

A National Focus: The Recruitment, Retention, and Development of Quality Teachers in Hard-to-Staff Schools

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ABSTRACT

A shortage of quality teachers in high-risk urban schools has compelled school leaders to examine innovative methods of recruiting and retaining new teachers to hard-to-staff campuses. Principals must work aggressively to attract new teachers to their campuses by forming university partnerships for early recruitment, and initiating on the job training for new recruits as early as the previous school year. Early immersion in the school environment is key to a smooth transition. Additionally, principals must allocate the necessary fiscal resources to the task of retaining new teachers, particularly in mentorship and professional development. Hard-to-staff campuses must invest in a full-time teacher mentor as well as retired teachers to provide intense mentorship and relevant professional training. Principals must also integrate other critical components to building teacher quality and commitment, such as on-site certification preparation, graduated retention bonuses, and most importantly, weekly formal and informal interactions between the principal and new teachers. The development of new teachers in hard-to-staff schools should be of the highest priority for principals, as stability is key to long-term school improvement. The commitment to this initiative must not only be evident in a principal's agenda and campus improvement goals, but the campus expenditures as well.

Introduction

As a national sense of urgency builds towards greater student preparedness and achievement in public schools, the need for the recruitment and retention of quality teachers has reached a fevered pitch. Urban, suburban, and even rural districts are marketing themselves to prospective teachers in the hopes of luring promising educators into their districts and keeping them there. Yet as effective as teacher recruitment efforts may be in individual districts, the teacher turnover statistic remains alarmingly high. Nationwide, annual teacher attrition (turnover) costs have risen to a staggering 7 billion dollars (NEA, 2007). Even more troubling are the statistics or numbers of teachers leaving hard-to-staff schools; recent numbers indicate that an average of 50% of teachers transfer, resign, or retire from high-risk schools within the first five years of employment (NEA, 2007). It is a sobering reality that teacher turnover is greatest in the most academically challenged environments.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to make recommendations for three critical questions regarding teacher recruitment, retention, and development in hard-to-staff schools:

- 1) How do hard-to-staff schools aggressively recruit teachers for their campuses?
- 2) What steps should principals take to develop new teachers once they become a part of their faculty?
- 3) What activities should principals engage in to secure a teacher's long-term commitment to the school?

Throughout this article, the term hard-to-staff applies to schools with the following characteristics:

- Large percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students
- Difficult teaching environment
- Undesirable school location
- Low academic achievement of student population (Allen, 1999)

The term 'teachers' will refer to teachers new to any given hard-to-staff campus, regardless of their previous professional experience.

Teacher Recruitment – Before the First Days (of School)

Principals in hard-to-staff schools can take a proactive approach to staffing by implementing the following techniques:

University Partnerships

Whenever possible, principals in hard-to-staff schools should solicit the cooperation of local colleges and universities to engage in early on-campus recruitment of prospective teachers. Many college graduates remain undecided on their career path as late as graduation day; a proactive approach to recruitment may sway a potential employee.

Pre-Service Preparation

In partnering with local colleges and universities, hard-to-staff schools must make the case to the universities to expose pre-service teachers to not only the high-performing, exemplary schools, but to low socioeconomic schools as well. Too often, college graduates become disenchanted with the public school system when their first teaching assignment bears no resemblance to their student teaching experience. New teachers need a more accurate depiction of hard-to-staff schools, so they will know the challenges that await them (and be willing to face them anyway).

Job Shadowing

When a principal's recruitment efforts net potential employees, he or she should move quickly to immerse the new teacher in the life of the campus. Principals in hard-to-staff schools should create job shadowing or apprenticeship opportunities for new employees even before they sign their contracts. The sooner the employee becomes involved, the faster he or she will develop a sense of commitment to the campus.

Early Contract Signing

It is no longer reasonable to expect new teachers to grasp all the inner workings of a campus during the two weeks just prior to the start of school. Rather, new teacher contracts should begin as early as the first of June to ensure that time is allotted for pertinent trainings, job acclimation, and preparation. An earlier start would mean fewer overwhelmed teachers on the first days of school.

Celebrations

New teachers should always be given a great amount of fanfare upon their arrival to a campus. Celebrations that allow new faculty members to meet returning teachers should be initiated at the beginning of the school year and continued on a frequently recurring basis.

