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Equitable Educator Staffing by Design

A Guide for System-Level Improvement of Students' Access to Experienced, Well-Prepared, and Well-Supported Educators

By Saroja Warner and John Jacobs

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Guide at a Glance

Purpose. This guide is for state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) leaders to use in examining educator staffing through a system-level lens to identify the conditions that produce inequitable staffing patterns and then select evidence-based strategies for improving students' access to experienced, well-prepared, and well-supported educators. (See Figure 1 on page 5.)

Who Should Use This Guide. The guide is designed for cross-functional teams that can see and influence the full staffing system. Teams may include human resources or talent leaders; school leadership and principal supervisors; leaders in the areas of instruction, Multilingual Learners, special education, and student support; leaders in finance and resource allocation; equity, data, research, and accountability staff; and the perspectives of educators, principals, labor, teacher preparation partners, families, students, and communities when relevant.

How This Guide's Worksheets and Tools Work Together. A team using this guide should first examine the staffing system and identify a staffing pattern and its equity impact as a priority to focus on and then connect that pattern to the system conditions most likely producing it. Before selecting a strategy for addressing the relevant conditions, the team should test its assumptions with the people closest to the pattern. The team then can use the Evidence-Based Levers Planning Tool to identify possible actions and the Decision Tool for Assessing Readiness and Choosing an Action Path to commit to a focused next step.

What Teams Will Produce. By the end of the process, the team should have a priority staffing pattern, an equity impact statement, a working hypothesis about the system conditions driving the pattern, a small set of evidence-based levers to use, a readiness-based action path, and an action-learning plan (Table 1).

Table 1. Steps, Tasks, and Products

Step	Team task	Product
1. **Understand the system**	Review how system conditions, staffing levers, staffing patterns, and student conditions connect.	Shared systems lens
2. **Diagnose the pattern**	Name the recurring staffing pattern and the students, schools, roles, or communities most affected.	Priority staffing pattern
3. **Connect pattern to conditions**	Use the four system conditions to interpret what may be producing the pattern.	System condition hypothesis
4. **Test assumptions**	Gather interest holder voice to distinguish symptoms from root causes.	Questions and evidence to check
5. **Select levers**	Choose one or two evidence-based levers aligned with the root cause.	Potential strategies
6. **Assess readiness**	Determine whether to proceed, proceed with conditions, or pause and build foundations.	Action path

Step	Team task	Product
7. Plan action learning	Commit to 30-, 60-, and 90-day actions; owners; measures; and equity guardrails.	Action-learning plan
8. Learn and adjust	Use learning loops to monitor data, experience, unintended consequences, and next decisions.	Adjustment plan

Design Principle

The goal is not to launch many new initiatives. The goal is to select a small number of high-leverage actions that can address root causes, improve conditions in the schools and roles in which inequity is concentrated, and build greater coherence across the staffing system over time.

Part 1. Why Equitable Educator Staffing Requires a Systems Lens

Why Educator Staffing Should Be a Priority

Ensuring that every student has access to skilled, well-prepared educators is a foundational condition for achieving academic excellence and for creating safe, supportive learning environments (Cardichon et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2024). Yet across states and districts, students with the greatest academic needs are often the least likely to have consistent access to experienced, fully credentialed, and well-supported educators (Cardichon et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2023).

This disparity is not new, nor is it the result of individual educator choices or isolated leadership decisions. Policies, incentives, working conditions, preparation pathways, and decision-making structures interact over time to produce predictable patterns of access and opportunity across schools. So, the disparity reflects how education systems are currently designed.

At its core, equitable educator staffing is about ensuring that every student learns in conditions that support academic success and healthy social and emotional development. These conditions include access to experienced and well-prepared educators, stable relationships with caring adults, strong instructional expertise, and learning environments that are both supportive and academically rigorous. Research consistently demonstrates that these factors matter for all students, but students who have historically experienced barriers to opportunity are systematically less likely to have access to them (Cardichon et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2023).

Why Individual Explanations Fall Short

Explanations for disparate staffing patterns often focus on individual choices. Educators may be described as unwilling to work in particular schools, insufficiently committed to the profession, or simply inclined to leave because of labor market opportunities. Efforts to improve staffing also often focus on visible workforce challenges such as vacancies, shortages, turnover, or hiring difficulties.

These challenges are real, but they are often symptoms of deeper system dynamics. Educators make decisions within contexts. Working conditions, leadership support, access to resources, opportunities for collaboration, compensation structures, preparation experiences, and professional growth opportunities all influence where educators choose to work and whether they remain there (Johnson et al., 2012; Steiner et al., 2022). Research consistently finds that educator workforce patterns are strongly influenced by organizational and system conditions (Johnson et al., 2012; Podolsky et al., 2023; Steiner et al., 2022).

Even when overall educator supply improves in a district or region, inequitable access can persist if hiring timelines, working conditions, placement practices, preparation pathways, and retention supports continue to differ across schools. The issue is not only how many educators are available; it is also how systems recruit, place, support, and retain educators across schools.

