TEACHER QUALITY

# BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TALENT

## Creating Conditions in High-Poverty Schools That Support Effective Teaching and Learning

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TO THE POINT

- **Conditions for teaching and learning are critical to teacher satisfaction.**
- **Failure to improve conditions for teachers has real and often dramatic consequences for the students in high-poverty schools.**
- **Districts must take responsibility for making *all* their schools places where good teachers *want* to work.**

Figuring out who the top teachers are is crucial, but without attention to school conditions that draw and hold on to good teachers, this effort is meaningless to struggling and low-income students.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Improving teaching effectiveness is a hot topic for policymakers around the country these days. The gathering movement marks an important step forward in the ongoing effort to strengthen our nation's schools. In many cases, however, these efforts start and stop with improving outdated, inadequate teacher evaluation systems. Such approaches fail to address a key problem: that our most vulnerable students are consistently and disproportionately saddled with the weakest teachers and seldom have access to the strong instruction they need and deserve.

To correct this systemic flaw, districts and states must address policy and culture issues that lead to higher rates of teacher dissatisfaction and turnover in schools serving large populations of low-income students and students of color. Teachers do not work in a vacuum. Like most other professionals, their feelings about their jobs and their decisions about where to teach are significantly impacted by their work environments. Despite widespread assumptions that students are the primary cause of teacher dissatisfaction and attrition, research shows that the work environment in schools — particularly the quality of school leadership and staff cohesion — actually matters more, especially among teachers working in high-poverty schools.

Around the country, too many states and districts are giving short shrift to the teaching and learning environments in schools serving students with the greatest need. But a few places are taking this work seriously. In this report, the Education Trust highlights five districts that recognize the importance of teaching and learning conditions: Ascension Parish Public Schools in Louisiana, Boston Public Schools in Massachusetts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, and Fresno Unified and Sacramento City Unified in California. These districts view building and sustaining strong teaching and learning conditions as a key strategy for attracting, developing and retaining strong teachers in high-need schools. While each district's approach is different, some consistent themes emerge: a focus on strong leadership, a campus-wide commitment to improving instruction by analyzing student data and reflecting on practice, and a collaborative environment that values and rewards individual contribution.

Done right, improved evaluation systems in coordination with positive conditions for teaching and learning could achieve equitable access to effective teachers for all students. With information on how effective teachers are at growing student learning, districts can be more deliberate and strategic about creating conditions that attract, grow, and keep strong teachers in the schools that need them most: schools serving large concentrations of low-income students and students of color. But this change will not occur on its own. States and districts must be intentional about removing policy barriers and creating conditions that ensure our neediest students have access to great teachers.

# BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TALENT

## Creating Conditions in High-Poverty Schools That Support Effective Teaching and Learning

BY SARAH ALMY AND MELISSA TOOLEY

For years, the Ascension Parish School System in southern Louisiana struggled to attract teachers to its highest poverty schools. When the state sanctioned two Ascension schools for low performance, district leaders knew it was time to get serious about improving the quality of teaching in these schools. Just moving teachers around was not enough, they needed to build a culture of professional development and instructional accountability that would attract and keep talented teachers. The district built and implemented systems to help teachers improve their classroom effectiveness and to create opportunities for professional advancement. Now, teachers are eager to work at the once low-performing schools, and other schools in the district are keen on replicating their approach.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, student achievement was lagging in the Fresno Unified School District. Located in California's Central Valley, Fresno Unified serves large numbers of low-income students. When Mike Hanson became district superintendent, he understood the urgent need to strengthen teachers' knowledge and skills. He also knew turning the district's principals into effective managers was a critical first step. So Fresno Unified launched an intensive program to train and support principals in their role as instructional leaders. Over time, the program has helped transform the district culture into one of reflective practice, feedback, and support — which, in turn, has helped improve retention and hiring of teachers across the district.

Fresno and Ascension are two among many districts nationwide that are working hard to improve teacher quality. But they are unusual in at least two ways:

- They explicitly focus on access to quality teaching for low-income students. The leaders in these districts know that just improving the average quality of teaching isn't enough: If the students who most need quality teachers don't get them, we'll never close damaging achievement gaps.
- They understand that moving toward equitable access to quality teaching requires more than simply evaluating teachers more honestly and offering bonuses to terrific teachers who are willing to work in high-poverty schools. If we are going to attract and hold strong teachers in our highest need schools, we need to transform these schools into places that recognize, reward, and support good teaching, routinely provide teachers with opportunities to work with others and hone their craft, and provide expert teachers more opportunities to advance.

These seem like common-sense concepts, and yet, deliberate attention to these notions remains rare.

### THE STATE POLICY CONTEXT

The past two years have seen a flurry of activity at the state and national levels to address growing concerns about the quality of teaching in U.S. schools. To date, most of that activity has focused on building better teacher evaluation systems and using information from those systems to improve teaching and learning. Nationwide, 32 states have made changes to the performance evaluation systems they use for teachers. In a huge departure from past practice, 23 of those states now require teacher evaluations to include objective evidence of student learning.[1]

These policy changes are a welcome recognition of the power of effective teachers and of the damaging impact of ineffective teachers who don't get help. Moreover, such changes have the potential to disrupt a professional culture in education that has generally treated teachers as interchangeable widgets.[2]

Yet many states are moving full speed ahead to build and implement new systems for evaluating teachers, while giving almost no attention to disrupting the longstanding pattern of assigning the students with the steepest learning challenges to the weakest teachers. The focus on effective teaching stops at the point of individual teacher evaluation and doesn't delve into school and district policy and culture changes that must accompany better evaluation systems, especially in high-poverty and low-performing schools. Such changes must address the experiences that teachers have within schools, but also the policy barriers that all too often exacerbate inequities in teacher quality between high-poverty and low-poverty schools.

These barriers include: staffing systems that rely solely on seniority, which disproportionately impact high-poverty schools because they have higher concentrations of new teachers; arduous processes for dismissing poor-performing teachers, which leads to the passing around of ineffective teachers, often from one high-poverty school to another; and structures that prohibit building level autonomy over schedules and staffing assignment, limiting campus leaders' ability to shape and influence school culture. Together, these policies have historically contributed to toxic school cultures and persistent gaps in access to quality teachers.

