



Recruiting and Retaining Highly Effective Turnaround Teachers

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A “turnaround” refers to a quick, dramatic improvement in an organization’s performance — inside or outside of the field of education. In education specifically, the term describes a rapid, dramatic improvement in low-performing school brought about by a new — or newly empowered and accountable — leader and staff.¹ State, local education agency (LEA) and school leaders face significant challenges as they seek to support low-performing schools with high-performing educators best suited to turnarounds. While a certain amount of turnover is typically part of the turnaround process, shortages of teacher candidates persist across the country, particularly in rural areas and low-performing schools.² In addition, these schools’ failure to retain their highly effective teachers, in particular, exacerbates talent shortages and leaves too many students without access to such teachers.³

This publication provides resources for State and local leaders considering strategies to recruit and retain highly effective teachers for school turnarounds. It summarizes research and promising practices on recruitment and retention in turnarounds across all sectors, as well as findings on the recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers, with emphasis on actions State leaders can take to find and keep talented educators in turnaround schools. Links to additional research and information are provided.

Recruiting Highly Effective Teachers for Turnaround Schools

Turnaround research and experience suggest that turnaround schools often require special staffing efforts to secure the teacher talent required to bring about rapid and dramatic improvements in student performance.⁴ States can support LEA recruiting efforts in several ways: aligning policy to enable priority hiring and placement in turnaround schools, supporting or funding financial incentives for teachers in turnaround schools, and helping LEAs redefine jobs in ways that leverage highly effective teachers for larger numbers of students.

Priority Hiring and Placement

States can play a critical role in turnaround success by helping LEAs prioritize teacher recruitment, hiring and placement for turnaround schools.

Schools implementing the turnaround school improvement model required by the Federal School Improvement Grant Program need a ready pool of qualified candidates to fill open positions. State efforts — including early or mission-focused recruitment for low-performing schools — can help turnaround schools find high-quality teacher applicants.⁵ With a broader reach than many LEAs, State agencies can also issue their own call for teachers to serve in turnaround schools. In Tennessee, for example, the Achievement School District (ASD) launched its own recruitment campaign for teachers to serve in the State’s low-performing schools. The effort involved a dedicated website and aggressive outreach across the State and nation for teacher candidates who matched the ASD’s mission: to give all students the opportunity to attend the best schools in the country.

The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

In addition, States can work with local teachers' unions to revise policies or help secure waivers for low-performing schools from tenure protections, from "bumping" rights solely based on seniority, and from other job protections and policies that typically apply to staff in all LEA schools.⁶ For example, in 2009, the union and the district in New Haven, Connecticut agreed to a new interpretation of the state's tenure law that would still require a fair dismissal policy, but no longer effectively barred dismissal of tenured teachers.⁷ Such policy changes or waivers can help schools keep highly effective teachers already in their building, whether or not they have tenure or seniority.

Financial Incentives

One approach to recruiting high-performing and high-potential teachers to turnaround schools is to change compensation: to pay teachers more for working in low-performing schools. Education research suggests that compensation alone is generally not sufficient to get new candidates in the door or encourage them to stay.⁸ But salary and other financial incentives are likely necessary to recruit and keep teachers. Roughly half of

Transfer Incentives Attract Highly Effective Teachers to Low-Performing Schools

A recent study funded by the U.S. Department of Education found that financial incentives successfully attracted high performing teachers to transfer to low-performing schools and retained them in these schools for two years. A majority of teachers chose to remain in their schools even after two years, when the financial incentive payments ended. In elementary schools, these high performers helped to raise math and reading test scores and were found to be more effective than teachers who would have filled the schools' teaching vacancies without the presence of the transfer incentive program.

To review the technical report, see <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/>.

teachers cite low salary as a factor in their decision to leave the profession, and approximately two-thirds say that better salaries would encourage teachers to stay on the job.⁹ In addition, surveys of employees across industries suggest that pay is a more important factor for high performers — exactly the kind of teachers that are needed in low-performing schools.¹⁰

A cross-sector review of literature from associations, advocacy organizations and think tanks within industries that have historically faced shortages offers lessons for public education. This research, covering the medical, legal, social services, civil service and defense sectors also suggests, however, that recruitment incentives are unlikely to have the effect educators hope for unless they comprise a fairly significant portion of recipients' compensation.¹¹ In sectors outside education, successful incentives typically comprise a larger portion of recipients' total compensation than most such attempts in public schools. To match the type of incentives that succeed in these sectors, education leaders would need to plan for premiums that approach 10-25 percent of teachers' average base pay (above current averages of 4-9 percent in schools today).¹²

In recent years, several States and LEAs have initiated compensation reforms for highly effective teachers, particularly in low-performing schools. For example, in Indiana, local salary schedules must be based in part on teacher performance and the academic needs of the teacher's students. In Tennessee, teachers can earn additional compensation by working in high-needs schools under State requirements for new differentiated pay plans. And in Florida, teachers in Title I schools and those in the bottom two categories of school improvement are eligible for salary supplements.

