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# Teacher career reforms: Learning from experience

# Executive summary

A major question for governments is how to transform teaching into an attractive career choice for today's youth. Countries all over the world are also grappling with the related challenges of poor working conditions and dwindling retention rates. In this context, teacher career reforms have been identified as a potentially powerful lever. Many governments are looking for ways to diversify teacher career structures and to widen career advancement opportunities in order to attract and retain high-performing teachers. Appropriate policies and the management of teacher careers are critical to achieving quality teaching and learning and to addressing teacher scarcity.

A close examination of the organization and management of teacher careers can provide useful insights into making a teaching career more appealing. A number of countries have reformed their teacher career structures over the past decades, and others intend to introduce changes in the near future. To benefit from the experience of school systems that have already implemented such reforms, we looked into the organization and management of teacher careers in Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Lithuania, Mexico, New York City, Peru, Scotland, South Africa, and Thailand. This report summarizes our findings and addresses the following research questions:

- What options exist in terms of the organization and management of teacher careers? How are teacher careers structured and promotion methods organized?
- What are the perceived effects of teacher career reforms on teacher motivation, attraction, and retention?
- What are the management implications and implementation challenges of teacher career reforms?

This research distinguishes the different teacher career models in use, the pitfalls to avoid in terms of design options, and numerous implementation challenges to be prepared for when considering teacher career reforms.

In recent decades, there have been important developments in the approach to teacher careers, with distinctions made between first- and second-generation teacher career models (UNESCO, 2015a). First-generation structures promote teachers based on seniority and experience, as exemplified by the single salary schedule model. In contrast, second-generation structures offer performance-based incentives, so teachers do not all progress through the salary scale at the same speed. These incentives can include systems of bonus pay, which give teachers a one-off payment for achieving specific objectives, or salary progression contingent

upon appraisal, which raises a teacher's base pay permanently after successfully completing one or more appraisals. An alternative second-generation structure is the career ladder, in which teachers take on a new status or role after meeting the required standards to do so, with their pay reflecting the new position. This model was identified as the one with the most potential for bringing about autonomous motivation. To be included in this research project, the reformed career structure had to include a career ladder that sought to diversify the professional course of teachers and to widen advancement opportunities.

Promising career schemes are expected to motivate teachers 'from the inside'. Looking at proxy indicators of teacher autonomous motivation, this research finds that, overall, teachers very positively welcome having more opportunities for career progression while still being able to stay in the classroom. Beyond agency over their professional mobility, teachers appear to be motivated by systems where their voices are heard and where they feel considered and valued as autonomous professionals. Having spaces and opportunities to collaborate with peers is equally a key driver of teacher motivation. Our research shows that collaboration is not automatically fostered by emerging career schemes, but must be clearly formalized through the career structure, for instance by giving experienced teachers the authority and extra time to support their peers. It is all the more important to encourage teacher collaboration, because it is a powerful means for professional development and knowledge sharing within schools. In the school systems studied, teachers also greatly appreciate a stronger focus on continuous professional development, either through the introduction of mentoring and coaching positions within schools, or through completing new requirements for career progression and professional development programmes.

Our research found that the effects of the career schemes on the attractiveness of the teaching profession appear limited. However, we also found a rather positive influence on teacher retention. Having more horizontal promotion opportunities contributes to teachers' willingness to stay in the profession. It also helps keep the best teachers in the classroom.

In line with motivation theories, we found that career structures are unlikely to have positive effects on the teaching profession if basic conditions are not already being met. In countries where salaries are not aligned with those of comparable professions, and working conditions are poor, the career structure is simply not teachers' main concern. This suggests that in order to strengthen teacher motivation, it is crucial to consider basic extrinsic factors before tackling intrinsic motivators.

Several lessons emerged when considering the design of second-generation career structures. The number of distinct positions in a career

ladder should demonstrate a clear differentiation in roles and responsibilities and show a natural progression correlated to increased teacher experience and professional development. Designing logical, coherent levels into a new teacher career model seems like common sense advice to any policy planner. Nevertheless, this process does not always prove as straightforward as it seems. Planners should fully consider the desired differentiation between teachers at distinct levels of the career structure, and develop a clear system that can fully define the roles and responsibilities of each stage. Further, planners should design systems that provide the support and training opportunities teachers need to excel in their newly defined roles. While a successful professional development programme can provide great support and benefit to teachers, a poorly designed or untenable one can merely increase their frustration.

Well-designed reforms can also have a positive impact on regulating entry into the teaching profession, as well as providing essential support to new educators. In some of the countries studied, the reform introduced major changes to entry requirements and selection procedures, with the aim of introducing a more meritocratic and transparent process. Examples of this included increasing qualification requirements and moving from a selection system dominated by nepotism to fair and competitive entry examinations. Thanks to the greater selectivity of candidates for the profession, these new requirements helped improve the calibre of the professionals recruited. Beyond the selection process, it is important to consider teachers' early years in the profession. Well-organized and supportive induction and probation periods, along with mentorship programmes, play a major role in professionalizing and retaining young teachers.