In too many places, the movement toward educator evaluation seems to be predicated on the belief that if we just identify our strongest teachers, low-performing schools that

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serve large numbers of poor children and children of color will magically get more of them. Unfortunately, our nation's history suggests exactly the opposite.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF INATTENTION TO EQUITY

All students pay a high price when they are subjected to ineffective teaching. But the highest price is paid by those who can least afford it: the students who start out behind. Yet instead of rushing our best teachers to these students, so that we can quickly catch them up with their peers, we do exactly the opposite: We saddle them with disproportionate numbers of our weakest teachers.

In Los Angeles, for example, a low-income student is more than twice as likely to have a bottom-performing, English-language arts (ELA) teacher as is a higher income peer. Latino and African-American students in L.A. are two to three times more likely to have bottom-quartile teachers in math and ELA, respectively, than their white and Asian peers.[3] Although all schools tend to have teachers that range in effectiveness, data from North Carolina and Florida indicate that the least effective teachers in high-poverty schools are much less effective than their counterparts in lower poverty schools.[4]

In failing to fix these inequities, policymakers undercut the impact of efforts to close long-standing achievement gaps. Pure and simple, if schools have a teacher-quality gap, they're going to have gaps in student achievement. Indeed, the L.A. data make that clear: Students who start at the below-basic level and have three bottom-quartile teachers in a row remain below basic, while similar students who have three top-quartile teachers in a row end up performing well above the proficient level. Figuring out who those top teachers are is crucial, but without attention to school conditions that draw and hold on to good teachers, the identification of these teachers is meaningless to struggling and low-income students.

## BEYOND INDIVIDUAL TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Most policy today focuses on individual teachers. Yet we know that teachers do not work in a vacuum. They teach within the context of a school, under the leadership of principals, and alongside colleagues. These and other working conditions have an enormous impact on how teachers feel about their job and where they choose to teach. Ultimately, efforts to improve the quality of individual teachers will do little to boost student achievement, especially for low-income students and students of color, if states and districts don't also pay attention to the environments in which teachers work.

To be clear, subpar conditions for teaching and learning must not excuse subpar teaching. However, these conditions can make it difficult for educators to grow and learn. Great teachers should not have to be great in spite of lousy school environments. Good school environments should actually help even our best teachers to improve.

There are timely and important reasons why states and districts should make conditions in high-poverty schools a top priority. The U.S. Department of Education recently began granting waivers to states seeking release from the requirements of No Child Left Behind. A number of the waiver states are developing school accountability systems that focus on and demand action in the lowest performing schools, which serve disproportionate numbers of low-income students and student of color. A key strategy to improve the poor performance of schools is to boost the quality of instruction in the building, which requires attention to the conditions for teaching and learning.

In addition, 46 states and the District of Columbia have committed to implementing the Common Core State Standards in ELA and mathematics, beginning in 2013-14. In most states, these standards will demand a new level of rigor, both for students and for teachers. States and districts can't expect teachers to figure out how to effectively teach these new standards in isolation. This is especially true in high-poverty schools, where capacity is often a challenge. Only through attention to leadership quality, to teacher and leader training and development, and to building collaborative school climates will districts and states ensure the success of the standards.

Some districts around the country, such as Ascension and Fresno, have recognized the power of school culture in attracting, developing, and keeping strong teachers in high-need schools. In the pages that follow, we identify school characteristics that are especially important to teachers and then highlight several districts where unique approaches to creating favorable conditions at their hardest-to-staff schools are attracting, developing, and retaining effective teachers.

## CONDITIONS THAT MATTER TO TEACHERS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

In trying to strengthen the teacher force in their highest need schools, the districts profiled in this report had to ask: What

makes teachers satisfied with their work, and why do they choose to stay or leave?

Certainly, leaders of these districts knew that teachers generally leave high-poverty schools at higher rates than their colleagues in lower poverty schools and that whether they stay or leave, teachers in high-poverty schools are less satisfied in their positions.[5] Research has shown as much for some time.

But were the teachers who were leaving rejecting the kids or the dysfunctional context of the schools?

For years, there's been a widespread assumption that it's the kids. Many have said, "Of course it's harder to teach *those* kids, with the challenges that they bring from their outside lives into the classroom." Undoubtedly, teaching in a high-poverty environment presents a host of challenges distinct from those faced by teachers in more affluent settings. Teacher survey data from the U.S. Department of Education's 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a nationally representative survey of teachers, show that teachers in high-poverty schools rate poverty and other conditions associated with it (such as readiness to learn, parental involvement, and student health) as more problematic in their schools.[6]

However, further analysis of data from that same national survey finds that teacher satisfaction is more influenced by the culture of the school than by the demographics of the students in the school.[7] This is consistent with other research. For example, a large quantitative study done in Massachusetts found that school working conditions explained away the relationship between teacher attrition and student demographic characteristics. Teachers with positive working environments were more satisfied and planned to stay longer. Further, their students made more academic progress than similar students in schools with poor working conditions.[8]

These findings raise a fundamental question: Which conditions create schools that draw and keep good teachers?