The First Days of School

You've got the teachers...now what will you do with them?

Invest

While most new teachers are given mentors upon their arrival, the mentor is almost always another teacher with a full course load and additional duties (since most teacher leaders tend to be involved in a plethora of activities). This arrangement leaves little time for true collaboration, and often leaves a new teacher to fend for his or herself. To depart from such scenarios, hard-to-staff schools must either allocate (or be subsidized by the school district) funds to hire a full-time teacher mentor. The teacher mentor would be primarily responsible for professional development, cognitive coaching, and coordination of mentor-mentee partnerships.

The use of retired teachers as one-to-one mentors will provide new teachers with the assistance they need and the personalization that conventional mentorship does not afford. Retired teachers would serve as mentors in the classroom, acting in a coaching and co teaching capacity. Feedback would be instant, giving the new teacher a support system for growth and development. In addition, new teachers should initially have a reduced course load for preparation and observation of best practices in peer classrooms. Principals must find monies to support this critical initiative rather than overburdening existing staff, as the importance of developing new teachers cannot be overstated.

Professional Development

The importance of relevant professional development and training opportunities to the survival of the new teacher cannot be negated. Training must be early, engaging, regularly repeated, and monitored for implementation. Critical topics for professional development in a hard-to-staff school would include:

- Understanding the culture of poverty (and its implications on teaching and learning)
- Discipline management (hard-to-staff campuses should develop a school wide model for implementation)

- Inclusion strategies for special populations (Special Education and English Language Learners)
- Curriculum Implementation
- Assessment and Data Analysis
- Examining Student Work
- Motivation and Creating Opportunities for Student Success
- Documentation
- Campus policies and procedures

Weekly Debriefing with the Campus Principal

The campus principal must take a hands-on approach to teacher mentoring. Too often, the responsibility of acclimating new teachers (to the campus) falls to the assistant principal, creating a disconnect between the principal and his newest/most impressionable employees. The principal must set aside time regularly (weekly is ideal) to debrief and interact with new teachers. Time with new teachers is far too critical for a principal to delegate, and should remain a priority on a principal's agenda for the entire academic year.

Test Preparation

On average, 34% of teachers enter the profession without the benefit of full certification (NEA, 2007). While many test preparation programs exist to prepare teachers for state examinations, many of the programs can be costly, and in some cases, only moderately successful. Hard-to-staff campuses would create a win-win situation by compensating campus based teacher leaders to tutor new teachers for certification exams; new teachers could gain relevant information at no additional cost, and schools would increase their number of certified teachers and the teacher's commitment to the school.

Beyond the First Day

How to Keep Quality Teachers

Money

Hard-to-staff campuses should establish an incentive pay structure that rewards new teachers with a *graduated* sum of money for each year that they elect to return to the campus. Retention pay would extend up to five years, as research indicates that most teachers permanently commit to the profession after four to five years.

Insist on Involvement

Teachers must sponsor or co-sponsor at least one student-centered activity or participate in at least one campus based committee their first year. Also, new teachers should be strongly encouraged to attend student-centered events, such as football games and school dances. Teacher presence at student-centered events communicates to students and parents that teachers are genuinely interested and supportive of student pursuits outside of the classroom. This in turn creates a more positive rapport between teachers and students in the classroom, as students are more likely to see the teachers as an individual who cares about their well-being.

Opportunities for Growth

Teachers should seek opportunities for relevant professional development and growth outside of the campus, and principals should allocate monies for their pursuits. As a goal, principals should encourage teachers to gain additional endorsements to increase their certification, and when possible, pay for teachers to take the classes needed to attain additional licensures.

Concluding Remarks

In a hard-to-staff school, principals must be sensitive to the need for quality, new teachers and aware of the difficulties they will face in finding them. The success of the new teacher is inextricably linked to the success of students, and if student achievement is a priority, then new teacher development must be a priority as well. Further, when prioritizing, principals must allocate time and funding to support their priorities. It is not enough to say that new teachers are important – sufficient monies must exist in the budget to support the initiative. A principal's commitment to the development of new teachers can ensure perpetuity and ultimate progress to the success of a hard-to-staff school.

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