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SREB

A State Policy Guide for Innovative, High-Impact School Staffing Systems



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Executive Summary

State and local education leaders face a dual challenge: improving instructional quality while stabilizing a strained educator workforce. Traditional school staffing models, largely unchanged for decades, were not designed for today's instructional demands, labor market realities or the current generation of students. Many current policy responses — such as signing bonuses, short-term incentives, emergency certifications or isolated programmatic reforms — do not address the underlying system design.

Strategic school staffing offers a different path forward. Rather than prescribing a single model or reform, strategic staffing is a **policy-enabled framework** that allows districts to redesign how educator roles, time, leadership and expertise are organized to meet instructional goals and workforce needs. It is flexible by design, adaptable across contexts and has demonstrated successful outcomes in districts across the country.

This policy guide provides legislators, state boards of education, state agency leaders, governors' offices and district policy leaders with a practical framework for enabling and scaling strategic staffing. Its purpose is not to advocate for a particular program, but to clarify how state and local policy can **remove barriers, enable high-quality implementation and provide technical assistance** in districts who wish to pursue sustainable innovation in school staffing.

States play a critical role in enabling strategic staffing design and implementation in districts by modernizing regulations, adapting funding structures and updating accountability systems to allow districts to enact strategic staffing in compliance with state regulations.



Key policy actions to embrace and encourage innovative strategic staffing include:

1. Providing flexibility in teacher-of-record, class size and seat time policies
2. Updating licensure and certification to support differentiated roles
3. Funding residencies, mentorship and career advancement pathways
4. Supporting regional technical assistance and capacity building so district and school leaders don't have to go it alone
5. Aligning data and evaluation systems with team-based accountability

Strategic Staffing as a Workforce Stability Strategy



Strategic staffing offers an alternative. By redesigning roles and support structures, districts can **stabilize staffing proactively** rather than reactively.

Instead of staffing by convention or crisis, systems can **staff by design** — embedding support, leadership and collaboration into the daily work of teaching.

Across the country, education systems are grappling with a mismatch between how schools are staffed and what today's instructional environment requires. Expectations for personalization, inclusive practices, higher-order learning and student support have increased substantially, while the structure of most school staffing models has remained largely unchanged for decades.

The dominant paradigm — one teacher, one classroom — was designed for stability and uniformity. In practice, it limits collaboration, constrains the reach of the most effective teachers, provides insufficient support for early-career educators and makes it difficult to use specialists, paraprofessionals, residents and tutors in intentional ways.

Strategic staffing reframes staffing as a lever for instructional improvement and workforce stability, rather than a mere administrative function. When enabled by policy and implemented with quality safeguards, strategic staffing can:

- ✓ Improve teaching and extend the reach of highly effective educators
- ✓ Reduce turnover and burnout by embedding support and shared responsibility
- ✓ Create meaningful career pathways that keep strong teachers in classrooms
- ✓ Improve recruitment by offering clearer entry points and growth opportunities
- ✓ Allow districts to innovate within existing funding levels

Too often, staffing policy is shaped by crisis response: emergency certifications, relaxed requirements and short-term fixes to fill unstaffed classrooms. While sometimes necessary, these measures can erode instructional quality and undermine long-term workforce stability.

The Limits of Traditional Staffing Models

Overreliance on traditional staffing structures has created repetitive, predictable challenges for schools and systems:

- High turnover in high-need schools with limited instructional support
- The most effective teachers reaching only a portion of students
- Minimal protected time for collaboration, planning and coaching
- Flat career structures that force effective teachers to leave the classroom to advance professionally and financially
- Chronic vacancies and overreliance on long-term substitutes
- Misalignment of specialist, interventionist and paraprofessional roles
- Rigid schedules that inhibit team-based or small-group instruction
- Insufficient mentoring and coaching for early-career teachers

These challenges are not the result of educators' effort or commitment; they are the product of systems designed for uniformity rather than adaptability. While these outcomes are largely treated as separate problems in policy, they are interrelated, as SREB has pointed out in [our policy Blueprint reports](#). Without policy flexibility, districts struggle to redesign staffing in ways that reflect modern instructional practice and workforce realities.



The Keys to Unlocking the Power of Strategic Staffing

Strategic school staffing is a deliberate, needs- and culture-based approach to organizing educator roles, responsibilities, time and leadership to advance instructional goals and support workforce sustainability.

It is not a single program or prescribed model or formula.

Strategic staffing is a framework guided by three core principles:



Alignment

Staffing decisions are explicitly tied to instructional priorities and student population and needs.



