



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**CLOSING THE
TEACHER
QUALITY GAP
IN PHILADELPHIA:**

New Hope and Old Hurdles

The Third Study of Teacher Quality in Philadelphia

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



RESEARCH for ACTION

CLOSING THE TEACHER QUALITY GAP IN PHILADELPHIA:

New Hope and Old Hurdles

WHAT'S BEEN DONE *and What We Still Need to Do*

The School District of Philadelphia has made significant progress in upgrading the qualifications of classroom teachers for its 174,000 students since 2002. That year marked the enactment of the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) law and the beginning of a sweeping reform program spurred by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's takeover of the district for fiscal and academic "distress." Responding to NCLB's requirement that students be taught by "highly qualified" teachers, and to priorities established by CEO Paul Vallas, the district has drastically cut the numbers of teachers with emergency certifications, reduced classroom vacancies, and radically improved the certification rate of new teachers.

During this same period, however, the district did not succeed in changing the unconscionable pattern of having the least qualified teachers in schools serving the highest percentages of poor and minority students. It has also made little headway in retaining teachers through at least their first six years.

Looking first at successes, the district has improved teacher recruitment through better marketing, stronger connections with higher education institutions, and modernized hiring procedures. It has replaced its overly centralized system for placing *new* teachers in schools with a school-based "site selection" hiring process that enables new recruits and school personnel committees to forge a better employment match. The move to expanded site selection, negotiated in the district's 2004 contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), led to a reduction in the seniority-based school transfer opportunities of veteran teachers.

Attrition among teachers during their *first* year in the classroom has been substantially reduced since the onset of reform efforts, and their second-year retention in the system has improved modestly. Better support for new teachers along with the introduction of a core curriculum and more plentiful teaching materials help account for this change.

These and other positive indicators show that a large urban school district serving mainly low-income and minority students can make substantial progress in solving teacher staffing problems.

Still, persistent hurdles remain. Long-term retention rates of teachers are alarmingly low. The convoluted and delayed timeline for hiring new teachers, caused by uncertainties about state funding levels and provisions in the PFT-district contract that regulate the processing of teacher transfers, remains a significant hurdle to hiring new teachers in a timely way. The district has also had difficulty increasing its percentage of minority teachers and finding enough qualified candidates in selected subject areas.

The barriers to improving teacher staffing are especially unrelenting in schools that serve the highest percentages of low-income and minority students. We found that the district has not been successful in moving toward greater equity in the distribution of fully certified and experienced teachers across all schools. The one area where there *has* been progress in teacher equity is the reduction in the numbers of emergency-certified teachers in the schools serving largely low-income and minority students and their replacement with teachers who are at least Intern certified.

In the three reports we have written on teacher staffing in the School District of Philadelphia, we have documented how pressures from NCLB and from district leaders have led to substantial improvement. Given the continuing challenges and the ever-fragile nature of gains that have been achieved, it is imperative that the district press for continued change, even as it faces an environment of fiscal austerity.

TRENDS IN TEACHERS' CREDENTIALS

In this and previous reports, we use teachers' professional credentials, a readily available indicator, as one way of measuring "teacher quality." In most of the analyses that follow, we draw on a district-provided data set of the system's teachers, one that spans the years from fall 1999 through fall 2005. We are aware that requirements for meeting NCLB's "highly qualified" teacher standards or for fulfilling state