Our research with the SASS data and other analyses of state and local data indicate that there are many working conditions that matter to teachers' satisfaction and retention. However, two conditions consistently emerge in research as especially important to teachers: **school leadership** and **staff cohesion.**

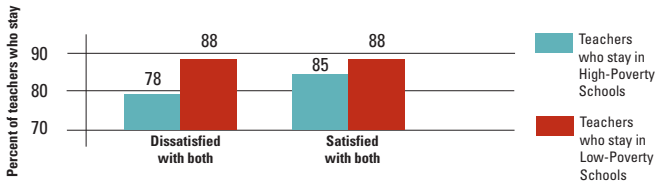
More than any other school factor, satisfaction with school leadership impacts teachers' overall satisfaction with teaching, as well as decisions about whether to stay or leave the profession.[9] School leaders have the power to develop a unifying commitment to student learning, set clear expectations for student achievement, and create a culture of trust and respect, all of which are important to establishing a positive school culture. Studies of high-performing, high-poverty schools that serve large concentrations of students of color show that school leaders who create a shared mission, focus on student achievement, and uphold a commitment to teacher learning can grow, attract, and retain effective teachers.[10]

School leaders who demonstrate instructional leadership and build a school culture that values professional growth seem especially important to teachers. A recent survey of nearly 5,000 teachers found that in schools defined as having a positive culture, 70 percent of teachers feel satisfied with the amount of feedback they receive compared with just 35 percent in schools with poor school culture. Additionally, teachers at schools with strong cultures view their professional development opportunities as more valuable than those teachers in schools with weak school cultures.[11] Teachers want to know that their school leaders are invested in their development, willing to take the time to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and able to offer them resources that will truly foster their professional growth.

In addition to leadership, staff cohesion — built on solving problems collaboratively and sharing responsibility and accountability with colleagues — also matters to teachers.[12] Similar to most professionals, teachers want to engage with their colleagues, to share successes and challenges, and to feel supported and motivated by a larger school community.

Satisfaction with leadership and staff cohesion seems especially meaningful to teachers in high-poverty schools. An analysis of the SASS data finds that even when teachers in low-poverty schools are unhappy with both leadership and staff cohesion, they are just as likely to stay as those who are happy. However, teachers in high-poverty schools who are dissatisfied with both of these conditions are less likely to stay than those who are satisfied.[13] Improved conditions in high-poverty schools shouldn't translate into universal retention — not all teachers will be successful in these settings. But addressing these elements is especially important for high-poverty schools as part of their efforts to retain their strongest teachers.

**Leadership and staff cohesion matter more to teachers who stay in high-poverty schools that to those who stay in low-poverty schools.**




Source: Analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey.

## COMPENSATION ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Salary and compensation are often listed among the factors believed to help boost the quality of teachers in high-poverty schools. Certainly compensation matters, but it has never risen to the top of the list for teacher satisfaction. For example, a recent study found that working conditions were more important to teachers than salary.[14]

A new strategy some districts are using builds on the understanding that compensation plays a role in teacher decisions and offers bonuses as a way to draw teachers to high-poverty and hard-to-staff schools. The Talent Transfer Initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Education,

offered $20,000 bonuses to effective teachers in 10 districts for moving to low-achieving schools within their district.

This program succeeded in filling vacancies in these hard-to-staff schools. However, only 6 percent of eligible teachers actually transferred, despite the promise of substantial additional compensation.[15] This suggests that trying to make up for subpar conditions for teaching and learning through bonuses will not, by itself, yield the strong teaching corps required in our high-need schools — something also illustrated in the experiences of the districts spotlighted in this report.

## POOR WORKING ENVIRONMENTS AFFECT STUDENTS, TOO

Addressing and improving the teaching and learning environments in all schools, but particularly in high-poverty schools, isn't just about creating places where teachers want to work. When teachers have positive perceptions about their school environments, it translates to real student outcomes.

Research suggests that schools where teachers are more satisfied with working conditions also have higher student achievement, even when controlling for school demographics.[16] What's more, schools with strong school cultures, based on teacher perceptions, have higher student proficiency rates than those with the weakest cultures — a difference of 23 points in math and 14 points in reading, according to one study.[17] Further, the same study finds that schools with the weakest school cultures can expect to lose twice as many of their effective teachers as those with the strongest cultures.

Thus, the school environment that shapes teacher experiences also plays a large role in determining which students benefit from — or get stuck with — which teachers. Given that high-poverty schools tend to have poorer school cultures, failure to improve conditions for teachers has real and often dramatic consequences for the students in these schools.

## Boost Teaching Quality by Improving Poor Working Environments

A small but growing number of districts around the country have recognized the power that lies in improving the conditions for teaching and learning that shape school culture.

Ultimately, the main unit of change is the school, but districts also play an important role. They can help schools to prioritize this work and can staff schools with top-notch leaders who will build a strong school culture.

In the following pages, we highlight some promising practices that districts around the country are undertaking to improve working environments in some of their most challenging schools.

Several of these districts focus on ensuring that top teaching talent is assigned to their lowest performing schools, rather than in their highest poverty schools. Focusing exclusively on low-performing schools without also addressing gaps in access to good teachers by poverty and race is insufficient. However, as low-performing schools, particularly in the spotlighted districts, tend to serve large numbers of low-income students and students of color, targeting these schools is one strategy for improving teacher quality for the highest need students.

PROMISING PRACTICES

In the first set of case studies, "Promising Practices," we highlight three districts that have been engaged in this work for several years and that, over time, have seen some positive changes in student achievement. It is important to note that all the districts we've included were simultaneously undertaking other reforms while improving the work environment at their most struggling schools. However, in all cases, district and school officials credit efforts to improve the conditions for teaching and learning with helping to raise the quality of teaching.

ONES TO WATCH

The second set of case studies, "Ones to Watch," highlight new work in two other districts. While these new efforts seem promising, much remains to be seen in terms of the longer term changes to student achievement.

All of the case studies offer compelling examples of districts that are working strategically to improve the conditions in their highest poverty and lowest performing schools. Some of these strategies may ultimately prove more effective than others, but we think all are worth examining.


# Ascension Parish Public Schools

*Supporting and Developing Teachers to Raise Student Success*

Located along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the Ascension Parish Public School System serves more than 19,000 students and is one of the fastest growing school systems in Louisiana. Roughly half of the students Ascension serves come from low-income families and one-third are students of color. While the district typically ranks among the top 10 in the state, a closer look at the data reveals that the strong academic performance of the district's more affluent schools on the east bank of the Mississippi river masks the poor results of the largely African-American, high-poverty schools in its west bank communities.

Jennifer Tuttleton, Ascension Parish's director of school improvement, says that until recently, recruiting teachers to the low-performing schools in the west bank had been difficult. Among other obstacles to student achievement in these schools, she says: "There was not a culture of time reserved for professional development." And, she adds, there was no shared commitment to using data to help students improve.

