanding that instruction should be tailored to meet each learner’s needs.

Most Important Qualities of Teachers in the United States

1	Ability to Develop Trusting, Productive Relationships
2	Patient, Caring, Kind Personality
3	Knowledge of Learners
4	Dedication to Teaching
5	Subject Matter Knowledge
6	Professionalism
7	Ability to Engage Students in Learning
8	Teaching Skills/Pedagogical Practices
9	Creativity in Planning and Delivering Instruction
10	Managing the Classroom Learning Environment

When the responses of all stakeholder groups are combined, the other seven categories in the Top 10 qualities or competencies mentioned, were in descending order:

- *Dedication* to teaching and students' success
- Deep content or *Subject Knowledge*
- *Professionalism*—e.g., responsibility, trustworthiness, knowledge of rules and regulations
- Ability to make content and learning *Engaging* and to motivate students to learn
- *Teaching Skills* and pedagogical methods
- *Creativity* in thinking and teaching, being innovative
- Creating and managing a productive learning environment (*Classroom Management*)

Six of the Top 10 most frequent responses for each group of stakeholders were shared by all groups and include *Relationships*, *Patient & Caring*, *Subject Knowledge*, *Teaching Skills*, *Knowledge of Learners*, and *Dedication*. Additionally, stakeholders associated with public and private schools shared nine of their Top 10 response categories, reporting the same top two most valued qualities. When addressing the qualities most valued for an elementary, middle or high school teacher, respondents also shared nine of their Top 10, reflecting that the qualities they valued most were not specific to grade level taught. Male and female respondents also shared nine of their Top 10 most valued qualities, with their top two in the same order.

The categories of qualities mentioned most often across the entire sample reflect how strongly education stakeholders in the U.S. value dispositions of relatedness, responsiveness, and commitment in their teachers. There is research that supports the link between these dispositions, teacher effectiveness, and learner outcomes. The dispositions of effective teachers are characterized as the bridge between a teacher’s capabilities (what they know and CAN do) and the actions they take (what they choose to do).

The survey responses align well with research on effective teaching, and with the standards for K-12 teachers outlined by InTASC (the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium). But there were a few significant gaps between what the educator stakeholder groups (teachers, principals, researchers and policymakers) valued most and what research tells us matters most in enhancing student learning. Few educators addressed the importance of knowledge and use of *Assessment* to evaluate and track student progress. Yet researchers suggest that this is the single most important aspect of teaching practice to enhance student learning. Also, few referenced making learning *Challenging* and rigorous for all students, in the belief that all can learn. A “watered-down” curriculum, in fact, has been shown to increase drop-out, repeating grades, and/or needing remediation. Additionally, there was surprisingly little mention of teachers focusing on *Deeper Learning* or developing students’ “*Non-Cognitive*” or 21st Century skills, both of which have garnered strong interest among teacher groups, researchers and policymakers.

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Implications

The greater emphasis placed on teacher dispositions such as relatedness, caring and kindness, reflect a strong focus on the dispositions required for effective teaching. Dispositions are considered to be the bridge between what a teacher is able to do and what he or she chooses to do. These findings among U.S. education stakeholders may reflect the belief that without these critical dispositions, teaching-specific knowledge and skills are insufficient to foster effective learning. Given the challenges in recruiting and retaining the “best and brightest” in teaching, and in improving the quality of pre- and in-service teacher training, this study offers an opportunity for the United States to re-think teacher effectiveness policies and the impact on the quality of the teaching workforce. Ultimately, the survey results reaffirm the notion that, at its foundation, learning is a social enterprise, and effective teaching is about trusting relationships between teachers and learners that foster learner success, as these communities define it.

Using These Results to Improve Teaching Practice in the U.S.

We recommend that the results of this survey be used to inform and guide the definition of what it means to be an effective teacher in the teaching and learning contexts of the United States. Moreover, the results can inform discussions about teacher preparation, hiring, training, and evaluation, particularly in light of the issues faced by the U.S. education system, which includes a large proportion of students who are not prepared with the skills required for participating in a global economy.

Given the stakeholders' emphasis on the importance of teacher-student relationships, teacher training programs could place greater emphasis on dispositions that stakeholders believe are essential for effectiveness, such as patience, compassion, passion for the work, and responsibility. The programs could assess these qualities in candidates, counsel candidates on career fit and provide training to develop and enhance teaching dispositions in future teachers. As other researchers have noted, focusing on improving the social relationship that is at the heart of student learning should lead to improvements in a wide range of student outcomes in schools.

Likewise, training programs may want to emphasize the knowledge and skills that were mentioned less frequently but have been shown to be critical to effective teaching and student learning. These could include assessment of learner progress and provision of a challenging, rigorous curriculum for all students, with an emphasis on the learning process and the skills students need for college and career success.

While this research identifies many different qualities and competencies of effective teachers, we caution against using the results to generate a checklist approach under the misguided belief that there is a single winning pattern of competencies to be an effective teacher. Finally, it cannot be overstated that to be effective teachers, the work conditions and environment, first and foremost, must be well managed; school context and community culture have a profound influence on the way different teacher roles and competencies are understood, prioritized, and practiced.

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