Coherence

Roles, schedules, professional learning and compensation reinforce one another, rather than operating in silos.



Flexibility

Districts adapt staffing models to local context, rather than implementing uniform mandates.

High-quality strategic staffing relies on clear role definitions, strong supervision and intentional use of support staff to enhance — not dilute — the focus on instruction. Strategic staffing is *not* about increasing class sizes indiscriminately or replacing certified teachers with less prepared staff.

The Basics of Strategic Staffing Models

Districts across the country are already implementing a range of strategic staffing approaches that include one or more elements listed below. States can support innovative models by ensuring policy flexibility and sustainable funding.

Sample Model Spotlight: Opportunity Culture Model®

Highly effective teachers lead and mentor small teaching teams, called Multi-Classroom Leader® teams, which include educators of various roles and experience levels — like strong teachers extending their reach to more students and paraprofessionals supporting classroom coverage and small-group instruction.

Team-Based Staffing

Instruction is delivered by teams of educators who share responsibility for a group of students. Teams may include lead teachers, co-teachers, residents, apprentices, paraprofessionals and specialists.

Para-to-Teacher & Residency-Based Models

Paraprofessionals (assistants) and residents, apprentices or interns engage in structured instructional roles with clear supervision and advancement pathways that promote growth as a teacher.

Learning Pods & Small-Group Models

Students rotate through small-group instruction facilitated by different adults, allowing teachers to specialize and provide targeted support depending on students' individual needs.

Specialization of Teaching Roles

Teachers specialize by content area, student group or instructional function, such as planning, assessment, intervention, discipline or student needs expertise.

Staffing for Personalized & Competency-Based Learning

Roles such as learning coaches, mastery coordinators and facilitators support individualized pathways and student pacing.

Flexible & Extended Scheduling Models

Innovative schedules create time for collaboration, coaching and professional learning while maintaining instructional coverage.

The Outcomes

Research and implementation evidence from districts using strategic staffing models indicate:

- Improved student outcomes when highly effective teachers lead and support teams — for instance, Opportunity Culture® team impact studies show 2-13 extra months of student learning growth per year in reading and math
- Higher retention among early-career teachers placed in structured, supported roles
- Reduced workload and improved job satisfaction
- Increased time for collaboration and job-embedded professional learning
- Stronger recruitment pipelines through residencies and apprenticeships

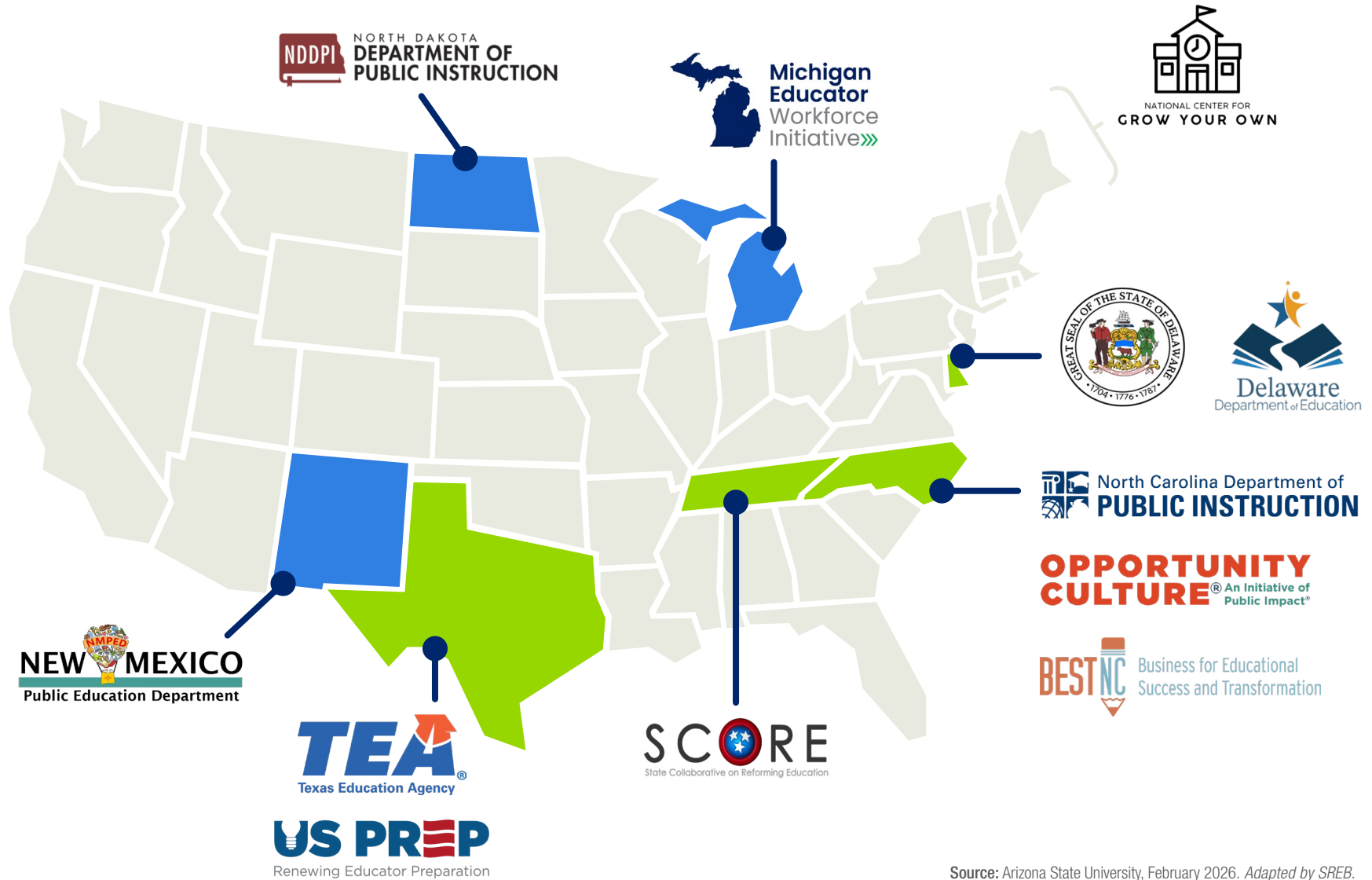
These outcomes suggest that staffing design is a critical, yet underutilized approach for instructional improvement.