## A NEW STRATEGY FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In the 2005-06 school year, two west bank schools serving large percentages of low-income students and students of color fell into state school improvement status. Lowery Intermediate School and Donaldsonville High School posted School Performance Scores of 55 and 58 on a scale of 0-200. The cut-off score was 60.

In an effort to lift the two schools out of school improvement status and close the achievement gap between high-poverty and low-poverty schools in the district, Ascension decided to focus on improving the quality of teaching in these schools. To this end, district leaders chose to implement TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement.

The TAP system focuses on four interrelated elements to improve teachers' instruction:

1. Ongoing applied professional learning
2. Instructionally focused accountability
3. Opportunities for career advancement through multiple career paths
4. Performance-based compensation

TAP emphasizes learning opportunities that are relevant, continuous, and led by expert instructors. To inform and drive the system's professional development efforts, TAP employs a thorough instructional accountability system that includes regular and rigorous performance evaluations. The results are then used to inform professional development planning, career advancement, and compensation. The system also requires educators to participate in regular and meaningful collaboration and self-reflection within the structure of the school day.

Kim Melancon, associate principal at Donaldsonville High, says the combination of these complementary elements was critical to improving the teaching and learning

conditions at her school. "I don't think we could have done this without all four components of TAP together."

Ascension chose the TAP model for these two struggling schools because both were wrestling with environments in which teachers were not working collaboratively to take responsibility for improving student achievement. "At these two schools, the culture had to be challenged," Tuttleton explains, noting that the biggest hurdle was getting teachers to examine their pedagogy and to accept that their students' failures were *their* failures as well.

District officials say they believe TAP forced teachers to explore their commitment to new learning and helped to create a collaborative environment. Once teachers saw that the more rigorous performance evaluations were employed, first and foremost, to improve practice, rather than as a punitive tool, most embraced the new culture of shared learning and responsibility that TAP brought to their schools.

"Even the best teacher in the world can be better," says Shaneka Burnett, a teacher at Lowery Intermediate School. She credits TAP with helping teachers to embrace this perspective. "We all understand where we want students to go, how to use the [TAP] rubric to evaluate our practice, and what [the results] mean, so we are able to collaborate and share ideas."

## IMPROVED TEACHER SATISFACTION AND RETENTION

Although Ascension did not make any staffing changes related to TAP's implementation at first, it later replaced a small number of administrators and faculty who did not demonstrate openness to changing the school's teaching and learning conditions. Many teachers remained in the schools and thrived under TAP. "When teachers see successes in their classrooms [as a result of new practices], that really helps [change their mindset]," Melancon says.

Getting teachers to come to these two schools on the west bank is no longer a problem at Ascension. "We have turned a corner where when you ask teachers to come to these schools, they say it is an honor," Tuttleton says. Her impression is that many teachers are now "waiting for the call."

Monica Hills, principal at Lowery Intermediate School says that what makes these schools so appealing is the opportunity to work in an environment deliberately focused on supporting teachers' instruction through reflection, feedback, and mentoring; providing teachers with non-administrative career growth opportunities; and improving achievement for *all* students.

Ascension's experience mirrors what Louisiana found in an independent review of the TAP program in its schools: "Teachers appear to be very positive about the levels of collegiality, opportunities for professional development, and the accountability associated with TAP."[i]

## TEACHER EFFICACY AS A PATH TO STUDENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

For Ascension, TAP is a strategic attempt to improve the conditions for teaching and learning in its highest poverty, lowest performing schools.

"We want to build teacher efficacy to build school efficacy," Tuttleton notes. She and other district leaders are convinced that helping teachers to become more successful and to feel more supported will help them become more effective for their students.

Since TAP's implementation, both Lowery Middle School and Donaldsonville High have seen steady improvement on their School Performance Scores. On another statewide measure, Lowery received a "value-added" student achievement score of 4, signifying above-average individual student growth compared with similar schools in the state.[ii] Neither school is on the state's "academically unacceptable" list any longer, although both still have significant work to do to reach Louisiana's new School Performance Score goal of 120.

Burnett attributes her school's improvement to two critical factors: 1) Teachers are now held accountable for what is happening in their classrooms, and 2) all students are held to high expectations.

While Ascension continues to focus on the initial two TAP schools, the district has expanded the initiative into six additional schools. "The second two schools did not take much convincing because they had seen the positive student achievement gains from the first two [TAP] schools," Tuttleton says. "The next four schools joining our TAP team *asked* for the system to be implemented on their campuses." ◆

i. "Louisiana Plan for Highly Qualified Teachers," p. 7. March 2010. http://www.teachlouisiana.net/pdf/LAPlanforHQTeachers.pdf

ii. http://www.tapsystem.org/newsroom/newsroom.taf?page=pressreleases&_function=detail&id=117

# Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

*Staffing Strategically to Boost Performance*

PROMISING PRACTICES

When Peter Gorman arrived as superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), he was troubled by the uneven performance he witnessed amongst district schools. While the district was improving on many fronts, one group of low-performing schools serving large numbers of low-income students seemed to be trapped in a cycle of failure.

The superintendent and his cabinet were convinced that the key to improving these schools was staffing them with the district's most talented teachers. But they knew from experience that even if they successfully persuaded strong teachers to teach in these schools, they wouldn't stick around without good school leadership and the sense that their work was supported and prioritized by the school district.

So beginning in 2008, Charlotte-Mecklenburg launched the Strategic Staffing Initiative, an effort to bring strong leaders and, in turn, strong teachers to the schools that need them most. The initiative started in seven of the district's most struggling elementary and middle schools, but the district has added one cohort of schools in each successive year.

The district began staffing these schools by recruiting CMS principals who had strong track records of improving student achievement: those who led schools where learning gains increased by more than a year's worth of instruction in the course of a single year. To establish just how important these schools and the initiative were to CMS, district leaders promised the principals priority access to district resources and personnel, including potential new staff from the district hiring pool.

