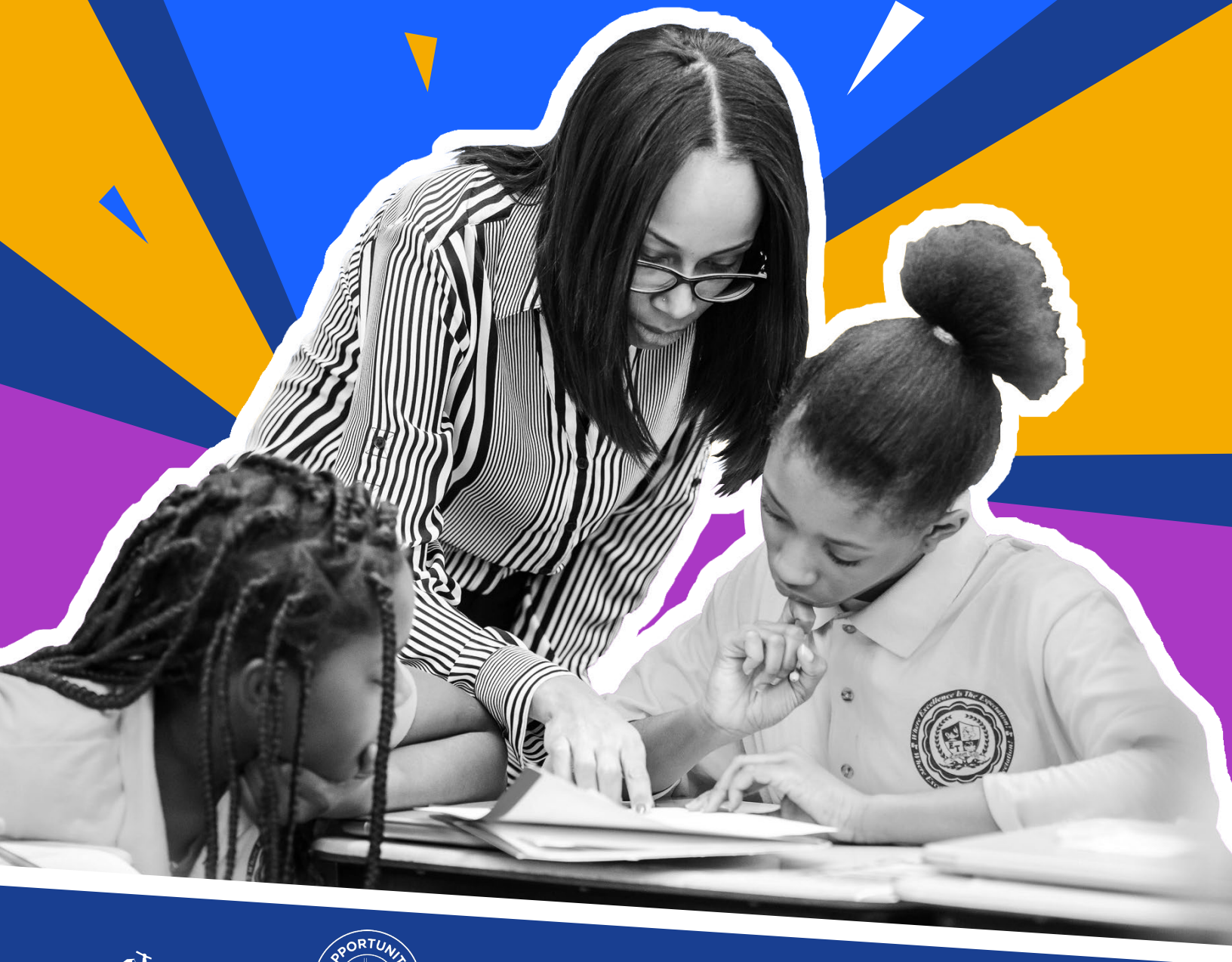


CASE STUDY | OCTOBER 2021

HOW CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS RECRUITS,  
RETAINS AND DEVELOPS HIGH-QUALITY  
TEACHERS FOR HARD-TO-STAFF SCHOOLS

# THE OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS INITIATIVE



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01

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Heading into the 2016-17 school year, Chicago Public Schools knew more needed to be done to address its persistent problems with staffing schools across the city. Many schools, most often in low-income neighborhoods on Chicago’s South and West sides, were struggling to recruit and retain teachers.**

To address this and other challenges, CPS launched *Teach Chicago*, a comprehensive initiative run by CPS’ Talent Office to attract and retain high-quality and diverse teachers for every classroom in the city. With the grounding knowledge that a great teacher can have a tremendous impact on student success in the classroom, the Teach Chicago programs are all focused on providing talent support and resources for the hardest-to-staff schools and the highest-need subject areas, such as special education.

As part of Teach Chicago, CPS started the Opportunity Schools program with the explicit aim of providing targeted hiring and professional development support to those hardest-to-staff schools. In the years since, Opportunity Schools has become an essential strategy for promoting equity across the district. The program has grown from 50 to 78 neighborhood schools across Chicago, with the goal of reaching 100 by 2024.

Opportunity Schools identifies educators to teach in high-need schools by providing individualized recruiting to ensure candidates find a school and role that are a good fit. Once on board, Opportunity Schools teachers in their early years are provided with day-to-day support by mentor teachers and instructional coaches. The goal: empowering them to be the best teachers they can be and supporting their retention.

The success of the Opportunity Schools Initiative is rooted in four key support strategies:

## 01

### **Centralized recruitment with placement driven by school leaders to meet individual school needs:**

CPS’ Central Office devotes resources specifically for recruiting teachers to Opportunity Schools, focusing on finding the right fit. This gives principals the flexibility to spend more time addressing other needs in the school, such as instructional planning and school operations.

## 02

### **PD on talent management practices for principals:**

Opportunity Schools leaders receive specific professional development on how to improve their talent strategies and practices. These include retaining teachers, (i.e., guidance on how to have “stay” conversations with new and highly effective teachers), improving hiring practices, setting a vision for their school communities, developing leadership opportunities for their teachers, etc.

## 03

### **Dedicated instructional coaching for teachers:**

In order to set up Opportunity Schools teachers for success, instructional coaches work specifically with new teachers to build their instructional skills and practices.

## 04

**Teacher mentorship program:** In addition to the instructional support, new teachers in Opportunity Schools are assigned a veteran mentor teacher who has been trained to help them work through the challenges of teaching.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviews with key stakeholders find that these strategies have helped Opportunity School principals find new teachers who are a good fit for their school and community, while also holding on to their most talented teachers.

