

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE QUEST *for* QUALITY

**Recruiting and Retaining
Teachers in Philadelphia**



The Second Annual Study of Teacher Quality in Philadelphia

A report from *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*

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Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Philadelphia

WHERE WE'VE BEEN *and Where We Need to Go*

The School District of Philadelphia hires a large number of new teachers each year. This is not because school enrollments are increasing; in fact, a declining birth rate and the growth of charter schools have resulted in decreasing public school enrollments in recent years. Philadelphia faces an ongoing teacher-recruitment challenge because a substantial number of teachers leave the district each year. In their efforts to meet this challenge, school district leaders in Philadelphia must tackle one of the most intractable problems in urban education: recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers.

In our 2003 report, *Once and For All: Placing a Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Philadelphia Classroom*, we described the dimensions of the problem: declining rates of teacher certification, high rates of teacher turnover, elevated attrition rates in high-poverty, low-performing schools, and highly centralized staffing policies that prevented timely and rational employment matches between new teachers and their schools. In this second report on teacher quality in Philadelphia, we revisit these issues with a particular focus on new teachers. We track the district's progress, assessing how far and how fast it has come in hiring and retaining teachers and in reforming the policies and practices that have for so long limited its ability to improve teacher quality.

There are hopeful signs that the district is turning a corner on teacher quality issues. Understanding the near-impossibility of improving student achievement in schools with transient and inexperienced faculties, the School Reform Commission

(SRC), the governing body that replaced the board of education as part of the state takeover of Philadelphia's public schools in 2001, and School District of Philadelphia CEO Paul Vallas have elevated human resources issues to priority status within the context of a broad-based reform effort. The Philadelphia public has been engaged in advocating for improvement as well. Their efforts are given special urgency by the requirement of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that all teachers be "highly qualified" by June 2006.

The initiatives of CEO Vallas and the SRC, and those of other district leaders, have resulted in an increase in teacher applications and a higher certification rate. Among new teachers, the proportion who are fully certified has increased and a higher proportion are staying on after their first year on the job. A new contract between the district and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) has opened the way to a modernized and school-based hiring process for new teachers. We applaud these improvements.

While the momentum for change is impressive, the tasks that remain are substantial. Our data show that the insufficient number of experienced and certified teachers in schools with the greatest number of low-income students is a continuing problem. In order to fill vacancies in the subject areas and grade levels where shortages exist, the district will have to rely on recruits coming through alternate certification programs—new teachers with just a few weeks of prior training for their job. And veteran teachers—particularly those in special education, or who teach English-language learners, or who are elementary-level certified but teaching 7th and 8th graders—must meet more stringent federal and state licensure requirements by June 2006.

This study is part of *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a four-year research and public awareness project that is assessing the effectiveness of school improvement in Philadelphia. The project is examining the impact of the 2001 state takeover of the Philadelphia schools, including the school management partnerships undertaken with external for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and the reforms initiated by the state- and city-appointed School Reform Commission members and district CEO Paul Vallas.

Led by **Research for Action** (RFA), a Philadelphia nonprofit, *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* has brought together a team of well-known scholars to develop a broad-based research agenda. The project is supported with lead funding from the William Penn Foundation and additional grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Surdna Foundation, the Samuel S. Fels Fund and others.

TRENDS IN TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The 2002-03 school year marked the start of a wide-ranging effort by the School District of Philadelphia to implement more effective ways to hire, support, and retain new teachers. This was done partly in response to what had been historically high rates of teacher turnover (See Figure 1, page 5). The initiatives were administered by Tomás Hanna, formerly special assistant to the CEO for recruitment and retention and now the district’s senior vice president of human resources. Early evidence shows that these efforts are having a positive impact.

Applications to teach in Philadelphia increased by 44 percent between the hiring seasons of 2002 and 2004. The district undertook an active marketing campaign, refined its Web site, introduced an electronic application, and reached out to teacher-education programs in local colleges and universities.