Explore the Research

- Texas Tech University:
[*Evaluating Opportunity Culture: Improving Student Achievement through Strategic Staffing in West Texas*](#)
- Tennessee Collaborative on Reforming Education:
[*Small School, Big Impact: How Perea Elementary is Redefining What's Possible in Tennessee Schools*](#)
- North Carolina State University:
[*Advanced Teaching Roles: Evaluation Report*](#)
- The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:
[*Strategic Staffing: Opportunity Culture Impact Studies*](#)
- National Institute for Excellence in Teaching:
[*Achieving Better Results: How Effective Strategic Staffing Increases Teacher and Student Outcomes*](#)
- National Center on Teacher Quality:
[*Reimagining the Teaching Role: Research Summary*](#)

State-Level Action



Source: Arizona State University, February 2026. Adapted by SREB.

Spotlights

Several states in the nation are working on statewide efforts to expand strategic staffing by serving districts who are adapting, guiding them with tools and implementation, and spotlighting what is working and how it came to be in the state. State policy is also being adopted in these states to enable strategic staffing design and implementation.

Spotlights on Southern States

North Carolina

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's pilot for Advanced Teaching Roles enabled North Carolina to become the first state to scale strategic staffing, now with nearly statewide adoption. Design, implementation and study efforts are supported by organizations like [Public Impact](#) and [BestNC](#).

Texas

The Texas Education Agency and state legislators are enabling conditions through two funding policy changes: the Texas Incentive Allotment policy to allow for significantly differentiated teacher compensation and the Preparing and Retaining Educators through Partnership, or PREP Program Allotment, to fund residency candidates and mentor support for early career teachers. The state is also spotlighting districts and partnering with external experts on staffing and residency models at [US PREP](#), housed at Texas Tech University.

Tennessee

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education, or SCORE, recently established the Tennessee Educator Staffing Innovation Network. This network pilots strategic staffing in Tennessee based on [recommendations](#) provided to state leaders in 2024. Study of the models is supported by philanthropic funding.

Delaware

Announced in fall 2025, the Delaware Department of Education will support schools in piloting team-teaching models that pair multiple educators with shared students to increase individualized support. Leaders will receive direct coaching, and DDOE teams will conduct statewide site visits to celebrate bright spots, identify barriers and create follow-up plans.



What Makes Strategic Staffing High Quality?

