

# KEEPING IRREPLACEABLES IN D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Lessons in Smart Teacher Retention

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We also thank District of Columbia Public Schools, and everyone who provided us with data for our research and helped us reach out to the DCPS community. Most of all, we thank the teachers and principals who took the time to participate in our study.

No large urban school district has changed its approach to teacher evaluation and compensation more dramatically than DCPS.

## INTRODUCTION

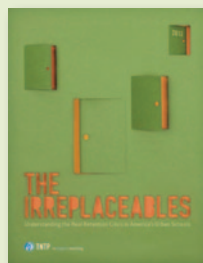
In *The Irreplaceables*, we argued that America’s urban schools take a negligent approach to teacher retention, losing too many of their very best teachers—their “Irreplaceables”—and keeping too many of their weakest teachers, year after year. A combination of weak school leadership, poor working conditions and restrictive policies prevented schools in the four districts we studied from making smarter choices about the teachers they keep—with devastating consequences for students and the entire teaching profession.

In this case study, we compare those findings with teacher retention patterns in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).<sup>1</sup> No large urban school district has changed its approach to teacher evaluation and compensation more dramatically in recent years. In the process, the district’s reforms have drawn widespread attention and controversy. Especially in light of concerns about churn in DCPS’s teacher workforce, it is important to explore whether the changes are helping the district keep more of its best teachers in the classroom.<sup>2</sup>

We find that the policy changes are having a positive impact on teacher retention patterns in DCPS—with some important caveats.

**DCPS keeps many more of its best teachers than its worst**, mainly because it retains fewer than half of its low-performing teachers. In the 2010-11 school year, the district kept 88 percent of its top teachers but just 45 percent of its low performers.

DCPS is a good example of why reducing teacher retention to a single number—what percentage of teachers are leaving or staying, without considering the performance of those teachers—can be misleading. The average *overall* retention rate for DCPS was 79 percent in the 2010-11 school year, lower than any of the other four districts we studied. However, that is mainly because DCPS is exiting far more of its low performers than the other districts; if DCPS retained as many low performers as the other districts, it would have had a similar retention rate.



### *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools*

Download the full study at  
[www.tntp.org/irreplaceables](http://www.tntp.org/irreplaceables)

<sup>1</sup> Disclosure: DCPS is a longtime client of TNTP, for services such as teacher recruitment. Current DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson is a former executive at TNTP. Many policies discussed in this report were begun under former Chancellor Michelle Rhee, TNTP’s founder. However, this report reflects the analysis and opinions of TNTP alone.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Simon, Mark. “Is teacher churn undermining real education reform in D.C.?” *The Washington Post*, Opinion Section, June 15, 2012.

**Enforcing rigorous expectations has not driven away DCPS's best teachers.**

DCPS sets a high standard for performance and consistently removes teachers who do not meet that bar, a practice that some feared might encourage top teachers to leave, too. Although DCPS needs to do more to keep its Irreplaceables, it retains them at a rate similar to the other districts we studied.

The district's adoption of performance-based compensation appears to be an important factor. Compared to teachers in the other districts we studied, Irreplaceables in DCPS were much less likely to cite compensation as a primary reason for leaving.

**Like other districts, DCPS is missing opportunities to keep even more of its best teachers.**

While district-wide policy changes have essentially forced principals to recognize the variance in performance among their teachers, it appears that many principals have not fully embraced smart retention as a top priority or substantially changed the way they treat their best teachers.

**Irreplaceables appear less likely to teach in the schools that need them most.**

In DCPS, highly rated teachers are much less likely to teach in schools with high concentrations of poverty than in other schools, and that disparity is greater than what we found in other districts.<sup>3</sup> We believe there are two possible explanations: either the district's best teachers are simply distributed unequally, or a flaw in the design or implementation of the IMPACT evaluation system is making it easier for teachers in low-need schools to earn high ratings. More analysis is necessary to find and address the underlying problem, and DCPS should work quickly to do both.

**As in other districts, some DCPS principals struggle to create cultures and working conditions where the best teachers want to work.** DCPS will need to address these school-level challenges in order to continue improving teacher retention patterns. These problems are most apparent in schools with the lowest achievement levels and in those serving the poorest students.

In short, DCPS provides evidence that strategic policy changes can help districts break the cycle of negligent teacher retention. This is an important finding that has national implications. But DCPS also shows that no set of policies can outweigh teachers' daily experiences in their schools. Keeping top teachers requires strong school leadership and school cultures that support effective teaching. In order to maximize retention of its Irreplaceables, DCPS needs to do more to hasten the cultural changes that must go hand-in-hand with its policy reforms.

DCPS provides evidence that strategic policy changes can break the cycle of negligent retention. But no set of policies can outweigh teachers' daily experiences in their schools.

<sup>3</sup> We identified DCPS Irreplaceables through IMPACT data; in the other districts we studied, Irreplaceables were identified by value-added data. See sidebar on page five.

## THE PATH TO SMART RETENTION: RESPECT AND RIGOR

The *Irreplaceables* made two main recommendations for solving the real teacher retention crisis and moving toward smart retention.

- ① **Make retention of Irreplaceables a top priority** by setting a goal to retain more than 90 percent of them annually; overhauling principal hiring, support and evaluation to focus on instructional leadership; monitoring and improving school working conditions; paying Irreplaceables what they're worth; and protecting them during layoffs.

- ② **Strengthen the teaching profession through higher expectations** by setting a new baseline standard for effectiveness (performance worse than that of the average first-year teacher should be considered ineffective); encouraging low performers to leave voluntarily; and removing policy barriers to higher expectations, such as forced-placement staffing rules and onerous dismissal processes.

Achieving smart retention requires action from education leaders at all levels, from individual school principals to district officials, teachers union leaders and policymakers.