Education leaders also face real constraints. Labor markets are tight, resources are limited, and staffing decisions are shaped by policies, contracts, funding formulas, and long-standing practices that can be difficult to change. As a result, inequitable staffing patterns can come to feel inevitable, even when leaders are deeply committed to equity. This guide is designed to help leaders identify where the constraints can be addressed through intentional system redesign.

While no single policy or program can resolve all educator staffing inequities, systems can be redesigned to produce different outcomes. Understanding the connections among system components can help shift attention away from isolated staffing challenges and toward the underlying conditions that produce them. Instead of only asking “How do we fill vacancies?” leaders can also ask “What system conditions are producing these vacancies?” Instead of focusing solely on recruitment, leaders can examine how decision-making structures, incentives, working conditions, preparation pathways, and support systems influence where educators work and whether they stay.

A Systems Lens for Focusing on Educator Staffing

A substantial body of research demonstrates that disparities in access to experienced, well-prepared educators are closely tied to system-level factors, including working conditions, compensation structures, preparation pathways, and policy design, rather than being the result of individual educator intent (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2023).

Figure 1 illustrates this central logic, which underlies this guide. System conditions shape staffing policies, structures, and decisions. Those decisions produce staffing patterns across schools, which in turn determine students’ access to experienced, well-prepared, and well-supported educators. Accordingly, addressing inequitable staffing requires attention not only to visible workforce challenges but also to the underlying system conditions that create them.

The framework illustrated in Figure 1 includes four connected levels:

- **system conditions:** the underlying conditions that shape how staffing systems operate, which often include fragmented decision-making without equity alignment; misaligned incentives and uneven working conditions; turnover-driven instability cycles; and unequal access to preparation, support, and talent pathways
- **system levers:** the policies, structures, and decisions that education leaders can influence, including hiring and placement, compensation and incentives, working conditions, professional learning and support, leadership development, resource allocation, and talent pathway development
- **staffing patterns:** observable outcomes such as uneven distribution of experienced educators, concentrated turnover, persistent vacancies and late hiring, and instability cycles that are difficult to break
- **student conditions:** the conditions students need to thrive, including experienced and well-prepared educators, stable staffing relationships, supportive learning environments, and consistent access to instructional expertise

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Figure 1. A Framework for Understanding Equitable Educator Staffing

How Education Systems Produce (or Fail to Produce) Equitable Staffing Outcomes

Student access to experienced, well-supported educators is the result of how system conditions shape the decisions we make—and the patterns that emerge.

01 System Conditions That Drive the Patterns

These underlying conditions exist within every system and interact to shape how staffing decisions are made and where educators choose to work.

Fragmented Decision-Making Without Equity Alignment
Staffing and policies are inconsistently aligned with equitable access to instructional expertise.

Misaligned Incentives and Uneven Working Conditions
Differences in incentives and working conditions drive where educators choose to work and whether they stay.

Turnover-Driven Instability Cycles
High turnover creates recurring instability, making it harder to attract, support, and retain educators.

Unequal Access to Preparation, Support, and Talent Pathways
Access to quality preparation, support, and diverse talent pathways varies by school and community.

02 System Levers We Control

Education systems influence staffing outcomes through the policies, structures, and decisions we design and implement.

- Hiring and Placement
- Compensation and Incentives
- Working Conditions
- Professional Learning and Support
- Leadership Development
- Resource Allocation
- Talent Pathway Development

These conditions influence how staffing policies, structures, and decisions operate across the system.

03 Staffing Patterns We Observe

When system levers are not aligned around equitable access to educator expertise, predictable staffing patterns emerge.

- Unequal Distribution of Experienced Educators
- Turnover Concentration
- Persistent Vacancies and Late Hiring
- Higher Turnover in Some Schools and Roles
- Instability Cycles That Are Difficult to Break

These patterns differ across schools and communities and are not random.

04 Student Conditions We Want

These are the conditions every student needs to thrive—when the system is designed to provide equitable access to educator expertise.

- Experienced Educators
- Well-Prepared Educators
- Stable Staffing Relationships
- Supportive Learning Environments
- Consistent Access to Instructional Expertise

When these conditions are in place, all students have access to skilled, well-supported educators in every school.

The Big Picture: System conditions shape the levers we control. Our decisions create staffing patterns, and those patterns determine whether students have equitable access to experienced, well-supported educators. By strengthening system conditions and aligning our levers, we can create more equitable outcomes.

Four System Conditions That Shape Staffing

If staffing patterns reflect system design, then understanding inequitable staffing requires examining the conditions that shape staffing decisions and educator and student experiences (see Table 2). These system conditions do not operate independently. They interact to influence where educators work, how long they stay, and the extent to which students experience stable access to skilled educators.