In 2003-04, the percentage of new teachers who were fully certified—about 57 percent—rose slightly over previous school years (Table 1).

Committed to enforcing new federal and state regulations on teacher licensure, the district undertook energetic efforts to recruit certified teachers. However, the percentage of fully certified new teachers still remains comparatively low, reflecting the difficulty of hiring in shortage areas and the cumbersome hiring process in place in those years.

Table 1

Percentage and number of new teachers fully certified to teach, 2000-01 to 2003-04*

	Percentage certified	Total number of new teachers
New in October 2000	54.2%	1,157
New in October 2001	46.2%	926
New in October 2002	54.6%	1,164
New in October 2003	56.7%	1,451

*This table does not count intern-certified teachers, such as those affiliated with Teach for America, as “fully certified.”

The proportion of new teachers who completed their certification during their first school year increased from 25 percent to 34 percent between the 2002-03 and 2003-04 school year. The district has increased pressure on teachers with emergency permits to complete their certification requirements or risk losing their jobs.

The percentage of Philadelphia’s entire teaching workforce who were certified to teach—89.6 percent—increased slightly during the fall of 2003, reversing a three-year downward trend (Table 2). This improvement is due in part to efforts to hire certified new teachers, encourage teachers with emergency permits to become certified, and dismiss teachers not making progress toward certification.

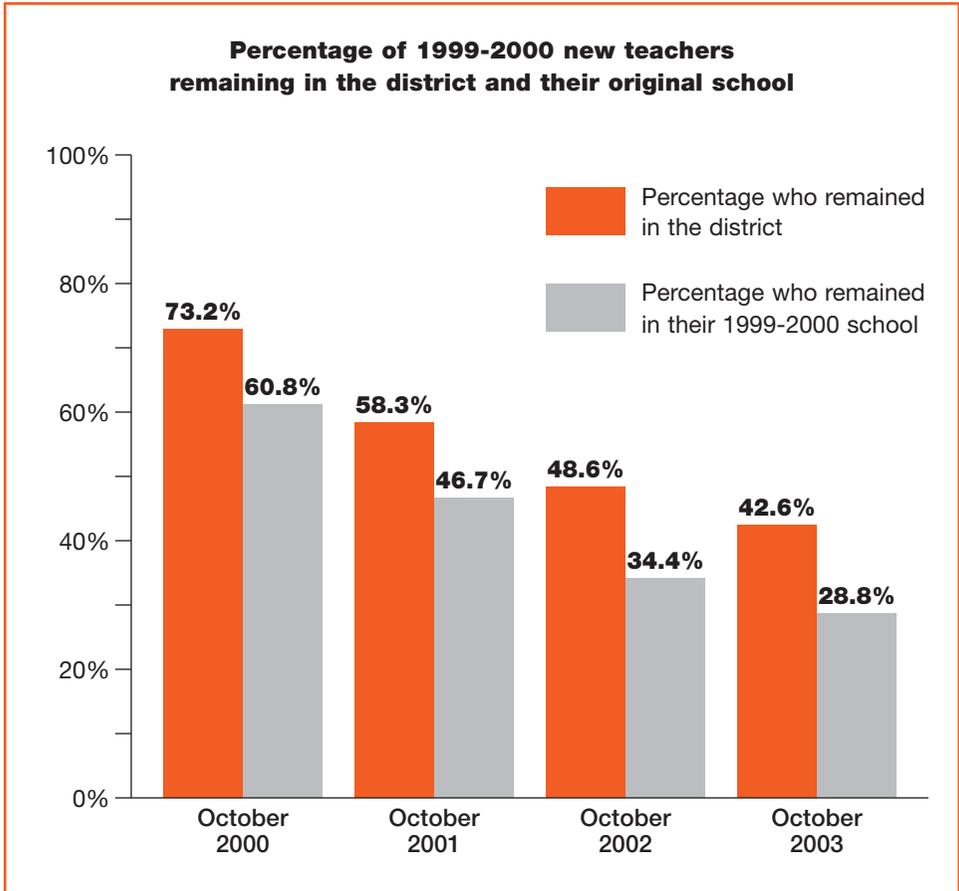
Table 2

Percentage of all Philadelphia teachers certified to teach, 1999-2000 to 2003-04*