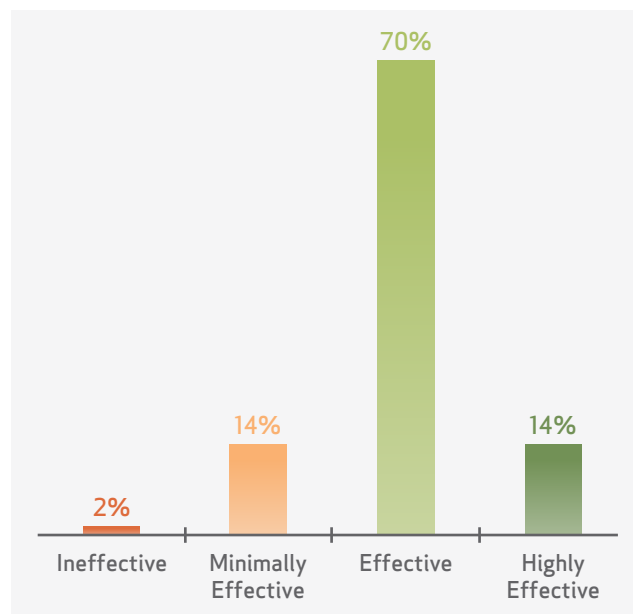
## CRITICAL POLICY CHANGES

Over the last three years, DCPS has implemented a number of policies and initiatives designed to move the district toward smarter teacher retention patterns. Many of these changes have roots in the contract the district negotiated with the Washington Teachers Union in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

**DCPS developed and implemented IMPACT, a ground-breaking teacher evaluation system.**

Launched in 2009, IMPACT rates teachers on a four-point scale (“Ineffective,” “Minimally Effective,” “Effective,” or “Highly Effective”) based primarily on classroom observations by principals and master teachers and, where available, data on student academic progress.<sup>5</sup> IMPACT reset performance expectations, and provides more frequent feedback to teachers. It also successfully differentiates teachers by performance (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 | TEACHER EVALUATION RATINGS IN DCPS



**IMPACT has begun to give DCPS a more realistic view of teacher performance.**

Source: DCPS IMPACT data, SY 2010-11.

<sup>4</sup> The contract between DCPS and WTU ended quality-blind layoffs, allowed high performers to earn top salaries regardless of longevity and established mutual consent staffing policies. For more details, see Turque, Bill. “D.C. schools, teachers union reach tentative deal.” *The Washington Post*. April 7, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> DCPS recently announced additional changes to IMPACT that are intended to promote further differentiation of teachers in the middle of the performance spectrum, by raising the minimum score required to achieve an “Effective” rating and adding a “Developing” rating category between “Minimally Effective” and “Effective.” Additional details can be found at <http://dcps.dc.gov>.

**DCPS uses evaluation results in decisions about teacher hiring and dismissal.** In DCPS, teachers who earn an “Ineffective” rating or two consecutive “Minimally Effective” ratings can be dismissed immediately. Evaluation results also factor into decisions about teacher layoffs, so that schools can protect their most successful teachers when budget cuts are necessary. Finally, the district uses “mutual consent” staffing rules, putting hiring decisions in the hands of principals and teachers instead of central office staffers.

**DCPS has made substantial changes to teacher compensation by tying bonuses and raises to classroom performance.** Through a program called IMPACTplus, teachers who earn a “Highly Effective” rating receive

a bonus of up to \$25,000. Teachers who earn two consecutive “Highly Effective” ratings also receive a service credit of up to five years, resulting in a significant salary raise. This means that Irreplaceables in DCPS can earn total compensation of \$100,000 after only four years in the classroom and a *base* salary of \$100,000 after only six years.<sup>6</sup>

Of the six policy barriers to smart retention we identified in *The Irreplaceables*, DCPS had addressed all but one by 2010. The district is rolling out a program to address the remaining barrier this school year (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 | POLICIES AFFECTING SMART RETENTION, BY DISTRICT

	DCPS	District A	District B	District C	District D
Does the teacher evaluation system meaningfully differentiate performance?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No*
Is performance, not seniority, the primary factor in layoff decisions?	Yes	Yes	No*	Yes	No
Do principals have the final say on whether a teacher is placed in their school?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can teachers earn bonuses or raises for outstanding performance?	Yes	No*	Yes	Yes	No
Do teachers have career pathways other than becoming a principal?	Yes	No	No	No*	No
Do dismissal rules quickly move low performers out of the classroom?	Yes	No	No	No	No

### DCPS has created a policy environment that encourages smart retention.

Policies implemented as of October 2012. DCPS career pathways policy started SY 2012-13. \*Indicates policy reforms in progress. Districts A-D were studied in *The Irreplaceables*.

<sup>6</sup> Top-performing DCPS teachers are also celebrated every year through “A Standing Ovation for DC Teachers,” hosted by the DC Public Education Fund. Held in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the event recognizes teachers rated highly effective and features tribute performances from musicians and celebrities, remarks by special guests and an awards presentation.

## IDENTIFYING IRREPLACEABLES IN DCPS

Our research in DCPS included surveys of 994 teachers about their experiences at their schools and surveys of 144 school leaders about their approach to teacher retention. We also reviewed 2010-11 IMPACT ratings for 3,482 teachers.<sup>7</sup>

For the other four districts we studied, we used teacher value-added scores or student academic growth measures to identify high- and low-performing teachers—those whose students made much more or much less academic progress than expected. These data provided us with a common yardstick for teacher performance. Teachers scoring in approximately the top 20 percent were identified as Irreplaceables. While teachers of this caliber earn high ratings in student surveys and have been shown to have a positive impact that extends far beyond test scores, we acknowledge that such measures are limited to certain grades and subjects and should not be the only ones used in real-world teacher evaluations.<sup>8</sup>

Because DCPS has several years of evaluation ratings for all teachers based on multiple measures, including rigorous classroom observations, we used IMPACT scores instead of value-added data alone to identify the highest- and lowest-performing teachers.

This approach allowed us to incorporate results from teachers in a wider range of grades and subjects, based on a more comprehensive measure of effectiveness. Although we mainly report results based on IMPACT scores in this paper, where possible we have also included results based on value-added scores in footnotes for readers who are interested in a direct comparison to the other districts we studied.<sup>9</sup>

Based on IMPACT scores, we classified the 14 percent of teachers who earned “Highly Effective” ratings in the 2010-11 school year as Irreplaceables, and the 16 percent of teachers who earned “Ineffective” or “Minimally Effective” ratings as low performing.

