



Catalytic Entry Points in Action:

Revise Compensation Systems to Enable Team-Based Structures and Student-Centered Career Paths

Challenge

Most educators today work under a traditional step-and-lane compensation model that inherently reinforces the rigid one-teacher, one-classroom model. Within this system, teachers' salary increases each year (step), with higher pay for those with advanced degrees (lanes).

Originally designed to mitigate bias by enforcing predictable, lockstep pay increases, this system assumes that teachers do the same job, work independently, and have similar amounts of experience and education. Step-and-lane structures also force educators seeking career advancement to pursue administrative roles in school or district leadership, rather than enabling them to balance working with students with expanding their reach and impact.

"Build Toward" Vision

Teaching should reflect the best of what today's most attractive professions offer, including opportunities for collaboration, career advancement, and impact that vary based on educator strengths and student needs. A collaborative model, in which educators work in teams with distributed responsibilities, enables teachers to leverage individual expertise and ensure all students receive individualized time and attention.

A compensation and career path strategy that supports this approach would:

- **Ensure teachers earn competitive wages**, with early-career salary increases encouraging educators to remain in the classroom during periods of intensive growth and development.
- **Support collaboration by creating roles** such as instructional experts, team leads, pre-service teachers, and early-career, in-service educators with fewer responsibilities and more support.
- **Provide effective teachers with opportunities for advancement**, ensuring the most accomplished teachers can expand their reach and impact without leaving the classroom.
- **Incentivize teachers to take on and pursue certification for harder-to-staff roles**, such as math, science, bilingual, special education, and high school positions.



“Do Now” Strategy

District leaders’ optimal entry point for building toward this vision depends on their system’s current student needs; talent profile; recent hiring and turnover trends; funding levels; and policy and labor context. For example:

- To adapt to state legislation directing districts to eliminate graduate-degree-based “lane pay” and pay increases for teachers rated ineffective, [Indianapolis Public Schools \(IPS\)](#) **implemented a salary schedule with “effectiveness steps” for teachers rated effective or higher.** District and labor leaders created instructional leadership roles—such as multi-classroom leaders based on the [Opportunity Culture model](#)—for school teams to incorporate into their staffing and scheduling plans. IPS leaders redirected investments in lane pay and salary increases for teachers rated ineffective toward these leadership roles.
- Community and district leaders of [Metro Nashville Public Schools \(MNPS\)](#) **recently committed to increasing teacher salaries by revising the district’s salary schedule to address high turnover rates among early-career teachers**—rather than by increasing pay across the board. Teachers who had previously received a 6.3% *total* salary increase over their first ten years, instead saw increases of more than 20% during the same time period. Revising their salary schedule helped MNPS stabilize its workforce and lay the groundwork for deeper change in the core structures of the teaching role.
- Arizona’s funding and teacher pay is lower than most of the country’s, which causes high turnover rates in many districts. **Leaders in Mesa, AZ, have partnered with the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University to implement a [Next Education Workforce model](#) in many Mesa schools.** The approach creates different roles—including teaching resident, community educator, and instructional team leader—each with differentiated pay based on skillset and role contributions.
- [District of Columbia Public Schools](#) **has introduced and maintained their Leadership Initiative for Teachers (LIFT) career ladder model, in which teachers move through five stages of the LIFT career path after earning “effective” or “highly effective” ratings.** As teachers move through stages, their leadership opportunities increase and formal observations decrease. Per union contract, “effective” and “highly effective” teachers earn annual step increases; “advanced,” “distinguished,” and “expert” teachers earn larger base salary increases; and “highly effective” teachers in high-poverty schools can earn up to \$25,000 in bonuses per year.

In each of these cases, district leaders committed to the “Build Toward” vision by building strategic compensation models that significantly improve the teaching role.



Resource Shifts and the District's Role

District teams, rather than individual school teams, typically manage compensation, so leaders play a critical role in ensuring their strategies and career paths enable broader changes in the teaching role. Since districts typically allocate around 45% of their operating expenditures toward teacher pay, any compensation shifts will significantly impact district finances.

To sustain strategic improvements in compensation and career paths, district leaders should consider:

- **Shifting resources away from pay for advanced degrees** and automatic pay increases for teachers rated ineffective.
- **Differentiating roles to incorporate pre-service educators**, such as student teachers and teaching residents, to shift resources to educator leadership roles with the most potential for expanding reach and impact.
- **Reducing investments in professional development** that has little or no relationship to the curriculum and daily work of teaching and learning.
- **Increasing class sizes and teaching loads for advanced electives** and other courses that incur above-average per-pupil costs.

District leaders are instrumental in supporting school leaders and teams as they create and implement strategic school designs with differentiated roles, innovative compensation models, and strong career paths. Schedules, staffing models, and direct support from district teams can help school leaders tailor their approaches to their school's particular student needs and teacher talent profile. This support, followed by a [continuous improvement approach](#), can ensure that new compensation structures—which may require other trade-offs at the bargaining table—directly improve teacher and student experiences and outcomes.