School Year	Percentage of certified teachers
1999-00	93.3%
2000-01	90.6%
2001-02	89.4%
2002-03	88.5%
2003-04	89.6%

*Teachers who are intern certified are counted as certified in this table. Intern-certified teachers have passed their PRAXIS licensing exams but have not completed all of their coursework for certification. However, intern-certified teachers are reported as “highly qualified” under Pennsylvania regulations.

Figure 1



The district reports that retention rates for teachers in their first year on the job jumped from 73 to 91 percent between the 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years. New teachers benefited from a set of supports put into place during 2003-04. These supports, particularly those provided by New Teacher Coaches, prevented a number of early resignations.

The percentage of new teachers returning in the fall for a second year increased from 77 percent of those hired in 2002-03 to 85 percent of those hired for the 2003-04 school year. It is probable that the higher first-year retention rates for new teachers led to a higher second-year return rate as well.

THE KEY CHALLENGE AHEAD: Insuring Highly Qualified Teachers for All Schools

Proper content-area certification in the middle grades is an ongoing challenge. In response to NCLB, Pennsylvania has introduced stricter content-area requirements for teachers of 7th and 8th graders. New elementary-level certified teachers in the middle grades must now possess an academic major (or its equivalent) in the subject(s) they are teaching or have passed a subject-area proficiency test. Veterans also have the option of completing a “bridge certificate” program that combines coursework, professional development hours, and experience in the classroom. Since the majority of Philadelphia’s certified middle school teachers have elementary-level certification (Table 3), a large number are affected by the more stringent state requirements. However, the pass rates on the content-area licensing exams for veteran Philadelphia teachers in these grades are discouraging. Given Philadelphia’s difficulties in attracting and retaining 7th and 8th grade teachers

Table 3

Certification areas for all middle school teachers and new middle school teachers, 2003-04		
	Percent of all middle school teachers with certification of this type	Percent of new middle school teachers with certification of this type
Elementary-level certification only	43%	27%
Elementary-level plus another type of certification	10%	3%
Certification only in an area other than elementary level	28%	14%
No certification	19%	56%
TOTAL	100%	100%
Total number of teachers	2,066	308

who have *any* type of certification, we are skeptical that Philadelphia will be able to meet NCLB requirements for “highly qualified” teachers in the middle grades, despite the district’s evident will to comply with the letter and spirit of the legislation.

Certification among special education teachers has fallen dramatically over the past few years and new, uncertified special education teachers are assigned disproportionately to schools with the most low-income students. During 2003-04, 81 percent of the district’s special education teachers were fully certified to teach special education, a dramatic drop from a high of 91 percent in 1999-2000. Further, a substantial minority of Philadelphia’s special education teachers are not certified in *any* subject, let alone prepared for a special education classroom in which students have challenging conditions and behaviors.

Finding ways to hire and keep qualified special education teachers is one of the toughest challenges Philadelphia faces. Nationally, special education teachers leave their jobs at much higher rates than regular teachers, citing difficult working conditions. To staff its special education classrooms, Philadelphia may need to provide extra incentives to special education teachers, such as reduced class sizes and teacher-student assignments organized so that teachers’ knowledge and skills are appropriately matched to students’ disabilities.

Disparities continue between schools in teacher experience and credentials. At schools where 90 percent or more of the students are classified as low income, approximately 40 percent of the teachers have three years or less experience in the district, compared with 23 percent at schools with less than 80 percent low-income students (Table 4, page 8). More than one-quarter (26.5%) of the teachers at the schools with the highest proportion of low-income students were in their first or second year of teaching in the district, compared with just 15 percent of the schools with the lowest proportion of low-income students.