Figure 1

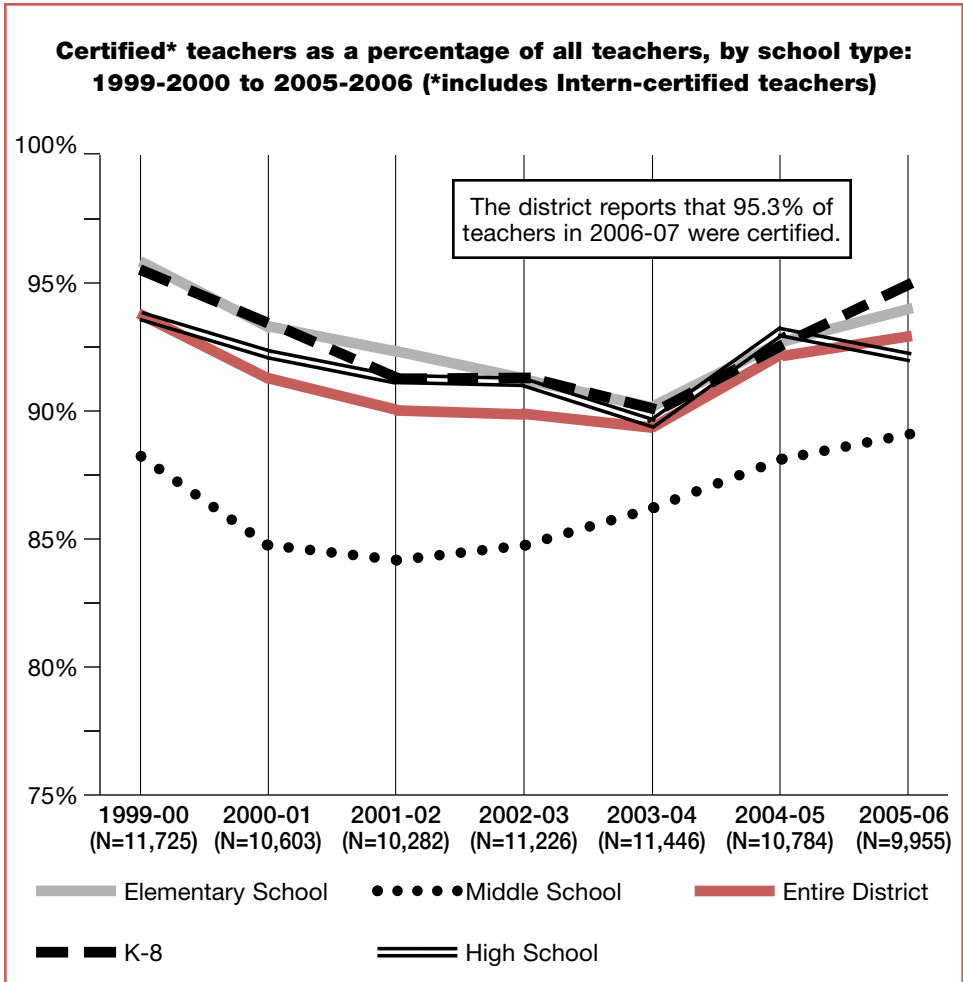
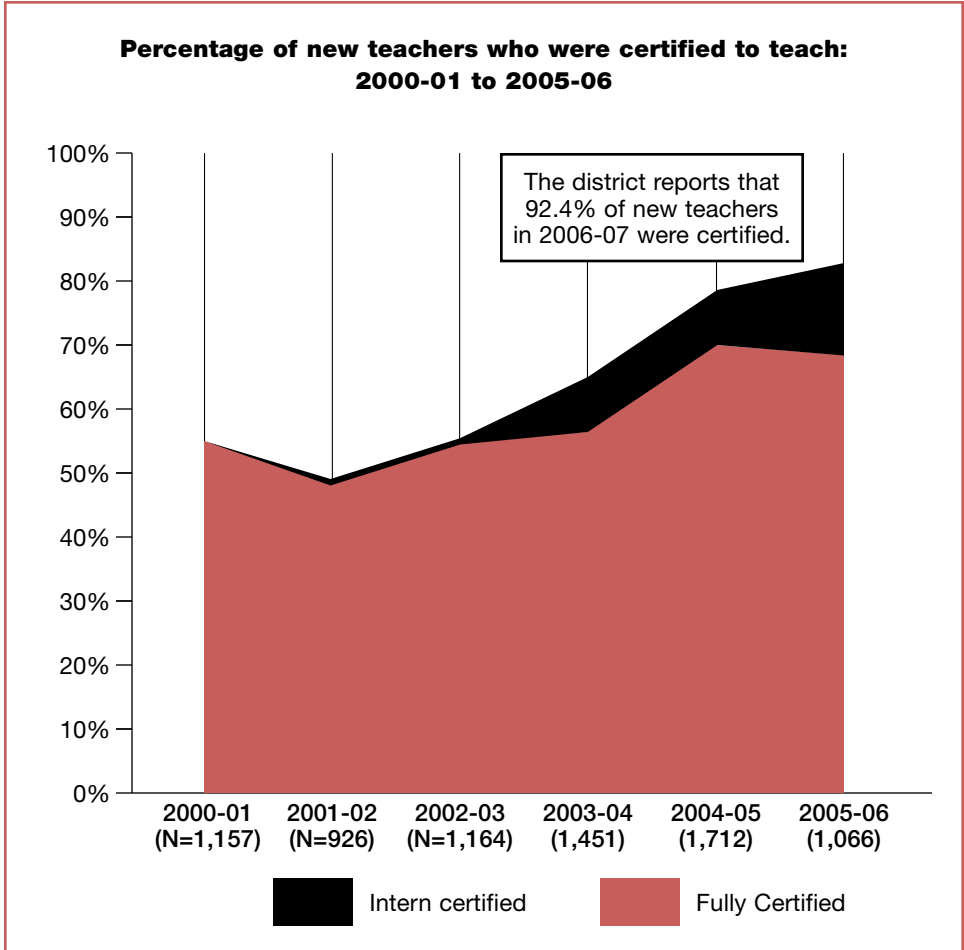