Since the program was introduced, the Opportunity Schools Initiative has decreased the teacher vacancy rate by 49% (from 7.5% to 3.8%) and increased the retention rate of early-career teachers by 46% (from 56% in FY17 to 82% in FY21). The improvements in teacher retention rates among Black and Latinx teachers are especially encouraging (first year Latinx teacher retention rate improved from 44% in FY17 to 87% in FY20, and the first year Black teacher retention rate improved from 52% in FY17 to 80% in FY20).

Teachers in Opportunity Schools also report that the support they received helped them grow in their profession and acclimate to the culture within their schools. There is now a growing body of evidence suggesting that the Opportunity Schools Initiative also contributes to positive gains in student achievement.

This case study offers a blueprint for urban school districts on how to address the challenges of recruiting, developing, and retaining excellent teachers in the hardest-to-staff schools. It also shares reflections from stakeholders who have played key roles in making Opportunity Schools a success. And, it offers recommendations and considerations for philanthropy in supporting similar initiatives, given the benefits to educators and students.

Since it was introduced, the Opportunity Schools Initiative has decreased the teacher vacancy rate in those schools by

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and increased the retention rate of early-career teachers by

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02

# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

**By spring of 2014, Chicago’s Charles R. Darwin Elementary School was at a crossroads. Its enrollment had shrunk from 1,200 students at its peak to only 400, the result of gentrification of the city’s Logan Square neighborhood that displaced many longtime residents. Within two years, the school had become one of the hardest-to-staff schools in the city, with a 43 percent teacher attrition rate by the end of the 2015-16 school year. It had little hope but to fill vacancies with new and inexperienced teachers, and would likely start the next school year with several classrooms helmed by substitute teachers.**

In 2015-16, Darwin’s story was hardly unique: across the city and particularly on its South and West sides, schools struggled to attract and retain talent. Their teachers left in numbers that made it difficult to sustain high-quality instruction. Yet, by the end of the 2018-19 school year, Darwin’s fortunes were turning. It cut teacher attrition to 13 percent, a 70 percent decrease. It earned the highest possible school quality rating for the 2018-19 school Year: 1+.

What prompted such substantial school improvement? Principal Daniel de los Reyes has a ready answer: the support he received from Opportunity Schools. “The most impactful person in any school community is the teacher who is working with students,” de los Reyes says. “By working with me to ensure that we’re hiring and retaining excellent teachers, Opportunity Schools provided resources that helped me transform our school into a wonderful place for students.”

Becoming an Opportunity School at the outset of the 2016-2017 school year, along with 49 other CPS schools, proved to be a turning point for teaching talent at Darwin, de los Reyes believes.

Darwin became part of a concerted district effort to ensure that schools with the greatest staffing needs had equitable access to highly qualified teachers.

**Since it began, the Opportunity Schools program has increased retention rates for early-career teachers (years 1-3) from 56% in 2017 to 82% in 2021 in those schools. And it has reduced teacher vacancy rates by nearly 50%—from 7.5% to 3.8% during the same period.**

**Of the more than 500 teachers placed in Opportunity Schools over the past three years, more than half are teachers of color and more than two-thirds teach hard-to-staff subjects, such as special education.**





## INTRODUCTION

The program has been so successful that CPS plans to expand it from the current 78 to 100 schools by 2024. The plan reflects CPS' longstanding commitment to ensuring that all of Chicago's children receive high-quality instruction. This case study shares how that commitment manifests in new, powerful and groundbreaking ways in the city's Opportunity Schools. The case study includes:

- Background on the initiative, including how it fits into CPS' broader Teach Chicago effort, and a description of the critical learnings that are at the heart of its key strategies to recruit and retain teachers
- Key Opportunity Schools strategies, with insights from CPS principals, teachers and Central Office staff
- A list of "Must-Do's" for school districts interested in developing the architecture for serious efforts to decrease attrition and improve teacher quality in hard-to-staff schools
- A brief conclusion summarizing the work and accomplishments of Opportunity Schools to date.







03

# BACKGROUND

# BACKGROUND

**Opportunity Schools are part of a broader CPS initiative called Teach Chicago, and critical understandings about how to recruit and retain teachers at hard-to-staff schools are at the foundation of Opportunity School’s efforts.**

The Opportunity Schools Initiative is not a standalone effort. It is part of a broader district-wide initiative: Teach Chicago. The goal of Teach Chicago is to diversify the city’s teacher workforce and help school leaders build and retain the staff necessary for student academic gains (see sidebar about Teach Chicago).

“Great teachers matter,” says Matt Lyons, CPS Chief Talent Officer during the program’s launch in 2016-2017. “With research consistently showing that teachers are the leading in-school factor in determining student achievement, the most important thing we can do for our students is hire, train, support, and retain outstanding teachers. This is the core of Teach Chicago’s mission.”

Opportunity Schools focuses specifically on a subset of the city’s hardest-to-staff schools where even great principals struggle to recruit teachers who don’t consider their schools as options, or try to retain top teacher talent without help. Opportunity Schools spearheads efforts to address some of the toughest recruitment and retention challenges that principals face.

These challenges had become particularly acute for principals of Chicago’s highest-need schools because of changes in the Illinois teacher labor market and characteristics of the city’s students.

## TEACH CHICAGO

Teach Chicago has five key elements.

- **Ensuring equity of access** to high-quality teachers. This is the foundation of Opportunity Schools.
- **Creating new pipelines into teaching**, including teacher residencies, especially for high-needs subjects, such as special and bilingual education.
- **Improving the readiness and effectiveness of new teachers** by partnering with preparation programs to lengthen the student teaching experience and training veteran teachers to better coach, mentor and provide thoughtful feedback to student teachers.
- **Supporting teacher recognition, leadership and retention** by expanding teacher leadership opportunities for the city’s most effective teachers, and creating new teacher awards and positive social media campaigns to help highlight and focus public attention on teacher excellence.
- **Building diversity for long-term change**—the foundation of the other four components—by committing to inclusiveness and diversity and ensuring that this commitment is the thread that runs through all Teach Chicago efforts.



## BACKGROUND

Between 2010 and 2015, the number of teaching candidates completing preparation programs decreased by 40%; and the number of prospective teachers with high-needs credentials (i.e., special education and bilingual education) decreased by 47%. At the same time, between 2012-2017, the number of CPS students with individualized education programs (IEPs) rose by 40%; and those in need of bilingual services rose by 100%.

