

Teacher Quality Roadmap

Improving Policies
and Practices in
Pittsburgh Public Schools

Executive Summary
May 2014



National Council on Teacher Quality



ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study was undertaken on behalf of the 26,000 children who attend the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

ABOUT NCTQ

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is a non-partisan research and policy organization committed to restructuring the teaching profession, led by our vision that every child deserves effective teachers.

PARTNERS AND FUNDERS

This study was done in partnership with A+ Schools, Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education and the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. Additional funding for this study was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

THE NCTQ TEAM FOR THIS PROJECT

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Executive Summary

Teacher quality is the most important in-school factor students to have to improve outcomes for a successful future. Studies have shown that one high-quality teacher in a given year can result in an increase in a student's lifetime earnings of \$80,000.¹ If that same student had a high-quality teacher twelve years in a row, his lifetime earnings could be increased by almost *one million dollars*. Given the difference teachers can make, it is not surprising the level of attention placed on improving teacher quality in recent years. NCTQ's series of district studies examines both the state and local policies that govern the teaching profession, with the knowledge that when these policies are strengthened, it will ultimately result in a better teaching force for our children.

Pittsburgh is the twelfth in NCTQ's series of district studies, and the second in the state of Pennsylvania. (We released a study of Philadelphia in May 2013). The Pittsburgh analysis highlights some challenges we see in almost every district; however, the district's recent efforts to improve teacher quality through its "Empowering Effective Teachers" plan have also provided some strong examples from which other districts can learn.




Staffing

While Pittsburgh makes some effort to give principals considerable authority in deciding who teaches in their school buildings, the authority is limited by state law and the contract with the teachers union. Pennsylvania requires Pittsburgh and Philadelphia to have an "eligibility list" and they are prohibited from hiring applicants who are not from the top 10 percent of the list. Meeting the obligations of its teacher contract, the district still "force places" those teachers who, for one reason or another, have lost their current position and can't find another one, requiring principals to accept teachers they may not think are a good fit in their schools.

The district hires most of its new teachers in August, after receiving most of the applications by April. This delay hurts Pittsburgh's ability to hire the best available teacher candidates, largely because the district spends too much time finding new assignments for teachers who are transferring out of their current schools and because notifications of resigning and retiring teachers often come late in the school year. Consequently, by the time principals have the opportunity to interview new candidates, many applicants have likely found employment elsewhere.

1 Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Rockoff, J. (December, 2011). *The long-term impacts of teachers: teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 17699




Primary staffing recommendations:


-  **1. Eliminate the eligibility list.** The eligibility list, while attempting to focus hiring on the most qualified candidates, hinders flexibility for both the district and schools.
-  **2. Eliminate all forced placements.** While the district has tried to minimize the effect of forced placements on schools, the fact of the matter remains that all teachers are currently placed in a new school if they have been displaced.
-  **3. Hire teachers earlier.** Early hiring can be accomplished, at least in part, by improving the retirement notification incentive and better projecting resignations.


Evaluation


Pittsburgh has made dramatic changes to its evaluation system as part of its “Empowering Effective Teachers” plan and is now in its first year of full implementation. With multiple measures of performance, including observations, a value-added measure and student surveys, Pittsburgh is ahead of most districts in modernizing its evaluations. However, differences between the Pittsburgh system and the framework constructed by the state of Pennsylvania threaten to cause confusion at the very least and, at most, undo some of the work done locally. Mechanisms need to be established to ensure that teachers are evaluated annually and to have performance ranges that distinguish between teachers who are just making the cut and those who are outstanding.

Primary evaluation recommendations:

-  **1. Continue allowing Pittsburgh to use its evaluation framework as designed.** Pennsylvania granted Pittsburgh a one-year waiver for its evaluation model, and the state will soon have to decide whether to extend this waiver.
-  **2. The district should provide more differentiated supports for teachers, depending on their performance.** The number of formal and informal observations should be directly correlated to a teacher’s evaluation rating, but currently teachers in the top two categories and the bottom two categories are treated the same.
-  **3. Broaden the needs improvement performance range.** Increasing the performance range that falls into the needs improvement category will identify additional teachers who need and will benefit from support rather than including them all in the proficient range.

 This recommendation requires only a change in practice.

 This recommendation requires a formal negotiation between the district and the teachers’ union.

 This recommendation requires a change in state law.






Talent Management

Once teachers become employees in Pittsburgh, they are met with an uneven level of supports to help them learn, grow and thrive in their profession. While there is an induction program that provides some assistance to teachers in their early years, implementation seems inconsistent and most new teachers report having no additional supports aside from their administrator. For more experienced teachers, the district has developed career ladder positions, but some are more successful than others. The strongest career ladder role is the Instructional Teacher Leader 2; however, not all schools have the benefit of this position.