The district also made an explicit effort to allow principals at the Strategic Staffing schools to staff their schools with teams that could accomplish the work set out for them. Each principal assembled a team that included an assistant principal, a behavior management technician, academic facilitators, and up to five teachers. Each team came to the school with the new principal. The principals also were given the latitude to transfer out up to five low-performing teachers, based on data and information that included the teachers' impact on student growth.

Finally, district leaders offered the principals autonomy over almost all school-level decisions. Recognizing that change doesn't happen overnight, school leaders were offered this autonomy for up to three years, with a promise that it would continue if student achievement results showed it was warranted.

The Strategic Staffing principals were offered a 10 percent salary increase for taking on the new challenge. Teachers who agreed to move to the Strategic Staffing schools also were offered increased compensation, $10,000 in the first year and $5,000 for the next two years. While these financial incentives were appreciated, district leaders are quick to note that the teachers and principals who came to, and have stayed in, the Strategic Staffing schools were motivated primarily by the opportunity to join exceptional teams, and the additional freedoms and flexibility afforded to these schools.

> All schools in the first two [Strategic Staffing] cohorts made gains in reading and math, and in some cases, those gains were dramatic, with schools increasing the percentage of proficient students by 20 to 30 percent over the course of two years.

"Teachers saw that I was serious about supporting them with firm structures and was committed to real collaboration," says Suzanne Gimenez, principal of CMS's Devonshire Elementary School. Once the results began to manifest, she adds, her teachers were even more motivated to stick around. "If they truly wanted to be a teacher, this became an ideal place to teach."

Compared with other district schools, the Strategic Staffing model afforded its schools a lot of flexibility. Yet as the initiative evolved, CMS leadership found that principals were not always maximizing that flexibility. So they launched the Innovation Institute for Strategic Staffing

school principals. The institute invited these principals to answer two questions: "What would your dream school look like?" and "What is keeping you from creating it?" With district support, principals were then allowed to invest time and resources into modifying structures and removing any barriers to achieving their dream school.

"What the Innovation Institute helped me realize is that there are so many ways to be innovative within the parameters of what I control [as the building leader]," Gimenez says. "My school is like a box, and despite what might happen outside of that box, what goes on inside is up to me." Gimenez has used the flexibility Strategic Staffing affords her to, among other things, develop new staff positions that support effective instruction while simultaneously creating professional learning and growth opportunities for top teachers.

> "One of the biggest changes I've seen is in the attitudes of the students. … They don't just come to school because they have to. They come to school inquisitive and anxious to learn."
>
> *—Ta-Rai Richardson, teacher, Devonshire Elementary*

## CHANGING CONDITIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Four years after Charlotte-Mecklenburg's launch of the Strategic Staffing Initiative, the results are promising.

Four of the seven principals from the initial cohort are still leading their schools (two of the seven retired from the district, and one received a promotion within the district). The district also has seen improved retention of strong teachers. This is attributable, in part, to the district's success at turning its traditional status hierarchy upside-down and making the highest need schools some of the most coveted places to work.

Some teachers are even advertising where they work, listing their status as a CMS "Strategic Staffing Teacher" in their email signatures alongside other professional credentials. For many in the district, being tapped to work at a Strategic Staffing school is a measure of their quality. The initiative is seen as one that brings great leaders and teachers to struggling schools and helps keep them there as they work to help students succeed.

Each year, CMS surveys teachers on a variety of working conditions factors. This survey is a key strategy the district uses to measure teacher satisfaction at different schools and the changes in teacher perceptions of their work environment over time. Findings from the survey suggest that the district's investment in leadership to improve conditions for teachers is working. On the most recent survey, teachers at 13 out of 14 Strategic Staffing schools were more satisfied with their school leader's effectiveness and support than were teachers at a set of comparison schools in the district.[i]

In the years since the Strategic Staffing Initiative launched, these schools have also seen gains in student achievement. All schools in the first two cohorts made gains in reading and math, and in some cases, those gains were dramatic, with schools increasing the percentage of proficient students by 20 to 30 percent over the course of two years.[ii] Additionally, 70 percent of the schools had student growth that outpaced comparison schools in the 2009-10 school year.[iii]

Teacher Ta-Rai Richardson, who is in her 10th year teaching at Devonshire Elementary, noted another important change since the start of the initiative. "One of the biggest changes I've seen is in the attitudes of the students. They used to come to school not knowing what was going to happen [from] day to day. Now they have consistency, they see how excited teachers are to be there … and they are excited, too. They don't just come to school because they have to. They come to school inquisitive and anxious to learn."◆

i. Jason Schoeneberger and Cheryl Pulliam "Evaluation of the Strategic Staffing Initiative," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools: Center for Research and Evaluation and Office of Accountability, 2011.

ii. Ibid.

iii. Ibid.


# Fresno Unified School District

*Developing Leaders to Develop Teachers*

When Superintendent Michael Hanson joined Fresno Unified School District student achievement was lagging. FUSD is California's fourth-largest school district, serving more than 73,000 students, but on the previous year's annual state assessment, only 30 percent of students met proficiency levels in math and only 26 percent were proficient in English Language Arts. To raise these achievement levels, Hanson knew he needed to develop teachers' knowledge and skills — and he believed that developing principals[i] into effective instructional leaders was key.

## THE SKILLFUL LEADER PROJECT

In 2006, Hanson introduced the Skillful Leader Project (SLP), a leadership development model designed to help principals provide the feedback and support teachers need to improve their practice. Hanson and other FUSD leaders firmly believed that with the right training and support, many of their current principals could develop into the kinds of leaders needed to dramatically increase student achievement across the district.

In the initial stages of the SLP initiative, FUSD found that existing teacher evaluation practices were not reliable across administrators: teachers with similar performance could be judged as poor performers in one school but top performers in another, and feedback was inconsistent and not constructive. "Our leaders were not equipped to support teachers," said Julie Severns, FUSD administrator of leadership development." And if we are going to be holding [teachers] accountable, we have to support them."