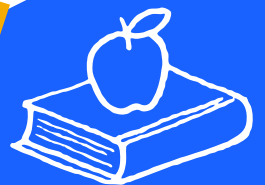
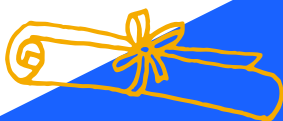
Within this context, Ben Felton, a former CPS teacher and current Executive Director of Teacher Recruitment, Pathways and Equity Strategy, launched Opportunity Schools in the 2016-17 school year. Today, he works with colleagues from the Talent Office and the Office of Teaching and Learning in leading the initiative. The team includes two managers of recruitment, one manager each for the initiative's coaching and mentoring programs, two additional recruiters, and nine instructional coaches—all supported by teachers who act as ambassadors to engage teacher candidates throughout the recruitment process.

All school districts employ strategies to recruit teachers to fill annual vacancies—and some employ targeted measures to hang on to them after they are hired. The CPS approach to these issues is innovative, comprehensive and unique as it is built on insights that emerged from a series of conversations with hard-to-staff schools, including a listening tour, to better learn their challenges and form deep partnerships. This outreach provided building principals with opportunities to talk about the staffing challenges and what the district could do to help. Those initial conversations yielded

critical insights that shaped the Opportunity Schools Initiative and distinguished its recruitment and retention efforts from those in most school districts.

- **Hard-to-staff schools need dedicated, differentiated recruitment and retention support.** Having a small team of employees focused on and accountable for outcomes in a relatively small subset of the district's schools ensures they are getting the attention they need. HR staff is able to develop deeper working relationships with school personnel, and principals are eager to work with the team because they know they are there to support and serve *them*—including helping identify strong teaching candidates who are a good fit—while minimizing paperwork. Because the universe of schools the team works with is smaller, it is able to differentiate retention supports, delivering targeted professional development and coaching, for example, to groups of schools facing similar challenges. Conversely, the small team's singular focus allows it to inform modifications to district-wide talent strategies for hard-to-staff schools, such as granting them priority access to support structures, candidates, and marketing and communication strategies tailored for Opportunity Schools.

**Ben Felton**





## BACKGROUND

- **Branding and recruiting strength comes from the cohort of Opportunity Schools, not from single-school or whole-district marketing efforts.** Opportunity Schools have a lot to offer candidates. Marketing and communications—and one-on-one conversations between recruiters and candidates—emphasize the strengths of these schools. Trying to build dozens of different school brands would make it difficult to deliver a singular, exciting and readily digestible message to candidates who are motivated to serve lower-income students.
- **Recruitment efforts should focus on appealing to great teachers who want to teach in high needs schools, not trying to persuade teachers less passionate about working in them.**

Candidates who have the right mindsets to work in CPS' hard-to-staff schools have social justice orientations, and recruiters should appeal to that passion. There are no tricks, gimmicks or incentives to entice candidates to join the ranks of teachers in Opportunity Schools. Candidates either want to work in them or they don't. Those who know low-income schools best are assets to the recruitment process and should participate in it. Teachers who have taught in CPS' low-income schools and Opportunity Schools recruitment specialists who have done the same can help present schools as the assets they are: vibrant communities with great kids. They can share their positive experiences and talk to candidates about navigating a big system

that often overwhelms new teachers, and work with candidates to ensure candidates find the right fit in both a position and school—because fit matters a lot.

- **Retaining teachers in high needs schools is possible; school districts can build systems and develop principal skills to retain teachers.** In addition to providing support for principals during the hiring process, it is essential to urge them to focus on the strategic retention of their most irreplaceable teachers. Principals must see themselves as team leaders capable of leveraging the most effective approaches to recruiting and retaining candidates who are good fits for their schools. At the same time, school districts must understand that principals are busy professionals. It's best to present them with tangible, ready-to-use strategies, such as how to have “stay” conversations or provide effective school-level induction activities. Principals also need Opportunity Schools to leverage veteran educators to support the recruitment of teacher candidates and coach and mentor new teachers—and to establish structures for innovative teacher leadership opportunities that increase job satisfaction.

These four critical insights undergird the strategies Opportunity Schools employs to recruit and retain teachers in some of CPS' hardest-to staff-schools.





04

# THE FOUR STRATEGIES

# THE FOUR STRATEGIES

Though Opportunity Schools began with a focus on recruitment and placement, the program has expanded to include three additional strategies, all of which rest on a foundation of trusting relationships between schools and the Central Office.

## THE 4 KEY STRATEGIES OF OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS



### DIVERSITY AS A CORE VALUE

*Trust and communication essential between Central Office and schools*



## THE FOUR STRATEGIES

### STRATEGY 1: “THE MATCH.COM OF CPS”

As an Educator Equity Manager for CPS, Ellen Goldblatt leads teacher recruitment for the Opportunity Schools Initiative within the district’s Talent Office. The Talent Office performs many of the functions of a typical district human resources department, but also is responsible for implementation of Teach Chicago. A former kindergarten and fifth grade teacher, Goldblatt is an educator who knows instruction and how important it is for teachers to find a school that’s the right fit. In the last three years, she has overseen the recruitment and placement of approximately 600 teachers.

Chicago has more than 500 schools, but Goldblatt and her team focus on only about 15 percent of them. “Because it’s a smaller subset of schools, it’s a great opportunity to build strong relationships with principals first,” Goldblatt says. “Those relationships and the trust that comes with them are the bedrock of the work we do with principals,” she concludes.

Goldblatt and her colleagues know that the success of their work is premised on the personal, trusting relationships that require more than virtual communication: “Meeting with them in person builds trust. They have to believe that we understand their school context and are vetting candidates who will be good fits.”

Goldblatt notes that every principal has a different vision of what they’re looking for in new recruits. Some want novice teachers; others want veterans. Others seek those who will fit with specific teams.

Once Goldblatt and her colleagues know what principals are looking for, they start to look for candidates applying to teach in CPS who fit those profiles. They point candidates to a variety of sources, such as the [dedicated CPS recruitment website](#), the Opportunity Schools webpage on



[teach.cps.edu](https://teach.cps.edu), videos featuring Opportunity Schools teachers, a digital brochure, job fairs, and social media content.

In the initial screening process and in subsequent interviews, however, Goldblatt has additional look-fors.

“I’m looking for candidates who are committed to social justice. They’re interested in educational equity and disrupting systems of oppression. We’re looking for candidates who want to come back to the communities they grew up in and who want the support that Opportunity Schools offer—coaching and mentoring—but who are also self-starters. Teaching in Chicago can be really hard work. I’m looking for someone who’s not going to give up very easily.”