Figure 2



certification provisions do not guarantee that a person is an effective teacher in the classroom. But the high failure rates of Philadelphia’s emergency-certified teachers on licensure tests of basic skills, figures we reported previously, lead us to believe that “highly qualified” and/or fully certified teachers are more likely than uncertified teachers to be proficient in the classroom.

The following indicators show that the School District of Philadelphia has upgraded teachers' professional credentials since 2002:

“Highly qualified” teachers: By November 2006, 92 percent of Philadelphia’s nearly 10,000 teachers were deemed “highly qualified” by NCLB standards according to district reports. This means that Philadelphia came close to meeting the NCLB deadline of June 2006 for all teachers to meet these standards. In Pennsylvania, “highly qualified” teachers must 1) have a four-year college degree; 2) possess either full teacher certification or an Intern certificate in the academic subject(s) they teach; and 3) demonstrate subject matter competency for the core content area they teach. The Intern certificate, good for three years, requires its holders to have a bachelor’s degree, to have passed the PRAXIS licensure examinations in basic skills and in their subject area, and to be enrolled in a state-approved teacher certification program in a college or university.

The existing teacher workforce: The percentage of all teachers in the district who were either fully certified or Intern-certified dipped between fall 1999 and fall 2003 to 89.6 percent, but rose steadily after that to 93.3 percent in the fall of 2005. The district reports that for 2006-2007, the rate continued to rise to 95.3 percent. Rates of certification were highest for teachers in K-8 and elementary schools, followed by high school teachers, with middle school teachers having the lowest rates of certification.

Emergency permits: The number of teachers with emergency permits has plummeted from 2,597 in fall 2002 to 423 in fall 2006.

New teachers: The certification credentials of *new* teachers have shown striking improvement. In fall 2001, just before the state’s takeover of the district and the passage of NCLB, only about 47 percent of new teachers were either fully certified or Intern-certified. By October 2005, that figure had risen to 83 percent. According to district reports, that figure has now risen to 92.4 percent.

Middle school teachers: The percentage of middle school teachers who were either Intern-certified or fully certified went from 38.5 percent in fall 2001 to nearly 83 percent in fall 2005. Much of that improvement was due to the replacement of emergency-certified teachers with Intern-certified teachers, many of them from alternate route certification programs run by national groups, particularly Teach For America and the Philadelphia Teaching Fellows program of The New Teacher Project.