Table 2. System Conditions and Implications

System condition	Key implication
1. **Fragmented decision-making without equity alignment**	Staffing decisions are often distributed across multiple departments and policies that may not be aligned for equitable access to educator expertise. Without intentional coordination and shared equity criteria, staffing systems can continue to produce uneven access even when individual policies are designed with positive intentions.
2. **Misaligned incentives and uneven working conditions**	Working conditions and incentives frequently vary across schools, and research suggests that these differences strongly influence educator satisfaction, educator retention, and school stability. When incentives and working conditions are not aligned with student need, systems can concentrate experienced educators in more advantaged settings.
3. **Turnover-driven instability cycles**	Turnover can create recurring cycles of instability. Without targeted strategies to reduce turnover and stabilize staffing in higher need schools, systems can reproduce cycles of inexperience and disruption that undermine instructional quality and student experience.
4. **Unequal access to preparation, support, and talent pathways**	Access to preparation pathways, mentoring, and talent development opportunities is often uneven. Without coordinated strategies addressing preparation, placement, support, and representation, efforts to strengthen the educator workforce may not translate into more equitable distribution of expertise.

How System Conditions Reinforce One Another

Together, these conditions can create reinforcing cycles in which access to experienced, well-supported educators and the stability and coherence they provide is concentrated in some schools and limited in others. Schools with stable staffing are more likely to retain institutional knowledge, develop collaborative cultures, support new educators effectively, and sustain instructional improvement efforts (Johnson et al., 2012). These conditions can make it easier to attract and retain additional educators.

By contrast, schools experiencing persistent vacancies, high turnover, or staffing instability may face increasing challenges in maintaining instructional continuity and organizational stability. As experienced educators leave, remaining staff often assume additional responsibilities. Increased workload and stress can contribute to further attrition, making it more difficult to stabilize staffing over time (Johnson et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2023; Steiner et al., 2022). As these dynamics accumulate, differences between schools can become increasingly pronounced, even within the same district or state.

Because these patterns are produced by system design, they can be changed through intentional system redesign. Addressing any single factor in isolation is unlikely to shift outcomes; meaningful progress requires coordinated action across the conditions described above.

How System Conditions Produce Inequitable Staffing: An Example

In Meridian School District, the human resources department manages hiring, the finance department manages the staffing formula, teaching and learning personnel manage coaching, and the union contract governs transfers. Each function operates according to its own rules, but the system is not coordinated around equitable staffing. When a veteran teacher transfers from a majority low-income elementary school to a more affluent school, each policy is followed correctly, yet the outcome is inequitable.

The lower income school has larger classes, limited coaching support, and a stretched administrative team. Its modest hard-to-staff stipend does not offset the difference in working conditions. The school loses six teachers and replaces many of them with novices or long-term substitutes. Remaining veterans absorb additional mentoring responsibilities without added time or compensation, which contributes to more transfer requests the following spring. Meanwhile, the district's residency partnership places candidates in stabler schools because those principals have the bandwidth to mentor residents. No single office caused the pattern, and no single fix will resolve it. The conditions reinforce one another: Fragmented decisions, uneven working conditions, turnover-driven instability, and limited pathway access combine to deepen inequity over time.

Staffing Patterns and Student Impacts

System conditions can create and reinforce disparities in access to skilled, well-prepared, and well-supported educators. These disparities have been documented across multiple decades of research and remain evident despite substantial efforts to strengthen educator recruitment and workforce development. While specific patterns vary across contexts, the overall picture is consistent: Access to educator expertise is not distributed evenly across schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2023) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Staffing Patterns and Why They Matter

Staffing pattern	Why it matters
Experienced educators are unevenly distributed.	Schools serving higher concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, Multilingual Learners, students with disabilities, and students in historically underserved communities are more likely to employ larger proportions of early-career educators and fewer highly experienced educators (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023). Differences in access to experienced educators often translate into differences in access to instructional expertise and organizational stability.

Staffing pattern	Why it matters
Turnover is concentrated rather than evenly distributed.	In schools experiencing high or chronic turnover, educators leave at higher rates, vacancies occur more frequently, and staffing changes are more likely to occur during the school year (Nguyen et al., 2023). High rates of turnover undermine instructional continuity and make it more difficult for schools to maintain stable improvement efforts (Podolsky et al., 2023).
Vacancies and late hiring are concentrated in particular schools and roles.	Vacancies are often concentrated in specific schools, geographic regions, grade levels, or subject areas. Positions in special education, multilingual education, mathematics, science, and other specialized fields frequently remain unfilled longer than other positions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023).
Access to fully prepared educators varies across schools.	Schools serving higher need student populations are more likely to employ educators who are early in their careers, are teaching outside their field of preparation, or are entering through alternative pathways that may provide less extensive clinical preparation. At the same time, access to induction, mentoring, coaching, and ongoing professional support often varies across schools and districts.
Staffing instability creates compounding challenges.	Schools experiencing high turnover are often the same schools facing persistent vacancies, greater reliance on novice educators, and reduced staffing stability. Frequent staffing changes make it more difficult to build collaborative teams, sustain improvement efforts, maintain instructional coherence, and preserve institutional knowledge.

These staffing patterns matter because they shape what students experience every day in classrooms and schools. Staffing patterns shape access to instructional expertise, the continuity of student–educator relationships, opportunities for collaboration, and the stability of learning environments. They can also both undermine efforts to improve outcomes and create conditions in which inequities persist over time.

