

## **Supporting and Retaining New Teachers in Philadelphia**

[for May 2005 issue of *Education Leadership*]

Elizabeth Useem

Senior Research Consultant, Research for Action

352 Woodley Road

Merion Station, PA 19066

610-667-1906

610-667-1271 (f)

[buseem@researchforaction.org](mailto:buseem@researchforaction.org)

Ruth Curran Neild

Assistant Professor of Education

Graduate School of Education

University of Pennsylvania

[rneild@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:rneild@gse.upenn.edu)

215-898-5195

215-898-4399 (f)

[2608 words including references and cover page]

[photos could be added]

## **Supporting and Retaining New Teachers in Philadelphia**

Education reformers have long recognized the importance of reducing new teacher attrition in high-poverty urban districts, but such turnover has been notoriously resistant to correction. Thus it was particularly noteworthy this fall when the School District of Philadelphia announced that the percentage of first-year teachers remaining through their initial year had risen from 73 percent in 2002-03 to 91 percent in 2003-04. Eighty-five percent returned in the fall of 2004 compared to 77 percent in fall 2003. This change in retention resulted from the district's implementation of an ambitious set of initiatives designed to retain novice teachers during 2003-04 school year.

There are many reasons why a school district should pay attention to teacher turnover. School improvement efforts, now fueled by the urgency of meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) student achievement targets, require a reasonable degree of staff stability. It is almost impossible to create change with a transient and inexperienced staff. And high turnover rates--common in stressed districts--make it harder to meet the federal NCLB requirement that all teachers be "highly qualified" by June 2006 since such systems typically are forced to fill a high percentage of vacant positions with uncertified teachers. Further, at the most basic level, replacing new teachers is expensive, costing on average about \$11,000 per recruit (Benner, 2000).

### **Making Human Resources a Priority**

When district CEO Paul Vallas arrived in Philadelphia during the summer of 2002, he found a system where fewer than half of the new teachers remained in the

system after three years on the job, and only a third were still in the school to which they were originally assigned (Neild, Useem, Travers, & Lesnick, 2003). Vallas quickly established teacher recruitment and retention as priorities in his administration, appointing a special assistant, Tomás Hanna, to oversee the effort. Realizing that the quality of the district's principal leadership corps was key to improving teacher retention, Vallas soon gave leadership development top priority as well and added it to Hanna's portfolio.

Facing in addition the rollout of a unique "diverse provider" model whereby 44 of the district's lowest-performing schools are managed by external organizations (Bulkley, Mundell, & Riffer, 2004), Vallas aimed his resource initiatives at enduring problems that can undermine the success of any management model. In this, he has been supported by the five-member appointed School Reform Commission (SRC), formed in 2001 when the state of Pennsylvania, in partnership with the city of Philadelphia, assumed governance of the school district.

The human resources effort developed momentum rapidly as district officials broke from traditional patterns and reached out aggressively to colleges and universities, business and civic groups, and external consultants to participate in the design and implementation of teacher recruitment and training programs. The district's long-term tendency to guard its administrative turf gave way to the view that the problems in finding and keeping teachers were too big for any one organization to solve. CEO Vallas and Tomás Hanna were candid about the weaknesses in the system's personnel policies, working conditions, and induction programs, which facilitated honest conversations with

partner groups. And they continued the district's practice of making longitudinal staffing data available to external researchers.

### **Recruiting Teachers**

Good retention policies must first attend to recruiting qualified teachers who are likely to stay in the system. Between 2002 and 2004, the numbers of teachers applying for jobs in the district rose by 44 percent. The acceleration and broadening of an array of recruitment initiatives by the Vallas administration accounted for this increase. Strategies included an aggressive marketing effort, use of "cultivation" (follow-up) activities with applicants, introduction of a tuition-reimbursement incentive, intensive fostering of relationships with program directors and deans of local colleges of education, and a more streamlined application process. Current teachers who recruited new candidates in high-need areas ("Teacher Ambassadors") received \$1,000 stipends. The number of student teachers doubled, and student teachers who became district teachers received \$1000 stipends and partial reimbursement of PRAXIS exam fees. The district continued its hiring bonus of \$4500, paid out in two installments over a three-year period.

More importantly, district officials developed a portfolio of six alternate-route programs with local colleges and universities to train the city's new teachers who lack certification and are working on emergency permits (Useem, Neild, & Farley, 2005). About 500 new teachers hired by the district each year over the last two years were participating in or had just completed one of these programs. The largest of these programs has been a home-grown model, the Literacy Intern program, conducted in partnership since 1999 with the non-profit Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF). This

alternate route supplied approximately 600 fully trained new teachers over the past two school years. Prior to being hired by the district as stand-alone teachers, participants in this program are employed with nearly full pay and benefits and co-teach in a primary grades classroom with a veteran teacher for two to three years. They also participate in intensive and sustained professional development in literacy, take courses for certification, and receive special mentoring from an adjunct (often retired) coach. Literacy Interns are more likely than other new teachers to report that they plan a long teaching career in the district.