When designing evaluation criteria for salary increases or promotion, policy-makers must carefully define clear markers with an appropriate level of difficulty according to teachers' roles and responsibilities at the different stages of the career structure. Our research shows that the criteria must be high enough to confirm teachers' expectations of the value of moving to a higher position or salary level, yet also attainable so as not to discourage teachers from seeking professional advancement. Consideration must also be given to the number of teachers that will be promoted in each cycle of assessment. Utilizing a norm-referenced system (only top performers are promoted) is more likely to lead to decreased collaboration between teachers and a limited sense of self-determination, whereas criterion-referenced systems (all applicants who meet the criteria are promoted) may encourage responsibility and autonomy without damaging interpersonal relationships. However, policy designers must weigh the benefits of a criterion-referenced system carefully against the financial stability that a norm-referenced system can bring.

Implementing teacher career reforms is no less substantial an undertaking than the design process, and needs to be planned and executed carefully. Our research has shown that in the majority of countries and jurisdictions analysed, resource constraints were the major obstacle to the successful implementation of teacher career reforms. Although this research did not undertake cost estimates of the reforms, it has demonstrated that the introduction of more sophisticated career structures requires careful forward planning in terms of teacher numbers and salary implications. In addition, second-generation career structures involve the use of performance evaluation systems that can impose significant costs on education systems. Adequate cost calculations and budget provisions prior to implementation are therefore essential for a smooth reform process. In addition to merely needing increased funding, second-generation teacher career reforms also need strong human and technical resources to ensure success at the implementation stage. This research has specifically highlighted the issue of the ability of staff to implement sophisticated evaluation systems in second-generation reforms.

Depending on the extent and nature of the career reforms, the transition from the old system to the new can become one of the most complex and contentious parts of implementation. When implementing the reform, ministries of education have three main options for the transition to the new career structure: (1) the new status is imposed on all teachers from the early stages of reform implementation (big-bang approach); (2) the reforms only apply to new teachers entering the profession (grandfathering); or (3) teachers voluntarily 'opt in' to the new career structure before it becomes mandatory for all teachers after a few years of implementation. The 'opt-in' approach is an interesting strategy to first pilot the scheme on a smaller scale, get feedback, and adjust the policy, which can increase the likelihood of successful reform implementation in the long term. The 'grandfathering' approach may initially appear to be a smooth and non-contentious way of transitioning to the new career structure, but it raises issues both in terms of management and cohesion of the teaching personnel. In terms of management, administering two sets of career structures simultaneously can prove burdensome for school systems, and delays the impact of the reform, as the incorporation of new teachers under the new structure spreads over years. With regards to cohesion, having different, coexisting career structures can cause tension between senior and entry-level teachers, which can undermine the implementation of the reform. Where feasible, a big-bang approach that incorporates some flexibility in its implementation may be more suitable.

Most importantly, our research found that the building of trust and a shared vision among all parties smoothed the transition process. The proper involvement of teacher unions and improved teacher buy-in were key. In direct relation to obtaining teacher buy-in, reform implementation plans should include

a comprehensive communication strategy to strengthen understanding and cooperation between institutions and teachers. An adaptive approach to implementation can help the process as well, since the reform can go through several versions before the design is finalized. An adaptive approach involves a flexible system that includes monitoring and feedback, which can lead to updates or changes to the reform.

In short, our research shows that well-designed and implemented reforms can have a positive impact on regulating entry into the profession, tackling corruption, diversifying career tracks to help improve retention, and encouraging teacher support roles that help promote greater collaboration. However, these reforms are complex and resource-intensive. In some contexts, the reforms have been mired by implementation challenges to such an extent that it is difficult to be conclusive about the feasibility and desirability of introducing career ladders where education systems still need strengthening.

A key takeaway for governments is thus to carefully evaluate their administrative capacity before launching into major reforms. Failure to deliver on reform promises due to technical, financial, or human resource constraints will result in lost trust and may jeopardize the whole process. Moreover, attempts at improving the status of the profession will be pointless unless salaries are attractive. Whatever governments decide to do, their efforts will need to be incremental and sustained over several decades to be successful. The issue of cost is critical, yet investing in teachers is investing in our future.

Due to variations in existing career structures, available resources, and cultural views on the prestige of the teaching profession, there is no standard bulleted list of policy advice that can apply to all systems looking to implement teacher career reforms. However, policy-makers can glean valuable lessons from reviewing the successes and shortcomings of the case studies examined in this research. And, as with the reforms themselves, the research into this topic must continue so that policy guidance can adapt and remain aligned with the ever-evolving realities of education and the teaching profession.

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## About the book

How can governments transform teaching into an attractive career choice for today's youth? Countries all over the world are grappling with this question, as well as with the related challenges of poor working conditions and dwindling retention rates in the profession. In this context, teacher career reforms have the potential to be very powerful. To better understand the models that are being implemented, the related challenges, and their effects, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) investigated the organization and management of teacher careers in Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Lithuania, Mexico, Peru, Scotland, South Africa, Thailand, and New York City. This publication brings together IIEP's research findings.

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