As in the other four districts we studied, Irreplaceables and low-performing teachers in DCPS have a lot in common on the surface. Irreplaceables in DCPS do not report working significantly longer hours or having much smaller class sizes than other teachers. Although experience is not generally a good predictor of a teacher’s IMPACT rating, experienced teachers in DCPS are slightly more likely than new teachers to be Irreplaceables. Nearly three-quarters of Irreplaceables in DCPS have more than three years of experience, compared to 62 percent of low performers.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Our analysis is based on data collected through SY 2010-11. DCPS recently released IMPACT results for 2011-12, which generally reflected the trends we found in previous years.

<sup>8</sup> Chetty, R., Friedman, J.N., & Rockoff, J.E. (2011). The long-term impacts of teachers: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood (Working Paper 17699). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>9</sup> Because of a combination of the limited number of DCPS teachers with value-added data and survey response rates, many analyses are not possible based on the VA-only definition of effectiveness.

<sup>10</sup> These seniority differences are not reflected in a VA-only definition of effectiveness: 65% of top teachers have more than three years of experience compared with 63% of low performers.

## FINDINGS

We sought to answer one primary question in our analysis: Have the recent policy changes in DCPS led to smarter teacher retention patterns? The data indicate that the answer is yes.

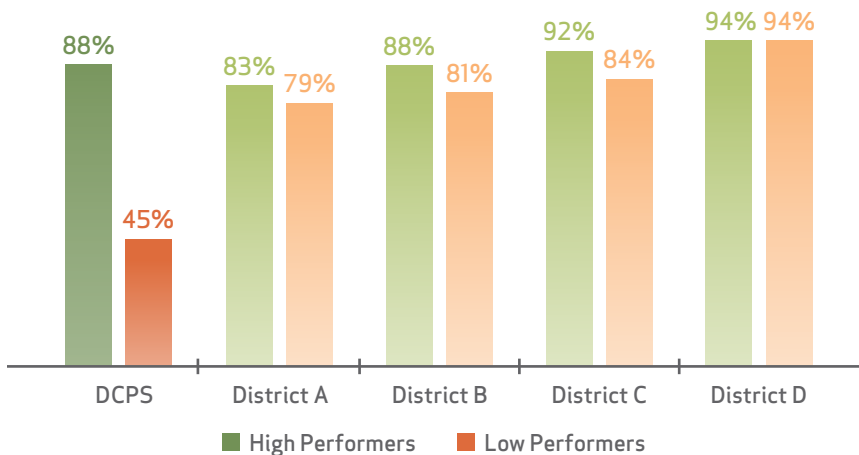
- ① DCPS retains a much higher percentage of its best teachers than its worst—mainly because it keeps far fewer low performers compared to other districts.

The four other districts we studied retained their best and worst teachers at similar rates. All four districts retained between 83 and 94 percent of their Irreplaceables and between 79 and 94 percent of their low-performing teachers annually. One district retained Irreplaceables and low performers at identical rates.

DCPS, on the other hand, retained Irreplaceables at nearly double the rate that it retained low-performing teachers.<sup>11</sup> In the 2010-11 school year, the district kept 88 percent of its Irreplaceables—about as many as the other districts we studied—but only 45 percent of its low performers (Figure 3).<sup>12</sup>

DCPS retains Irreplaceables at nearly double the rate that it retains low-performing teachers.

FIGURE 3 | DISTRICT RETENTION RATES BY TEACHER PERFORMANCE



**DCPS retained its best teachers at nearly double the rate of its weakest.**

Source: IMPACT (DCPS) and value-added or growth data (Districts A-D). Data for Districts A-D are from SY 2009-10, the most recent year for which we had reliable data for all districts. IMPACT data from DCPS are from SY 2010-11; since IMPACT began in SY 2009-10, data from the following school year are a more accurate reflection of the policy's effects.

<sup>11</sup> School retention rates for high and low performers were reported in *The Irreplaceables*, in contrast to the district retention rates in this paper. For comparison, school rates are: DCPS – high 82%, low 37%; District A – high 77%, low 72%; District B – high 86%, low 75%; District C – high 87%, low 79%; District D – high 89%, low 88%. Data for Districts A-D are from SY 2009-10, the most recent year for which we had reliable data for all districts. Data from DCPS are from SY 2010-11; since IMPACT began in SY 2009-10, data from the following school year are a more accurate reflection of the policy's effects.

<sup>12</sup> When using a VA-only definition of effectiveness, overall retention is 73%. Top teachers are retained at a rate of 78%; low performers at a rate of 55%.



Top teachers crave critical feedback that helps them get even better.

Why the difference? DCPS has a much lower tolerance for ineffective teaching. It has consistently moved teachers with the lowest IMPACT ratings out of the classroom. Since 2009, the district has removed approximately 400 ineffective and minimally effective teachers from its schools, including 98 in 2012.

It is worth noting that removing so many weak teachers has not made it more difficult for DCPS to keep its best. The district retains a very similar percentage of Irreplaceables to the four other districts we studied, which operate under less rigorous policies.

② **Irreplaceables in DCPS are more likely than low performers to experience low-cost, high-impact retention strategies.**

In *The Irreplaceables*, we identified eight low-cost teacher retention strategies that most principals could put in place immediately—steps as simple as praising great teachers for a job well done. Low performers in the four districts we studied experienced most of these strategies about as often as Irreplaceables, suggesting that principals were doing nothing more to keep their best teachers than their worst. In one of the other districts we studied, more than one-third of low performers were encouraged to stay, and only one in five left or were encouraged to leave.