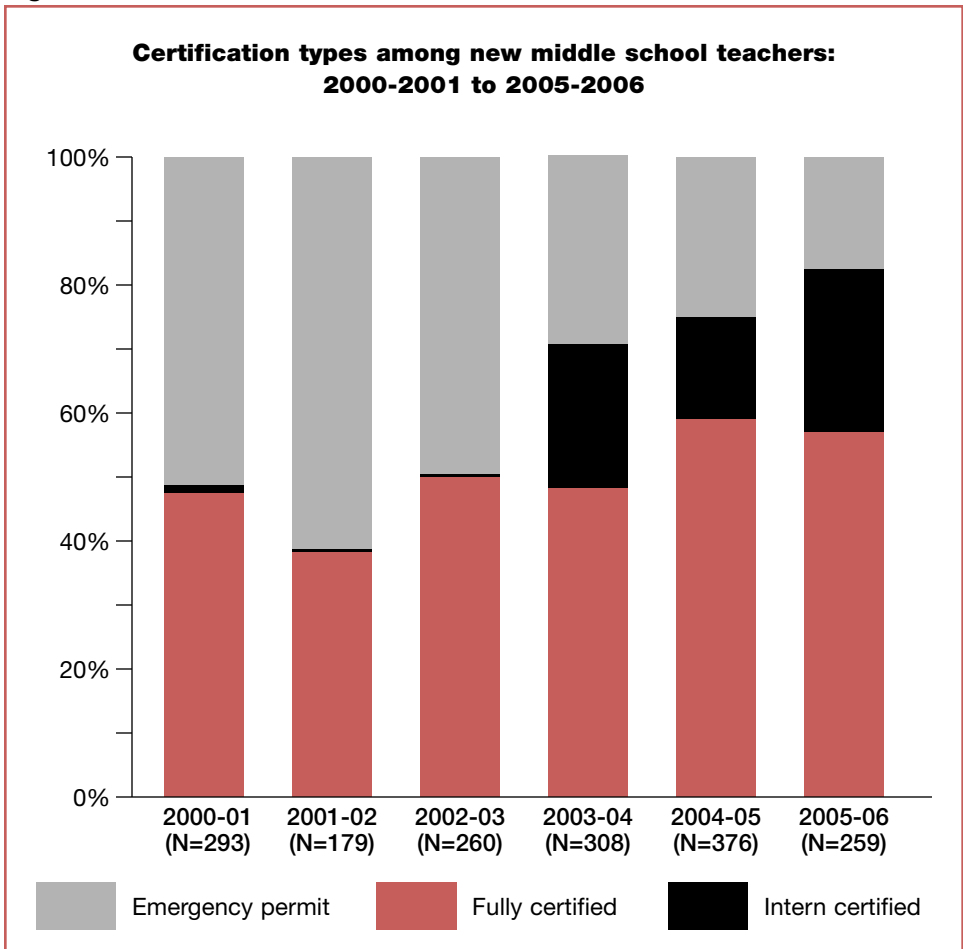
TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS: Solutions and Challenges

The district pursued multiple initiatives after 2002 that enabled it to make progress in meeting the June 2006 deadline set by NCLB for all teachers to be “highly qualified.” These included:

SOLUTIONS:

Recruitment: The district continued to intensify its recruitment efforts, including Roll Out the Red Carpet recruiting days for college education majors and career-

Figure 3



changers; job fairs; and a paid training program for student teachers in partnership with the Philadelphia Education Fund. The number of candidates who passed the initial Human Resources screening rose from 1,346 to 1,997 between the 2005 and 2006 hiring seasons.

Site selection: The expansion of school-based hiring, allowed by the 2004 contract between the PFT and the district, became operational for the 2005-06 school year. New and transferring teachers could apply and interview for openings in the 63 schools that were “full site selection” schools, first allowed by the contract signed in 2000. They could also seek to fill up to half the vacancies in the remainder of the district’s 260+ schools. The rollout of this process was reasonably successful, resulting in about 70 percent of all vacancies being filled through site selection, but fell short of district expectations as not all principals chose to hire through the new school-based process.

