



BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TALENT

**CREATING CONDITIONS IN HIGH-POVERTY
SCHOOLS THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE
TEACHING AND LEARNING**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Improving teaching effectiveness is a hot topic for policymakers around the country these days. The gathering movement marks an important step forward in the ongoing effort to strengthen our nation's schools. In many cases, however, these efforts start and stop with improving outdated, inadequate teacher evaluation systems. Such approaches fail to address a key problem: that our most vulnerable students are consistently and disproportionately saddled with the weakest teachers and seldom have access to the strong instruction they need and deserve.

To correct this systemic flaw, districts and states must address policy and culture issues that lead to higher rates of teacher dissatisfaction and turnover in schools serving large populations of low-income students and students of color. Teachers do not work in a vacuum. Like most other professionals, their feelings about their jobs and their decisions about where to teach are significantly impacted by their work environments. Despite widespread assumptions that students are the primary cause of teacher dissatisfaction and attrition, research shows that the work environment in schools—particularly the quality of school leadership and staff cohesion—actually matters more, especially among teachers working in high-poverty schools.

Around the country, too many states and districts are giving short shrift to the teaching and learning environments in schools serving students with the greatest need. But a few places are taking

this work seriously. In this report, the Education Trust highlights five districts that recognize the importance of teaching and learning conditions: Ascension Parish Public Schools in Louisiana, Boston Public Schools in Massachusetts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, and Fresno Unified and Sacramento City Unified in California. These districts view building and sustaining strong teaching and learning conditions as a key strategy for attracting, developing and retaining strong teachers in high-need schools. While each district's approach is different, some consistent themes emerge: a focus on strong leadership, a campus-wide commitment to improving instruction by analyzing student data and reflecting on practice, and a collaborative environment that values and rewards individual contribution.

Done right, improved evaluation systems in coordination with positive conditions for teaching and learning could achieve equitable access to effective teachers for all students. With information on how effective teachers are at growing student learning, districts can be more deliberate and strategic about creating conditions that attract, grow, and keep strong teachers in the schools that need them most: schools serving large concentrations of low-income students and students of color. But this change will not occur on its own. States and districts must be intentional about removing policy barriers and creating conditions that ensure our neediest students have access to great teachers.

FIGURING OUT WHO THE TOP TEACHERS ARE IS CRUCIAL, BUT WITHOUT ATTENTION TO SCHOOL CONDITIONS THAT DRAW AND HOLD ON TO GOOD TEACHERS, THIS EFFORT IS MEANINGLESS TO STRUGGLING AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS.



ASCENSION PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Supporting and Developing Teachers to Raise Student Success

Located along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the Ascension Parish Public School System serves more than 19,000 students and is one of the fastest growing school systems in Louisiana. Roughly half of the students Ascension serves come from low-income families and one-third are students of color. While the district typically ranks among the top 10 in the state, a closer look at the data reveals that the strong academic performance of the district's more affluent schools on the east bank of the Mississippi river masks the poor results of the largely African-American, high-poverty schools in its west bank communities.

Jennifer Tuttleton, Ascension Parish's director of school improvement, says that until recently, recruiting teachers to the low-performing schools in the west bank had been difficult. Among other obstacles to student achievement in these schools, she says: "There was not a culture of time reserved for professional development." And, she adds, there was no shared commitment to using data to help students improve.

A NEW STRATEGY FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In the 2005-06 school year, two west bank schools serving large percentages of low-income students and students of color fell into state school improvement status. Lowery Intermediate School and Donaldsonville High School posted School Performance Scores of 55 and 58 on a scale of 0-200. The cut-off score was 60.

In an effort to lift the two schools out of school improvement status and close the achievement gap between high-poverty and low-poverty schools in the district, Ascension decided to focus on improving the quality of teaching in these schools. To this end, district leaders chose to implement TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement.

The TAP system focuses on four interrelated elements to improve teachers' instruction:

1. Ongoing applied professional learning
2. Instructionally focused accountability
3. Opportunities for career advancement through multiple career paths
4. Performance-based compensation

TAP emphasizes learning opportunities that are relevant, continuous, and led by expert instructors. To inform and drive the system's professional development efforts, TAP employs a thorough instructional accountability system that includes regular and rigorous performance evaluations. The results are then used to inform professional development planning, career advancement, and compensation. The system also requires educators to participate in regular and meaningful collaboration and self-reflection within the structure of the school day.