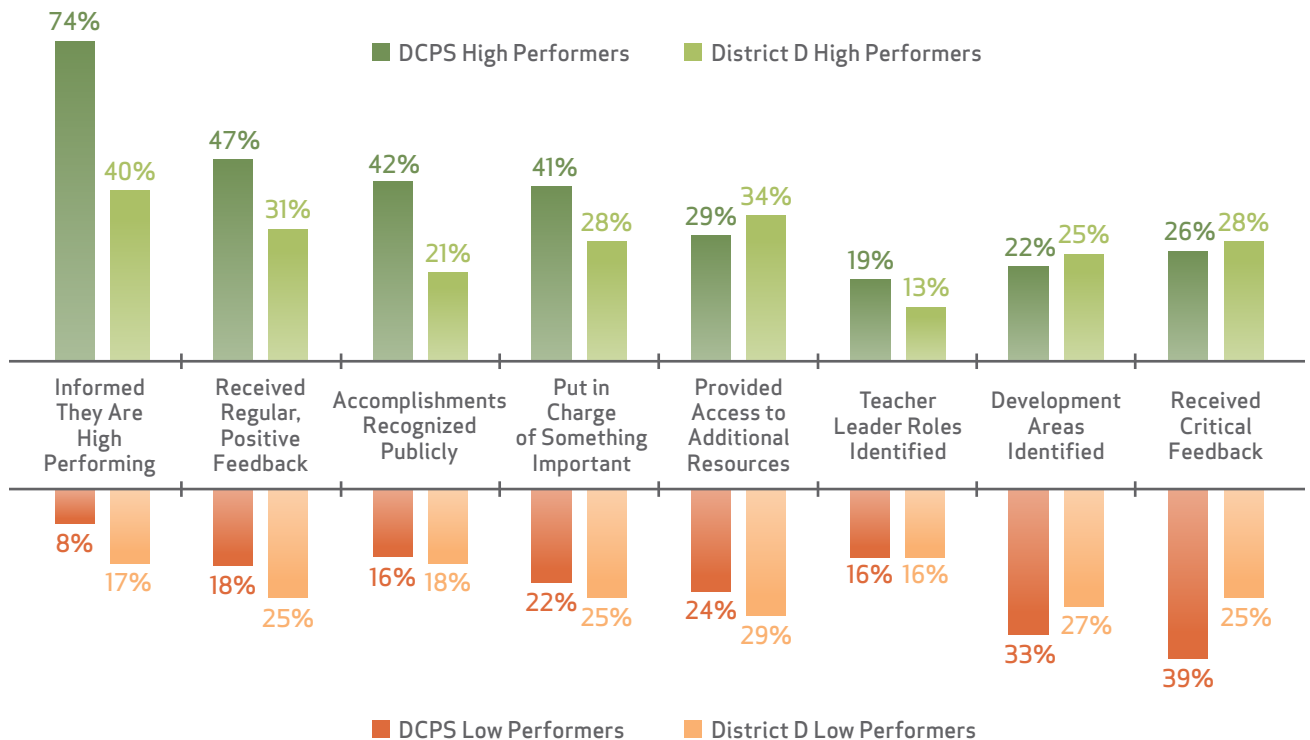
We found a more positive trend in DCPS. Irreplaceables there were more likely than low performers to experience many of the eight strategies, especially the ones involving positive feedback (Figure 4). In addition, almost 80 percent of low performers in DCPS either left or were encouraged to leave.

We found two exceptions to this more strategic use of retention strategies, though. As in other districts, low performers in DCPS were just as likely as Irreplaceables to say they were offered leadership roles in their schools.<sup>13</sup> And, perhaps reflecting the effect of IMPACT, low-performing teachers were somewhat more likely than Irreplaceables to experience two particular retention strategies: receiving critical feedback and having development areas identified. Only about one-quarter of Irreplaceables experienced either strategy, compared to about one-third of low-performing teachers.

DCPS principals may be withholding constructive criticism from top teachers because they believe those teachers should only hear praise. However, our analysis suggests that top teachers crave critical feedback that helps them get even better. In fact, one-quarter of DCPS Irreplaceables who planned to leave cited a lack of opportunities to develop as one of their top reasons.

<sup>13</sup>DCPS recently announced that it is also addressing career pathways at the district level, unveiling a new approach to career progression for all teachers. Additional details can be found at <http://dcps.dc.gov>.

FIGURE 4 | TEACHERS REPORTING THEY EXPERIENCED LOW-COST RETENTION STRATEGIES



High performers in DCPS were more likely to experience four of the eight retention strategies, but still lacked the critical feedback and clear pathways that can help them improve and advance.

Source: TNTP survey data.

③ Many DCPS principals do not appear to be trying hard enough to keep their best teachers.

The generally positive trends around retention strategies in DCPS mask a serious problem: Principals do not consider smart retention a top priority. In fact, more than two-thirds of DCPS principals do not consider “retaining effective teachers” one of their *five* priorities. That is similar to the other four districts we studied. While policies are helping DCPS principals identify and recognize more top teachers, too few principals are taking even simple steps to take the district policies further.

Irreplaceables in DCPS seem to experience retention strategies more often than low performers, but too many don’t experience them at all. Less than half of the district’s Irreplaceables experienced most of the individual strategies, just as we found in the other four districts. Almost a third experienced fewer than two of the strategies—an important finding, because Irreplaceables

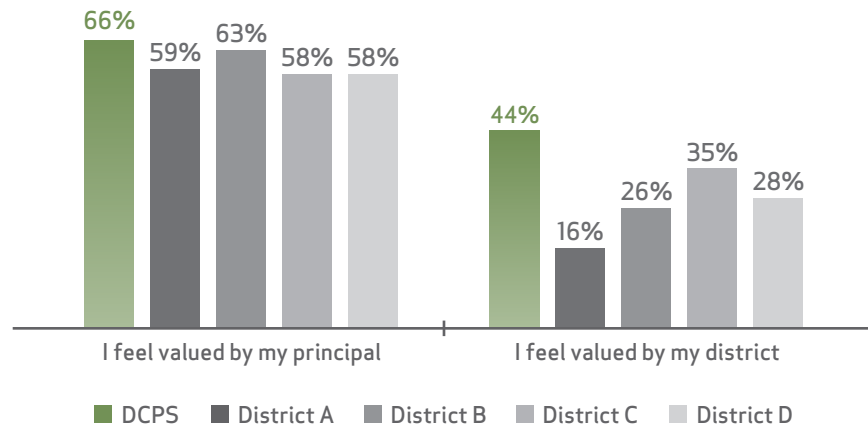
who experienced at least two strategies planned to stay at their schools longer.