The 2004 contract between the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the school district includes a provision that only half of the openings at most schools can be filled on the basis of seniority. We expect that, at a minimum, the contract provisions will result in a different mix of novice and veteran teachers at schools with fewer low-income students, particularly at the high-school level. Unfortunately, the new four-year contract did not include robust incentives to attract and retain teachers at traditionally hard-to-staff schools.

Table 4

	Less than 80% low income	80% - 89% low income	90%+ low income
New teacher	9.2%	13.6%	17.0%
1 year experience	5.8%	8.7%	9.5%
2 years experience	4.1%	5.3%	6.6%
3 years experience	4.0%	5.8%	7.9%
4 or more years experience	77.0%	67.0%	59.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION:
New Supports to Help Teachers Get Through the First Year**

The School District of Philadelphia launched an ambitious set of major initiatives to retain teachers new to the system for the 2003-04 school year. The initiatives, after undergoing some refinement, continued into 2004-05. These programs appear to have accounted, at least in part, for a rise in retention of new teachers.

Principals were trained in methods of retaining new teachers. During the summer of 2003, more than 250 principals participated in three days of district-sponsored training, an experience that helped improve their support of new teachers (Table 5). Their subsequent performance appraisals by a regional superintendent included assessment of their skill in reducing attrition.

A cadre of 61 New Teacher Coaches traveled among schools to provide support to the new teachers at the school site. The district created the position of New Teacher Coach to provide mentoring and in-classroom assistance to new teachers. Evidence from interviews, surveys, and focus groups indicates that these coaches—all teachers on special assignment based outside their school—played an important role in boosting retention of new teachers through the school year in 2003-04. A limitation of the program was that the coaches had a caseload, on average, of nearly 20 new teachers in approximately eight different schools.

The district introduced a new core curriculum in literacy and math in grades K-9, with one objective being to offer more instructional guidance for new teachers. While systematic evidence of its reception among new teachers has not been collected, a small sample of teachers in our interview study welcomed the curricular structure and resources.

Table 5

Percentage of new teachers who said they were given basic supports during their first week on the job: 2002-03 and 2003-04

During your first week on the job, were you:	Percentage 2002-03 N=366*	Percentage 2003-04 N=454
Given curriculum scope and sequence?	32%	67%
Given student forms?	28%	58%
Given staff handbook?	64%	80%
Told name of PFT building representative?	50%	70%
Given a mailbox?	73%	97%

*366 out of 598 new teachers (61%) filled out the survey in October 2002 at a district induction session.

The district required participation in a two-week, paid summer orientation for all new teachers and added an additional two weeks for new teachers who were not fully certified. Eight hundred teachers attended the sessions in 2003 compared to 360 who attended voluntary sessions the previous summer. In 2004, 563 attended.

New teachers attended a new, year-long after-school New Teacher Academy run by Teachers College, Columbia University. Professional development for new teachers continued during the year in 18 after-school sessions, focusing on such issues as classroom management, classroom routines and procedures, multicultural education, and lesson planning. The number of sessions was trimmed to 12 for 2004-05 to better accommodate new teachers' time-pressured lives.

Other efforts to retain new and veteran teachers included a **reduction in class size** in grades K-3, an extensive **facilities improvement program**, and a tightening of **disciplinary policies**, including the transfer of seriously disruptive pupils to an expanding network of alternative schools.

IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION: A Timely and School-Based Process for Hiring Qualified New Teachers

The School District of Philadelphia is decentralizing, expediting, and modernizing the way it hires teachers and assigns them to schools. As a result of new provisions in the district's 2004 contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), the old centralized system of assigning new teachers to schools and of giving veteran teachers the extensive rights to transfer to other schools prior to the hiring of new teachers is being dismantled.