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**“Our strongest selling points, in addition to great schools and principals, are the resources and supports we provide for new teachers. We tout our mentors and instructional coaches. They are real selling points.”**

**Ellen Goldblatt**

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## THE FOUR STRATEGIES

After a paper screening, Goldblatt and her team conduct an initial “phone screen” with select candidates, followed by a longer in-depth interview if the candidate appears promising. Goldblatt markets Opportunity Schools in the interviews because candidates have not specifically applied for positions within them. If after both interviews screeners believe the candidate would be a good fit for the district, the Talent Office extends them an early offer that guarantees a position in CPS for the next year, not necessarily in an Opportunity School.

It is important to make an early offer, Goldblatt observes. In the past, CPS lost talent because many principals didn’t hire until the summer. As a result, CPS missed out on strong teachers to charter schools and suburban districts who made their offers earlier. “Early offers give candidates peace of mind if they are relocating from another state, about to graduate from college or leaving another school system. We commit to excellent candidates early so they have that security, and then we can focus on finding them the right position,” Goldblatt says.

The Talent Office extends offers as early as January and as late as July, as positions in schools inevitably open up as late as a month before school starts. Once the district extends offers, Goldblatt starts connecting Opportunity Schools principals with candidates. Talent Office staff intentionally nudge candidates to specific schools where they know there are vacancies that candidates are suited for.

Felton suggests that his office is a talent agent for the teacher and a talent scout for the principal. “We play the matchmaker role once we find great people,” he says. Goldblatt e-introduces candidates: “I talk up the candidate and talk up the principal, and then I either schedule an interview or the principal does.”

## MATCHING TEACHERS TO SCHOOLS

“It’s the Match.com® of CPS,” says Equity Specialist Ellen Goldblatt of Opportunity Schools’ recruitment efforts. “I think of it like that when I’m talking to candidates. Which principals would be a good fit for this candidate, and which wouldn’t? There’s a good fit for everyone.”

Goldblatt notes that candidates who have some teaching experience have preferences for different management styles and school sizes. Some want to be placed with a team that’s collaborative or that supports a specific number of students. “Novice teachers don’t really have enough experience to know what they want, so we talk about what worked in the past and what went well in student teaching,” says Goldblatt.

Usually candidates find their match quickly. But each year there are a handful of candidates who go through many interviews before they find the right fit. Goldblatt observes that there was one special education teacher who went on seven interviews before she found the right school, noting that the match worked because she been teaching there successfully for two years.



## THE FOUR STRATEGIES

Goldblatt and her team also connect candidates to **Teacher Ambassadors** (see pg. 18 Spotlight). These are select teachers at Opportunity Schools who make themselves available to talk on the phone or meet in person with candidates during school visits.

“Ultimately, the ambassadors can tell candidates a lot more about what it’s like to work in a particular school or neighborhood, which is why they’re so valuable. It’s also helpful for candidates to see schools in action so they can make their own judgments about whether the school is a fit for them,” Goldblatt says.

Jessica Gilmore, a teacher ambassador at Mary E. McDowell Elementary School in Avalon Park on Chicago’s South Side, is typical of other ambassadors. She has discussions with teacher candidates by phone. She shares her background, what it’s like to teach at an Opportunity School—its benefits and challenges—and her personal testimony about why she teaches at her school. Like other teacher ambassadors, she receives an

annual \$2,500 stipend for what CPS estimates is 20 hours of work per month, which includes monthly strategy meetings for ambassadors.

After the screening process and candidates have had an opportunity to meet with ambassadors, principals interview a slate of candidates the Opportunity Schools team passes on to them. Though some principals invite an Opportunity Schools staffer to participate in interviews, they choose the candidate they want. Most candidates find placements quickly. For those few who do not, Goldblatt troubleshoots with candidates and principals and sometimes provides candidates with support in the area of best interview practices.

Goldblatt and her colleagues’ focused recruitment efforts are supported by digital marketing efforts, which include redesigned CPS teacher recruitment and specific Opportunity Schools websites, the latter of which includes a [video primer](#) on the Opportunity Schools program and why it is an attractive option for candidates.



Jessica Gilmore



### Jake Spangler: Profile of an Opportunity Schools Teacher Ambassador/Talent Recruiter

Jake Spangler is an English teacher at Fenger High School on Chicago’s South Side. He is also a teacher ambassador, selected by CPS’ Talent Office to represent his school.

Spangler hosts teacher candidates in person, speaks with pre-service teachers over the phone, contacts them by email, and interviews those that apply to Fenger. He represents the district at local events and interviews candidates who have applied to Fenger. He’s a strong recruiter who makes a heartfelt pitch: “Opportunity Schools are the schools where parents should send their kids.”

Spangler demonstrates what Goldblatt says the dispositions of Opportunity Schools teachers ought to be: a commitment to racial equity and social justice and a passion for the students who attend Fenger. “I talk to teachers about what it’s like to teach at an Opportunity School and why it’s important to have strong teachers on the South and West sides of the city, where it’s difficult to

attract teachers,” says Spangler. “I enjoy this role because it allows me to show people we are not their stereotypes. What we’re doing at Fenger and at other Opportunity Schools is what the purpose of education should be: helping kids with a range of social and emotional needs and engaging them in a really powerful way.”

Spangler views his students through a lens of strengths, not deficits: “Their resilience is unmatched.”

- influencer
- strong recruitment
- racial equity + social justice
- commitment
- resilience

Jake Spangler



## Principals' Perspective on Centralized Recruitment Customized to Their Needs

District staffers and principals are noticing that the quality of candidates is now much stronger. "Principals have found candidates they wouldn't have come across in the past. And the schools who work with us most closely are the ones who are fully staffed on the first day of school —when they weren't in the past," says Goldblatt.

Opportunity Schools principals also report how much better the recruitment and hiring process is for them—and how the quality of candidates, is much improved. Principal Jasmine Thurmond of Martin Luther King Junior Academy of Social Justice, an elementary school in the Englewood neighborhood on the city's South Side, notes that centralized teacher recruitment has provided a larger pool of candidates that is aligned with what King needs. "They vet people and give me multiple options, a wide variety of candidates. Then it's up to me to make the final decision," says Thurmond.

Thurmond also appreciates the work Opportunity Schools does once candidates are hired. "What they do is phenomenal," says Thurmond. "When I decide to hire a candidate, they take on the logistics making sure they have all their endorsements and are on-boarded properly."