Despite significant policy changes intended to recognize and reward high-performing teachers, less than half of Irreplaceables in DCPS reported having their accomplishments recognized publicly and receiving regular feedback. When asked whether they feel valued by their principal, 66 percent of Irreplaceables in DCPS responded positively—only modestly more than in the other four districts we studied.

However, 44 percent of DCPS Irreplaceables indicated that they felt valued by their district, significantly more than in the other districts we studied (Figure 5). The problem in DCPS seems to be that too many top teachers do not feel valued in spite of district policies, not because of them.

Too many top teachers do not feel valued in spite of district policies, not because of them.

FIGURE 5 | HIGH PERFORMERS AGREEING THEY FEEL VALUED



**Irreplaceables in DCPS are more likely to feel valued than Irreplaceables elsewhere.**

Percentage of high performers who agreed or strongly agreed. Source: TNTP survey data.

As a result, DCPS retains about the same percentage of its Irreplaceables as the other four districts we studied. This means that, as in the other districts, DCPS schools are losing many Irreplaceables that they should be able to keep. Between 12 and 20 percent of Irreplaceables with fewer than five years of experience leave the district each year—most for reasons that could have been prevented. Only about 25 percent of Irreplaceables who planned to leave DCPS did so for personal reasons, and 75 percent told us they planned to continue teaching or working in K-12 education. Nearly 90 percent of Irreplaceables who planned to leave DCPS told us they could be convinced to stay.

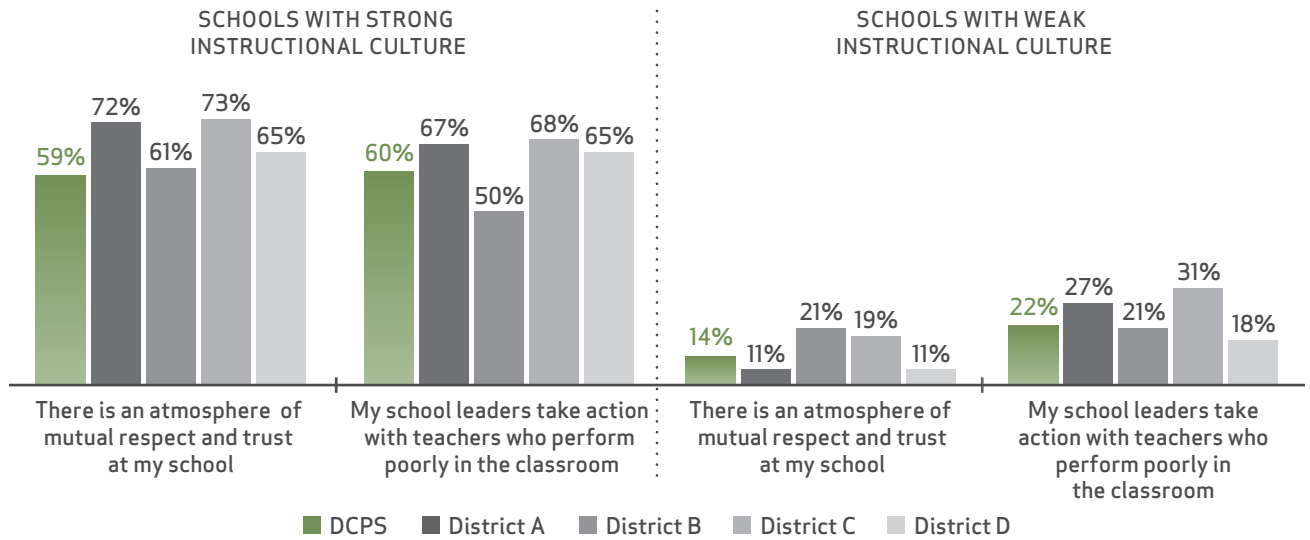
④ **Some DCPS schools—like schools in other districts—struggle to build environments and cultures where the best teachers want to work.**

In *The Irreplaceables*, we found that culture and working conditions can make a big impact on teacher retention. Schools with strong instructional cultures—where great teaching is truly the top priority—retain more of their Irreplaceables than schools with weaker cultures.<sup>14</sup>

The same holds true in DCPS. Schools with the strongest instructional cultures were much more likely to have atmospheres of mutual respect and trust, while also refusing to tolerate poor teaching (Figure 6). Irreplaceables planned to leave DCPS schools with weak instructional cultures at nearly twice the rate of Irreplaceables at schools with strong instructional cultures.

<sup>14</sup>We measure “instructional culture” by surveying teachers on their school’s vision, expectations and support for effective teaching. Schools where the majority of teachers respond positively to these questions have higher student proficiency rates in math and reading and retain more of their effective teachers. For additional details, see “Greenhouse Schools: How Schools Can Build Cultures Where Students and Teachers Thrive.” TNTP. 2012.

FIGURE 6 | TEACHER AGREEMENT WITH KEY ASPECTS OF SCHOOL CULTURE



**In DCPS and elsewhere, a strong instructional culture means a combination of respect and rigor.**

Percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed. Schools with strong and weak culture were defined by their ranking in either the top or bottom quartile of their local district or charter network, based on results of teacher surveys on instructional culture. Source: TNTP survey data.

Unfortunately, just as in other districts, many principals in DCPS are struggling to build cultures where the best teachers want to work. In nearly 40 percent of DCPS schools, more than one-third of teachers said they were dissatisfied with their school's overall morale and culture. This was true in 32 to 42 percent of schools in the four other districts we studied (Figure 7). In other words, school culture problems are no worse in DCPS than in those other districts—despite the more rigorous expectations DCPS enforces for teachers—but they are significant.

It is important to note that high-need schools can build strong cultures despite the challenges they face. Nearly one-third of DCPS's highest-need schools have cultures that rank among the best in the district. Ultimately, school culture reflects the priorities and leadership abilities of principals, not the demographics of students.

