

The Urban Education Collaborative



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A Research Brief: *Principals' Hiring of Teachers in Philadelphia*

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The School District of Philadelphia (SDP), like many other urban school districts, struggles to increase its hiring and retention of experienced and highly qualified teachers in its low-performing/high-need schools. Excluding its charter schools, SDP serves approximately 165,000 students, largely from high-poverty (76%) and minority (85%) backgrounds, in nearly 300 schools. In 2003–04, teacher quality was a persistent problem. Less than 60% of new teachers were certified, and only 43% of new teachers were retained after 3 years. There was a shortage of teachers in high-need subject areas and in low-performing schools. In such hard-to-staff schools, there were significant gaps in teacher qualifications and experience.

Toward the goal of improving teacher quality and the experience balance, particularly in hard-to-staff schools, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and SDP agreed to a set of innovative approaches in their 2004 contract. That contract included new policies for school-based selection of teachers and the provision of incentives for teachers who seek employment in selected “incentive schools,” in selected subjects, and to teachers new to the district’s schools.

Although similar hiring and/or incentive policies have been used elsewhere, little is known about the role that districts and principals play in implementing these policies and how they affect teacher recruitment. Therefore, at the request of SDP, the Urban Education Collaborative (UEC) at Temple University’s Institute for Schools & Society conducted a study of SDP’s effort to implement these new policies during 2005–06. This research brief reports, in particular, on how SDP’s principals responded to the district’s newly created hiring and incentive policies.

Method

With the assistance of SDP’s Office of Human Resources and the cooperation of the PFT, the UEC conducted an archival review of communications and training materials (e.g., brochures, CDs, websites) related to the hiring initiatives. Web-based surveys were sent to all SDP principals and to a sample of 1,000 teachers who had recently changed schools or who were new to SDP and hired through site-based selection. In order to understand

more about the nature of policy implementation, supports, strengths, and weaknesses, a randomized sample of survey participants—10 principals, 9 experienced teachers, and 9 new teachers—were interviewed. This brief focuses on findings from data derived from principals, 77% (207) of whom completed the UEC-developed survey.

School-Based Hiring Policies

School-based selection promises to make a more precise fit between schools and teachers. In Philadelphia, the school-based selection policy allows, under certain conditions, principals and/or school-based committees to recruit, interview, and select both new and experienced teachers for specific open positions within a school. This policy coexists with the seniority policy previously used in SDP. That policy allows experienced teachers to use their seniority to move to open positions in schools.

The district provided materials about school-based hiring to all principals, including a letter from the superintendent, an orientation packet, a training manual and video, an interactive CD, and instructions on how to use the web-based tracking system. Training included four sessions on the policies, one of which was “mandatory” for all principals. In addition, two websites were set up to specifically answer questions regarding aspects of the site selection process.

Satisfaction With Materials and Understanding of Policies. Approximately 95% of principals reported satisfaction with each set of materials. Most principals—85%—were also very satisfied with the related trainings. A high rate (92%) of principals claimed understanding of new site selection policies. The relatively few principals who used site-based teacher selection to hire new teachers all said they would recommend the process to other principals. They felt it gave them more detail about candidates and that the process was good for their entire faculty. In addition, the majority of the principals found the site selection committee to be helpful or very helpful, particularly in reviewing résumés and interviewing candidates.

Limited Use. Sixty percent of principals stated that they knew about the websites set up to answer questions about site-based hiring, but only 31% used them for their

intended purpose. Principals used the website tracking system at a much higher rate, 80%, but a majority accessed it only to check the number of candidates who were interested in their school or to verify that a candidate registered for site selection was eligible to do so. Furthermore, in spite of claiming to understand the site-based selection, many principals did not take full advantage of the new policy and left some, if not all, of the hiring to the district's central office. Over one third of principals did not hire a single candidate through site-based selection.