Research across multiple states has found that students achieve at higher levels when taught by educators who are fully certified, prepared through comprehensive teacher preparation programs, certified in their teaching field, and supported in developing advanced professional expertise. Teacher qualifications are among the strongest school-related predictors of student achievement, even when accounting for differences in student demographics and family background (Cardichon et al., 2020).

Educator effectiveness also increases over time, particularly during the early years of teaching. Students taught by experienced educators generally demonstrate stronger academic growth than do students taught by less experienced educators. Benefits extend beyond test scores: Students taught by experienced teachers show stronger attendance and engagement, and schools with staffs who are more experienced tend to report lower suspension rates and to have other indicators associated with positive school climates (Cardichon et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2024).

Finally, the benefits of educator experience extend beyond individual classrooms. Educators working alongside experienced colleagues become more effective. Experienced educators often serve as mentors, instructional leaders, and sources of organizational knowledge that strengthen schoolwide improvement efforts. Schools with high concentrations of novice educators have fewer opportunities to benefit from these professional learning relationships (Cardichon et al., 2020).

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Why Addressing System Conditions Matters

System conditions drive staffing outcomes, which influence whether students have access to experienced educators, stable instructional relationships, supportive learning environments, and consistent expertise across schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2023). When these conditions are concentrated in some schools and limited in others, disparities in opportunity persist.

The research does not suggest that individual educators alone determine student success. Rather, it highlights how education systems influence access to the conditions that support student learning. Because staffing patterns are shaped by system design, they can also be improved through intentional system action. The question for leaders is not whether educator staffing matters. The evidence clearly demonstrates that it does. The more important question is where and how to address the staffing issues.

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Part 2. From Sensemaking to Action: A Sequence of Worksheets and Tools for Teams

The information in Part 1 of this guide establishes a central idea: Inequitable educator staffing is not simply a vacancy problem, a recruitment problem, or the result of isolated decisions. It is a system outcome. Staffing patterns emerge from the interaction of policies, incentives, working conditions, preparation pathways, decision-making structures, and supports. Those patterns then shape students' access to experienced, well-prepared, and well-supported educators.

Part 2 is designed to help cross-functional teams move from examining staffing data to taking coordinated action. Teams begin by naming a priority staffing pattern and its equity impact. Then they connect that pattern to the system conditions most likely producing it. Before selecting a strategy, teams test their assumptions with the people closest to the pattern. They then use the Evidence-Based Levers Planning Tool to identify possible actions and the Decision Tool for Assessing Readiness and Choosing an Action Path and Worksheet 5 to create a 30-/60-/90-day action-learning plan that commits to a focused next step.

The worksheets and tools are intended to be used together, not as separate checklists. Teams may move through them in sequence or return to earlier tools as new information emerges. Choosing the largest number of strategies is not the goal. The goal is to choose a small number of high-leverage actions that will address root causes and that can build greater coherence across the system over time.

Preparing to Use the Worksheets and Tools

Use the worksheets and tools with a cross-functional team that can see and influence the full staffing system, not just one department or program area.

Who Should Participate

- Human resources or talent leaders
- School leadership or principal supervisors
- Instruction, curriculum, Multilingual Learner, special education, and student support leaders
- Finance, budgeting, and resource allocation leaders
- Equity, data, research, and accountability staff
- Educator, principal, labor or association, preparation partner, family, student, or community voice when relevant

Data and Evidence to Bring

- Vacancy, late hiring, time-to-post, and time-to-fill data by school, role, grade, and subject
- Turnover, retention, mobility, and midyear departure data by school, role, and educator experience level
- Educator experience, certification, preparation pathway, out-of-field assignment, and demographic data

- Student demographic, program, course access, and need data, for examining where staffing patterns affect student access
- Working condition data, including data from climate surveys, stay interviews, and exit interviews and including data on class size, planning time, leadership stability, and support staff availability
- Hiring timelines, budget calendars, transfer and reassignment policies, reduction-in-force rules, staffing formulas, and induction or coaching participation data

Facilitation Agreements

- Start with student access. Ask which students have the least consistent access to experienced, well-prepared, and well-supported educators.
- Treat data for clues, not verdicts. Pair quantitative patterns with educator, leader, candidate, student, and family voice when appropriate.
- Explain patterns through system conditions. Avoid explanations that blame individual educators, principals, families, or communities.
- Look for interactions. Staffing inequities usually emerge from multiple policies, timelines, incentives, supports, and working conditions interacting over time.
- Choose focused action. Select a small number of aligned strategies that address root causes and can be monitored through a learning cycle.

Suggested 90-to-120-Minute Sequence

Teams may use the sequence in one longer meeting or across multiple shorter meetings depending on staff availability and the complexity of the focus area (see Table 4).