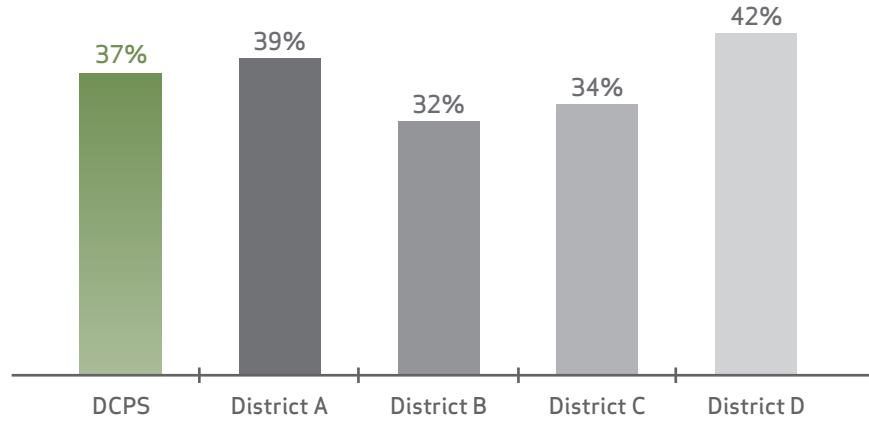
We also found that many DCPS teachers—especially those in low-achieving schools—also endure poor working conditions, much like teachers in the other districts we studied. Fifty percent of teachers in struggling DCPS schools said their school was “a good place to teach and learn,” compared to 85 percent of teachers in high-achieving schools (Figure 8). As in other districts, dissatisfaction was greatest—and gaps with higher-performing schools were largest—on issues related to parent engagement, the school's record of achievement, school location, safety and student conduct.

It should come as no surprise that low-achieving schools—the schools that need Irreplaceables the most—struggle to attract and retain top teachers when teachers consider them much less desirable places to work.

Many principals are struggling to build strong instructional cultures.

High-need schools can build strong cultures despite the challenges they face.

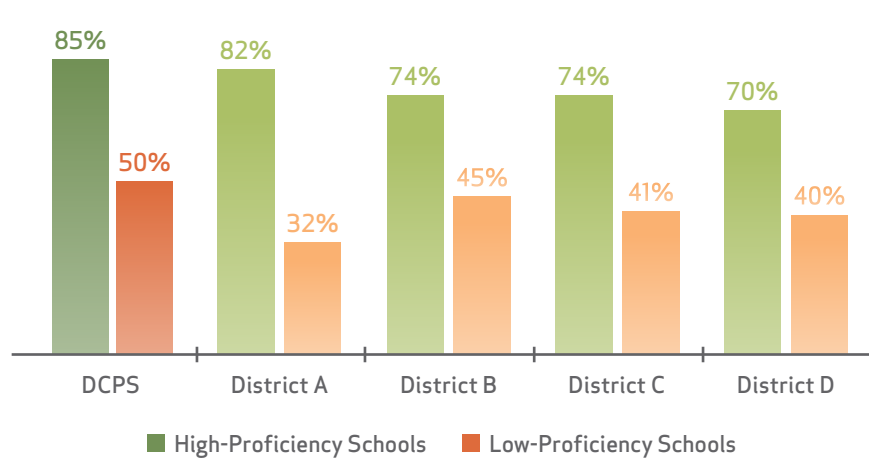
FIGURE 7 | SCHOOLS WHERE MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF TEACHERS REPORT BEING DISSATISFIED WITH CULTURE



A similar percentage of schools struggled with culture in DCPS and the other four districts we studied.

Schools where more than one-third of teachers responded “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” when asked to rate their satisfaction with their school’s culture. Source: TNTP survey data.

FIGURE 8 | TEACHERS AGREEING: “MY SCHOOL IS A GOOD PLACE TO TEACH AND LEARN”



Teachers in struggling schools are much less satisfied with their working conditions.

Percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed. Source: TNTP survey data.

⑤ **Irreplaceables are less likely to teach the students who need them most.**

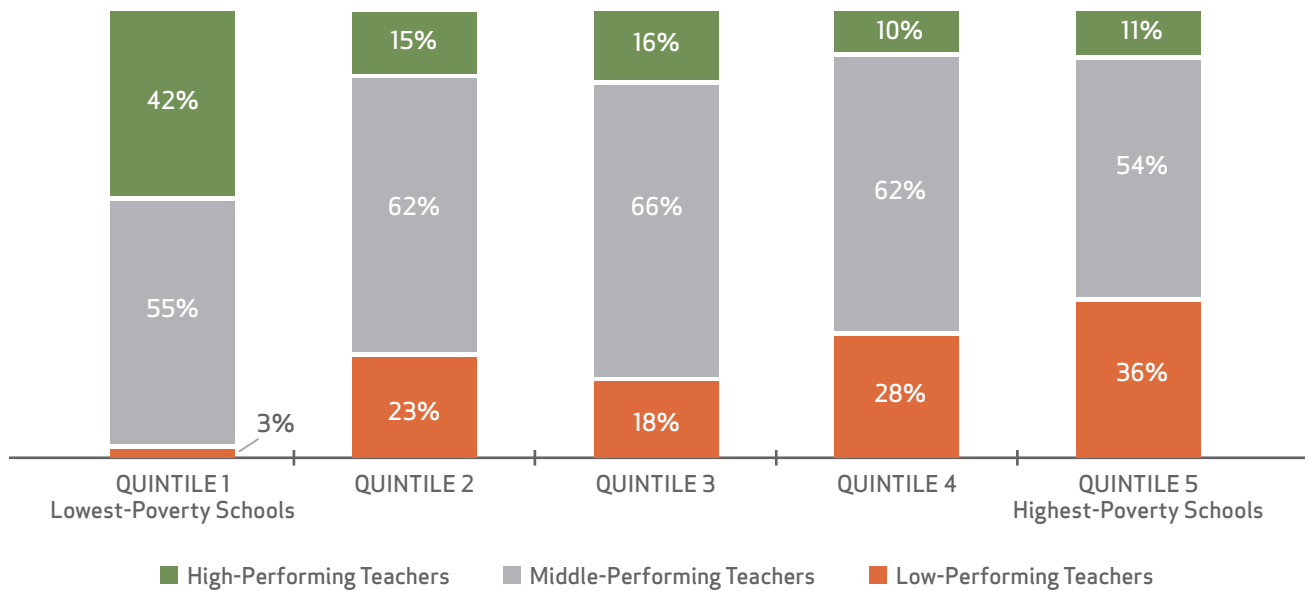
Irreplaceables in DCPS appear to teach significantly fewer high-poverty students than low performers do. Top teachers in DCPS reported that only 60 percent of their students come from high-poverty backgrounds, compared to 90 percent of the students taught by low-performing teachers.<sup>15</sup> This is a troubling finding and one that stands in stark contrast to the other districts we studied, where Irreplaceables were about as likely as low performers to report teaching high-poverty students.