The effort to keep high-performing teachers in schools is also met with some policies that further that effort while others, primarily at the state level, undermine it. Compensation policies are structured specifically to retain high-performing teachers, including recognizing tenure with a big raise. Retention has not been seen as a significant problem district-wide, but it is more of a problem for high-need schools. State law does not permit the district to consider teacher performance when teachers are laid off. State law also limits timely dismissal for tenured teachers. In some cases, tenured teachers who are unsatisfactory can remain in a school for more than two years.

Primary talent management recommendations:


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1. Allow performance to be a factor in determining which teachers will be laid off. Pennsylvania is one of a few states where seniority is the sole criterion determining teacher layoffs.
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2. Update career ladder positions and repurpose those that are not working as originally intended. The district has tracked the success of its career programs, and some of them have been more successful than others.
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3. Initiate a district-wide mentoring program for novice teachers. This could consist of school-based programs with a framework determined by the district in consultation with the union.

Compensation

Pittsburgh is one of a small number of districts that are leaders in designing new pay scales that attempt to forge a closer link between teacher performance and salary. The new salary schedule implemented in the 2010-2011 school year is clearly designed to attract and retain high-performing teachers with raises based on performance.

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The district may be missing out on some candidates who see higher salaries in surrounding districts at the beginning of their careers. Once in the district, teachers have less incentive to go to high-need schools, especially when there is no pay increase and their building seniority decreases.

Pittsburgh's compensation system is doing a lot of things right. It is new, however, and its impact on recruitment and retention should be monitored closely through surveys and other communication with teachers.


Primary compensation recommendations:


-  **1. Consider increasing starting teacher salary.** Raising starting salaries to be more competitive with surrounding districts could increase the quantity and quality of the pool of applicants to the district.
-  **2. Use a district-based seniority system rather than a building-level seniority system to determine who loses their teaching assignment when cuts are made.** This will remove the inherent disincentive teachers now face in transferring to a different school.
-  **3. Monitor advancement on salary schedule.** Keep close tabs on trends of teachers who advance and those who do not. Watch for signs that teaching assignments are determining advancement rather than performance.


Professional Culture

Pittsburgh teachers have a mixed bag when it comes to their professional culture. While they have a shorter work day than their peers in other near by districts, Pittsburgh teachers working in high schools have more of the work day set aside to plan, collaborate and learn through professional development. It is unclear whether or not this additional time is yielding results. Teachers report that school-based professional development is more helpful to them than district-wide efforts.

While the contract allows for 14 days of sick and personal leave, 11 percent of teachers missed three days of school or less. At the other end of the spectrum, 18 percent of teachers are chronically absent; these 300 teachers each missed 18 or more days of school last year.




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Primary professional culture recommendations:

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1. Ensure that schools are using the professional period to increase teaching and learning. Schools and teachers should be able to articulate how this time is spent and provide evidence that it will support teacher and/or student growth.
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2. Commend teachers with excellent attendance and develop a system that flags teachers who are chronically absent. The district should provide principals with up-to-date teacher attendance data and work with chronically absent teachers to address the issues that cause absences.
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3. Require teachers to notify a principal when they will be absent. Whether the absence will be for one day or five, notifying the supervisor directly is a policy that will remind both school leaders and teachers of the importance of being there every day and hold them accountable.

This analysis is meant to serve a practical purpose, offering clearly articulated steps to pursue, including steps that the district might take alone, jointly with the teachers union, or in lobbying the Pennsylvania state legislature. We do not dwell much on the problems stemming from the culture of the district even though the culture that permeates a district and defines expectations and roles of teachers may in fact be more important than any written policy, contract provision or law.

However, as we have found elsewhere, professional practices often become embedded in written policy. The first signal that a district or state intends to do things differently is to change policies. Policies matter. But good policies require a sustained commitment to a new culture of practice, not just from the superintendent and union leadership, but also from school leaders and educators in the classroom.

The full report is available online at www.nctq.org/districtPolicy/districtStudies.do.

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The National Council on Teacher Quality advocates for reforms in a broad range of teacher policies at the federal, state and local levels in order to increase the number of effective teachers.

Subscribe to NCTQ's free monthly newsletter tracking school district trends. Each month, we use data from NCTQ's Teacher Contract Database to highlight the latest trends in school district policies and collective bargaining agreements nationwide. The Teacher Contract Database contains teacher policies from 114 school districts and 2 charter management organizations, including the 50 largest districts, the largest district in each state, Broad Prize winners, Gates investment districts and members of the Council of the Great City Schools.

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