Table 4. Sequence Phases, Guiding Questions, and Products

Phase	Guiding question	Product
1. Center equity	Which students have the least consistent access to educator expertise and stability?	Shared equity focus
2. Describe the pattern	What is recurring? Where, when, and for whom?	Priority staffing pattern
3. Interpret system conditions	What system conditions are most likely producing the pattern?	System condition hypothesis
4. Test assumptions	What do affected educators, leaders, candidates, students, families, or partners help us understand?	Questions and evidence to check
5. Select possible levers	Which evidence-based levers align with the root cause?	Potential strategies
6. Assess readiness	Do we have clarity, control, and capacity to act?	Decision to proceed, proceed with conditions, or pause
7. Commit to action learning	Who will do what in the next 30, 60, and 90 days?	Action-learning plan
8. Learn and adjust	What is changing, what are people experiencing, and what should we adjust next?	Learning loop decisions

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Worksheet 1. Name the Pattern and Its Equity Impact

Begin with the most visible staffing pattern. Use specific evidence before moving to interpretation. A strong problem statement names who is affected, what access is uneven, and how the pattern shows up over time.

Prompt	Team notes
Which staffing pattern is most visible? ☐ Uneven distribution of experienced educators ☐ Turnover concentration ☐ Persistent vacancies or late hiring ☐ Unequal access to fully prepared educators ☐ Compounding staffing instability	
Where is the pattern concentrated? Consider schools, regions, roles, grade levels, subjects, programs, and student populations.	
What evidence confirms the pattern? Use both quantitative data and qualitative evidence from educators, leaders, candidates, students, and families when appropriate.	
What student access conditions are affected? ☐ Experienced educators ☐ Well-prepared educators ☐ Stable staffing relationships ☐ Supportive learning environments ☐ Consistent access to instructional expertise	
What do we still need to learn before selecting a strategy?	

Equity Impact Statement

Students in [schools, communities, programs, or roles] are less likely to have access to [experienced, well-prepared, well-supported educators / stable relationships / instructional expertise] because [staffing pattern], which contributes to [student and school experience].

Worksheet 2. Connect the Pattern to System Conditions

Use the four system conditions as lenses for interpretation. Be careful not to choose a label too quickly. The goal is to identify the condition—or the interaction of conditions—that is most responsible for the pattern.

1. Fragmented Decision-Making Without Equity Alignment

Signals you might see: There is delayed or inconsistent hiring; HR, finance, instruction, and school leadership use different timelines or priorities; transfers, reductions, or placements occur without shared equity criteria.

Sensemaking questions: Where are decisions made? When do timelines collide? Who sees equity data before decisions are finalized? Which policies unintentionally disadvantage specific schools or roles?

Evidence to check: hiring and budget calendars; time-to-post and time-to-fill; transfer and reassignment policies; staffing formulas; reduction-in-force rules; cross-department agendas

2. Misaligned Incentives and Uneven Working Conditions

Signals you might see: Schools or roles with greater student need carry a heavier workload, fewer supports, or less stable conditions without aligned incentives or resources.

Sensemaking questions: How do working conditions differ across schools? Do supports and incentives follow student and educator need? What would make educators more likely to choose and stay in impacted schools?

Evidence to check: class size, planning time, leadership stability, support staff ratios, climate and stay survey data, compensation or stipend structures, workload indicators

3. Turnover-Driven Instability Cycles

Signals you might see: The same schools or roles replace educators repeatedly; midyear departures disrupt staffing; remaining staff absorb more work; instability makes recruitment and retention harder.

Sensemaking questions: What makes the pattern self-reinforcing? What happens after an educator leaves? Which supports arrive too late? Which roles or schools are caught in repeated churn?

Evidence to check: retention, attrition, and mobility data by school and role; exit and stay interviews; midyear vacancies; substitute and out-of-field data; onboarding timelines

4. Unequal Access to Preparation, Support, and Talent Pathways

Signals you might see: Novice, underprepared, or out-of-field educators are concentrated in particular schools or roles; mentoring, coaching, induction, and pathway partnerships are not equitably matched with needs.

Sensemaking questions: Which pathways supply affected schools? How are new educators placed and supported? Do mentoring and coaching resources reach the highest need schools and roles? How is educator diversity addressed?

Evidence to check: certification and preparation sources; induction participation; mentor loads; coaching schedules; preparation partner data; candidate pool data; educator demographics

System Condition Hypothesis

The pattern appears to be driven primarily by [system condition] because [specific policy, routine, resource decision, incentive, working condition, support gap, or timeline]. It is reinforced by [related condition] through [interaction]. We need to test [assumptions] before selecting a strategy.

Worksheet 3. Test Assumptions With Interest Holders

Before selecting strategies, test the team's interpretation with people closest to the pattern. Interest holder voice can help distinguish between a visible symptom and the system condition producing it.