Principal Althea Hammond of Ambrose Plamondon Elementary School shares Thurmond's enthusiasm for the support offered by Opportunity Schools: "I feel like recruiting is individualized for me. Ben Felton and his team speak to me directly and say, 'Hey, what are the needs of your school' because my needs may be different than other school's needs." She observes that her work with Opportunity Schools "has been a tremendous lift off me," noting that she once had to sift through candidates of varying quality and now she can focus on highly attractive pre-screened candidates who have been chosen specifically for her school. And the resumes, she contends, are for candidates who can meet the needs of children in her specific school community. "The last three years are the freest I've felt in hiring over the past several years," she says.

Althea Hammond



## SPOTLIGHT

Principal Daniel de los Reyes of Darwin shares his colleague's enthusiasm, observing how his school's relationship with Opportunity Schools has ratcheted up the quality of Darwin's staff. But he also issues a pointed reminder of how strong trusting relationships between the Central Office and principals are vital to the work of school improvement:

"When I was the AP of Darwin and managing the school's hiring process, Ben Felton of Opportunity Schools was a one-man show at the time. Darwin was still hammering out the positions it needed. Ben from the outset was really crucial. He visited our school and asked questions to understand our vision and culture. He then streamlined the work I had to do by sifting

through resumes of candidates from the district, the state and across the nation. From the beginning, he provided me not just with candidates, but with high-quality candidates. Among those candidates are teacher leaders who are pursuing certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards or constantly pursuing other leadership positions. We've been finding candidates that have been a fit for mission and vision. It has been big."

The Opportunity Schools recruitment and placement process has been a boon for principals leading Chicago's hardest-to-staff schools. But even the strongest of processes can be undone if principals can't hang on to the teachers they hire. That's addressed by the second major strategy.



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**"I'm looking for a certain level of skill and will. I can teach a candidate skill. I can't teach them will. That is a part of their vetting process. Is this a place where candidates can see themselves working? We are a small school with not a tremendous amount of resources, but if I can make it work, I will. If a candidate is willing to take the journey with me, I will make them a phenomenal teacher."**

**Principal Althea Hammond,  
Ambrose Plamondon Elementary School**

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## STRATEGY 2: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PRINCIPALS—A FOCUS ON RETENTION

King Academy for Social Justice became an Opportunity School in 2016 when it was a “Level 3” school in the CPS school quality rating system and nearing probationary status. Today, King is a school in good standing with a school quality rating of “1.”

“In the four years that I’ve been here, there is only one person I’ve identified as an ‘irreplaceable’ who has left the school since I started employing retention strategies I’ve learned from the Opportunity Schools staff,” says King’s principal, Jasmine Thurmond. “In an average year, I used to turn over six to eight.”

“Irreplaceable” is a term coined in 2012 by the national nonprofit The New Teacher Project (TNT) in its seminal publication, “The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools.” In its examination of four urban school districts, TNT observes that the best and worst teachers in urban schools leave at similar rates. It argues that American schools need to focus

their retention efforts not on every teacher but on teachers “so successful at advancing student learning that they are nearly impossible to replace.”<sup>1</sup>

While the Opportunity Schools recruitment efforts aim to bring in great talent, its retention work seeks to ensure that its best teachers don’t leave. This research helped inform the efforts of Opportunity Schools to keep strong teachers from leaving, including its contention that there are several low-cost strategies districts can employ to retain top teachers:

- Provide regular feedback about how to develop their instructional and leadership practices
- Help identify areas of development
- Provide informal feedback about performance
- Conduct “stay conversations” that are designed to retain staff and ensure that staff have meaningful development opportunities
- Identify opportunities and resources for meaningful teacher leadership opportunities
- Develop appreciation strategies for teaching staff.

TNT’s research suggests that top teachers who benefit from two or more of these strategies remain at their schools nearly twice as long as those who do not benefit from them. Opportunity Schools provide professional development opportunities

<sup>1</sup> The New Teacher Project. *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools*. 2012.



Jasmine Thurmond



## THE FOUR STRATEGIES

to principals to help them implement research-based differentiated retention strategies, such as those advocated by TNTP, to hang on to their irreplaceable teachers.

CPS worked with TNTP to develop and facilitate a professional learning community (PLC) of principals that meets several times during the school year as well as over the summer. During the course of these sessions, principals:

- Develop strategies to show appreciation and gratitude for teachers and their work
- Place emphasis on the first 90 days, when teachers are more likely to make decisions about staying or going
- Provide leadership opportunities for veteran teachers
- And create a culture of inclusiveness for decision-making and collaborative teams.

To stave off defections at the end of the school year, principals have learned how to improve their execution of what the district calls “stay

conversations,” thoughtful, ongoing dialogue with teachers about the decisions they will make to stay or leave. “We’ve learned that we need to engage teachers at peak times over the course of the year when teachers are most likely to consider leaving,” says Thurmond.

The district also emphasizes the importance of attending to human and not just professional connections between teachers and school leaders. Hammond notes how the PLC meetings and helpful insights from colleagues have helped her meet people where they are: “I am an intrinsically motivated person and I expect that everyone should just do their jobs. The meetings have helped me recognize that there’s more to it than that, that not everyone is motivated for the reasons I am and that they need to be acknowledged to increase their motivation.”

Principal de los Reyes of Darwin notes that what he has learned through his PLC has resulted in him taking a completely different approach to retention (see spotlight on next page).



### A TEACHER'S REFLECTION ON STAY CONVERSATIONS

**“I had conversations with my principal toward the end of my first year, and, even before that, my principal was checking in with me, making sure I felt supported. In my first year around testing season, I was particularly flustered and our principal noticed that and checked in with me. We had several conversations about whether I was coming back and making sure I felt supported. It was nice to feel like my principal cared about whether or not I was returning.”**

**Katie Creagh, Teacher,  
Emmitt Till Math and Science Academy**

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## Daniel de los Reyes: Lessons from a Professional Learning Community of Principals

Daniel de los Reyes is the principal of Logan Square's Charles R. Darwin Elementary School. He led Darwin's transformation from a school on the brink of closure to a school in good standing, with a vastly reduced rate of teacher attrition. In this interview, he shares what he's learned from his participation in Opportunity Schools' professional development offerings.

### On the importance of the first 90 days

I understand that the first 90 days of work are critical, as it's when teachers really do decide whether they'll stay or go. So, I start with an orientation and then immediately assign new teachers to a more experienced mentor, who has gone through training, learned how to set goals with teachers, and talk them through how to succeed.

### On the importance of showing gratitude

I end every conversation with teachers by telling them "thank you" and that I appreciate their work.