Under new regulations, procedures, and processes:

- All new teachers will be hired through a site-selection/school-based hiring process.
- A staff-selection committee—two teachers, a parent, an assistant principal (where applicable) and principal—will screen and recommend candidates to the principal, who will then make the final selection of qualified candidates.

- Schools can become full site-selection schools by a two-thirds faculty vote, a move that allows them to fill all their vacancies through a school-based interview process with no preference given to transferring teachers. A five- or six-member personnel committee will screen and recommend candidates to the principal. Other site-selection schools include three “demonstration schools,” 10 “incentive schools,” and all “transition schools” that are changing their grade configuration.
- Principals at new high schools can hire all of the staff for the first two years; thereafter, half of the vacant positions can be filled through the seniority-transfer process.
- Half of the vacancies in schools that are not otherwise designated as site-selection schools will be filled by giving priority to transferring veteran teachers. The other half will be filled by new and transferring teachers through a site-selection process.
- Principals will designate which vacancies in schools will be eligible for site selection of candidates.

The implementation of districtwide site selection and the diminishment of veteran teachers’ automatic right to transfer to other schools should increase the probability that school leaders can build cohesive staffs committed to a particular school. Further, the “experience balance” at each school, called for in the new PFT-district contract, is a new concept that shows promise in reducing inequities in teacher experience levels among schools.

The district also has committed itself to implementing a **new, accelerated hiring timeline**. In the past, a lengthy teacher-transfer process as well as budget and enrollment uncertainties drove many able candidates to accept jobs elsewhere. Beginning in 2005, district officials are coordinating internal budgeting in order to facilitate expedited hiring.

To meet the challenges of this new and complex hiring and school-assignment process, the district Office of Human Resources is undergoing a reorganization that will include the installation of a long-needed **automated applicant-tracking system**.

FILLING THE GAP: Recruiting New Teachers from Alternate-Route Certification Programs

Federal and state regulations under NCLB consider uncertified teachers to be “highly qualified” if they have passed PRAXIS licensure examinations and are enrolled in a state-approved teacher-education program leading to full certification. In Pennsylvania, such teachers are referred to as intern-certified teachers. Working in concert with external partners the school district has developed (or expanded) seven alternate-route programs for intern-certified (or almost intern-certified) teachers. About 500 new teachers a year during 2003-04 and 2004-05 have come to teach in the city through these routes.

Alternate-Route Certification Programs

Teach for America (TFA): Approximately 200 TFA corps members, all high-achieving new college graduates, are teaching full-time in shortage subject areas and hard-to-staff schools, particularly middle schools. TFA is a well-regarded, nonprofit national organization whose participants sign on for a two-year stint.

Transition to Teaching: These federally funded programs, run by Drexel University and the Philadelphia Education Fund, train teachers to fill vacancies in secondary mathematics and science. During 2003-04, these programs supplied 74 secondary math and science teachers to the district.

Accelerated Certification for Teachers (ACT): This state-funded program for either new or already-employed intern-certified teachers in shortage subject areas enables these teachers—97 in 2003-04—to complete a certification program on an expedited basis with subsidized tuition. The program encourages enrollment of minority teachers and those who are changing careers.

The Literacy Intern Program: Participants in this district-funded program—more than 1,700 since its inception in 1999-2000—co-teach in a primary-grades classroom for two to three years with a veteran teacher while they take coursework for certification. The Philadelphia Education Fund oversees the mentoring and training of the interns, a large number of whom become full-time employees of the district.

Middle Grades Transition Support Tutors: Sixty-five of these tutors work with small groups of eighth graders four days a week and take subsidized certification coursework one day a week. Administered by the Philadelphia Education Fund, the program is modeled on the Literacy Intern program notion that alternate-route training works best when new teachers do not have full-time responsibility for a classroom.