Who to learn from	Questions to ask	What it may reveal
Principals and supervisors in affected schools	Which staffing decisions arrive too late? Which supports would most help stabilize staffing?	Decision fragmentation, resource allocation issues, leadership workload, support gaps
Educators in affected schools or roles	What makes it easier or harder to stay? What supports have mattered most? What barriers are avoidable?	Working conditions, incentive alignment, workload, mentoring, collaboration, leadership support
Novice, underprepared, or out-of-field educators	What preparation and induction supports were available? What would have helped earlier?	Preparation, placement, mentoring, coaching, and pathway support gaps
Human resources, finance, instruction, and student support leaders	Where do policies, timelines, and data systems conflict? Which decisions are made without shared equity criteria?	Levers within system control and opportunities for cross-department alignment
Candidates, preparation partners, and community partners	What affects candidate supply, placement, and willingness to work in targeted schools or roles?	Pathway barriers, partnership opportunities, and candidate experiences
Students and families, when appropriate	How do staffing changes affect relationships, program access, services, and learning conditions?	Student experience and equity impacts that may not appear in workforce data

Root-Cause Check

Before naming a strategy, ask the following: Is this a symptom or a condition? What makes the pattern predictable? Which system routines reproduce it? Which current initiatives could be aligned before adding something new? What is within our control in 90 days, this budget cycle, and the next policy or contract cycle?

Evidence-Based Levers Planning Tool

Use this tool after your team has identified a priority staffing pattern or system condition and tested key assumptions. Begin with the system condition that best matches your team's sensemaking. Then identify one or two strategies that directly address the root causes your team surfaced. The full descriptions for each condition appear in the Appendix.

Priority condition	What priority levers can do	Possible starting strategies
1. Fragmented decision-making without equity alignment	Create coherence across the departments, policies, data routines, and timelines that shape staffing decisions.	Establish cross-functional staffing governance; align hiring, budgeting, and assignment timelines; review transfer, reassignment, and reduction-in-force policies for equity impact; use equity-centered staffing indicators; conduct recurring cross-department data reviews.
2. Misaligned incentives and uneven working conditions	Improve the conditions and supports in the schools and roles where staffing inequity is concentrated, and align incentives with student and educator need.	Strengthen school-level working conditions; differentiate incentives strategically; invest in leadership stability and effectiveness; develop coordinated student support systems; monitor educator mobility patterns.
3. Turnover-driven instability cycles	Treat retention and stability as core staffing strategies, especially in schools and roles experiencing repeated churn.	Prioritize retention; use strategic staffing and distributed expertise models; create career ladders and retention-focused leadership roles; use working-conditions surveys and stay interviews; reduce disruptive staffing churn; plan multiyear stabilization strategies.
4. Unequal access to preparation, support, and talent pathways	Strengthen preparation, placement, induction, mentoring, and pathway access in the schools and roles where student need is greatest.	Expand affordable, high-quality preparation pathways; align placement with student and school needs; ensure equitable access to mentoring and professional learning; recruit and retain a more diverse educator workforce; strengthen pathways into hard-to-staff roles and subjects.

For each possible strategy, ask the following questions:

- Does this address a root cause rather than only a visible symptom?
- Can we influence this through policies, structures, resources, supports, or routines within our control?
- Does this require coordination across departments or partners?
- Will this improve conditions in the schools, roles, or student communities where inequity is concentrated?
- What leading indicators, lagging outcomes, and equity guardrails will help us know whether the strategy is working?
- Does the action avoid shifting additional burden to affected schools or educators without additional support?

Decision Tool for Assessing Readiness and Choosing an Action Path

Use the readiness factors below to determine how to move forward. The strongest next step may be immediate action, alignment work, or foundational sensemaking before implementation.

Readiness factor	Questions to ask	Team assessment
Clarity: Do we have a clear understanding of the issue?	Do we have clear data confirming the pattern? Do interest holders share a common understanding? Do we know which students, schools, roles, or communities are most affected?	
Control: Do we have influence to act?	Do we have authority over the policies or practices contributing to this condition? Can we influence partners or other organizations that play a role? Which decisions are within our control in 90 days, this budget cycle, or the next policy or contract cycle?	
Capacity: Do we have the ability to act?	Do we have the staff, time, and resources to take action? Are there existing initiatives we can align with? What support, partnership, or leadership action would increase our capacity?	

Action path	When to use	Focus	What to watch for
Proceed	Data, shared understanding, authority, and capacity are strong enough to begin.	Select one or two high-leverage strategies and implement with a clear owner, timeline, and learning measures.	Changes happening too quickly without continuing to check educator, school leader, student, and family experiences
Proceed with conditions	The pattern is clear, but ownership, alignment, data, or capacity is partial.	Take a limited action while building shared ownership, clarifying decision authority, aligning existing initiatives, and closing data gaps.	New programs being added before current work is aligned
Pause and build foundations	Data are limited, the problem is not yet shared, authority is unclear, or capacity is insufficient.	Conduct a cross-department data review, define equity indicators, establish governance, and gather interest holder voice.	The pause becoming inaction rather than being used to build the conditions for effective action

Worksheet 4. Make a Team Decision

Based on our readiness assessment, our starting path is [Proceed / Proceed With Conditions / Pause and Build Foundations].

Our rationale is [summary].

Our immediate next step is [action].

The owner is [name or team].

The decision or support we need from senior leaders is [decision/support].

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Worksheet 5. Draft a 30-/60-/90-Day Action-Learning Plan

It is not the purpose of the plan to solve the entire staffing system in one cycle. Rather, the purpose is to test a high-leverage change, learn quickly, and align future decisions around what the team learns.

