



Managing Talent for School Coherence: Learning from Charter Management Organizations

Overview

In school districts across the country, reform-minded leaders are transforming personnel systems that were long driven by compliance and regulatory concerns into systems that take a more strategic and performance-based approach to talent management. These transformation efforts are a potentially game-changing opportunity to test new human capital strategies that aim to ensure that all public school students have great teachers.

As reformers continue to pursue performance-driven approaches to HR, they need to ask not only how they can hire and reward effective teachers, but also how they can build talent management systems that get the right teachers into the right schools and create coherent work environments that develop and support teacher performance.

Charter management organizations (CMOs) are an important but overlooked source of ideas for thinking about these organizational issues. CMOs are nonprofit organizations that directly manage groups of charter schools. In many cases, CMOs are building systemwide structures designed to support coherent, mission-driven schools at scale.

This brief summarizes a recent report by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) that looks at how CMOs manage teacher talent for coherence.¹ The report focused on three questions: How do CMOs recruit and hire teachers? How do they develop teachers? And how do they manage teacher performance?

CRPE researchers analyzed data from a larger study of CMOs conducted jointly by Mathematica Policy Research and CRPE. Although not focused specifically on talent management, the joint study offered a rich array of data on how CMOs manage teachers, including in-depth case study data as well as survey data from CMO central offices and principals.

Findings

The CRPE report does not represent the way that all CMOs—or even the best CMOs—manage talent for coherence. (Indeed, no two CMOs in the study approached talent management in exactly the same way.) Instead, the report highlights some of the broad ways in which the CMOs in the larger

Mathematica-CRPE study recruited, hired, developed, and rewarded teachers while putting organizational coherence first.

The report examines how the CMOs tried to build coherence by orienting teachers to a common set of goals and strategies. In some cases these goals and strategies were about instruction. In other cases, CMOs focused on broader cultural goals and strategies. Regardless of their specific focus, CMOs generally managed talent for coherence in three main ways:

Recruiting and hiring for fit. CMOs often narrowed the pool of possible teachers to people they believed would be best suited to their organizations. They did this by targeting particular sources of teachers and by using focused recruitment messages. By honestly communicating the CMO's particular cultural and instructional approaches during recruitment, the CMOs hoped to attract good matches and ward off candidates who were unlikely to commit to their approach.

Telling It Like It Is

"I tell them [job applicants] that they're coming to a place that cares about kids," said one CMO teacher. "And we care about adults too, but our adults are second. And I always tell them that. So, you know, kids are first."

Providing intensive and ongoing socialization on the job.

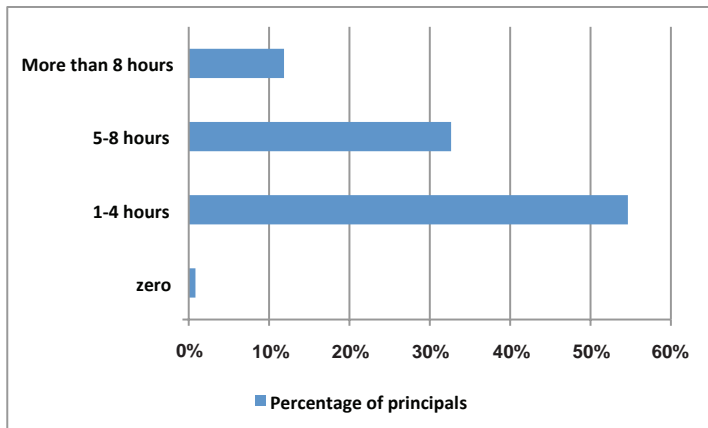
The CMOs were continually socializing teachers toward their goals and strategies. They did this in large part by insisting that leaders and teachers watch each other work and constantly share information about schools' expectations and how people were performing. A large part of the CMO principal's job is observing teachers teach and providing feedback and support (see Figure 1).

Showing Your Work

"I would be surprised if you walk around today and see a teacher by themselves in class. . . . [Teachers] get a lot of help from coaches," said one CMO leader.

¹ Michael DeArmond, Betheny Gross, Melissa Bowen, Allison Demeritt, and Robin Lake, *Managing Talent for Coherence: Learning from Charter Management Organizations* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, May 2012).

Figure 1. Hours per week principals report observing teachers in the classroom



Source: CMO principal survey, 2009; n=203

Aligning pay and career advancement opportunities with organizational goals. In many cases CMOs offered opportunities for exceptional teachers to work as coaches or other types of staff developers or to start new schools. When CMOs used these and other rewards to promote alignment, they often relied on the professional judgment of leaders more than on hard-and-fast performance metrics or assessments.

Moving Up

“When you take your career seriously and you decide this is going to be my career, you always want to see that you have the opportunity for advancement,” one teacher said. “I want to be able to move up to the next level, should that be what I aspire to do.”

Judgment Calls

“We have no salary scale here—none,” the CMO leader said. “. . . I sit down with the principal and the team leaders and we go through every single teacher in every school, with the pros and cons.”

Together, these three broad practices appear to contribute to coherence in CMOs by helping create and reinforce a common understanding of the organizations’ goals and strategies. Collectively, these practices send messages to teachers about what is unique about the organization, socialize them to that uniqueness, and reward those who exemplify it.

Implications

The practices highlighted in this report echo much of what we know happens around professional development in effective traditional school districts. But what is striking about the CMO cases is that these systems did not just focus on professional development. They also aligned and leveraged recruitment and selection practices, evaluations, and rewards to attract teachers and then further shape their matches with schools in ways that helped build organizational coherence.

Traditional school districts can learn from the way that CMOs manage talent for coherence. To start, districts need to understand what kinds of teachers their schools need to be successful and make a plan for how much talent management should be done centrally and how much can be left up to individual schools. None of the practices in this report are worth pursuing for their own sake. They only make sense in the context of schools that have clear goals and strategies for getting there. With that in mind, the experience of CMOs raises several key points for how districts might think about managing talent for coherence. These include:

- The importance of having central office recruiters who have relationships with a variety of sources of teachers (the best traditional preparation programs, but also alternative programs) and understand what each source has to offer.
- The importance of helping principals or networks of school leaders craft recruitment messages that are targeted to their schools’ mission and work culture. Districts might assign specific central office personnel, sometimes called case managers, to work with subsets of schools that they know well to develop strong recruitment practices.
- The importance of having selection practices that go beyond just interviewing. If selection happens primarily at the school level, principals need to be given autonomy to assess candidates in new ways, training in how to do so (for example, how to arrange and evaluate demonstration lessons), and sufficient time to administer these more extensive selection practices.
- The importance of providing or brokering differentiated resources and supports for schools that are aligned with school-based improvement efforts (for example, by providing coaching and other job-embedded professional development and resources for school-level collaboration).

policy brief

The current wave of new teacher evaluation systems going into effect around the country offers an opportunity to broaden the conversation surrounding teacher effectiveness and its relationship to school coherence. Schools and school systems around the country—both charter and traditional—should seize this opportunity to ask themselves how they might take a more integrated and intentional approach to attracting, training, and managing high-quality teachers. Teacher effectiveness should not be looked at in isolation, but rather as part of a broader set of factors related to schools and the organizations that oversee them.

Managing Talent for Coherence: Learning from Charter Management Organizations, by Michael DeArmond, Betheny Gross, Melissa Bowen, Allison Demeritt, and Robin Lake, is available at www.crpe.org.

Center on Reinventing Public Education

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