

Analysis of Seattle Contract Proposals

8/18/2010

National Council on Teacher Quality



I. OVERVIEW

Seattle Public Schools Proposal

The proposal by the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) for its new teachers' contract is an excellent first step in improving the quality of teachers in the school district. The district's proposal targets many of the problems we identified in the October 2009 report *Human Capital in Seattle Public Schools*. Most notably it addresses two key areas that were of fundamental concern to NCTQ: fully implementing mutual consent hiring and improving teacher evaluations. Also noteworthy is the career ladder which recognizes and rewards highly effective teachers and which gives teachers increased responsibilities and prestige while in the classroom. The district's proposal makes an appropriate connection between teacher quality and student achievement goals.

Seattle Education Association Proposal

For its part, the SEA proposes four pilot programs as the primary recommendation for the 2010 contract negotiations: Community Schooling; Parent Engagement; Correlating Student Outcomes; and Teacher Evaluation and Building Leadership Councils. Although these proposals could offer value, none would have an impact on the teacher quality issues which we believe are essential for Seattle to confront: teacher assignment, evaluation and retention. There is also little emphasis given to school accountability.

In this paper we comment on the policy proposals put forward both by SPS and the SEA, also offering our assessment of each proposal's importance for this contract round. Proposals are labeled as either a “**must have**” or as “**important**”. The distinction between the two being that proposals designated as a "must have" will have the most immediate impact on teacher quality.

II. SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

A. Teacher assignment

Problems identified by NCTQ in collective bargaining agreement:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Principals do not have full authority to determine who works in their schools: Many teachers are placed without principals' approval and often on the basis of seniority rather than their fit in a school.2. Excessed teachers who cannot find a principal to voluntarily hire them are force placed into remaining vacancies.	
Solution offered by SPS: Eliminate super-seniority privileges and the forced placement of any teacher in any school. Mutual consent hiring would exist for all teachers, regardless of the reason a teacher is transferring schools or when the position is being filled.	Solution offered by SEA: The SEA does not offer any recommendations which would alter the current contract language on teacher placement.

<p>Career-ladder positions would provide additional compensation for teachers who prove their effectiveness (through multiple measures) as well as stipends for highly effective teachers who agree to teach in low-performing schools.</p> <p>Excessed teachers would be able to remain in the displaced pool for a limited amount of time while they search for a new position: 12 months for teachers on a continuing contract; 6 months for teachers on a provisional contract. After this period, they would be subject to layoffs.</p>	
<p>NCTQ assessment of proposal: Giving principals full autonomy to select who works in their buildings, as Seattle Public Schools proposes to do, is a critical first step towards school accountability.</p> <p>A mutual consent policy should reduce turnover and the concentration of inexperienced teachers at high-poverty schools. With seniority no longer factoring into teacher assignments, senior teachers would be less likely to cluster into a few favored schools. Furthermore, with financial incentives aimed at attracting highly effective teachers to the neediest schools, top teachers would be motivated to seek assignments district-wide.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MUST HAVE</p>	

<p>Problems identified by NCTQ in collective bargaining agreement: High performing teachers can be laid off if they have less seniority than another teacher, even if other teachers are underperforming.</p>	
<p>Solution offered by SPS: When layoffs are necessary, the order of layoffs will be based on a combination of seniority <i>and performance</i>.</p>	<p>Solution offered by SEA: The SEA proposal does not suggest changing the seniority based layoff policy, only that full time employees not be a consideration in the layoff.</p>
<p>NCTQ assessment of proposals: Research shows that experience (after the first few years in the classroom) is a poor predictor of teacher effectiveness. Using performance as the determinant in layoffs can actually strengthen a school's staff: the strongest teachers remain when and where they are most needed. Performance-based layoffs will also result in fewer positions cut, as fewer teachers will lose their jobs to reach the same monetary savings. New teachers cost less than senior ones, which means that, with a strictly seniority-based system, Seattle would have to lay off a larger number of teachers to fill budget holes.</p> <p>While the economic forecast remains uncertain for the coming years, layoffs can be averted largely through the combination of attrition and the new evaluation system (which should result in dismissals of a few ineffective instructors). Also, the new jobs bill requires the state to support K12 at the same level next year (also decreasing any immediate need for layoffs).</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IMPORTANT (Layoffs likely will be averted this year for reasons described above.)</p>	