Kim Melancon, associate principal at Donaldsonville High, says the combination of these complementary elements was critical to improving the teaching and learning conditions at her school. "I don't think we could have done this without all four components of TAP together."

Ascension chose the TAP model for these two struggling schools because both were wrestling with environments in which teachers were not working collaboratively to take responsibility for improving student achievement. "At these two schools, the culture had to be challenged," Tuttleton explains, noting that the biggest hurdle was getting teachers to examine their pedagogy and to accept that their students' failures were *their* failures as well.

District officials say they believe TAP forced teachers to explore their commitment to new learning and helped to create a collaborative environment. Once teachers saw that the more rigorous performance evaluations were employed, first and foremost, to improve practice, rather than as a punitive tool, most embraced the new culture of shared learning and responsibility that TAP brought to their schools.

“Even the best teacher in the world can be better,” says Shaneka Burnett, a teacher at Lowery Intermediate School. She credits TAP with helping teachers to embrace this perspective. “We all understand where we want students to go, how to use the [TAP] rubric to evaluate our practice, and what [the results] mean, so we are able to collaborate and share ideas.”

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IMPROVED TEACHER SATISFACTION AND RETENTION

Although Ascension did not make any staffing changes related to TAP’s implementation at first, it later replaced a small number of administrators and faculty who did not demonstrate openness to changing the school’s teaching and learning conditions. Many teachers remained in the schools and thrived under TAP. “When teachers see successes in their classrooms [as a result of new practices], that really helps [change their mindset],” Melancon says.

Getting teachers to come to these two schools on the west bank is no longer a problem at Ascension. “We have turned a corner where when you ask teachers to come to these schools, they say it is an honor,” Tuttleton says. Her impression is that many teachers are now “waiting for the call.”

Monica Hills, principal at Lowery Intermediate School says that what makes these schools so appealing is the opportunity to work in an environment deliberately focused on supporting teachers’ instruction through reflection, feedback, and mentoring; providing teachers with non-administrative career growth opportunities; and improving achievement for all students.

Ascension’s experience mirrors what Louisiana found in an independent review of the TAP program in its schools: “Teachers appear to be very positive about the levels of collegiality, opportunities for professional development, and the accountability associated with TAP.”ⁱ

TEACHER EFFICACY AS A PATH TO STUDENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

For Ascension, TAP is a strategic attempt to improve the conditions for teaching and learning in its highest poverty, lowest performing schools.

“We want to build teacher efficacy to build school efficacy,” Tuttleton notes. She and other district leaders are convinced that helping teachers to become more successful and to feel more supported will help them become more effective for their students. Since TAP’s implementation, both Lowery Middle School and Donaldsonville High have seen steady improvement on their School Performance Scores. On another statewide measure, Lowery received a “value-added” student achievement score of 4, signifying above average individual student growth compared with similar schools in the state.ⁱⁱ Neither school is on the state’s “academically unacceptable” list any longer, although both still have significant work to do to reach Louisiana’s new School Performance Score goal of 120.

Burnett attributes her school’s improvement to two critical factors: 1) Teachers are now held accountable for what is happening in their classrooms, and 2) all students are held to high expectations.

While Ascension continues to focus on the initial two TAP schools, the district has expanded the initiative into six additional schools. “The second two schools did not take much convincing because they had seen the positive student achievement gains from the first two [TAP] schools,” Tuttleton says. “The next four schools joining our TAP team asked for the system to be implemented on their campuses.”

i. “Louisiana Plan for Highly Qualified Teachers,” p. 7. March 2010. <http://www.teachlouisiana.net/pdf/LAPlanforHQTeachers.pdf>

ii. http://www.tapsystem.org/newsroom/newsroom.taf?page=pressreleases&_function=detail&id=117

COMMON THEMES

Strong school leadership matters, as does giving these leaders autonomy over staffing and other key decisions. District and school leaders must intentionally focus on building a collaborative environment; developing reflective, data-driven practice; and securing from everyone on campus—teachers and leaders—an unwavering commitment to professional growth and improving instruction. In addition, flipping the traditional status hierarchy by deliberately making the highest poverty and lowest performing schools the most coveted places to work is effective in attracting and keeping strong teachers.