Alternate route certification programs: Since 2002, the district has relied heavily on alternate route programs whose participants are Intern-certified to fill vacancies in certain subject shortage areas—particularly special education, math, and the physical sciences—and in schools with high poverty rates and low student achievement. About a third of the 800 new teachers hired for the fall of 2006 were in one of these programs. The two biggest of these programs are both run by national groups and are highly selective in choosing candidates—Teach For America and the Philadelphia Teaching Fellows program of The New Teacher Project.

“Add a certification” program for veteran teachers: In order to meet the NCLB deadline for “highly qualified” status in the subjects they were actually teaching, hundreds of veteran teachers passed the relevant licensure examinations to add a certification. The district paid for the necessary training for some of these teachers, particularly those wishing to add a certification for special education or for a 7th or 8th grade core subject to their existing elementary-level certification. More than 700 other teachers signed up for the state’s version of the HOUSSE option (High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation) to meet the “highly qualified” designation to teach core academic subjects to 7th and 8th graders, students in alternative schools, or those in special education or English as a Second Language classrooms.

At the same time, the district still confronts serious difficulties in hiring new teachers in a relatively smooth and uncomplicated way and in hiring adequate numbers of minority teachers.

CHALLENGES:

The delayed and convoluted hiring process: Despite efforts to decentralize and modernize the hiring and school placement process, it is still extraordinarily complex and slow. Some of the delay can be attributed to budget uncertainties, particularly at the state level, but much of the complicated and protracted nature of the process is due to agreements between the district and the PFT. For example, under current rules, the district must coordinate the school assignment of new and transferring teachers (both forced and voluntary transfers), each on a different timeline. In addition, a court ruling requires that attention be given to achieving racial balance among staff in the schools. The complexity and delay makes it difficult to hire “the best and the brightest” in a rational and timely way.

Hiring more teachers of color: Teachers of color are seriously under-represented, both in the district and statewide. According to the system’s figures, 85 percent of Philadelphia’s students are African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander or “other” compared to only 38 percent of their teachers. A Teacher Diversity Campaign launched in the district in 2006 calls for a number of initiatives over a five-year period to increase this percentage. While some of these efforts are being pursued, additional external resources are needed to fully fund this effort.

TEACHER RETENTION

The district has made some headway in retaining new teachers through their first year and in getting them to return for a second year. Long-term retention, however, is abysmal.

First year retention of new teachers: According to the district, more than 90 percent of the new teachers hired each year since fall 2003 have stayed in the district through June of their first year compared to 73 percent in years prior to that. This change is attributed to a set of retention reforms: support from New Teacher Coaches; better hiring processes; increased district pressures on principals to give active support to new teachers; the implementation of a system-wide core curriculum; and better supplies of books and curriculum materials. The New Teacher Coach positions were eliminated in 2007 as a result of budget cuts although, in lower-performing schools, this support has been taken over by “School Growth Teachers” located in the schools.

Second year retention of new teachers: The percentage of new teachers returning for a second year has increased modestly from about 77 percent of those hired in the years between 2000 and 2003 to a little over 81 percent of those who joined the system in fall 2004.

