

The Strategic Management of Human Capital: Brief Reflections and a Few Propositions

*Prepared for the Rose Community Foundation
Barnett Berry
August 19, 2008*

Reflections

I am fascinated by the recent interest in and focus on the strategic management of human capital (SMHC) — which has been defined as “the acquisition, development, performance management and retention of top talent in the nation’s schools.”¹ It is one thing to identify talented educators; it is another to utilize them strategically. Granted, over the last two decades policymakers and researchers of most “stripes” have come to conclude that teachers make the most difference in raising student achievement, and strong principals are key to school improvement. As a result a wide array of initiatives have been launched to attract non-traditional recruits to education, measure effective teaching and label “highly qualified” teachers, train principals differently, and the like. And no doubt — progress has been made. However, America’s public schools still rest on a relatively dysfunctional system of teacher and principal development.

Although we are approaching the end of the first decade of the 21st century, our nation’s teacher development system still seems to be built on the assumption that talented females, as a captive labor pool, are willing to work for below-market wages. School district recruitment and hiring practices rest on mid-20th century organizational assumptions about teaching and learning as well as the career mobility patterns of Baby Boomers — not those of Generation Y.² Most universities, while attracting more academically able candidates than in the past,³ still do not prepare teachers for teaching in high-needs schools.

School district and union collective bargaining agreements focus on seniority and security in the face of stark divisions of labor and contentious relationships between administrators and teachers. Tenure rules are designed to protect teachers from administrative abuses and performance evaluations continue to be perfunctory. However, there is clear evidence these norms of operation can get in the way of creating a more nimble and effective human capital system.

More problems prevail. Lock-step teacher compensation systems ensure uniformity and predictability for teachers and the school boards who pay them. However, these archaic systems stifle teacher creativity, ignore market realities, and isolate teaching expertise. Low teacher salaries in urban and rural districts almost guarantee that local policymakers do not have the financial resources to compete in the teacher labor market. At the same time state school boards and legislators routinely lower hiring standards in order to expediently address teacher shortages — especially for schools serving our nation’s most vulnerable students. New teachers tend to be assigned the most challenging and difficult classes without content-based mentoring from trained experts who have time to support them. Even well-prepared, well-qualified teachers cannot teach

¹ Odden, A. and Kelly, J. (2008) Strategic Management Of Human Capital in Public Education. Madison WI: CPRE.

² The New Teacher Project and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform have forged considerable progress of late in helping urban school districts create more effective HR systems.

³ See Drew Gitomer’s recent analyses of the improved academic ability of teacher education candidates and graduates at http://www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/TQ_full_report.pdf

effectively due primarily to poor working conditions (e.g., inadequate and unsupportive administrators, limited time to learn, too few opportunities to lead, etc.).

The recruitment and support systems for principals are even more underconceptualized and underdeveloped. While notable exceptions have unfolded over the last several years (e.g., New Leaders for New Schools and the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute), most principals are not selected for their teaching expertise and experience and their roles often are complex and ambiguous without adequate mentoring or support. Principals work without any coherent development system to frame their careers and retain them as school leaders. Few school districts know how to grow their own talent — especially from the pool of community members who might begin their education careers as teaching assistants, mentors for students, or content experts from the private sector.

In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future issued a report, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future*, putting forth evidence linking teacher knowledge to student achievement. The path-breaking report, for its time, pointed to the critical need to overhaul our teacher development systems — including policies related to who teaches and what teachers’ qualifications are; how teachers are recruited, selected, and inducted; and how teachers are developed, assessed, and rewarded. State and local partnerships grew out of the blueprint that outlined action steps based on five interlocking recommendations.

Since the release of the 1996 NCTAF report, some teaching quality policy progress has been made, but the spread of technical know-how and the building and maintaining of political will necessary for transformative reforms have not taken place. Only marginal changes have taken hold. While teaching quality now is seen by policymakers as a key lever for improving schools, the debate over how to identify good teachers and whether they need to be prepared in particular ways still rages. And the system to improve teacher quality seems to be out of sync with efforts to upgrade the quality of principals and other school administrators. As a result a new push, drawing on both market forces and professionalism models, is driving new thinking about not just teacher development — but the entire human capital system.

Some Propositions

The following propositions are built from some of the SMHC literature and rhetoric that have surfaced of late. The “nine pairs” of propositions are designed to stimulate discussion and consideration on what is needed in a SMHC and how school communities might achieve their goals. They are by no means exhaustive, but they are meant to provoke deeper thinking around key issues. Which ones resonate with you and why?