High-quality strategic staffing models share common features:

- ✓ Clear role definitions and expectations
- ✓ Protected, regular collaboration time
- ✓ Structured support for all educators, especially novice educators
- ✓ Intentional use of paraprofessionals and non-teacher staff for release time and tutoring
- ✓ Sustainable financial design
- ✓ Strong partnerships with preparation providers

District Examples

District examples from across the country illustrate how strategic staffing can be adapted to varied contexts, including rural districts, large urban systems and high-poverty schools. Each case demonstrates the differentiation and complexity of implementation given the flexible nature of strategic staffing — and the importance of enabling policy conditions, sustainable funding and local leadership. The following reports spotlight particularly stellar implementation in districts across the nation:

- [Bellweather](#) (slides 34-71)
- [Education First](#) (slides 49-71)
- [National Council on Teacher Quality](#)



Policy Changes to Innovate School Staffing

Policy Design Principle: Making Flexibility Operational

Flexibility is often invoked in policy conversations but rarely defined. In practice, effective policy frameworks distinguish between what states should define, what they should enable and what they should avoid prescribing. For strategic staffing:

States should define:

- Quality standards for mentors, residents and teacher leaders
- Data elements to track implementation progress, retention, workforce stability and instructional outcomes
- Eligibility rules for funding that are tied to high-quality implementation

States should enable:

- Multiple staffing configurations aligned to local instructional goals and research
- Differentiated educator roles, career pathways and compensation levels
- Schedule and seat-time flexibility for team-based models

States should avoid:

- Mandating a single staffing model or structure
- Fixed staffing ratios that inhibit innovation
- Compliance requirements that assume one teacher is solely responsible for one classroom



A Policy Roadmap for Action

To transition to strategic talent management systems, states should move away from rigid, traditional regulations and toward an environment that prioritizes flexibility, sustainable funding and high-quality educator preparation.

The following pages describe **five state-level policies recommended for this multi-year transition.**

Within 12 months:

- Identify regulatory barriers to team-based staffing
- Launch and evaluate pilot sites tied to quality criteria
- Modernize mentorship and residency policies

Within three years:

- Codify differentiated roles and career pathways
- Transition from pilot funding to sustainable streams
- Align data systems to track workforce stability and outcomes

Recommended State Policy #1

Implementing Regulatory Flexibility

Many states have traditional teacher of record policies and class size mandates that restrict innovative staffing structures. To allow for innovative team-teaching models, states should be flexible and allow districts to restructure classrooms, redefine instructional roles and be more forward thinking with student-led instruction. States can:

Expand class size options

Provide waivers for class size and funding restrictions in strategic staffing districts. In districts implementing innovative teaming models in which highly effective teachers oversee larger groups of students or co-teach multiple groups, provide flexible student-to-teacher ratio policies — alongside funding flexibilities that allow for team teaching.

Integrate teaching support

Permit interns, residents and paraprofessionals to support instructional activities, rather than limiting them to non-instructional tasks that stifle a team approach and individual staff growth.

Reform teacher-of-record policies

Shift from hiring unprepared and uncertified teachers as teachers-of-record in charge of a full class. Allow interns, residents, tutors, paraprofessionals, first-year teachers, and alternative and emergency certified staff to deliver instruction under the supervision of a certified lead or master teacher as part of a team-based staffing approach.



Policy Friction

Class-size and teacher-of-record rules often assume individual classrooms rather than shared responsibility of student groupings.



Policy Fix

Allow flexibility in teacher-of-record designation and class structures and sizes for innovative, supervised team models.

Recommended State Policy #2

Modernizing Certification and Career Structures

Traditional “flat” career structures offer few advancement opportunities without leaving the classroom. State policy can support differentiated career pathways by establishing pre-service credentialed pathways like intern, residency, apprenticeship and para-to-pro pathways, certifying teacher leader roles and differentiating compensation by role. States can:

Establish a formal residency credential

Create a residency certificate, such as the Enhanced Standard Certificate in Texas or the Teacher Resident License in New Mexico, to codify requirements for high-quality preparation with a strong emphasis on student teaching. This provides a clear pathway for candidates to grow in stages while receiving valuable on-the-job experience and mentorship.