Table 1

**Second-year teacher retention for teachers hired
in 1999-2000 to 2004-2005**

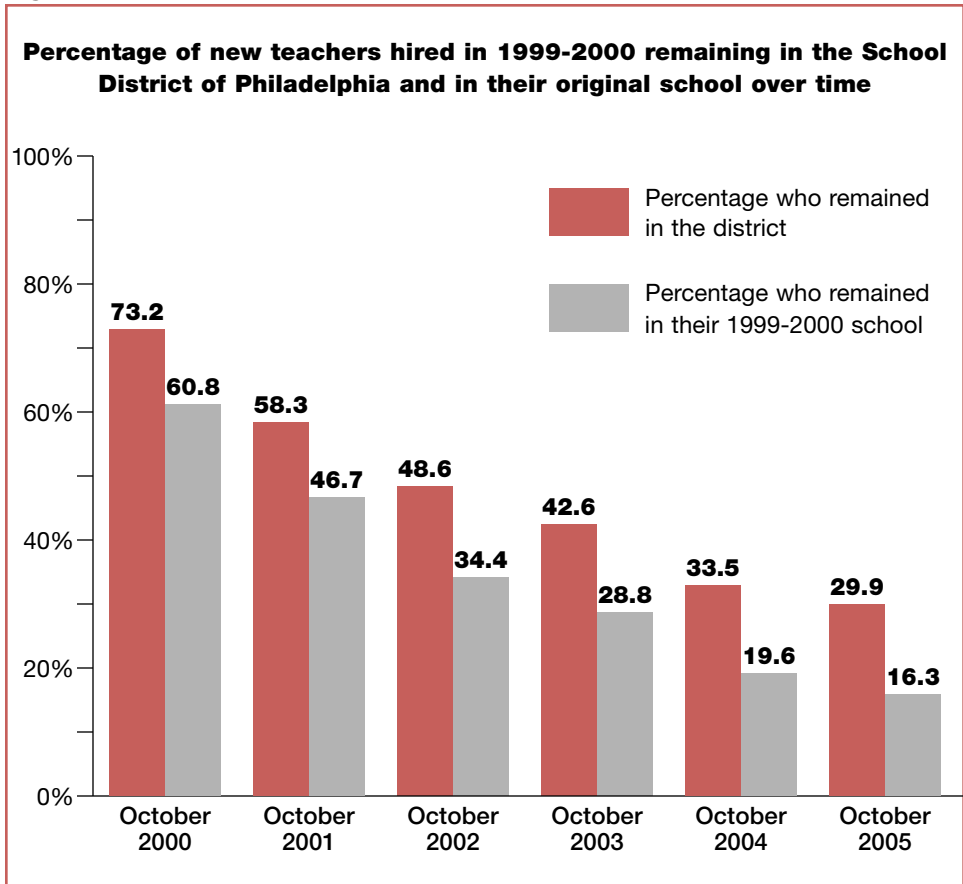
New Teachers	Hired in 1999-2000	Hired in 2000-2001	Hired in 2001-2002	Hired in 2002-2003	Hired in 2003-2004	Hired in 2004-2005
Returning to district for 2nd year	73.2%	77.6%	76.8%	76.9%	69.3%	81.1%
Returning to same school for 2nd year*	60.8%	69.5%	63.2%	62.2%	56.6%	67.9%

*The calculation of the percentage of first-year teachers returning for a 2nd year is highly sensitive to the time interval being used. Our figure of returning teachers counts only those who were on the payroll as of October of their first year and October of their second year. Teachers hired who came or went between those two dates are not counted.

Long-term retention: Longer-term retention figures show that teachers leave the district in high numbers during their first few years. Of those hired in 1999-2000, only about 30 percent remained in the district six years later and even fewer, approximately 16 percent, could still be found in their original schools.

In some respects, it is not surprising that turnover among teachers is so high. In surrounding suburbs, salary scales, especially at the top end, tend to be much higher, classes are smaller, and other types of working conditions are generally better. Given the substantial costs of attrition to the district—in staff cohesion, coherent educational programs, institutional memory, the expense of hiring and supporting new teachers, and lowered levels of student learning—the need for a substantial infusion of resources into support for teachers in their early years seems obvious.