The effect on students is striking. In a high-need DCPS elementary school, the typical student will have two low-performing teachers before she moves on to middle school, and nearly 40 percent of the students will never be assigned to an Irreplaceable's classroom. In a low-need elementary school, however, the typical student will have two or three Irreplaceable teachers, and most students (4 out of 5) will never have a low-performing teacher.

There are two possible explanations for this trend. The first possibility is that top-performing teachers are inequitably distributed across DCPS schools, with more Irreplaceables working in lower-need schools. The second possibility is that a flaw in the design or implementation of IMPACT makes it easier for teachers working in low-need schools to earn top ratings.

We found evidence suggesting that inequitable distribution is a real problem regardless of the existence of design or implementation flaws in the evaluation system. When we performed our analysis using value-added results instead of IMPACT ratings—a method that controls for student poverty levels—high-need schools still had many more low-performing teachers and many fewer Irreplaceables (Figure 9). However, more analysis is necessary to confirm this pattern and determine whether other factors are involved.

FIGURE 9 | DCPS TEACHER COMPOSITION BY SCHOOL POVERTY LEVEL



**Irreplaceables in DCPS are much more likely to work in low-poverty schools.**

Teacher performance calculated by value-added scores, rather than IMPACT ratings. Source: DCPS SY 2010-11 district data.

<sup>15</sup> Percentages represent median values reported in teacher survey responses.

Inadequate compensation ranked 20th on the list of reasons Irreplaceables cited for leaving DCPS; it was one of the top three factors in the other districts we studied.

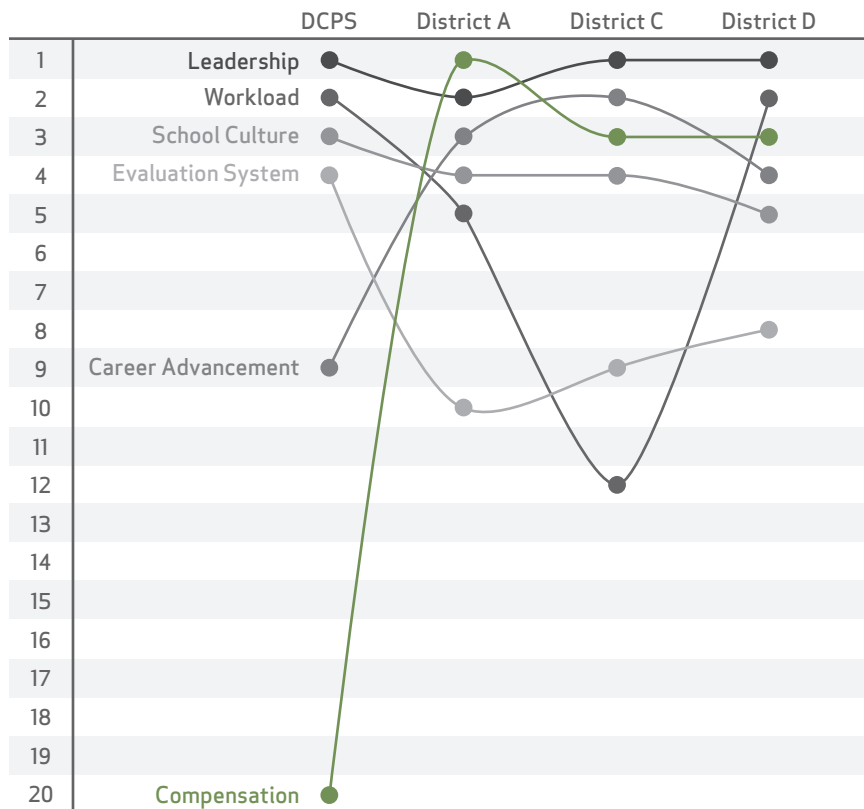
⑥ Performance-based compensation is helping DCPS keep more Irreplaceables.

DCPS has done more than any other district we studied to make performance a major factor in teacher compensation. In particular, DCPS is the only major district that has focused on moving its best teachers up the compensation scale quickly, even if they are relatively new to the profession. Some 59 to 61 percent of Irreplaceables in DCPS earn more than the average teacher, and 61 to 65 percent earn more than the average ineffective teacher. This is an improvement compared to the other four districts we studied, where 55 percent of Irreplaceables earned a *lower* salary than the average ineffective teacher.

As a result, Irreplaceables in DCPS are much more satisfied with their compensation than Irreplaceables in the other districts we studied. Nearly 70 percent indicated that they were satisfied with their pay, compared to 11 percent, 27 percent, 39 percent and 44 percent in the four other districts.

In fact, the changes to compensation policy in DCPS have largely eliminated the issue as a factor pushing Irreplaceables out the door. Inadequate compensation ranked 20th on the list of most common reasons Irreplaceables cited for leaving DCPS schools (Figure 10); it was one of the top three factors in the other districts we studied. Instead, DCPS teachers were more likely to cite leadership, workload, school culture or evaluation.

FIGURE 10 | TOP REASONS CITED BY HIGH PERFORMERS PLANNING TO LEAVE



Thanks to policy changes, DCPS rarely loses Irreplaceables because of dissatisfaction with their compensation.

Most important reasons cited by low performers planning to leave their schools in the next three years, ranked by frequency. Ns in District B were too low to include in this analysis. Source: TNTIP survey data.

In addition, compensation was the No. 2 factor that DCPS Irreplaceables cited as a motivation for staying, behind only their ability to have a “significant impact” on student outcomes. In only one of the four other districts we studied did compensation rate among the top five motivations for staying.