B. Supporting teachers and fostering an environment in which teachers can be effective

<p>Problem identified by NCTQ in collective bargaining agreement:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not all new teachers are assigned a mentor. There is little in the way of other supports for new teachers, such as collaborative planning or team meetings. Mentors are assigned late in the year. New teachers at low performing schools do not receive any additional supports. 2. Work day for teachers does not provide sufficient time to plan and meet collaboratively with other teachers. 	
<p>Solution offered by SPS: Increase the number of mentor teachers from 6 to 11 so that approximately 165 teachers can have support during their first three years and experienced teachers can opt into this support.</p> <p>Each school will be allowed to schedule extended blocks of planning-conference-preparation time, based on a majority vote by the staff. (This would be implemented as either late start time or early release time for students.) For example, every other Friday students would leave early to accommodate additional planning time for teachers. The total minutes of student instructional time will remain the same, but will be distributed differently.</p>	<p>Solution and responses offered by SEA:</p> <p>The SEA supports the district's proposal to expand the mentor program.</p> <p>Regarding extended learning, the SEA rejects SPS's proposal because it will result in 12 additional minutes of teaching time on the days when there are not the collaborative planning blocks. Furthermore, the SEA objects to the fact that only 7 of the 19 collaborative planning blocks can be decided by teachers, while 5 are decided by the district directed and 7 are principal directed.</p>
<p>NCTQ assessment of proposal: It is commendable that Seattle is willing to expand its mentor program, especially given the high cost of such an investment.</p> <p>SPS's proposal to provide additional planning and collaboration time to teachers is critical for good instruction. This is time that would be used to review student data, evaluate student progress and plan for instruction.</p> <p>However, both sides of the negotiating team are still neglecting the problem of Seattle's short student work day. Seattle students still have one of the shortest instructional days and years in the country.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IMPORTANT</p>	

C. Teacher evaluations

<p>Problems identified by NCTQ in collective bargaining agreement:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Objective measures of student achievement are not factored into teacher evaluations. 2. Teachers are only observed by one evaluator.
--

3. There are no informal, unannounced observations factored into teacher evaluations.

Solution offered by SPS:

The proposed SERVE evaluation would measure teachers on four areas:
-Instruction and professional practice (evaluation tool currently being used and jointly developed by SEA and SPS)
-Individual student growth, using two years worth of data
-Whole-school growth
-Evaluations from other teachers and, at the high school level, from students

Teachers would be assigned one of five ratings (up from two in previous system).

Solution offered by SEA:

SEA proposes to keep the current evaluation instrument as it is, rejecting the SPS proposal to use of student achievement data and feedback from peers and students. It has not proposed any additional changes for this contract.

NCTQ assessment of proposals: The evaluation framework jointly developed by SPS and the SEA has many strengths. However, it cannot remain the only instrument used to evaluate teachers, as the SEA proposes, primarily because it does not take into account a teacher's impact on student learning. For this reason, SPS's proposal to factor student growth in teacher evaluations is critical.

The district should be commended for including school-based growth in a teacher's evaluation, since student success relies not just on individual teachers, but on the collective contribution of the staff. Also notable is the student input component of teacher evaluations. Student and peer feedback can greatly help teachers improve instructional practice. Students have the most to gain (and lose) from their teachers.

Although not all teachers will be required to participate in this new evaluation model proposed by the district, the changes would nonetheless represent a big step forward for the district.

MUST HAVE

D. Compensation

Problems identified by NCTQ in collective bargaining agreement: Seattle's pay structure (due in large part to state mandates) is inherently flawed:

1. Teachers earn higher salaries for master's degrees, even though research shows that such degrees do not make teachers more effective.
2. Seattle pays teachers with the most experience the highest annual raises. This does little to encourage teachers with less experience to stay in the profession. Furthermore, research on teacher experience shows that, after the first few years in the classroom, teacher experience on average does not correlate with higher student achievement.
3. Seattle offers no incentives to attract teachers to hard-to-staff subject areas or any way to recognize or reward exemplary teachers.

<p>Solution offered by SPS: The most controversial of Seattle's contract proposals is a new program that would link teacher performance with compensation. This new program, known as SERVE, would be voluntary for teachers currently employed by SPS and mandatory for new teachers. The program would be phased in over the next few years.</p> <p>SERVE would create 340 career ladder positions (3-4 at each school) for exemplary teachers to model best practices. In addition, stipends ranging from \$2,500 to \$5,200 a year would be awarded to teachers who take on additional responsibilities, primarily as teacher-leaders.</p> <p>Teachers who agree to use SERVE, the new evaluation and compensation model, would earn a 1 percent pay raise in each of the following two years.</p>	<p>Solution offered by SEA: The SEA has rejected the district's proposal to implement performance based bonuses for highly effective teachers. The SEA puts forward no alternative proposal.</p>
<p>NCTQ assessment of proposal: The concept behind Seattle's proposal is on target: Highly effective teachers would be recognized and rewarded for their performance. By offering leadership opportunities, the district would encourage exceptional teachers to stay in the classroom. The only drawback is that the amount of money that would be awarded to the most effective teachers is small—smaller, in fact, than the money an experienced teacher can earn by going the traditional route of acquiring a master's degree. Given the absence of state policy changes, however, Seattle's proposal represents some marginal improvement.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IMPORTANT</p>	

III. Final thoughts

In October 2009, the National Council on Teacher Quality released a report exploring Seattle's policies shaping teacher quality. Though its teacher contract was not unlike most districts, harkening back to a factory model, we observed that it did little to attract and reward excellence. Less than one year later, we are pleased to see the vigor in which the district has grappled with the policy challenges impacting teacher quality. Overall, Seattle's proposals for the new teacher labor agreement are strong. Enacting them would put Seattle on the forefront of reforms and make it a national model for improving teacher quality.