Want to Improve Teaching?

Create Collaborative, Supportive Schools

BY ELAINE ALLENSWORTH

Imagine trying to be an effective teacher at a school where the average student misses two months of class time out of nine months of the school year—a common situation in urban high schools. Further, imagine that your fellow teachers and school leaders refuse to work together to prevent students from skipping class or support struggling students in a coordinated way. You may stay, but probably not for long, and not if you have other options. Teachers tend to leave schools where they feel ineffective. At the same time, it's harder to be effective in schools with the lowest levels of student performance, schools that are most in need of effective teaching.

There is a pressing need to improve the quality of instruction in urban schools to reduce long-standing inequities in educational performance by race and economic status. The current policy context acknowledges the importance of teaching quality for student achievement, but the most popular policy strategies for improving teaching focus on individual teachers, using incentives to attract and reward strong teachers, and developing methods to identify and remove those who are weak. The work my colleagues and I have done at the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows that the context in which teachers work sets the stage for them to be effective and want to stay in their school. It does little good to put highly qualified teachers in a weak school if they are unlikely to stay there, or if they are not able to put their skills to good use because of larger problems in that school environment. There is a role for examining individual teachers' performance, and for using performance management to build the professional capacity of a school, but it is unlikely to be effective if it narrowly focuses on individual teachers. Without broader work on the school as an organization, schools serving the most disadvantaged students will face high rates of teacher turnover and little chance of sustained instructional improvement.

In our study on teacher mobility in Chicago, *The Schools Teachers Leave*,[1] we found that the quality of the work environment was strongly predictive of whether teachers remained in their schools. One key element in teacher retention is teachers' perceptions of their colleagues as collaborators. Teachers are more likely to stay in a school if they see themselves as part of a team that is working together toward making their school better, supported by school leadership. Teachers are also more likely to stay in schools where they feel they have influence over their work environment and they trust their principal as an instructional leader.

These are the same elements of schools that are most predictive of improvements in student learning; schools that show the largest improvements in student learning over time are those where teachers work collectively on improving instruction, and where school leadership is inclusive and focused on instruction.[2]

Two further working conditions account for most of the differences in teacher mobility rates by school racial composition. One is teachers' relationships with parents. Especially in elementary schools, teachers are more likely to stay in schools where they feel that parents support their work as partners in educating students. The other, which is particularly critical in high schools, is the learning climate at the school. Teachers are more likely to stay at schools where students feel safe, and where students report that their classroom peers engage in appropriate academic behavior.[3]

Research outside of Chicago has likewise found that working conditions seem to affect whether teachers remain teaching in their school. For example, Susan Moore Johnson, the lead researcher on the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, found that novice teachers are more likely to stay in their schools when they are engaged in a collaborative way with more experienced colleagues.[4] And a 2008–2009 follow-up study to the U.S. Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey found that teachers who changed schools tended to report better working conditions in their new school than their old school: more support from administrators, more opportunities for working with colleagues, better availability of resources and materials, and more influence over workplace policies and practices.[5] Other studies have found that strong principal leadership reduced turnover.[6]

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School and Classroom Context

In 2010, my colleagues and I documented the findings from a large study in Chicago that examined the ways in which school practices and school and community conditions promote or inhibit improvements in mathematics and reading.[7] We found that schools that are effective in improving student learning tend to have strong organizational structures across five areas: leadership, professional capacity, partnerships with parents and community, learning climate, and instruction. When examining professional capacity in the

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school, we found that the individual qualifications of teachers were not nearly as important as the ways in which teachers worked together. When tied to strong instructional practices, the extent to which teachers took collective responsibility for the school and formed a professional community were the most important elements for increasing learning gains. Schools with strong collaboration were more effective as a whole than schools with strong individuals but little collaboration.

While a strong professional community

seemed to lead teachers to be more effective than they would be on their own, a poor learning climate limited the effectiveness of even the most qualified teachers. Another study in Chicago found that the association between teacher qualifications and learning gains depended completely on the school context.[8] This study showed that, in general, learning gains were greater the more that the teaching staff had high levels of human capital—higher ACT scores, more teachers who passed the basic skills test on the first try, and full certification. But there was no association between teacher quality and learning gains at schools with poor learning climates—students at these schools were unlikely to show substantial gains regardless of the quality of the teaching staff.