Aim Statement

By [date], we will [increase, reduce, or improve] [staffing outcome] for [schools, roles, or student groups] by changing [system lever or condition] so that students have more consistent access to [educator expertise, stable relationships, preparation, support, or learning conditions].

Planning element	Team decision
Priority system condition	
Starting strategy and system lever(s)	
0–30 day actions and owner(s)	
31–60 day actions and owner(s)	
61–90 day actions and owner(s)	
Leading indicators Examples: time-to-fill, candidate pool depth, mentoring/coaching delivery, stay interview completion, class size, planning time, support staff access	
Lagging outcomes Examples: retention, turnover concentration, vacancies, late hiring, out-of-field assignments, novice educator concentration, educator diversity, student access to expertise	
Equity guardrails How will we know gains are reaching targeted schools, roles, and students without creating new inequities?	
Communication plan What will we communicate, to whom, and when?	
Decision points and escalations Which policy, budget, timeline, or partnership decisions may need senior-level action?	

Learning Loop Prompts

- What changed in the data since the last review?
- What are educators, school leaders, candidates, students, or families experiencing?
- Are supports and resources reaching the schools and roles named in the equity impact statement?
- What unintended consequences are emerging?
- Which policy, timeline, resource, partnership, or communication decision should be adjusted next?

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Appendix. Full Evidence-Based Levers by System Condition

Use this appendix after the team has completed sensemaking and identified a priority system condition. The descriptions in this appendix are not meant to be read as a menu of disconnected initiatives. They are intended to help teams select a small number of high-leverage actions that address root causes, improve conditions in the schools and roles where inequity is concentrated, and build coherence across the staffing system.

System Condition 1: Fragmented Decision-Making Without Equity Alignment

Core Challenge

Staffing decisions related to hiring, budgeting, transfers, reductions in force, and educator placement are often made across multiple departments and policy structures. When those decisions are not consistently aligned around equitable access to educator expertise, they can unintentionally produce uneven staffing outcomes.

How This Challenge May Show Up

- Enrollment-based funding formulas that trigger staffing reductions without considering equity impact
- Hiring timelines and budget cycles that make it difficult for some schools to hire early
- Transfer, reassignment, or reduction-in-force policies that affect schools differently
- Seniority-based rules that may unintentionally reduce access to specialized expertise in higher need schools
- Lack of shared equity indicators across human resources, finance, instruction, school leadership, and student support teams

Example

A middle school loses teaching positions because of declining enrollment. Because of seniority-based rules, newer teachers with specialized literacy training are released, while teachers with more seniority but without that expertise remain. At the same time, other experienced teachers transfer to schools with stabler conditions. The school is left with less instructional expertise and more instability, not because of one decision but because multiple policies interact without a shared equity focus.

Possible Evidence-Based Levers

- Create cross-functional staffing governance structures. Establish a team that includes human resources, finance, instruction, equity, school leadership, and student support leaders. Use the team to align staffing decisions around instructional priorities and student need.
- Align staffing timelines, budgeting, and hiring processes. Coordinate hiring, budgeting, and assignment timelines so that schools with the greatest staffing needs can access strong candidates earlier.
- Review transfer, reassignment, and reduction-in-force policies for equity impact. Examine how seniority rules, transfer policies, enrollment formulas, and reduction processes affect access to specialized expertise in higher need schools.

- Use equity-centered staffing indicators in decision-making. Track vacancies, late hiring, turnover concentration, access to experienced educators, access to specialized instructional expertise, and staffing stability across schools and student groups.
- Conduct recurring cross-department data reviews. Review staffing patterns, educator mobility, placement decisions, and retention trends to identify unintended inequities created through interacting policies.

What Success Could Look Like

Staffing systems become more coherent. Hiring, placement, budgeting, and workforce policies are aligned around equitable access to experienced, well-supported educators.

System Condition 2: Misaligned Incentives and Uneven Working Conditions

Core Challenge

Working conditions, supports, and incentives are not always aligned with the goal of attracting and retaining experienced educators in higher need schools. Educators may be asked to work in more demanding conditions without additional supports, resources, or incentives.

How This Challenge May Show Up

- Large classes or heavier workloads in some schools
- Limited instructional resources or planning time
- Inconsistent leadership support
- Limited access to counselors, social workers, psychologists, student support staff, or behavioral specialists
- Insufficient social, emotional, or mental health supports
- Fewer opportunities for professional growth
- Incentives that do not reflect differences in working conditions or student need

Example

Teachers in a high-need school face large class sizes, frequent behavioral crises, and no school counselor. When the district adds counseling support, reduces class size, and provides a retention stipend, teacher retention improves and more educators who are experienced choose to stay.

Possible Evidence-Based Levers

- Strengthen school-level working conditions. Improve leadership support, collaboration time, instructional resources, class sizes, access to counselors and social workers, psychologists, student support staff, and related supports.