As a result of this discovery, district leaders used SLP as an opportunity to help principals develop the skills needed to recognize effective teaching practices and provide teachers with concrete feedback that would guide their professional growth. To do so, administrators were organized into cohorts to create smaller professional learning communities. These cohorts included principals as well as the district administrators who directly supervised them, to ensure that all administrators had a common language and expectations of practice. Five times a year, these learning communities convene to engage in training on how to support and develop staff. In these sessions, principals analyze videos of teacher

instruction and collaboration, role play the delivery of constructive, evidence-based feedback; and practice using data to diagnose gaps in instruction. Julie Severns says these opportunities for principals to come together "have done more to create consistency of practice and expectations in our system than anything else we have introduced." Between trainings, principals continue to develop these skills at principal meetings and through one-on-one support at their school sites.

Under SLP, a principal's primary role is as a collaborator with teachers – supporting them as they work to improve their instruction and increase student achievement.

Principals then began to conduct frequent, informal classroom visits to observe and engage with teachers in order to improve instruction. Under SLP, a principal's primary role is as a collaborator with teachers — supporting them as they work to improve their instruction and increase student achievement. In order to do this effectively, principals must maintain a pulse on teachers' instruction, making regular observations and conversations about practice imperative.

Principals also focused on building professional learning communities among teachers so that they, too, could become comfortable analyzing data to improve their practice. But Edward Gomes, principal of Yosemite Middle School, believes that FUSD's focus on *first* developing principals' capacity to identify and support effective classroom practice was key to teachers embracing these changes. He also says, in a time of myriad reforms, this decision gave these efforts more credibility with teachers, who might otherwise have questioned their staying power.

To ensure a continued pipeline of skilled principals, the district also implemented a leadership preparation program in partnership with California State University–Fresno. The program is based on standards similar to the SLP and is taught, primarily, by Fresno school leaders.

## A CHANGED CULTURE

One payoff of this approach was the emergence of networks of school leaders who could support each other in learning and applying the state's teaching standards. Tiffany Hill, principal of Balderas Elementary, says professional support is critical: "Working with other principals in a cohort allowed us to get great ideas from each other that we could take back to our [schools]. It also helped us calibrate [our observations and feedback] across our individual school sites."

Initially, the effort targeted developing administrators, but over time it has evolved into a district-wide and coherent focus on improving instruction through clear feedback and consistent support. Professional development for teachers now aligns with the improvement areas their leaders have been trained to identify. Teachers at Balderas Elementary told Principal Hill, "We've never gotten this kind of feedback before. This is really clear to me."

In addition, a more effective formal evaluation rubric has enabled FUSD principals to better distinguish between teachers of varying effectiveness. By supporting teachers to develop their practice, and dismissing those who consistently fail to meet expectations, the district is improving the performance of its teachers overall. And teachers appear to be responding positively. Since implementation of the SLP, teacher retention at FSUD has increased and nearly all of the open teaching positions are filled by June of the prior school year. District leaders credit the SLP initiative with improving their succession planning as well. Vice principals are engaging in the same training as principals and hence can transition into the role of principal with greater ease. District leaders also report that aspiring principals tell them that the district's commitment to developing successful leaders plays a role in their decision to pursue these positions in FUSD schools.

Principal Hill adds that the district's focus on supporting principals to act as strong instructional leaders of teachers has improved school culture and focused instruction on student outcomes. "The environment has changed in the sense that teachers better understand the importance of their own learning. Teachers understand that we are looking for certain things in the classroom … because of the impact on the child," she says.

Since the SLP's implementation, proficiency rates among FUSD students for English Language Arts and mathematics appear to have increased consistently. While the district still has a long way to go before all of its students are on track to succeed, it has made tremendous strides on the key first step — getting, developing, and keeping the right people in its schools.◆

i. FUSD's SLP initiative included principals, vice principals, and other site administrators. Therefore, in this case study, the term "principal" refers to all FUSD school site administrators.

# Boston Public Schools

*Creating Shared Leadership for Strong Teachers*

A few years ago, Massachusetts designated 12 of Boston's 134 public schools as "Level 4" institutions, meaning student achievement in the schools was persistently and significantly low. These 12 schools serve populations in which poverty is the norm and children of color form the majority. Many of the schools struggled with attracting and retaining teachers; at one school, for instance, nearly 50 percent of the staff turned over in a single year. So it's not surprising that when asked by a Boston teacher "What keeps you up at night?" Superintendent Carol Johnson's response was staffing the highest needs schools in the district with effective teachers.

## A CULTURE OF SHARED AUTHORITY AND COLLABORATION

To address Johnson's concern, Boston Public Schools (BPS) partnered with Teach Plus, an organization that works to improve urban students' access to effective, experienced teachers. The partnership's goal was to attract and retain strong teachers in BPS' low-performing schools by providing them opportunities for shared decision making and career growth through formal teacher-leadership roles.

"Many teachers want to work in a high-needs school, but they want to know they won't be alone," says Meghan O'Keefe, national director of the Turnaround Teacher Teams Initiative ("T3") at Teach Plus. "They want to work with collaborative, like-minded colleagues, and work with a principal who values shared leadership."

In 2010, Teach Plus developed the T3 model in an effort to produce just such an environment, one that encourages and supports collaborative decision making and teacher leadership. T3 uses a rigorous selection process to identify teachers who are committed to working in low-performing schools and who have demonstrated competence in collaboration and facilitating teams, as well as prior success raising student achievement in challenging environments. Teach Plus then trains these teachers to use student data to drive instructional improvement and to skillfully facilitate teams so they can take on teacher-leader roles within their schools, creating a model of shared leadership. The T3 model requires at least 25

percent of a school's teaching staff to be T3 teachers, to create a critical mass of teacher leaders who can support one another's efforts. In addition, a T3 coach is placed in each school to provide ongoing professional development and support.

BPS, the first district to implement the T3 program, initially identified three schools to adopt the model: Orchard Gardens (K-8), Blackstone Elementary, and Trotter Elementary.