What also is clear, when looking at districts engaged in this work, is that simply improving conditions at high-poverty schools doesn’t guarantee top-notch teacher quality. Improved conditions may make it more attractive for all teachers, strong or struggling, to stay put. To ensure that high-poverty schools are differentially retaining their top teachers (and moving out their worst), districts must improve conditions for teaching and learning, and put in place systems that assess and address teacher performance.

ACTIONS FOR DISTRICTS AND STATES

There is no “silver bullet” strategy that can single-handedly ensure equitable access to effective teachers for low-income students. However, in every context, there is a role for both districts and states, and there are steps they can take to promote teaching environments that attract, sustain, and retain quality teachers in high-need schools.

States can help districts work strategically. While the difficult task of improving teaching environments primarily rests with districts, states must create a policy environment that removes barriers that undermine this goal. Examples of detrimental policies include requiring districts to fill vacancies based solely on seniority, or preventing districts from using innovative strategies to recruit top teachers to high-poverty schools. In addition, states must require districts to implement teacher and school leader evaluation systems that assess accurately and meaningfully differentiate educator effectiveness based significantly on student learning outcomes. Such systems are critical to helping districts identify which teachers they want to attract and keep at their highest poverty schools and which leaders will help accomplish this goal.

There are two other important roles for states in this work. First, they should monitor data on the equitable access to effective teachers between and within districts, requiring action wherever inequities exist. Second, states should identify districts and schools that are using innovative strategies to improve school environments and hold them up as examples of best practices.

Districts can pursue this difficult and important work in various ways. First and foremost, districts must use available data to understand the distribution of their teachers and make equitable access to top teachers an absolute priority. They must then assume a responsibility for making all their schools places where good teachers want to work. Specifically, districts should take the following steps:

- Recruit talented school leaders to their highest need schools, and get them to stay. In addition to the districts spotlighted earlier, the District of Columbia Public Schools has taken a rigorous approach to principal recruitment. The district scours student achievement data from school districts around the country (especially those close to D.C.) and then actively recruits principals of top-performing schools.

- Put in place teacher and school-leader evaluation systems that differentiate educator effectiveness in order to identify top-performing teachers and leaders. Using these systems in conjunction with data on working conditions and attrition, districts can study which teachers are more and less satisfied, as well as which ones are staying and leaving—and why.
- Provide teachers in the highest need schools with meaningful professional growth and career ladders as well as opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, as Ascension Parish and Boston Public Schools have done.
- Avoid isolating their most effective teachers and, instead, build teams of highly effective teachers in the district’s most challenging schools, as both Boston Public Schools and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools have done.
- Concentrate not just on recruiting new school leaders and teachers to high-need schools, but on developing the skills and instructional abilities of existing employees, as have Fresno and Ascension Parish.
- Implement a tool to measure teacher perceptions of their teaching environment, such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools’ working conditions survey, and then use data from the tool to identify target schools and determine primary issues that need to be addressed. For example, Pittsburgh Public Schools works with the New Teacher Center to implement a district-wide survey on working conditions. The district requires all schools to use the data to identify a plan of action and pays special attention to the plans of schools with the poorest survey results to ensure that the planned interventions align with the identified areas of need.
- Once better evaluations are in place, districts should make working conditions data part of school and district-leader evaluations. North Carolina requires that survey data on working conditions are factored into school-leader evaluations, which encourages leaders to take the survey results seriously and to act on areas identified as needing improvement.

CONCLUSION

To date, the conditions that shape teachers’ daily professional lives have not been given the attention they deserve. Too often, a lack of attention to these factors in our highest poverty and lowest performing schools results in environments in which few educators would choose to stay. For too long, the high levels of staff dissatisfaction and turnover that characterize these schools have been erroneously attributed to their students. But research continues to demonstrate that students are not the problem. What matters most are the conditions for teaching and learning. Districts and states have an obligation to examine and act on these conditions. Otherwise, we will never make the progress that we must make to ensure all low-income students and students of color have access to great teachers.