In 2004, the Vallas administration collaborated with PEF to expand the Literacy Intern model by piloting a middle grades program in which new teachers (called Transition Support Tutors) work four days a week in the schools and take courses for certification on the fifth day. In addition, the New York-based New Teacher Project is piloting the Philadelphia Teaching Fellows program, aimed at filling mid-year vacancies in subject areas where teacher shortages exist. The 63 participants, chosen from 700 applicants, received four weeks of training in January 2005 and stepped into vacant positions in February. Teach for America (TFA), a well-known national organization, started supplying teachers to Philadelphia during 2003-04. The 200 TFA teachers are placed in high-need middle grade schools and subject areas. Two additional alternate-route programs—the federally funded Transition to Teaching initiative and a state-funded Accelerated Certification for Teachers pilot program—also provided new recruits to the district.

This strategy of hiring teachers on emergency permits in alternate-route programs represents an acknowledgement by district officials that Philadelphia, for the foreseeable

future, cannot count on finding enough fully certified teachers to fill the more than 1,000 positions that open up each year. Pennsylvania regulations consider alternate-route candidates who have passed the PRAXIS exams and are enrolled in a teacher education program as Intern certified and “highly qualified.” While there is merit to the claim by critics that such teachers are only minimally qualified, Philadelphia’s push to hire Intern-certified teachers is an improvement over its former reliance on turnover-prone “Apprentice” teachers who had not yet passed the PRAXIS exams and/or had not necessarily enrolled in, or successfully pursued, a teacher education program.<sup>1</sup>

### **Supporting and Keeping New Teachers**

In addition to hiring new teachers with stronger initial qualifications, Philadelphia officials, beginning in 2003-04, launched an ambitious set of initiatives to retain teachers who were new to the system.

First, district leaders focused the attention of school principals on the importance of retaining teachers, and on new teachers in particular. Principals’ performance appraisals by their Regional Superintendents began to include assessment of their skill in reducing attrition. In the summer of 2003, principals participated in several days of training in methods of improving retention, and drew up a teacher retention plan for the fall. Surveys of new teachers showed a marked increase between 2002 and 2003 in their reports of feeling welcomed and supported by administrators.

Second, the district intensified a series of mandated induction activities for all teachers new to the system. New teachers who were certified were required to attend a

---

<sup>1</sup> The district dismissed 163 of these Apprentice teachers who had not met the requirements for full or Intern certification at the end of the 2003-04 school year.

two-week, paid summer orientation: those who were not fully certified attended a four-week orientation program. Once school began, new teachers attended an after-school New Teacher Academy run by staff from Teachers College, Columbia University in partnership with the district.

Third, the district created a new position in 2003-04—the New Teacher Coach—designed to provide mentoring and in-classroom assistance to the new teachers.

Philadelphia has experimented with the use of in-classroom coaching over the last decade, beginning with the work of the Johns Hopkins University Talent Development Middle School and High School programs, two of the federally supported comprehensive school reform designs. The Talent Development model stresses the importance of sustained coaching tailored both to subject areas and grade levels, and links this support to a schoolwide curriculum and to intensive professional development courses and workshops.

In contrast to the district's traditional colleague mentor program, in which selected classroom teachers mentored their new colleagues in the same building, the 61 New Teacher Coaches (all teachers on special assignment) did not have classroom teaching responsibilities. Evidence from interviews, surveys, and focus groups indicates that these coaches, who were all based outside the school, played an important role in boosting the new teacher retention rate during 2003-04 (Useem & Costelloe, 2004; Useem, Neild & Farley, 2005). The new teachers were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the support they received from the coaches:

*My new teacher coach was a godsend. She was there the day I started. I felt like I was walking in cold, but I got instant support. She helped me set up my room and gave suggestions. She came by once per week, and we talked on the phone and e-mailed. She also modeled lessons and observed in my room. She was a big help because she is familiar with Special Education. (Middle school Special Education teacher)*

*My New Teacher Coach saved my life, saved my sanity. She has shown up at the most appropriate times and is the most consistent [support]. She cut out bulletin boards and ran interference with the principal. She was everything I needed. She covered classes when I needed to cry. (5<sup>th</sup> grade bilingual teacher)*

Fourth, the district's introduction of a common core curriculum in 2003-04 and 2004-05 appears to have made life easier for most new teachers. In addition to the scope and sequence, texts, and materials, teachers were provided with suggested lesson plans and resources. Although some veteran teachers have found the curriculum constraining, new teachers appreciate the instructional guidance and the lesson plans.

*The core curriculum was important to me. I wasn't overwhelmed with developing lesson plans. This year would have been much tougher without the core curriculum. (9<sup>th</sup> grade math teachers)*

*I would have drowned without the core curriculum. (9<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher)*

In several other ways, the district has taken steps to improve working conditions for all teachers, partly with the hope of reducing attrition among them. These steps include smaller class sizes in grades K-3, an extensive facilities improvement program, and a tightening up of disciplinary policies, including the transfer of seriously disruptive pupils to an expanding network of alternative schools.