- 1A. School districts will abandon their efforts to recruit traditional college-prepared teachers who will teach for a career, and focus on finding talented, young, less expensive candidates who enter with limited pre-service education, receive more on-the-job training, and are expected to stay in the classroom for just a few years.
- 1B. School districts will be more strategic in recruiting and utilizing talented individuals as “master” and “assistant” teachers, but recognize that their high-needs schools demand that students are taught and supported by well-prepared, stable faculty who know them and their families well. Many high-needs schools will require as much or more attention to growing talent from within their communities (e.g., local teaching assistants groomed as teacher

leaders) as opposed to just recruiting from afar (e.g., newly minted college graduates from prestigious universities).

- 2A. School districts will more tightly define and distinguish administrators from teachers and vest more authority in building principals to hire and fire those who teach.
- 2B. School districts will break down traditional barriers between administrators and teachers and offer more opportunities for the latter to create and lead their own schools and take more control over who enters and stays in their profession.
- 3A. Teachers do not need substantial preparation before they begin teaching — and districts and non-profits, not universities, are best suited to train the next generation of educators — primarily on the job.
- 3B. Teachers — because of advancements in cognitive science, the new science of teaching reading and math, and the growing demands of working with second language learners — need more preparation than ever before. While university-based teacher education has been too far removed from the realities of today’s schools, solely relying on districts to train teachers will most likely yield those who are not prepared to teach in multiple contexts and for tomorrow’s schools. Currently, the pace of our nation’s public schools and its egg-crate organizational structure do not allow for the time and space needed to learn how to teach.
- 4A. The majority of the nation’s 3.4 million teachers, who do need intense preparation or “high level” skills as specialists (e.g., reading and math coaches, second language learners experts, etc.), will serve in part-time, adjunct teaching roles — and do not need incentives (e.g., pay, pensions) for long-term retention.
- 4B. The majority of the nation’s 3.4 million teachers, who have varying expertise, will work in teams⁴ that carefully match content specialists as well as pedagogical generalists (e.g., elementary school teachers) and social service providers who are committed to serving students and their families over time — and incentives (e.g., pay, pensions) will match commitment and accomplishments.
- 5A. Public schools can no longer afford for their highly skilled teachers to perform custodial and administrative duties — and as such require less skilled, itinerant teachers to perform the tasks of bus and cafeteria duty, test administration, etc.
- 5B. Public schools can no longer afford for their highly skilled principals and teachers to perform custodial and administrative duties — and as such must redesign organizations in order to accommodate business managers to help run schools and auxiliary personnel and contract staff to handle the many custodial tasks associated with public education.
- 6A. Teachers will be paid primarily on performance, based on new advancements in value-added methods that identify those who help their students make gains on current standardized achievement tests.

⁴ For a thoughtful view of teacher teams for the future see: Wise, A. (2004). Teaching Teams: A 21st-Century Paradigm for Organizing America’s Schools. Education Week. September 29. Vol. 24, Issue 05, pp 32,44.

- 6B. Teachers will be compensated on the basis of their qualifications and experiences as well as on multiple measures of performance — including advancing student learning on standardized tests as well as more authentic forms of assessment, assisting struggling colleagues and spreading teaching expertise, supporting students in coping with life's exigencies, and building strong school-community relationships. The highest paid anybody in a school district would be a practicing teacher.
- 7A. Unions will be disbanded and teachers as entrepreneurs will negotiate individual contracts with their local school boards and states.
- 7B. Unions will be transformed and morph into more of a professional association that organizes members first on issues of teaching and learning (including Working Conditions 2.0) — and second on matters of compensation.
- 8A. With emerging technologies, teachers will no longer have to teach in brick and mortar buildings while students will be able to learn 24/7 and have more choices in when they learn and who will teach them.
- 8B. With emerging technologies, teachers will have numerous options for entrepreneurial activity and participating in the global trade in pedagogy — but the continuing custodial requirements of public schools and the dramatic need to integrate social services and education will transform school buildings into 24/7 community centers that educate and support children and adults.
- 9A. Principals will be recruited from a large pool of current teachers as well as others in the private sector and non-profit organizations — and will be rewarded on the basis of how well they help improve student achievement as measured by standardized achievement tests.
- 9B. Principals will be recruited from a large pool of current teachers as well as others in the private sector and non-profit organizations — but will be expected to have demonstrated excellence in teaching before being responsible for instructional leadership in their schools. They will be rewarded on the basis of how well they help improve student learning (measured in multiple ways) as well as how well they develop and utilize teacher leaders and create the working conditions necessary for successful teaching and learning.