### On the importance of stay conversations

The paradigm for "stay conversations" is different. It's cultivated throughout the year. I've learned how to have ongoing check-in conversations with teachers. We set goals and discuss how things are going. So, my "stay conversations" are incremental and they help me keep track of who might leave.

### On the importance of sharing decision-making with teachers

When new recruits feel included in decision-making, they are more likely to remain in the building.

### On the importance of distributed leadership

Darwin's school environment is conducive to learning and growing for students and staff. As a result, we have a higher rate of teacher retention. New teachers are given leadership positions right off the bat. Every single teacher in the building is on a school-wide leadership team.

### On letting some teachers go

When two teachers told me that they were leaving the school, they were surprised that I didn't try to get them to stay. This is a whole-heart business. If their heart wasn't into being here, they should go.

# Daniel de los Reyes

leadership

how to succeed

mentorship



### **STRATEGY 3: COACHING NEW TEACHERS IN OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS**

As an instructional effectiveness manager, Marci Glick oversees the Opportunity Schools coaching program for the CPS Talent Office, an effort that has been underway for three school years, beginning in 2018-19. Glick supervises nine full-time release coaches, each with a portfolio of 14 teachers spread across four-to-six schools typically in the same geographic region of the city.

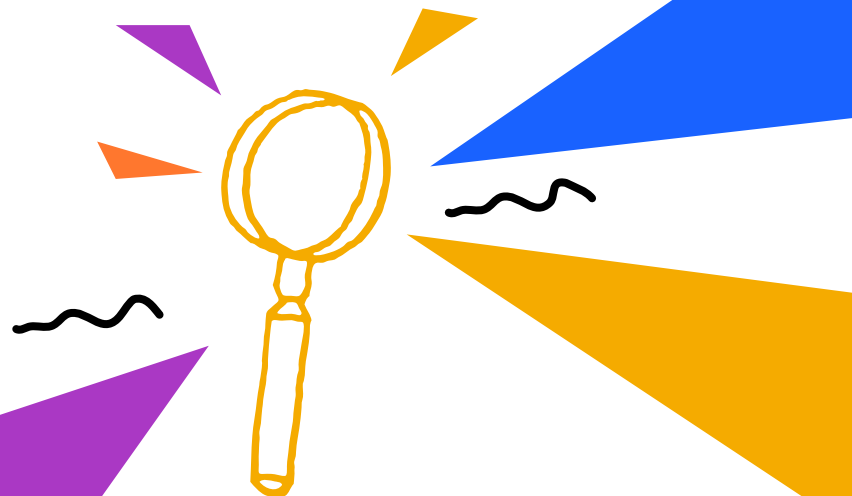
The relationship between novice teacher and coach begins with an advance meeting of the coach and building principal to set expectations, followed, sometimes immediately, by a meeting between the coach, principal and the teacher(s) who will receive coaching. The coach and teacher introduce themselves in person—after having already connected through email—to review the coaching process, set shared expectations, ask and answer questions.

The coach establishes the expectation that the work includes, but will not be limited to, three-to-four meetings of 60-90 minutes each month (180 minutes required) and that during these times coach and teacher will prioritize CPS' Framework for Teaching, including lesson/unit planning and analysis of student work, through regular classroom observations and debriefs, real-time coaching, teacher reflection and goal-setting. A three-stage coaching/teaching cycle (plan/prepare, teach/assess and analyze/reflect) guides the work they do together.



**“My coach was a wonderful resource. She came to my classroom to observe and then we would talk right afterward for feedback that wouldn’t go towards my evaluation. She would say, ‘Here’s what I’m seeing. Try this. Or, here’s what you can do better.’ I leaned on her a lot last year. It was nice to have an outsider come in and help in that way.”**

**Katie Creagh, Teacher,  
Emmitt Till Math and Science Academy**



## THE FOUR STRATEGIES

It is the coach's goal to create a safe space where teachers can express their concerns, challenges and questions relating to instruction. Coaches also have ongoing dialogue with Opportunity School principals, as the two parties are required to meet quarterly. Conversations between coaches and principals often shy away from focus on individual teachers, instead focusing on trends coaches see across novice-teacher classrooms. "Coaches are not snitching on teachers, and we've learned that principals don't want that," says Glick. "We're not in schools to make sure that teachers have great observations for their evaluations either. Our coaching is very flexible; coaches focus on individual teacher needs based on discussions with them and observations of their classrooms."

Teachers are not the only ones that receive coaching. Glick and the coaches she supervises are being coached up by the New Teacher Center (NTC), which introduced the coaching/teaching cycle to them and helps them implement it. Glick and her colleagues are in the second of a three-year relationship with NTC, premised on the notion that at the end of three years, the district will have the knowledge and skills to support the teaching/coaching cycle on its own. As Glick describes, it's an "I-do, we-do, you-do approach." Now in the "we-do" year of work with NTC after finishing off a first year in which NTC led and taught the coaching team, Glick and her coaches continue to receive monthly professional development from NTC, with whom CPS will continue to collaborate.





## An Interview with Marci Glick, Manager of the Opportunity Schools Coaching Program

### **Why did you make the shift from coaching both new teachers and teachers new to CPS to coaching only novice teachers?**

We've been learning along the way about whom we should target. In our first year, we learned that experienced teachers did not have the same level of need and often argued that they didn't need the support. In many cases this was true. Why would someone who has been teaching elsewhere for six years and whom Opportunity Schools identified as a strong, experienced candidate need the same coaching supports as someone who has never before had their own classroom? It seemed to us that our resources would be better spent on and better accepted by novice teachers.

### **Are teachers new to the profession eager to engage coaches 180 minutes a month at minimum?**

We think they are now. This was another learning for us. In the first year we found that not all novice teachers viewed coaching as the gift that it is. New teachers are so overwhelmed by the job that some weren't showing up to meetings with their coaches because they thought it was 'just another meeting.' That's why we started what we call 'triad meetings' with the principal, coach and the teacher, where we share detailed information about the scope of supports for new teachers in Opportunity Schools, how coaching fits in, and what the expectations are, including the mandatory 180 minutes a month. This meeting also secures the buy-in and support of principals and gives us a chance to sell our services. Previously, new teachers did not really know who we are. Now they do.

### **What have you learned about coaching?**

There's been a huge learning curve. My coaches are high flyers. They are a seasoned group of former teachers and school leaders. The focus of work in the past for many of them was teacher evaluation. There's been a lot of growing pains as they move from evaluating teachers to coaching them. Instructional coaching is a skill set. Just because someone was an assistant principal doesn't mean they have the skills to do this work. They need to develop teachers' technical skills in areas such as standards, curriculum and assessment, but they also need to help teachers master human relationships. They must acknowledge that students are human beings and that it's important for them to figure out what students are good at and what they love so they can use those as assets. It's also important that coaches recognize that though classroom management is a challenge for new teachers, they need to focus work on instruction too. That's an equity issue for our students. All these issues are important for districts to keep in mind as they think about whom to employ as coaches. What coaching skills can districts develop and what skills are required from the very beginning?