The system is also moving away from its rigid and centralized method of assigning new teachers to schools. Its new contract with the teachers' union, signed in 2004, allows for a greatly expanded system of school-based hiring. For the first time, all new teachers will be able to interview at a school before choosing to teach there, a process that should lead to higher retention since new teachers and the school's principal and hiring committee will have engaged in a mutual choice process.<sup>2</sup> The potential of these new policies for stabilizing staffing, of course, will depend heavily on the skill of principals in taking advantage of their new authority over hiring.

### **The Ongoing Challenge**

Taken together, these steps have helped stem the loss of new teachers during their first year on the job and have increased the numbers returning for a second year. The challenge will be to sustain and strengthen these initiatives. This will be no easy task.

---

<sup>2</sup> The new system is complicated. Half of all vacancies will be open in the spring to new teachers and to veterans who will have to be chosen by the school's principal and hiring committee. The vacancies that still remain in the summer after the other openings have been filled through the seniority-based transfer process will be filled by new teachers who, like those hired in the spring, will interview and be chosen in a school-based site selection process. Only 53 schools out of 270 (20%) in the district will hire all of their teachers through site selection, foreclosing any automatic transfers due to seniority.

For one thing, these efforts are not cheap. The annual price tag for the New Teacher Coaches, the New Teacher Academy, the summer orientation and selected financial incentives--tuition reimbursement, partial reimbursement of the cost of PRAXIS exams, finder's fees for the Teacher Ambassador program--is nearly \$7 million. The Literacy Intern program alone costs about \$93,000 per participant over two years for salary, benefits, and training. When budgets are tight--a perennial condition--the temptation always exists to cut programs such as these, even though, in the long run, they save money and boost school improvement. And additional expenditures are needed. The New Teacher Coaches, for example, have a caseload of almost 20 new teachers per coach, a number the district would like to cut in half by hiring additional coaches.

Teacher vacancies may escalate after June 2006 when the new NCLB requirement that all teachers be "highly qualified" goes into effect. This will be especially true for positions in core subjects in the seventh and eighth grades that are now mostly filled by elementary-certified teachers who lack content-area specialization. Although the district is sponsoring several training efforts to assist teachers in passing middle-level PRAXIS subject tests, and the state has created a middle-level credentialing option that allows current teachers to bypass the tests, a number of the district's teachers may still fail to meet these new requirements.<sup>3</sup>

An even more serious challenge exists in filling Special Education positions, especially in middle schools. Because a shortage of certified Special Educators exists in Philadelphia and across the state, the district has relied increasingly on uncertified

---

<sup>3</sup> This option, adopted in 2004, called the Bridge Certificate in Pennsylvania, represents Pennsylvania's version of the Highly Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) allowed by NCLB. It allows teachers who are already certified in another area to compile credits for experience, course work, and professional development activities as a way of obtaining middle-level certification.

Apprentice teachers or Intern-certified teachers for these positions.<sup>4</sup> This practice not only puts student learning at risk, it creates higher rates of teacher turnover.

Attracting and keeping both new and veteran teachers in large, high-poverty, low-performing schools is the toughest challenge of all. Students in such schools are much more likely than others to be instructed by new and/or uncertified teachers or by substitutes. Staffs are not stable enough to form cohesive learning communities that work together to help boost student learning. As is the case in most other urban districts, Philadelphia has not yet put into place a package of improved working conditions (e.g. smaller classes, top-notch leadership, more support personnel) that would contribute to staffing stability in schools with the highest concentrations of poor students. The fact that the city is located in a state with severe fiscal inequities between wealthy and poor districts, with no judicial relief in sight, helps explain why the resources to attack this problem have been lacking.

The continuing challenges, however, should not obscure Philadelphia's progress in retaining first-year teachers. Indeed, the actions of the Vallas administration and the

---

<sup>4</sup> The situation could get worse in the short run as new NCLB regulations requiring multiple content-area certifications for secondary-level Special Education teachers take effect in 2006.

School Reform Commission show that headway can be made in tackling a difficult problem when energy and resources are directed at its solution.

## **References**

Benner, A. (2000). *The cost of teacher turnover*. Austin, TX: Texas Center for Educational Research.

Bulkley, K., Mundell, L., & Riffer, M. (2004). *Contracting out schools: The first year of the Philadelphia diverse provider model*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Neild, R., Useem, E., Travers, E., & Lesnick, J. (2003). *Once and for all: Placing a highly qualified teacher in every Philadelphia classroom*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Useem, E., Neild, R. C., & Farley, E. (2005). *New teachers: New realities*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Useem, E., & Costelloe, S. (2004). *Philadelphia's New Teacher Coaches: Reflections on their first year*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.