Philadelphia Teaching Fellows: This new pilot program, conceived and administered by the New York City-based New Teacher Project, hired and trained 61 participants with strong academic records to fill mid-year vacancies in shortage subject areas.

International Recruitment: The district currently employs 42 math and science teachers who were recruited during previous years from India and Kenya. Recruitment from those countries has ended, however, because of federal restrictions on the number of visas allowed for that purpose. The Office of Human Resources reports that these teachers, after a predictably rocky start, have high rates of retention in the system. A small number of Spanish teachers—five for 2004-05—continue to be recruited from Spain.

Other Problems to Solve

As noted earlier, content-area certification in middle grades, certification in special education, and the equitable distribution of qualified teachers are critical challenges facing the School District of Philadelphia. Other problems in human resources exist as well, including the four listed below.

The need to train principals to manage school-based hiring well and to have the leadership skills that promote teacher retention. District officials recognize this need and are implementing an extensive leadership-development program for new and aspiring principals. They realize that the success of new hiring and retention efforts will ultimately be decided at the school-building level.

High districtwide attrition among new teachers. In a cohort of 1999-2000 new teachers that we have been following, just over 40 percent of the 919 new teachers remained in the district four years after they began teaching, and less than 30 percent were still in the district *and* teaching at the same school where they had started (See Figure 1, page 5).

Continued reliance on using teachers with emergency permits to fill positions in shortage subject areas. Like other districts in the state, Philadelphia has a surplus of applicants for regular elementary positions but lacks candidates in certain fields: special education, physical education, bilingual education, math, science, Spanish, and computer science. The district still hires teachers on emergency permits who are not “highly qualified” to fill some of these vacancies. For the fall of 2004 alone, 245 teachers on emergency permits were hired.

A dependence on teachers in alternate-route certification programs to meet “highly qualified teacher” requirements. New teachers in these programs, many of whom are intern-certified in their subject area and deemed “highly qualified,” begin teaching with little or no prior training in pedagogy and classroom management. The district hires several hundred such teachers each year to meet its staffing needs. While they fill critical gaps in staffing and are generally more qualified than “apprentice teachers” on emergency permits, many are only minimally qualified to step into challenging classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The teacher recruitment and retention initiatives launched by the School District of Philadelphia have already produced some encouraging results. Recruitment numbers are up, the downward slide in the percentage of certified teachers is reversing, turnover among new teachers has been reduced, and the district's overly centralized method of hiring and assigning new teachers to schools is no longer in existence. District officials, led by CEO Vallas and the School Reform Commission, have continued to refine and expand a range of initiatives designed to improve teacher quality. In doing this, they have drawn on the expertise of dozens of external organizations, including many of the local institutions of higher education.

This movement for change has not lost its momentum. Indeed, important new components are being added: leadership-development programs for principals, the introduction of districtwide site selection of new teachers, an acceleration of the hiring timeline, and the automation of the employment process.

Still, turnover among new and veteran teachers remains high, and the most-stressed schools have the highest proportion of minimally qualified teachers. Many new teachers, who are working under emergency permits, do not meet the state's definition of "highly qualified," and many of those who are "highly qualified," by reason of being intern certified, enter the classroom with thin instructional training.

Despite the district's vigorous and comprehensive initiatives to upgrade its teacher workforce, it appears unlikely to be in full compliance with the NCLB-imposed June 2006 deadline that all its teachers meet the designation of "highly qualified." Given the obstacles—tough working conditions, modest pay, shortages of teachers in selected fields, and long-term social forces that encourage young people to choose other occupations—the race to full compliance looks more and more like a marathon rather than a sprint. District officials are to be applauded for doing so well in the first leg of this marathon, and we hypothesize that the continuing rollout of new initiatives is likely to result in substantial progress toward meeting the "highly qualified" teacher goal. But Philadelphia's school leaders and their partner groups and civic supporters will have to maintain aggressive efforts over a period of years to fulfill this commitment to the system's young people and their families.

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