- Differentiate incentives strategically. Use targeted compensation, loan forgiveness, housing supports, retention stipends, or career advancement opportunities in hard-to-staff schools or subject areas.
- Invest in leadership stability and effectiveness. Strengthen principal retention, coaching, and instructional leadership capacity, especially in schools experiencing high turnover or instability.
- Develop coordinated student support systems. Build integrated academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health support systems that reduce the burden on teachers and improve learning conditions for students.
- Monitor educator mobility patterns. Use transfer and retention data to identify whether experienced educators are concentrating in more advantaged schools.

What Success Could Look Like

Working conditions and incentives are better aligned with student and educator need. Retention improves in higher need schools, and students have more equitable access to experienced educators.

System Condition 3: Turnover-Driven Instability Cycles

Core Challenge

Persistent turnover creates recurring instability that limits schools' ability to build experienced, stable educator teams over time. The same schools or roles may repeatedly experience vacancies, late hiring, and high numbers of new staff.

How This Challenge May Show Up

- High turnover in specific schools or roles
- Midyear departures and vacancies
- Repeated cycles of hiring new staff
- Large numbers of new hires replacing departing staff rather than filling new positions
- Limited supports for new teachers
- High workload and stress
- High educator burnout
- Inconsistent instruction and disrupted relationships for students

Example

A high-turnover school hires many teachers each year. After using data to identify the causes, district leaders match new teachers with mentors, create teacher leader roles, improve working conditions, and provide counseling support. Turnover drops and students experience more consistent instruction.

Possible Evidence-Based Levers

- Prioritize retention as a core staffing strategy. Shift from focusing primarily on recruitment to retaining effective educators in schools experiencing higher turnover.
- Implement strategic staffing and distributed expertise models. Pair experienced or highly effective educators with early-career, novice, emergency-certified, or underprepared educators through mentoring, coteaching, team teaching, or instructional leadership roles.
- Create career ladders and retention-focused leadership opportunities. Develop roles, such as mentor teacher, instructional coach, lead teacher, or residency support teacher, that allow educators to grow while remaining close to classroom practice.
- Use educator working-conditions surveys and stay interviews. Regularly collect and analyze educator feedback on working conditions, professional supports, workload, leadership, collaboration, and reasons why educators choose to stay or leave.
- Use data to identify and respond to turnover concentration. Monitor turnover patterns by school, role, certification pathway, and educator group to identify recurring instability and target supports.
- Reduce disruptive staffing churn by limiting avoidable midyear reassignments, vacancies, and staffing disruptions that undermine school stability.
- Stabilize staffing through multiyear planning. Develop proactive staffing and succession plans for schools with chronic turnover patterns and ensure access to multidisciplinary support teams and mental health resources.

What Success Could Look Like

Schools build stabler educator teams. Students have more consistent access to instructional expertise, stronger relationships, and improved instructional continuity.

System Condition 4: Unequal Access to Preparation, Support, and Talent Pathways

Core Challenge

Access to well-prepared educators, instructional supports, and diverse talent pathways is uneven across schools and student populations. Higher need schools may rely more heavily on novice, underprepared, emergency-certified, or out-of-field educators.

How This Challenge May Show Up

- Limited access to high-quality and affordable preparation pathways
- Uneven placement practices

- Unequal access to mentoring and professional learning
- Lack of educator diversity
- Insufficient supports for shortage areas such as special education, multilingual education, STEM, or literacy intervention
- New educators placed in high-need schools without adequate induction or coaching

Example

A district lacks strong pathways for special education and mathematics teachers. New teachers are placed without sufficient induction support. After the district has built partnerships and established residencies and mentoring, more prepared educators stay and students gain access to needed expertise.

Possible Evidence-Based Levers

- Expand access to affordable, high-quality preparation pathways. Partner with preparation programs, residency programs, apprenticeships, and grow-your-own initiatives to reduce financial barriers and increase access to high-quality preparation.
- Align placement practices with student and school needs. Use intentional placement strategies to connect educators' expertise with schools requiring specialized instructional support.
- Ensure equitable access to mentoring and professional learning. Prioritize coaching, induction, and ongoing professional learning in schools serving higher need students.
- Recruit and retain a more diverse educator workforce. Implement targeted recruitment, placement, and retention strategies for educators of color and multilingual educators.
- Strengthen pathways into hard-to-staff roles and subjects. Develop targeted supports for special education, multilingual education, STEM, literacy intervention, and other shortage areas.

What Success Could Look Like

The educator workforce becomes stronger, more diverse, and better prepared. Schools have more equitable access to expertise and support across roles and student populations.

Act Across Conditions

These levers are likely to be most effective when implemented as part of a coherent, equity-centered strategy. Addressing one condition in isolation may reduce symptoms temporarily, but lasting improvement usually requires coordinated action across staffing policies, working conditions, retention, preparation, and support systems.

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For example, a district may expand teacher pathways, but if new teachers are placed in schools with unstable working conditions and limited mentoring, turnover may continue. Similarly, a district may offer incentives for hard-to-staff schools, but if school leadership, workload, and student support needs remain unaddressed, incentives alone may not be enough to improve retention.

Use this appendix alongside the Evidence-Based Levers Planning Tool and Decision Tool to identify your system's priority condition, select high-leverage strategies, and design coordinated actions that address root causes.

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