⑦ **DCPS schools can “trade up” when they replace low-performing teachers—even when the replacements are brand new to the classroom.**

In *The Irreplaceables*, we showed that even an average first-year teacher is likely to achieve greater student achievement growth than a chronically low-performing teacher, based on teacher value-added scores. DCPS offers a unique opportunity to test that finding more broadly, using a rigorous evaluation system that includes multiple measures.

A total of 318 teachers who taught in DCPS in the 2010-11 school year were low performers the previous school year. Their average IMPACT score in 2010-11 was 245, compared to an average score of 277 for the district’s first-year teachers. In other words, DCPS schools would generally have gotten better results by hiring brand-new teachers than inviting these low performers to return.

This holds true even among the subset of teachers who did not have value-added scores in 2010-11 or the previous school year, whose IMPACT scores were based overwhelmingly on classroom observations. The average 2010-11 IMPACT score for teachers in this category who were low performers the previous year was 247, compared to average score of 282 among first-year teachers.

In all, three-quarters of the returning low-performing teachers scored lower than the average first-year teacher in the following year. Throughout the district, nearly 30 percent of teachers with more than five years of experience earned lower IMPACT scores than the average first-year teacher.





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## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

DCPS's experience offers two overarching lessons for state, district and school leaders who want to make smart retention a top priority.

### ① It takes more than policy changes to maximize smart retention.

The smartest retention strategies must solve both sides of the teacher retention crisis: the systemic neglect of great teachers and the tolerance for poor performance that allows struggling teachers to remain indefinitely.

DCPS stands out from the pack for creating a policy environment that is more conducive to smart retention than any other urban school district in the country. Policy changes have helped DCPS compensate Irreplaceables more competitively, created new forms of recognition for top performance and expedited the removal of low-performing teachers. As a result, the district has achieved greater differentiation in its teacher retention rates than any other we have studied.

However, to continue this progress, principals must fully embrace the spirit of the policy changes. District-wide policy cannot substitute for what teachers experience day in and day out at their schools. With compensation and career pathways off the table, school leadership, workload and school culture remain the top reasons for leaving cited by Irreplaceables.

If principals and school leadership teams do not make an effort to recognize and retain great teachers and build strong instructional cultures, those teachers will be more likely to leave. Smart retention requires principals who can and will use their own influence and the policy tools at their disposal.

### ② Districts can remove low-performing teachers without alienating top teachers.

DCPS dismisses most of its consistently low-performing teachers every year. Yet it still retains as many Irreplaceables as other districts. Enforcing high expectations for teachers does not appear to have made it significantly more difficult for the district to keep its Irreplaceables. Nor has it created school culture challenges any more severe than what we found in districts that have not made major policy changes.

School principals and district leaders often worry that seeking to remove unsuccessful teachers will alienate the rest of the faculty and create a toxic school environment. Our research, past and present, suggests that it is actually the failure to enforce high expectations that weakens a school's culture, and that the best teachers want to work in schools that are serious about good teaching. This appears to hold true in DCPS too, at the school and district level. It is striking that DCPS has enforced a high bar for performance, but far more of its Irreplaceables feel valued by their district than in the other districts we studied.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DCPS

DCPS has made substantial progress toward smart teacher retention. Our analysis suggests four steps the district can take as it moves ahead.

### ① Don't compromise on high expectations for teachers.

The single biggest thing DCPS has done to move toward smart retention is setting and enforcing high expectations for all teachers (through IMPACT and quality-focused provisions in the 2010 teachers union contract). The district has wisely made improvements to IMPACT each year based on feedback from teachers and principals, and it should continue to do that. But DCPS should resist calls to return to the days when struggling teachers could remain in the classroom for years, even if they showed no signs of improvement.

### ② Carefully monitor teacher composition at high-need and low-performing schools.

In DCPS, high-need and low-performing schools have far fewer Irreplaceables and far more low-performing teachers than other schools in the district. They even have fewer Irreplaceables and more low performers than similar schools in the other districts we studied.

IMPACTplus awards bonuses for success, and DCPS's LIFT career ladder should help keep and reward teachers who achieve excellence in the most challenging environments. It is too soon to tell if these policies are working quickly enough, but the distribution of effective teachers is a critical issue that DCPS must continue to monitor—and address—if current policies and practices do not close the gap.

### ③ Help school leaders do more to keep great teachers, and hold them accountable for making it happen.

DCPS principals come to the challenge of keeping great teachers with the advantage of an extremely supportive policy infrastructure behind them, but they are still missing opportunities to keep more of their best. Whether this reflects the reality that cultural change takes longer than policy change or indicates that the district needs to do a better job communicating and supporting a vision for administrators remains to be seen. Either way, DCPS has an important opportunity to increase retention efforts for top performers by continuing to improve leadership practices.

District leaders should train principals on simple, day-to-day strategies they can use to ensure Irreplaceables feel recognized and valued. Principals need to understand that retaining Irreplaceables is a top priority.

District leaders should also work with principals to give teachers more opportunities to share feedback about their school's instructional culture and working conditions, through regular surveys, for example. They should use that information to identify problem areas and improve teachers' day-to-day experiences.

In the longer term, DCPS should make instructional leadership—including the willingness and ability to retain Irreplaceables and create a culture where great teachers want to work—a primary focus in principal hiring, support and evaluation. The district is already taking a step in that direction with a federal grant that will tie principals' salaries in part to teacher retention rates and leadership skills.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Brown, Emma. "New plan will allow merit raises for D.C. school principals." *The Washington Post*. September 27, 2012.

## ABOUT TNTP

TNTP strives to end the injustice of educational inequality by providing excellent teachers to the students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching in every classroom. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP is driven by the knowledge that effective teachers have a greater impact on student achievement than any other school factor. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to find, develop and keep great teachers. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 49,000 teachers—mainly through its highly selective Teaching Fellows programs—benefiting an estimated 8 million students. TNTP has also released a series of acclaimed studies of the policies and practices that affect the quality of the nation's teacher workforce, including *The Widget Effect* (2009), *Teacher Evaluation 2.0* (2010) and *The Irreplaceables* (2012). Today TNTP is active in more than 25 cities, including 10 of the nation's 15 largest. For more information, please visit [www.tntp.org](http://www.tntp.org).