Redefining Teachers' Roles

Beyond financial incentives, if a particular position is persistently difficult to fill, successful organizations in other sectors often reorganize staffing to make the position more attractive or eliminate the need for it entirely.¹³ States can also help LEAs and schools address their staffing needs in turnaround schools by designing policies that support new roles for highly

effective teachers that extend their reach to more students. By redefining teachers' jobs in ways that let them reach more students with excellent teaching, schools can immediately provide more students with access to top-quality instruction, while relying on less-experienced teachers, paraprofessionals or blended learning technology to assist with basic-skills acquisition and other classroom tasks. It also can ease recruiting needs by decreasing the overall number of teaching positions a school has to fill. At the same time, the career benefits made possible by staffing models that extend the reach of highly effective teachers can improve retention by making the job more attractive to top teachers already working in schools today.¹⁴

In North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Project L.I.F.T. forms an innovative zone within this large urban LEA. Launched in 2012, the program aims to extend the reach of excellent teachers to more students, while increasing pay and implementing complex career paths for these teachers within current budgets and without the need for supplemental funding. The schools' staffing plans are intended to enable excellent teachers to lead multiple classrooms, specialize in their best subjects and roles, use digital learning to free their time to reach more students, plan and collaborate, and employ interactive technology to teach students in multiple schools.

Retaining Highly Effective Teachers

Many States and LEAs have increased efforts to retain teachers beyond the first few years in a school, especially in turnaround schools. Frequently followed tactics include teacher induction programs, professional development and various other supports for new and experienced staff.¹⁵ These efforts will have the most impact when they focus specifically on retaining *highly effective* teachers. In fact, the field's real challenge has been to retain more high performers — those teachers who achieve outstanding results with students year after year, and who leave classrooms at the same or only slightly lower rates than their average or less-effective peers.¹⁶

As SEAs work to help LEAs and schools cut turnover among highly effective teachers in turnaround schools, States may consider two approaches. A systemic approach has program supports aimed at retaining successful teachers across the board, while a tailored, individualized approach aims at keeping individual teachers who are crucial to a successful school turnaround.

Systemic Approaches to Increase Retention

Research and practice suggest several strategies that schools and LEAs can use to improve retention of top teachers in turnaround schools, including team-based staffing, empowered and challenging roles for teachers, and purposeful compensation. State leaders can help LEAs implement these strategies by removing policy barriers to staffing and pay autonomy in turnaround schools, adopting policies that require LEAs to use that autonomy, and designing and directly funding pay increases for highly effective teachers in turnaround schools.

Team-based staffing

Research from across sectors suggests that grouping high performers together improves their collective performance and lowers turnover after hiring.¹⁷ Schools and LEAs that assign work in ways that maximize teacher interaction — such as by enabling highly effective teachers to move together to low-performing schools, or creating opportunities for groups of teachers across schools to work together regularly — may be more likely to retain their top talent. For example, the nonprofit Teach Plus sponsors the T3 initiative, which places highly effective teachers in turnaround schools in Massachusetts; Washington, D.C.; and Tennessee. T3 teacher leaders are placed in teams that comprise at least 25 percent of the school's total faculty and play a central role in helping to turn around low-performing schools, as they are selected based on their effectiveness with urban students, are trained in a cohort for the challenges of a turnaround, have formal responsibility for instructional leadership and have the opportunity to earn additional pay.¹⁸ In Boston, where the T3 initiative launched in 2010, this

approach appears to be working: During the first two years of implementation, the six pilot schools showed accelerated student achievement across grade levels in both English language arts and mathematics.¹⁹

Empowered and challenging roles

A sense of achievement and opportunities for recognition, advancement and growth are key to building and sustaining employee motivation — a critical factor in retention.²⁰ Empowering teachers with opportunities for advancement can increase retention rates, especially for high performers. Equally important for turnaround schools is the research finding that suggests that high-performing employees value opportunities to step into new roles and take on new challenges, even if they do not involve formal advancement.²¹ Challenging work and the opportunity to take on new roles aligned with their interests can significantly boost retention among schools' highly effective teachers.