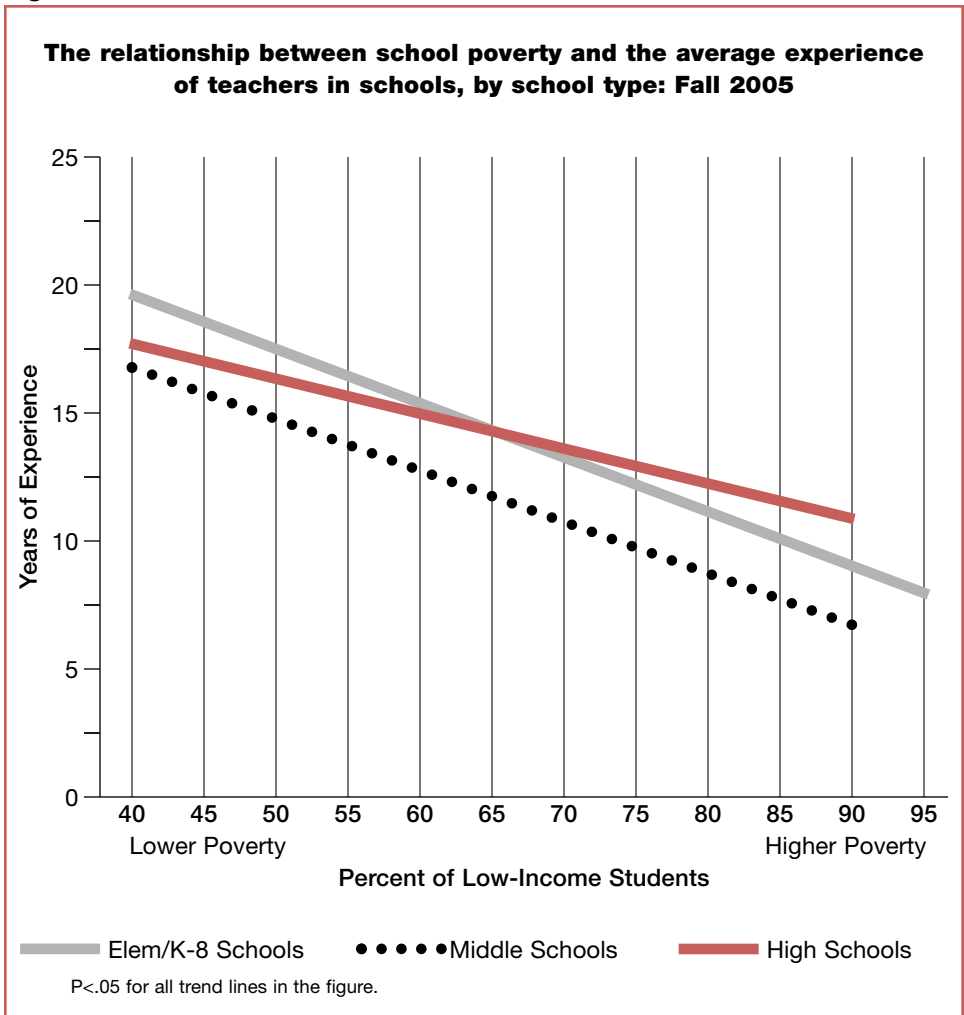
Figure 4



TRENDS IN THE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Our data show that the district has not yet made progress in distributing qualified and experienced teachers in an equitable way across all district schools. As before, we found that schools made up largely of poor and minority students were much more likely to have teachers who were less experienced and less credentialed, a condition that was not improved by new staffing provisions in the 2004 PFT-district contract nor district efforts to improve retention.

Figure 5



District officials had hoped that the designation of a group of 24 schools where teachers would be given extra incentives to stay or to go there would improve their experience balance. They also thought that the expansion of school-based site selection in the filling of vacancies would help hard-to-staff schools seek out experienced teachers and would also allow a higher percentage of new teachers to fill vacancies in less-stressed schools. These latter openings had traditionally been snapped up first by transferring teachers exercising their seniority rights. In these ways, the contract provisions might have nudged the district toward greater equity in the distribution of teacher experience. We found, however, that in the first year of the contract’s implementation, this did not occur.

Table 2

Distribution of teacher certification status in schools, by percentage of minority students: 2005-2006					
Teacher Certification Status	Number of teachers	Less than 50% minority	50-89% minority	90%+ minority	Entire district
Fully certified	9,459	96.7%	94.3%	87.7%	90.4%
Intern certified	309	0.8%	1.6%	3.9%	3.0%
Emergency permit	694	2.5%	4.1%	8.4%	6.6%
Total certified (Full and Intern)	9,768	97.5%	95.9%	91.6%	93.4%