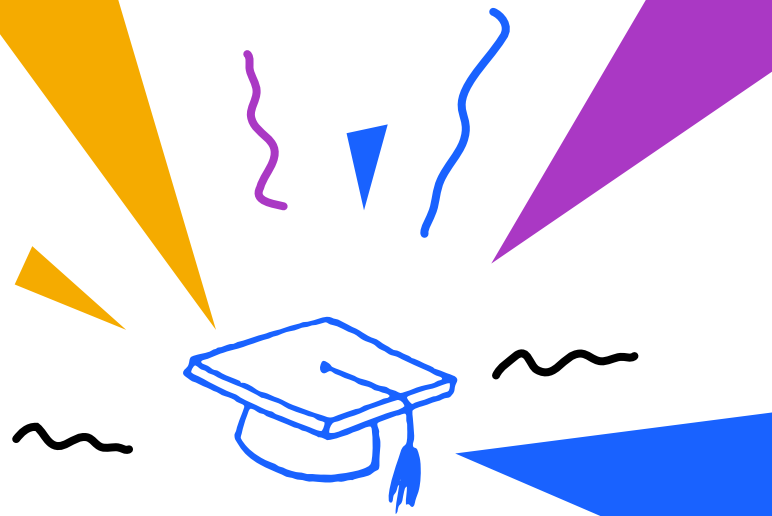


## STRATEGY 4: MENTORING FOR NEW TEACHERS AND TEACHERS NEW TO THE DISTRICT

As they do with the coaching support offered by Opportunity Schools, principals opt in to the initiative’s mentoring program, also in its third year. Mentoring of teachers newly hired into Opportunity Schools is not a standalone activity. **It is linked inextricably to the instructional coaching that the same teachers receive.** Jenni Turner, the manager of mentoring for Opportunity Schools, works closely with Glick’s instructional coaching team. Both take care not to overload new teachers with support. Mentors adjust their supports based on other supports new teachers receive. Since coaching focuses on instruction, mentoring often addresses non-instructional issues, such as acclimating to a new school climate and colleagues. In some cases, mentors can support instruction for new CPS teachers who do not receive instructional coaching through the Elevate program or other opportunities in their school building. Lawanda Domingo, a mentor at Emmett Till Math and Science Academy, suggests in fact that “the first thing a mentor should do is help build the mentee’s relationships in the building because that helps keep the mentee in the school in the long term.”

### Origins and Operation of the Mentoring Program

Turner works in CPS’ Office of Teaching and Learning, frequently partnering with the Talent Office, on its work in Opportunity Schools. Turner leads all new teacher support for the district and has been building that for the past four years, both district-wide and within Opportunity Schools. Turner has worked to improve induction supports for new teachers. As a part of those efforts, she created an



induction program focused on district-wide supports, including district-based mentors—a model of support that CPS continues to implement. A year into the work, the CPS Talent Office initiated a partnership with the Office of Teaching and Learning to explore in-school mentoring programs. They decided to start in Opportunity Schools, to complement the Talent Office’s aggressive teacher recruitment strategy, and where there are a large number of new teachers each year.

“We also wanted to leverage the expertise of veteran teachers in these schools,” Turner says, noting that providing veteran teachers with opportunities to grow and lead is a retention strategy. Principals select the veteran teachers to become mentors, with guidance from the district. “We leave it up to the principals to make decisions on who the mentors will be, and with whom they should be matched. But we provide suggestions on the competencies that they should consider when selecting mentors. It is not necessarily the most outstanding teacher in the building who will be the best mentor,” Turner says.

Opportunity Schools recommends no more than a one-mentor to three-teacher ratio. If there are more than three new teachers in a building, then schools select an additional mentor. Mentors are required to participate in professional learning opportunities throughout the school year. They receive training

## THE FOUR STRATEGIES

in the summer and quarterly during the school year. Mentors are trained to support new teachers through the phases. By reacquainting themselves with the experience of early career teachers and their needs during each phase. They identify the strengths of their own school climates and cultures and how to leverage them to support the teacher. Mentors also learn about best practices and standards for mentoring, including being facilitative and not directive, and addressing challenges without bias. Mentors ground much of their work in Turner’s New Teacher Development Areas (Satisfaction, Knowledge, Instructional Shifts, and Student Achievement) so they know clearly the areas in which they can help teachers create goals.

Mentors develop monthly action plans that address the goals mentees have established, and meet with mentees at least once a week. The action

plans cover an entire month so that mentors can address an area of need deeply and aren’t simply responding to what new teachers find urgent in a given week. Turner and the Opportunity Schools team monitor progress on all aspects of new teacher development—including the mentoring support. All new teachers complete surveys designed to assess their level of satisfaction and their perception of their content knowledge, ability to make instructional shifts associated with the common core, and the achievement of their students. As a result, month-to-month Turner and her team develop an understanding of where teachers are growing and where they need support. This information informs the support mentors provide to teachers each month.

Mentors receive a \$2,000 annual stipend, regardless of how many teachers they mentor.



### A MENTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

**“I mentor two teachers, a second-year English teacher and first-year math teacher. It gives me a greater appreciation of the struggle teachers go through at the beginning of their careers. I felt overwhelmed and blamed myself for my failures when I was new. I see my mentees are going through a similar experience. I feel like if I had someone who was there for me maybe I would have been able to build my capacity as a teacher faster.”**

**Jake Spangler, Teacher,  
Fenger High School**

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**Lawanda Domingo (LD) and Katie Creagh (KC) teach at Emmitt Till Math and Science Academy. Domingo mentors Creagh and as a teacher ambassador hosted her at the school as Opportunity Schools recruited her.**

**On what do you focus your work over the course of a two-year mentor-mentee relationship?**

**LD:** The first thing a mentor should do is help the mentee build relationships in the building. That should be a focus of both years one and two. Those relationships help keep mentees in the school long term. We also work on instruction. If my mentee has deficits in areas of instruction, I help her with that and help gather resources. The biggest thing, though, is building relationships so that the mentee doesn't have to heavily rely

on just me. She can go to other people. In the second year, we really focus on retention, keeping the teacher here, building relationships, being part of a team and making them feel welcome so that they stay.