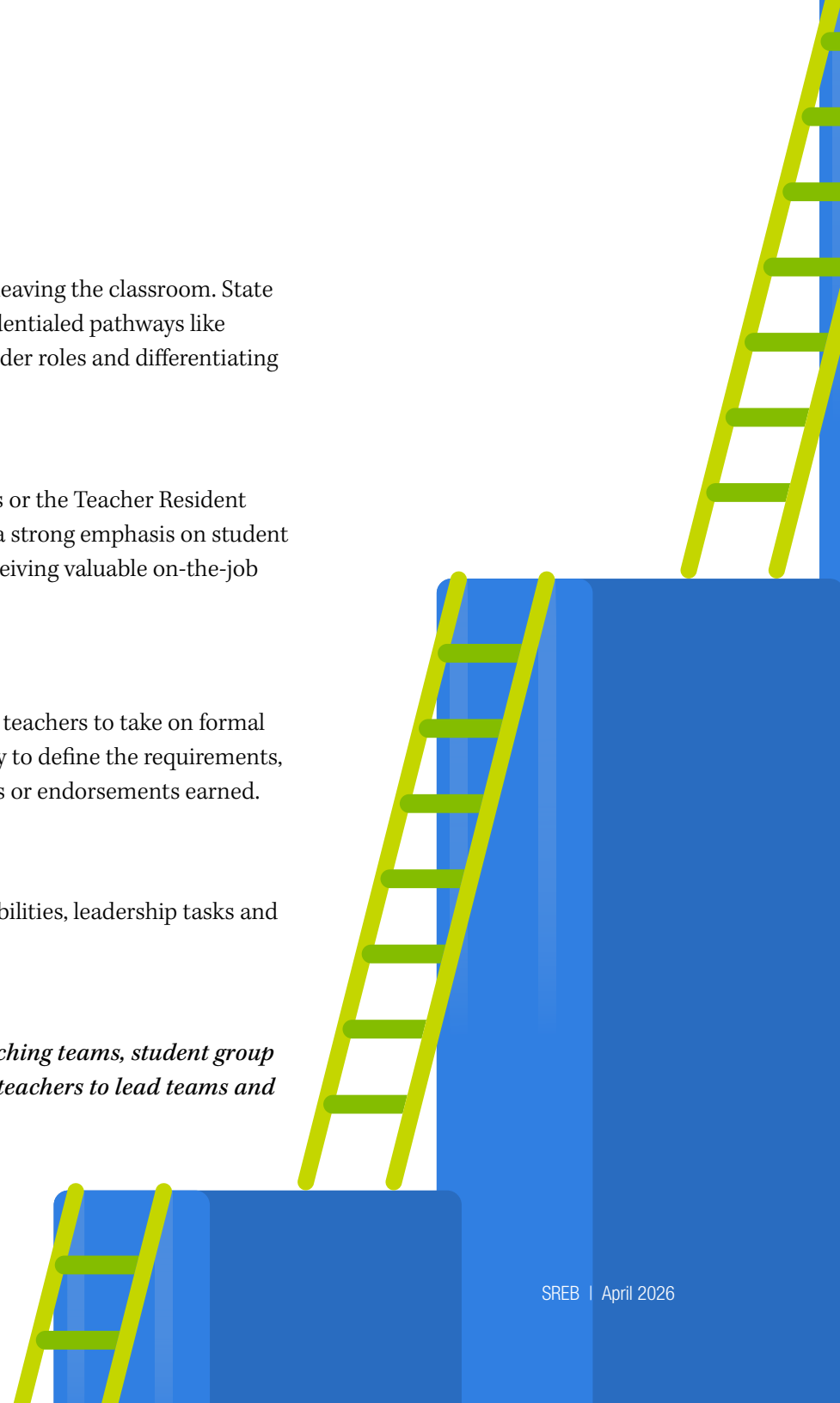
Establish multi-stage career ladders

Support the shift from “flat” career structures to advanced roles that allow expert teachers to take on formal leadership roles without leaving the classroom. Reform state-level licensure policy to define the requirements, qualifications and pay structures for these differentiated roles as separate licenses or endorsements earned.

Allow differentiated compensation

Encourage differentiated salary flexibility based on factors like roles and responsibilities, leadership tasks and student load, and teaching in hard-to-staff areas.

Formalizing pathways and advanced roles allows schools to foster creative teaching teams, student group learning experiences and scaffolded early career support; it also allows expert teachers to lead teams and earn higher pay while still remaining in the classroom.





Policy Friction

Most state licensure and certification systems assume a single, flat teaching role and a linear career trajectory. Advancement typically requires educators to leave the classroom, while early-career roles are often loosely defined, inconsistently supervised or disconnected from long-term career pathways. As a result, districts struggle to build coherent teaching teams, support novice educators or retain expert teachers in instructional roles.



Policy Fix

Modernize licensure and certification systems to recognize staged entry, differentiated roles and classroom-based leadership. This applies to career pathways into and through the profession — supporting team-based staffing, early-career development and sustained, distributed instructional leadership.