While the program's emphasis is on empowering teachers as leaders, principal buy-in is essential. Principals must clearly define where they have authority and where teachers should exercise leadership and autonomy. "The principals' willingness to share leadership is key [to the success of T3," says Lesley Ryan Miller, director of teacher development and advancement at Boston Public Schools. "Teachers want to be sure they're not leaders in name only."


"Many teachers want to work in a high-needs school, but they want to know they won't be alone."

*— Meghan O'Keefe, national director, T3, Teach Plus*

As the T3 Initiative was being prepared for implementation in Boston, a landmark education law passed in Massachusetts that made it easier for BPS to transfer teachers out of school buildings. While this removed many restrictions on who BPS could employ in the T3 cohort, Teach Plus still chose to hire one-third of each school's T3 cohort from among teachers already employed by each school. "We systematically try to ensure that a portion of all the teachers come from within the school," O'Keefe explains. "We know there are great teachers in every low-performing school who can be effective in the model." The remaining two-thirds of teachers in the initial three schools came equally from other schools within the district and schools outside of the district.

The goal of the T3 shared leadership model is to improve student outcomes by enhancing the teaching and learning environment within the school. To achieve this goal, daily activities in T3 schools are coordinated through collective planning efforts rather than top-down directives. Every week, T3 teachers in BPS facilitate the common planning time with their colleagues, thus creating a space for collaborative, data-driven instructional planning. T3 teachers also work closely with their school leadership on instruction and data usage.

"T3 provides a liaison between the administrative staff and the teaching staff to make sure all voices are heard," says Megan Struckel, a T3 teacher at Orchard Gardens, about the role these teachers play at her school.

## WHO BENEFITS FROM IMPROVED TEACHING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS?

"As a teacher who was here before [T3 was implemented], it's remarkable to see the difference," Struckel says. "It's a collaboration between the teachers and the administrators, rather than the two parts working separately. It's the way education should be, because we're all working toward the same thing."

Struckel also attributes a change in her school's climate to the increase in teacher leadership and collaboration: "We finally have a calm and cohesive environment. We finally have a community at the school — a community among the students and the staff and the families." Struckel adds that perhaps the most important benefit of this culture shift is the change she's seen in her students: "They are happier to be in school, and they are ready to work."

While improvements in school culture and teacher satisfaction are apparent in the T3 schools, with only one year of data, it is unclear whether the initiative will have an ongoing influence on student progress. But Struckel is excited about the possibilities the recent improvements portend and is confident that the long-term goal of 90 percent proficiency in all grade levels in her school is realistic. "We have the team in place to make it happen." ◆

# Sacramento City Unified School District

*Prioritizing Effective School Leaders*

The Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) serves more than 44,000 racially and ethnically diverse students (36 percent Hispanic, 19 percent Asian, 19 percent white, and 18 percent African American) in California's capital city. Overall, 70 percent of SCUSD's students come from low-income families, but this varies widely from school to school. At some schools, only 1 in 10 students is low income; but at others, all students are low income. It is in these high-poverty schools that SCUSD had historically struggled most to raise student achievement.

In early 2010, one of the district's schools, Oak Ridge Elementary, received a harsh wake-up call: The school was performing in the bottom 5 percent of all schools in California. In response, Superintendent Jonathan Raymond directed his academic team to review data and develop a plan for Oak Ridge and for several additional low-performing schools. The team identified six schools that ranked among the lowest 20 percent in the state on student achievement and designated them as "Priority Schools." The team then outlined the first step in their plan for these schools: Persuade some of the district's best school leaders to take on the challenge of turning them around.

District leaders identified six principals who had been successful in narrowing achievement gaps and in improving overall academic performance. Superintendent Raymond asked each of these principals to lead a Priority School, explaining that in this role, they would report directly to the chief officer of the new office of accountability and would receive priority for all central office services and supports. As part of their commitment, Raymond asked the principals to remain at the Priority School for at least three years. When it was time to decide, each principal accepted Raymond's challenge.

## PRIORITY SCHOOLS IN PRACTICE

SCUSD gave these Priority School principals more autonomy than was granted to other principals, including the opportunity to build their own leadership teams and select teachers to fill vacancies (as opposed to having staff assigned to their schools by the district). To retain continuity and cohesion among the staff hired by Priority School principals, the district also successfully fought to prevent teacher layoffs in these schools. By making the case that these teachers were trained specifically to work in Priority Schools, SCUSD was able to circumvent a state law that requires schools to base teacher layoffs solely on seniority.

> "Camaraderie and professional improvement drive teachers to want to come to a school."
>
> *— Mary Shelton, SCUSD's chief accountability officer*

The district's strategy has been to get (and keep) the right people in the building and then, to the extent possible, get out of their way. While the leaders of Priority Schools share ideas, Oak Ridge principal Doug Huscher explained that each has taken a different approach to addressing their schools' and communities' radically different needs. "We [Priority School principals] were given latitude … to develop an action plan to do what we needed to do. We got permission to take into account the kids', the staff's, and the community's needs. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have gotten the same [positive] results."

Although Priority School leaders have been given a great deal of autonomy, there are common strategies being employed in all of the district's schools. For example, the district has invested resources in training principals and

assistant principals in collaborative leadership skills so they can effectively support the work of their school teams.

In addition, each Priority School was required to form a data inquiry team, which the district trained to use data effectively and consistently to advance teaching and learning. Priority School leaders allocated time for these teams to dig into student data and identify areas where instruction needed to improve. Based on this analysis, all Priority Schools instituted instructional coaches to support teachers' practice and to provide professional learning opportunities to address any areas identified as needing improvement. By making it clear that coaches were there to improve teachers' instruction, rather than to evaluate them, the Priority Schools' leaders helped to facilitate trust between teachers and their coaches, which empowered teachers to grow.

"I feel supported on a professional level," says Katherine "Kass" Craig, a first-grade teacher at Oak Ridge Elementary. During her coaching discussions, she adds, "the tone is on development, not judgment."

## THE BENEFITS OF STRONG LEADERSHIP

SCUSD's Priority School initiative is only in its second year, but the district is already beginning to see positive changes. Very few teachers left these schools after the first year, and as the 2011-12 school year approached, the district found that many teachers actually wanted to transfer to a Priority School. Word had gotten out that these were innovative, collaborative places to work where the focus is on professional improvement as a means to increase student learning.