One notable finding of the survey is that years of experience as a principal seemed to play a role in many of the results. Less experienced principals were more likely to report having more limited access to and greater dissatisfaction with the school-based selection materials and trainings. They were also less likely to have attended any training and to know about and use the websites.

Data from this study further suggest that the limited use of site-based selection might be explained by principals' belief that teacher recruitment and hiring is not the responsibility of the principal—a belief fostered, in part, by an ambiguity in responsibilities. Both SDP and site selection schools are charged with recruiting and hiring teachers, but SDP is responsible for assigning teachers to schools without site selection or when site selection positions are not filled. In addition, all teachers contract with SDP, leaving principals with little say over the salaries. Many principals also feel the process does not provide them with any more valuable information than they already have.

Incentive Policies

The 2004 SDP–PFT contract specifies two sets of teacher incentives intended to increase and distribute more equitably teacher quality within SDP. The first set targets teachers who wish to become or are already National Board certified. The SDP will reimburse teachers up to \$2,500 for application fees for certification. Upon receiving certification, teachers are awarded an annual bonus of \$3,500. The other set of incentives concerns 25 SDP schools that are typically hard to staff. Teachers choosing to work in “incentive schools” receive a maximum of \$2,400 per year in tuition reimbursement for graduate course work. Teachers at incentive schools were also to be provided “targeted professional development dealing with managing disruptive pupil behavior.”

The district also offers two incentives not specified in the 2004 contract. Subject bonuses award teachers an extra \$1,500/year to teach in hard-to-staff subjects: bilingual education (Spanish and Asian languages), chemistry, physics, special education, mathematics, and Spanish. A signing and retention bonus offers teachers new to SDP \$4,500 if they stay in the job for 37 months.

Understanding of Policies. Rates of principals' expressed understanding of the four incentive policies lagged significantly behind that of the site-based selection policies and differed somewhat by incentive type. Only 37.4% to 49.5% of principals reported understanding each

of the four incentives well or very well. Only 58% of principals working in hard-to-staff schools reported understanding the hard-to-staff school bonus well or very well, and only 46% of principals working in middle or high schools reported understanding the subject area bonus.

That principals understood the incentive policies less well than the site selection policies may be attributed to the focus of SDP's trainings and materials: all were focused on implementing site-based selection and not on the use of incentive policies to recruit and retain new teachers. Just as with site-based hiring, experience may have played a role in understanding the policies. Although less experienced principals were more likely to believe in the importance of incentives for recruiting, retaining, and increasing the quality of teachers, they were also least likely to understand the policies well or very well. Principals early in their career were significantly less likely to have understood the subject bonus policy.

Limited Use. A vast majority of the principals believe that the incentives are important or very important in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, yet only 20% who claimed to understand all of the policies well or very well explained the incentives to teacher candidates. Of those principals who taught in “incentive schools,” 57% did not explain the incentive bonus to potential hires.

Data from the surveys and interviews suggest explanations for the lack of principal proactivity in using incentives to appeal to potential hires. Principals tended to believe (a) good teachers shouldn't be motivated by financial incentives and doubted the effectiveness of such teachers, or (b) teachers should be rewarded for meritorious teaching, not their willingness to do it.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest positive steps forward for SDP in communicating and supporting the new policies. However, the findings also reflect different needs and responses of principals according to experience level, suggesting a need for customized information and training.

What is especially striking is how few principals were proactive in improving teacher quality at their schools. They made limited use of web-based information, tracking of candidates, and communication. They did not “pitch” incentives to interested candidates, and many ceded hiring decisions to the central office rather than make use of site selection.

The study suggests that limited policy impacts resulted from lack of buy-in and accountability for implementation among principals. While the latter can be explained, in part, by a centralized hiring system that often makes accountability ambiguous, the former is not well explained by either the quality of the policies or the means by which they were communicated. Rather, principals' dispositions seemed to affect their enthusiasm for and implementation of the innovations and incentives in teacher hiring. How such values emerge and how they may be responded to remain important questions for policy implementation.