Recommended State Policy #3

Providing Sustainable Funding and Compensation

States must transition from temporary grant-funded initiatives to permanent funding streams that support talent development. States can:

Fund paid residencies

Establish and fund a teacher residency pathway to subsidize stipends for residents and cooperating teachers, making the highest-quality pathway accessible to a larger workforce

Scale mentor programs

Increase funding for allotments (such as Texas’s Mentor Program Allotment) to ensure all beginning teachers receive research-based, job-embedded mentorship.

Enable resource reallocation

Provide policy guidance that helps districts shift funds from “underutilized” lines, such as long-term substitutes or unfilled paraprofessional roles, to sustainably fund lead teacher stipends and resident salaries.



Policy Friction

Many strategic staffing initiatives pay for ongoing costs like teacher-leader pay supplements with short-term grants or one-time investments that are designed for start-up redesign. Districts face structural barriers to reallocating funds across budget lines, even when dollars are tied up in chronic vacancies, long-term substitutes or underutilized roles. This creates a cycle in which promising staffing models launch but struggle to scale or persist.



Policy Fix

Shift from temporary funding approaches to permanent, flexible funding structures that support talent development and role differentiation. Sustainable funding signals that strategic staffing is a long-term system design — not a short-term experiment.

Recommended State Policy #4

Investing in Technical Assistance for Regional Capacity

Because implementing these models involves complex change management, districts often lack the internal capacity to redesign their talent systems alone. States policies should:

Fund technical assistance

Allocate state dollars to hire expert providers — such as Opportunity Culture, US PREP or Next Education Workforce — to help districts redesign master schedules, budgets and staffing models.

Build regional support hubs

Train state-authorized regional entities (like Education Service Centers) to provide ongoing strategic staffing support to local districts, ensuring that expertise remains accessible statewide, even after initial grant funding ends.



Policy Friction

Redesigning staffing systems requires expertise in change management, scheduling, budgeting, labor alignment and instructional leadership — a capacity that many districts, particularly small or rural ones, do not have, therefore leading to uneven quality and limited impact.



Policy Fix

Invest in expert assistance to support high-quality implementation. This approach ensures that strategic staffing expertise is accessible statewide and that districts are not expected to navigate complex redesign efforts alone.

Recommended State Policy #5

Streamlining Evaluation and Data Systems

Strategic talent management requires data-driven continuous improvement. States can:

Revise evaluation standards

Ensure state evaluation systems allow for joint accountability, where a lead teacher and their team are collectively responsible for the growth of a shared group of students.

Centralize vacancy data

Fund statewide employment applications and data systems that collect **real-time statistics** on teacher vacancies and turnover, allowing for more targeted recruitment and a clearer understanding of talent needs across the state.

Understand teacher workloads

Fund and conduct teacher workload studies to identify and streamline non-instructional tasks and inform smarter role design. Better support students by ensuring teacher workloads are sustainable and focused on student learning, and by identifying the necessary support roles needed for non-instructional tasks.

Common concerns to strategic staffing include cost, scheduling complexities, labor agreements and educator autonomy. Evidence from existing implementations show these challenges can be addressed through piloting in phases, practicing transparent communication and allowing for flexible school and district policies.



Policy Friction

Many state evaluation and data systems are built around individual classrooms and isolated teacher performance, making them poorly suited to team-based staffing models. States often lack real-time vacancy, turnover and workload data, limiting their ability to detect workforce challenges or assess the impact of staffing innovations. In some cases, evaluation systems inadvertently discourage collaboration by reinforcing individual accountability structures misaligned with team teaching.



Policy Fix

Align evaluation and data systems with shared responsibility, continuous improvement, joint accountability in team-based models, and timely, actionable data-driven insights. Fund workload studies to identify non-instructional burdens and inform smarter design of roles.

Steps Forward

Achieving stimulating and intellectually demanding instruction for every student is a goal that cannot be met with disconnected policies or short-lived initiatives. It requires a fundamental transformation in how we recruit, develop, support and empower the most powerful factor in our students' education: **our teachers**.

Strategic staffing is not a mandate or a silver bullet. It is an opportunity for cohesive innovation. It takes courage and intentionality to dismantle the traditional systems of the past and build a truly strategic framework for educator talent management. This is not just another initiative; it is the essential work of reimagining our organizations to place instructional excellence at the very center of everything we do.

By modernizing policy and supporting innovation through strong school and district leaders, states can help districts build staffing systems that are sustainable, adaptable and centered on student success.



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SREB

Southern Regional Education Board
592 10th St., N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30318-5776
(404) 875-9211

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