Purposeful compensation

Literature from across sectors provides strong evidence that tying compensation to performance, beyond just recruitment incentives, can have positive effects on the overall quality of a team, including increased retention of the most successful members.²² Decades of research suggest that performance-based pay is more attractive to high performers, who stand to earn more and are confident in their skills — those most important for turnaround schools to keep. In Washington, D.C., the District of Columbia Public Schools has increased its retention rate for high-performing teachers, in part, by tying raises and bonuses to teacher performance. Financial rewards are so substantial for high performers, especially high performers in the school district's lowest-performing schools, that teachers can earn \$100,000 after four years of teaching.²³

Individualized Approaches to Retaining High Performers

Even highly effective teachers differ both in their value to a turnaround school and in the combination of factors that shape their decision to stay with a particular school. In addition to systemic strategies, LEAs and States may need specialized efforts to retain certain teachers who contribute extra value to a turnaround. These efforts might involve higher compensation, a new role or assignment, flexible work roles, sabbatical leave or other approaches, based on what matters most to the employee. Research across sectors suggests that the most successful organizations use a combination of systemic approaches designed to maximize overall retention, in conjunction with focused strategies that enable direct managers to do what it takes to keep the top contributors on their team.²⁴

States can support the use of both systemic and individualized approaches by LEAs to ensure that State policies on teacher hiring, placement, tenure and compensation do not inadvertently prevent LEAs from recruiting and retaining high-performing staff. In addition, States can work to finalize budgets in time for schools to design and fund teacher assignments before the start of a turnaround. State agencies may also consider offering either performance-based awards directly to teachers who show success with students in turnaround schools or investing in promising LEA efforts to reform staffing policies, career roles and compensation. Additionally, States can create or align policies to protect the autonomy of principals at turnaround schools to retain and reward their highest performers.

Practical Resources for Staffing Turnaround Schools

Turning around Chronically Low-Performing Schools. U.S. Department of Education (2008).

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf

This guide, from the Institute of Education Science's What Works Clearinghouse, identifies practices that can improve the performance of chronically low-performing schools.

Closing the Talent Gap: Attracting and Retaining Top-Third Graduates to Careers in Teaching. McKinsey and Co. (2010).

<http://mckinseysociety.com/closing-the-talent-gap/>

This report asks what lessons the United States might learn from nations that succeed in delivering world-class educational outcomes with top talent in teaching — Singapore, South Korea and Finland — and what an American version of such a strategy might entail.

Financial Incentives for Hard-to-Staff Positions: Cross-Sector Lessons for Public Education. Center for American Progress (2008).

http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2008/11/pdf/hard_to_staff.pdf

This report summarizes research and experience from across sectors to guide State and LEA leaders as they design and refine programs in public education for hard-to-staff schools.

School Turnaround Teachers: Competencies for Success. Public Impact (2008).

http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_Teacher_Competencies.pdf

This guide helps schools implementing turnarounds understand the underlying characteristics of teachers likely to succeed by clarifying the critical competencies — or patterns of thinking, feeling, speaking and acting — that enable people to succeed in the turnaround context. The guide includes definitions of each competency and examples of various levels as they may play out in a turnaround school. The related [Selection Toolkit](#) includes step-by-step tools to help State, LEA and school leaders run a competency-based screening process for teacher candidates in turnaround schools.

The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools. TNTP (2012).

http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Irreplaceables_2012.pdf

This report documents failures by schools not only to retain enough teachers, but also to retain the right teachers. Spanning four urban school LEAs encompassing 90,000 teachers, 2,100 schools and 1.4 million students, the study focuses on the experiences of teachers so successful at advancing student learning that they are nearly impossible to replace.

Keeping Irreplaceables in D.C. Public Schools. TNTP (2012).

http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_DCirreplaceables_2012.pdf

A companion piece to *The Irreplaceables*, this report describes how critical policy changes in D.C. have improved retention rates for the most effective teachers.

Shooting for Stars: Cross-Sector Lessons for Retaining High-Performing Educators. Public Impact (2010).

http://opportunityculture.org/images/stories/shooting_for_stars_2010.pdf

This report examines the research and case studies outside education — such as in private businesses, nonprofits, government and health care organizations — to identify four key strategies to boost high-performer retention in K-12 schools: pay with purpose, give high performers mountains to climb, design flexible and challenging work roles, and build lasting teams.

Endnotes

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