It is difficult to enact high-quality instruction in a disorderly, unsafe environment. But developing a safe, orderly climate is more challenging when a school serves disadvantaged student populations. At the same time, our research shows that schools serving highly disadvantaged students that do manage to develop strong organizational supports for teaching are just as likely to show learning improvements and to hold on to their teaching staff as are schools serving more advantaged student populations.[9]

The Focus on Individual Teachers

Strategies around teaching that focus on the qualities and performance of individual teachers assume that instructional quality is inherent in the teacher. If teachers were working in the same context, this *might* be true, but teachers face very different working conditions in different schools. Teacher evaluation systems that judge teachers without regard to context can further disincentivize teaching in the hardest environments.

Some value-added models consider peer effects or student composition. However, many do not. They often compare students with similar prior performance to each other—this shows which schools and teachers produce the highest learning gains. But they do not adjust for the fact that it is harder to create a strong environment in some contexts than in others. Teacher evaluations based on observations are not any more fair for teachers in the most difficult contexts—commonly used protocols make no adjustments for the types of students being served. Yet, we know that instructional quality is determined not only by the skills teachers bring to the classroom, but by the interaction of those skills with the students being served and the larger school context.[10] If we base incentives and employment decisions entirely on performance, without regard to context, we risk increasing turnover rates in schools that already have little stability. At the same time, it is not fair to students to lower expectations for instructional quality, especially for those with low levels of achievement who most need high-quality instruction. Data on classroom instruction and student performance can be used to drive conversations about practice to structure professional development and build a professional community in the school, focused on the instruction and learning that is occurring in the building.

It seems unlikely that much will be gained from better methods of identifying teacher performance in schools with weak organizational supports. That is why it is so critical to have systems that support teachers around instruction: collaboration can provide insight into methods for better practice. If a teacher is in a school with a poor climate for instruction where she feels she cannot be effective, pointing out that she is ineffective may do little except make her more frustrated. Strategies that focus on individual teachers can only go so far by themselves.

More critical than identifying those few especially effective or ineffective teachers is to develop collaborative relationships among teachers, school leaders, and families. Without improving the school context so that it is a good working environment, teachers who could have been effective are likely to leave. Many schools are stuck in a cycle of teacher loss that is hard to break—teachers leave because of poor school climate and low achievement, but these are hard to improve when there is constant turnover. Unless this cycle is broken, students who have historically underperformed will continue to do so. Schools that struggle with low achievement, especially those serving the most impoverished communities, face extraordinary challenges in developing strong organizations that can maintain a strong teaching staff. But building those organizational supports is what is needed to provide a high-quality instructional environment for all students and improve equity in educational outcomes. □

Endnotes

1. Elaine M. Allensworth, Stephen Ponisciak, and Christopher Mazzeo, *The Schools Teachers Leave: Teacher Mobility in Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2009).

2. Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine M. Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

3. Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo, *The Schools Teachers Leave*.

4. Susan Moore Johnson, "How Best to Add Value? Strike a Balance between the Individual and the Organization in School Reform," EPI Briefing Paper #249 (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2009).

5. Ashley Keigher and Freddie Cross, *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results from the 2008–09 Teacher Follow-Up Survey* (Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

6. Charles Clotfelter, Elizabeth Glennie, Helen Ladd, and Jacob Vigdor, "Would Higher Salaries Keep Teachers in High-Poverty Schools? Evidence from a Policy Intervention in North Carolina," NBER Working Paper 12285 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006); and Jason A. Grissom, "But Do They Stay? Addressing Issues of Teacher Retention through Alternative Certification," in *Alternative Routes to Teaching: Mapping the New Landscape of Teacher Education*, ed. Pam Grossman and Susanna Loeb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008).

7. Bryk et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement*.

8. Karen J. DeAngelis and Jennifer B. Presley, "Teacher Qualifications and School Climate: Examining Their Interrelationship for School Improvement," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 10, no. 1 (2011): 84–120.

9. Bryk et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement*; and Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo, *The Schools Teachers Leave*.

10. It is not just the teacher that determines the quality of instruction in a classroom, but the interaction of the teacher and the students together around the material technologies. See Deborah Loewenberg Ball and David K. Cohen, "Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Education," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, ed. Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 3–32.