"Camaraderie and professional improvement drive teachers to want to come to a school," says Mary Shelton, SCUSD's chief accountability officer. "It's a badge of honor to work in the Priority Schools – the teachers feel pride in their profession."

But she also notes that having "a strong instructional leader was the most important factor [in the schools' turnaround]. They created a different atmosphere with higher expectations for students and teachers."

Craig agrees that the administration at her school has struck the right balance of support and high expectations, of structure and instructional freedom, that empowers her and other teachers to make the right choices for their students.

"We got permission to take into account the kids', the staff's, and the community's needs. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have gotten the same [positive] results."

*— Doug Huscher, principal, Oak Ridge Elementary*

Principal Huscher attributes an initial uptick in student achievement at his school to the shift to a more student-centered culture and strongly believes that common planning time, centered on data and reflection about student work, helped to establish that culture.

It is still too soon to tell whether SCUSD's focus on bringing strong leaders to the Priority Schools and their use of data to drive decisions about instructional practice and resource allocation will lead to ongoing improvements in student achievement. But they are approaches that we will continue to watch closely so that other schools and districts may learn from them. ◆

## COMMON THEMES

Every district is different and, as is seen in the case studies, a district's approach to improving school environments is driven by a unique combination of information and opportunities. However, looking across the five districts, some clear themes emerge. Not surprisingly, these factors align closely with what research shows matters most toward building a positive school culture.

Strong school leadership matters, as does giving these leaders autonomy over staffing and other key decisions. District and school leaders must intentionally focus on building a collaborative environment; developing reflective, data-driven practice; and securing from everyone on campus — teachers and leaders — an unwavering commitment to professional growth and improving instruction. In addition, flipping the traditional status hierarchy by deliberately making the highest poverty and lowest performing schools the most coveted places to work is effective in attracting and keeping strong teachers.

What also is clear, when looking at districts engaged in this work, is that simply improving conditions at high-poverty schools doesn't guarantee top-notch teacher quality. Improved conditions may make it more attractive for all teachers, strong or struggling, to stay put. To ensure that high-poverty schools are differentially retaining their top teachers (and moving out their worst), districts must improve conditions for teaching and learning, *and* put in place systems that assess and address teacher performance. This is the approach taken, in one way or another, by our spotlighted districts.

## ACTIONS FOR DISTRICTS AND STATES

There is no "silver bullet" strategy that can single-handedly ensure equitable access to effective teachers for low-income students. However, in every context, there is a role for both districts and states, and there are steps they can take to promote teaching environments that attract, sustain, and retain quality teachers in high-need schools.

States can help districts work strategically. While the difficult task of improving teaching environments primarily rests with districts, states must create a policy environment that removes barriers that undermine this goal. Examples of detrimental policies include requiring districts to fill vacancies based solely on seniority, or preventing districts from using innovative strategies to recruit top teachers to high-poverty schools. In addition, states must require districts to implement teacher and school leader evaluation systems that assess accurately and meaningfully differentiate educator effectiveness based significantly on student learning outcomes. Such systems are critical to helping districts identify which teachers they want to attract and keep at their highest poverty schools and which leaders will help accomplish this goal.

There are two other important roles for states in this work. First, they should monitor data on the equitable access to effective teachers between and within districts, requiring action wherever inequities exist. Second, states should identify districts and schools that are using innovative strategies to improve school environments and hold them up as examples of best practices.

Districts can pursue this difficult and important work in various ways. First and foremost, districts must use available data to understand the distribution of their teachers and make equitable access to top teachers an absolute priority. They must then assume a responsibility for making all their schools places where good teachers want to work. Specifically, districts should take the following steps:

- Recruit talented school leaders to their highest need schools, and get them to stay. In addition to the districts spotlighted earlier, the District of Columbia Public Schools has taken a rigorous approach to principal recruitment. The district scours student achievement data from school districts around the country (especially those close to D.C.) and then actively recruits principals of top-performing schools.
- Put in place teacher and school-leader evaluation systems that differentiate educator effectiveness in order to identify top-performing teachers and leaders. Using these systems in conjunction with data on working conditions and attrition, districts can study which teachers are more and less satisfied, as well as which ones are staying and leaving — and why.
- Provide teachers in the highest need schools with meaningful professional growth and career ladders as well as opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, as Ascension Parish and Boston Public Schools have done.
- Avoid isolating their most effective teachers and, instead, build teams of highly effective teachers in the district's most challenging schools, as both Boston Public Schools and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools have done.
- Concentrate not just on recruiting new school leaders and teachers to high-need schools, but on developing the skills and instructional abilities of existing employees, as have Fresno and Ascension Parish.
- Implement a tool to measure teacher perceptions of their teaching environment, such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' working conditions survey, and then use data from the tool to identify target schools and determine primary issues that need to be addressed. For example, Pittsburgh Public Schools works with the New Teacher Center to implement a district-wide survey on working conditions. The district requires all schools to use the data to identify a plan of action and pays special attention to the plans of schools with the poorest survey results to ensure that the planned interventions align with the identified areas of need.
- Once better evaluations are in place, districts should make working conditions data part of school and district-leader evaluations. North Carolina requires that survey data on working conditions are factored into school-leader evaluations, which encourages leaders to take the survey results seriously and to act on areas identified as needing improvement.

## CONCLUSION

To date, the conditions that shape teachers' daily professional lives have not been given the attention they deserve. Too often, a lack of attention to these factors in our highest poverty and lowest performing schools results in environments in which few educators would choose to stay. For too long, the high levels of staff dissatisfaction and turnover that characterize these schools have been erroneously attributed to their students. But research continues to demonstrate that students are not the problem. What matters most are the conditions for teaching and learning. Districts and states have an obligation to examine and act on these conditions. Otherwise, we will never make the progress that we must make to ensure all low-income students and students of color have access to great teachers.

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## ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels, pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

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