

# TEACHER QUALITY ROADMAP:

## Improving Policies and Practices in Miami-Dade County Public Schools

### Executive Summary

This study looks at the policies and practices shaping teacher quality in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS). It is part of a series of analyses by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) looking at select school districts across the nation.

We undertake each of these studies to better engage the whole community. The community is in the best position to drive much-needed improvements in schools. By providing the community with essential data about the school district, most of which has never been shared with the public, we are able to deliver a set of concrete, actionable reforms on which to build a platform for improvement.

We consider our work to be the easy part of a very tough process. The hard work comes after we leave, ensuring that the push for change stays organized, determined and constructive.

This study comes on the heels of impressive academic progress over the last decade by Miami students, and indeed students across the state. Florida's growth has been significant, producing some of the biggest gains nationally for both African American and Hispanic students. However, in spite of the tremendous strides, there are signs that the progress may have leveled off. Regardless, far too many of Miami students are still underperforming. Only about one-third of Miami's fourth graders are proficient in mathematics and reading.

Miami is undertaking a host of reforms, some of which are part of the district's Race to the Top initiative. For example, the district has revised its evaluation instrument and has implemented a new performance pay model. Many of these reforms are also spurred by aggressive state legislation aimed at improving student achievement, and fundamentally changing the teaching profession state-wide. These state-level changes have broad implications for many of the standards addressed by NCTQ in this report.

We focus on district policies and practices in four key areas all of which affect the quality of the teaching force: (1) evaluation, (2) staffing, (3) compensation, and (4) work schedule.

#### Snapshot of Miami-Dade County Public Schools

- 4th largest district in the nation
- 435 schools
- 966 principals and assistant principals
- 20,322 teachers
  - Teachers represented by United Teachers of Dade, an affiliate of both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association
  - Current teacher contract expires 2012
- 347,133 PK-12 students
  - 70 percent are eligible for free and reduced lunch
  - 18 percent are English language learners

## 1. Evaluation

Teacher evaluations must be the linchpin of a district's strategy to improve the quality of its workforce. They serve to help teachers improve by providing meaningful feedback on their instruction, as well as to inform staffing decisions, like placing high-performing teachers where they are most needed, or removing low-performing teachers from the classroom.

While Miami has made many improvements to its teacher evaluation instrument over the past few years, much work remains to be done. To begin, it needs to use what information it gains from evaluations. Currently, the district does not know its teachers' ratings, such as how many teachers are high performing, how many are underperforming, and what are the district's areas of strength and weakness. Miami is missing a critical opportunity to use this most fundamental personnel data to inform decisions in hiring, promotion, and professional development.

Additionally, the instrument principals use to evaluate teachers needs significant improvement, as it does not provide adequate guidance on what behaviors and evidence to look for during classroom observations.

### Primary Recommendations for Miami-Dade County Public Schools

1. Start using teacher performance data to drive staffing and compensation decisions.
2. Develop a full-time corps of accomplished 3rd party evaluators who can complement principal evaluations and provide content-specific feedback to teachers.
3. Improve the observation instrument to provide more explicit guidance for principals on what evidence to look for when observing teachers.
4. Collect and examine student feedback on teacher instruction; new research shows that students are in fact much better at judging true teacher performance than can be accomplished by the occasional observations conducted by adults.

## 2. Staffing

An increasing number of school districts are moving toward a "mutual consent" approach to staffing, meaning that principals and teachers decide assignments, rather than being controlled by the district HR office. New Florida legislation supports this staffing strategy as it gives principals the right to decline a teacher seeking to transfer if she or he has been rated "needs improvement" or "unsatisfactory." However, the law does not go far enough, as principals can only reject an applicant based on a poor evaluation rating, and not on their own managerial judgment about an applicant's "fit" with the school.

While Miami has made adopted mutual consent for some decisions, its principals are still limited in others. As the new school year approaches, the district reverts to the old practice of "force placing" any teachers who have been unable to find a position.

State law is also ahead of Miami in deciding that performance rather than seniority should dictate layoff decisions. To avoid laying off tenured teachers, Miami is hiring all of its new teachers on temporary contracts, creating a revolving door of new teachers. Meanwhile tenured teachers remain protected from cuts, a failing strategy that ignores performance in decisions about which teachers should be laid off as well as the deleterious impact it has on the recruitment, development



and retention of new talent. As new Florida law places all teachers, not just new teachers, on annual contracts, Miami will no longer be able to protect its veteran instructors at the expense of newer teachers.

### Primary Recommendations for Miami-Dade County Public Schools

1. Always give principals full authority to decide who works in their building with no exceptions.
2. Train Human Resources staff in what to look for in successful teacher applicants.
3. Increase Human Resources' ability and capacity for recruiting talented teachers to better support principals in staffing vacancies.

### Primary Recommendations for Florida

1. Allow principals to refuse teacher placements that, in their judgment, are not in their students' best interest, regardless of how a teacher has been rated.
2. Approve only those teacher preparation programs that are found to be preparing effective teachers.

## 3. Compensation

Commendably, neither Miami nor Florida place undue value on graduate coursework, as most pay scales do. The salary differential between teachers with a master's and bachelor's degree is lower in Miami than all other districts NCTQ has studied.

Still, Miami could better compensate its teachers, and especially its top performers, by giving better raises to teachers in the first decade of their career and creating substantive salary increases for excellent teachers. Currently, 70 percent of a teacher's raises are reserved until the teacher has served nearly 20 years or more.

### Primary Recommendations for Miami-Dade County Public Schools

1. Distribute raises more equitably throughout a teacher's career to help retain younger teachers.
2. Consider significant base salary increases for teachers in the top 5 to 15 percent of performance.

## 4. Work Schedule

Miami's current contract does not provide teachers with sufficient opportunity to work collaboratively. About a third of the 100 plus districts in NCTQ's TR<sup>3</sup> database provide strong opportunities for teams and departments to plan together, something that Miami teachers and principals, too, seek, as expressed to us in focus groups. One way to provide for this collaboration time would be to extend Miami's 7 hour, 5 minute work day to 8 hours, as it is a shorter day than most districts report.

Miami provides a reasonable amount of leave, essentially one sick or personal day per month of work and its teachers' attendance rates are better than in most districts. Still, two-thirds of the workforce are absent more than 10 days during the school year, in large part due to the practice of allowing teachers to be absent for professional development when school is in session.

## Primary recommendations for Miami-Dade County Public Schools

1. Require teachers to work an 8 hour day onsite.
2. Teachers who are going to be absent and who work in schools with low attendance should be required to notify a school level administrator, not an automated substitute system.
3. Professional development should be scheduled when school is not in session and distributed throughout the year.

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 to lobby in the Florida state legislature. We do not dwell much on the problems stemming from the culture of the district, even though culture defining 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/p/publications/nctq\\_miami.pdf](http://www.nctq.org/p/publications/nctq_miami.pdf).**