EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly a decade ago, Washington state embarked on an ambitious school reform effort which set high expectations for student learning. Increasing expectations for students have also had a significant impact on teachers, since teachers shoulder the primary responsibility for ensuring that students meet those learning goals. As attention has focused in recent years on teacher quality and strategies aimed at improving instruction, Washington state has run squarely into questions about whether and how teachers have the means, knowledge, and skills to meet the varied learning needs of all students. Though often framed as a problem of "teacher quality," three distinct yet interrelated aspects are involved: the quality of *teaching*, the quality of the *teaching force,* and the quality of *support for teachers' work*.

In this report we provide Washington educators and policymakers with a portrait of the state's current teacher workforce. As a starting point for understanding the nature and distribution of the state's teaching force, we have chosen to focus on indicators for which data are currently available in Washington state. The report is organized around three central themes: characteristics of the current teacher workforce, teacher supply and demand, and retention of teachers.

Data and Methods

A good place to start looking for information about the state's teaching force is in the data already collected by the state, though not assembled for analytical purposes of this type. Using a number of these existing state data sources, the research team constructed a new database in order to include the demographic, fiscal and student achievement information necessary for desired analyses. The core data for this research comes from the Washington state personnel database (S-275) for the years 1996-97 to 2001-02. While the S-275 is designed to provide data for determining state school funding levels, it contains much that is useful for studying issues related to teacher quality.

Analyses were conducted on teacher characteristics at state, district, and school levels. The district-level analysis includes all school districts in the state for the 2000-01 school year. In order to illustrate what could be learned by looking more carefully within districts, a sample of ten districts was selected based on factors (poverty rate, enrollment size, and region of the state) which might impact the composition of the teacher workforce. Initial school-level analyses were conducted to provide insight into the distribution of the teaching workforce across a sample of schools serving students with widely varying educational

needs and circumstances. Analysis were also conducted regarding the retention of beginning teachers over a five year period. The analyses of teacher characteristics, supply and demand, and retention are briefly summarized as follows.

Findings Regarding the Teaching Force

Teacher Characteristics: Who is in the state's current teacher workforce?

Washington's teacher workforce consists of over 55,000 classroom teachers. In 2000, the majority were white (93 percent), had five or more years of experience (75 percent), held a master's degree or higher (54 percent) and were over 40 years of age (64 percent). While an examination of aggregate, statewide statistics tend to reflect little variation in the workforce, differences do exist, particularly at the district and school levels. There are few clear and consistent patterns when examining teacher characteristics by district size or region of the state. However, our examination of data in 2000 indicate that districts serving students with the highest percentages of students in poverty tend to have teachers with less experience and fewer advanced degrees than other districts in the state.

Based on proxies such as level of education and certification status, Washington's teachers hold similar qualifications to teachers nationally. Virtually all Washington teachers possess at least a bachelor's degree and slightly over half, 54 percent, hold an advanced degree (master's degree or higher). Few teachers in Washington hold emergency or conditional certificates.

Teacher Supply and Demand: Do we have enough teachers to meet the state's needs?

Based on what we can know from existing data, the overall available teacher workforce statewide currently is sufficient to fill most positions. However, the state may experience shortages in certain subject areas and in particular regions of the state. Statewide student enrollment is projected to continue to grow through 2012, but at a much slower rate than the previous decade. While the number of teachers eligible to retire in the near future is expected to increase, there is also a sizeable group of experienced educators to take their place in subsequent years. However, the ethnic profile of the state's workforce is not particularly well-matched with the student population. As the student population has grown ever more diverse, the rate of growth for teachers of color has been much slower.

Retention: How long do teachers stay in their school or district?

Patterns of retention for Washington's teachers resemble national trends. New teachers leave at higher rates than those who remain in the profession through

the middle career years. Approximately 72 percent of beginning teachers in 1996 were still in the Washington education system five years later. Districts differed considerably, however, in the extent to which their teachers moved among schools, left for other districts or private schools, or exited the Washington education system. Of those who remained, 93 percent were still classroom teachers five years later.

In short, existing data sources can reveal a number of useful things about the state's teaching force. However, analysis of existing sources necessarily stops short of capturing all that matters in providing important facts about the teacher workforce and teaching quality.

Policy Implications

The goal of this work is to provide accurate and useful information about the teaching force that can inform policymaking. A central question for policy makers is: what can and should be done to enhance the quality of teaching, the teaching force and support for teachers' work in pursuit of high learning standards for all students? Even given its limitations, the current analysis contains some important messages for policymaking. These concern, first, the meaning of a relatively stable, well-educated teaching force; second, the often overlooked inequities in the distribution of teachers at the school level; and third, the importance of good information for setting and adjusting policies that relate to teachers, teaching and support for teachers' work.

Given the relative stability of the state's teacher workforce, policy aimed at supporting teachers presently in the classroom may be an important place to focus energy and resources. The majority of the state's teachers remain in the profession over the course of their career. Recent state reforms have expected more of teachers in providing a higher quality of learning experience. Unlike some other states, Washington is not faced with a crisis in attracting a teaching force with the right credentials (though there appear to be pockets of shortage), nor the prospect of a huge exodus of veteran teaching talent. But do teachers have the means, knowledge and skills to realize the intent of the reforms in their classrooms? If not, what policy strategies can be considered to ensure that teachers have ample and effective support throughout their careers?

While all indicators point to an adequate overall supply of teachers, certain subject matter fields and regions of the state may consistently face a shortage of qualified candidates. As elsewhere in the nation, there is an important concern about the distribution of teaching talent between hard-to-staff schools and schools viewed as more desirable places to teach. While data about teacher assignment in individual schools is currently contained in state databases, the

information is not readily accessible nor has it been systematically analyzed. State policy has not addressed the issue, leaving the question of how to equitably distribute teaching talent as a matter for local districts to address.

State-level policymakers need a better base of information about teaching, the teaching force, and support for teachers' work. Some analyses undertaken by various organizations have taken us part way into this territory, but they stop short of assembling in a systematic and on-going way the kind of information that would illuminate these conditions and state initiatives aimed at improving them. More dynamic and integrated databases can be designed to examine questions of teaching quality and its relation to student learning.

Improving statewide capacity to collect and analyze data regarding the teaching force can help address a number of unanswered questions. Among these questions are matters pertaining to attracting, rewarding, and retaining teachers; developing support for teachers' professional learning; and capturing how teachers are responding to reform in their classroom practice. These issues are particularly important to examine in schools that are high-poverty, hard-to-staff or low-performing.

At the close of each section of this report, we have tried to note where other types of analyses could help to address these kinds of unanswered questions. Given better information on teacher retention, professional development and classroom practice, among other topics in its agenda for improving learning and teaching, the state policy community will be in a better position to appraise and interpret the results of the state's student performance results and thereby imagine courses of action that are likely to support high-quality teaching. Washington's continued engagement with issues of teaching quality will require an enhanced capacity for answering these questions and efforts to provide the policy community with useful information regarding the conditions that affect the improvement of teaching and learning.