Table 3

**Distribution of teacher certification status in schools,
by school poverty level: 2005-2006**

Teacher Certification Status	Number of teachers	Less than 80% low income	80-90% low income	90%+ low income	Entire district
Fully certified	9,459	93.0%	90.7%	86.6%	90.4%
Intern certified	309	1.9%	2.7%	4.6%	3.0%
Emergency permit	694	5.2%	6.6%	8.7%	6.6%
Total certified (Full and Intern)	9,768	94.9%	93.4%	91.2%	93.4%

In conducting our analyses of equity, we looked at the distribution of teacher experience. Researchers have shown that students tend to learn less from teachers with three or fewer years of classroom experience. Schools with large numbers of new teachers each year are especially difficult places for students to learn. Our findings included the following:

Trends in teachers' average years of experience: Teachers' average years of experience in the district declined each year between fall 2002 and fall 2004. In fall 2005, that trend reversed among teachers in elementary and K-8 schools; the decline halted in middle schools; and in high schools the decline continued, but at a much slower rate. The increase in experience levels at the elementary and K-8 level was concentrated in the lower-poverty schools.

School poverty and faculty experience: Teachers in schools with the highest levels of poverty had faculties with significantly less classroom experience. This relationship was stronger at the elementary/K-8 schools and middle school levels (where the correlation between poverty and experience was a robust .71 in both cases) than at the high school level (where it was .56).

School percent minority and teacher experience: The higher the percentage of minority students in a school, the lower the average years of teacher experience. This relationship was weaker than that between faculty experience and school poverty levels, but it was still substantial and statistically significant.

Faculty experience balance in “incentive schools”: The 24 hard-to-staff “incentive” schools did not register a change in average faculty experience levels during 2005-2006 in ways that differed from previously established trends (2001-2004) in those schools. This is not surprising given that the package of financial and other incentives to teach in those schools was comparatively weak.

Faculty experience balance in "full site selection" schools: In 2005-2006, about half of the middle schools using “full site selection”—i.e., all of the teaching vacancies could be filled through a selection process conducted by school personnel—tended to have higher average levels of teacher experience than expected (from trends since 2001) but only if they were not “incentive” schools. The benefits of full site selection on experience balance were not found at the elementary/K-8 or high school levels.

Teacher certification by school poverty and percent minority: In looking at teachers’ professional credentials, we found that schools with higher proportions of low-income and minority students continued to have fewer teachers who were *fully* certified. The percentage of fully certified teachers changed hardly at all in these schools between fall 2002 and fall 2005. During that same period, however, the percentage of Intern-certified teachers went up and the percentage of the less-qualified emergency-certified teachers went down, representing some improvement in credentials in these schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we conclude our multi-year research on trends in teacher workforce issues in the School District of Philadelphia, we are more than ever convinced that the district must place high priority on upgrading, diversifying, and retaining its teaching staff and on finding ways to place equally qualified teachers in *all* schools. We recommend that the district take the following actions:

To improve equity:

- Create a package of robust incentives (e.g. smaller classes, strong school leaders who promote collegial work, extra pay) to attract and retain teachers in “hard-to-staff” schools. This will require reconfiguration of existing funds and an infusion of money from external public and private sources.
- Establish specific targets and timelines for achieving greater equity across schools in measures of teacher quality.

To improve recruitment and school placement:

- Redesign the teacher hiring and school assignment process to be less cumbersome and complex, a process that will require changes in the PFT-district contract.
- Hold school principals accountable for recruitment efforts and provide them with the technological tools they need for an efficient teacher selection process.
- Find resources to pay for programs to recruit and train minority teachers.
- Work with, and put pressure on, teacher education programs to prepare more teachers in shortage subject areas such as special education, math, and science.

To improve retention:

- Expand high-quality mentoring and induction programs for new teachers.
- Expand leadership training programs for school administrators and school behavioral climate initiatives in order to improve working conditions for teachers.

About the Study

This study is part of *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a multi-year research and public awareness project that has assessed the effectiveness of school improvement in Philadelphia since Pennsylvania's takeover of the School District of Philadelphia in December 2001. The project is supported with lead funding from the William Penn Foundation and related grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Samuel S. Fels Fund, the Edward Hazen Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Philadelphia Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and others.

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About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

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