**KC:** I survived my first year. Now I can focus on doing better in instruction. My second year has been about growth in that area now that I feel grounded in the school and feel more comfortable in my abilities. Lawanda has been really helpful in that transition in focus.



**Katie Creagh**

**Lawanda Domingo**



- growth
- self-reliance
- retention
- mentorship
- relationships







05

# CONCLUSION

# CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS

**Since the 2016-17 school year, CPS has been working hard to change the reality for dozens of its hardest-to-staff schools, employing strategies designed to recruit and retain great teachers to ensure that their students have access to high-quality instruction year-in and year-out. The district's decision to tackle only a slice of its schools—about 10 percent—makes the effort manageable and within its capacity. It allows the Talent Office to develop trusting relationships with principals who become certain that the district will deliver multiple targeted supports to their schools.**

Principals report that this centralized recruitment program fueled by trust is resulting in higher-quality entry-level teachers. These teachers then are supported by trained coaches and mentors who help them become strong instructors and skilled navigators of their schools and a large school system. And principals themselves report feeling armed with the skills and knowledge to retain their best teachers.

Early results are promising. Though the two-year interruption in districtwide student assessments caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made it

difficult to measure the impact Opportunity Schools has had on student learning, leading indicators related to the school's workforce show that teacher vacancy rates are down and teacher retention rates up substantially. CPS' efforts to improve teacher recruitment and retention outcomes in the subset of 78 schools is worth watching and merits further study.

**Vacancies:** The Opportunity School teacher vacancy rate went from an average of 7.5% when schools joined in 2016-17 to 3.8% on the first day of 2020-21 school year, a 49% decrease.

**Retention:** First year teacher-retention improved between 2016-17 and 2020-21 school years, from 52 to 78%. For the same time period retention for Black first year teachers increased from 52 to 80% and for first-year Latinx teachers from 44 to 84%. The retention rate for all novice teachers (those in years 1-3) increased from 56 to 82% during this same time frame.

“Through our Opportunity Schools Initiative, Chicago Public Schools has made remarkable progress in tackling one of public education's most intractable challenges: Ensuring students in low-income communities have equitable access to top teaching talent. As we look to the future of Opportunity Schools, we're energized by the progress we've already seen coming out of these schools and are proud of everyone involved in this effort,” says Felton.

Principals supported by Opportunity Schools are at the heart of these improvements.

Daniel de los Reyes, principal of Darwin Elementary, affirms that connection and suggests the initiative has transformed the way he works with and manages teachers.



## CONCLUSION

“Opportunity Schools helped me develop my capacity as a leader, how to best engage my own team in critical human capital decisions, and how to mentor and develop new teachers and develop a deep bench of leaders in the building. Principals

need support to recruit and hire teachers and support them so they are effective and want to return. The support I have received has changed the way I work. Opportunity Schools has been a game-changer for me.”

### VACANCIES

3.8%

49% decrease

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### FIRST-YEAR TEACHER RETENTION

78%

Up from 52%

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### FIRST-YEAR LATINX TEACHER RETENTION

84%

Up from 44%

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### FIRST-YEAR BLACK TEACHER RETENTION

80%

Up from 52%

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### HIRED TEACHERS

800+

Since the program started in 2016-2017

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### NEW TEACHER DIVERSITY

49%

identified as Black or Latinx in SY21

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06

MUST DO'S



# “MUST-DO’S” FOR DISTRICT INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES IN HARD-TO-STAFF SCHOOLS

**Chicago’s efforts to strengthen teacher recruitment, teacher retention and improve instruction have potential implications for how other districts might implement strategies to ensure that students in all schools have equitable access to high quality teaching. This list of “must-do’s” is derived from what CPS has done and learned over the past four years through its Opportunity Schools Initiative.**

## **Planning**

- Identify a subset of schools that have the highest rates of teacher vacancies and/or attrition. It should be a manageable number of no more than five or 10 percent of schools.
- Determine the support that you will offer hard-to-staff schools, but at a minimum prioritize centralized recruitment and retention, building-based mentoring, and professional development focused on retention strategies for principals. Robust instructional coaching should also be a consideration for districts with available resources.
- Assign staff and resources focused on supporting these schools. Identify the number of full-time employees you need to implement the initiative, including those who will manage each component of the effort.

- Create a plan to resource the initiative, to pay for salaries, stipends and technical support (such as training for coaches/mentors). Consider ESSA funds and other federal grants, re-allocation of district funds and local philanthropic resources. Plan for sustainability from the start, so once philanthropic resources run out, you can sustain the program.
- Tap into the experienced teachers that are on staff (especially with mentoring, leadership opportunities, etc.). They are a critical asset!
- Have a plan but do not be afraid to experiment with ideas to see what works in your context.

## **Building Trust and Communicating**

- Develop relationships and trust with participating schools and their leaders. Bridge the bureaucracy between the HR office and schools by spending time in schools and meeting with each principal. Listen. Ask questions to identify the human capital needs of each school. Consider central office staff leads that principals will find credible, who have worked as teachers and principals themselves. More than anything, HR/Talent staff should consider the schools their “clients” and convey their desire to partner with schools to address their most intractable talent needs.
- Ensure that during each in-person touch point with principals, project leaders remind them of resources that are available to them—specifically coaching and mentoring opportunities.

## MUST DO'S

- Find ways to engage teachers in the recruitment of talent to their schools, through a teacher ambassador or similar program—this builds trust between schools and recruits.
- Create a communication plan to ensure regular contact with principals—with emphasis on resources that they have available to them. It's okay to make coaching and mentoring opt-in activities but make sure that “opting out” is not a result of too little information or too few touch points between the district and schools.
- Principals are incredibly busy! HR/Talent teams need to make supports as accessible and easy to use as possible.

## Training

- Make participation in professional development activities focused on retention mandatory for all principals.

- Assume that coaches and mentors will need to be trained and coached—plan and resource a training strategy that is evidence-based.

## Monitoring

- Survey teachers regularly to identify their needs, perceptions of their performance and satisfaction; use this information to plan coaching and mentoring activities.
- Survey principals at least once a year to assess their perception of the candidates they have hired through the recruitment and retention process.
- Establish baselines for teacher vacancy rates and teacher retention, and assess progress against these variables.



Erika Carrion





To learn more about Chicago Public Schools' Opportunity Schools Initiative, visit [teach.cps.edu/opportunity-schools](https://teach.cps.edu/opportunity-schools)

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Questions? Contact our team: [opportunitieschools@cps.edu](mailto:opportunitieschools@cps.edu)

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